

PETRONIUS' AJAX

CLAUDIO SANSONE (SANSONE@UCHICAGO.EDU) | CAMWS 2021

(1) “..simus ergo, quod melius est, a primitiis hilares et Homeristas spectemus.” Intravit factio statim hastisque scuta concrepuit. ipse Trimalchio in pulvino consedit, et cum Homeristae Graecis versibus colloquerentur, ut insolenter solent, ille canora voce Latine legebat librum. mox silentio facto “scitis” inquit “quam fabulam agant? Diomedes et Ganymedes duo fratres fuerunt. horum soror erat Helena. Agamemnon illam rapuit et Dianae cervam subiecit. ita nunc Homeros dicit, quemadmodum inter se pugnent Troiani et Tarentini. vicit scilicet et Iphigeniam, filiam suam, Achilli dedit uxorem. ob eam rem Ajax insanit et statim argumentum explicabit.” haec ut dixit Trimalchio, clamorem Homeristae sustulerunt, interque familiam discurrentem vitulus in lance du<ce>naria elixus allatus est, et quidem galeatus. secutus est Ajax strictoque gladio, tanquam insaniret, <vitulum> concidit, ac modo versa modo supina gesticulatus mucrone frust[r]a collegit mirantibusque {vitulum} partitus est.

(Petronius *Satyrice* 59.2-7)

“...Let us be (as is better) newly joyful, and let us behold the Homerists” The party [of Homerists] entered forthwith and made a clattering noise striking their shields with their spears. Trimalchio sat himself on a cushion, and while the Homerists spoke Greek verses to each other (as they are insolently accustomed to do) he read out from a book in a sing-song voice, in Latin. Shortly, there was silence. “Do you know,” he asked, “what story they tell?” “Diomedes and Ganymedes were brothers. Their sister was Helen. Agamemnon seized her and replaced [Helen] with a deer for Diana. And here Homer tells how the Tarentians and the Trojans fought amongst each other. Clearly, he [Agamemnon] won, and gave his daughter Iphigenia in marriage to Achilles. Because of this, Ajax went mad, and he will explicate this matter to you in a moment.” Thus spoke Trimalchio, and the Homerists raised a shout, and from between the slaves, who had scattered out of the way, a calf was wheeled in on a two-hundred-pound platter—wearing a helmet! Ajax followed, sword drawn, and attacked it just as if he were insane, running it through, sweeping the sword forehanded and backhanded, he collected pieces on the point of his sword, and the calf was divided up amongst the bewildered observers.

(2) Calvisius Sabinus memoria nostra fuit dives. Et patrimonium habebat libertini et ingenium; numquam vidi hominem beatum indecentius. Huic memoria tam mala erat, ut illi nomen modo Vlixis excideret, modo Achillis, modo Priami, quos tam bene quam paedagogos nostros novimus. Nemo vetulus nomenclator, qui nomina non reddit, sed inponit, tam perperam tribus quam ille Troianos et Achivos persalutabat. Nihilominus eruditus volebat videri. Hanc itaque compendiarium excogitavit: magna summa emit servos, unura, qui Homerum teneret, alterum, qui Hesiodum; novem praeterea lyricis singulos adsignavit. Magno emisse illum non est quod mireris; non invenerat, faciendos locavit. Postquam haec familia illi comparata est, coepit convivas suos inquietare. Habebat ad pedes hos, a quibus subinde cum peteret versus, quos referret, saepe in medio verbo excidebat. Suasit illi Satellius Quadratus, stultorum divitum adrosor, et quod sequitur, adrisor, et quod duobus his adiunctum est, derisor, ut grammaticos haberet analectas. Cum dixisset Sabinus centenis milibus sibi constare singulos servos; "Minoris," inquit, "totidem scrinia emisses." Ille tamen in ea opinione erat, ut putaret se scire, quod quisquam in domo sua sciret.

(Seneca *Epistulae* 27.5-7)

Within our own time there was a certain rich man named Calvisius Sabinus; he had the bank-account and the brains of a freedman. I never saw a man whose good fortune was a greater offence against propriety. His memory was so faulty that he would sometimes forget the name of Ulysses, or Achilles, or Priam, - names which we know as well as we know those of our own attendants. No major-domo in his dotage, who cannot give men their right names, but is compelled to invent names for them, - no such man, I say, calls off the names of his master's tribesmen so atrociously as Sabinus used to call off the Trojan and Achaean heroes. But none the less did he desire to appear learned. So he devised this short cut to learning: he paid fabulous prices for slaves, - one to know Homer by heart and another to know Hesiod; he also delegated a special slave to each of the nine lyric poets. You need not wonder that he paid high prices for these slaves; if he did not find them ready to hand he had them made to order. After collecting this retinue, he began to make life miserable for his guests; he would keep these fellows at the foot of his couch, and ask them from time to time for verses which he might repeat, and then frequently break down in the middle of a word. Satellius Quadratus, a feeder, and consequently a fawner, upon addle-pated millionaires, and also (for this quality goes with the other two) a flouter of them, suggested to Sabinus that he should have philologists to gather up the bits. Sabinus remarked that each slave cost him one hundred thousand sesterces; Satellius replied: "You might have bought as many book-cases for a smaller sum." But Sabinus held to the opinion that what any member of his household knew, he himself knew also.

(Gummere trans.)

(3) "[Trimalchio's references] are so obviously out of synch with their Homeric originals that it is hardly original or clever to make an issue of their absurdity. Could this be Trimalchio taking his role as deceptive and manipulative 'author' of the Cena to an extreme, rather than showing himself up as an ignoramus?"

(pp. 46-7)

Through Trimalchio's alternative myths, intoned from a Latin book like the one we are reading, we see incorporation envisaged as a creative, transformative act which will unnerve as well as humor its readers, make them swallow new perspectives.

(p. 47)

Rimell, V. 2002. *Petronius and the Anatomy of Fiction*. Cambridge.