

Comparing Social Inequality in the *Satyrica* and *Egalia's Daughters*

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Introduction

In 1977 a relatively unknown Norwegian author, Gerd Brantenberg, published a satire, *Egalia's Daughters*, which quickly became an international best-seller and established her as one of the most influential Scandinavian authors of the time.¹ Brantenberg named the main character in *Egalia's Daughters* Petronius Bram after the Roman author Petronius, because she knew that Petronius lived during the emperor Nero's oppressive reign.² Despite the fact that her work echoes many of the comic themes found in the *Satyrica*, Brantenberg's satire remains relatively unknown to the community of scholars who study classical antiquity. But for anyone interested in the classical tradition and the influence of the *Satyrica* on modern social satire, this work is highly relevant. Conversely, because *Egalia's Daughters* provides a comically exaggerated look at what happens when marginalized characters invert the social norms, reading Brantenberg's satire can help Petronius's modern audience gain a better insight into the *Cena*, and what Trimalchio's behavior may have to tell us about the lives of the non-elite and socially oppressed in Roman society. By the time Brantenberg's work was published, the leaders of the feminist movement in Norway had spent over a

¹ Garton 1993, 241. Since Brantenberg's satire was first published in 1977, the work has been translated into numerous languages, including English, and made into a film. See also Moberg 1985, 326.

² See Moberg 1985, 326 n.6. It is now widely accepted by Petronian scholars that the author of the *Satyrica* composed his work during Nero's reign. For a discussion of the chronology and social context of the *Satyrica*, see Rose 1971, 1–37; Smith 1975, 214–231; D'Arms 1981, 97–120; and Sullivan 1985, 1666–1686.

decade educating the public about the social oppression of women in their culture, which included the disparity between men and women in the workforce and the pressing need for women to have equal representation in political affairs.³ Brantenberg pokes fun at Norway's patriarchal culture and provides her readers with a comic look at what would happen in modern society if the sex roles were reversed for men and women. Since laughter is one of the tools which oppressed characters in both works use to fight social inequality, my purpose in this essay is to examine the way in which both authors, Brantenberg and Petronius, use humor to explore the themes of social inequality and oppression.

Readers who are familiar with the *Satyricea* will find that the universe of the disillusioned Encolpius and his companions has much in common with Brantenberg's fictitious land of Egalsund, where Petronius Bram, a writer of satire, and his friends ridicule their society's mores and engage in comic misadventures. When Petronius Bram realizes the limits of his social mobility as one of the less-privileged members of his society, he uses humor to fight back when he writes a satire that mocks the pretensions of the wealthy and privileged. Petronius Bram sees firsthand the disquiet of the elite and powerful members of his society when he challenges their rules for proper behavior and attire. The restriction of Trimalchio's social status as a freedman can be compared to the way in which Petronius Bram has certain limitations placed upon him as a male within the social sphere of Egalsund. Trimalchio's behavior at the *Cena* suggests that while there are social and political boundaries he cannot cross as a freedman in Roman society at large, he can push the limits of these restrictions within the confines of his own home. I suggest that Brantenberg's novel transforms one of the key themes of the *Cena* – the distress in ancient Rome of the less-privileged social groups at the way in which the more privileged members of society have excluded them from advancement – into a dialogue about social inequality in modern society.

While previous studies of both the *Satyricea* and *Egalia's Daughters* have considered how clothing either enhances or disguises the true nature of a person's identity,⁴ I intend to examine what happens when marginalized

³ Garton 1995, 7–8.

⁴ As Rimell's recent study of the *Satyricea* suggests, clothing is a focal point throughout the work. See Rimell 2002, 34–37 for a consideration of episodes in the *Satyricea* where clothing is used to conceal or deceive aspects of a main character's true nature. In a study

characters use clothing to communicate their frustrations about the cultural restraints placed on what constitutes acceptable social behavior. My intent for the remainder of this essay is to examine Brantenberg's variation on the *Cena*'s treatment of how the character Trimalchio, who exists within the lower strata of society,⁵ appropriates the dress and appearance of more privileged members of society in order to test the confines of social mobility. While the question of whether the *Satyricon* should be understood solely as light, entertaining reading or as reflecting an in-depth concern for societal decline remains highly contested among scholars, it seems clear that the author of the *Satyricon* takes a comic look at the morals and customs of Neronian Rome in the *Cena*.⁶ The figure of Trimalchio is often described, therefore, as a caricature of one of the many imperial *nouveaux riches* who, although wealthy, will find that being a former slave places limits on one's social ambitions.⁷ I follow the argument of Perkins, however, which suggests that despite the satirical nature of his work, Petronius's depiction of the freedmen may echo the mind-set and anxieties of the non-elite members of Roman society.⁸ Trimalchio's inversion of the social order, therefore, can reflect real frustrations aimed at the social hierarchy of the Neronian world. The *Cena* provides a comic look at the social tension which existed during this time between the freedmen and the more privileged members of soci-

of *Egalia's Daughters*, Barr 1989, 88 considers the use of clothing as a status signifier in modern culture and argues that specific types of clothing can place undue emphasis on gender characteristics.

