Savoring Power,  
Consuming the Times
Palma, Pina.

Savoring power, consuming the times: the metaphors of food in medieval and Renaissance Italian literature / Pina Palma.

pages cm
Includes bibliographical references and index.
1. Italian literature—To 1400—History and criticism  2. Italian literature—16th century—History and criticism.  3. Food in literature.  4. Gastronomy in literature.  I. Title.
PQ4053.F58P36  2013
850.9'3564—dc23

© 2013 University of Notre Dame
For Enzo,  
In memoriam
CONTENTS

Acknowledgments ix

Introduction: Taste and See the Power of Food 1

ONE The Language of Food in Boccaccio’s Decameron 33

TWO Of Frogs, Giants, and the Court: Pulci’s Morgante 89

THREE Banquets of Power: Boiardo’s Innamorato 153
and the Politics of Gastronomy

FOUR Meals, Transformations, and the Belly 215
of History: Ariosto’s Furioso

FIVE Courtesans and Figs, Art and Nature in 265
Aretino’s Ragionamento

Conclusion 317

Notes 321

Bibliography 383

Index 411

© 2013 University of Notre Dame
Many people have helped me during the years of work on this book. To them, I will always be indebted. I am especially grateful to my friend and colleague Jim Rhodes. With patience, wit, and wisdom he posed tough questions, pored through several drafts of the chapters, and commented on them. His criticism and suggestions improved the manuscript in more ways than I can say. Unflinching in his encouragement and unwavering in his confidence in the outcome, Jim provided generous and perceptive guidance, making me a sharper reader and writer. The privilege of teaching with him in the Honors College at Southern Connecticut State University led to lively discussions that drew me deeply into medieval texts and contexts. And when the complexities of the project became overwhelming, Jim remained a beacon of intellectual rigor, encouraging me to stay the course and to believe in myself. It is with pleasure that I acknowledge my debt to him.

Juliana D’Amato, OP, Dominican Sisters of Peace, read through the manuscript at various stages and offered advice and support despite the distance separating us. In many ways the seeds for this work were planted during the course of a conversation with her on the beach of Oyster Bay, Long Island. That conversation continued, perhaps unbeknown to her, throughout the years and from both sides of the Atlantic. With acute comments, piercing questions, and forbearance she guided me through discussions on Mary, the Gospels, Saint Dominic, Saint Thomas Aquinas, and everything else in between much as she did when I was her student at Albertus Magnus College. As my study on food took the medieval and Renaissance path, her suggestions were crucial at every stage. Above all, with humor and humility she helped me keep my feet on the ground.
I owe Giuseppe Mazzotta, my maestro at Yale, a special thank you. His courses on Dante and Ludovico Ariosto were fundamental in shaping my work and giving preliminary form to the ideas expressed in this book. Early on he embraced my project with intellectual enthusiasm. Over the years, he was an unmatched interlocutor, challenging me on many points and always suggesting the possibility of more riveting perspectives. This book is in part a tribute to his work and teaching, for without them it would not have been possible.

This list would not be complete if I did not mention Pete Wetherbee, who read the first draft of the chapter on Giovanni Boccaccio and made perspicacious comments. His criticism led to a complete revision of that chapter. Marcia Colish, during a break of the 8th Medieval Conference she was attending at SCSU, gave me an impromptu lesson on the days of Creation. Alaister Minnis, on several occasions, took the time to answer my questions about various aspects of medieval culture. During his stay in New Haven, and later from Pisa, Catania, and Milan, Silvano Nigro took a vivid interest in my project. Our long conversations about food, the Renaissance, Luigi Pulci, and Medici culture triggered my reflections in several chapters of this work. From the first time he heard me talk about food in literature in Cambridge, UK, Konrad Eisenbickler encouraged me to pursue the project and spurred me to bring it to completion. Rosa Morelli’s remarkable ability to identify any passage from the sacred scriptures taught me to take a fresh look at familiar subjects. Zeynep Gürsel, former student and now colleague, was a constant source of wise counsel and encouragement.

I am also grateful to the three anonymous readers. Their significant suggestions transformed my manuscript into a book. Needless to say, the errors that remain are all mine.

