Trimalchio: Naming Power

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Introduction

Near the end of his lavish dinner party, Trimalchio, the wealthy freedman host in Petronius' *Satyrica*, describes the grave monument he has commissioned. He recites its short epitaph (71.12). It will begin with his name, C. Pompeius Trimalchio Maecenatianus, and conclude just before its final valediction with the proud assertion that the deceased left thirty million and never listened to a philosopher (*sestertium reliquit trecenties, nec umquam philosophum audivit*).[1] What does Trimalchio have against philosophers? We can find clues to his attitude in the nature of metaphor, with its emphases on proper naming and essential meanings.

Naming: Propriety and Power

Aristotle's definition of metaphor set the standard for ancient understandings of the figure.[2] Aristotle defines metaphor as part of his general discussion of words (*onoma*). He divides words into proper (*kurion*) or other kinds. Metaphor, explained as "the transfer (*epiphora*) to one thing of a name (*onoma*) that belongs to something else," is in this second category (*Poetics* 21, 1457b 8–9).[3]

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[1] See Schmeling (1994, 164) for Trimalchio's good life without the benefit of philosophers.

[2] For an overview of Aristotle on metaphor, see Kirby (1997). Aristotle's views are also discussed by Tim Whitmarsh and Helen Morales in their papers in this volume (see above).

[3] This follows Derrida's translation In *White Mytholog*y (1982, 231). In this text, Derrida makes his case that the central concepts underlying metaphysics are always themselves metaphorical. See Harrison (1999) on "White Mythology."

Modern theorists have faulted Aristotle's definition for reasons Trimalchio might share: for its constitutive complicity with metaphysical notions of being.[4] First, by assuming a standard of "proper" naming, the definition projects a sense of structured and bounded categories, effacing gradation or overlap. The construction of such oppositions as proper/improper, rational/irrational, and spiritual/material, where one of the two terms is privileged, has been recognized as a fundamental maneuver of Western conceptual thought and the foundation of some of its basic inequities.

A second critique is leveled against Aristotle's assumption that some "sense" exists to be transported by metaphor "that remains rigorously independent of that which transports it."[5] In this model, labels (e.g., names, words) can be exchanged without affecting an underlying essence that constitutes the meaning of the word. But as contemporary theorists have pointed out, human experience is always mediated through language, and this recognition confounds any notion of an "essence," a meaning that is "rigorously independent of that which transports it." Rather the semiotic paradigm based on this recognition understands meaning to be always in motion across the chain of signifiers that constitutes a language, never fixed into one single point of self-presence. As Stellardi summarizes, "There is neither proper nor improper, the sense is in motion …"[6]

The idea that there is no meaning independent of its linguistic expression may have been alien to the ancients.[7] But they had a continuing interest in the nature of the relationship between words and what they refer to that focused on a similar theme: the relation between a word and a purported essence of its referent. Deliberation on the essential being of things was basic to the ancient debate as to whether there is a "natural" correctness of names/words in accordance with the nature of things, or whether a name is merely a matter of convention and agreement. In Plato's *Cratylus*, for exam-

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[4] See Derrida (1982), Harrison (1999), and Stellardi (2000) for the relation of Aristotle's discussion of metaphor to contemporary metaphysical thinking.

[5] The quoted words are again those of Derrida (1982) who is referring to philosophic metaphors at this point in his discussion. For the essentialist aspects of Aristotle's theory of naming, see David Charles (1994, 61–73 with bibliography). Catherine Atherton (1993, 24) points out that this was a widely shared attitude in antiquity: "What these very different groups [ancient theorists, critics, and teachers of style] had in common was a basic conception of language as a conduit for or means of transferal between minds of a single, detachable, preselected message or meaning."

[6] Stellardi 2000, 110.

[7] Everson 1994b, 3.

ple, Socrates first shows sympathy for the conventionalist position[8] but ultimately rejects this for not sufficiently conforming to his belief that, since things "must be supposed to have their own permanent essences" (*Crat.* 386d), names had to be fashioned to capture this essence.[9] And Aristotle, although generally a conventionalist, reflects in his formulation of metaphor a similar presumption that things have permanent essences that a shift in language does not affect.[10]

Trimalchio's Puns: The Power of Naming

This cultural attention to the relation of words to essential being provides a context for appreciating the significance of Trimalchio's puns on naming in the *Cena*. His puns on the names Carpus (36.6), Liber (41.7), and Corinthus (50.4) have often been dismissed as examples of Trimalchio's "feebleness," of Petronius "poking fun at Trimalchio's fondness for the over obvious."[11] But as seen in Aristotle's use of *onoma* (literally, "names") to refer to words in general, naming was a serious topic in this period. It was understood to be the "basic function of words."[12] Rather than obvious, the relation of names, or labels, to the object represented by them is the crux of any theory of metaphor. In his series of puns, Trimalchio challenges metaphor's basic assumption that meanings are stable and refer to some ontological essence behind language. Trimalchio's puns instead function to expose the power dynamics inherent in language and naming.

Trimalchio first signals his interest in naming in a scene where he orders his meat cutter to slice up an entree: *Carpe, inquit* (36.6). Encolpius comments on Trimalchio's strange behavior following this order. Trimalchio keeps whispering (*lentissima voce*), *Carpe, Carpe.* Encolpius asks another guest the reason for Trimalchio's mutterings. The guest explains that the meat cutter's name constitutes an implicit pun (36.8): "You see the one carv-

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[8] Keller 2000, 304. Bibliography on naming in the *Cratylus* is extensive; see Everson 1994b, 245–46 for a sample.

[9] Williams 1994, 36.

[10] See Charles (1994, 37–73) for Aristotle's theory of signification.

[11] Smith 1975, 135, 193. Sullivan (1968, 226) calls these puns "childishly naïve or ponderously artificial" and used "to satirize Trimalchio's deficiencies in wit." Dupont (1977, 96) suggests that Trimalchio's puns serve to emphasize the inherent ambiguity and polysemy of language.

[12] Atherton 1993, 156.

ing the food: he is called Carpus. So whenever Trimalchio says 'Carpe,' with the same word he both names him and orders him."[13] *(Vides illum inquit qui obsonium carpit: Carpus vocatur. Itaque quotienscumque dicit, 'Carpe', eodem verbo et vocat et imperat,* 36.8).

