

Petronius *Satyricon* 46. 8:
litterae thesaurum est

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To raise a question about a passage in Petronius that has not received critical investigation when so many vexed readings and interpretations abound in that text may appear unwelcome. Yet Petronius' narrative does not reliably furnish its reader with a set of stable meanings, nor is its thematic organization beyond dispute, not necessarily because of the fragmentary state of the text. What has not received critical inquiry may deserve to be scrutinized, if one agrees that analysis can function as a way of moving from the particular to the whole, as well as a process dismantling the whole into its various components. Petronius' description of Trimalchio's dinner party, it has long been noted, presents speakers of Latin whose conversations undermine and dissolve classical grammar and syntax. One may also observe that the *Satyricon* as we have it also accomplishes a dissolution of the expectations of its reader for a classical text; subject, level of style, length, characterization, the level of reality represented, all are in some ways deviations from the tradition of literary composition. Operating within the system, Petronius seeks to subvert its values whilst preserving much of its old shell, such as his parody of higher forms of literature like epic.

The passage in question, the end of the speech of Echion the fireman,¹ seems to offer an example on the level of semantics of what the text of the *Cena* in particular, not to mention the whole of the *Satyricon*, displays on the level of significance and interpretation: an example of doubleness of meaning. At Trimalchio's table, things are not as they seem to be; allomorphic displays of food proliferate, Trimalchio's dress at dinner sends false and contradictory signals of social status, and Corinthian bronze can be something other than bronze from Corinth.² Doubleness of meaning parallels double-meaning words and phrases. Comment has frequently been addressed to the grammatical and syntactical vagaries of the men at the banquet, not least Echion. What they mean to say is often clear, but how

¹ Echion is a *centonarius*; Lewis and Short's "rag dealer" has been superseded by "fireman who used mats for extinguishing fires" in the *Oxford Latin Dictionary*.

² E. g., *Sat.* 49; 32; 50. 2-4.

they express their thoughts is anomalous.³ One should perhaps also observe that what at first appears to be an unambiguous statement can be read in more than one way, just as the pillows are not filled with everyday stuffing but with scarlet or purple material.⁴

In the passage under discussion, Echion has been generally understood to conclude his remarks with a banal assertion about the relative merits of education, that is, proficiency in literature, and a trade: "*litterae thesaurum est et artificium numquam moritur.*" His remarks to the rhetor Agamemnon have included mention of his son, "*cicaro meus,*" who presently will be old enough to discard the somewhat unsatisfactory tutors he now enjoys and begin work with the professor of rhetoric with whom Echion converses. It is clear that the conversational gambit which chooses to talk of children's education with teachers is at work here. Echion either intentionally or unintentionally slights literature and things literary, including professors of literature. Alternatively, Petronius as author snipes at literature through his character Echion. One can make out a case for Echion doing this intentionally if one takes his opening statement to Agamemnon in a less than friendly way: "*non es nostrae fasciae et ideo pauperorum uerba derides,*" 46. 1. Note that here at the outset of his remarks to the literary authority Agamemnon Echion perpetrates a "mistake" in Latin, the genitive plural *pauperorum*; are we getting a signal from the writer to watch the *uerba* of this speaker? Is Echion possibly baiting Agamemnon with his "mistake"?

Echion puts down literature in the following ways. He mildly insults Agamemnon for being *fatuus prae litteras*, he is overly casual about the arrangements he makes for his son's tutoring at home,⁵ and he displays vulgar over-estimation of the benefits to accrue from activity in barbering, being an auctioneer, "*aut certe causicum.*"⁶ The equation of trade and profession is a sign of his social class. His son "*litteris satis inquinatus est.*" The choice of word here is not flattering to Agamemnon's role in life. The example which Echion draws to his son's attention is that of Philcros, a *causicus* who because he worked hard on learning has escaped his servile background and can take on in court that touchstone of success in this circle, Norbanus himself. He concludes his statements to Agamemnon with the passage under review, "*litterae thesaurum est et artificium numquam moritur,*" which also serves to conclude his words of wisdom to his son as well, it would appear.

Of the first clause it has long been remarked that Echion uses the wrong gender for *thesaurus*, and that this is in keeping with his educational level

³ E. g., *Sat.* 46. 5; 38. 13.

⁴ 38. 5; see also *ius cenae*, 35. 7, with the pun on *ius* "law / sauce."

⁵ 46. 5-7.

⁶ 46. 7. The note of Martin S. Smith, *Petronii Arbitri Cena Trimalchionis* (Oxford 1975) 124, on the comic force of "*aut certe causicum,*" is most helpful.

and outlook.⁷ It is generally thought that the sentiment conveyed is that "a literary education is a gold-mine" rather than "an inaccessible deposit." One may note that *thesaurus* is not the word one might expect Echion to use if he were talking about his own financial resources; it is an elevated word, much in keeping with the following "*artificium numquam moritur.*" It has not been generally noted that Echion's sentiment about the value of literary education is somewhat out of keeping with the speaker's assertions and attitudes elsewhere in this rather extended bit of portrayal of a denizen of a lower class.⁸ Yet one commentary does think it necessary to assert that there is no antithesis in Echion's peroration: *litterae* is "book-learning," *artificium* "practical training."⁹ The two terms are in the mind of the speaker logically contrasting items of a different order. The proverbial nature of the remark is also noted by commentators, and Otto lists this as the sole example of an apparently low-class sentiment.¹⁰ The over-all impression of character conveyed by the language of Echion is that of someone who can speak effectively in clichés whilst perpetrating a fair number of solecisms.

