Written during the 1st century A.D., the *Satyricon* is often referred to as the first Roman novel. Most scholars agree that the language and structure of the novel are constant with writing of the second half of the first century A.D. and thus attribute it to Petronius Arbiter, possibly the *arbiter elegentiae* of the Emperor Nero’s court. The novel has only survived for us in fragments, and for this reason it is impossible for the modern reader to reconstruct its plot completely. However, the *Satyricon* serves as an invaluable source of information about the daily life and language of the Roman populace. Petronius deliberately reproduces plebeian language and slang, offering a rare insight into everyday Roman life, which polished and refined works leave absent.

One particular section of the novel, referred to as the *Cena Trimalchionis*, describes an elaborate dinner party hosted by Trimalchio, an immigrant businessman who gained riches in Rome without gaining any elegance or education fit for a true aristocrat. Since this section has been preserved more completely than the other fragmentary
chapters of the novel, its recurring themes and motifs are able to develop more fully and be more closely understood as Petronius had originally intended. Scholars have interpreted different chapters and scenes of the *Cena* as highlighting the vast social gap between Rome’s crass *liberti*, or freed slaves, and the well-educated *scholastici* whom they desperately sought to mimic. Although this theme appears consistently throughout the *Cena*’s entirety, it is particularly evident in the bizarre superstitions of Trimalchio and his belief in folklore. P.G. Walsh concludes from his study of the novel that “Petronius had doubtless observed how large a part these tendencies play in the lives of many self-made men [like Trimalchio].”¹ In order to fully understand and appreciate Petronius’ satire in these instances, one must first have some grasp on their significance in antiquity.

Trimalchio’s words and actions throughout the *cena*, or dinner, scene evince his inability to understand superstition. This becomes clear to the reader before Agamemnon’s party even enters the dining room. Before crossing over the threshold, “one of [Trimalchio’s] slaves, who was stationed there for this duty, shouted ‘Right foot

first!” (exclamavit unus ex pueris, qui super hoc officium erat positus “dextro pede,” 30.5). The taboo that it was unlucky to begin a journey or step with the left foot first was one generally accepted by lower class citizens as well as Rome’s leading men; Augustus himself was said to have considered it ill-omened to put on his left shoe before the right (Suetonius, De vita Caesarum II.92.1). However, Trimalchio, in his typical ostentatious fashion, takes precaution against superstition to a ridiculous extent. He seeks to avert any possibility of ill-omen not only for himself but for his dinner guests. Trimalchio gives one of his slaves the officium of barking admonitions to those about to cross the threshold. Petronius’ word choice of officium mocks Trimalchio’s dramatic fear of superstition. The word, literally meaning “duty,” was a crucial and serious aspect of the mos maiorum for citizens to fulfill their political and religious duties. A citizen was bound and obliged by the mos maiorum, or customs of his ancestors, to carry out his officium for the sake of the Roman state. Petronius employs the word ironically in this context, using officium to describe a trivial duty. Petronius uses Trimalchio’s vulgarity and inability to learn an understanding of such a common superstition to scoff at the ignorance of Rome’s freedmen.
Another example of Trimalchio’s misunderstanding of superstition comes just a few chapters later. His histrionic entrance into the dining room is as ridiculous as the rest of his words and actions. The sight of Trimalchio being carried on a litter among little pillows “squeezed out laughter from his unsuspecting guests” (*expressit imprudentibus risum*, 32.2). Agamemnon, Encolpius, and Ascyltos claim repeatedly that free dining and entertainment is their only reason for attending the banquet and putting up with Trimalchio’s excessive behavior. Throughout the *cena* they tolerate his ridiculous tricks and antics. Many of the guests laugh at their host as well. Trimalchio is described as “with a shaven head protruding from a scarlet dressing-gown, and round his neck draped with a muffler he had thrust a napkin with a broad purple stripe and fringes dangling from it all round” (*pallio enim coccineo adrasum excluderat caput circaque oneratas veste cervices laticlaviam immiserat mappam fimbriis hinc atque illinc pendentibus*, 32.2). His appearance and dress would seem odd even to modern readers. Not only does Agamemnon’s party sneer at Trimalchio’s appearance, but the freedmen at the table take notice. His vulgarity is evident to even the most imprudent guests. Among other jewelry, Trimalchio is shown wearing two gold rings: one
“massive gilt ring” (*grandem sublauratum*, 32.4), the other “inlaid with iron bits, as if they were stars” (*ferreis velut stellis ferruminatum*, 32.4). The etching of stars on a piece of jewelry was commonly found on Roman amulets to ward off the evil eye. According to Pliny, the right to wear a gold ring was mainly confined to free-born equestrians (*Naturalis Historia* 33.32). Trimalchio not only acknowledges this, but actually celebrates his rise to riches as a former slave. By wearing a ring that denotes an equestrian heritage, Trimalchio shows yet again his ignorance of social propriety.