Trimalchio's musing on *Carpe* indicates his fascination with this word that both names and orders, both denotes a subject and subjects him to his role.[14] The effect of Trimalchio's pun is to detach naming from a metaphysical or linguistic context and locate it explicitly in the realm of power. In this pun, words not only signify persons, but also insert them into social positions. The pun in *Carpe* does not connect names to people's essences but, as the coincidence of vocative and imperative denotes, to the social and cultural power exerted over individuals in their material being.

The second pun also emphasizes the inherent power in designations. A beautiful slave boy enters the dining room, carrying grapes and decked in vine leaves and ivy, imitating the god Dionysus. Trimalchio addresses the boy: *Dionyse ... Liber esto* (41.7). This phrase is ambiguous. It can mean either "Dionysus, be free," or "Dionysus, be (i.e., imitate) Liber." The boy immediately signals his interpretation of the phrase in the former sense by snatching the *pilleus*, the cap of freedom, worn by the roast boar and putting it on his own head.[15] Trimalchio continues his punning and the episode's focus on the slippage between words and meanings in his next statement: *Non negabitis me, inquit habere liberum patrem* (41.8). This phrase means either "You won't deny that I have a free father" or "You won't deny that I have Father Liber," i.e., this slave acting the part of the god Liber. A third pun will help explicate the dynamics of this example.

In the third case, Trimalchio sees Agamemnon eyeing his Corinthian bronze plate, and he announces that he is the only one who has real Corinthian plate (*solus sum qui vera Corinthea habeam*, 50.3). Encopius surmises

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[13] Dupont (1977, 99) has an interesting discussion of this scene. She suggests it exhibits the inherent instability of language in a deconstructive move.

[14] This pun appears as almost a foreshadowing of Louis Althusser's concept of interpellation: "By addressing the individual as a unified and coherent person who is the sovereign author of his acts, the dominant social order recruits her and assigns her a place in the labor scheme" (Morton and Zavarzadeh 1991, 6).

[15] Encolpius is puzzled when a large wild boar wearing a cap denoting freed status is served. A fellow diner explains that on the previous day, this same boar had been presented but was sent back by the diners (*dimissus*, 41.4). So it returns to this meal as already freed (*tamquam libertus*, 41.5). Cf. Slater (1990, 63–64) on this passage.

that Trimalchio will begin his boasting again, claiming that his Corinthian plate was imported directly from Corinth. But, instead, as he says, Trimalchio goes one better (*sed ille melius*, 50.4). Trimalchio explains, "Perhaps you wonder why I alone have true Corinthian ware" (50.4). The answer is obvious, he says; his Corinthian is real because "the smith I bought it from was named Corinthus and what is real Corinthian, unless someone has a Corinthus" (*quia scilicet aerarius, a quo emo, Corinthus vocatur. quid est autem Corintheum, nisi Corinthum habet*? 50.4). This pun stresses the inherently arbitrary nature of any distinction between proper and improper naming. His merchant may not be the usual reference of "Corinthian" but is nevertheless a valid one.

This last pun clarifies the previous one. Trimalchio's statement that to have real Corinthian plate one must have (*habet*) a Corinthus echoes his claim that he has (*habere*) Father Liber. Trimalchio does indeed possess the slave taking the part of Father Liber,[16] so with this pun, he stresses his right to call himself free (*liber*), just as having a Corinthus guarantees real Corinthian bronze.

Either reading of his pun on *liber* ("I have a free father"; "I have Father Liber") emphasizes his claim to free status. Trimalchio clearly recognizes that many might not consider him a real (*verus*) Roman. That his slave boy has gained his free status through a pun involving a name inversion emphasizes both how much difference names can make, and how much power inheres in them.

Trimalchio in his own life has experienced the power of designations in a momentous renaming. He transferred his name from that of a slave to that of a Roman citizen. That this is his "real" name is reflected in his pun that "real" (*vera*) Corinthian ware is that bought from a person named Corinthus. Likewise, he, Gaius Pompeius Trimalchio, as his very name declares, was once owned by a Gaius Pompeius. Trimalchio explains in the narrative that he was his master's heir, but many slaves purchased their own freedom.[17] On the basis of the logic of his Corinthian pun, Trimalchio, formerly owned by a Pompeius, is by definition a uniquely "real" Pompeius. Although an ex-slave, this Pompey is just as "proper" a reference for the name as any other

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[16] Smith 1975, 97.
[17] See Watson (1987) for varieties of manumission procedures and benefits.

ever named by it, however illustrious. Contradicting Aristotle's definition of metaphor, names do *not* change without effect.[18]

The Carpus pun calls attention to the power of words to name and order at the same time. In his slave name, Trimalchio had experienced one aspect of society's coercive power; his Roman name changed that status.[19] This connection between civil status and names helps explain Trimalchio's punning focus on names in the *Cena* and also his distrust of philosophical discussions of naming and metaphor premised on specious distinctions between proper and improper naming, and on the connection of names to unchanging essences.

Trimalchio's delight in his new name, as testament to his changed state, is on display in the *Cena*. He not only imagines it carved on his grave monument (71.12); his name also appears twice on the doorposts of his dining room (30.2, 30.4), and engraved on his dishes (31.10). The sound of it resounds in his house. His slaves approve his culinary marvels by shouting his Roman praenomen, *"Gaio feliciter"* (50.1), and shifts of slaves leave and enter the dining room with this name on their lips: *"vale Gai ... ave Gai"* (74.8). Even his old friends carefully use his new praenomen, Gaius, when addressing him.[20] This transfer of name has obviously been significant for Trimalchio; it has not, as metaphor would have it, left his "being" unchanged.[21] His own life explodes the notion that only certain references are

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[18] Dupont (1977, 101) sees Trimalchio's names as a sign of his impossible situation and his reification of the ambivalence of the social code.

[19] See Quintilian (7.3.27) for how the three-part name defines "the free."

[20] See Adams (1978, 150) for the use of the praenomen as a gesture of intimacy and Smith (1975, 63). Smith refers to Horace's mockery of freedmen's emphasis on their praenomen (Hor. *Sat.* 2.5.32).

