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**Practicing Death – Petronius' *Cena Trimalchionis* and Plato's *Phaedo***

It has well been noted that the *Cena Trimalchionis* consciously plays with and inverts episodes and themes from Plato's *Symposium* (e.g. Courtney 2001, 1962; Cameron, *CQ* 1969; Bessone, *MD* 1993). Whereas the *Symposium* provides a series of encomia of *eros* by learned gentlemen of Athens, the *Cena* consists in a series of vulgarly hedonistic episodes, the most prominent themes of which lie in the obsessions of its host – corporeal satisfactions and death. It is the purpose of this paper to develop further Petronius' use and inversion of Plato, but in this case with his *Phaedo*. I argue that there are two chief parallels: firstly, an ironic correspondence in the use of mythical imagery; namely Theseus' journey through the labyrinth used as an image of the idea of a journey through death in life. Secondly, and more concretely, I argue that the *Cena's* final scenes – from the reading of his will through to the mock death of Trimalchio – consciously parallels the final scenes of Socrates' life as depicted in the *Phaedo*. The *Phaedo*, as a whole justifies and extols the life of philosophy as "practicing death" – the separation of the body from the soul. By bringing out contrasts and parallels to this philosophic work Petronius vividly shows the pointlessness of the vapid and soulless life of Trimalchio who, flitting in his own house of Hades, literally practices his own death daily.

The use of the imagery of Theseus in the labyrinth in the *Cena* as suggestive of a journey through death (Hades) in life is well established and many clear allusions to *Aeneid VI* further underscore this theme (e.g. Leary, *CQ* 2000; Courtney, *AJP* 1987; Cameron *Latomus* 1970). One further point which has not been made is the number of guests at Trimalchio's – fourteen in addition to Trimalchio, a number unusually large for a Roman *cena* and clearly reminiscent of the "twice seven" who accompany Theseus. Likewise, in the descriptions of Socrates' final day, many scholars have recognized allusions to Theseus' labyrinthine labor (eg. Geddes (1863), Burger (1984), Gotshalk (2001)). Whereas Socrates-as-Theseus leads his companion to an end which is philosophy and the freeing of the soul from the fear of death, Trimalchio leads his companions - soulless bodies - through a labyrinth of voluptuary pleasures which he envisions will stay with him after death.

The death scenes of Socrates and Trimalchio offer remarkable structural parallels: a discussion about their last requests, followed by one concerning burial. Thereafter each bathe. Later there are indications of sunrise (*Cena*) or sunset (*Phaedo*), and finally extended descriptions of their deaths. As becomes very evident the events of Trimalchio's "final moments" provide a distorted mirror of Socrates' death. For example, Socrates' bath is an act of purification for his approaching death, whereas Trimalchio bathes in order to be able to eat and drink more. Trimalchio out of superstition and gluttony orders a cock to be killed (74.4), whereas Socrates kills a cock for the health of his soul. Socrates dies in silence, health and without fuss, whereas the sounds and luxury of Trimalchio's "death" lead Encolpius *ad summam nauseam*.

Petronius offers in the final scenes of the *Cena* a sustained parody of the *Phaedo*. Trimalchio and Socrates, as Theseus-like guides of their companions, offer two stark

conceptions of man's mortality. For Socrates, the priority of the soul over the body makes death something to be confronted and, finally, embraced as a release of the soul from the body. As a mere body, Trimalchio in his underworld house practices death not as philosophy, but the vain attempt to secure the satiety of his corporeal pleasures.