Behind Echion stands Petronius, and it is not inconsonant with his technique that he can be making unexpected points through his speakers, points about social status that are of course entirely invisible to his characters, and also referential statements which may have more than one meaning for them and for the reader. The expected significance to be recuperated from "*litterae thesaurum est*" is that the speaker is on a low educational level (the gender of *thesaurus*) and that his mind is at home in banalities (the real value of a trade versus the symbolic or cultural value of literary pursuits, which are elevated, high-flown). Echion seems to be paying lip service to the value of literature ("a gold-mine") but may also be saying that it is an inaccessible and hence useless treasure, especially in contrast to a trade. A third and quite unexpected meaning may also be recovered.

The word *litterae* has in its plural the signification of scholarship, what is learned from books. As such the singular verb *est*, "is," might be seen as normal for the language level of this speaker, e. g., "letters is a gold-mine," rather than as an elevated reversal of nouns along the line of "the people is

⁷ Smith (*supra*, n. 6) 124-25.

⁸ Not in, e. g., P. Perrochat, *Petrone: Le festin de Trimalcion: commentaire exégétique et critique* (Paris 1939); W. B. Sedgwick, *The Cena Trimalchionis of Petronius* (Oxford 1925); or Smith. A. Salenius, *Die Griechen und das Griechische in Petrons Cena* (Helsingfors 1927) 29, has a good characterization of Echion's language in 46. 7. Obviously *thesaurus* in this context does not imply exclusively the idea of a hidden treasure the usufruct of which is unavailable, but also the idea of a store from which one may draw, as often in Greek: see e. g. Pindar, *Pythian* 6. 5 ff., and probably Callimachus, *Hymn to Delos* 23 ff.

⁹ E. T. Sage and B. B. Gilleland (New York 1969) 169.

¹⁰ A. Otto, *Die Sprichwörter der Römer* (Leipzig 1890), s. v. *litterae* (2).

grass."¹¹ The gender mistake in *thesaurus* would re-inforce this. The plural *litterae* in the sense found here is notionally singular. In statements involving *est* and *sunt* as copula it is common for the copula to be assimilated to the number of the predicate rather than the subject, such as in "*amantium irae amoris integratio est*," Terence, *Andria* 555.¹² This is the way in which Echion's discourse has been interpreted, on the assumption that *est* is from *sum, esse*. However, keeping *thesaurum* as accusative and taking *est* as third person singular indicative active of *edo, esse* yields an interesting result. The plural *litterae* still is the subject of a singular verb, but not the copula *est*. This would be the only occurrence in Latin in which a collective noun in the plural, if indeed it be notionally singular in Echion's way of speaking Latin, is the subject of a singular verb; the opposite often occurs, e. g. with *pars, exercitus*, and so on. But the text is so rich in syntactical and grammatical peculiarities in this section of the *Cena* that one more oddity should not cause undue alarm.

Taking *est* as from *edo* removes Echion's solecism of *thesaurus* as neuter. He obviously still has trouble with gender; see 46. 7, "*emi . . . aliquot libra*," where again the "blunder" has to do with literary things. What is more important than getting *thesaurus* straight is that Echion's sentiment at the conclusion of his discourse is in keeping with his superficial reverence for literature in Agamemnon's presence and his underlying contempt for it and him. His grammatical anomalies are often perpetrated on words relating to education and literature. *Edo, esse* in the sense of "to consume, devour" of inanimate objects like one's treasure is poetical,¹³ and the impact of such a phrase containing such an egregious blunder of verb number coming to an Agamemnon from an Echion is unmistakable.

According to this interpretation, *et* will have the meaning of the adversative, connecting the logically contrasting items of *artificium* which receives Echion's approbation, and *litterae* which receives his contempt; in this context, namely the scheme of values of Echion, these two words are opposites.

Doubtless Echion is a more complex character than we might on first reading suppose him to be. How much does Petronius deconstruct his text through him, and through him the Neronian institution and practice of *litterae*? What emerges from Echion's mouth is a many-edged remark: "the pursuit of literature eats away your money," which I take to mean not the expenditure one spends on one's child to hire *grammatici* but the expenses involved in the practice of literature; and again, "literature is a gold-mine,"

¹¹ Allen and Greenough, *New Latin Grammar* (Boston 1903) 317d, note 2; Kühner-Stegmann, *Ausführliche Grammatik der lateinischen Sprache*² II. 1 (Hannover 1912) 40-41.

¹² Cf. Allen and Greenough 316b.

¹³ Lewis and Short, *A Latin Dictionary*; see also the examples in the *Oxford Latin Dictionary*.

in itself ambiguous: a source of wealth, and, perhaps in subordinate position, wealth that is inaccessible for practical purposes. This observation it is hoped contributes another measure of doubleness to a text which seems to proliferate meanings in an exceptionally unstinted way.

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