⁵ In keeping with the arguments offered by Alföldy 1988, 148–150 and Garnsey and Saller 1987, 109, I am declining to use the terms 'upper class' and 'lower class' because they do not adequately define social divisions in the Roman world. Instead, I am using the vocabulary that Hope 2000, 127ff. employs in her essay on status divisions, including the terms 'non-privileged', 'high strata', and 'low strata'. I would also like to point out that wealth is separate from social privilege in both the worlds of Trimalchio and Petronius Bram.

⁶ See, for example, Walsh 1974, 189–190; Slater 1990, 3; and Lawall 1995, iv, for their impressions of the *Satyricon* as a novel that is more entertaining than critical. For an overview of the arguments that the author of the *Satyricon* did engage in social commentary, see Highet 1941, Bacon 1958, and Arrowsmith 1959. Bartsch 1994, 199, provides a more recent discussion that compares Trimalchio's behavior to the emperor Nero's.

⁷ For a detailed examination of Trimalchio as representative of the freedmen who were unable to advance socially and politically despite their acquisition of wealth, see Bodel 1984.

⁸ Perkins 2005, 147.

ety:⁹ when the ex-slave Trimalchio decides to appropriate the symbols of cultural privilege, including imitation of the clothing of the senatorial and equestrian elite, his behavior appears to test the limits of both the social system designed to keep him in his place and the tolerance of his guest Encolpius. The question that remains contested among scholars, however, is whether or not Trimalchio's attempts to challenge the status quo are a reflection of real changes that were taking place in the hierarchy of Roman society. Conte argues that the *Cena* depicts the collapse of the familiar social hierarchy to his audience: 'When Petronius satirizes in the *Cena* the uneducated tastelessness of the newly rich he is recording the emergence of new social elements and new wealth, but at the same time he is announcing a program of cultural disintegration'.¹⁰ The 'cultural disintegration' that Conte refers to is met with laughter at first, but as Trimalchio continues to test the limits of the social boundaries that separate him from the more privileged members of society, Encolpius's reaction suggests that the author of the *Satyrica* is highlighting the discomfort some members of Roman society may have felt at the deconstruction of the established cultural norms. Finley, on the other hand, comments on the restrictions that were still in existence for Roman freedmen at that time: '. . . the Romans recognized an *ordo libertinorum*, but they appreciated the virtual meaninglessness of such an order and rarely referred to it. In his wealth, Trimalchio ranked with the senators in his "class", too, in the Marxist sense, and even in his life-style so long as we consider only his esoteric luxury and his acceptance of certain "senatorial" values, the ownership of large estates as a "non occupation" and the pride he took in his economic self-sufficiency. But not when we look beyond, to the activities from which he was legally excluded as a freedman, to the social circles from which he was equally excluded, and which he made not the

⁹ Although both Veyne 1964, 301–324 and Ebersbach 1973, 96–104 have suggested that the author of the *Satyrica* is alerting his own peers to the threat presented by freedmen who are attaining both power and wealth at this time, Bodel 1984, 18–20 cautions that, while the freedmen characters in the *Satyrica* do reflect the social changes taking place during this time, there is a danger in reading the work solely as a moralizing and historically accurate text because it excludes other readings of the work that are based on its literary value. See also Hight 1941, 176–194.

¹⁰ Cf. Conte 1996, 116: 'It is not that Petronius wants to replace the high with the low, the non-material with the material, the incorporeal with the corporeal, to produce in carnival fashion a "world turned upside down"; rather he wants to blur the hierarchic divisions themselves and reduce high and low to the same material level'.

slightest effort to break into'.¹¹ Trimalchio could have as much money as a senator, but outside the confines of his own home, his social life and access to certain activities within the city still would have been constrained. It is my contention that Trimalchio's behavior demonstrates that any blurring of the lines between the high and low strata of society represented, for the Roman elite, a threat to their established way of life which seemed very real. But at the same time, the fact that Trimalchio's world of social inversion could exist only within the confines of his own house suggests that for the non-elite Roman freedmen, advances in society, such as the creation of the *ordo libertinorum*, had had few practical ramifications on the way in which freedmen lived their lives in the public sphere over the years.

The Cena Trimalchionis

The inverted and comic world of the *Cena Trimalchionis* derives much of its humor from the guests' laughter at Trimalchio's lavish displays of food and money.¹² Trimalchio stages his dinner party in a style he imagines contains many aristocratic elements, but he reverses the ideals that exemplify the noble Roman's lifestyle, and, as a result, the gathering lacks a moderate and refined atmosphere.¹³ Instead, crude displays of material wealth and extravagance dominate the evening at his home: the excessively elaborate food, lack of intellectual conversation, and raucous performances by the slaves make the guests at this party perceive the evening as hideously *nouveau riche* rather than high-quality or cultured.¹⁴ But the entertaining episode cannot be dismissed merely as ignorance or bad taste on the part of Trimalchio; rather, when the *Cena* highlights Trimalchio's act of turning social convention on its head, it allows Petronius's audience a rare look at society from the per-

¹¹ Finley 1985, 50–51.

¹² In particular Slater 1990, 50–86 and Conte 1996 provide an overview of the humor in this episode. Plaza 2000 has also recently provided an excellent and comprehensive survey of laughter in the *Satyrice*.