Stephen Little, my patient editor, was equally supportive.

Finally, I owe a debt of gratitude to my children, Giancarlo and Flavia, patient allies throughout the whole journey, and to my husband, Jeff Stanton.

This book is dedicated to the memory of my brother Enzo with whom during our summers at Villa Beck I began to explore the complexities of foods and flavors. With him I discovered the happiness of brotherly wonderings and the sweetness of convivial gatherings. Without him I tasted the bitterness of death.
Shorter versions of some of these chapters were published in professional journals. I publish here the extended versions and gratefully acknowledge permission to reprint. Chapter 1 was published under the title of “Hermits, Husbands, and Lovers: Moderation and Excesses at the Table in the Decameron,” in Food and History 4, no. 2 (2006): 151–162. Chapter 3 appeared as “Banquets and Power: Boiardo’s Innamorato and the Politics of Gastronomy,” Quaderni d’italianistica 27, no. 1 (2006): 21–29. Chapter 4 includes “Florinetta and the Food of Freedom: Morgante XIX,” which appeared in Table Talk: Perspectives on Food in Medieval Italian Literature, ed. Christiana Purdy Moudarres (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), 111–125.

Unless otherwise indicated, English translations are mine.
Introduction

Taste and See the Power of Food

“If you observe well, you will see that, from one age to another, there is a change not only in men’s speech, vocabulary, dress, style of building, culture and such things, but, what is more, even in their sense of taste. A food that was highly prized in one age will often be found far less appetizing in another.”¹ Thus Francesco Guicciardini in his Ricordi explains the fickleness, unpredictability, and inconsistency that characterize the human propensity for change. Arguably, the eagerness to accept and adapt to new systems, be they linguistic, artistic, or culinary, is the direct expression of the enduring human desire to discover, explore, and appropriate objects of wonder. The impulse driving this interest is to deepen human knowledge. This allows humanity to determine and assign meaning to the unintelligible. At the same time, it also engages the problematic and transforms the uncommon into the familiar. With refreshing directness in his aphorism, the Florentine historian seems to suggest that the penchant to replace the old with the new, the known with the unknown, or the tested with the untested mirrors, first of all, the appetite for innovative endeavors that sets the human mind afire.

By listing foodstuff among the elements that characterize a particular age and grouping it with widely recognized models that define the ever shifting landscape of cultural preferences, Guicciardini provides the clearest evidence yet for the Renaissance that food is a sign of its times. Indeed, through the particular ingredients and preparation techniques
that any given epoch privileges, food bears witness to the many socio-cultural facets and contradictions that shape an age. Of course, the sociocultural aspects that define any system are generally grounded in philosophical, political, and theological beliefs. As a result, food, as the historian describes it, turns into a nontraditional mode of assessing the currents that characterize the times in which it is consumed. In addition, it stands revealed as a highly reliable gauge of human endeavor. In the shifting trends that typify human progress, food exemplifies the departure from numbing ordinariness and, metaphorically, a change from resignation, denial, and quiescence. As a matter of fact, it also typifies risk-embracing creativity, unbending resoluteness, and inventiveness, all of which can pave the way to the moral truths after which humanity hungers.

Clearly, the sociohistorical traits Guicciardini assigns to food turn it into another cultural marker. As such, the historian reminds us that it can be used along with language, fashion, and architecture to assess the experiences that change, and at times mar, society as it pursues the knowledge that guides it to happiness, justice, and, ultimately, peace. The historian’s assertion is especially momentous because it puts food on a par with language and architecture. By the time Guicciardini was confecting his aphorisms,\(^2\) both these fields were highly established branches of study. In the middle of the fifteenth century, the Florentine Leon Battista Alberti had codified the rules governing modern architecture. Even before it was published, almost fourteen years after the author’s death, Alberti’s treatise *On the Art of Building in Ten Books* (*De re aedificatoria*) circulated among various groups of connoisseurs whose enthusiastic acclaim it won.\(^3\) That the work focused entirely on architecture was one of the reasons for its immediate success. At the time of its publication, Pollio Vitruvius’s *On architecture* (*De architectura*) was the only theoretical work specifically devoted to the art of building.\(^4\) The wide range of interpretations and commentaries that throughout the centuries flourished around this treatise spawned a wide variety of works.\(^5\) Nevertheless, this tradition produced mere variants of the original treatise the Roman architect and engineer had dedicated to Augustus.

