

Bodies in Motion, Bodies at Rest: Status, Corporeality, and the Negotiation of Power at Ancient Meals

Abstract: This paper extends my initial thoughts about the power dynamics at play in the meal setting offered at the end of last year's paper, "The Sex-Trade and Slavery at the Meal," in view of the Roman domestic meal. I continue to mull over comments from the seminar members' last time about corporeality and intimacy at this meal, and about what that might mean for the status and subjectivity of marginalized people in elite meal settings—the slave and prostitute in particular. Having surveyed various kinds of evidence, material and textual, I have decided to focus on texts, particularly satire and comedy (the reasoning, I hope, is clarified in second section of the paper). This paper has four parts. In the first and second section I reflect on how bodily positioning and sharing of food and drink contributed to making the meal a space of competing, though erotic and disruptive, tensions around bonding and hierarchy. Engaging Hal Taussig's new study, *In the Beginning was the Meal*, I offer some preliminary thoughts about how we might (or I might) start to theorize more about corporeality and food sharing as contributing to these dynamics of the meal. Here I bring in briefly the work of Mikhail Bakhtin on carnival and grotesque bodies, considering how to approach the literary and rhetorical nature of the texts with which I am dealing here—asking why these texts highlight the bodies and figures they do. The third and fourth section undertake preliminary test cases that elaborate my theorizing. Jumping off of different satirical and comic texts, Petronius' *Satyricon* and Plautus' *Asinaria*, for example, I think more seriously about how slaves and courtesans manipulated their bodies, and the bodies of others, in the space of the meal to take advantage of the "experimental" possibilities for creating new networks of power available in it.

I eagerly anticipate our discussion and your feedback, and for thinking about how such analyses could be put to work on early Christian texts. Thank you.

Section 1:

Corporeality, Intimacy, and Power at the Meal

To recline at a festive, domestic meal, a *convivium*, in the Roman world was to partake in *otium*: leisure. It was a posture, Matthew Roller notes in his *Dining Posture in Ancient Rome* (2006), associated with elite men who enjoyed "wine, food, companionship, and the prospect (at least) of sex."¹ At the consummate (elite) meal diners strewn on downy couches are adorned with floral wreaths, before them scurrying slaves brought in elegant tables, with leonine legs, covered with delectable foods, figs and nuts, later fish and pork glistening in garum sauce.²

¹ Matthew Roller, *Dining Posture in Ancient Rome: Bodies, Values, and Status* (Princeton, 2006), 16.

² For clear descriptions of the Roman *convivium*, see Dennis Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist: The Banquet in the Early Christian World* (Fortress, 2003), 13-46 and Hal Taussig, *In the Beginning was the Meal: Social Experimentation and Early Christian Identity* (Fortress, 2009), 23-26.

Wine circulated in handsome cups. Handsome, youthful, male slaves stood at the foot of the bench, in view of the diners, particularly the guest of honor, ready to fan them or fetch more wine, sweet-tempered child slaves sat at their mistresses' feet, and lovely flute-players, harpists, and perhaps prostitutes, male and female, danced and sang at the guests' pleasure—and even reclining below them, if the guests so desired.

If reclining denoted privilege then other postures, such as standing, sitting and even more subtly moving—getting the drinks for others—or remaining still—having the handsome cup-bearer get it for you, sharing in the common cup, or being refused it, reveal how corporeal performance could sustain social boundaries and hierarchies in the meal. Bodily logistics were subtle and calibrated at these meals, and the movement of bodies was constrained and enabled by the intimate space in which domestic meals occurred, and by the fact that food was consumed, was shared, in that space. The diners reclined on couches, facing one another in a u-shape, each couch marking the status of the guests,³ and allowed the diner to have another person recline before him (or her?).

Sympotic literature often uses bodily movement and posture to inform an audience about the disposition of a particular character in a dialogue. Posture and bodily decorum are used in this way precisely because in the Greek and Roman worlds virtue was so often linked to knowing “one’s place” in every encounter and demonstrating that corporeally to one’s peers.⁴ In Roman perspectives, most especially, virtue was said to be registered on the body. To take one example of how such moralizing views of the body might appear in sympotic literature, in his *Banquet of the Seven Sages*, Plutarch describes two women, Melissa and Eumetis, the former sits and does not speak, while the latter reclines and does. Eumetis comes off more positively in

³ Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist*, 33-34.