¹³ See Gowers 1993, 1–49 for the relationship between food and morals in the Roman world. For the dramatic element in the *Cena*, see especially Rosenblüth 1909; Preston 1915, 260–269; Sandy 1974, 329–346; and Panayotakis 1995.

¹⁴ An analysis of social power and language in Petronius can be found in Laird 1999, 209–258 and Bloomer 1997, 198–241. See also Walsh 1970, 111–140. Perkins 2005, 145–160 has a thorough discussion of how the *Cena* portrays the views of non-elite members of Roman society.

spective of an ex-slave who still remains very much a marginalized figure, despite his status as a freedman.¹⁵ His behavior is an inversion of the expected cultural norms for freedmen at that time, and his guests are quick to observe this. Trimalchio, according to Plaza, wishes to reverse the social hierarchy that exists between the freedmen and the freeborn, but his efforts are met with resistance on the part of his freeborn guests.¹⁶ She suggests that Encolpius's reactions, although he is not a nobleman, reflect the disdain that noble Romans would have upon witnessing, for example, Trimalchio picking his teeth with a silver toothpick (*Sat.* 33.1): 'The freedmen's world presented to the reader in the *Cena Trimalchionis* is, in several respects, an inverted version of the ideal of a noble Roman. This ideal is, ironically, mirrored in Encolpius's views, when he, who is himself an effeminate rogue far removed from such an ideal, tries to hold on to the noble perspective in the face of the massive transgression of it by the freedmen'.¹⁷ During the course of the evening, however, Encolpius will switch from deriding Trimalchio to feeling fearful and anxious about the ex-slave's behavior.¹⁸ This transition becomes apparent, I suggest, when Trimalchio tests the social boundaries that Encolpius wants maintained between the freeborn and freedmen at the dinner party.

In a scene that is central to the theme of social divisions in the *Cena*, Trimalchio's grand entrance into the dinner party is marked by the vulgar and unsuitable amount of material wealth that he displays in front of his guests. In particular, Trimalchio's endeavor to dress in garments that he considers elegant and refined proves at first to be funny to the freeborn Encolpius and his dinner companions, who see this behavior as exemplifying Trimalchio's bad taste:

in his eramus lautitiis, cum ipse Trimalchio ad symphoniam allatus est positusque inter cervicalia minutissima expressit imprudentibus risum. pallio enim coccineo adrasum excluserat caput circaque oneratas veste

¹⁵ See Perkins 2005, 146.

¹⁶ Plaza 2000, 164.

¹⁷ Plaza 2000, 84.

¹⁸ Plaza 2000, 155 suggests that it is difficult for the audience to discern whether Trimalchio's dinner party is either 'comic or threatening' to Encolpius. I consider Encolpius's fear of the inversion of the social order, however, to be reflective of the cultural milieu of Nero's Rome where freeborn Romans perceived the behaviors of freedmen as encroaching on their social sphere.

*cervices laticlaviam immiserat mappam fimbriis hinc atque illinc pendentibus. habebat etiam in minimo digito sinistrae manus anulum grandem subauratum, extremo vero articulo digiti sequentis minorem, ut mihi videbatur, totum aureum, sed plane ferreis veluti stellis ferruminatum. et ne has tantum ostenderet divitias, dextrum nudavit lacertum armilla aurea cultum et eboreo circulo lamina splendente conexo.*¹⁹

(*Sat.* 32,1–3)

We were consuming these marvelous tidbits when, at the sound of a trumpet, Trimalchio himself was brought in and was placed among heaps of tiny cushions, which caused some indiscreet guests to laugh, for he had swathed his close-cropped head in a scarlet-colored cloak and around his neck, which was burdened with clothing, he had hung a purple-striped napkin with little bits of fringe hanging here and there. He also had on the little finger of his left hand an enormous gilded ring. On the last joint of the next finger he had on a smaller ring that looked, I think, like solid gold, but plainly was encrusted with iron stars. And he did not show off only these riches; he bared his right arm, which was adorned with a golden bracelet and an ivory hoop with a brilliant clasp.²⁰

Trimalchio's appearance at the dinner party is greeted with much amusement; the guests find the bright colors he is wearing to be vulgar²¹ and his imitation of the accoutrements of the senator and knight to be cheap looking. Yet as Slater notes, the laughter can be seen as a form of protest at Trimalchio's outfit, which mixes together the symbols of freedmen, senators, and members of the equestrian order: 'Trimalchio's imprudent guests are having trouble accepting their own roles and the proper social frame around their behavior'.²² The guests do not perceive Trimalchio's appearance and actions as normal; moreover, they are unwilling to assume subordinate roles while

¹⁹ All fragments of the *Satyrica* are from the 4th edition of K. Müller, *Petronii Arbitri Satyricon Reliquiae* (Stuttgart – Leipzig 1995).

²⁰ All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

²¹ For the vulgar and colorful dress of both Trimalchio and Fortunata see Walsh 1970, 119–120 and Panayotakis 1995, 66, 96.

