

Obligati tam grandi beneficio: Satirization of Compassionate Manumission in the Satyrice

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1) *Pet. Sat. 29.2-29.6:*

Et collegae quidem mei riserunt, ego autem collecto spiritu non destiti totum parietem persequi. Erat autem venalicium titulis pictum, et ipse Trimalchio capillatus caduceum tenebat Minervaque ducente Romam intrabat. Hinc quemadmodum ratiocinari didicisset, denique dispensator factus esset, omnia diligenter curiosus pictor cum inscriptione reddiderat. In deficiente vero iam porticu levatum mento in tribunal excelsum Mercurius rapiebat. Praesto erat Fortuna cornu abundantia copiosa et tres Parcae aurea pensa torquentes.

My friends all laughed at me, but I gathered my courage and wasn't put off from examining all the rest of the wall. There was the slave-market painted with inscribed placards, and Trimalchio himself with longer hair was holding a caduceus and was entering Rome being led by Minerva. The diligent painter had rendered everything with captions – here how he had learned how to calculate financial records and then how he had been made household accountant. At the point where the portico was already beginning to end, Mercury was lifting him by the chin and was carrying him up to his great magistrate's seat in the sky.

2) *Pet. Sat. 30.7-31.2:*

Ceterum ut pariter movimus dextros gressus, servus nobis despoliatus procubuit ad pedes ac rogare coepit, ut se poenae eriperemus: nec magnum esse peccatum suum, propter quod periclitaretur; subducta enim sibi vestimenta dispensatoris in balneo, quae vix fuissent decem sestertiorum. Retulimus ergo dextros pedes, dispensatoremque in atrio aureos numerantem deprecati sumus ut servo remitteret poenam. Superbus ille sustulit vultum et: “Non tam iactura me movet,” inquit, “quam negligentia nequissimi servi. Vestimenta mea cubitoria perdidit, quae mihi natali meo cliens quidam donaverat, Tyria sine dubio, sed iam semel lota. Quid ergo est? dono vobis eum.”

***Obligati tam grandi beneficio** cum intrassemus triclinium, occurrit nobis ille idem servus, **pro quo rogaveramus**, et stupentibus spississima basia impexit gratias agens humanitati nostrae. “Ad summam, statim scietis,” ait, “cui dederitis beneficium. Vinum dominicum ministratoris gratia est.”*

Meanwhile, as we were all moving our right-feet forward at the same time, an enslaved man who had been stripped for flogging fell at our feet and began to plead with us to save him from his punishment. The mistake that had landed him in his current peril was not even a particularly big one: the clothes of the dispensator, scarcely worth ten sesterces, had been stolen from him in the baths. And so we pulled our right feet back from the doorway and interceded with the *dispensator*, who was in the atrium counting gold coins, so that he would remit the enslaved man from punishment. The former haughtily turned up his nose and said, “It is not so much the monetary loss that bothers me as much as the negligence of such a terribly worthless slave. He lost my dinner clothes, which a certain client had given me for my

birthday – Tyrian-dyed, of course – though I guess I had already washed it once. Ah, well, what can I do? I give him to you.”

We felt obliged by so great a benevolent act and while we entered the dining room, the same enslaved man ran up to whose case we had just pleaded, and pressed thick kisses on our astonished faces while thanking us for our compassion. “In short,” he said, “you will soon know for whom you have done this benevolent thing. Remember – the master’s wine is provided thanks to the server.”

3) A few examples of *beneficium* used to refer to manumission in literature:

a) Cic. *In Verr.* 2.1.124:

Utrum reprehendis quod patronum iuvabat eum qui tum in miseriis erat, an quod alterius patroni mortui voluntatem conservabat, a quo summum beneficium acceperat?

For which of the reasons do you censure him – is it because he helped his one patron who was in distress or because he tried to respect the wishes of his other patron who had died and from whom he had received the greatest benevolence?

b) Tac. *Ann.* XIII, 26, 3 and 27, 2:

Nec grave manu missis per idem obsequium retinendi libertatem, per quod adsecuti sint: at criminum manifestos merito ad servitutem retrahi, ut metu coerceantur, quos beneficia non mutavissent.

And it really wouldn’t be that onerous to require manumitted people to retain their freedom through that same obedience because of which they had obtained it: but those who were plainly guilty deserve to be returned to enslavement, so that those whom our acts of benevolence have not reformed can be compelled to behave through fear.

Non frustra maiores, cum dignitatem ordinum dividerent, libertatem in communi posuisse. Quin et manu mittendi duas species institutas, ut relinqueretur paenitentiae aut novum beneficium locus.

It was not for nothing that our ancestors, when they were determining the ranks of the different orders, made liberty a shared characteristic of all. And indeed they established two forms of manumission* so that they could leave room for either punishment or a new display of their benevolence.

* ie. formal and informal manumission – the former resulted in full Roman citizenship, while the latter resulted in a quasi-freed state during the Republic and in Junian Latin status after Augustus. The *novum beneficium* to which Tacitus refers is elevating someone informally freed to full Roman citizenship.