⁴ See Carlin Barton, “Being in the Eyes: Shame and Sight in Ancient Rome,” in *The Roman Gaze: Vision, Power, and the Body*. Edited by David Fredrick (Johns Hopkins), 216-235 and “The Roman Blush: The Delicate Matter of Self-Control,” in *Constructions of the Classical Body*. Edited by James Porter (Michigan), 213-233.

the narrative of course.⁵ She knows her place in the meal, a philosopher, yes, but a woman too. Thus she sits and lets other speak about her, a clear demonstration of the virtues of humility and modesty.

This hierarchy and bonding could also be elaborated by the kinds of foods served—or declined—and by the ways in which people ate them. Pierre Bourdieu argued that worldviews, including hierarchical schemes, cosmologies, politics, etc. (*habitus*) are instilled pedagogically “through injunctions insignificant as ‘don’t hold your knife in your left hand,’” or in ancient Rome, don’t drink from the cup before pouring out a little wine to the gods, or eat dry foods and not wet ones.⁶ Plutarch, or Philo in describing the meal of the *Therapeutae*, use food to ascribe positive virtue to their interlocutors, these esteemed characters eat sparsely and do not drink wine (connected with particular philosophical perspectives that strive for “balance” of bodily humors), while over-indulging is anticipated in humorous contexts, in satirical texts and elegy, comedy, and the like which I will focus on in this paper. Where philosophical banquets are inscribed more often with composed, bonded, balanced bodies of diners (reflecting a cosmology that is also conceived of in terms of order and balance),⁷ satire and comedy evoke bodies that fit Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of the “grotesque,” bodies that transgress boundaries and collide with the world around them, with other bodies.

In philosophical settings, writers stress the austere food of the meal not only to showcase the moral fortitude of their characters, but also because an edifying meal does not risk the extension of corporeal boundaries that over-indulgence suggests. The philosopher should be self-contained and in control.⁸ But eating, drinking, defecating, vomiting, fighting, engaging in

⁵ Plut. *Mor.* 150b; cf. Angela Standhartinger, “Women in Early Christian Meal Gatherings: Discourse and Reality” SBL meeting 2005.

⁶ Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, (Cambridge, 1977), 94.

⁷ On this aspect of philosophical literature and its construction of the “bounded” self, see Kate Gilhuly, “Bronze for Gold: Subjectivity in Lucian’s *Dialogue of the Courtesans*.” *American Journal of Philology* 128 (2007), 80.

⁸ On philosophical ideals of the human body, particularly Stoic and Platonic, particularly as they apply to early Christian constructions, see Dale Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (Yale, 1995), 3-37 (and more recently his chapter “Paul without Passion,” in *Sex and the Single Savior*, 2006) and

sex acts are important aspects of satirical meals. For instance, Trimalchio's meal from the *Satyricon*, this nouveau riche host speaks about his bouts of constipation and reminds his guests of the necessity to step outside to urinate and defecate—much to their chagrin.⁹ Does the humor rest on the fact that Trimalchio makes discursive the intimate and destructive elements of food consumption itself? Eating food, and sharing it as well as drinking from the same cup extend bodies into each other, because in eating one “makes the world a part of himself,” when meals are shared, diners partake in ingestion of “the world” together. Bakhtin writes:

Eating and drinking are one of the most significant manifestations of the grotesque body. The distinctive character of this body is its unfinished nature, its interaction with the world. These traits are most fully and concretely revealed in the act of eating; the body transgresses here its own limits: it swallows, devours, rends the world apart, is enriched and grows at the world's expense. . . Here man tastes the world, introduces it into his body, makes it part of himself.”¹⁰

In eating (and sharing conversation together) peoples' bodies converge and transgress their boundaries. This fact makes convivial meals sites for intensive bonding, erotic encounter, but also destruction and disruption.¹¹ Roller has argued that Romans perceived this threat to be live (particularly its erotic potency) at the *convivium* because men reclined with women—that is the relaxed and intimate posture of these events was socially marked as “erotic.”¹² It is, however,

Teresa Shaw, *The Burden of the Flesh: Fasting and Sexuality in Early Christianity* (Fortress, 1998), especially chapter two.

⁹ *Satyr.* 47.

¹⁰ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1984), 281. My use of Bakhtin's conception of the eating and boundaries is indebted to a paper delivered by Dr. Anna Miller, who gave me permission to cite it, entitled “Devouring Dialogue: Salome and Jesus in the Gospel of Thomas,” delivered at the SBL Bible and Bakhtin group 2006.

