

Critical Analysis of Chapters 36 and 37 of the Satyricon of Petronius

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These two chapters will be analyzed with regard to two criteria in order to facilitate understanding the transition from the performances of food being brought in, to the discussion of wealth. The first criterion will be that of theatricality. The '*many links to the theatre and other spectacles*' can be divided on the one hand into direct descriptions of '*actual theatrical entertainment, singing, acting, acrobats*'¹ and on the other hand '*the disjunction that is established between being and seeming*'², that is people and objects not being quite what they seem, such as the apparent viscera of an allegedly ungutted pig actually being '*tomacula cum botulis*'³ *sausages and puddings*. Minor theatricality of this kind such as the '*tromp l'oeil extension*'⁴ were common in the Roman home but '*Trimalchio's whole household and way of life is... a stage-show*'⁵. The chapters often dwell on binary contrast, such as between clean and dirty or between having and not-having, this is more typical of the theatricality of comedy than say, the nuance of tragedy.

Secondly the text will be considered in relation to attitudes to wealth. These attitudes can be divided into those relating to physical coined money and those relating to more general assets, such as land. Despite, or perhaps because of, being very wealthy Roman elite members' lives were expected to be '*dominated by political and social*'⁶ activities. However, the *Cena Trimalchionis* section of the Satyricon (which these chapters are within) is '*very much populated by freedmen*'⁷ rather than elite members. The freedmen, especially Trimalchio, in *Cena Trimalchionis* talk more freely than might be considered polite about very pragmatic topics, such as bodily functions, but perhaps this is most striking in the attitude that '*for the freedmen, it is money alone that counts*'⁸ and physical coined money above all. An example of how the Satyricon shows '*the characters' attitude toward... coin*'⁹ is Trimalchio '*albis ac nigris aureos argenteosque habebat denarios*' *having instead of black and white counting stones, gold and silver coins*. Attaching physical value to coined money is a social convention of making something seem more than it is, even '*a fantasy with an illustrious lineage*'¹⁰. In this respect there will be interaction between the first analytical criterion of theatricality and the second criterion of attitudes to wealth.

¹ Hales (2012) p196

² Teixeira et al (2008) p70

³ *Petr* 49.10

⁴ Beeson (2019) p40

⁵ Horsfall (1989) p195

⁶ Andreau (1999) p9

⁷ Andreau (2012) p139

⁸ Andreau (2012) p147

⁹ Bodel (2003) p272

¹⁰ Eisenstein (2011) p33

The chapters considered here lie a little way into the middle third of what has come down to us of the *Satyricon* which is referred to as the *Cena Trimalchionis* (*Dinner of Trimalchio*). The immediately preceding chapter has had very dainty servings of twelve little items to symbolise the signs of the spheres, this is essentially setting the scene. Chapter 36 then represents the first bringing in of substantial amounts of food. It is likely that for less well-off clients dinner at a patron's house had some actual economic value in satisfying '*the need for food*'¹¹. The food is the main protagonist here. In Chapter 37 a conversation begins about Trimalchio's wealth, that is wealth becomes the main protagonist. This continues into Chapter 38 and intermittently for the rest of the dinner. In this respect the chapters are important in representing simultaneously the serving of substantial food, ratcheting up of theatricality and introducing discussion of wealth.

The indirect theatricality of the signs of the spheres in Chapter 35 is rounded off with direct theatricality of '*voce... canticum extorsit*' a voice wrung out a song with the engagement of the sense of touch engaged with *extorsit* to give the sense of the awfulness of the singing. Even more so Trimalchio's '*feeble... familiar pun*'¹² of '*cenemus, hoc est ius cenae*' eat up, this is the rule of dining / this is [only] the sauce of the dinner. This seems to act as a direct theatrical cue as Chapter 36 begins '*Haec ut dixit*' As he said this. This ushers in '*quattuor tripudiantes*' four dancers performing '*ad symphonium*' to music so both the visual and auditory senses are entertained at once. The lifting of the upper tray reveals the dishes below which exhibit more indirect being-seeming disjunction with both '*leporem... pinnis subornatum, ut Pegasus*' a hare decorated with wings as if a Pegasus and '*garum piperatum currebat super pisces qui in euripo natabant*' peppered fish sauce running on to fish swimming as if in a tidal strait. In the latter case not only does the spiciness engage the sense of taste but the fish are as if swimming and so implementing direct theatricality. The being-seeing disjunction is further strengthened by the descending from the indicative '*Quo facto, videmus*' This done, we saw to the subjunctive '*ut... videretur*' as if to seem. So that the diners know they are an audience there is applause '*a familia inceptum*' started by the household staff to close that 'scene' of the theatricality.