The similarities between Vitruvius’s and Alberti’s treatises are few. The most obvious one is the ten chapters into which they both are
subdivided. The differences, in contrast, are many and glaring. The most compelling one involves an innovative point of view. As Joseph Rykwert points out, Vitruvius’s treatise looked at the past whereas Alberti’s focused on the future. Specifically, by making the designs of Hellenistic and early Greek architects the models for Roman buildings, Vitruvius did not strive for originality and inventiveness. He never endeavored to reach beyond the forms and designs that his investigations into the architectural past unearthed. Throughout his career Vitruvius remained a supporter of ancient construction rules and practices. Alberti’s approach was exactly the opposite. He turned toward the imaginative new, a mode that enabled him to supersede the unimaginative, and no longer functional, old. For this reason, Alberti regarded the descriptions of ancient buildings he found in literary texts and the knowledge he gained from the ruins he studied as his points of departure. In his view, the authority of the ancients could not function as a point of arrival because, among other reasons, ancient architecture provides neither answers to political demands nor spaces for social interactions and cultural sensibilities. Because these concerns ranked high among the preoccupations of the modern age, Alberti looked for architectural solutions to those needs. The new order of building he envisioned takes into account and attends to precisely the complexities and ambitions defining his age and society. For him old models neither meet the expectations nor live up to the tensions, the curiosity, and especially the desire to exceed and improve on the past. Yet these are the tinders that kindle modernity. Not surprisingly, the far-reaching implications of Alberti’s treatise on architecture not only influenced the political and social spheres, but also had impacts in the linguistic arena. This latter field is of particular relevance for the purpose of this study because it elucidates the link that Guicciardini draws between architecture and language.

From Alberti’s perspective, the idea of “inventing terms to explain matters,” paired with his resoluteness about using “proper Latin, and in a comprehensible form,” lays bare the necessity to rely on a language capable of expounding cutting-edge theories. As he emphasizes the need for a Latin suitable for his work’s inventiveness Alberti, before Guicciardini, makes language and architecture part of the same discourse on
creativity, innovation, and mastery. By insisting on a precise language that functions as an airtight system yielding the clearest meanings and measuring up to his new building criteria, Alberti establishes another fundamental difference between his work and Vitruvius’s. More than this, the necessity to adopt a language that is lucid and coherent intersects in a meaningful way with the Florentine’s interest in language itself. In various works he authored, Alberti reiterates his interest in the accurate use of language, whether Latin or volgare. His specific concern with correct linguistic usage led him to write a Grammatichetta. In essence, by opting for a language that conveys the precise meanings of his leading-edge building criteria Alberti foreshadows, and at the same time gives substance to, Guicciardini’s assertion: together architecture and language are epoch-defining sociocultural markers.

There is yet another reason language and architecture are closely linked in Guicciardini’s aphorism. In the sixteenth century the language debate, or the questione della lingua, which spanned decades was re-ignited by Pietro Bembo’s publication of the Prose della volgar lingua (1525). To give uniformity to the linguistically fractured peninsula that comprised a variety of volgari, the Venetian humanist maintains that a canon must be set. As to the bases of this canon, he specifically pinpoints Petrarch’s use of Tuscan for poetry and Giovanni Boccaccio’s for prose. In contrast to Bembo’s thesis, Giovan Giorgio Trissino theorizes about the use of a common language he defines as “Italian.” In the wake of his discovery of Dante’s De vulgari eloquentia (1513), Trissino argues that Tuscan is one of many variants that “Italian” must encompass. He puts forward his linguistic views in the Epistola de le lettere aggiunte ne la lingua italiana (1524) as well as in his dialogue Il castellano (1529). Writing within the same arc of time, Baldesar Castiglione, in The Book of the Courtier (1528), argues against Bembo’s artificial use of Tuscan and moves closer to Trissino’s position, advocating the use of volgari.