¹¹ Not only do satirical accounts, like Lucian's *Symposium*, end in fights, but records from associations (documented by Phil Harland) show a repeated concern that the behavior of guests be restrained and order maintained, including prohibitions against fights, see *Associations, Synagogues, and Congregations* (Fortress), 74-83.

¹² Roller, *Dining in Ancient Rome*, 116.

the addition of food and wine, the inherent ability of a meal and conversation to entangle participants' with one other that also serves to extend the perception, and possibility, of these meals as erotically charged and sites of social bonding.

Section 2:

Theoretical Directions and Corporeal Negotiations at the Meal

As Matthias Klinghardt and Dennis Smith have shown, the meal was constituted ideally as the space of equals and friends, but it was also a space that reinforced social distinctions and hierarchies.¹³ These seeming conflicting goals of equality and stratification, however, are precisely what made the meal a site of social experimentation, as Hal Taussig has recently argued. My discussion above takes its cue from Taussig's point that the meal, rather than obscuring the tensions between these two goals, becomes the space for their elaboration and for social experimentation. In conversation with ritual theorists like Catherine Bell, Victor Turner, and Jonathan Z. Smith, Taussig considers meals a space where social dichotomies, rich and poor, women and men, slave and free, are brought to bear in the shape and form of the meal.¹⁴ If slaves and women recline at the meal, we can read this occasion as an "experiment" concerning interactions between these groups in every day life, the total authority of a master over a slave, or man over his female lover.

Catherine Bell notes that ritualization carefully avoids ("misrecognizes") this potential through a refusal to put this power negotiation into discourse.¹⁵ (She indicates that discourse and language turn out to derive their meaning from the ritualization, rather than define or ascribe meaning of the ritual itself). Instead, the dynamic quality or potential of ritualization to rehearse as well as transform social and cultural schemes (often dichotomous ones—

¹³ cf. Taussig, *In the Beginning was the Meal*, 65.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 61.

¹⁵ Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford, 1992), 112-113.

sacred/profane, human/divine, above/below, or in the case of meals, men/women, slave/free, adult/child, bonding/hierarchy, shared commensality/corporeal boundary) derives from the fact that it is a “practice,” and as a “doing” inevitably shifts and reforms those schemes in the attempt to reproduce them.¹⁶ Bell importantly stresses that the body is the site in which ritualization occurs. Ritualization is a bodily pedagogy in which such schemes are rendered “objective reality,”¹⁷ but is also a means for the playing off of these schemes one against another.¹⁸

When meal participants moved, the power dynamics and social bonds that resulted from them did as well. People could shift to alternate couches, change seating arrangements and, thus, transform the nature of the relationships of those at the meal—for good or ill. For instance, in Plato’s *Symposium* the love-struck Alcibiades recalls a time when he climbed under the rough tunic of his teacher, Socrates, on the symposial couch.¹⁹ The source of his embarrassment at being rebuffed—“when I got up in the morning I had no more slept with Socrates...than if he’d been my father or elder brother!”²⁰—comes from the fact that he submitted himself to his teacher (thus taking a risk that this shift in status would “pay off” in making himself the teacher’s favorite), but that the intimate physical relationship implied in reclining below Socrates was denied. In snuggling Socrates, Alcibiades shifted the power dynamics between himself, a freeborn man and another freeborn man, a gamble that proved disastrous for him because of Socrates’ refusal of his affections.²¹

Thus we see across sympotic literature a tension over bonding and boundaries, and further, following Bell that this tension was enacted on bodies that negotiated and moved

¹⁶ Ibid, 110-111.

¹⁷ Ibid, 98-99.

¹⁸ Ibid, 116.

¹⁹ Plato *Symp.* 219a-c.

²⁰ Plato *Symp.* 219d (Hamilton and Cairns, 570).

²¹ In fact, Alcibiades hopes for an “exchange” of sex for learning.

through that ritual space. To sit and stand, recline or not, Roller notes, were corporeal acts marked with symbolic power in the meal precisely because they encoded and reflected these conflicting social schemes of power. But other sympotic literature, especially satire and comedy, goes even farther in addressing, or shining a light on the ways in which the sharing of food and drink, was also part of what made this tension between bonding and boundary especially fraught at the meal. In keeping with Bakhtin's arguments about Roman satire (what he calls *menippea* after Menippus' lost symposium), some authors enjoyed dramatizing and elaborating, the potency that the meal space had for eroticism and disruption: "Very characteristic for the *menippea* are scandal scenes, eccentric behavior, inappropriate speeches and performances, that is, all sorts of violations of the generally accepted and customary course of events...they make a breach in the stable, normal ("seemly") source of human affairs," Bakhtin writes. It is in short a "carnivalized" genre (as is sympotic literature in his view, though less fantastic in its form of experiment).²² Satire, and carnivalized literature generally, is defined by a penchant for "*free and familiar contact among people...a place for working out in a concretely sensuous, half-real and half-play-acted form, a new mode of interrelationship between individuals* [italics original]."²³