The ghost stories which Niceros, one of Trimalchio’s dinner guests, and Trimalchio tell at the dinner table are the most extensive and revealing examples of their understandings of superstition. Prior to their *fabulae*, or stories, the dinner conversation consists mostly of the freedmen guests discussing mundane, personal topics and issues affecting their class in Rome. Each topic addressed reflects its speaker’s personal interests in life and their subsequent secondary role in society. The *liberti* begin by telling stories about local acquaintances and friends, who they know or have known personally. The

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conversation develops a more serious tone when Ganymedes reproaches corrupt magistrates in the city and his personal afflictions from steeply increasing bread prices. Echion reverts back to mundane topics, commenting on an upcoming gladiatorial contest and games. So far, their comments seem to be little more than gossip and small talk common at social gatherings. Grecisms, slang, and proverbial phrases are rampant throughout. This sort of vulgar Latin spoken by the freedmen further demonstrates the social gap between themselves and their audience of scholastici.

Later in the scene the same Echion, a lowly centonarius, or rag-merchant, scorns Agammenon, saying, “You're not of our stock and so you laugh at poor men's conversation” (*non es notrae fasciae et ideo pauperorum verba derides*, 46.1). Clearly, Agammemnon’s facial expressions throughout the conversation have shown such noticeable disgust that Echion confronts him. The tension between the guests evolves and is acknowledged explicitly from this point. Agamemnon, Ascyltos, and Encolpius reach the point at which they are no longer able to restrain their sneers at the vulgarity of their company. Ascyltos in particular laughs “to the point of tears” (*ad lacrimas*, 57.1), enraging Echion so much that he berates the *scholastici* as a
rude and snobbish class. His tireless defense of his role in society as a freedman proves that Echion acknowledges the intellectual disparity between men of both classes.

Petronius’ placement of the two ghost stories immediately after rather than before these conversations offers insight to his reason for including them in his work at all. Their significance to the novel must also be to contribute to Petronius’ contrast between *liberti* and *scholastici*. These two tales, though brief in length, are two of the few fully preserved from Roman folklore that survive today. Difficulties in understanding their meaning arise from a scarcity of information about folklore and the role it played in Roman daily life. These stories or others similar were surely familiar to Petronius’ audience, since even two freedmen were able to recite them from memory. The inclusion of such common tales would have helped his readers easily identify his irony. However, many of these jokes and puns are lost on the modern reader. To discern Petronius’ intended ironies and mockery in these short *fabulae*, the origins of Roman folklore must first be examined for a better understanding.

“The conservative character of agricultural customs has made them the richest field of superstitions in modern
Folklore. This rule holds good for antiquity also.”³ Rome’s agricultural origins from its foundation explain why both of Petronius’ fabulae take place in pastoral settings: the werewolf of Nicers’ tale devours a flock of sheep, while Trimalchio claims to have witnessed the witches he describes while a slave on his master’s country estate. Rustic qualities found in ancient folklore would have appealed greatly to the freedmen as described earlier in the Cena, most of whose duties were working on large estates. Trimalchio describes his vast estate with “four dining-rooms, twenty bed-rooms, two marble colonnades, a store-room upstairs, a bed-room where I sleep myself, a sitting-room for this viper, a very good room for the porter, a guest-chamber for visitors” (quattuor cenationes, cubicula viginti, porticus marmoratos duos, susum cenationem, cubiculum in quo ipse dormio, viperae huius sessorium, ostiarii cellam perbonam, hospitium hospites capit, 77.4). He claims to raise his own livestock and grow his own crops, including a vineyard. It can be assumed that an estate of such magnitude could not possibly fit inside the bustling, crowded city of Rome. Furthermore, since he inherited his estate from his former master (76.2), Trimalchio would

have spent his slave life tending to the fields. Thus, the
ghost stories which serve as entertainment for city-dwellers
would have seemed much more real to Trimalchio and
Niceros, a former slave as well. This may also explain why
tales so obviously mythical to the upper classes would have
seemed real to slaves and former slaves.