Niccolò Machiavelli does not shy away from this debate; rather, he lends his voice to it. In the Discorso o dialogo intorno alla nostra lingua, he argues that the linguistic norms for Italy must be drawn from the Florentine. But he emphasizes that the rules ought to be based on the volgare—the spoken language. For him, the greater “constitutional and structural regularity” of this idiom gives it preeminence over other vol-
To lend credibility to his argument, the secretary argues that it was on the Florentine’s linguistic foundations, not any other, that Dante, Boccaccio, and Petrarch found the means to express their ideas. Accordingly, Machiavelli maintains that their use of the Florentine volgare, in turn, legitimizes its ascendency over other idioms. His reasoning undermines the artificiality of language that Bembo and Trissino advocate. More importantly, although he never openly states it, it is evident that like his friend Guicciardini, Machiavelli does not lose sight of the geopolitical implications that the use and predominance of one language over others entail.

Against these theoretical disputations, Teofilo Folengo’s Baldus (1517, 1521, 1539–1540, and posthumously 1552) adds fuel to the debate. Through a linguistic experiment, Folengo takes a bold anticlassical stand against Bembo’s theory, openly questioning the validity of the rule imposed by the canon. The macaronic Latin hexameters he uses in his Baldus provide a concrete example of the richness that idioms other than Tuscan possess. By parodying and ridiculing the excesses of “linguistic purity” in humanist literature, the Benedictine monk brings a fresh if rebellious perspective to the debate on language. Through images of food and banquets that ground his discourse in popular culture and natural experiences Folengo with “verbal inventiveness and spontaneity” pokes fun at the artificiality of pedantic linguistic rules. And although these types of rules characterize the ongoing debate, Folengo demonstrates that a formalistic attitude toward language undermines its rich and fluid essence. Like food to be relished bite by bite, each mouthful appreciated for its own individual uniqueness and yet contributing to the whole meal’s deliciousness, Folengo in his mock-epic poem posits northern Paduan dialects as constitutive parts of one idiom. In the end, by commingling Latin morphology and constructs with dialectal forms and uses, he shows another side of the complexities associated with selecting a specific volgare as the basis for an “Italian” language. Through the voices and works of these linguistic theorists and practitioners, among others, the questione della lingua occupies center stage in the literary landscape at the time of Guicciardini’s writing. It is no surprise, therefore, that the historian speaks of language and architecture in the same breath with food.
There exists yet another strong nexus between language, architecture, and food. These elements lend themselves quite naturally to the consumption of users, readers, and viewers. Indeed, the way onlookers gaze at a particular building can be construed as a type of consuming. Visually appropriating an artistic, literary, or architectural object is comparable to taking in, to consuming it. Sight, the sense that occasions this phenomenon, functions like taste and smell. And just as these senses play an important role in tasting food, sight is central to partaking of the object observed. It could be argued that residing in and making a space one’s own are comparable to absorbing into oneself what is outside of it (in this case, the surroundings). Like actual eating, both gazing at and inhabiting a space entail appropriating what is outside of the self and incorporating it. In anthropological terms, the absorption of the “other” into the self is a process that “synthesizes the other as part of the self.” While this notion accounts for different forms of cannibalism, it is obvious that living in a space or looking at an object is by no means the same as cannibalism. One is reminded, however, that internalizing ideas, forms, and spaces, in short, appropriating external objects through the senses, can be likened to the act of eating and ingesting. Isidore of Seville puts forward an intriguing common etymology for *aedes, aedificium* (room, building, edifice) and *edere* (to eat). The two words, he claims, share a common origin. According to Ann W. Astell, Isidore’s conjecture on this linguistic resemblance was seized on by medieval monastic orders. The belief that the food (spiritual or physical) they privileged made it possible to build and reside in different types of houses (divine or worldly) originated in Isidore’s pronouncement.

