

## Experiencing Death in Petronius' *Satyricon*: Trimalchio and Failed Ritual

There is something perverse about Trimalchio's feast, in that normally, although the feast is an exercise in excess beyond nutritional needs (Garnsey 1999), it usually reaches an apex and comes to an end. Without this culmination, the excess of the feast is no longer truly transgressive and pleasurable but becomes grotesque. In this paper I argue that the *Cena Trimalchionis* represents a failed religious ritual. During the course of the extravagant dinner, Trimalchio, a wealthy freedman, is possessed by his desire to achieve complete satiety. However, he constantly falls short of his goal because he perpetuates the ritual of the feast beyond what is needed to experience a state of ecstasy and divinity. In doing so, Trimalchio also overturns the realms of the living and the dead, making feasting a sort of monstrous eternal exercise.

In his seminal article on death in Petronius' *Cena Trimalchionis*, William Arrowsmith says: "[Trimalchio] drives himself toward death by satiety. By eating he proposes to forget death, to 'seize the day' and to live; but with every mouthful he takes he tastes death" (1966: 308). Arrowsmith states that food and sexuality must be governed by Epicurean *askesis* in order for a society to recover life (1966: 309). So, for Arrowsmith, Trimalchio's feast is grotesque because it is not philosophically governed by an economy of need. Historian of religion Georges Bataille has argued, however, that the feast is an opportunity to break rules, a place where unreasonable and prohibited actions become permissible (1989: 71). The ritual of the feast ascribes value to transgression by virtue of the fact that it is only allowed within the program or structure of that ritual. From excessive pleasure, one can reach a sort of divine Dionysian experience.

I argue that Trimalchio fails to meet with the requirements of his ecstasy due to his failure to put an end to his reveling, which results in a devaluation of the experience of pleasure. Trimalchio does not desire to forget death; he persistently reminds himself and his guests of it (*Sat.* §71-72). It seems, rather, that he fears a particular kind of death. Throughout the dinner he states that he wants to seize the day and live while he can (*Sat.* §34), but the subtext of the dinner tells a somewhat different story. Trimalchio wants to live as though he were already dead. He wants to experience the ultimate religious transgression with the sensation of the living but with the eternity of the world of the dead. Because of his violation of the ritual of the feast, Trimalchio cannot achieve the divine experience of satiety the feast aims at, and creates a monstrous experience of endless appetite without satisfaction.

#### Bibliography

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