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Double Vision: Satire vs. Carnival in Petronius

This paper argues that clues suggesting different, even mutually exclusive, interpretations coexist in the text of Petronius' *Satyrica*, and that the effect achieved may be metaphorically described as an optical illusion such as the Necker cube. My focus will be on the conflict between the satirical vision, often embraced by the narrator Encolpius, and a carnivalesque celebration of exactly that transgression – sexual, social, aesthetic – which shocks Encolpius into satirising it. This ambiguity involves several aspects: genre (the influence of satire vs. that of the comic theatre), narrative (the authority of the I-narrator vs. various challenges to that authority, such as the speech and character of the personages he ridicules), and general tenor (moralism and aesthetic superiority vs. rejoicing in the transgressions and inversions depicted). The ultimate result of the work's strategy is, I suggest, a questioning of all interpretative frames, and a merry relativisation of value hierarchies. The argument is built on close analysis of several passages in the *Satyrica*, notably the Quartilla episode (Sat. 18–19) and the quarrel between the freedman Hermeros and the freeborn guests at Trimalchio's dinner (57–58).

In the cases of Quartilla and the freedmen, we encounter traditional satirical settings and targets in the lecherous women and the boorish host respectively, and both episodes have indeed been read as satire. First-person narration by a freeborn male is in itself a feature shared with Roman satire, and Encolpius makes explicitly negative statements about the women and the freedmen, as well as attempting irony and ridicule against them. Since in the case of the *Cena* there is also the powerful intertext of Horace's *Serm.* II.8, there are good reasons for suspecting a satirical discourse.

Yet if satire is defined as comprising an element of criticism, we must ask whether the narrator's critique remains unchallenged. We then find that the presumed targets undercut the satire by speaking too many lines, using too good arguments, and sometimes even attempting to ridicule Encolpius in their turn! So Quartilla's mimic laughter is allowed to fill the scene (19.1), while satirical laughter by the main character is suppressed (16.3; 17.9). Hermeros at the *Cena*, while replying to satirical laughter against the freedmen, is given two humorous, potentially moving speeches for his counterattack (57.2-11, 58.2-14). The worldview that Hermeros propounds is to a great extent an inversion of traditional Roman beliefs: he claims that it is more praiseworthy to work one's way up than to be born free; he underlines his ability to make money, while his educated opponents are called worthless; and he is almost proud of his grammatically and stylistically vulgar speech, picking his earthy metaphors with gusto. There is much here that may be interpreted in terms of Bakhtinian carnival, and the same can be said of the Quartilla episode.

Although a few readings have tried to account for both the satirising and the merry perspective, they have either toned down the contrast between them, or claimed that the text leads to interpretative chaos. I suggest, rather, that the *Satyrica* enacts relativisation resulting from simultaneous hints at incompatible interpretations. If, for instance, we join Encolpius' vision of the quarrel scene at the *Cena*, Hermeros is a ridiculous parvenu with

an inferiority complex – but if we choose to look with the freedman speaker, the freeborn guests become confused and conceited creatures, laughably out of touch with reality, “tamquam mus in matella” (58.9). And the axis on which both the satirical and the carnival reading of this “optical illusion” turn is humour.