[21] Bodel (1984, 185), in his analysis of the *pilleus*-wearing pork in the Liber pun, depreciates this change between slave and freed: "Petronius points out how easy it is for a slave to become a freedman, and how little the promotion in civil status improves the actual 'status' of the new citizen. The boar is 'liberated' by a simple ritual, and remains what he was, a pig; the transformation is purely superficial. Similarly the boy Dionysus is informally manumitted, but in essence he remains unchanged. The transition from slavery to freedom is easy; the transition from freedman status to free born status is impossible." However, the freedmen in the *Cena* do not seem to experience their change in status as insignificant. Rather than demonstrating the inadequacy of manumission to effect change (the boar remains a pig), this visual pun (the status sign worn by a dead pig) may remind of the arbitrariness of status designations in face of the shared physical basis of material being. All humans are equal in their shared bodily nature.

proper. Rather, as his puns insist, names, labels, and the identities they refer to are in flux, open to change, filled with potential.

Unheard Voices

By having Trimalchio dwell on slave names, Petronius may also signal his intention to display in his narrative a perspective seldom heard in the contemporary culture: the views of the non-elite. In his musings over slaves' names, Trimalchio enters a public conversation that had been conducted for centuries without the participation of those who were its object. The naming of slaves had long been a staple of philosophical discussions around words and their meanings. In the *Cratylus*, for example, Hermogenes buttresses his conventionalist position by invoking the naming of slaves: "Any name you give, in my opinion, is correct, and if you change that and give another one, then that name is no less correct than the other one, just as we change the names of our slaves" (384d).[22] Diodorus Cronus in the Hellenistic period is reported to have used the names of his slaves to demonstrate his contention that all words can signify. He named one of his slaves "However" (*alla mēn*) and others after connectives.[23]

Varro continues this use of slaves' names to support linguistic arguments in the Roman period.[24] To exemplify the distinction between the voluntary and natural derivation of words, for example, Varro explains, "So when three men have bought a slave apiece at Ephesus, sometimes one derives his name from that of the seller, Artemidorus, and calls him Artemis; another names his slave Ion, from Ionia, the district; the third calls his slave Ephesus, be-

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[22] Trimalchio also changes slaves' names; he tells us that in a stroke of genius, he changed his cook's name to Daedalus to reflect the cook's exceptional talent (70.3). Critics have ascribed this renaming to Petronius' parodic effort to convey a fallen social world when the name of a great artisan is given to a cook. But what needs noticing is the interpretive movement at the heart of metaphor. Metaphor functions by invoking similarities between different things and ignoring the differences. With his new name, Trimalchio has constructed a metaphor: the cook is a Daedalus. Trimalchio notices the similarity in the shared talent of his cook and Daedalus. Those who read the metaphor as debasing reveal how the overriding difference in status makes it impossible for them to recognize the relevant similarities between these two cunning workers. This confirms how powerful differences in status are for occluding the recognition of similarities.

[23] Aulus Gellius 11.12.1–3; Ammonius, *On Aristotle's De Interpretatione* 38.17–20, in Long and Sedley (1987, 1.227).

[24] Varro, *De Lingua Latina* 8.6, 8.10, 8.21, 9.22. See Atherton 1993, 154–160.

cause he has bought him at Ephesus. In this way each derived the name from a different source as he preferred" (*De Lingua Latina* 8.21). Beyond their philosophic or linguistic points, all these examples imply the stark power-lessness of slaves, their inherent lack of volition and voice.

By representing Trimalchio's focus on naming, Petronius inverts this traditional perspective and provides a new voice on slaves, one seldom heard in elite circles—not quite the voice of the slave himself, but at least that of the ex-slave. Indeed, the *Cena* as a whole centers on the voices and views of such ex-slaves. In this section, Petronius keeps Encolpius' comments to a minimum, allowing the non-elite characters to present themselves without the filter of the first-person narrator's perspective.[25] The narrative effect is what Plaza has described as the "general nature of the inversion of Trimal-chio's universe,"[26] or the *Cena*'s "Saturnalian nature," in Rankin's phrase.[27] By expressing non-elite views, the *Cena* inverts the usual cultural perspec-tive. But from the perspective of the ex-slaves, whose opinions dominate the section, it is the elite who live in the upside-down world. As Ganymede comments (44.3), "For those rich jaws it's always the Saturnalia" (*nam isti maiores maxillae semper Saturnalia agunt*).

How realistic are the concerns and attitudes that the freedmen voice in the *Cena*? To determine whether Petronius simply satirizes his characters as he reports their opinions or also reflects attitudes perhaps representative of freedmen of the period, considering an analogy may help. Petronius' efforts to provide his readers with a rare opportunity to experience non-elite, popu-lar Latin in the *Cena* are well attested.[28] By analogy, in the "inverted uni-verse" constructed in the *Cena*, he might well have sought to express subjects and themes as typical of the non-elite as their language. To demon-strate this contention conclusively, to distinguish between the actual attitudes of the non-elite and those Petronius may have projected upon them is impos-sible, since so little evidence for non-elite perspectives survives in the cul-tural record. But Petronius' experiment with language is revealing. Although he may be mocking speakers' usage when he introduces "vulgar" Latin

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[25] Point of view in the *Satyrica* is a particularly vexed topic; see Conte (1996). In the *Cena*, however, as both Beck (1973, 272) and Laird (1999, 209–228) note, the narrator is in the background, and the characters appear to be allowed to display their own perspectives.

[26] Plaza 2000, 101, 137.

[27] Rankin 1962, 136.

[28] Boyce 1991, 19–36.

forms into his text, his examples nevertheless mimic actual usages, as inscriptional and linguistic evidence has corroborated.[29]

On this model, when Petronius describes the views and concerns of the characters in the *Cena*, he may have a satirical aim, but at the same time, these views may reflect the attitudes, feelings, and judgments of those in this status position. Recent studies by Whitehead, Donahue, and Rowe confirm that Trimalchio's attitudes and claims coincide with those inscribed by freedmen in their inscriptions and funerary monuments, and Bodel has provided valuable evidence for the typicality of Trimalchio's freedmen guests.[30] This confirmation, joined to Petronius' practice of reproducing plausible non-elite language, indicates that the *Cena* might offer one of the few cultural entrances into the thought world of the non-elite in this period.