²² Slater 1990, 59 n. 19. He also cautions that the use of the word *imprudentes* to describe the laughter of the guests suggests that they are exercising poor judgment. If the guests wish to be invited to dinner, they should not reveal their true feelings about Trimalchio's attire, since they risk insulting the host with their behavior. Plaza 2000, 106 notes that the legal use of *imprudentia* (ignorance of the laws or facts of a situation) implies that the guests do not know the rules of the house.

they are guests in Trimalchio's home. The giggling of the 'imprudent' guests is due to the fact that there were expectations for proper dress and decorum in ancient Roman society that the community expected its members to follow. When Trimalchio violates the dress code, his behavior can be seen as testing the accepted social order.

Throughout the dinner party there is much merriment and laughter. The evening begins with the freeborn guests mocking Trimalchio and the other freedmen for their inverted world-view, in which the ability to display heaps of money and tell vulgar jokes is vastly preferred to intellectual pursuits. But as the events proceed, it becomes less certain whether the laughter heard in Trimalchio's household is meant to ridicule him or whether it is a sign of approval at his display of tasteless humor.²³ The social climate appears to shift in favor of Trimalchio soon after his grand entrance. There is approving laughter when more food is served (*Sat.* 36,4), and later some of the freeborn guests begin to laugh in enjoyment, not ridicule, at Trimalchio's jokes (*Sat.* 56,10). But Encolpius's tolerance for Trimalchio's world appears to be diminishing. Trimalchio continually exposes Encolpius to behavior that inverts the social hierarchy. As the evening progresses, Encolpius's behavior begins to shift from mocking what is happening around him to indifference, followed by fear, and finally nausea. It becomes evident that Encolpius no longer wants to take part in Trimalchio's universe, in which he cannot feel superior to the boorish freedman: 'After all, Encolpius is but a guest in a universe where Trimalchio is king, and unlike Horace's Fundanius in *Cena Nasidieni*, he is not quite convinced that an abstract kind of superiority based on the ability to deride will make him a winner over the vulgar nouveau-riche'.²⁴ He does not react when Ascyrtos and Giton are rebuked for laughing too boisterously (*Sat.* 57–59,1–2). Then he confesses to feeling ill when Trimalchio serves to each guest an extravagant dish of whole chickens and goose eggs instead of smaller and more suitable portions of poultry. Immediately after this he panics at the appearance of the mason Habinnas, whom he mistakes for a praetor because of his clothing and entourage (*Sat.* 65,1–5).²⁵ As he considers all of the deceptive appearances of food and clothing

²³ Plaza 2000, 37–56 argues that the laughter in the *Cena* is ambiguous because different social classes would view the scenes from multiple perspectives and consequently this type of humor would have a broad appeal.

²⁴ Cf. Plaza 2000, 106–107.

²⁵ Encolpius also panics when he sees the painted dog at *Sat.* 29,2.

around him, Encolpius compares this dinner to the feast at the Saturnalia (*Sat.* 69,9).²⁶ Trimalchio goes on to reveal his desire to free his slaves after his death and to give some of them lavish gifts of property, and the slaves begin to cheer and show their approval (*Sat.* 71,1–2). Encolpius’s growing discomfort becomes apparent when the whole room begins to sob around Trimalchio while his will is read aloud. Yet Slater comments that Trimalchio ‘has his audience in the palm of his hand again’²⁷ as he stops his tears and is grinning (*gaudentem*) as he urges everyone to follow him to the baths (*Sat.* 72,2–4).

Encolpius is sickened when the ultimate breach of good taste occurs: Trimalchio encourages his guests to pretend that they are experiencing his funeral feast: *Ibat res ad summam nauseam* ‘The event turned utterly nauseating’ (*Sat.* 78,5). Trimalchio’s shroud of choice, in which he is depicted on his tomb, is the *toga praetexta*, which he will wear along with five golden rings. Courtney suggests that Trimalchio, as a member of the *seviri Augusti*, would have been allowed to wear this garment at the games he would have staged when he was initiated into the sevirate but finds no other evidence that the sevirs were allowed to wear this after they no longer held the office.²⁸ Encolpius’s nausea and disgust prompt him to leave the party as soon as an opportunity presents itself. Trimalchio’s cheerful demeanor at *Sat.* 72,4 may also imply that he has won a small but significant victory over Encolpius, who can no longer mock him but instead is reduced to queasiness and then escapes into the night. Encolpius exits the party because he is unable to tolerate what is happening around him. Conte describes Encolpius’s departure with his companions as evidence that they have lost control of the situation and lack the authority to challenge Trimalchio’s behavior: ‘Their final flight will be precisely an admission of defeat, not a gesture of contempt or an affirmation of superiority’.²⁹ As Trimalchio repeatedly defies social convention, Encolpius’s reactions, or even his inability to react to the outrageous events taking place around him at the party, suggest to Petronius’s audience that the world-according-to-Trimalchio is not merely comic, but also threatening to some of the freeborn guests.

²⁶ Plaza 2000, 88 and Döpp 1993.

²⁷ Slater 1990, 77.

²⁸ Courtney 2001, 120–121 n. 66.

²⁹ Cf. Conte 1996, 130.

