

PETRONIUS AND PLATO

It has frequently been remarked by critics of Petronius (though usually merely in passing) that the entry of the monumental mason, Habinnas, in the *Cena Trimalchionis* is modelled on that of Alcibiades in Plato's *Symposium*.¹ Yet surprisingly enough the parallel has not found its way into the commentaries, nor has it ever been analysed in detail. In fact it can stand as an interesting illustration of the use of literary allusion in the *Satyricon*.

The entry of Alcibiades is one of the loveliest passages in Plato. It is an entrance made with some *éclat*. Diotima has just given her discourse on love, the philosophical peak of the dialogue; but the comments of the assembled company have to wait, for there is a sudden knocking on the door and the sound of revelry: καὶ ἐξαίφνης τὴν αὔλειον θύραν κρουομένην πολλὴν ψόφον παρασχεῖν ὡς κωμαστῶν, καὶ αὐλητρίδος φωνὴν ἀκούειν (212 c). The voice of Alcibiades can be heard—καὶ οὐ πολὺ ὕστερον Ἀλκιβιάδου τὴν φωνὴν ἀκούειν . . . σφόδρα μεθύοντος καὶ μέγα βοῶντος (212 d). He is revealed supported by his attendants and by a flute-girl, garlanded with ivy and violets, and with ribbons on his head—ἄγειν οὖν αὐτὸν παρὰ σφᾶς τήν τε αὐλητρίδα ὑπολαβοῦσαν καὶ ἄλλους τινὰς τῶν ἀκολούθων, καὶ ἐπιστῆναι ἐπὶ τὰς θύρας ἐστεφανωμένον αὐτὸν κιττοῦ τέ τινι στεφάνῳ δασεὶ καὶ ἴων, καὶ ταινίας ἔχοντα ἐπὶ τῆς κεφαλῆς πάνυ πολλὰς (212 d-e). Even when drunk he is as glamorous and as charming as ever; he has come late to Agathon's party after a night of drinking and pleasure, not to crash in but to crown with the garlands from his own head the head of ὁ σοφώτατος καὶ κάλλιστος (212 e). He does not walk straight in, but stands waiting on the threshold to see whether a tipsy reveller like himself is welcome or not (212 e-213 a). Of course there can be only one answer; the solemn mood of Diotima's speech is broken, and all present, host included, jump to their feet and invite him in. He enters, held up by his attendants, already reaching up to take off his ribbons; but in so doing he fails to notice Socrates and sits down between him and Agathon still unaware of Socrates' presence: καὶ τὸν ἰέναι ἀγόμενον ὑπὸ τῶν ἀνθρώπων, καὶ περιαιρούμενον ἅμα τὰς ταινίας ὡς ἀναδήσοντα, ἐπὶπροσθε τῶν ὀφθαλμῶν ἔχοντα οὐ κατιδεῖν τὸν Σωκράτη, ἀλλὰ καθίζεσθαι παρὰ τὸν Ἀγάθωνα ἐν μέσῳ Σωκράτους τε καὶ ἐκείνου (213 a). There follows his sudden recognition of Socrates, their interchange, and Alcibiades' speech in praise of Socrates, a memorable piece, quite different in tone from the speeches which have preceded it in the dialogue.

With this passage Plato set the pattern for a stock character of dialogue, the ἄκλητος who arrives late, when the discussion is well under way.² Within the *Cena Trimalchionis*, that hybrid of dialogue and banquet, Habinnas performs the function of the ἄκλητος. But Petronius clearly had Plato's *Symposium* in mind and was not merely using the stock theme. His allusion is not, however, a parody.³ He is not mocking Plato. Instead, here as so often in the *Satyricon*, Petronius is

¹ A. L., 'Zu Petronius', *Berl. phil. Woch.* xx (1900), 925-6; G. Wissowa, 'Athenaeus u. Macrobius', *Nachr. Gött. Ges., Phil.-Hist. Kl.* iii. (1913), 334 n. 2; J. Martin, *Symposion. Die Gesch. einer lit. Form*, Paderborn (1931), 96; E. Courtney, 'Parody and literary allusion in Menippean Satire', *Philologus* cvi

(1962), 97; Helen H. Bacon, 'The Sibyl in the Bottle', *Virginia Quarterly Rev.* xxxiv (1958), 271.

² R. Hirzel, *Der Dialog* ii (Leipzig, 1895), 46 n. 2, 313 n. 1.

³ So A. L., loc. cit.

subtly manipulating a famous literary passage for his audience to recognize and appreciate. He was writing for men as well read and as alert as himself, men who would see at once the absurdity and the skill of making the vulgar Habinnas play the role of the aristocratic and romantic Alcibiades. Once more Petronius casts an absurdly unheroic character in the part of a figure from serious literature.