Open Body, Open Meanings

When the text presents its "arguments for the other side,"[31] what does it offer? Principally a focus on the body, its margins and its material reality. One of the first glimpses of Trimalchio shows him urinating, and food, eating, and drinking are the central focus of the *Cena*. This emphasis on bodily materiality undoubtedly plays a part in the text's inversion of elite values, for Greco-Roman hierarchy was erected upon and maintained through a sustained privileging of the mind/soul/spirit and a rejection of the material. The contemporary society devalued people who were associated with material needs, who had to work with their bodies or out of a necessity to support their bodies.[32] Seneca labels occupations associated with bodily work as common and base (*Ep.* 82): *volgares et sordidae*.[33]

This cultural privileging of the soul/mind/spirit helps to explain the *Cena*'s invocation of Plato's *Symposium*. Petronius appears to have constructed this freedmen's banquet to oppose the *Symposium*, the arch-text for the privileging of the mind/soul/spirit. The *Cena* and the *Symposium* share

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[29] Ibid., 36–75.
[30] Whitehead 1993; Rowe 2001; Donahue 1999; Bodel 1984, 72ff.
[31] Richlin 1983 212.
[32] Veyne 1987, 137.
[33] For attitudes toward work, see D'Arms (1981); Garnsey (1980); Treggiari (1980, 48–64); Joshel (1992, 62–68); and Veyne (1987, 117–137).

structural similarities: a series of five speeches, followed by a culminating speech, and then the entrance of a late-arriving guest.

In Diotima's speech, number six in the *Symposium*, a series of ascending analogies provides the rationale for the valorization of the soul. Diotima explicates how the physical must be steadily moved away from until, finally, the transcendent, the one, unchanging Being is attained. Diotima's "Beautiful" is itself a metaphor constructed from a series of other analogies;[34] metaphors work by invoking the similarities between different things and by ignoring differences. In the *Symposium* what is ignored and left behind in the ascent toward the unchanging is the body, as demonstrated by Diotima's list of what the Beautiful is not. The Beautiful is pure presence; it does not come into being, perish, grow bigger, or waste away (211e); it is not infected with the flesh and its mortality (211e). It is not, to make the point, the body.

In the *Cena*, Trimalchio's speech on his return from the latrine occurs in the same position as Diotima's (last in a series of six speeches), and it can be read as a refutation of her case for the metaphorical ideal of an abstract immutable self-presence.[35] Rather than disavowing the body, with its open margins and changing nature, Trimalchio proclaims it. As he says, "None of us are born quite solid."[36] Trimalchio's complaint is rather that he is not fluid enough; he suffers from constipation. He urges his guests to relieve themselves; the greatest torture is to be constricted, bound up. Not even Jove, he says, can hold it in.[37] The topic of this speech has earned Trimalchio reproach and comparison with Theophrastus' characterization of the "disgusting" man.

Julia Kristeva has an interpretation of the disgust and horror associated with what she calls the "abject"—all that issues, leaks, and flows out from the body. According to Kristeva, what is disgusting about excrement and urination is the challenge they offer to any notion of a body as self-identical,

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[34] All concepts are on this basis metaphors. As Sarah Kofman 1993, 37) says, "The concept is a transition from the analogous to the identical, from diversity to unity."

[35] For the influence of the *Symposium* on the *Cena*, see Cameron (1969); Dupont (1977, 61–90); and Bodel (1999, 40–41).

[36] *Nemo nostrum solide natus est* (47.4). Connors (1994, 229) notes that Tacitus' description of Petronius' death suggests that he, unlike Seneca and the tradition of Plato's *Apology*, did not have his mind on the soul but on frivolous verses. She suggests the connection to Trimalchio's claim that he never listened to a philosopher.

[37] *Hoc solum vetare ne Iovis potest* (47.4). Smith notes the suggestion to delete *vetare* here and give a "racier sense as well as improving the rhythm" (1975 127).

whole, bounded, contained and to notions like the Platonic ideal of self-presence, essence, and Being that are metaphorically premised upon a bounded body. Victoria Rimell has demonstrated in compelling detail how the *Satyrica*, by its encompassing focus on the body and its flux, upsets dichotomies founded on bounded categories like proper/improper, intellectual/physical, and high/low.[38] Traditional social hierarchies are premised upon such strict boundaries, but Trimalchio with his speech on the dangers of constriction offers the basis for a different social model. Trimalchio presents a politics of the open end, of porous margins, of flux, change, and eventual running out. His embrace of the bodily in all its abjection refuses his culture's contempt for the material body and those associated with it. His consideration for his slaves and his inclusion of them in the party is testament to his lived sense of this open society.[39]

Trimalchio's affirmation of change and flux is a challenge not only to the *Symposium* but to a range of contemporary philosophies. As Long has noted, Platonic, Aristotelian, Epicurean, and Stoic philosophers shared certain common ground: "All of them accept the legitimacy of making a distinction between body and soul such that the soul is the cause of intelligent life occurring within that part of space which is bounded by the normal human body …. What today would be called mental and moral attributes are universally regarded as attributes of the psyche as distinct from the body associated with the psyche."[40] All the philosophic systems contemporary with Trimalchio subordinated the material, physical human body to something other than the body. Even the Stoics and Epicureans, who proposed a corporeal soul, nevertheless held that the human body was made of a different and lesser stuff. Trimalchio's exuberant materiality would have received little affirmation from contemporary philosophers.

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[38] Rimell 2002, 12.

[39] See D'Arms (1991) for the bad treatment (including death) that slaves staffing dinner parties might experience. Seneca (*Ep.* 47.3) notes that slaves were made to stand around all night hungry. This contrasts with Trimalchio's inviting his slaves to join the party (70.10) and later dismissing slaves so they may eat (74.6). He has, however, put up a notice that his slaves will be whipped if they leave the house without permission (28.7), and the daily record of his affairs notes that a slave was crucified for "cursing the genius of our Gaius" (53.3). The punishment may be another reminder of how much Trimalchio valued his freed status—which bestowed both praenomen and genius.

[40] Long 1982, 226–27.

Nor would Trimalchio's stance on naming shown in his pun on 'Corinthian' have won approval. The "conventionalist" idea in this period that words can mean whatever their speakers intend specifically challenged the contemporary Epicurean, Stoic, and Platonic consensus on the naturalism of names. Trimalchio's conventionalism can be read as resistant to contemporary philosophical authority. As Catherine Atherton explains, the Stoics had opposed Diodorus Cronus because his thesis would have left "no place for the description and prescription of meanings which is central to the Stoic philosophical project."[41] Trimalchio's embrace of the open body and open meanings testifies to his openness to change and evolution and his resistance to contemporary philosophic thinking.

