Petronius: *Cena Trimalchionis* (*Satyricon* Chpts. 2-3)

“The *Cena* is one incident from a long novel called *The Satyricon* of which only fragments survive. The plot of this immense work centers around the adventures of the narrator, Encolpius . . . He is a drifter who wanders from place to place with no visible means of support, continually involved in disreputable escapades, an anti-hero who evokes no admiration but a certain sympathy. Finally ending up at Puteoli, a popular and fashionable seaside resort and a leading commercial center in Italy, Encolpius meets Ascyltos, a philosophy student, with whom he shares lodgings. His professor, Agamemnon, overhears Ascyltos ranting about the inadequacies of modern education and impressed, procures for Encolpius and Ascyltos the invitation to dinner with the millionaire Trimalchio.” (M.G. Balme)

*The Satyricon* is satire, but not treated in the same way that Horace and Juvenal handled the genre. There is no indignation or verbal whipping in Petronius; he laughs but does not moralize. As a result, the reader is likely to find Trimalchio not disgusting but simply laughable.

The author of *The Satyricon* is almost certainly the same Gaius Petronius who was prominent at the court of Nero (54-68 CE). The historian Tacitus reports that he was the Arbiter of Elegance among Nero’s intimate friends. However, he was accused of complicity in a plot against the emperor and forced to commit suicide in 66 CE.

In the following excerpt Ascyltos and Encolpius describe Trimalchio’s dining room and the grand entrance of their host.

**Text and Translation**

**Chapter 2**

Asellus Corinthius in mensā positus erat cum bisaccio, qui habebat olivas

A little Corinthian donkey had been placed on the table with a double basket, which held white olives.

1. **asellus**: *asellus, -i, m.*: little donkey (diminutive of *asinus*, “donkey”)
2. **Corinthius**: *Corinthius, -a, -um*: Corinthian; Corinth is a city in Greece
3. **mensa**: *mensa, -ae, f.*: table
4. **bisaccio**: *bisaccium, -ii, n.*: saddle-bags; here, double basket
5. **olivas**: *oliva, -ae, f.*: olive
in alterā parte albas, in alterā nigras. Tegebant asellum lances duae, olives on one side and black on the other. Two platters were covering the little donkey’s back, in quibus nomen Trimalchionis inscriptum erat et argenti pondus. In his upon which had been inscribed the name of Trimalchio and the weight of the silver. On these (platters)
erant glires melle et papavere sparsi et tomacula et Syriaca pruna. were dormice sprinkled with honey and poppy seeds and little sausages and Syrian plums

2. **albas**: albus, -a, -um: white
**nigras**: niger, nigra, nigrum: black
**tegebant**: tego, -ere, texi, tectum: cover
**lances**: lanx, lancis, f.: platter
**duae**: duo, duae, duo: two (fem. nom. pl.)

3. **Trimalchionis**: Trimalchio, -onis, m.: a Roman name
**inscriptum erat**: = in + scribo: inscribe
**pondus**: pondus, ponderis, n.: weight
**argenti**: argentum, -i, n.: silver

4. **glires**: glis, gliris, m.: dormouse; a dormouse is a type of rodent
**melle**: mel, mellis, n.: honey
**papavere**: papaver, -eris, n.: poppy; here, poppy seeds
**sparsi**: spargo, -ere, sparsi, sparsum: sprinkle
**tomacula**: tomaculum, -i, n.: sausage
**Syriaca**: Syriacus, -a, -um: Syrian
**pruna**: prunum, -i, n.: plum

Chapter 3

In his eramus lautitis, cum ipse Trimalchio ad symphoniam allatus est. Cum We were in (the midst of) these extravagances, when Trimalchio himself was brought in, to the sound of a band. After

1. **lautitis**: lautitia, -ae, f.: extravagance
**symphoniam**: symphonia, -ae, f.: musical performance; here (with ad), “to the sound of the band” probably consisting of a lyre, double pipes, and percussion
**allatus est**: adfero, adferre, attuli, allatum: bring in
lecto accubuisset, pinnā argenteā dentes perfodiens, “Amici” inquit, 
he had reclined upon (his) couch, picking his teeth with a silver feather, “Friends,” he said,