Before Habinnas enters, there is the same knocking on the door—'inter haec triclinii valvas lictor percussit' (*Sat.* 65)—and a reveller enters (*comissator*). Like Alcibiades, Habinnas is recognized, though not by everyone. Petronius warns the careful reader that something is coming when he devotes several lines to Encolpius' reaction (alarm, for Habinnas is wearing official robes, and Encolpius mistakes him for the praetor) and then, when Agamemnon has announced Habinnas' identity, makes Encolpius sit back with a warning to the reader in the words 'recreatus hoc sermone reposui cubitum, Habinnamque intrantem cum admiratione ingenti spectabam'. There follows a direct allusion to Plato—'ille autem ebrius uxoris suae umeris imposuerat manus, oneratusque aliquot coronis et unguento per frontem in oculos fluente, praetorio loco se posuit, continuoque vinum et caldam poposcit'. The differences are striking and clever. Where Alcibiades had leaned on a flute-girl, Habinnas is supported by his formidable and vulgar wife, Scintilla; Alcibiades was garlanded with ivy and violets, whereas Habinnas' head is dripping with unsavoury oils; Alcibiades' first words were to apologize for his drunken state, Habinnas' to shout for more wine (a motif which comes only later in the Alcibiades scene—213 e); Alcibiades gracefully asked whether he might come in, whereas Habinnas walks straight to the best seat. Where Alcibiades was modest, Habinnas is overbearing. And Trimalchio of course sees nothing wrong; Habinnas' conduct is *hilaritas* for Trimalchio, who enthusiastically joins in the call for more drink. We are not told where Alcibiades had been; but Habinnas has just come, appropriately enough (especially in view of what follows), from a funeral dinner. Alcibiades' arrival gave rise to a certain amount of raillery with Socrates (213 b f.), but then very soon to his elegant eulogy of Socrates as a satyr and a Silenus (215 a ff.). Habinnas' entry, on the other hand, gives rise to a scene of further vulgarity, featuring Fortunata and Scintilla (67), and leads ultimately to the grand climactic theme of Trimalchio's own death (71 ff.). Habinnas, the mason who is to make Trimalchio's tomb, has been brought in to pave the way for the development of the death theme, yet another exposé of Trimalchio himself. He and Alcibiades are linked in their literary roles because they each lead to and participate in a final revelation of the main personage.¹ But nothing could be more different from Alcibiades' affectionate and teasing speech in praise of Socrates than Trimalchio's maudlin performance on the theme of his own death.

Once Alcibiades has appeared, the whole tone of the *Symposium* changes. Likewise Habinnas, coming soon after the spooky tales of the werewolf and the changeling (61–3), sets the action on a new and different tack, symbolized by the announcement of the *secundae mensae* (68. 1). It is only when Habinnas has come in, with his description of another dinner (a funeral one this time) no less grotesque than Trimalchio's own, that Petronius can make the transition to the dramatic and bizarre scene which ends the *Cena*.

¹ J. P. Sullivan in *Critical Essays in Roman Literature: Satire* (London, 1963), 86, and see too *Arion* vi (1967), 82–3. W. Arrowsmith,

'Luxury and Death in the *Satyricon*', *Arion* v (1966), 312, emphasizes the structural importance of Habinnas.

In Petronius' use of Plato there is no hint of mockery. Plato is set up in Encolpius' tirade against rhetoric (c. 2) as one of the masters of *naturalis pulchritudo*—apparently Petronius' own ideal.¹ And there are other likenesses between the *Cena* and the *Symposium*—for instance the similarity between their final scenes, each with a sudden entry from a group of strangers (revellers in Plato, firemen in Petronius), or the way in which the main character is presented as somewhat removed from the gathering (*Symp.* 174 d, 175 c, *Sat.* 32, 41). For those who knew, Petronius was providing a striking and subtle adaptation of a famous literary scene.

