

**“Verba Barbara, Monstrosa,  
ne Humana Quidem”**

*Vulgar Latin and the Textual  
Criticism of Petronius*

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“If Petronius has not exaggerated the peculiarities of his freedmen, there is no piece of Latin literature which shows in so interesting a fashion the difference between the *sermo urbanus* and the *sermo plebeius*.”<sup>1</sup> Certainly any reader trained on Cicero and Vergil will be struck by the unfamiliarity of the freedmen’s dialogue in the *Cena Trimalchionis*. The discovery of this excerpt from the *Satyricon* “produced a storm of controversy in the scholarly world”;<sup>2</sup> when the practice of textual criticism grew widespread in the early nineteenth century,<sup>3</sup> it became clear that Petronius required a different approach from most other Roman authors. An examination of three *apparatus critici* for the freedman Echion’s speech<sup>4</sup> will demonstrate how knowledge of the characteristics of Vulgar Latin has helped immensely in solving some thorny problems in this passage—while at the same time causing new difficulties of its own.

It may be helpful first to define what Vulgar Latin is and is not, since this term has been applied in widely varying ways over the years. It is certainly not, as Pulgram stresses, “the chronological successor (a corruption) of Classical Latin.”<sup>5</sup> Instead, both the Vulgar and the Classical descended from a common source, Old Latin, which was probably more similar to the vernacular than to the literary language.<sup>6</sup> Nor was there ever “an unbridgeable gap” between spoken and written Latin, but rather shades of difference according to social background, geography and other factors;

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<sup>1</sup> Frank F. Abbott, “The Use of Language as a Means of Characterization in Petronius,” *Classical Philology* 2.1 (1907): 49.

<sup>2</sup> Bret Boyce, *The Language of the Freedmen in Petronius’ Cena Trimalchionis* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1991) 14.

<sup>3</sup> L.D. Reynolds and N.G. Wilson, *Scribes and Scholars: A Guide to the Transmission of Greek and Latin Literature* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1991) 210.

<sup>4</sup> Namely those versions edited by Ludwig Friedländer (Amsterdam: Verlag Adolf M. Hakkert, 1960), Martin S. Smith (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1975) and Konrad Müller (Stuttgart: B.G. Teubner, 1995). These books will be cited in the footnotes by editor rather than author to avoid confusion.

<sup>5</sup> Ernst Pulgram, “Spoken and Written Latin,” *Language* 26.4 (1950): 458.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.* 463.

moreover, the formal language influenced the vernacular and vice-versa.<sup>7</sup> Herman therefore defines Vulgar Latin not as a dialect or language unto itself, but “the set of all those innovations and trends that turned up in the usage, particularly but not exclusively spoken, of the Latin-speaking population who were little or not at all influenced by school education and by literary models.”<sup>8</sup>

Unfortunately, our evidence for these mostly spoken phenomena comes necessarily from written sources; and since Romans learned to write only in the literary dialect, not even a piece of hastily-scrawled graffiti will be “pure” Vulgar Latin<sup>9</sup>—any Vulgarisms will be mostly unintentional. Bearing this in mind, scholars can extract those aspects of a text that diverge from the Classical standard. Sources of evidence for Vulgar Latin comprise inscriptions and graffiti (collected e.g. in the *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* beginning in 1863<sup>10</sup>); letters and other documents on papyrus and wax tablets; medical texts, cookbooks, and other technical works; Christian writings; the works of grammarians and other critics of “improper” language; the modern Romance languages, as descendants of spoken Latin; and finally Petronius himself.<sup>11</sup> Scholars have, in fact, come to the conclusion that “Petronius is often a more reliable index of the actual state of the contemporary spoken language than the other sources” for the very reason stated above: the writers of all the other sources of Vulgar Latin are attempting to write correctly and produce vulgarisms only by mistake, whereas Petronius utilized them deliberately.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Jozsef Herman, *Vulgar Latin* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State UP, 2000) 6.

<sup>8</sup> 7.

<sup>9</sup> Pulgram 459.

<sup>10</sup> Herman 3.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.* 18-26. Pulgram also lists Plautus and Apuleius alongside Petronius (459).

<sup>12</sup> Boyce 26-27.

