Liber esto: wordplay and ambiguity in Petronius' Satyrica

Wessels, A.B.; Vöhler, M.; Fuhrer, T.; Frangoulidis, S.

Antje Wessels

Liber esto – Wordplay and Ambiguity in Petronius' *Satyrica*

Abstract: Among the many techniques employed in the *Cena Trimalchionis*, the centrepiece of Petronius' *Satyrica*, is the application of wordplay. Wordplay disrupts the common function of language as representing a pre-existing thought and thereby appears to absolve the author from any moral responsibility. Specifically, this absolution seems to be realized through examples of wordplay that are based on a word's alleged ambiguity — that is, with wordplays that succeed in opening up a new semantic space, without, however, changing the sequence of letters that compose the terms. The paper discusses how Trimalchio employs ambiguity in order to question and re-arrange crucial elements of the social setting, including the social status of a character.

Keywords: wordplay, Libertas, fluid ambiguity, Dionysus/Liber, Roman Literature

Even before beginning to read the text of Petronius' *Satyrica*, the first thing to be considered is a wordplay: the title *Satyrica* itself. The contrived term *Satyrica* or *Satyricon* [sc. *liber*][1] alludes — or rather guides its reader allusively — to three different genres. While the first three letters — sat — invite us to think of the Roman *satura*,[2] this association is immediately undermined by the following -y- , which seems to turn the word into an allusion to Greek satyr-play, and, again, by the suffix -ca, which is known from titles of Greek novels. Finally, the title may remind the reader of the god Saturnus, the patron of the Saturnalia, a feast, in which the roles of slaves and patrons are exchanged,[3] and whose name may thus be understood as a reference to the instability of conventional ascriptions.

---

1 Cf. Harrison 1999, xiii. The title is first mentioned in the 4th cent. AD by Aphthonius (Aelius Festus Aphthonius uel Asmonius, id est: Marius Victorinus [pseudo]) in *De metris omnibus* lib. 4.1 (= *Grammatici Latini*, ed. H. Keil, 1874, vol. 6), p. 153, l. 33: *plerique, inter quos Arbiter* [*sc. Petronius*] *satyricon* […].

2 On satyrical elements in Petronius' *Satyrica* see Sullivan 1968, ch. iii & iv and Schmeling 1996, xxx–xxxviii.

3 Cf. e.g. Döpp 2011, 149.

The title does not simply blend together four different spheres, genres or associations, but rather sets up the reading experience as a kind of adventure-trip. The word *Satyrica*, even as the first letters are being processed, immediately interrupts, reopens and, again, withdraws from each previous interpretation. It does not summarize the features of an innovative, however clearly definable genre, but rather provides an example of fluid ambiguity. The experiential ambiguity has a spatio-temporal dimension, and it foreshadows a technique of reading or, more specifically, the *process* of how one might perceive a word, a text (specifically, Petronius' *Satyrica*) and, in a more referential sense, the world around us. Since the title produces and immediately undermines upcoming expectations, it first of all prepares the reader to be extremely cautious: do not believe what you see (or hear); everything is different from what you may have thought.

At the same time, the title provides a microcosm of what will happen in the core piece of the (transmitted) text: the famous *Cena Trimalchionis*. Like the readers, the characters of the *Satyrica* are continuously destabilized — and invited to fragment, revise and rebuild former expectations.

The luxury of the *Cena Trimalchionis* is not just a showcase of material luxury — of animated objects, exotic fruits and theatrical performances. On a metapoetic level, it also points to the luxury of reading and re-reading a text, to the creation of language that is λοξός (ambiguous)[4] — and, again, when speaking about a 'text', I mean Petronius' *Satyrica* (as something written) as well as the world that is presented in it (that is, the *world* as a text).

Trimalchio, who is presented as a rich freedman (a *libertus*), can allow himself to do whatever he may want to do. He does not aim, however, at employing his power by just expanding and showing his financial richness. His real power

---

4 λοξός means "slanting, crosswise", and with respect to language "indirect, ambiguous", especially of oracles, cf. LSJ, s.v. λοξός, e.g. Luc. *Alex.* 10–11: κἀνταῦθα μὲν Κοκκωνᾶς ἐν Χαλκηδόνι καταλείπεται, διττούς τινας καὶ ἀμφιβόλους καὶ λοξοὺς χρησμοὺς συγγράφων, καὶ μετ' ὀλίγον ἐτελεύτησε τὸν βίον, ὑπὸ ἐχίδνης, οἶμαι, δηχθείς. [11] προεισπέμπεται δὲ ὁ Ἀλέξανδρος, κομῶν ἤδη καὶ πλοκάμους καθειμένος καὶ μεσόλευκον χιτῶνα πορφυροῦν ἐνδεδυκὼς καὶ ἱμάτιον ὑπὲρ αὐτοῦ λευκὸν ἀναβεβλημένος, ἅρπην ἔχων κατὰ τὸν Περσέα, ἀφ' οὗ ἑαυτὸν ἐγενεαλόγει μητρόθεν. ('Then Cocconas was left behind in Chalcedon, composing equivocal, ambiguous, obscure oracles, and died before long, bitten, I think, by a viper. [11] It was Alexander who was sent in first; he now wore his hair long, had falling ringlets, dressed in a parti-coloured tunic of white and purple, with a white cloak over it, and carried a falchion like that of Perseus, from whom he claimed descent on his mother's side', transl. Harmon 1925). Even though the passage does not show a direct connection between luxury and ambiguity, the emphasis on the oracle's ambiguity is clearly embedded into a scenario of strange luxury.

