

Between the Clock and the Bed: Novelistic Resistance to Linear Time
in Petronius' *Cena Trimalchionis*

Time and temporality have long been seen as a unifying feature of Petronius' *Cena Trimalchionis* (Arrowsmith 1966; Slater 1990). The extravagant freedman Trimalchio has a water-clock in his atrium along with a trumpeter to announce with precision the amount of his life Trimalchio has wasted (*Sat.* 26; on which, see Magnusson 2000); and at the close of the banquet, Trimalchio counts down the days until his death (see *Sat.* 77, where Trimalchio claims to have "30 years, 4 months, and 2 days" left in his life), demanding a *horologium* for his tomb in order that "everyone who looks at the hours, whether he wants to or not, has to read [Trimalchio's] name" (*Sat.* 71: *quisquis horas inspiciet, velit nolit, nomen meum legat*). Moreover, as Peter Toohey has suggested, the *cena* emphatically stresses the linearity of time and its connection to digestive regularity in stark contrast to previous Roman models of cyclical time and historical iteration (Toohey 2004).

However, what has gone underappreciated in Petronius scholarship is the way in which the *cena* simultaneously offers alternative models of time to resist Trimalchio's obsessively linear framework. Whereas Trimalchio's compulsive time-measurement plays into an imperial impulse to control, regularize, and standardize the cosmos, other characters in the *cena* resist this imperial maneuver through the compression or expansion of time. Furthermore, the narrative experience of the banquet itself – modeled simultaneously on the Vergilian underworld (Bodel 1994) and on an inescapable labyrinth (Bodel 1999; Rimell 2002) – emphasizes the cyclicity of novelistic time. Every course of this feast is iterative, representing the novel's capacity for repetition with variation; every reperformance of *luxuria* undercuts the overpowering linearity of measured time.

In this paper, I explore how Petronius plays with a realistic novelistic time – what Bakhtin labeled the “adventure time of every day” (Bakhtin 1981; Branham 2002) – as a mechanism of resistance. First, I argue that Trimalchio’s regularization of time has clear links to imperial ideology. The linearity of time finds its closure, for instance, in apotheosis, as the mural Trimalchio’s guests see upon entering his atrium reveals (*Sat.* 29). Moreover, aligned with Trimalchio’s attempt to control time is his manipulation of space and boundaries: in *Sat.* 38, we learn that he has imported rams from Tarentum, bees from Athens, and mushrooms from India so that he can reproduce them at home; at *Sat.* 48, in turn, Trimalchio compresses space, claiming that he wants to buy Sicily so that he can “sail to Africa within his own borders whenever he wants” (*cum Africam libuerit ire, per meos fines volo*). Regulation of time is paralleled by the redefinition of borders and the imperial expansion over the Mediterranean.

However, interspersed with Trimalchio’s obvious attempts to control time is a resistant, novelistic impulse, which is voiced by the narrators as well as characters in the text. In the speeches delivered by freedmen, for instance, the first speaker Dama wishes to compress time, so that one can go “straight from bed to the dining room” (*Sat.* 41: *de cubiculo recta in triclinium*). Guests at the banquet marvel at the performative compressions of time, such as when a huge pig is roasted in less time that it would take to cook a chicken (*Sat.* 49), and even the Sibyl at Cumae wishes to escape the oppression of time, as she tells Trimalchio in Greek that she “longs to die” (*Sat.* 48: ἀποθανεῖν θέλω). The most powerful resistance to Trimalchio’s stubborn linearity, though, is the cyclicity of novelistic time, which is revealed through narratorial commentary on the iterations of the feast. Encolpius responds with growing disgust at the spectacular display after display, as the novel rejoices in carnivalesque repetition. Moreover, as our protagonists long to escape the ostentatious feast, the doorman refuses them exit, at which point the narrator

laments that they have been “closed in a new kind of labyrinth” (*Sat. 73: novi generis labyrinth inclusi*). The novel dramatizes, in other words, the desire to escape the stubborn linearity of imperial ideology, and thus its quotidian “adventure time” resists the overpowering control of the clock.

Bibliography

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