Status and the Power to Name

The focus on learning and education in the *Cena* may provide another example of the non-elite's attitude toward an important contemporary institution. Trimalchio has been ridiculed for his farrago of false mythologies and confused history. Most commentators interpret these as comic vehicles for exposing the ignorance and pretensions of this boorish parvenu. On one level—from the perspective of the elite—this is likely true; however these "errors," as well as the explicit comments in the text about education, may also offer evidence for the reactions of people like the freedmen guests to their culture's veneration of *paideia*. Trimalchio's confused learning may be his assertion of the absurdity that a society would structure its hierarchies and allot its social rewards on the basis of people's ability to get the facts of fictive stories right.

After his pun on the meaning of Corinthian, Trimalchio reassures his educated guests, Encolpius, Ascyltos, and Agamemnon, "Don't think me stupid. I know very well how Corinthian came into being."[42] He then describes how Hannibal, at the fall of Troy, collected all the bronze and gold and silver statues into one heap and melted them, and it was from this mixture that Corinthian ware was derived (51.6–7). Describing his silver cups, Trimalchio continues his gaffes. One, he says, shows "Cassandra killing her sons, and the boys lying there dead and so that you would think they were

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[41] Atherton 1993, 162.

[42] *Et ne me putetis nesapium esse, valde bene scio, unde primum Corinthea nata sint* (50.5).

alive."[43] On another cup he describes Daedalus shutting up Niobe in the Trojan horse.[44]

Trimalchio, as has often been pointed out, here jumbles his stories. It was Medea who killed her sons, and Daedalus and Niobe were not associated with each other or with Troy. The story that Trimalchio places between these two instances of mangled learning, however, destabilizes the conventional reading of these confusions—that they are meant to ridicule Trimalchio's pretensions. His story about a glassmaker explicitly focuses on how categories of value are maintained in a society. Education (in part the correct knowledge of mythology and history) was a value particularly important for establishing hierarchy in both the *Satyrica* and its contemporary society.

As he talks about his silver cups, Trimalchio remembers a story about a glassmaker who invented unbreakable glass and brought his discovery to the emperor. The emperor asked him if he had shared his knowledge with anyone else. When the glassmaker answered in the negative, the emperor ordered him executed because, Trimalchio explains, "if his invention became known, we would treat gold like mud" (*aurum pro luto haberemus*, 51.6–52.1).[45] The moral of this story is the drive of the powerful to maintain the status quo. The point it stresses is that those with power do not welcome the transformation of something cheap or common (*vilia*), like glass, into a valuable substance.[46] That *lutum* is a word used like *sordes* (dirt) as a derogatory social reference is germane here.[47] Recognition that the powerful would not appreciate being treated like the lower classes (gold like mud) is inherent in this analogy, and their power to enforce their wishes is made visible in the emperor's action.

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[43] *Quemadmodum Cassandra occidit filios suos, et pueri mortui iacent sic ut vivere putes* (52.1).

[44] *Ubi Daedalus Niobam in equum Troianum includit* (52.2–3).

[45] *Quia enim, si scitum esset, aurum pro luto haberemus* (51.6–52.1). This same point, that categories of value are arbitrary, is made later in the *Cena* in almost the same words. Habinnas comments on the cost of his wife's jewelry. He explains, "If it were not for women, we would treat all such gems as dirt" (*Mulieres si non essent, omnia pro luto haberemus*, 67.10). Here also, worth is arbitrarily assigned.

[46] Bloomer (1997, 299, n. 56), links this story of the glass to Echion and Habinnas' comments and suggests that together these offer that "The dirt cheap economy is prevented by corrupt magistrates, the emperor, and women." The story of the unbreakable glass is referred to by Pliny (*N. H.* 36.195) and Dio Cassius (57.21.5ff). On this episode, see Anderson (1999) and Santini (1986).

[47] Catullus 42.13; Persius 3.23

In Petronius' society, cultural knowledge and skill in speaking well were determining factors in establishing social worth. What Peter Brown recognized in the later empire was equally true for the early empire : *paideia* was a means of expressing social distance.[48] Plaza has pointed out how the freedmen in the *Cena* both recognize and react to their society's dismissal of them based on their lack of culture. The rag dealer Echion, for example, accuses Agamemnon of mocking him as he speaks, mocking, as he says, "the words of poor men" (*pauperorum verba derides*, 46.1). But Echion dismisses this mockery and rejects the education it is founded on. He asserts, "We know that you are crazy (fatuum) on account of your education" (46.1–2).[49]

Hermeros similarly reacts angrily to what he takes to be the elite guests' contempt for Trimalchio's etymologies and calls their education worthless: "I haven't learned your geometries, criticisms, or trivialities, but I know capital letters and how to do percentages …. Now I will show you your father wasted his fees even though you are a rhetorician."[50] Niceros goes further, simply dismissing out of hand the pretensions of the educated. Urged by Trimalchio to tell his ghost story, he at first demurs: "I fear that those scholars (*scholasticos*) will laugh at me. They'd better watch it. I'll tell my story anyway. What does it matter to me who laughs?" (61.4).[51] Plaza reads

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[48] Brown 1992, 39.

[49] *Scimus te prae litteras fatuum esse.* See Boyce (1991, 81–84) and Plaza (2000, 115–119) on Echion's speech and its excessive deviations from educated standards of language. Echion still wants his boy to get an education, but for all the wrong reasons from an elite perspective; see Bloomer (1997, 196–241) and Laird (1999). Bloomer points out that the ambitions of the *Cena*'s freedmen are reflected in the funerary monuments of the period (197). Laird reminds that the standards of value inherent in the labeling of so-called proper and improper speech belong to the false metaphysical dichotomies that underwrite social power that this paper is focusing on.

[50] *Non didici geometrias, critica †et alogias menias†, sed lapidarias litteras scio, partes centum dico ad aes, ad pondus, ad nummum …. iam scies patrem tuum mercedes perdidisse* (58.7–8). Plaza (2000, 133–142) suggests this scene is a "touchstone" for scholars in determining whether they side with the scornful guests or the freedmen (138). Bloomer (1997, 210) notes, "The threatening, often sexually aggressive language constitutes a speech characteristic shared among the freedmen as much as any phonological, morphological, lexical or syntactic items." Hermeros' speech seems especially abusive and aggressive.

