

Disguised Foods, Pole-Dancing, and Homeric Muddles: the Challenges of Teaching *Dinner with Trimalchio* to Sixth-Form Students

by Edward Bragg

Introduction

We have been delivering the A Level Classical Civilisation unit 'Roman Society and Thought' on the OCR specification for a number of years at Peter Symonds College. This paper focuses on the delivery of one of the four set texts for this AS unit, Petronius' *Dinner with Trimalchio*. It points out some of the challenges teaching this translated text and then explains a number of the teaching methods and resources that we employ to enable our students to understand and learn this tricky piece of ancient literature.¹ Petronius is one of the texts on the draft proposal for the new A Level Classical Civilisation under the section 'Literature written in Latin' under the sub-section 'Novel & Fable' and therefore this paper should aid teachers considering it as a unit option.

Challenges

A small number of our AS students will have taken GCSE Latin, Classical Civilisation or Ancient History, but the majority of the cohort at the start of the year will have never studied the ancient world or classical literature before. By the time we start Petronius in the spring term they will have acquired a modest grasp of Roman society, having now studied a selection of 18 of Pliny's *Letters* and three of Juvenal's *Satires* during the autumn

term. They will have also received a concise overview of Roman history and the basic features of Roman imperial society. For the Petronius, every student has to have their own copy of Sullivan's Penguin translation of the *Satyricon* with its excellent notes by Helen Morales (2011). In the spring term it takes about 18 55-minute lessons to deliver *Dinner with Trimalchio* across six weeks. On account of the students' limited experience of ancient literature we have to cover considerable subject knowledge when studying this satirical account of a fictitious 12-course Roman dinner party. Furthermore, in these 18 or so lessons I have to ensure that we have touched on core themes within the unit's specification, including Roman humour, food, religion, the nature of wealth and the role of freedmen and slaves.

As we progress through the dinner the students regularly raise all manner of questions. For example, why is Trimalchio giving his guests disguised foods? Why is Trimalchio so morbid? Why do these Roman freedmen have a chip on their shoulder? Why are these freedmen so desperate to flaunt their wealth? Above all, what would have been funny to a Roman audience is often markedly different to what teenagers in the 21st century find amusing. For instance, the physical misogynistic assaults carried out by Habinnas and Trimalchio on the hostess Fortunata (sections 67 and 74) go down like a lead balloon with many of the students. Some of Petronius' humour does

appeal though. For example, the insult 'curly-headed onion' (section 58), delivered against Giton by the drunken freedman Hermeros, is frequently repeated by the students against each other.

Another challenge is the mixed-ability nature of our large classes. I have to be conscious of the wide range of abilities amongst my students in class sizes of between 22 to 26 students. On the one hand, there are the potential Oxbridge candidates who have an excellent work ethic inside and outside the classroom and who chuckle at the obscure bits of humour. On the other hand, there are the less able students who have only just scraped a C grade at English Language GCSE. They might well love studying the classical world, but every year there is always a small, yet solid, number of students who seem to be allergic both to reading outside the classroom and also to producing sustained pieces of good-quality written prose. These less able students frequently find understanding certain episodes very tricky. For example, the two episodes where Trimalchio muddles his Homer with other myths and literature (sections 52 and 59) require careful and slow explanation. By the end of the 18 lessons I have to ensure that the all students regardless of ability are sufficiently armed to analyse any section of *Dinner with Trimalchio* on multiple levels for the commentary questions, and, furthermore that they have absorbed and understood a range of episodes from the dinner in order to answer OCR's thematic essay questions.

The nature of OCR's questions

The 'Roman Society and Thought' examination paper is 90 minutes long and has a total of 100 marks available. For section A (which covers a total of 55 marks) the students receive two passages from any of their four set texts. Then they chose one of these passages or gobbets and answer three commentary questions: a 10-mark context question, a 20-mark direct analysis of the passage question and a 25-mark springboard question on a theme raised in the passage. Then in section B of the paper they have to answer one essay question from a choice of three which is worth 45 marks. Below is a selection of commentary questions and essay questions that involve *Dinner with Trimalchio* from the last few years.

Selected past paper questions from OCR unit 'Roman Society and Thought'

Commentary Questions (55 marks):

a) = 10 marks, b) = 20 marks, c) = 25 marks

2010 Petronius *Dinner with Trimalchio* 40

- What has happened in Trimalchio's life before the day of the dinner?
- How successfully does Petronius make the scene in the passage vivid? In your answer you should refer to Petronius' use of language.
- 'Humour is the most important ingredient in *Dinner with Trimalchio*.' In your opinion, how important is humour to the success of *Dinner with Trimalchio*?