is the power of producing and controlling interpretations. Trimalchio, the freedman, feels free to perform as a stage director (a term that Stavros Frangoulidis has also used in depicting Trimalchio as the stage director of a mock funeral performance)[5] – a stage director who allows himself to cut and re-arrange his text by spelling out or re-defining the semantic field of an existing word, by ascribing an unexpected meaning to it or, finally, by intentionally producing, destroying and re-producing ambiguities. Trimalchio is reading a world — a world, however, he himself creates and shapes — and he displays his role as host and *pater familias* by controlling the experiences of his recipients. He does so when presenting a meal, and he does so when presenting words.

Trimalchio's recipients are both the readers of the *Satyrica* and the protagonists in the text itself, who, after a torturous visit to Quartilla's brothel and cursed by the wrath of the phallic Priapus, have now decided to attend Trimalchio's dinner-party: Encolpius, the narrating character, and the group of friends who have joined him during his adventures throughout the *Satyrica*. Represented as Trimalchio's audience, they serve to pre-inscribe the possible perspectives of the readers.

The *Cena Trimalchionis* depicts the world of literature and its perception. Of course, there is no point in claiming that Trimalchio's poems (the actual 'literature' he has produced) provide good poetry. The epigram in 34.10, for example, Trimalchio's spontaneous improvisation of an epitaph after a silver skeleton is brought into the hall,[6] displays poor style and grammar:[7]

> eheu nos miseros, quam totus homuncio nil est!
> sic erimus cuncti, postquam nos auferet Orcus.
> ergo vivamus, dum licet esse bene.

---

5 Frangoulidis 2008. Cf. also Panayotakis 1995 on the theatrical elements in Petronius' *Satyrica*. Trimalchio's performance as a stage director goes well with his function as organizer of the *cena*, where he has to fulfil the role of an entertainer (on the performance of improvised epigrams during the symposion cf. Höschele 2010, 27sqq.)

6 Schmeling 2011, *ad loc.*, 125: The metrical pattern (two hexameters followed by a pentameter) is "a combination of popular origin that often can be found on tombs". As to form and content, the poem imitates Greek epitaphs.

7 E.g. *auferet* instead of *abstulerit*. On the poem's quality and its function within the *Cena* see Setaioli 2011, 91–112 (= ch. 5: "Trimalchio's 'Epigrams' [Petr. 34.10; 55.3]"), esp. 102–104 on the "numerous blames addressed by scholars to this poem" (103). The Latin text is taken from the Teubner edition (Müller 1994/2009); translations, unless otherwise stated, are by myself and John Hamilton.

> Ah, we miserable ones, how the whole of puny humanity is nothing!
> Thus, shall we all be, after Orcus will bear us away.
> Therefore, let us live well, as long as it is allowed.

Verses such as these may invite the reader to disregard Trimalchio's poetic impact and to reduce his activities to the role of a γελωτοποιός, who simply aims at entertaining his guests by making corny jokes.[8] Yet, Trimalchio's poetic impact goes further. Trimalchio employs the power and techniques of language in order to create an ambiguous world and to transcend the sphere of logic and plain thinking.[9]

It is not without reason that the *Cena Trimalchionis* starts and ends with its protagonists entering and leaving the dinner-party via a liminal or rather transitory space, which marks Trimalchio's house as a place governed by rules that are different from those to be encountered in the 'real world' outside. Both scenes center around the cathartic sphere of a bathroom.

Let me start with the introductory scene. When entering Trimalchio's house, the young men have to enter a bathroom (*in balneum sequi*, 26.10). Before they actually succeed in reaching it and having a bath[10] and while still walking around, they see (27.1–4)[11]

> senem calvum, tunica vestitum russea, inter pueros capillatos ludentem pila. nec tam pueros, quamquam erat operae pretium, ad spectaculum duxerant, quam ipse pater familiae, qui soleatus pila prasina exercebatur. nec amplius eam repetebat quae terram contigerat, sed follem plenum habebat servus sufficiebatque ludentibus. notavimus etiam res novas.