Given the *Cena*'s status as the most faithful reproduction of lower-class speech in Roman literature, it is amusing to look at the initial reactions to its first publication in 1664—two writers attempted to prove that the work was a forgery by pointing out grammatical errors and by drawing parallels between the freedmen's language and modern Italian and French idiom.<sup>13</sup> The first scholars to realize the truth of the matter were Pierre Petit and Giovanni Lucio, who both wrote defenses of the *Cena* within six years of its release; Boyce quotes Petit as proclaiming: "Quid igitur mirum, si tales homines, rudes litterarum, educationis expertes, desitis aut sordidis vocabulis utantur?"<sup>14</sup> However, it was not until the mid-nineteenth century, when scholarship in Vulgar Latin grew, that the freedmen's language began to be studied systematically.<sup>15</sup>

When analyzing the linguistic characteristics of the *Cena Trimalchionis*, some caveats need to be made. First of all, virtually all of the text of the *Cena* relies on a single manuscript, known as H, which was discovered in Dalmatia in 1650 and dates to around 1423.<sup>16</sup> Without any other extant manuscripts to use as points of comparison, "it is sometimes extremely difficult to distinguish between scribal errors and solecisms introduced by Petronius."<sup>17</sup> The millennium and a half between Petronius and the copying of H allowed time for numerous errors of transmission on the part of scribes; but equally problematic may be those copyists who decided to correct what they saw as "mistakes" in the text. Such corrections may be in the

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<sup>13</sup> Boyce 14-16, the source of the quotation in the title of this paper.

<sup>14</sup> 17-18.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.* 19.

<sup>16</sup> L.D. Reynolds, ed., *Texts and Transmission: A Survey of the Latin Classics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983) 296.

<sup>17</sup> Smith xxiii.

direction of Classical Latin—“for this reason,” says Boyce, “we may never know the true extent of the vulgarisms in the *Cena Trimalchionis*, especially those of a purely phonetic nature, which are most easily ‘corrected’”<sup>18</sup>—or, if the scribe allowed himself to be influenced by his own spoken vernacular, he might create vulgarisms that Petronius never intended.<sup>19</sup> It can be very difficult, therefore, to draw conclusions regarding linguistic features that appear in, for example, the Pompeiian graffiti but not in Petronius, or vice-versa.

Nevertheless, there are many definite features of Vulgar Latin to be found in the freedmen’s speeches but not in the language of the more educated characters, revealing Petronius’ masterful use of dialect as characterization.<sup>20</sup> We will examine some of these uncontested examples in Echion’s speech before delving into the *apparatus critici*; there is much to be said, as “the percentage of vulgar forms in Echion’s speech is 7.67, among the very highest in the novel.”<sup>21</sup>

As an example of the elusive phonetic change, Echion uses *plodo* for *plaudo*.<sup>22</sup> In the category of morphology, we find in Petronius “one of the earliest indications we have of the elimination of the neuter gender in vulgar Latin”;<sup>23</sup> Echion turns *caelum* into *caelus*<sup>24</sup> and uses the Greek neuter *stigma* as a feminine.<sup>25</sup> The reverse also happens, a phenomenon known as hypercorrection or hyperurbanism: when Echion attempts to seem cultured, he overgeneralizes higher-class structures

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<sup>18</sup> 26.

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Boyce 21 for a list of vulgarisms in Eumolpus’ poem on the civil war.

<sup>20</sup> See Boyce 58-59 and 67-68 for tables that nicely enumerate and compare the occurrences of various vulgar and urbane forms in the speech of the freedmen and the more educated characters.

<sup>21</sup> Boyce 82. For the next two paragraphs, see Boyce 81-85 and Abbott 45-47.

<sup>22</sup> Section 45.13 in Smith’s edition.

<sup>23</sup> Abbott 45.

<sup>24</sup> 45.3.

<sup>25</sup> 45.9.

and betrays his own rusticity—a subtle yet powerful indicator of his status as a social climber.<sup>26</sup> Thus, while discussing education, he turns masculine nouns into neuters--*libra* and *thensaurum*.<sup>27</sup> He illustrates “the freedom with which deponent verbs admit an active form or vice versa”<sup>28</sup> with *argutat*<sup>29</sup> and *delectaretur*.<sup>30</sup>

Echion also deviates dramatically from Classical syntax. He replaces the future tense with the active periphrastic<sup>31</sup> or with the present subjunctive;<sup>32</sup> he turns the intransitive verbs *sufflare* and *persuadere* into transitives;<sup>33</sup> and he uses *quod* or *quia* to introduce indirect statements, rather than the infinitive and accusative construction.<sup>34</sup> Finally, his vocabulary is filled with Vulgar epithets, such as *sestertarius*, *burdubasta*, and *loripes*, many of which are *hapax legomena*.<sup>35</sup>

Clearly, the existence in the *Cena* of so many Vulgar features discovered also in inscriptions and other sources shows that Petronius must have been familiar with the lower-class dialects of Rome (perhaps through the freedmen who populated the Imperial court). Once the validity of the text as a sample of Vulgar Latin was established, some words and phrases in the freedmen’s speeches that had previously given editors trouble could be better understood using linguistic principles. We will next examine a few such examples.