Another possibility of why freedmen were more
prone to believing these tales could be their Greek roots.
Pliny dedicates an entire chapter of his Natural History to
the origin of the werewolf tale. He relates Greek folklore
and superstitions about werewolves popularly still retold by
his peers. However, Pliny prefices those, which he is about
to relate, with this warning:

“That men have been turned into wolves, and again
restored to their original form, we must confidently look
upon as untrue, unless, indeed, we are ready to believe all
the tales, which, for so many ages, have been found to be
fabulous” (Nat. 34.2-3).

After narrating several superstitions and tales, Pliny
slanders Greek veracity, dryly remarking, “It is really
wonderful to what a length the credulity of the Greeks will
go! There is no falsehood, if ever so barefaced, to which
some of them cannot be found to bear testimony” (Nat.
34.8). His aspersion on the Greek people can be applied to
the Greco-loving Niceros and especially Trimalchio. Both freedmen pause several times during their narrations to reaffirm to their guests the truth and honesty of their words. Niceros’ preface to his werewolf story diminishes its credibility before he even begins. He acknowledges his fear of being ridiculed when he says, “I’m afraid that those well-educated men will laugh at me” (*timeo istos scholasticos ne me ridant*, 61.4). When Trimalchio implores Niceros to tell the tale about the experience he had, the reader can infer that Niceros has recited this tale many times previously. Perhaps someone of his past audiences has mocked him or debunked his story. It also proves that not all Romans believed in these types of folklore, or at least that some were wary in believing. When he finally agrees and is narrating the story, Niceros interrupts himself to again assure his doubtful listeners’ faith, saying, “Don't think that I'm joking: I would not tell a lie for even a great inheritance” (*Nolite me iocari putare: ut mentiar nullius patrimonium tanti facio*, 62.5). One can infer that the faces of Agamemnon, Ascytlos, and Encolpius must be wearing mistrusting expressions after Niceros finishes his bizarre tale with the words. He concludes that “others can see what they want to take out from this story. If I am lying, I will have to face your angry
geniuses” (viderint alii quid de hoc exopinissent. Ego si mentior, genios vestros iratos habeam, 62.14). Niceros, whose name itself echoes Greek origin, displays the same deceitful quality that Pliny attributes to the Greeks.

However, this does not necessarily mean that Niceros knowingly tells his audience a fabrication. Instead it is more likely that he is rustic who truly believes it to be the truth. His naivety protrudes through his description of his relationship with Melissa, a woman in his story who he tries to woo. Niceros claims that his attraction was not physical or sexual, but rather for her good nature (61.7). This may be Petronius making an ironic jab at his foolishness, especially when Niceros insists that any money he gave to Melissa she returned back to him. Her scolding of him for arriving too late to save her flock also reveals her dominance of Niceros. Therefore Niceros, the ignorant libertus, foolishly believes this folktale to all degrees. Petronius uses this tale to convey the feeble-mindedness and gullibility of Rome’s lower classes.

Following Niceros’ example, Trimalchio’s witch tale shares many similar qualities. In his preface, Trimalchio reaffirms the validity of not only his own story but vouches for Niceros as well. He implores his audience to believe their tales and take them in good faith (63.1). His
exaggerated description of the Cappadocian brute who “was able to lift a bull” (poterat boven tollere, 63.5) diminishes Trimalchio’s credibility as a reliable storyteller. The line resounds the godlike strength of heroes from Greek mythology, about whom Trimlachio has already proven to be ignorant. Nevertheless, the witches of Trimalchio’s tale were believed to be real by many Romans at the time.