---

8 For the γελωτοποιός cf. e.g. Xen. *Smp*. 1. 11–16.

9 On the relation between creativity and power and between the art of cookery and the art of language see e.g. the passage on Trimalchio's cook, named Daedalus, who is able to re-arrange and transform food (69.8–70.2: *cum positus ... anser ... 'mirabor' inquam 'nisi omnia ista de <cera> facta sunt aut certe de luto. vidi Romae Saturnalibus eiusmodi cenarum imaginem fieri'.... cum Trimalchio ait: 'ita crescam patrimonio, non corpore, ut ista [sc. anserem et alia] cocus meus de porco fecit. non potest esse pretiosior homo. volueris, de vulva faciet piscem, de lardo palumbum, de perna turturem, de colepio gallinam. et ideo ingenio meo impositum est illi nomen bellissimum; nam Daedalus vocatur'*). Cf. also Conte 2011, 132, who, additionally, refers to Trimalchio's statement that *obsonatores* (cooks or buyer of victuals) and *rhetores* are born under the same star (39.13: *in piscibus obsonatores et rhetores*) and to the traditional use of gastronomical images in literary criticism and its reception in Petronius' *Satyrica* (134–136).

10 Cf. 28.1: *intravimus balneum, et sudore calfacti momento temporis ad frigidam eximus* ("We went into the bath. We stayed till we ran with sweat, and then at once passed through into the cold water." Transl. Heseltine 1913).

11 Transl. Allison 1930 (with modifications).

nam duo spadones in diversa parte circuli stabant, quorum alter matellam tenebat argenteam, alter numerabat pilas, non quidem eas quae inter manus lusu expellente vibrabant, sed eas quae in terram decidebant.

a bald-headed old man in a russet tunic, playing ball amid a troupe of long-haired boys. It was not however so much the boys, though these were well worth looking at, that drew us to the spot, as the master himself (*pater familias*), who wore sandals and was playing with a green ball. He never stooped for a ball that had once touched ground, but an attendant stood by with a sackful, and supplied the players as they required them. We noticed other novelties too (*res novas*). For two eunuchs were stationed at opposite points of the circle, one holding a silver chamber-pot, while the other counted the balls, not those that were in play and flying from hand to hand, but rather those that fell on the floor (*decidebant*).

The *pater familias*, who is playing with green balls, turns out to be Trimalchio. The situation certainly exhibits comic aspects. The crucial point here, however, is not that a *pater familias* is playing with balls, but that the scene displays a dissolution of standard values: the eunuchs, whom we would expect to be interested in their master's success, entirely ignore the balls which are passed on to the other participants of the game and pay attention exclusively to those balls which have fallen down on the floor (*decidebant*). That is, the eunuchs disregard the balls that still have a function and only care for the senseless parts of the game. Before Encolpius and his friends can actually enter the house, they are introduced to a world that is characterised by a special sense for those things and elements, which — outside Trimalchio's world — would be counted as entirely useless.

At the end of the dinner, again, the protagonists have to cross a liminal space, before they can leave and re-enter the real world where they had come from. After Trimalchio has staged his own mock-funeral (or, as James Joyce would call it, a funferal[12]), he invites his guests to enjoy a bath (72.2–3):[13]

Trimalchio 'ergo' inquit 'cum sciamus nos morituros esse, quare non vivamus? sic vos felices videam, coniciamus nos in balneum, meo periculo, non paenitebit. sic calet tamquam furnus.'[14]

---

12 I.e. a "fun funeral" *and* a "fun for all", cf. Joyce [1939] 1964, 111.15.

13 Transl. Heseltine 1913.

14 The morphological similarity of *furnus* and *funus* may suggest that here, too, a wordplay is intended (Fuhrer, *per litt.*).

> Trimalchio said "Well, well, if we know we must die, why should we not live? As I hope for your happiness, let us jump into a bath. My life on it, you will never regret it. It is as hot as a furnace."

The protagonists, overwhelmed by the challenging performances they had to suffer during their attendance at the dinner, decide to jump at the chance and escape the party by running into the entrance hall, from which they had first arrived. They are stopped, however, by Trimalchio's groundkeeper who tells them (72.10):[15]

> 'erras' inquit 'si putas te exire hac posse qua venisti. nemo umquam convivarum per eandem ianuam emissus est; alia intrant, alia exeunt.'

> "You are wrong," he said "if you suppose you can go out at the door you came in by. None of the guests are ever let out by the same door; they come in at one and go out by another."

It is probably not without reason that one of them, Ascyltus, when trying to avoid the bathroom, falls into a *piscina* before he can reach the door of the entrance hall in order to leave the party. One cannot be a guest of Trimalchio without being transformed. It is impossible to go back to the precise place from which you first emerged.[16]

A Both scenes can demonstrate that Trimalchio's dinner-party is not simply about luxury, and that the enactments performed and experienced during the event revolve around the rules, potential meanings and techniques of *literary* production and its reception.