2013 Petronius, *Dinner with Trimalchio* 72-73

- Briefly describe the people who were guests at Trimalchio's dinner.
- How does Petronius make this passage humorous? In your answer you should refer to what

the characters do and say and Petronius' use of language.

- How far do you agree that the narrator Encolpius is essential to the success of *Dinner with Trimalchio*? In your answer you should include reference to this passage and the rest of *Dinner with Trimalchio*.

2015 Petronius, *Dinner with Trimalchio* 36

- What food has been served to the guests before the passage begins?
- How does Petronius make this passage entertaining? In your answer, you should refer to Petronius' use of language.
- 'A laugh from beginning to end.' Using this passage as a starting point, explain to what extent you have found *Dinner with Trimalchio* to be humorous.

Essay questions (45 marks): some can be predominantly on *Dinner with Trimalchio*, but most require candidates to produce answers that draw on a range of their four set texts.

2009 Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of being a freedman in Roman society.

'The Romans were obsessed with money and wealth.' To what extent do you agree with this statement?

2010 How enjoyable do you think life was for a woman in Roman society?

2011 'Roman writers never seemed to respect their emperors.' To what extent do you agree with this statement?

How far do you agree that cruelty in Roman satire is essential for its success?

2012 'A person could be respected as a slave but never as a freedman.' How far do you agree with this statement?

2013 Who would have enjoyed being a guest at Trimalchio's dinner more – Horace or Pliny?

2015 In your opinion, was the purpose of Roman satire the same as the purpose of modern satire?

Surely these questions are rigorous enough for the students of A Level Classical Civilisation in the 21st century? Consider the specific subject knowledge and writing skills required to answer these questions effectively. For example, one commentary question from 2013 asked the candidates 'How far do you agree that the narrator Encolpius is essential to the success of the *Dinner with Trimalchio*?' Then there is the 2013 essay question 'Who would have enjoyed being a guest at Trimalchio's dinner more – Horace or Pliny?' Prior to answering such commentary and essay questions the students not only need to remember their set texts, but they also need to understand them in depth to produce effective analytical answers. Furthermore, they need to employ a good range of technical language within their answers in order to attain the higher levels on the OCR mark scheme.

Teaching resource one: accessible interpretations of *Trimalchio's Dinner*

In the weeks prior to teaching *Dinner with Trimalchio* for the first time three years ago my experienced head of department Graham Gardner warned me that *Dinner with Trimalchio* can appear as a bit of slog to the students with its one course after another. This contrasts with the more bite-size letters of Pliny and Juvenal's satires which the students have studied prior to Petronius. Early on I wanted the students to have a grasp of the whole dinner and so enable them to fit specific episodes within the overall narrative.

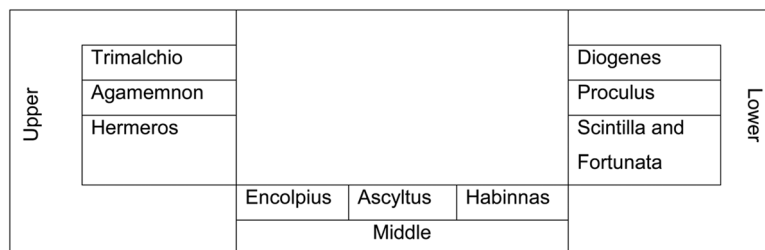
In light of these concerns and aims, in the second lesson I organise a group lesson which covers the whole dinner in 55 minutes. (The first lesson involves an introduction to Petronius and the imperial context of the dinner). The key resource for this group lesson is a concise overview of the dinner aimed at the average

layperson. I found it on the Picador website and it is written by Rosanna Boscawen (2012). I give this to the students as a three-page A4 handout with ten questions on a fourth page. Boscawen's summary includes backgrounds on the key characters, a list of the 12 courses as well as the key conversations and incidents, such as the funeral rehearsal at the end of the dinner. When I give it out to the students, I wave the document around stressing its use throughout the next six weeks for reference and context and then set a quiz on it for next lesson. The class is then split into five groups, labelling them as group Trimalchio, group Fortunata, group Giton, group Encolpius and group Habinnas. (This group labelling early on encourages students to recognise and remember the key characters in the dinner.) Each group (of four to five students) analyses the whole document for 20 to 25 minutes and answers all of the ten questions. I wander around the class checking their progress and also taking questions on the dinner (of which there are frequently many). Then in the last ten minutes of the lesson I collate their various interpretations on the whiteboard in ten boxes. As a result of this group exercise and the quiz in the subsequent lesson, prior to starting the main text the students should have read and analysed a narrative outline of *Dinner with Trimalchio*. This overview also encourages a number of the more able and enthusiastic students to start reading the set text outside the classroom.