Clothing as a Cultural Signifier

Plaza explains how Trimalchio, although he still bears the mark of a former slave with his shaved head, displays his ambitious desire to be recognized as someone who belongs to a privileged social group: ‘Trimalchio’s social transgression is neatly summarized by the images of his napkin, displaying the broad purple stripe which was worn by the senatorial order on their togas (32.2), and of his gold ring, the sign of a Roman knight, thinly disguised by iron stars (32.3)’.³⁰ In his effort to make an entrance into high society, Trimalchio dons garments that resemble the attire normally reserved for the elite Romans. Courtney suggests that even though Trimalchio is not actually claiming to be a senator or knight, his attire is suggestive of their clothing.³¹ The appropriate *cenatoria* for Trimalchio would probably have consisted of a brightly colored tunic, perhaps loosely belted.³² Since distinctive clothing provided a way for the community to differentiate quickly between the social orders, it also served as an easy way for members of the community to challenge or confuse the boundaries that kept the social orders apart. Sebesta argues that the interest in making clothing that varied in color and material ‘reflected the basically hierarchical Roman society and the struggle to distinguish or change social rank by the members of the higher and lower social orders’.³³ Jewelry could indicate one’s rank as well: Juvenal’s attack on the Egyptian Crispinus at 1,28 mentions his gold ring, which denotes his status as an equestrian. Pliny the Elder remarks that slaves and former slaves often wore iron rings plated with gold, which could deceive observers into thinking they were part of the equestrian order (*HN* 33,6,23). Pliny’s comment also suggests that the community of imperial Rome placed great emphasis on status and that, when individuals within the community wished to confound the visible distinction between high and low status members of society, they appropriated certain status symbols, such as a particular kind of jewelry or dress.

The *Cena* satirizes the way in which Roman society based its initial perception of who had power and who was in control on visible details such as dress and appearance. Because the status of any person within the Roman

³⁰ Plaza 2000, 105–106.

³¹ Courtney 2001, 83.

³² See Croom 2000, 39.

³³ Sebesta 1994, 65.

community could shift according to the social context and environment, social status was a constantly changing category. Purcell has documented how a person's status, or social standing, could depend on the location of the person and the status of the witnesses observing the person's behavior.³⁴ Since determination of one's social status in any given situation is often based superficially and initially, at least, on appearance, this is one way for the lower social orders to appropriate the standards and symbols of a socially respectable image.³⁵ As a result it becomes more and more challenging for the members of the community of imperial Rome to determine an individual's status based solely on appearance. But just as Trimalchio never hides the fact that he is a former slave (*Sat.* 71–72), the non-privileged persons are not defying social categories in order to disguise or dismiss their origins, but in order to attain upward mobility within the Roman community in spite of the status assigned to them by society.

As Trimalchio continues to test the limits of what is considered acceptable behavior, Encolpius's bewilderment and hesitancy add to the sense that the socially inverted world of the *Cena* reflects certain societal tensions in Rome. At this time in imperial Rome, it was becoming commonplace for the less-privileged members of society to blur or maneuver the boundaries that defined the divisions between the upper and lower strata in order to challenge social inequalities. Rimell cautions that Trimalchio should not be understood solely as representing the comic buffoon who displays his ignorance; she notes that it is important to recognize that Trimalchio distorts the visual in every aspect. From the many dishes served to his guests that appear to be one thing and turn out to be another to his flamboyant attire, his imitation highlights the idea that not everyone finds it funny when the *nouveaux riches* emulate their betters.³⁶ Although Trimalchio's dress and behavior temporarily invert the social order, in the end he has to content himself with being the wealthiest man at his own dinner party. Even though Encolpius does not always correctly identify the food he sees in front of him, his reaction to the clothing indicates that Trimalchio's attire does not mislead so

³⁴ Purcell 1983, 126.

³⁵ Hope 2001, 179–195 reconstructs the Roman gladiators' attempts at respectability. Because they were marginalized figures within the Roman community, they tried to construct a more socially acceptable identity after death by creating funerary memorials that resembled the monuments of the *seviri Augustales* of Nîmes.

³⁶ Rimell 2002, 47–48.

much as disgust him.³⁷ As Plaza notes, when the laughter becomes more inclusive and less derisive, Trimalchio's world is no longer funny to Encolpius.³⁸ Trimalchio's brightly colored clothes and crass manners overwhelm Encolpius, and, as a result, Encolpius realizes that he is in the social minority in his opinions. Not only is Trimalchio behaving outrageously, but also the other guests are not ill or silent; rather, they continue to laugh and enjoy the evening.

Holding a dinner party in ancient Rome was an event that allowed the host to show off his social privilege to the community at large.³⁹ Instead, throughout the course of the *Cena*, Trimalchio strives to make apparent his superior position and authority in his own home.⁴⁰ He may be a person of great importance to his serving staff, but as a freedman, once he leaves the confines of his property, his participation in greater society would be severely limited. Trimalchio's physical appearance demonstrates his desire to reverse the social sphere of his world with that of the upper strata of society, but Encolpius and the other guests can escape his inverted world order by leaving the dinner party.