A second aspect that is addressed in the *Cena Trimalchionis* is the redefinition of a thing or action, such as the redefinition that is delineated in the scene that follows straight after the entrance-scene: Trimalchio, who has had a bath, is now indulging in his servants' care. While he is rubbed down "with pieces of blanketing of the softest and finest wool", he observes that (28.3–4):

> tres interim iatraliptae in conspectu eius Falernum potabant, et cum plurimum rixantes effunderent, Trimalchio hoc suum propin esse dicebat.

---

15 Transl. Heseltine 1913.
16 Since the *Cena Trimalchionis* is permeated with motifs of death, Trimalchio's villa has also been interpreted as the underworld, see Hofmann 2014, 106–107. In this case the *piscina* could be considered to be the Styx.

Three ointment-doctors were swilling Falernian wine under his eyes; yet, when seeing how the fellows are brawling over their liquor and spilling most of it, Trimalchio declares, it was a toast they were making in his particular honour.

The situation itself at first sight seems to be quite simple: drunken men are spilling wine. However, Trimalchio re-defines it as an act of libation. By declaring that "this was drinking to his own health"[17] Trimalchio interprets a silly accident, the spillage of wine, as an intentional act of (cultic?) devotion. Not only does his interpretation place him at the centre of attention, since he considers that this act of devotion is performed in his honour, but it also re-defines the whole situation: a silly accident, which primarily resulted from a little brawl among some undisciplined masseurs, is now turned into a highly meaningful situation with quasi-religious impact.

Trimalchio is certainly tremendously rich (37–38) and he is certainly extremely keen on showing and presenting his wealth. The beginning and the end of the *Cena*, however, and the sphere displayed in 28.3–4 can show that the crucial point of the *Cena Trimalchionis* is not about senseless luxury or exuberance, but about the power of creating ambiguities in situations or words that seem, at first sight, clear and plain.

The most prominent scene in this context is the one which also provides the opening words of my paper's title: '*liber esto*' (41.7). After having enjoyed the theatrical performance of several menus, such as the peacock's eggs, which seem to have been brooded by a wooden hen before they turn out to be real,[18] the Zodiac dish[19] and the appearance of a group of hunting dogs,[20] the guests of the dinner see a large dish being brought into the room — with a huge boar on it. The boar is *pilleatus* (40.3), which means 'wearing a cap of liberty'.[21] And he is surrounded by little suckling pigs (40.4):

circa autem minores porcelli ex coptoplacentis facti, quasi uberibus imminerent, scrofam esse positam significabant. et hi quidem apophoreti fuerunt.

---

17 Transl. Calboli 2009. Heraeus' conjecture *propin esse* (= προπιεῖν) (1915, 25–28) is followed by Konrad Müller in his Teubner (1994/2009, 22). Calboli 2009, 131 n. 49, following Bücheler, Friedlaender, Ernout and Scarsi, prefers the reading of MSH *propinasse* (*propinare* = προπινεῖν). Both forms are an infinitive, *propin* however is Greek.

18 33.5: *pavonis ova gallinae* [sc. *ligneae*] *iussi supponi*.

19 35.2: *rotundum enim repositorium duodecim habebat signa in orbe disposita*, and 39.5–15, Trimalchio's explanation of the *signa*.

20 40.2: *et ecce canes Laconici etiam circa mensam discurrere coeperunt*.

21 On *libertas* in Petronius see Downer 1913, 12, 30, 36, 38, 68, 69.

> Round it lay suckling pigs made of simnel cake with their mouths to the teats, thereby show-ing that we had a sow before us. These suckling-pigs were for the guests to take away. [22]

Furthermore, when a hunting-knife is plunged into his side, a number of thrushes[23] fly out at the blow (40.5: *ex cuius plaga turdi evalverunt*).

It is a weird ensemble. Specifically, Encolpius wonders why the *aper* had come in with a cap of freedom on. After 'consuming' "every foolish explanation of it" (41.2: *postquam omnis bacalusias consumpsi*),[24] he finally puts the question to one of the more experienced guests. The explanation comes on the heels of it (41.4, the speaker is the guest who is talking to Encolpius):

> 'plane etiam hoc servus tuus indicare potest; non enim aenigma est, sed res aperta. hic aper, cum heri summa cena eum vindicasset, a convivis dimissus <est>; itaque hodie tamquam libertus in convivium revertitur.'

> "Your slave [sc. I] can plainly (*plane*) explain that too," he said, "there is no riddle, the thing is clear. Yesterday, this boar was devoted to be served for dinner, the guests however set him free. That's why, today, he comes back to dinner as a freedman (*libertus*)."