From a different perspective, the idea of building a beautiful edifice based on the spiritual, not the material, food consumed, was also derived from the notion of feeding on the sacred scriptures. For the medieval mind “eating” the scriptures was a commonly used metaphor. This idea traced its origins back to the Old Testament book of Ezekiel (3:3–4):

“Son of man, eat what is before you: eat this scroll, then go, speak to the house of Israel. So I opened my mouth and he gave me the scroll to eat. Son of man, he then said to me, feed your belly and feed your stomach with this scroll I am giving you. I ate it, and it was sweet as honey in my
mouth. He said: Son of man, go now to the house of Israel, and speak my words to them.” Accordingly, it was believed that the spiritual nourishment provided by these texts strengthened, educated, and beautified the consumer. The aesthetic value attached to the theological one lent force to the building theory the spiritual orders championed. Guicciardini’s terse statement indirectly calls attention to this tradition, underscoring once again that food, like architecture and language, heralds symbolic meanings that speak to the choices every society deliberately makes.

Understood in terms of a gastronomic taxonomy that assigns meaning to ingredients, preparations, dishes, and meals, the traditional role of food is upended. Its usefulness no longer limited by the nutritional values it delivers to an organism, food turns into something more than a mere means of sustenance. It becomes an element that possesses, among other attributes, aesthetic values. Eating thus stands for the internalization and appreciation of those values. In much the same way, the particular shapes and colors conferred to foodstuff for the purpose of stimulating and delighting the consumers’ senses turn it into gastronomic works of art. Like other creative works, gastronomic ones are influenced in part by the identity and personality of the artists shaping them. But the character, and in particular the social status, of those individuals for whom they are created also affect preparations. In fact, gastronomic creativity often aims at reflecting and affirming the latter’s power, displaying their achievements, and conveying their sophistication.

Of course, there is another side to this. Admiring the attractive shapes into which expert hands turn food even before ascertaining its exquisiteness suggests a possible dichotomy between appearance and reality. Metaphorically, this is the equivalent of biting into an aesthetic layer without verifying the ethical one. The passage from the aesthetic to the ethical value of food is set in motion precisely by the pleasure of the senses that the former engenders. By appealing to the senses of sight and taste, the attractiveness and tastiness of gastronomic creations bring out the whole problematic range of ethical implications. This stems from the fact that the senses pave the way to bodily pleasures. And these, according to Aristotle and Saint Thomas Aquinas, among others, more often than not lead to immoderation, intemperance, and sin. Yet
the saint, in the wake of the philosopher’s claim, maintains that “there is an art of making pleasure, namely, the art of cookery and the art of making unguents” (emphasis added). Without ambiguity, this assertion posits cooking—the preparation of food and its final result, the dish and the meal—as a creative form of art that brings pleasure to the consumer. Yet, while substantiating the idea that gastronomic works of art engender pleasure, Saint Thomas’s words straddle different types of pleasures. Thus, his pronouncement lays bare the shifting, thrilling, but also unsettling implications that gastronomy elicits. As one might expect, the degree of pleasure it engenders—immoderate or moderate—mirrors the individual’s temperance. Like the art of making perfumed ointments intended to enhance the body’s appeal, cookery does bring pleasure to the senses; but the temperate person steers clear of the excessive and unregulated behavior that sensual pleasures can elicit. For Saint Thomas, delighting in a sensible enjoyment of natural pleasures that are good for both body and spirit is not sinful. What he, and Aristotle, rejects altogether is the loss of self-control caused by sensual pleasures. In their respective views, yielding to them leads to the abrogation of moral and ethical principles. But Aquinas’s assertion is fascinating for another reason also: it indirectly foregrounds the powerful role played by the artist charged with preparing the food. Cast against vulnerable consumers, who are more likely than not to give in entirely to the enticing delights, the cook—author and deviser of irresistible dishes—is unaffected by, and even unsusceptible to, their seductiveness. Because of this, the cook embodies control and authority; in short, he has power.

