

Trimalchio's *Canis Catenarius*: A Simple Solution?

A well-known problem in the *Cena Trimalchionis* is the change from the painted watchdog which greets Encolpius and company on their entrance (29.1) to the live (and quite lively) dog which prevents them from leaving (72.7-9). It has been argued that this is a deliberate pairing, part of the elaborate ring-composition of the *Cena*, and J. Bodel points to the similarity of the narrator's reaction in each case as emphasizing the echo: in 29.1, Encolpius is knocked over by the sight, while in 72.7 Ascyrtos falls into the fishpool and Encolpius is dragged in with him.¹ Some will have it that the painted dog has somehow come to life in the interval,² or is a warning notice for the real one.³ While not wishing to discount the fantastic (and phantasmagoric) effects of the *Satyricon*, I suggest that a more naturalistic explanation is possible, or rather two quite different naturalistic explanations.

According to the first solution, which I consider the less likely of the two, this is another of Trimalchio's elaborate practical jokes, and we are to understand that he has arranged to have the actual dog Scylax substituted for the painted dog during dinner, perhaps immediately after 64.7-10.⁴ This would certainly ensure that none of the guests

¹ J. Bodel, "Trimalchio's Underworld", in J. Tatum (ed.), *The Search for the Ancient Novel*, Baltimore and London, 1994, 237-59, with further bibliography at 255 n. 24.

² A recent example is N.W. Slater, who is rightly a bit tentative: "As the creations of Trimalchio's imagination grow more and more dominant, it is perhaps significant to see this watchdog [the one in 72.7-9] as the painted one first encountered now come alive", *Reading Petronius*, Baltimore and London, 1990, 77 n. 66.

³ E. Courtney, "Petronius and the Underworld", *AJP* 108, 1987, 408-10: "the chained dog which they had been warned about before". That there is a real watchdog in the house, in addition to the painted one, is clear from 64.7-10, where Scylax, *ingentis formae . . . canis catena uinctus* and *praesidium domus familiaeque*, is sent for and shown to the guests, with unfortunate results. We are not told how or when he leaves after attacking Margarita, or where he goes, but it is plausible enough to suppose that he has been sent back to his guardpost, to appear again in 72.7-9. That is certainly L. Friedlaender's assumption in his note on 72: "**canis catenarius**: der 64 vom ostiarius ins triclinium gebrachte" (*Petronii Cena Trimalchionis*, Leipzig, 1906²). If Friedlaender is right in identifying the dog which attacks the guests in 72.7-9 with Scylax, the only question is why he was not at his station in 29.1. If he was asleep down the hall somewhere, he is not much of a watchdog, and the whole point of the chain is to prevent him from leaving his post, except when sent for by his master.

⁴ Since the dog of 29.1 was painted right on the wall (*in pariete*), he is doubtless still there, but departing guests would hardly be likely to notice once they had seen and heard the real one. Consequently we

could leave by the same door by which they had entered, as indeed we see happen. Trimalchio is undoubtedly fond of elaborate practical jokes, and sometimes combines silliness with cruelty or threats of cruelty: an example is the uncut pig of 49, whose cook is stripped for flogging. On the other hand, the threats of violence are generally directed only at the slaves, and are not followed through. In fact, Trimalchio's threats have a way of turning into jokes. Our passage would reverse this procedure, with the silly dog-joke turning into an all-too-real and not at all friendly one: this is one reason why I prefer my second solution. We might even read the painted dog's label, *caue canem*, as implying a further warning: "watch out for the watchdog, which is not necessarily this picture of a dog" – "ceci n'est pas un chien", as it were. In any case, my first interpretation resembles Courtney's (note 3 above) in taking the first dog as a warning of the second. However, I take the warning as an ironic label accompanying a planned practical joke and intended to be heeded only when it is too late, whereas Courtney, I think, takes it as a straightforward and unironic "Beware of Dog" notice.

My second solution to the watchdog problem is just as naturalistic, though not, I think, drierly so. Simply put, the dog is still painted in 72.7-9, but the guests are too drunk to tell the difference.⁵ After all, even when sober, Encolpius had been knocked off his feet by his first sight of the painted dog. Although a second look should come as much less of a shock, they have drunk a great deal in the interval between entrance and attempted exit, more than enough, surely, to outweigh any advantage from prior acquaintance.⁶ I prefer my second solution mostly because it seems wittier. Indeed, the picture of Encolpius and his companions bouncing their morsels of food off a wall-painting, under the impression that it is greedily snapping them up, is one I find

need not assume that a tapestry has been hung over the picture or that Scylax is standing in front of it and concealing it, or anything along those lines.

⁵ Where is Scylax in 72.7-9? Wherever he was in 29.1, I suppose. If the dog in 72.7-9 is Scylax, we might expect Encolpius to notice, unless all vicious dogs look the same to him.

⁶ Although it would be easy enough to count up the references to drinking in the intervening pages, it should suffice to point to *ebrius* in our chapter (*nec non ego quoque ebrius [qui etiam pictum timueram canem,] dum natanti opem fero, in eundem gurgitem tractus sum, 72.7*) and *ebrietate discussa* in the next (73.5). The two passages support each other, so Jahn's *exterritus* for *ebrius* (72.7) can be dismissed. (Müller's excision of the *qui*-clause, though abandoned in his third edition, with W. Ehlers, Artemis, 1983, seems necessary: it looks like an early and unsuccessful attempt to deal with the two-dog problem.)

irresistible.⁷ One final, though rather speculative, point might also be put in the scales on the side of the second interpretation. If, as now seems generally agreed, Petronius is parodying *Aeneid* VI, with the dog (or pair of dogs) standing in for Cerberus,⁸ then a false dream would be very much in order here. Of course, a drunken hallucination is not the same thing as a false dream, and they do not succeed in exiting by this gate in any case, which is why I call the point speculative.

⁷ The fact that it does not actually bite them would tend to make them believe that the tactic had worked. Since they were no doubt intending to live on their takings for a while, their voluntarily throwing all the precious leftovers away, although they are in no danger, is almost pathetic. The fact that the *atriensis*, who must surely know that the dog is painted, apparently helps rescue them from it, is not necessarily an objection, since we have only Encolpius' version of the events, and his might have been quite different.

⁸ Courtney's article (note 3 above) is probably the most important, while Bodel (note 1 above) gives the most up-to-date bibliography on the question.