“nondum volui in triclinium venire, sed, ne diutius vos morarer, omnem 
“not yet did I wish to come into the dining room, but, lest I should delay you longer, I denied
voluptatem mihi negavi; permittite tamen mihi ut lusum finiam.” Sequebatur
myself every pleasure; nevertheless, allow me to finish (my) game.” A slave followed

puer tabulam terebinthiam portans et crystallinas tesseras; et pro calculis

5 carrying a terebinth board and crystal dice; and instead of white and black

albis et nigris aureos argenteosque habebat denarios. Potantibus ergo nobis

pebbles, he has gold and silver coins. Then while we were drinking and

2. lecto: lectus, -i, m.: dining couch
accubuisset: accumbo, -cumbere, -cubui, -cubitum: to lie down; here, recline
pinn_: pinna, -ae, f.: feather
argentea: argenteus, -a, -um: (made of) silver
dentes: dens, dentis, m.: tooth
perfodiens: perfodio, -fodere, -fodi, -fossum: excavate; here, pick

3. nondum: (adverb) not yet
triclinium: triclinium, -i, n.: dining room
morarer: moror, -ari (deponent verb): delay

4. voluptatem: voluptas, -tatis, f.: pleasure
permittite: permitto, -mittere, -misi, -missum: allow (+ dative; also, ut + subjunctive)
lusum: lusus, -_s, m.: game
finiam: finio, -ire: finish
sequebatur: sequor, sequi, secutus sum (deponent verb): follow

5. tabulam: tabula, -ae, f.: gaming board
terebinthiam: terebinthi(n)us, -a, -um: (made of) terebinth; terebinth is a type of wood
portans: porto (1): carry
crystallinas: crystallinus, -a, -um: (made of) crystal
tesseras: tessera, -ae, f.: die (pl. dice)
calculis: calculus, -i, m.: little pebble (diminutive of calx, “stone”)

6. aureos: aureus, -a, -um: (made of) gold
denarios: denarius, -i, m.: Roman silver coin
potantibus: poto (1): drink
ergo: (adverb) therefore; here, then
et lautitias mirantibus, larvam argenteam attulit servus, cuius articuli in
gawking at the lavishness, a slave brought in a silver skeleton, whose joints were being bent

omnem partem flectebantur. Cum hanc super mensam semel atque iterum
in every direction. After he had suspended it above the table time and again,

obiecisset, ut aliquot figuras exprimeret, Trimalchion exclamavit: “Eheu, nos
so that it struck some poses, Trimalchio exclaimed: “Alas! We poor (creatures),
miseros, quam totus homuncio nil est. Sic erimus cuncti, postquam nos
how whol(ly) nothing is contemptible mankind. We will all be like this, after death carries

auferet Orcus. Ergo, vivamus, dum licet esse bene.”
us off. Therefore, let us live, while it is permitted to be well.”

7.   **mirantibus**: miror, -are, -atus sum (deponent verb): wonder at; here, gawk
larvam: larva, -ae, f.: ghost; here, skeleton
articuli: articulus, -i, m.: small joint (diminutive of artus = limb or joint)

8.   **flectebantur**: flecto, -ere, flexi, flexum: bend
**semel atque iterum**: time and again

9.   **obiecisset**: obicio, -icere, -ieci, -iectum: throw in the way; here, suspend
aliquot: (indeclinable numeral) some
figuras: figura, -ae, f.: shape; here, pose
exprimeret: exprimo, -primere, -pressi, -pressum: force out; here, struck
exclamo (1): exclaim
Eheu: (interjection) Alas!

10.  **homuncio**: homuncio, -onis, m.: lit. “contemptible man(kind)” (diminutive of homo)
cuncti: cunctus, -a, -um: all
postquam: (conjunction) after

11.  **auferet**: aufero, auferre, abstuli, ablatum: carry off; here, future = present
Orcus: Orcus, -i, m.: the god of the lower world
licet (impersonal verb): “it is permitted”
esse bene: idiom, “to be well”