

Trimalchio as Cultural Theorist:  
The Semiotics of Ambition in the *Cena Trimalchionis*

In the preface of her 1993 study of the representation of food in Roman literature, Emily Gowers credits the *Cena Trimalchionis* for inspiring her work: “The urge to peer into the sinister entrails of Roman civilization seized me first as an undergraduate, when my stomach was turned by Petronius’ account of the boar that had to be gutted at Trimalchio’s table” (vii). Gowers’ reaction is far from singular; Petronius’ images of food throughout the *Cena* are evocative for their very outrageousness. At Trimalchio’s banquet, food is more than nutrition (Garnsey 1999): it is an index of class and economic status as well as race and ethnicity (Goody 1982); it participates in the larger themes that run throughout the *Satyricon*, such as “trickery” and “deception” (Rudich 1997); and it characterizes both the characters of Petronius’ novel as well as the very world in which it is set. Recent scholarship has shown that “taste” is itself a cultural construction, structured around self-identification in terms of geography, gender, race, ethnicity, class, and social standing (Bourdieu 1984, Warde 1997).

What interests me is the power the representations of food have in the *Cena*. After all, food is the centerpiece in Trimalchio’s theatrical *tour de force*. Trimalchio’s conspicuous consumption (e.g., §34.4), his claims to offer the best possible goods (e.g., §34.6-7), and his attempts to make ordinary foods appear exotic (e.g., §69.7) may be read within a semiotics of social distinction. Trimalchio is a rich freedman constantly striving to represent himself as belonging to a respectable class; he manipulates food in a kind of “language” of class ambition in an attempt to raise himself above his social status. His repeated claim to be a *homo inter homines* (§39.4, §74.13; cf. Hermeos at §57.5) is indicative of this ambition, a “craving,” as Edward Courtney puts it, “for assimilation” (2001: 87).

Nevertheless, Trimalchio’s posturing fails to achieve his goals through its radical turn. I argue that Trimalchio’s banquet appears monstrous because his “language” of food is structured on a “grammar” which can be analyzed through Lévi-Strauss’ “culinary triangle”: the mutually exclusive categories *le cru*, *le cuit*, and *le pourri* do not tolerate slippage back and forth, and yet, Trimalchio’s dishes attempt this very dislocation (cf. §49-50: the *porcus Troianus*; §33: the *pauona oua*; and §69-70: the course entirely *de porco factum*). The deconstruction of boundaries between the raw, the cooked, and the rotten can produce only an illicit mixture (*monstrum*: cf. §69.7) that turns the stomachs of his guests and critics, and in analogous terms, Petronius’ satire points to a critique of Trimalchio’s social ambitions as structural transgression.

## Works Cited

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