4) A few examples of *beneficium* used to refer to manumission in the juristic sources:

a) Ulp. Dig. 38, 2, 1, pr.:

Hoc edictum a praetore propositum est honoris, quem liberti patronis habere debent, moderandi gratia. Namque ut Servius scribit, antea soliti fuerunt a libertis durissimas res exigere, scilicet ad remunerandum tam grande beneficium, quod in liberos confertur, cum ex servitute ad civitatem Romanam perducuntur.

This edict was proposed by the praetor in order to regulate the official respect which freedmen are supposed to have towards their patrons. For, as Servius wrote, it used to be the case that patrons were accustomed to demand the harshest conditions of the freedmen, as though they were paying them back for so great an act of benevolence, which they bestowed on their freedmen when they guided them from enslavement to Roman citizenship.

b) Papin. Dig. 48, 19, 33:

Fratres imperatores rescripserunt servos in temporaria vincula damnatos libertatem et hereditatem sive legatum, postquam tempus expleverint, consequi, quia temporaria coercitio, quae descendit ex sententia, poenae est abolitio. Si autem beneficium libertatis in vinculis eos inveniat, ratio iuris et verba constitutionis libertati refragantur.

5) *Humanitas*, freedpeople, and the enslaved in the letters of Pliny:

a) Plin. Ep. VIII, 16, 3:

Confecerunt me infirmitates meorum, mortes etiam, et quidem iuvenum. Solacia duo nequaquam paria tanto dolori, solacia tamen: unum facilitas manumittendi (videor enim non omnino immaturos perdidisse, quos iam liberos perdidit), alterum quod permitto servis quoque quasi testamenta facere, eaque ut legitima custodio... Sed quamquam his solaciis adquiescam, debilitor et frangor eadem illa humanitate, quae me ut hoc ipsum permitterem induxit.

The illnesses and even deaths of my slaves have really been doing me in emotionally lately – not least because some of them were young. Two things console me a bit, maybe not enough for this much pain, but they console me all the same: one is my own readiness to manumit them (because it doesn't feel like I've lost them too young if I've lost them as freed men) and the other is the fact that I allow them to make a sort of quasi-last will and testament that I act as executor for as though it were legitimate... But even though I am somewhat satisfied with these small comforts, I am weakened and broken by that same sense of compassion that induced me to grant this same thing.

b) Plin. Ep. V, 19, 2:

Quod si essem natura asperior et durior, frageret me tamen infirmitas liberti mei Zosimi, cui tanto maior humanitas exhibenda est, quanto nunc illa magis eget.

But even if I were naturally more harsh and hard-hearted, the illness of my freedman Zosimus - to whom I must show so much more compassion now that he really needs it - would still be breaking me.

6) Deprecor as a technical verb for an enslaved person seeking intercession:

a) Ulp. Dig. 1, 6, 2:

Dominorum quidem potestatem in suos servos illibatam esse oportet nec cuiquam hominum ius suum detrahi: sed dominorum interest, ne auxilium contra saevitiam vel famem vel intolerabilem iniuriam denegetur his qui iuste deprecantur.”

It is proper that the authority of masters over their slaves should be unimpaired and that no person should be deprived of their legal right; however, it is also in the interest of masters that remedy from savagery or starvation or intolerable injury should not be denied from those enslaved persons who seek lawful intercession.

b) Paul. Dig. 21, 1, 43:

Qui ad amicum domini deprecaturus confugit, non est fugitivus: immo etiamsi ea mente sit, ut non impetrato auxilio domum non revertatur, nondum fugitivus est, quia non solum consilii, sed et facti fugae nomen est.

Whoever flees to the friend of his master so that he might seek an intercession on his behalf is not considered a fugitive slave; for even if his intention were not to return home if his remedy was ultimately not achieved, he would still not yet be considered a runaway slave since the term “flight” refers not just to the intention but to the act as well.

c) Aulus Gellius, 7, 16, 9:

Q. Ennius in Erectheo non longe secus dixit quam Catullus:

“...aerumna mea libertatem paro,

Quibus servitatem mea miseria deprecor.”

Ennius in his Erectheus says something not far off of Catullus’ use of that word. He says:

“...I provide freedom through my hardship,

For those on whose behalf I intercede with my misery to avert their enslavement.”

7) Deprecor in the Cena - Petronius, Sat. 49.6-50.2:

Non fit mora, despoliatur cocus atque inter duos tortores maestus consistit. Deprecari tamen omnes coeperunt et dicere: “Solet fieri; rogamus, mittas; postea si fecerit, nemo nostrum pro illo rogabit.” Ego, crudelissimae severitatis, non potui me tenere, sed inclinatus ad aurem Agamemnonis, “plane,” inquam, “hic debet servus esse nequissimus; aliquis oblivisceretur porcum exinterare? Non mehercules illi ignoscerem, si piscem praeterisset.” At non Trimalchio, qui relaxato in hilaritatem vultu, “ergo,” inquit, “quia tam malae memoriae es, palam nobis illum exintera.” Recepta cocus tunica cultrum arripuit porcique ventrem hinc atque illinc timida manu secuit. Nec mora, ex plagis ponderis inclinatione crescentibus tomacula cum botulis effusa sunt.