Then about five weeks later when we are close to finishing the dinner I give the students their second document. This involves two articles: one is an essay by Susan Ruden called 'Roman Dinner Parties' from her commentary of the *Satyricon* (Ruden, 2000) and the other is an insightful *Omnibus* article by Costas Panayotakis entitled 'Don't Trust Trimalchio' (Panayotakis, 2001). The students receive these in another handout alongside ten differentiated questions, including an adapted commentary question, and they have a week to complete all ten questions. In one of the final classes on the dinner I make sure we thoroughly go through their answers. This handout provides two analytical essays on the dinner from two different perspectives that are academically appropriate for sixth-form

students. By reading these two articles, the students see how Ruden and Panayotakis have selected examples from *Dinner with Trimalchio* to make their points and so hopefully encourage the students to find examples when producing their own points. These two essays, above all,

provide some answers and interpretations to key questions that the students often raise, such as why Trimalchio provides his guests with disguised foods and why a Roman audience would have laughed at Petronius' characters.



Dinner at Trimalchio's: seating plan.

Teaching resource two: a diverse range of visual images

As we progress through the text it is paramount to employ various images to allow the teenage students to visualise the dinner, its characters, and the environment in which the narrative takes place.

One of the most important images is one depicting the seating arrangement of the guests within Trimalchio's *triclinium*. The following image is based on the one from Sullivan's Penguin translation.

Although it does not include the location of the key character Giton or the freedmen who are seated on the outer tables, this seating plan is important visual information prior to a number of key episodes. For example, when Hermeros has his drunken rant at Ascylltus and Giton in sections 57 to 59 I put this table arrangement up with arrows to indicate who is saying what to whom. Then later when we reach section 65 where Habinnas and Scintilla arrive, I use the layout again to point out where these late-comers will be seated.

Another good source of images derives from Federico Fellini's 1969 film *Satyricon*. Many of these colour images can be found on the website of the classicist Gary Devore (Devore, 2012). These are very useful as they allow the students to see how Petronius' characters can be interpreted and also they can prompt students during starter exercises.

Probably the most fortunate discovery occurred when searching for images of Trimalchio's tomb. Originally, I assumed that such an image of this fictitious edifice would not be available and an appropriate

alternative would be an image of a tomb that commemorated a real wealthy freedman or nouveau riche, such as the famous one of Eurysaces the wealthy baker situated by the Porta Maggiore in Rome. Fortunately, I discovered the drawing of Trimalchio's tomb by an artist called Redswordman on the Deviant Art website, which imagines what it might have looked like (see <http://redswordman.deviantart.com/art/Trimalchio-s-Tomb-16572912>). This sketch is a highly beneficial visualisation for the students when analysing Trimalchio's detailed description of his intended monument and its accompanying epitaph (section 71).

Overall, a stimulating learning environment can be created by the judicious deployment of a range of images during the delivery of *Dinner with Trimalchio*. In addition, many of these images are available on the college's intranet, so that the students can draw on them when they are creating their revision materials.

Teaching resource three: a list of different humour types

On the specification for 'Roman Society and Thought' there is the key literary theme of humour. This theme can occur within the commentary questions as well as the essay questions. For example, in 2013 there was the commentary question 'How does Petronius make this passage (section 31) humorous?' In 2010 a commentary question asked 'How important is humour to the success of *Dinner with Trimalchio*? When teaching the OCR A2 unit 'Comic Drama in the Ancient World' I created a

sheet of different humour types to help my A2 students appreciate and understand Aristophanes', Menander's and Plautus' humour. So I adapted this humour sheet to fit in with Petronius' satirical approach. The following 15 humour terms or expressions make up this list: bawdy humour, exaggeration (or hyperbole), invective, irony (or sarcasm), parody (or lampooning), perverse (or surreal) humour, role-reversal, satire, scatological humour, *schadenfreude*, sexual humour, slapstick (or physical humour), topical allusions, verbal humour (including joke-names), and visual humour. Definitions are given beside each humour term.

