

Petronius' Ajax

In Section 59 of the *Satyricon*, Trimalchio stages a pastiche of Homeric myths, interrupting the *Cena* with his own “translation” of Homer. As he breaks off, a waiter dressed as Ajax enters to serve the next course: a calf wearing a helmet. Many scholars have viewed this Homeric pastiche or pantomime as a series of errors satirizing Trimalchio’s lack of education and his aristocratic pretensions (e.g. Schmeling 2011, Panayotakis 1993, Slater 1987, Smith 1975). Rimmell (2007), however, suggests that Trimalchio’s muddled version of Homeric myth may be read more seriously as a “provocative gag” that raises questions about the status of *paideia* within the power hierarchies in Petronius’ text and cultural milieu. Despite this important insight, Rimmell does not analyze the passage’s details and their pointed transformation of the Homeric tradition. Accepting her premise that such passages invite a “participatory” reading, inviting readers to perform a “double-take,” I re-read Trimalchio’s version as a surprising lucid rendition of traditional myth.

In Trimalchio’s version, Diomedes and Ganymedes were Helen’s brothers; she was seized by Agamemnon and then replaced by a deer for sacrifice to Diana. The Trojan War was fought against the Parentians, and Agamemnon, upon winning, married Iphigenia to Achilles. This is not the Homer I am used to, nor the one Trimalchio’s guests might recall. Yet, despite the jumble of names and events, the socio-economic contours of the plot anchor Trimalchio’s variant within the canonical version. Trimalchio focuses on the transfer of different kinds of wealth through modes of exchange such as kidnapping (and its complement, ransom), sacrifice, and marriage—conveyed materially through traditional signs of capital: women and animals. That is, Trimalchio’s Homer is one concerned primarily with sources of wealth and the complex social behavior of an aristocratic class directed towards preserving that wealth.

Trimalchio's understanding of the text is also evident in the culminating act: the Ajax-waiter, waving his sword menacingly, distributes the meat to the audience. He therefore enacts the madness of Ajax in killing the generals' unapportioned spoils, but emphasizes the destruction of wealth rather than attempted murder. When Trimalchio's Ajax-waiter reveals that the objective of his frenzied sword-play was here not to kill but to carve, he enacts the division of spoils that never took place in the Ajax myth. The loss of the spoils is now symbolically restored amidst Trimalchio's elaborate transformations of symbols and food (cf. Conte 1996, Bartsch 1994, Bryson 1990).

Thus, Trimalchio's mythic hyper-correction alerts us to a mode of selective reading that amounts to a critical and proto-Marxist analysis of the Homeric tradition. Trimalchio exposes the ideological function of myths. In this regard, his disregard of the names becomes a cogent criticism of the artificial veneer of *paideia*, which dissimulates the true function of literary education through the importance of "correct" learning whilst concealing the "social charter" implicit in the mythology. It follows that, to Trimalchio, names are just names—but the world of social relations and the distribution of wealth is of great interest to him as a man charting the distinction between *nouveau riche* and aristocracy. By emending the text in his way, he provides a disarming challenge to his guests, and to Petronius' audiences, daring them to laugh it off in the knowledge that they have been exposed.

To take Trimalchio seriously would be to throw into question those foundations of culture which are supposed to be unshakeable. But if read in a reparative light, the *Satyricon* goes further: it offers an uncomfortable but productive path towards repairing one's epistemological grounding in a literary education. Petronius' use of Trimalchio in this episode promotes such a possibility by giving us a character who reads self-interestedly—as we

all do, whether openly or not. Thus, this passage emphasizes the class tensions underwriting the *Cena* in their specifically literary dimensions. Trimalchio was born a slave in the Roman province of Asia, and no amount of wealth or displays of erudition will erode the boundary between him and the aristocracy. But, I suggest, his position has its advantages: he is committed to an interstitial position and is ideally situated to produce internal critiques of the society in which he lives. This paper shows that, rather than simply a misreading of Homer, Trimalchio's revision offers a pointed critique of how literary education underwrites power.

Bibliography

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