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<sup>26</sup> Boyce 84.

<sup>27</sup> 46.7, 46.8.

<sup>28</sup> Abbott 46.

<sup>29</sup> 46.1.

<sup>30</sup> 45.7. Boyce 84 considers this a hyperurbanism because of its context.

<sup>31</sup> 45.4, 45.6.

<sup>32</sup> 46.2.

<sup>33</sup> 45.11, 46.2.

<sup>34</sup> e.g. 45.10, 46.4.

<sup>35</sup> 45.8, 45.11. Smith xxiii cautions against implicitly trusting the otherwise unattested words found in H.

First, there is the word in 45.6 which appeared in H as *ampliteatur*, an unknown verb located where a verb is not possible.<sup>36</sup> Bücheler conjectured instead *amphitheater*—although the ‘correct’ word is *amphitheatrum*—based on one occurrence in the *CIL* and on other transformations of neuter nouns to masculines.<sup>37</sup> This felicitous suggestion not only requires a less drastic change to the original text, it also agrees with Echion’s character—he is talking about an upcoming gladiatorial show, and in his excitement he may be expected to let a Vulgarism slip out. All three editors, as well as Boyce, agree with Bücheler’s reading;<sup>38</sup> strangely, however, Friedländer tells us that Bücheler himself, in his third edition, revised the word to the Classical *amphitheatrum*.<sup>39</sup> I can imagine no compelling reason for this, and apparently neither can any of the more recent editors.

A more complicated case is that of the phrase in 46.1 that originally read “quia tu, qui potes loquere, non loqui.”<sup>40</sup> Echion’s meaning is clear, but the grammar is not. Several readings were proposed before the most likely one was chosen. Scheffer reversed the two forms of *loqui* to create a classically correct sentence.<sup>41</sup> Bücheler, in his third edition, suggested “quia tu, qui potes, non loquere,” perhaps believing that a careless scribe had transferred the verb to the previous clause and had then needed another to finish the sentence.<sup>42</sup> Then, in his fourth edition, he changed his mind and simply added one letter to H: “quia tu, qui potes loquere, non loquis”;<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Smith 17. Most original readings from H can be found in any of the *apparatus critici*, but when possible I will cite Smith for the sake of convenience.

<sup>37</sup> *ibid.* 116.

<sup>38</sup> Smith 17, Müller 38, Friedländer 122, Boyce 82.

<sup>39</sup> 122.

<sup>40</sup> Smith 17.

<sup>41</sup> Müller 40.

<sup>42</sup> Friedländer 124.

<sup>43</sup> *ibid.* 124.

Burmann also offered this emendation,<sup>44</sup> and all three of our editors accept it.<sup>45</sup>

Besides being the simplest change of all those suggested, it makes use of the Vulgar Latin mechanism that changes deponent verbs into active ones. Boyce notes that Echion's use of *loqui* is unusual, since it "was not particularly popular even in its 'correct' deponent form and tended to be replaced by longer and more easily declined verbs such as *fabulari*."<sup>46</sup> It is important that Echion is here addressing the philosopher Agamemnon; while trying to seem cultivated by using a literary word, he accidentally Vulgarizes it and once again betrays his humble background. Thus, the best reading is not only simple but also aids in the characterization of the speaker.

Possibly the most controversial phrase in this section of the *Cena* is *dispare pallavit* at 46.2.<sup>47</sup> In fact, all three editors give a different reading, and even more suggestions are listed in the *apparatus critici*. *Dispare* seems to be unattested elsewhere, and the Oxford Latin Dictionary lists *pallo* as an "unintelligible word in Petronius."<sup>48</sup> Friedländer stays with the original reading of H,<sup>49</sup> but in his notes he quotes Bücheler as writing: "*Dispare* ist wol Adverb (vgl. das späte *comparus*... als Nebenform zu *compar*), wie z. B. *concorde* statt *concorditer* ... das Richtige trifft wol Reiskes Konjektur *pullare*, intransitiv 'ausschlagen, sprossen' ... hier faktitiv zu fassen."<sup>50</sup> Friedländer also cites Orelli's suggestion of *dispalavit*, which would be an

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<sup>44</sup> Smith 17.

<sup>45</sup> Smith 17, Friedländer 124, Müller 40.

<sup>46</sup> 83.

<sup>47</sup> Smith 18.