Egalia's Daughters

The fictitious world of Egalsund also contains residents who wish to overcome the limitations placed on them by the conventions of society. Brantenberg's division of society into the non-privileged and the privileged is entirely gender-based, however, because the world of *Egalia's Daughters* depicts a matriarchy in which the author reverses the sex roles and women rule over men. The first eighteen chapters of the novel examine the life of the protagonist Petronius Bram and his increasing disenchantment with living in a matriarchy. The second half of the novel, which consists of fifteen chapters, shows what happens when Petronius Bram and his male friends rebel and demand equal rights for themselves. This is not a utopian society,

³⁷ See Schmeling 1994–1995, 207–211 for a discussion of Encolpius's unreliability as a narrator. See also Beck 1973, 271–283.

³⁸ Plaza 2000, 153 suggests that the other characters' ridicule of Encolpius's panic highlights how the inverted order of society appears to be frightening to the freeborn guests.

³⁹ Cf. Hope 2000, 126.

⁴⁰ Although he does not, as Plaza 2000, 110 points out, have authority over his wife Fortunata.

nor is it a story about straightforward sex-role reversal; rather, Brantenberg demonstrates that, when the sex roles are reversed, Egalsund is a ridiculous place because the characters base their claim that women are the dominant sex solely on the fact that they have been socialized to believe this.⁴¹ The social challenge that her character Petronius Bram faces is similar to the one Trimalchio confronts in the *Cena*: no amount of wealth can alter the fact that these characters are expected to remain in the lower strata of society due to circumstances beyond their control. Just as Trimalchio could not change the fact that he was born a slave, Petronius Bram cannot help being born male. Trimalchio and Petronius Bram are expected to dress and behave in a way that makes them easily recognizable as part of the lower strata of society. When Petronius Bram decides to challenge the rules that keep the upper and lower strata of society separate, like Trimalchio, he gains acceptance among his peers but cannot move beyond the barriers that separate him from the more elite members of his world.

As non-privileged members of society, the men of Egalsund struggle constantly to rebel against the cultural constraints placed on what is expected of them in terms of appearance and social conduct. In order to fit in, men must marry. They are under pressure from the media, their wives, and their mothers to appear in public with their eyebrows plucked and body hair shaved. The consistent style of dress that men must wear if they want to be considered attractive and therefore socially acceptable includes a tight-fitting skirt, painfully small shoes, and decorative beard-bows. The men's existence is clearly marked by this distinctive dress that restricts their movement. Since any change in the accepted way of doing things is met with laughter and resistance on the part of the female characters, the audience sees how the established cultural norms in Egalsund define what is appropriate for men to wear and how they should behave, and when men are challenging the accepted standards for dress and conduct.

Brantenberg echoes the *Cena*'s theme of clothing-related behavior that seems at first to be in bad taste but then evolves into a situation where the less-privileged members of society indicate through their fashion choices their desire for a more socially acceptable identity. On the first page of Brantenberg's novel, Petronius Bram tells his mother and sister about his desire to pursue a career as a deep-sea diver when he grows up. His mother, Ruth,

⁴¹ Moberg 1985, 331. See also Barr 1989, 89.

tells him to be more practical and his sister, Ba, ridicules him for wanting to be different from the other males in their society:

His sister laughed derisively. She was a year and a half younger and she teased him constantly. “Ha, ha! And a manwom can’t be a seawom either, a mafele seawom! Ho, ho! Or perhaps you’re going to be a cabin boy or a seamanwom or a helmsmanwom? I’ll die laughing, I will...”
(1–2)⁴²

Ba is laughing at him in part because teenage boys in Egalsund do not grow up to be deep-sea divers; they stay home and watch the children instead. But Ba is also laughing because their society does not manufacture deep-sea diving outfits for men, and the idea strikes her as particularly comical: ‘A *diver*! They don’t have frogwom suits for menwim. A mafele frogwom!’ (10). The female members of the family quickly dismiss his dream, and his sister’s derisive laughter immediately lets the reader know that Petronius Bram is violating the cultural expectations for how young men in his society should behave.

Petronius Bram Buys a Bra

After Ba ridicules Petronius Bram for wanting to dress like a female deep-sea diver, he recognizes that clothing is linked to power and cultural privilege. When Petronius Bram looks at his mother’s attire he admires it for its practicality and comfort:

Mum was a handsome wom. She had a fine rounded head and short-cropped hair that always stood straight up. A straight nose, sharply defined features, small piercing pale blue eyes, a thin determined mouth, straight shoulders and distinctive movements. When she moved, she always did so purposefully and efficiently. Her voice, which was sharp and penetrating, always gave the impression that she knew what she was

⁴² The text is from G. Brantenberg, *Egalia’s Daughters*, Louis MacKay and Gerd Brantenberg, trans. (Seal Press 1977; reprint 1985). One of Brantenberg’s main considerations when writing this work was that language is not neutral; rather, social order and gender affect it. Thus, she has reconstructed all gender-specific terms to reflect a society based on matriarchal rule. Hence, mafele = male, fele = female, etc.

talking about, even when she didn't. That was how a woman ought to be. Besides, she was always stylishly dressed. A loose brown tunic and baggy trousers. Brown shoes with thick soles. She usually wore a white silk scarf around her neck. She always looked neat. An attractive woman, such as men would dream of. Petronius knew that. (11–12)

The loose-fitting, practical clothing that women wear allows them to work at any career they wish. Ruth represents the ideal, 'an attractive woman, such as men would dream of' because of her clothing and physical appearance. She is indeed a particularly privileged member of society in Egalsund since she is a high-paid government official who lives with her family in a penthouse. Despite his family's wealth, as a male, the career options for Petronius Bram are restricted to low-paying jobs such as teaching or secretarial work, and he must dress like the other men.