This document has multiple functions when I introduce it about half way through the dinner. In a starter exercise I ask the students to make a list of the different humour types that they have seen so far and I put them up on the white board. Then I give them the handout and ask them to mark the humour types they recognise and ask questions about the types they do not understand. Already their knowledge of technical terms is being reinforced and expanded. *Schadenfreude* and invective are the terms that seem to raise the most questions. It is a good idea to have modern equivalents in your head to help explain these humour types to the students. For instance, a modern example of invective is the labelling of Ed Milliband as Ed Millipede. When explaining the physical and sexual humour of Fortunata dancing the *cordax* dance, I equate it to a modern day pole-dance (The nature of this provocative and earthy *cordax* dance is described by Juvenal (*Satire* 11.162-4) who says 'the girls encouraged by applause sink to the ground with tremulous buttocks'). Then I find a section of text which is rich in both obvious and subtle bits of humour for the students to identify. For example, section 47 of the *Satyricon* is good when Trimalchio returns to the *trichinium* after he has been to the toilet. As well as the overt scatological and visual humour, there is also some irony and *schadenfreude*. This handout continues to be useful after finishing the dinner as during the revision period the students often draw on the sheet when planning commentary and essay questions. I encourage the students to fold it up and put it inside their Penguin editions so, wherever they go, they have it to hand to further their understanding of the text. Overall, this humour sheet widens the students' technical vocabulary and increases their

confidence when interpreting the various verbal and physical antics that occur during the dinner.

Teaching resource four: differentiated pop quizzes

I employ three quizzes during the 18 lessons. Quiz one is on Petronius and Boscawen's overview of the dinner. Quiz two is on the first half of the dinner (sections 26.1 to 54.1) and quiz three is on the second half of the dinner (sections 54.1 to 78.8). Within these ten question quizzes I ask a mix of straightforward and more complex questions, each of which have two answers, so they end up with a final mark out of twenty. For example, during the third quiz I asked these sorts of double questions. 'What is Trimalchio's Chef called and why is it an appropriate joke-name?' 'What is Habinnas' wife called and how does Habinnas humiliate Fortunata?' Some of these questions require straightforward one- or two-word answers, whilst others might require a sentence of explanation. During the peer assessments, which the students frequently take extremely seriously, misspelt answers lose half a mark and for the top score at the end of each quiz, the winner receives a sticker. If you want appropriate stickers for A Level students check out the sticker books on the ancient world published by Usborne.² After Easter I put the quiz PowerPoints on the college's shared drive without the answers, so the students can test themselves outside the class room during the revision period. After the peer assessment these quizzes, above all, indicate which students have and which students have not read their handouts and set texts. When I go round checking their scores at the end of the quiz, there is no hiding place for the students with low scores, whilst those who have read the text get a good sense of what they have absorbed and understood and what they have not.

Teaching resource five: timed practice of 'little a' commentary question

In the exam there is a ten-mark commentary question, which we entitle

'the little a'. This requires the students to regurgitate factual relevant information on a thematic topic, a character or a section of the text. For example in 2013 a 'little a' asked: 'Briefly describe the people who were guests at Trimalchio's Dinner'. The students will spend less than ten minutes in the exam on the 'little a', so in class I set them this exercise with a time limit of seven minutes. During the six weeks of teaching the dinner, I employ this exercise as a starter about four times. Prior to writing I give them the option of using or not using their notes and translations during the writing exercise, and then I make them very aware of the clock. I then give them the question and start the clock. I also put up some images relating to the topic to encourage additional relevant answers. For seven minutes the students write free-hand prose. When the seven minutes are up I get them to swap with their neighbours and they peer-mark the written answers. I provide a range of answers and then take additional answers from the class. It is wonderful to see how much some students can write in seven minutes. It also highlights those students who find it a challenge producing good-quality written prose. The students, above all, get a feel of how much they need to recall from their set text.

Conclusions

Petronius' *Dinner with Trimalchio* is not a straightforward text to deliver to large classes of mixed-ability sixth form students. During the six weeks of delivery there is a danger that these teenagers might feel that they are bogged down amongst a series of different Roman dinner courses interspersed by drunken freedmen ranting, rambling and boasting. Through a mixture of engaging resources and activities it is possible to create a learning environment that encourages these students to absorb, appreciate and, above all, enjoy this complex piece of Roman satire both inside and outside the class room, and as a consequence help prepare them for the rigorous and demanding 90-minute examination.

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¹An earlier version of this article was delivered at the Classical Association annual conference at Nottingham in April 2014. This AS Classical Civilisation unit on the OCR specification is entitled 'Roman Society and Thought.' The other set texts for this unit are 18 of Pliny's *Letters*, three of Juvenal's *Satires* and four of Horace's *Satires*.

²Watt, F. (author) and Nicholls, P. (illustrator) (2011). *Romans Sticker Book*, Usborne. Cullis, M. (author) and Robbins, W. (illustrator) (2015). *Ancient Romans Sticker Book*, Usborne. Both are available from the Hellenic Bookservice.