The guest's explanation pretends to be *plane*: *non* [...] *aenigma est, sed res aperta*. At the same time, however, the guest employs an expression which playfully re-acts to the metapoetical meaning of the ensemble.[25] For in the center of the al-leged *res aperta* is the *aper*. This *aper* is a boar, but it is also a word. Similarly to a word that can produce multiple meanings, the *aper* presented at the table is

---

22 Transl. Heseltine 1913.

23 According to Lewis and Short, s.v. *turdus*, *turdus* can mean either a thrush, a fieldfare (e.g. Hor. *Epist.* 1.15.41) or a kind of fish, a seacarp (e.g. Plin. 32.11.53, § 151). Here, it is definitely a bird (cf. *evalverunt*). The word *turdus* goes back to the Greek στρουθός, which is famous from the simile in Hom. *Il.* 2.308–330 (the mother-sparrow and her eight young).

24 According to Lewis and Short, s.v. *bacalusia*, this is a "kind of sweetmeat" (following Bücheler *ad loc.*). The translation "every foolish explanation of it" is a suggestion made by Hes-eltine 1913, 69, n. 1. Schmeling 2011 *ad loc.*, 159 translates "after I ticked off even remote possi-bilities". A different translation is given by the OLD, s.v. *bacalusiae* (sic): "(perhaps) stupid guesses". *Consumpsi* is a gastronomic metaphor, which suggests that Encolpius has literally eaten one of the take-aways, at the same time that he is turning the problem over in every way: the suckling-pigs are presented as meat, but they are actually "sweet"; cf. also 40.4, where the little pigs are described as *ex coptoplacentis facti*. *Copta* is a "kind of cake made of pounded ma-terials, Mart. 14.68 — the same, or a similar kind, called cop-tŏplăcenta, Petr. 40.4" (Lewis and Short s.v. *copta*: "copta, ae, f. = κόπτη).

25 My thanks to John Hamilton for drawing my attention to the potential wordplay that is sug-gested by the words *aper* and *res aperta*.

able to produce offspring.[26] He is presented as a female who has just given birth to little pigs, and when a knife is plunged into his body (and the *aper* even physically turns into a *res aperta*[27]) further unexpected offspring — birds — emerge. Furthermore, similarly to a word that is received by its readers, the *aper*'s offspring are meant to be received by the guests. While there are "fowlers ready with limed twigs", who catch the thrushes as they flutter round the dining-room (40.6–7: *parati aucupes cum harundinibus fuerunt et eos circa triclinium volitantes momento exceperunt*)[28] in order to offer them to each person at the table,[29] the little pigs are given to the guests to take away and be consumed.

The guests might think that the *aper* is the pinnacle of the feast. However, as readers acquainted with the conversation between Encolpius and the guest, we are aware that the *aper pilleatus* is just the beginning of the spectacle. The *aper pilleatus* is not only a transformed being himself — from possession to freedman, from mother of piglets to producer of birds, and from male to female — he is also the starting point of a cascade of wordplays which will redefine and transform the role of the people who are around him. Just after the *aper* is presented, a fair and beautiful young boy, presumably a slave,[30] enters the scene, adorned with vine leaves and ivy. While passing around grapes among the guests and performing some of Trimalchio's poems[31] in a 'strident voice', he introduces himself as *Bromius*, *Lyaeus* and *Euhius* (41.6):

> dum haec loquimur, puer speciosus, vitibus hederisque redimitus, modo Bromium, interdum Lyaeum Euhiumque confessus, calathisco uvas circumtulit et poemata domini sui acutissima voce traduxit.

---

26 In ancient literature, literary texts are often thought to be living beings who behave like humans (or pubescent children), who start their own life and have their own will once their author has created them — we may think here of Hor. *Epist*. 1.20, Ovid's *Tristia* (cf. 1.1.107–14 and 3.1) or Martial's epigram 1.3, where authors reflect on saying farewell to their texts when they go to be published and on how the texts will henceforth withdraw from the author's (or rather "father's") control. Cf. Wessels (forthcoming).

27 An 'open artwork' (Umberto Eco) *avant la lettre*.

28 Again, a hunting motif, cf. the presentation of hunting dogs (*canes Laconici*) in 40.2.

29 Cf. 40.7: *cum suum cuique iussisset referri Trimalchio* with Schmeling 2011, 158: "Each person at the table is shown his own thrush, which is then perhaps taken to the kitchen, roasted, and brought back."

30 According to 41.7 the *puer* performs poems by his *dominus* (*poemata domini*); the *dominus* is certainly Trimalchio.

31 Three of Trimalchio's poems can be read in 34.10 (see above), 55.3 (*quod non expectes, ex transverso fit <ubique, |nostra> et supra nos Fortuna negotia curat. | quare da nobis vina Falerna, puer*) and 55.6 — the second one being a spontaneously composed 'poem'.