The male residents of Egalsund are easily identifiable because they wear pehos. The dress of all grown men and maturing boys in Egalsund must include this bulky and uncomfortable piece of underwear that is clearly visible through their clothing. When his father, Christopher, takes him to buy his first peho, Petronius Bram describes the garment in a way that most readers would probably find comical, but there is a disturbing element to the scene as well:

The boys said it was awkward and uncomfortable, cramming your penis into that stupid box. And it was so impractical when you had to pee. First you had to loosen the waistband, which held the peho in place. The waistband was fastened under the skirt, so you stood fumbling for a long time, especially at first. The waistband was usually too tight and it cut into the skin.... Some were proud of their pehos. Baldrian, for example, really did look charming in his. Petronius sighed. "I wish I were a girl," he thought. God knows how many times he had thought that. Then he would have a stout flap in his trousers or overalls that it only took a moment to unbutton when nature called. (12–13)

The uncomfortable peho, which Petronius Bram describes, is part of the mandatory uniform he must wear in public if he wants to be considered socially acceptable to the women of Egalsund. His appearance distinguishes

him as inferior to women, who do not have to appear in public in clothing that restricts their movement or causes them pain.

In both *Egalia's Daughters* and the *Cena*, the audience observes what happens when the code of conduct is broken regarding the rules for correct dress and appearance. In her study of the use of humor in *Egalia's Daughters*, Barr argues that while female readers may find it empowering to laugh at the male characters' dilemma, it is also possible that they can see a more discomfiting aspect of this scene as they recall their own adolescent experiences.⁴³ Barr suggests that it is the fact that the highly impractical garment restricts the men's movement and calls so much attention to their genitalia that is both amusing and disturbing.⁴⁴ The humor that such a garment evokes, however, will eventually become empowering when the male residents of Egalsund finally learn to laugh at their own attire. Instead of being controlled by derisive laughter, now men will be able to use humor to break free of the social conventions expected of them. The male laughter, like the laughter of the freedmen in the *Cena*, is a way for the marginalized and alienated characters to challenge what is considered normal in their respective cultures.

When Bad Taste Becomes Political

In the second part of the novel, men explore what happens within their community when they manipulate the status boundaries that have been established by the females. Men become openly rebellious at having to wear traditional attire, and when they refuse to do so, the women are no longer amused by their actions. Rather, they are stunned and horrified when, for example, at a women's athletic festival, Petronius Bram and three of his friends dare to appear bare-chested on a public stage:

There they stood, in all their flat-chested indecency – and two of them even had hairy chests. Worst of all, one of them was clearly a manwom of advanced age.... One of these four masculist fanatics somehow got hold of the microphone, and he began shouting, “Away with all men-

⁴³ Barr 1989, 88 suggests that the humor in *Egalia's Daughters* can be analyzed according to Kristeva's discussion about Menippean discourse since both have scenes that manage to be comical and tragic at the same time. See also Kristeva 1986, 34–61.

⁴⁴ Barr 1989, 89–91.

wim's finery and decorations! Why should we be forced to hide our bodies? ... We demand the right to be as we are." At this moment a gasp of astonishment ran through the crowd. The older manwom tore off his wig and flung it up in the air. The crown of his head was completely bald. It was the most horrific and obscene sight the hundreds of spectators had ever seen. Of course, most of them had probably seen bald heads in the privacy of their own bedrooms. But here in public! A bald head in the open air! (251)

The festival crowd begins to rage out of control at this point, and the police are called in to restore order and subdue the men. After Petronius Bram and his friend Baldrian are released from police custody, Baldrian informs him that it is a social construct of the matriarchy in which they live that dictates that men and women have to wear different clothing, and it is not, as Petronius Bram previously thought, a rule based on the biological differences between the sexes (253). The men's bald heads and their bare chests are as vulgar to the women as Trimalchio's attire was to his guests.

Conclusion

Brantenberg's novel turns traditional values upside down and, in doing so, she educates her audience about a deeper underlying problem in the modern world: the absurdity of cultures in which status distinctions are in part superficially based on factors such as dress and physical appearance.⁴⁵ At the end of *Egalia's Daughters*, Petronius Bram writes his own satire, *The Sons of Democracy*. In this satire-within-a-satire, patriarchy is the norm, but not everyone finds his parody of modern society humorous:

Some people disliked the book and stopped reading half way through. There was nothing particularly funny about portraying "men" as muscle-bound supermen, always carrying on and shouting and ordering people about, while "women" went round smiling and behaving like servile dolls in pretty dresses. It was grotesque. No culture which managed to distort the natural characteristics of the two sexes to such a degree could be regarded as a real culture.... Christopher thought the book was de-

⁴⁵ Cf. Moberg 1985, 330.