The method is entirely typical of Petronius. Little in the *Satyricon* is merely what it seems. The characters are constantly presented in the guise of literary personages. Encolpius in the persona of Odysseus or Aeneas plays an elaborate game of metamorphosis with Encolpius the 'hero' of a Greek romance. The *Symposium* theme is to recur, both implicitly and explicitly. It appears, first, in the story of the Pergamene boy (*Sat.* 85 f.), a reversal of the story told by Alcibiades of Socrates (*Symp.* 217 a ff.). In Plato the story is told with charm and delicacy—Alcibiades laid elaborate plans to seduce Socrates, with total lack of success, even when he lay down right next to the δαιμόνιος ἄνθρωπος (219 c). In the *Satyricon* however, it turns into obscenity; it is the teacher who tries to take advantage of the pupil, only to find that the boy is even more corrupt than he is himself. Eumolpus, the fake poet, stands in the position of Socrates, a travesty indeed. Later in the work, Giton ironically thanks Encolpius for loving him with a *Socratica fides*; he goes on 'non tam intactus Alcibiades in praeceptoris lecto iacuit' (128. 7). This time a direct allusion. That it should be Giton who thus complains of Encolpius links this use of the Plato passage to the earlier one; in each case the pupil, or rather the younger character, who might be expected to be the more innocent, in fact turns out to be the more corrupt. It is hardly coincidental that the *Symposium* is about love, when one of Petronius' recurring themes is the perversion of human relationships. Though thematically less important than these uses of the Alcibiades–Socrates relationship, the Habinnas passage is none the less connected with them. The character of Habinnas is as much a travesty of that of Alcibiades as the relationship between Encolpius and Giton, or between Eumolpus and his pupil, is to that between Socrates and Alcibiades.

It has been pointed out² that Giton likes to indulge in such pretentious literary allusions as his reference to Socrates and Alcibiades. Ascylltus and Encolpius are 'a second Eteocles and Polynices' (80. 3). But it is not only Giton. This device belongs to Petronius, not to just one of his characters. Ascylltus likens himself and Giton to Tarquin and Lucretia (9), and that is only one of the openly expressed parallelisms. The *Satyricon*, even in its present fragmentary state, operates on many levels. Role-playing, disguise, and metamorphosis are among its chief preoccupations. Within the action itself, the characters and their situations are constantly revealed as other than what they appear. On a different plane, their appearance in contexts paralleling those of serious literature deepens the contrast between those epic deeds and the sordid, if funny, adventures of Encolpius and his friends. But again, on the technical, literary level, Petronius can be seen manipulating themes and

¹ Cf. 132 'novae simplicitatis opus'. Plato is a recommended author in the 'schedium Lucilianae humilitatis' (c. 5).

² Peter George, 'Style and Character in the *Satyricon*', *Arion* v (1966), 339.

situations from very diverse sources. The *Cena* is a play upon a serious and respectable literary genre, a hybrid of dialogue and meal-description (compare Trimalchio's attempts at learned conversation—39. 3 'oportet etiam inter cenandum philologiam nosse'; the real counterpart of the philosophical conversation proper to a dialogue is of course the homely philosophies of the freedmen). And the *Satyricon* itself is surely the supreme example of Petronius' games with literary themes and genres—a mongrel if ever there was one. This may seem a long way from Habinnas. Yet in a modest, but none the less significant way, the use which Petronius makes of the character of Habinnas illustrates both the technical expertise so apparent in the *Satyricon* and the contrast between the classical world of Plato and the vulgarly realistic world inhabited most of the time by Petronius' characters.

There is a further point of interest relating to the *Symposium*. When Tacitus wrote the *Dialogus* he too modelled its setting on Plato's work.¹ The tragic poet Maternus corresponds to Agathon; in the *Dialogus* as in the *Symposium* the scene is set on the day after a performance of a tragedy by the host. Messalla is another latecomer (*Dial.* 14). He comes in with an apology for his interruption and, like Alcibiades and Habinnas, he sets the discussion on a different course. Tacitus' purpose, unlike that of Petronius, is serious, and it is hardly surprising, it might seem, that the device of alluding to the *Symposium* should thus have occurred independently to two such masters of literary genre as Tacitus and Petronius.² Yet there are other resemblances between the *Dialogus* and the *Satyricon*, even if more of subject-matter than of expression.³ Both authors were sensitive as few others were to the changing circumstances of their age and the effect which these circumstances were producing in contemporary literature. If Petronius is indeed the Petronius of Tacitus, *Annals* 16. 17 ff. (and I see no reason to share the exaggerated scepticism which even now persists), then it would be surprising indeed if Tacitus had *not* been aware of the *Satyricon*. Yet even aside from the possibility of direct connection, there remains the interesting fact that both Petronius and Tacitus went back past more recent models of the genre to the *Symposium* itself, each to use it in a characteristic and individual way.

Columbia University, New York/King's College, London

AVERIL CAMERON

¹ E. Fraenkel, *Horace* (Oxford, 1957), 136 n. 1.

² For Tacitus and the dialogue form see Alan Cameron, 'Tacitus and the date of Curvatus Maternus' death', *C.R.* n.s. xvii

(1967), 258 ff.

³ P. Collignon, *Étude sur Pétrone* (Paris, 1892), 94 ff. (still fundamental for literary allusions in the *Satyricon*, though by no means always to be followed).