Countless examples of witches still survive in other works of Latin literature. Even Apuelius dedicates three substantial scenes to them in his novel, Asinus Aureus. Although written sometime in the mid-2nd century A.D., Apuelius’ witches hold little in common with those in Trimalchio’s tale. The witches described by Apuelius hold “love as their primary concern, as usual with the witches of Latin tradition. Witches’ magical powers, whatever their sort, are employed primarily in the service of love.” All three of his scenes involving witches follow the same basic pattern: man meets witch, though at the time unaware of her magical powers; then, because of some type of slander, she punishes him with either a spell or death. This is in stark contrast with Trimalchio’s witches, who appear for

only a brief moment in time before vanishing. They appear undisguised and in their natural form. Even his story’s end, the witches’ reason for abducting the body of a dead boy from his wake and turning it into a bundle of straw (63.4-8) still remains unknown. The witches in Trimalchio’s tale have no dialogue with any humans. Moreover, their only interaction with the living at all comes when the Cappadocian brute pierces one of the women through with his sword (63.6). Witches were also thought to possess the ability to shape-shift, resonant of the etymology of the word *strix*, which probably derived from another ill-omened word, *strix*, *strigis*, meaning “a screech owl supposed to suck the blood of children in the cradle.”

Trimalchio’s exclamation that, “women have too much knowledge, are nocturnal, and flip things upside down” (*sunt mulieres plussciae, sunt nocturnae, et quod sursum est, deorsum faciunt*, 63.9) is one that many Romans may have truly feared. Men of higher rank would have constantly feared their power being threatened by the oppressed in society: women, freedmen, and slaves. Although these resentful groups could never form an uprising great enough to overthrow them militarily, stories

about witches’ superhuman powers would have offered them an easier, more subtle, way to rebel against authority. For this reason, many powerful men in Rome would have cowered at the possible existence of the powers of the witches that Trimalchio tells. Trimalchio’s own fearful comment represents the notion that women wielding power over men was unsettling to the Roman culture. Thus, a witch was feared as a real threat because she possessed a power superior to even an emperor. Pliny reaffirms this idea, stating that “there is no one who is not afraid of spells” (Nat. 28.4). However, Trimalchio’s version of a witch tale does not comply with the common themes of all other surviving examples in Latin literature. Therefore, though belief in witchcraft was more widely accepted than that in werewolves, Trimalchio jumbles his facts as usual and his story turns into a mockery.

Continuing to botch the rituals associated with common Roman superstitions, Trimalchio’s obsession with superstition grows more evident as the Cena unfolds. When a cock crows (gallus gallinaceus cantavit, 73.6), he responds to the ill-omen with more excessively cautionary measures. According to Pliny, if a cock’s crow portended a fire, water was poured under the table (Nat. 28.26). Petronius continues his mockery of Trimalchio’s vulgarity
as a *liberti* through his ostentatious order that “wine must be poured under the table” (*vinum sub mesa...effundi*, 74.1). He turns the universal precaution that Rome’s elite would have deemed appropriate into a ridiculous blunder. As his fellow freedmen at the table are astonished by his show of wealth in his pouring wine, the *scholastici* see through Trimalchho and his poor attempt to imitate social decorum of the upper class. His superstitiousness is emphasized so greatly by his elaborate and morbid planning of his funeral that the dinner guests cannot bear to endure it any longer. No free meal is worth tolerating Trimalchho’s ridiculous antics.

Encolpius’, Ascyltos’, and Giton’s escape from the *Cena* affirms the social rift between Rome’s *liberti* and *scholastici*. They stand in stark contrast to Trimalchho and his other guests, composed of mostly freedmen. Petronius begins his novel with speeches in Agamemnon’s oratory school about the decline of knowledge and morality in Rome. Through Agamemnon’s speech, Petronius blames the deterioration of oratory on ambitious parents who behave much like Trimalchho. He says that they “push their children into the forum and into eloquence” (*in forum pellunt et eloquentiam*, 4.1). Trimalchho also believes that eloquence is the ultimate goal for being successful and
polite. However, as seen in his ridiculous interpretations of superstition, Trimalchio proves that wealth does not buy social etiquette. Instead, it must be diligently studied and learned by freedmen and slaves who were never introduced to such proper behavior. Petronius elaborates on Agamemnon’s argument throughout the entirety of his Cena Trimalchionis chapters. By juxtaposing the educated characters of Agamemnon’s party with socially ignorant freedmen like Trimalchio and the rest of his guests, Petronius mocks the absurd behavior of what must have been common for former slaves who suddenly acquire wealth. One may gain all the treasures in the world, Petronius argues, but no amount of sesterces could ever be sufficient to buy social decorum. Roman superstition, in moderation, was socially appropriate and even necessary to appease the gods. In his novel, Petronius mocks, among many other aspects of Roman life, the ignorance of freedmen and their vulgar attempt to assimilate into high society.
Bibliography