<sup>48</sup> P.G.W. Glare, ed., *Oxford Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982) 1285.

<sup>49</sup> 126.

<sup>50</sup> 269-270. Smith in his notes (121-122) also acknowledges the possibility of Reiske's suggestion.

active use of *dispalor*.<sup>51</sup> Müller chooses *depravavit*;<sup>52</sup> Smith notes that “this gives a satisfactory sense, but assumes a greater corruption in H.”<sup>53</sup>

Smith himself follows the inspired conjecture of Cholodniak, who reconstructed a verb *\*disparpallare* “based on the existence of French *éparpiller* and Ital. *sarpagliare*”<sup>54</sup>; using the knowledge that many Romance words come from Vulgar Latin ancestors, and applying the tools of historical linguistics, Cholodniak found an ingenious solution to a tangled problem. Of course, no one scholar can be proven right or wrong, unless by some miracle an older manuscript of Petronius is discovered; but suggestions such as this one have a persuasive elegance.

In addition to these cases, which seem more or less solved (to whatever extent that is possible), a few words in Echion’s speech might benefit, in my opinion, from more scrutiny. For example, *adhebeta* in 45.12<sup>55</sup> was emended to *adhibete* by Bücheler, and this was accepted by all the editors.<sup>56</sup> However, one of the phonetic changes Vulgar Latin underwent was *i > e*; Petronius has examples of this elsewhere.<sup>57</sup> I can see no reason why this should not have happened in the case of *adhibete*—the rarity of this phonetic change in Petronius likely indicates scribal corrections, rather than authorial intent.

Another difficult word is *erripiat* in 45.10.<sup>58</sup> Friedländer leaves it untouched except to correct its spelling to *eripiat*,<sup>59</sup> but both Smith and Müller follow Scheffer

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<sup>51</sup> 126.

<sup>52</sup> 40.

<sup>53</sup> 122.

<sup>54</sup> 121.

<sup>55</sup> Friedländer 124; Smith does not cite this word in the *apparatus criticus*.

<sup>56</sup> Friedländer 124, Smith 17, Müller 40.

<sup>57</sup> Boyce 36-37.

<sup>58</sup> Smith 17.

<sup>59</sup> 124.

in changing it to *eripiet*.<sup>60</sup> This use of the future makes good grammatical sense in the context of the sentence; however, Boyce cites *eripiat* along with *persuadeam* (untouched by editors) as a paraphrase of the future.<sup>61</sup> Echion is here discussing town politics, and with such an emotional topic, a Vulgarism might be expected. *Eripiet* may certainly be correct, but the change was perhaps made too precipitously. (Indeed, Scheffer seems to have a greater tendency toward mistrust of H than some other editors.)

One last controversial example is *artificii* at 46.7.<sup>62</sup> The use of the genitive does seem strange to the classically trained; moreover, “the genitive ... tends to lose ground in the language of the freedmen,”<sup>63</sup> and only Bücheler retains *artificii* unchanged.<sup>64</sup> And Smith points out, “in view of the accusatives ‘aut tonstrinum aut praeconem aut certe causidicum’ it is safer to regard *artificii* H as a mere slip rather than as a deliberate solecism modelled on the genitive sometimes found after *doctus* and *docilis*.”<sup>65</sup> However, Boyce, despite his generalization above about the genitive, claims that because Echion is more prone to hyperurbanisms than the other freedmen, *artificii* may be a correct reading.<sup>66</sup>

Through the examination of even such a small number of phrases, from just one of the freedmen’s speeches, the unique problems posed by Petronius’ innovative style of writing become obvious. When editing almost any other Classical Roman author, the scholar has an abundance of grammatical precedent from which to make

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<sup>60</sup> Smith 17, Müller 39.

<sup>61</sup> 83.

<sup>62</sup> Smith 18.

<sup>63</sup> Boyce 65.

<sup>64</sup> Friedländer 126.

<sup>65</sup> 124.

<sup>66</sup> 66.

his or her judgments on the text. And although textual criticism always involves some amount of guesswork, Petronius makes demands on the editor far greater than Cicero or Vergil do. An understanding of the flexibility and irreverence of living language becomes essential, as well as a willingness to accept uncertainty; for there are so many complicating factors in the language of the *Satyricon*—from the textual transmission itself to authorial intent to the scarcity of other intentional samples of Vulgar Latin—that many aspects of Petronius will likely always be obscure to us. But the work done so far is encouraging and impressive, having augmented not only our knowledge of lower-class Latin, but also our appreciation of Petronius as perhaps the first master of literary characterization.

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