> While we were saying these things, a beautiful young boy, adorned with vine leaves and
> ivy, revealing himself now as Bromius, and then as Lyaeus and Euhius, passed around
> grapes in a basket and, with a most strident voice, performed his master's poems.

Even without listening to all these names, it is made quite clear to everyone that
the guests are encountering Dionysus. The names are three epithets of the Greek
god: the "thunderous" (Βρόμιος), the "loosener", "deliverer from care" (Λυαῖος),
and the one who provokes the enthusiastic and exultant Bacchic cry εὐοῖ (Εὔιος).

The young boy's behavior clearly plays with these ascriptions by imitating
the god's major features, his emblems, such as vine-leaves, ivy and grapes, and
by performing Trimalchio's poems *acutissima voce* (which we might imagine in-
cluded high-pitched cries of εὐοῖ). Whether his behavior is meant to be a playful
transformation (or translation) of his real name (a suggestion made by A.E. Hous-
man)[32] or whether he has been inspired by the boar's cap of liberty, remains un-
clear. His master Trimalchio, however, promptly reacts and shouts: *Dionyse, liber
esto* (41.7).

The three words are quite interesting, because they seem, at first sight, to
disambiguate the situation — the boy is clearly marked now as "Dionysus" — but
on the other hand, they succeed in opening up a space for multiple interpreta-
tions. There is no doubt that the remark plays with the Roman translation of
λυαῖος, *liber or Liber* (capitalised), as well as with the social status of a freedman
(or a 'freed boar'), a *libertus*.

It is clearly a lexical ambiguity, a pun. Yet, what precisely *is* the pun? What
does Trimalchio want to say? 'Be Dionysus, be free — analogous to the god of
liberation?' Or: 'Be Dionysus — however not the Greek one, but the *Roman* ver-
sion of the god' (in this case *Liber* has to be written with a capital letter)? Or:
'Since you are a Roman version of Dionysus, you are *Liber* (capitalised), and as a
consequence you have the right to be *liber* (lower-case) i.e. free (or freed)?'

The boy himself has one single answer. He takes away the cap of liberty from
the boar's head and puts it on himself (41.7): *puer detraxit pilleum apro capitique
suo imposuit.* Analogous to the freed boar, the former slave is freed. In an act that
attributes Trimalchio's *liber esto* to the performative language of Roman Law, the
boy's performative reaction spells out his desired interpretation: "be freed" and
"be turned into a *libertus*".

The scene could end here, but, again, Trimalchio opens space for further in-
terpretation. For he comments on the boy's reaction by adding that "nobody will
deny that I have a *Liber pater*": *tum Trimalchio rursus adiecit: 'non negabitis me'*

---

32 Housman 1918, 164.

inquit 'habere Liberum patrem.' The guests, apparently, take this as a witty joke, not to be further commented upon: *laudavimus dictum*. They approve and shower the young man with kisses (*puerum sane perbasiamus*). By praising both, Trimalchio as well as the *puer*, the guests show a reaction that again reduces Trimalchio's words to one single meaning: the slave has succeeded in being freed. Trimalchio's words, however, are extremely ambiguous and, in fact, untranslatable.[33]

Basically, the discussion turns on two options for translation: "free father" or "*pater Liber*", a standard title for Bacchus, the Roman Dionysus[34] — the pun being that either Trimalchio has a "free father" (which cannot be true, for he is a *libertus*) or that he now "has a Dionysus".[35]

Yet, there is a third possibility which plays with the ambiguity and blends together both translations. In this case, the pun would be that Trimalchio himself now turns into a free man: if his former slave in a first step has turned into *Dionysus*, in a second one into the Roman *Liber*, in a third one into the Roman *Pater Liber* (capitalised) and in a fourth one into a free father (a *liber pater*, lower-case, therefore a free man), then, from his own perspective, Trimalchio now does not have a slave anymore, but rather a "free father". In other words, although the former slave (the *puer*) is still owned by Trimalchio, he (i.e. the slave) has now turned into Trimalchio's father (his *pater liber*); and because he, Trimalchio's father (*pater*), is now free by birth (*liberum patrem habeo*), Trimalchio turns from being a *freedman* (a *libertus*, who had been freed, but never had a free father)[36] into being the son of a *free* man — and as a consequence into a free-born person.

---

33 Translators usually refuse to translate the passage without adding a note and presenting two or more alternatives, cf. Kritzinger 2003, 111; the German translator Wilhelm Ehlers (Müller/Ehlers 1983, 75) who uses Müller's text [*Liberum patrem*] in his translation, prints the two words *liberum patrem* fully in capitals in order to avoid any decision and to leave open what exactly the two words refer to.

34 Cf. Arragosti 1995, 222 n. 104: "qui il nome serve a Trimalchione per realizzare il banale gioco di parole", and Downer 1913, 12.