In the second half of Chapter 36 a new 'scene' of theatricality opens as the reader is told that the key audience member '*Trimalchio eiusmodi methodio laetus*' Trimalchio is delighted by this sort of artifice. As at the beginning of the first half Trimalchio gives a cue '*Carpe!*' Carve! and the performer in this case the '*scissor*' carver comes out and again '*ad symphonium*' to music. The '*display of art takes precedence over the function of carving*'¹³ as the reader is told about '*gesticulatus*' gesturing which '*ut putares essedarium... pugnare*' would make you think he were fighting from a chariot. Referencing gladiatorial games engages the sense of direct theatricality which is intensified by addressing the reader directly in the second person. The theatricality is further intensified by comparison to a musical performance '*hydraule cantante*' accompanied by the water organ. This has all been done to allow Trimalchio to make '*another feeble pun*'¹⁴ this

¹¹ Verboven (2002) p97

¹² Smith (1975) p77

¹³ Courtney (2002) p85

¹⁴ Courtney (2002) p86

time on the name of the carver, Carpus. The pun very much casts Carpus as the stock character of the carver. Trimalchio seems to enjoy both being in the audience, giving the cues, and actually participating in the theatricalities. Encolpius reinforces his role in the audience with the first person pronoun '*Ego suspicatus ad aliquam urbinitatem*' *I suspected some urbane [humour]*. The diner who explains the joke to Encolpius has often seen '*eiusmodi ludos*' *this sort of game* both mirroring Trimalchio's joy at '*eiusmodi methodio*' *this sort of artifice* [indirect theatricality] and bringing to mind the direct theatricality of gladiatorial games. The being-seeming disjunction is further intensified by the diner's address '*vides*' *you see* as that 'scene' closes.

Chapter 37 is principally a discussion about Trimalchio's wife Fortunata between Encolpius and the diner next to him. It links the previous narration which has been principally about food and its theatrical serving with the following chapters which discuss the subject of money. That Encolpius is now satiated with regard to food is emphasized by '*non potui*' *I was not able* being brought to the beginning of the sentence and indeed chapter. It was noted earlier that for the not-so-well off a filling free meal would have a tangible economic value, so economics start to be introduced here. The new topic is further signposted with a contrasting conjunction and verb of movement '*sed conversus*' *but having turned*. Encolpius states that he does so for a purpose with an ut-with-subjunctive clause in canonical word order '*ut quam plurima exciperem*' *in order that I might learn many things*, alerting the reader that there will be useful information in the following dialogue. The moment Fortunata is mentioned the link that her name implies with money is further strengthened by linking her to physical coined money with a relative pronoun '*Fortunata appellatur, quae nummos modio metitur*' *She's called Fortunata, who weighs her coins by the gross*. This casts her as the stock character of the rich man's wife. This '*proverbial expression for possession of great wealth*' ¹⁵ is strengthened by repetition of further m sounds creating the calming sense that financial security brings '*modo, modo quid fuit? what, what indeed was she?*' There follows a contrasting proverbial expression '*noluisse de manu illius panem accipere*' *you wouldn't have wanted to receive bread from her hand*. The link between food and money is reiterated and the reference to '*manu*' gives a subtle reminder of Fortunata's (and Trimalchio's) former enslaved status, which would have been considered worse than having no bread. The binary contrast between having and not-having of wealth being '*precarious and fleeting*' ¹⁶ is further emphasised by the contrast of light-dark and past-future between '*in caelum abiit*' *she's gone to heaven* and '*dixerit... tenebras esse*' *she will say it's darkness*. This sharp binary contrast between having and not-having (food, money etc) is very different from the theatrically softened and blurred contrast between being and seeming that was to the fore in the preceding chapter.

The second half of Chapter 37 directly introduces the topic of the scale of Trimalchio's wealth being hard to describe '*ipse nescit quid habeat*' *he himself doesn't know how much he has* with the intensifying pronoun brought to the beginning of the sentence for emphasis. This is very directly about attitudes to wealth. The physicality of money is emphasised in cleanliness-sordidness contrast '*adeo saplutus est; sed haec lupatria providet*' *how cleansed it*

¹⁵ Smith (1975) p79

¹⁶ Bodel (2003) p272

is, but this prostitute provides, the slang '*lupatria*' prostitute formed from the feminine of wolf with a Greek ending giving a sense of otherness. Sharp contrast (that money has unlike theatricality) is further demonstrated with at one moment Fortunata being '*sicca, sobria*' temperate, sober with soothing s sounds then '*pica pulvinaris*' a woodpecker on a couch with forceful plosive p sounds. The focus on money is intensified with three money words juxtaposed '*nummorum nummos. Argentum*' coins upon coins. Silver. This leads into a device that is repeated in later chapters where a small part of Trimalchio's wealth is described as larger than all of a typical man's equivalent portion. This comparison of a slice of one pie to another different pie is repeatedly used to express the unknowable scale of Trimalchio's wealth. In this case '*Argentum in ostiarii*' Silver [coin] in his estate office versus '*quisquam in fortunis*' in another man's [whole] fortune. These comparisons both emphasise the freedmen's interest in '*the jingle of [coined] money*'¹⁷ and the binary contrasts between rich and poor that money creates. The discussion of money continues in Chapter 38 with discussion of Trimalchio's estates and his thrifty use of its produce. This would be usual in an '*economy rooted in agriculture*'¹⁸ and gives participants the opportunity to refer to Trimalchio's (again physical) assets in further 'pie-slicing' comparisons.

These two chapters have been considered through the lens of theatricality and through that of attitudes to wealth. Theatricality concerns itself with blurring the boundary between being and seeming whilst wealth has here been seen to be regarded very much in terms of binary contrasts: between clean and dirty or between having and not-having. Theatricality has brought about the transition from the serving of food to the discussion of wealth: the scene was set, then food performed as the main protagonist, then was ushered off the stage for wealth to enter as the new main protagonist.

¹⁷ MacKendrick (1950) p312

¹⁸ Verboven (2012) p158

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