The Show Must Go On: Role-Play and Disguise in Petronius' *Satyricon*

A deceitful and exaggerated world, steeped in disguise and role-play, acts as the backdrop for Petronius' *Satyricon*. Theatricality and deception create uncertainty for his characters and amusement for his external audience looking on. This paper will examine various scenes which contain role-play in order to determine Petronius' purpose throughout the narrative, weaving the scholarship of deceit within the *Satyricon* which seeks to explain the constructs of the novel itself (Beck 1973, Frangoulidis 2008). Role-play is utilized to advance the plot and to create conflict. Scenes unfold in which actors take on various roles in order to deceive other characters in the novel which gives way to the progression of the plot, as conflict is created and a solution must be found.

Petronius allows his characters to invent facades, as when Encolpius disguises himself as a soldier during an encounter on the street, or he creates situations in which characters may assume the identities of other characters, such as in the scenes between Encolpius, under the guise of Polyaenus, and Circe. These recognizable identities become the very essence of the deception within the scene—that is, characters are under the impression that they know the character with whom they are engaging. However, that particular character is actually under the guise of another character and holds intentions unknown to anyone but himself and the audience. Within these scenes, deception is utilized by characters in order to attempt to gain something they otherwise would not be able to (Rimell 2002). Deception, therefore, is the key to acquisition. Another function of deception is as a source of entertainment for the audience, who usually has more knowledge of the context than the characters within the narrative (Rankin 1969). Given the advanced knowledge of the audience, examination of the misunderstanding between characters becomes a source of humor. Ultimately, the success of role-play is

determined in two ways. On one level, one judges success upon the characters' execution of the disguise within the plot. However, the inevitable failure of the deception of characters in the *Satyricon* allows Petronius to create humor for his audience. To observe the unfolding and collapse of the deception is amusing for the reader who has particular information of the production put on by the unaware actors.

The paper will examine four scenes in order to evaluate the success of role-play: Encolpius' interaction with a soldier on the street (Petronius 81-82), Encolpius and Giton aboard the ship of Lichas (Petronius 99-112), Encolpius' affair with Circe as Polyaenus (Petronius 126-130), and the *Cena Trimalchionis* (Petronius 26-78). The *Cena* will offer the largest portion of material to examine role-play in various forms. Trimalchio's dinner is layered with elements of performance for both his guests and for the reader. In other scenes, Petronius drops Encolpius and Giton into situations in which they must utilize deception to successfully maneuver their way out, in the much the same way as in Encolpius' meeting with the soldier. Deception offers safety, and a disguise must be maintained in order to acquire and sustain that protection. Encolpius' affair with Circe exemplifies deception for status and wealth, and social safety. In this way, disguise is a mechanism for social advancement and the acquisition of opportunity.

The disguise in each scene is considered in order to determine the success of the actors performing within the story, and the amusement of the audience is evaluated, as humorous, ironic or dramatic (according to the typology of Hope 2009). Petronius' creation of this world, acts a foil to the realities understood by his readers living in Neronian Rome. Petronius' construction of everyday life, as filtered through the exaggerated lens of his characters, settings and plot, exhibits the understanding that nearly everyone has the capacity to utilize deception in

order to obtain a degree of social or material safety. Petronius' use of role-play and deception is a template through which his readers may understand the reality of their own society.

Bibliography

Beck, Roger. 1973. "Some Observations on the Narrative Technique of Petronius." *Phoenix*. 27: 42-61.

Frangoulidis, Stavros. 2008. "Trimalchio as Narrator and Stage Director in the *Cena*: An Unobserved Parallelism in Petronius' *Satyricon 78*." *Classical Philology*. 103: 81-87.

Hope, Valerie. 2009. "At Home with the Dead: Roman Funeral Traditions and Trimalchio's Tomb." In *Petronius: A Handbook*, edd. Johnathan R.W. Prag and Ian D. Repath: 140-161.

Panayotakis, Costas. 1994. "Theatrical Elements in the Episode on Board Lichas' Ship (Petronius, "Satyrica" 99.5-115)." *Mnemosyne*. 47: 596-624.

Preston, Keith.1915. "Some Sources of Comic Effect in Petronius." *Classical Philology*. 10: 260-269.

Rankin, H.D. 1969. "Some Themes of Concealment and Pretence in Petronius' *Satyricon*." *Societe d'Etudes Latines de Bruxelles*. 28: 99-119.

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