35 Smith's commentary on the passage (1975, 97) explains: "Trimalchio repeats the pun in a slightly different form: 'You won't deny that I have a father who is free' (an untrue claim with reference to any freedman), and 'You won't deny that I possess Father Liber' (Liber Pater was a standard title for the god), i.e. the slave Dionysus." Additionally, following a suggestion made by Richard Seaford (oral remark), it should be taken into consideration that Trimalchio presents himself as Jupiter (i.e. as the father of Dionysus, i.e. of the god *Liber Pater*).

36 One may feel reminded of Hor. *Sat.* 1.6, where the poetic I repeatedly stresses his status as a *libertino patre natus* — a phrase that "in different forms tolls throughout the poem" (Gowers 2011, 222), cf. e.g. 1.6.6; 7; 21; 29; 36; 45; 46; 58; in l. 38 even Dionysus is addressed (*tune ... Dionysi filius ... ?*).

The ambiguity ascribed to the words in question is far more than a mere pun or a funny wordplay. It has a real effect, not only on the social status of the slave, but also on the status of Trimalchio himself. Actually, what had begun as the triumph of a slave is ultimately turned into a win-win situation. In the first part of the dialogue (*Dionyse, liber esto*) Trimalchio seemed to embrace the possibility of losing his slave, because he does not want to lose the opportunity for a good joke (or, to modify Quintilian, *Inst. Or.* 6.3.28: *potius servum quam dictum perdere*). In the second part of the dialogue, he certainly has a freed slave (or more precisely, he has lost his slave), but as a *quid pro quo*, he *himself* exceeds the new status of his former slave, and even his own former social status: he, who had only been freed (and is a *libertus*), now is free by birth (*liber*).

Additionally, since the whole scene plays with the identification of *liber* and Dionysus, one could even argue that Trimalchio, who, within this play, has succeeded in having a free father, a *liber pater*, and becoming himself a free man, a *liber*, simultaneously transforms into the Roman *Liber*, that is into *Liber Pater*, the Roman version of the god Dionysus, the god of theatre and poetry. If Trimalchio is viewed as Dionysus, then the people around him — those who try to flee, but are to be controlled by his regime — can be considered his satyrs.[37] Petronius' *Satyrica*, literally, turns into a satyr-play, a *satyricon liber*, a book on the power of Dionysus. Additionally, if we assume a playful exchange of long and short syllables, the title, *satyricon liber* (now read with a long -i-), makes us think of Dionysus (the Roman Liber Pater: *liber*) and his followers (the entourage of satyrs: *satyricon*). *Vice versa*, Trimalchio's *liber esto*, within the narrative an act of liberation (*līber esto*, with a long -i-), on a metapoetic level alludes to the text itself and its power as literature: *lĭber esto* (now with a short syllable), "be a book". Finally, since books were often considered their author's children,[38] we may even think of a wordplay that brings together *lĭber* (with a short -i-): "book", *līber* (with a long -i-): "child", and Pater Liber (note the ambiguous casus of *Liberum* in 41.8: *Liberum patrem*): the poet as a father who produces children — and, as a consequence, books. If we read Trimalchio's words *Non negabitis me* [...] *habere Liberum patrem* (41.8) as a hint to the slave's new status as a poet who himself both produces and sets free new children, the scene that follows also acquires a poetological impact. After being applauded by his guests, Trimalchio has left the dinner party in order to go to the chamber pot (*ab hoc ferculo Trimalchio ad lasanum surrexit*, 41.9). Sharing similarities to the poet who, after setting free his

---

37 For the motif of satyrs who try to flee, cf. Seidensticker 2020, 10.

38 Books were often considered to be the children of their author, cf. Ov. *Trist*. 1.1.1–2 and 107–115. Cf. also n. 26 above.

book, must stay at home (cf. Hor. *Sat*. 1.20 or Mart. *Epigr*. 1.3) or in exile (cf. Ov. *Trist*. 1.1), while the book enjoys its freedom and turns into an active, communicative being, Trimalchio's withdrawal from the scene, allows his guests (or passes on) the *libertas* to speak. When Trimalchio himself, due to constipation (as he will explain when re-entering the scene in 47.1–2), is confined to the toilet and unable to act or communicate, his guests immediately start exercising their (inherited) freedom to speak by gossiping and complaining[39] without being controlled by the 'tyrant'. Thus the guests react: "*nos libertatem sine tyranno nacti coepimus invitare*".[40]

Trimalchio uses the power of words to create ambiguous meanings. Trimalchio is free, not because he becomes a free man in a social sense, but rather because, similarly to *Dionysus* (the god of theatre and poetry), he has the power to create a poetic space. The exploitation of the lexical ambiguity of *liber* involves more than just a witty joke and useless wordplay. It allows Trimalchio to unfold and seize upon the semantic space that the word provides and to produce new thoughts, while being freed from any moral responsibility. It is the *word* that invites Trimalchio to liberate — and seize upon — its potential multiple meanings. Trimalchio's social act of liberation is based on the semantic space of *liber esto*. It goes without saying that Trimalchio intentionally employs the word's ambiguity in order to destabilize and re-create the world around him. Ambiguity here serves as a tool for thinking, which allows for the liberation from plain thinking and any concrete rules, and for a poet's approach to the world: *liber esto*.