lightful. "Why don't you write about something that appeals to people," asked Ruth Bram bad-temperedly. But Christopher went on laughing until he fell over, while Ruth yelled at him to stop his constant guffaws. "It really can't be that funny, reading about wim being ridiculed!" But Christopher carried on regardless, laughing his way through the whole book. (266–267)

Finally, it is the non-privileged members of Egalsund who have something to laugh at. In her critical study of how laughing at *Egalia's Daughters* can be liberating for female readers, Barr concludes that the women who find the text funny are challenging the conventions of their own society because they too have been socialized to believe in a patriarchy.⁴⁶ The male characters within *Egalia's Daughters* undermine the established hierarchy for men and women in Egalsund when they laugh at the antics in *The Sons of Democracy*. But *The Sons of Democracy* has not overturned the established social order in Egalsund. The final conversation takes place between Petronius Bram and his mother, Ruth, at the very end of *Egalia's Daughters*. She is upset with him for thinking that a patriarchy could be successful and she explains to him why it can never succeed:

In a society where menwim were allowed to rule, all terrestrial life would die out. If menwim weren't kept down, if they weren't restrained, if they weren't civilized, if they weren't *kept in their place*, life would perish And as always, Ruth Bram had the final word. (269)

The last words of this satire, spoken by a female character who argues that men must be '*kept in their place*', remind the reader once again that, when the roles for men and women are overturned, modern society is revealed to be a ridiculous place.⁴⁷ Brantenberg's audience can find the experience of laughing at a novel that parodies the absurdities of modern culture empowering. Her work is a call to action because she wrote it from the viewpoint of the disillusioned and oppressed.

The humor which Brantenberg uses to raise awareness of the disparity between the sexes did not appeal to all members of her society when the novel first came out: women received it enthusiastically while men did not

⁴⁶ Barr 1989, 97.

⁴⁷ Cf. Moberg 1985, 330.

find the novel to be particularly funny or interesting.⁴⁸ Barr suggests that, when the female audience finds *Egalia's Daughters* amusing, it is a form of rebellion: 'When the reader laughs, she successfully gains sufficient strength to overcome inhibitions placed against finding fault with her place in the patriarchal construction of reality'.⁴⁹ Whether the satire comes from ancient Rome or 1970s Norway, both authors, I would contend, employ the idea that the oppressed members of any society will appropriate the symbols of their oppressors, including aspects of dress and appearance, in order to challenge the apparent distinction between themselves and the social elite.

For modern readers both works highlight the difference between a society's illusions about social reform and the reality of how equality is achieved within a society, even in light of increased awareness of the repression of the rights of certain members of a community. In ancient Rome, the perspective of the non-elite is largely missing from literature. This was not the case in Brantenberg's Norway. Brantenberg was one of many female voices in Norway who challenged the status quo and raised awareness of the unequal conditions.⁵⁰ In 1973 the Norwegians celebrated the 60th anniversary of suffrage but many reflected on how little women's lives had changed since then and how under-represented they remained in public life. *Egalia's Daughters* was published two years before Norway passed an Equal Status Act in 1979, which recognized that 'the removal of formal barriers was not in itself enough to achieve real equality'.⁵¹

The *Cena Trimalchionis* and *Egalia's Daughters* both depict comic situations in which non-privileged members of society imitate the clothing and behaviors associated with social privilege and prestige. The two satires also provide an alternative viewpoint to the familiar and more dominant perspective on social order when they examine the world through the eyes of the non-elite members of society. Although at first the marginalized characters are derided or mocked for being ignorant and lacking good taste, their efforts represent a challenge to the cultural expectations, as established by the more privileged members of society, that define who can present themselves to others as having power and an identity that is socially acceptable. The established social system in Rome placed restrictions on the status and

⁴⁸ See Moberg 1985, 329.

⁴⁹ Barr 1989, 91.

⁵⁰ Garton 1995, 7–24.

⁵¹ Garton 1995, 8.

prestige that freedmen like Trimalchio could attain.⁵² Petronius's work, although a highly satirized account of life at this time, offers a rare look into the views and behaviors of low-status members of society: 'by expressing non-elite views, the *Cena* inverts the usual cultural perspective'.⁵³ Brantenberg's satire goes much further, as her work demands revolution. Her text creates a dialogue regarding her concerns about the inequality between the sexes in 1970's Norway.⁵⁴ Her character Petronius Bram emphatically rebels against the restraints the more privileged members of his world have placed upon his social mobility, and this gives her work a decidedly more political agenda. When he reverses social convention and turns Egalsund's matriarchal society on its head, his world becomes as ridiculous as the inverted universe Trimalchio occupies in the *Cena*.⁵⁵

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⁵² See Bodel 1984, 16–24.

⁵³ Perkins 2005, 146.

⁵⁴ See Moberg 1985, 330.

⁵⁵ I would like to thank Gerd Brantenberg for her patience in answering my questions about *Egalia's Daughters* in a conversation we conducted via e-mail on April 6–8, 2005. Avery D. Cahill, Costas Panayotakis, and Gareth Schmeling provided helpful comments on earlier drafts of this essay. David Lamontagne's assistance also proved to be invaluable. I would also like to thank Maaïke Zimmerman, Roelf Barkhuis, and the anonymous referees of *AN* for their observations and incisive criticism. Any errors remain my responsibility.

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