Trimalchio Magister: (Mis)education and Orienting Mythologies in the *Cena Trimalchionis*

There are a number of scholars (Finley, Jones, Garnsey, among others) who have, quite fairly, read the many superfluous extravagances and perverse performances in the *Cena Trimalchionis* as at best a comic distortion (D’arms) and at worst a grotesque aping (Veyne) of the Roman senatorial class at symposia. The many manumitted slaves in attendance—and Trimalchio in particular— strive in vain at a pathetic attempt to achieve “respectability” (D’arms, 1981). While a large portion of the comic charge that Petronius has engendered in the scene is driven by Trimalchio’s over- or under-indulgence in the luxuries (*res elegentiae*) appropriate to such a meal, a closer consideration of the specific social and economic positions of Trimalchio and his fellow freedmen suggests that there is more at stake than the ridicule of the *nouveau riche*. Born into the lowest stratum of Roman society and yet having acquired such incredible wealth, Trimalchio finds himself in something of a liminal social space. Since his low birth denies Trimalchio entrance into the upper echelon of the Roman elite even as his estates generate tremendous economic power, he is relegated to a lower aristocracy—a “second gentry” that, as its most celebrated member, is his to define. One of the responsibilities that this position bestows upon Trimalchio is the introduction and indoctrination of new members to the values and customs that define this second gentry. That is, the responsibility of ensuring the smooth transfer of ideology from an older generation to a younger one that typically fell to educators of the children of the Roman elite, in the case of the second gentry, falls upon Trimalchio himself. As such, the many comic inversions and perversions of the values of the Roman elite that are on display in the *Cena Trimalchionis* can be read as an evening in Trimalchio’s schoolhouse, where an emerging social class attempts to define itself in opposition to what it is not.

Taking as its starting point the role of “orienting mythologies” in the transfer and perpetuation of ideology discussed by the French Marxist literary critic Louis Althusser, this paper explores the notion of Trimalchio as an educator and his attempts to initiate his fellow freedmen into an emerging social sphere that he himself epitomizes. I begin with a brief overview of the two most established Roman orienting mythologies that Trimalchio dissolves—the mandate that the Roman youth should emulate their ancestors in all things (*mos maiorum*) and Homeric poetry. Next, I explore the didactic effects of the myriad gastronomical and literary subversions present at the dinner. Throughout the ongoing dinner theater Trimalchio redirects the more typical Roman orienting mythologies toward the specific values of the second gentry, and each performance is conducted toward a common purpose—the aggrandizement of the meal itself. Accordingly, one might read the meal as a whole (its atmosphere, attendants, rituals, foods, etc.) as a syllabus to the orienting education of a successfully indoctrinated member of the second gentry, a *homo inter homines* (57.5). Finally, I postulate a few of the more prominent orienting mythologies that form the foundation upon which the lessons of the *Cena Trimalchionis* rest. Indeed, beneath Petronius’ comic lampooning of the Roman aristocracy there runs a more serious undercurrent that explores the experience of an increasingly populous and wealthy segment of the Roman population.

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