Bibliography

Texts and Translations

Allinson, Alfred R. (transl.) (1930), *Petronius. Satyricon*, New York.
Arragosti, A. (1995), *Petronio Arbitro, Satyricon. Introduzione, traduzione e note*, Milano.
Heseltine, Michael (transl.) (1913), *Petronius Arbiter*, London.

---

39 Cf. 41.10–47.1. Additionally, it would be worth exploring whether the guests also enjoy a freedom of interpretation. For instance, "in *Sat*. 42 a cause of death is diagnosed (against the "expert" doctors), while in *Sat*. 43–45 various omens are discussed (again, often in contradiction to the "expert" priests)." (Payne *per litt*.).

40 For the poet as a *dominus*, or even a kind of 'tyrant', cf. Mart. *Epigr*. 1.3, where the poet addresses his book (*parve liber*, 2), which is about to escape his master's control: *sed tu, ne totiens domini patiare lituras | neve notet lusus tristis harundo tuos, | aetherias, lascive, cupis volitare per auras*. Cf. also above, n. 26.

Joyce, James (1964), *Finnegans Wake* [1939], London.

Keil, Hermann (ed.) (1874), *Grammatici Latini*, 1855–1880, vol. 6, Leipzig.

Müller, Konrad (ed.) (1994/2009), *Petronius, Satyricon Reliquiae*, Berlin/New York.

Müller, Konrad/Ehlers, Wilhelm (ed., transl.) (1983), *Petronius Satyrica. Schelmenszenen*, München.

Books and Articles

Calboli, Gualtiero (2009), "Latin Syntax and Greek", in: Philip Baldi/Pierluigi Cuzzolin (eds.), *New Perspectives on Historical Latin Syntax*, vol 1: *Syntax of the Sentence*, Berlin/New York, 65–193.

Conte, Gian Biagio (1996), *The Hidden Author. An Interpretation of Petronius' Satyricon*, Berkeley.

Döpp, Siegmar (1993), "Saturnalien und lateinische Literatur", in: Siegmar Döpp (ed.), *Karnevaleske Phänomene in antiken und nachantiken Kulturen und Literaturen*, Trier, 145–77.

Downer, James W. (1913), *Metaphors and Word-Plays in Petronius*, Waco, TX.

Frangoulidis, Stavros (2008), "Trimalchio as Narrator and Stage Director in the *Cena*: An Unobserved Parallelism in Petronius' *Satyricon* 78", *CP* 103, 81–87.

Gowers, Emily (2011), *Horace. Satires Book 1*, Cambridge.

Harrison, Stephen (ed.) (1999), *Oxford Readings in the Roman Novel*, Oxford.

Heraeus, Wilhelm (1915), "Προπεῖν", *RhM* 70, 1–41.

Hofmann, Heinz (2014), "Petronius, *Satyrica*", in: Edmund P. Cueva/Shannon N. Byrne (eds.), *A Companion to the Ancient Novel*, 96–118.

Housman, Alfred Edward (1918), "Jests of Plautus, Cicero, and Trimalchio", *CR* 32.7–8, 162–164.

Kritzinger, Jacobus P.K. (2003), "*Non negabitis me, inquit, habere liberum patrem*: Petronius, *Sat*. 41.8 Revisited", *AClass* 46, 111–117.

Panayotakis, Costas (1995), *Theatrum Arbitri: Theatrical Elements in the Satyrica of Petronius*, Leiden.

Schmeling, Gareth (1996), "Genre and the *Satyrica*. Menippean Satire and the Novel", in: Claudia Klodt (ed.), *Satura Lanx. Festschrift für Werner A. Krenkel zum 70. Geburtstag*, Hildesheim, 105–117.

Schmeling, Gareth (2011), *A Commentary on the Satyrica of Petronius*, Oxford.

Seidensticker, Bernd (2020), *Euripides. Kyklops*, Berlin/New York.

Setaioli, Aldo (2011), *Arbitri Nugae. Petronius' Short Poems in the* Satyrica, Heidelberg.

Smith, Martin S. (ed. comm.) (1975), *Petronius. Cena Trimalchionis*, Oxford.

Sullivan, J. P. (1968), *The Satyricon of Petronius. A Literary Study*, London.

Wessels, Antje (forthcoming), "Ovid *Tristien*", in: Melanie Möller (ed.), *Handbuch Ovid*, Stuttgart.