Plausum post hoc automatam familia dedit et “Gaio feliciter” conclamavit. Nec non cocus portione honoratus est et argentea corona, poculumque in lance accepit Corinthia.

Without delay the cook was stripped and the miserable man was stood up in between two torturers. Everyone began to intercede and to say: “These things happen! We beg you to let him off. If he does it again later, none of us will plead on his behalf again.” But I was in a very hard-heartedly strict mood and, unable to restrain myself, I leaned over to Agamemnon’s ear and said, “Obviously this must be the most terribly worthless slave; what kind of a moron forgets to gut a pig? I wouldn’t let it go, by god, if he had let a fish slip his line like that. But not Trimalchio, who, with a smile creeping across his face, said: “Well, if your memory is so bad, gut him right now here in front of us.” The cook pulled his shirt back up, grabbed a knife, and cut open the stomach of the pig here and there with a shaky hand. Sausages and black puddings immediately poured out as the cuts opened up from the weight pushing out from the inside.

The household applauded this ingenious device and shouted a hearty “Good show Gaius!”. And the cook was honoured with a toast and a silver crown and received his drink on a Corinthian plate.

8) *Humanitas in the Cena* – Sat. 64.13-65.2:

Repressus ergo aliquamdiu Trimalchio camellam grandem iussit misceri [et] potiones dividi omnibus servis, qui ad pedes sedebant, adiecta exceptione: “si quis” inquit “noluerit accipere, caput illi perfunde. Interdiu severa, nunc hilaria.”

Hanc humanitatem insecutae sunt mattee, quarum etiam recordatio me, si qua est dicenti fides, offendit. Singulae enim gallinae altiles pro turdis circumlatae sunt et ova anserina pilleata, quae ut comessemus, ambitiosissime [a] nobis Trimalchio petiit dicens exossatas esse gallinas.

And after a little while Trimalchio calmed himself down and ordered a giant wine goblet to be mixed and drinks to be distributed among all of the enslaved who were sitting at our feet, appending the following stipulation: “If anyone,” he said, “does not accept their drink, pour it on their head. We work hard in the day-time and play hard at night!”

This display of compassion was followed by several amuse-bouches, the recollection of which, if you can believe my saying it, still makes me gag a bit. Instead of dainty little thrushes, fully fattened hens were brought around and goose eggs à la Phrygian cap, which Trimalchio enthusiastically urged us to eat, saying that they were deboned chickens.

9) *Beneficium in the Cena*:

a) Sat. 48, 1:

Et cocum quidem potentiae admonitum in culinam obsonium duxit, Trimalchio autem miti ad nos vultu respexit et “vinum” inquit “si non placet, mutabo; vos illud oportet bonum faciatis. Deorum beneficium non emo, sed nunc quicquid ad salivam facit, in suburbano nascitur eo, quod ego adhuc non novi...”

And so the pig, the about-to-be-entrée, led the cook, now sufficiently reminded of his master’s power, back into the kitchen, but Trimalchio turned to us with a placid expression and said, “if the wine is not pleasing you, I can change

it. Good wine is only good with good company. Incidentally, I don't have to buy it, by the benevolence of the gods, but everything here that makes you drool originates in my suburban villa, which I haven't actually visited yet..."

b) Sat. 67.9:

Nec meliora Scintilla, quae de cervice sua capsellam detraxit aureolam, quam Felicionem appellabat. Inde duo crotalia protulit et Fortunatae in vicem consideranda dedit et "domini" inquit "mei beneficio nemo habet meliora."

And Scintilla was no better – she took a little gold box, which she called “Felicio”, from around her neck. She took two great big dangly earrings out of it and passed them across to Fortunata for her appraisal and said, “Thanks to the benevolence of my master, no one has better jewelry than me.”

c) Sat. 71.5:

Respicens deinde Habinnam "quid dicis" inquit "amice carissime? Aedificas monumentum meum, quemadmodum te iussi? Valde te rogo, ut secundum pedes statuae meae catellam ponas et coronas et unguenta et Petraitis omnes pugnas, ut mihi contingat tuio beneficio post mortem vivere; praeterea ut sint in fronte pedes centum, in agrum pedes ducenti..."

Then, looking back at Habinnas, he said, “what do you say, my dearest friend? Are you going to build my monument in the way that I've asked you to? Please, please, please, I ask you that you put on it one after the other: a puppy at the feet of my statue and crowns and perfumes and all of the fights of Petraitis, so that I might be able to live after death by your benevolent act. Oh and also see to it that the tomb plot is one hundred feet across and two hundred deep..."

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