[51] *Etsi timeo istos scholasticos, ne me [de] rideant. Viderint: narrabo tamen; quid enim mihi aufert qui ridet?* (61.4). Plaza (2000, 144) sees this statement as decisive because Niceros "does not even bother to argue against their laughter, but bluntly states it cannot hurt him." (*Contra* Conte 1996, 127.)

the freedmen's rejection of elite education (except for the "bread" it can provide) as part of the *Cena*'s overall effort to construct an inverse hierarchy that reflects freedmen's perspectives and values.[52] Niceros' statement, in Plaza's opinion, is the boldest rejection of elite values in the *Cena*, for the supreme rejection is not to care: "What does it matter to me who laughs?"

The inserted story of the emperor and the unbreakable glass, along with the ex-slaves' explicit refusal of the elite's right to deride others on the basis of their education, supplies a context for Trimalchio's mythological gaffes. They may function to suggest the absurdity of investing so much in empty signifiers. The text itself signals this reading in its ironic comment on Cassandra's slain sons, looking so really dead that you would think they lived (52.1).[53] This witticism may mock the pretensions of realistic art, as commentators suggest,[54] but it also foregrounds the reader's recognition that these boys, no matter whose sons they are said to be, never existed, either dead or alive. Why then should getting their mother right matter so much in estimating an individual's worth? The story of the emperor and the glass-maker proposes an explanation for why value systems are maintained: to protect the position of the powerful from encroachment from below, "lest we should hold gold as dirt" (52.1). In the early empire, getting myth histories right operated as a part of the contemporary system of values that helped to set off the elite and secure their position.

As Greenblatt has said, "the quintessential sign" of power is "to impose one's fictions upon the world."[55] Trimalchio's stories challenge this power. That his stories have met with ridicule may have more to do with his status than with their accuracy. By their nature, myths are additive, open to alteration, responsive to cultural changes and needs. So Euripides may have added Medea's murder of her sons to the myth, and Smith cites Pausanias' story that Cassandra was indeed the mother of two sons by Agamemnon.[56] The difference between a mistake and an alternative emerges as, at least at one

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[52] Plaza (2000, 145) notes that Niceros' werewolf tale is an example of social inversion, for it is the *scholastici* who "are demonized into the frightening figure of the werewolf …. The slaves are the norm, i.e. real human beings of flesh and blood, while the non-slave represents another type of being, which is incomprehensible, unpredictable, and dangerous."

[53] Smith 1975 reads *sic ut vivere* as Heinsius offered for the *sicuti vere* in H.

[54] Smith 1975, 139. Smith cites Pliny 35, 66 in support.

[55] Greenblatt 1981, 13.

[56] Rabinowitz 1993, 146; Pausanias 2.16.7.

level, a matter of the speaker's status. Pausanias' version is an alternative; Trimalchio's a blunder. In his description of Agamemnon as one "who has power to speak" (*tu, qui potes loquere*, 46.1), [57] Echion marks his recognition that only some voices can speak and be taken seriously in a society. Trimalchio challenges these strictures in his idiosyncratic myth histories, and like his friend Niceros, he may not care who laughs at him.

Change: The Challenge of the Possible

As his opinions on naming and the body demonstrate, Trimalchio accepts and affirms flux, motion, and change.[58] Indeed, Trimalchio memorializes the changes he himself has experienced.[59] He is the hero of his own life; he has no famous antecedents. A mural on the wall of his foyer depicts with epic overtones his metamorphosis from a boy sold at a slave market to a member of the Augustales, honored with a privileged seat in the amphitheater.[60] By portraying Mercury in this last scene in his role as psychopompus and invoking the language of spiritual ascent (*rapiebat* 29.6), Bodel explains, "Trimalchio represents his elevation from slavery to freedom as an apotheosis."[61] His mural commemorates growth and progress through time. It figures iden-

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[57] Ironically, using an incorrect verb-form, the active infinitive *loquere* for the correct deponent *loqui*.

[58] This challenges the Platonic view. Sedley (1998) suggests that in the *Cratylus*, Socrates attempts to show the illusion in the seeming consistency of the etymologies suggesting that all things are in flux.

[59] Trimalchio's depiction of his life on the mural and in the autobiographical statement at the end of the *Cena* (75–77) have been faulted as examples of his egotism. However, Whitehead (1993, 319) explains that this autobiographical drive was in fact typical of freedmen: "That the preference for biography was a trait of freedmen can be seen in all the genres of funerary art freedmen commonly commissioned."

[60] Bodel (1994, 240) notes the implicit comparison drawn between Encolpius examining Trimalchio's mural and Aeneas examining the scenes on the temple doors in Cumae (*Aen.* 6.20–34).

[61] Bodel offers an excellent discussion of this scene (1994, 243–248; 1984, 54–61). He suggests that Trimalchio's entrance into Rome led by Minerva suggests both a triumphal *adventus* and the epic theme of a young man "escorted by a female protector into a city." The motifs also recall funeral reliefs: "Trimalchio's identification with Mercury would have reminded Petronius' contemporaries unmistakably of the type of sculpted relief that had recently begun to appear in the funerary monuments of slaves and freedmen with backgrounds very similar to that of Trimalchio" (246). Jane Whitehead also traces the similarity between the themes of the *Cena* and actual freedmen's tombs.

tity not as a static essence, but as a trajectory. Change is a major focus in the freedmen's self-representation. So Trimalchio metaphorically offers himself as a frog who became a king (77.6). His gravestone proclaims that he "grew from very little" (*ex parvo crevit*, 71.12).

Variations of this phrase epitomizing the freedmen's success in overcoming their slave origins are repeated in the *Cena*, often coupled with an allusion to the stark harshness of these beginnings. Diogenes, another of the freed guests, is described as "growing from nothing" (*de nihilo crevit*); it is explained that not so long ago "he carried loads of wood on his back" (38.8).[62] Similarly, the recently departed Chrysanthus is said to have grown from "small change" (*ab asse crevit*, 43.1). A vivid verbal figure conveys the indignities he tolerated to make his new life: "He was always ready to snatch a coin out of the dung with his teeth."[63] Recollections of the humiliations inherent in the former slave life of the freedmen subtly pervade the revelry of the *Cena*. One can hear behind Trimalchio's justification "that nothing is base (*turpe*) which the master orders," the indignity of being his master's sexual plaything.[64] The characterizations of both Trimalchio's and Hermeros' wives allude to their sexual vulnerability before their husbands bought them out of slavery (37.3, 74.13, 57.6). Freedom changed these women's situations, just as it did their husbands' lives. For ex-slaves, change is not the scandal it is for metaphysicians.

