Obligati tam grandi beneficio: Satirization of Compassionate Manumission in the *Satyrica*

Petronius' *Satyrica* presents a world in which many of the characters, often freed slaves themselves, employ the language and imagery of manumission. Bodel has emphasized the significance and transformative qualities of Trimalchio's own manumission and its relationship to social rebirth (Bodel 1994). This paper builds on Bodel's examination of manumission in the *Cena* as well as Roth's observations on the three "enactments of freedom" (Roth 2016) that she identifies in the *Satyrica* (40.3-41.4; 41.6-41.7; 54.1-54.5) by highlighting other representations of and allusions to the language of Roman manumission in the text. In particular, Petronius' satirization of gratuitous manumission as something both sanctimonious and perfunctory, but also ultimately superficial in its outcome, contains within it a critique of the hypocrisy of the contemporary upper-class ideals of compassionate enslavement.

I propose that we should also include the episode when Encolpius and his companions are about to enter the dining room and encounter an enslaved person about to be beaten, whom they rescue from the lash (30.5-31.2) among the quasi-manumissions noted by Roth. I argue that the way Petronius deploys the language of gratuitous manumission in this scene, especially the terms *beneficium* and *humanitas*, establishes a pattern repeated at important points later in the narrative. While the scenes of actual manumission in the *Cena* may seem spontaneous and indulgent, the work conceals a more complex satire of compassionate manumission.

The episode of the suppliant *servus* at the entrance to the *triclinium* may not represent a legal emancipation in a strict sense, but it is nonetheless full of the language of gratuitous manumission. The act of the *dispensator* in releasing the slave from punishment is described as *tam grande beneficium*, word for word the idiom that Ulpian uses for manumission in *Digest*

38.2.1. Similarly, Cicero (*Verr*. 2.1.124) uses the phrase "*summum beneficium*", suggesting that this was a common and recognizable euphemism for manumission (for other examples, Mouritsen 2011, 36; Lopez 1993). A few sentences later, the enslaved man himself thanks Encolpius for his *humanitas* and calls his intercession a *beneficium*. This repetition clearly marks the contextual significance of the terms, which are used again when Scintilla describes her husband Habinnas' indulgences (67.9); when Trimalchio insists the enslaved servers drink or have wine poured on them (65.1); and, significantly, when Trimalchio asks Habinnas to give him life after death by making his tomb (71.6).

One of the very first incidents we encounter in the dinner is that a servant is "freed" from the threat of a beating, an essentialized representation of the constant corporal danger of slavery from the perspective of a free Roman. This liberation is only granted through the compassionate intervention of a Roman slaveowner. In this way, Petronius initially presents a highly idealized gratuitous manumission that he then proceeds to undermine throughout the rest of the *Cena*. The relieved sense of obligation of the rescued slave – his promise of the master's best wine – finds a more sinister parallel in the obligation of the enslaved servers to drink or have that same wine poured on their heads. The manumitory ideals of magnanimity and charity are subverted by Scintilla's transactional vanity. As such, Petronius' mockery of gratuitous manumission among friends in the *Cena* is not simply an objection to its ostentation and vulgarity, but rather draws its satire from the limitations of the *beneficium* of manumission and from a recognition that obligations remained for those who were freed.

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