That food is a significant marker of culture, disclosing meanings that are fixed to culture and its milieu, just as Gucciardini claimed in the Renaissance, is a concept that modern anthropologists have long embraced. Although the anthropological analysis of food is beyond the literary aims of this study, it is important to remember that well before literary scholars, anthropologists probed the meanings of foodstuff and its relevance to the development of societies. More than forty years ago, for instance, Claude Lévi-Strauss argued convincingly that the universal transformation of nature into culture takes place through the cooking of food. In his seminal work, the anthropologist maintains that gas-
tronomy “is a language in which each society codes messages which allow it to signify a part at least of what it is.”41 Lévi-Strauss’s discourse makes it abundantly clear that food, including the ingredients used, the preparations chosen, and even the contexts in which it is presented and consumed, is an element that enables us to differentiate—either in its natural state or in its final preparation and apart from its nutritional value—among cultures and societies. To carry his assertion further, it would be accurate to say that food through its organizing and unifying properties becomes similar to a language. Its ingredients, spices, and cooking techniques replace the phonemes and morphemes that as a nonverbal language it lacks. And just like any language, it possesses a vast range of meanings. More often than not, these offer surprisingly arresting nuances. From these subtle differences one can analyze the context, culture, and society from which food is developed and within which it is consumed. To grasp the symbolic significance of food, accepting it as a sign of the culture of which it is part and which regulates it, requires understanding that it is itself a system governed by rules. These rules, not unlike social tenets, can either ensure or undermine the excellence of the final product that the cook, like a consumed leader and artist, aims to achieve. And as with any spoken language, food’s rules are communicable and understandable only to those well versed in the code that defines them. Recognizing this system as one having the same force of a language gives rise to the same set of expectations the former provides. Food does meet them; and as an expression of social and cultural phenomena it discloses the sometimes riveting, sometimes repugnant principles every society champions as it seeks to advance itself over others—even if it entails subjugating them.

It is no wonder, then, that from the earliest times food has occupied a prominent place, first in the oral and later in the written literary tradition. Whether describing a shared meal or a solitary repast, storytellers and writers—from Homer and beyond—have used foodstuffs as another means through which to plumb the depths of the human condition as it evolved under the extraordinary, and sometime intense, circumstances of the times in which the authors lived. An early example of this in the Latin tradition is Petronius Arbiter’s Cena Trimalchionis. This work is an absorbing if occasionally unrefined model of food and
dinner scene used to frame the social, political, and cultural practices shaping Petronius’s society. Throughout the dinner the host’s boasting is the common thread linking the various conversations taking place between him and his guests. In this work, Trimalchio’s flamboyant pretentiousness is the supporting structure of Petronius’s satire. Indeed, the host’s affectation is palpable in every aspect of the banquet, during which, what appears as spontaneous action, is the furthest thing from improvised.

From the beginning, it is obvious that Trimalchio’s dinner is nothing other than a calculated maneuver staged to flaunt the wealth he has amassed as a freedman of the empire. Through it, he aims at garnering his guests’ admiration. To add luster to his riches, and complement them, during the banquet Trimalchio seizes the opportunity to display his “erudition.” He does so by voicing his views on—and his interpretations of—philosophical, astrological, and mythological issues. In his understanding, to be conversant in a wide variety of subjects lends a sophisticated sheen to the social status he has carved for himself; the intellectual curiosity he demonstrates adds legitimacy to it. Predictably, however, the very opposite ensues. Every time Trimalchio addresses subjects intended to show his literary taste and liberal education, fusing, in a sense, generosity of spirit with a light touch of pedagogy, he winds up revealing his utter ignorance. Mistakes, misstatements, and missed details sum it all up. The coarseness and conceit Trimalchio embodies bear all the marks of the nouveau riche who closely track his fortune while feigning a lack of interest toward it. Despite his affectation, the host’s vexatious obsession with his wealth is depicted in vibrant tones and hues especially as he boasts about the copious food and wine he offers to his guests.