Trimalchio focuses on how high the stakes are in the change from slave to free, when he warns Fortunata not to forget the life he rescued her from. He has made her a "man among men," a human being equal to any other (*hominem inter homines feci*, 74.13). This phrase encapsulates freedom's defining difference; in Roman culture and law, the slave was assimilated to the animal.[65] In the *Cena*, the freedmen testify to how this transformation to full humanity informs their sense of themselves. Thus, when Hermeros reacts angrily to Ascyltos' disrespect for Trimalchio, he proudly announces himself to be a "man among men" (57.5). Scorning the ease of free birth, he

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[62] *Modo solebat collo suo ligna portare* (38.8).

[63] *Et paratus fuit quadrantem de stercore mordicus tollere* (43.1).

[64] *Tamen ad delicias [femina] ipsimi [domini] annos quattuordecim fui. nec turpe est quod dominus iubet* (75.11).

[65] Keith Bradley (2000) reviews the cultural and legal associations between animals and slaves and uses this association as a lens for an important reading of Apuleius' *Metamorphosis*. Bradley suggests Lucius' change into an ass ought to be read as metaphorically replicating the experiences of a human's fall into slavery.

lists his achievements: he owes nobody, he owns land, he supports twenty people and a dog, and he bought his wife's freedom. He claims that his accomplishments are "true contests" (*vera athla*, 57.11) and displays his contempt for the easy victories of the freeborn. "Being born free is as easy as 'come here,'" he says (57.11).[66] For the freeborn, the good life is there for the asking; for the ex-slave, it is evidence for the struggle that he has won. On this basis, as Hermeros intimates, the freedman is superior to the freeborn.

Trimalchio exhibits a very similar sense of self.[67] He shares a similar pride in his successes, achieved, as he says, by his own power (*virtute mea ad hoc perveni*, 75.8). Trimalchio presents himself as a man of energy, confident and resilient, even in the face of disaster. He describes his reaction when his first commercial venture failed and all his ships sank: "Do you think I panicked? No, by God, I was no more licked by my losses than if nothing had happened. I built others, bigger, better and luckier, so that no one could say I wasn't brave."[68] Brave (*fortis*, 71.12) is one of the adjectives Trimalchio wants carved on his grave monument. His self-presentation confirms his claim to this designation. The picture on his mural of the little boy

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[66] *Haec sunt vera athla; nam [in] ingenuum nasci tam facile est quam "accede istoc"* (57.11) The phrase *hominem inter homines* is also used of Trimalchio (39.4). Bodel offers Hermeros as "a remarkably consistent portrait of a successful independent freedman" (1984, 144; for a full discussion of Hermeros, 111–179). The only element he finds inconsistent in Hermeros' depiction is exactly the one under discussion: Hermeros' self-esteem. Bodel reports, "Further evidence that freedmen felt proud of their status as ex-slaves is hard to find" (1984, 151). He cites Lily Ross Taylor (1961) as evidence that "freedmen attempted to hide their libertine status on their epitaphs with increasing regularity throughout the first and second centuries AD by omitting the freedman designation (l.) from their nomenclature" (Bodel 1984, 153). I am not persuaded that the omission of the freedman status marker can be interpreted necessarily as an indication of low self-esteem. See Joshel (1992, 76–91) for signs of self esteem on freedman and even slave tombs. Boyce (1991, 90–94) treats Hermeros' language. It is worth noting that the answers to the riddles that Hermeros uses to try to show up the *scholastici* all refer to the body. The body as a mark of the inherent equality between humans challenges social hierarchy.

[67] Bodel (1984) notes that Hermeros and Trimalchio have the only autobiographical statements in the *Cena*, and both display a similar sense of pride in their status. He believes Petronius intended to show by this similarity that there is no way to transcend freed status.

[68] *Putares me defecisse? Non mehercules mi haec iactura gusti fuit, tamquam nihil facti. Alteras feci maiores et meliores [et feliciores], ut nemo non me virum fortem diceret* (76.5).

leaving the slave market and entering Rome all alone, except for the goddess Minerva, testifies to the courage and drive it took for Trimalchio to achieve his present fortune.[69]

Trimalchio's sense of self and his conception, as displayed in his mural, that life is a becoming, a progress question the conventional reading of the repeated references to time and death in the *Cena*. Arrowsmith, for example, notes that Trimalchio is "a man obsessed with death,"[70] and Bodel suggests, "Thoughts of it [death] … hang like a shroud over the banquet."[71] Rimell describes Trimalchio as having "an obsession with time … haunted by his past … petrified of death."[72] However, these perspectives do not do justice to the framing of the references to death in the *Cena* and Trimalchio's comments on the topic.

Themes of time and death do certainly permeate the narrative; the very first information about Trimalchio in the text refers to his wealth and that he has in his dining room a clock and a trumpeter to tell him how much time he has lost from his life (*sciat quantum de vita perdiderit*, 26.9). Funerals are a particular focus; two of the guests are in the funeral business: an undertaker and a grave monument maker (38.14; 78.6; 71.5), and twice the dinner conversation turns to recently attended funeral celebrations. Trimalchio not only has his will read out and the instructions for his grave monument specified, he insists that his guests pretend they are at his funeral (78.4): "Pretend I'm dead, he said" (*fingite me, inquit, mortuum esse*, 78.5). Of course, he is not dead, and that's the point. One cannot enjoy one's own funeral. But Trimalchio enjoys this mock one. He anoints his guests with the nard intended for his final rites and jokes that he hopes he will enjoy this as much when he is dead as he does alive (78.3).[73] It is not that Trimalchio fails to recognize the inherent poignancy of death; joined by his wife, friends, and slaves, he breaks into tears after describing his grave (72.1). But he quickly dismisses

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[69] See Bodel 1994, 245 for a different interpretation.