More than the speeches and dialogues intended to give substance to appearances and inspire awe in the guests, Trimalchio’s raw ostentatiousness is manifest in the manner in which the dishes he offers are prepared and served. The culinary preparations disguise, and at times conceal, the basic ingredients used in their creation. For this reason, they turn almost into images of a textual banquet that Trimalchio authors throughout the evening. Arguably, this aspect of the meal hints at a link between the delicacies and the moral fiber of its provider. The privileged
social position the host has reached is not the result of his moral character. On the contrary, insofar as he is concerned, moral values and forms of conduct do not traverse the road to riches. Trimalchio swanks about his cooks’ culinary creativity, deeming it the gastronomic index of his own prosperity. As for his guests, whose sole objective is to “gaze and guzzle,” they feign attention to the host’s incoherent blather. In reality, it is the cooks’ artistic renditions of food that turn into an evolving text that dazzles their eyes. In course after course, chapter after chapter as it were, this culinary text redirects their attention to the luxuries that affluence, and not moderation, self-control, or propriety, secures. To be sure, for the guests the lure of Trimalchio’s wealth and all it promises, their steady increase—in short, the culmination of what they understand as freedom—vanquishes the mental numbness that over-indulging at the table causes.

Undoubtedly, the cooks’ culinary ingenuity and skillfulness reflect the host’s own craftiness. The latter’s extraordinary social trajectory, from slave to wealthy freedman, owner of an opulent villa equipped with a legion of slaves he governs with an iron hand in the privileged Puteoli milieu, is evidence of this. Yet Petronius’s acerbic commentary on the depravity and dissoluteness that lie beneath the banquet’s exotic fare summarizes the breakdown of social norms and civic bonds. Because he lacks the ability to make the subtle distinction between education and riches, reason and power, elegance and garishness, authority and tastelessness, Trimalchio’s dinner highlights the very absence of self-restraint and, by extension, refinement. The presentation of a boar served with a cap of freedom—a pilleus—on its head graphically exemplifies this. The idea of serving exotic animals cooked whole and presented in spectacular manners is consistent with the host’s intent of displaying his prodigious means. In Trimalchio’s understanding, wealth turns the ordinary and formulaic into the exceptional and magnificent. But the effect the boar produces on the narrator Encolpio—and the readers through him—is quite different. At first, in fact, the significance of the cap eludes him completely. But as the mentor dining next to Encolpio points out, the peculiar garb with which the cooked boar is presented in Trimalchio’s household signifies the freedom the animal gained on the previous night. Presented to other dining guests on that occasion,
it was not eaten because of the copious food served. In the host’s twisted logic, as a leftover, the boar gained an additional day of existence, and this earned it the freedom the cap signifies.

The parade of the freed boar is intended to crown Trimalchio’s celebration of his wealth in the dining quarters of his villa. The dining hall is a context that controls his character and is simultaneously controlled by it because there he can sate his guests’ physical hunger while they, in turn, can satisfy his hunger for social acceptance. The boar, however, illustrates the absurdity of Trimalchio’s thinking. Rather than complementing the strident roar of celebration and the forced joviality the guests are expected to display, it highlights in a paradoxical way the host’s misguided principles. An untamed and fierce animal known for the astuteness it deploys in concealing its own footprints to escape capture, the boar is highly prized for its meat because hunting it down requires force and skill. Thus, reducing it to a prepared dish, taming, in a sense, the wild beast, turns into an image that invites the meal’s partakers (and Petronius’s readers) not simply to eat, but to take in the visual text of Trimalchio’s entitlements. Served on his textual table, the boar exemplifies a chapter of the host’s ascent to riches. That he can grant freedom to the animal is a further if ironic proof of it. On the table the boar becomes the image of the host’s power, especially by way of contrast. In other words, while the first lost its freedom to satisfy human hunger for rare morsels, the latter gained it to gratify his desires for them.

While the spectacle of the cap is choreographed to emphasize the daily copiousness of Trimalchio’s table, where the quantity and quality of food by far surpass the partakers’ ability to consume it all, the pilleus does suggest that the boar is much more than just another course. The banquet of images and ideas that Trimalchio hosts lends itself to several interpretations. First of all, the cap brings the notion of freedom into play, suggesting, yet again by way of contrast, that it is never tied to mere appearance. For in spite of its symbolic cap the boar has been captured, killed, cooked, and served. A dead animal can hardly be thought of as free. Also, the paradox of the cooked/freed animal casts a penetrating light on the political implications of freedom. This idea, unsurprisingly, calls to mind the persistent tension between the social positions people hunger after and the moral and ethical values they willingly for-