[70] Arrowsmith 1966, 306.

[71] Bodel 1999, 44. Bodel explains that this death imagery helps to convey the reality of the freedman's status: "He lives in a particular social limbo, like the disembodied spirits of the underworld, who have the form but not the substance of real men" (1999, 47).

[72] Rimell 2002, 184–85.

[73] *Statim ampullam nardi aperuit omnesque nos unxit et spero inquit futurum ut aeque me motuum iuvet tanquam vivum* (78.3).

this reaction—"Since we know we must die, why don't we live?"—and suggests a bath.[74]

References to death in the *Cena* function as a recall to life. They signal that time "when nothing else will be possible."[75] In this scheme, thoughts of death are not morbid but are prompts to live, calls to action. Trimalchio accepts the inherent flux of his material body; he says, "None of us are born quite solid,"[76] and with this he accepts its mortality. The silver skeleton, introduced at the beginning of the meal, reifies this theme (34.8). Skeletons, a conventional motif at Roman meals, figured the end point implicit in the body's material cycle that begins with the consumption of food: consuming, digesting, absorbing, excreting, making tissue, growing older, rotting in the tomb, flowing away until nothing but bones remains. This continual vulnerability of the material body to flux and change is specifically what metaphysical notions of being reject. But Trimalchio, with his emphasis on the materiality of the body and its open margins, understands the limits set upon lives, that humans eventually "die of their own nature."[77] His declarations of this fact have often been dismissed as trite, but that is a value judgment, not an argument against a perspective. This theme of death is the topic of his first poem, where he laments that once death bears us away, we will all be nothing. Here again he reads this inevitability that life will end as a challenge to live: "So now let us live, while we can live well" (*ergo vivamus, dum licet esse bene*, 34.10)[78]

The most telling indication that Trimalchio is not petrified by death in the *Cena* is his knowledge that he is in no danger for a very long time. He knows that he has thirty years, four months, two days left to live (77.2). He learned the date of his death, he says, from a seer who "knew my intestines; he told me everything except what I had eaten the day before" (76.11).[79]

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[74] *Cum scimus nos morituros esse, quare non vivamus* (72.2).

[75] Lingis 2000, 106.

[76] *Nemo nostrum solide natus est* (47.4).

[77] Lingis 2000, 106.

[78] Connors (1998, 52) points out how the frame of this poem plays on *aufero*: "Death is figured (in the verb *auferet*) as Orcus carrying one away, while in a punning reversal, a new dish (*ferculum*, from the same root as *aufero*) is literally carried in as the poem on being carried off ends." She also notes the pun in *esse*: either *sum* (to be) or *edo* (to eat). These figures contribute to the understanding of material life based on the inherent fluidity of consuming and digesting body that I see as the foundation for Trimalchio's perspective on existence.

[79] *Intestinas meas noverat; tantum quod mihi non dixerat quid pridie cenaveram.*

Trimalchio's death, as it is for all humans, is inscribed on his very body and in its material nature. Trimalchio knows he will die, but this is no cause for despair, as his statements make clear. To live in the anticipation of death is "to live in the future and the possible, to set goals and advance toward them."[80] In that way, Trimalchio shows himself determined to live, as he declares immediately following the revelation of his remaining life span: "If I could only expand my boundaries to Apulia, I shall have gone far enough in my lifetime."[81] This is why his trumpeter blows the hours—not to lament the passing of time, but to tell Trimalchio how much time he has to achieve his goals.[82]

Critics who describe Trimalchio's home as exclusively "a house of the dead" do a disservice to the host's commitment to life and the future. The place may indeed be a social underworld, a world below and unknown to denizens of a more elite upper world, but this does not make it an underworld for those who inhabit it. Bodel has made a case that the correspondence between the descriptions in Trimalchio's autobiographical mural and contemporary funerary monuments allows readers to recognize one aspect of Trimalchio's house as a house of the dead. These correspondences might, however, also remind that not all groups in societies have equal access to enunciating their perspectives.[83] Trimalchio's views may reflect the discourse of freedmen's tombs, not because Petronius wishes to call attention to death, but because he articulates a freedman's perspective that finds few opportunities for cultural expression, except on tombs commissioned and planned by their freedman owners, just as Trimalchio's is.

Some have read the image of the Sibyl with her wish to die (48.8) as another indication that Trimalchio's house figures a living death. But in the context of Trimalchio's knowledge of the very date of his death and his energy and drive to complete his goals before that ending, the Sybil only confirms the tragedy of living forever.

In the *Cena*, Trimalchio takes every opportunity to express his desire to live as fully as possible in the time allotted: "If we must die, why don't we

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[80] Lingis 2000, 107.

[81] *Hoc mihi dicit fatus meus. quod si contigerit fundos Apuliae iungere, satis vivus pervenero* (77.3). As Smith (1975, 209) points out, this does not coincide with his wish in 48.3.

[82] See Toohey (1997, 53–54) for an interpretation of time in the *Cena*.

[83] As Echion implied in his comment to Agamemnon, *quia, tu potes loquere, non loquis* ("You who are allowed to speak, don't speak," 46.1).

live?" He thrusts his life forward with all his energy toward its end. He wants to leave his mark on time, as the image of the clock on his tomb declares. Bodel has suggested that the freedmen "live against the clock" in the unredeemed half-life of their freed status.[84] But Trimalchio's instructions about his tomb suggest a different attitude. He wants a clock placed in the middle so that "anyone who looks at the time will read my name whether they like it or not" (71.11).[85] Trimalchio has no illusions about how his society views him. Some may not like it, but nevertheless, his tomb will emblazon his mark on time, his name, his citizen name, a final testament to the progress of becoming that his life has been.

The Cena is not, as some would have it, Trimalchio's underworld; it is rather the "Undertakers' Ball," where those who recognize and accept the material basis of life and its inherent limits, celebrate. The reference to the labyrinth (73.1) does not refer to Trimalchio's "mongrel" status, half slave, half free, as Bodel suggests,[86] but rather to the evidence metaphysicians try to keep from sight: that all humans, as the Minotaur metaphorizes, are equal in their shared animal, material, and physical being.

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[84] Bodel 1994, 253.

[85] *Horologium in medio, ut quisquis horas inspiciet, velit nolit, nomen meum legat* (71.11).

[86] Bodel 1994, 253.

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