Bakhtin attunes us to the literary character of our texts probing me to explore why some texts become especially good vehicles for the rhetorical expression of "social experimentation" that Taussig identifies in the meal.²⁴ In the following I focus on literature that would largely fit Bakhtin's vision of the "carnivalized," literature that lifts up the very tensions that are enacted and reproduced in the space of the meal for the purposes of comedy and social commentary.

²² An interesting defense of Bakhtin's argument is the fact that status issues are often raised in the symposial context of the meal, for instance, Plut. *Quaest. Con.* 615c-619a, cf. Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist*, 56-57, and of course, a common issue that Jesus raises in meals in the gospels, see Luke 14:7-14 and John 13:1-20.

²³ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Edited and Translated by Caryl Emerson (Minnesota, 1984), 122-123.

²⁴ An enticing quote about early Christian literature appears here also: "In the Christian genres as in the *menippea*, enormous organizing significance is allotted to the testing of an idea and its carrier, testing by means of temptations and martyrdom..." Ibid, 135.

While the scenes that I consider below are highly informed by their generic styles, they are nonetheless extremely valuable instances in which authors' imagined how the meal could be the site for the negotiation of power—negotiations that occur in and through the body. What is more, since the carnivalized literary form expresses this experimentation through “free and open contact,” the presence of food and drink is an essential component of this literary form. The sharing of food and drink draws bodies into one another, into a shared world that they collectively imbibe. It is precisely in texts that highlight the excessive convergence of bodies at the meal—too much talking, too much food, too many slaves, too much emotion, too much singing, just plain too much—that the often “invisible,” though necessary, bodies of slaves and courtesans recede from the background and become central actors in the convivial scene.

Section 3:

Slaves, Intimacy, and Power at the Meal

Roman writers, like Seneca the Younger, consider the unhappy situation of slaves at the meal who are made to stand: “...their slightest murmur is repressed by the rod; they pay a huge penalty for the slightest breach of silence; all night long they have to stand around, hungry and dumb.”²⁵ Seneca worries especially over the “luckless,” heavily coiffed cupbearer—a master’s pet (*delicatus*)²⁶ who might be made to accompany his master to all such social occasions, to enhance the pleasure of evening—both that of his own master and the other guests.²⁷ He might fetch wine, but also recite poems and songs, be made to sit with other guests, to rub their feet with perfume and the like, and at the close of the meal likely perform sexual services desired by

²⁵ Sen *Ep.* 47.3 cited in John D’Arms, “Slaves at Roman *Convivia*,” in *Dining in a Classical Context*. Edited by William Slater (Michigan, 1991), 177.

²⁶ See John Pollini, “Slave-Boys for Sexual and Religious Service: Image of Pleasure and Devotion,” in *Flavian Rome: Culture, Image, Text*. Edited by A.J. Boyle and W.J. Dominik (Leiden 2003, 149-166).

²⁷ D’Arms, *Dining in a Classical Context*, 173.

his master.²⁸ “I pass over the flocks of luckless boys,” Seneca writes, “whom other physical abuses of the bed chamber (*cubiculi contumeliae*) await after the banquet is over.”²⁹ His dress, Seneca reports, was perhaps more degrading than these services: “...the server of wine has to dress like a woman and to wrestle with his advancing years...His body hair is plucked away, and he is kept beardless; he is forced to keep awake all night, dividing his time between his master’s drunkenness and his lust.”³⁰

The cup-bearer is often said to be an indicator of his master’s prestige, a coveted object of affection, whose presence at the meal was often a site of competition amongst the male diners.³¹ In this sense his role overlapped with that of the courtesan and other hired entertainers as object of physical pleasure (where other slaves served food, handled seating of guests, cleaning and crowd control).³² Certainly, Seneca reflects the rather precarious reality that these young boys faced, but in the interest of highlighting more complexly, and fully, the social realities they experienced, it is important to recall two points. First, as an elite diner, Seneca had little ability from his own experience to contemplate and, therefore, present a fuller picture of these “luckless boys.” Following the work of members of the seminar, the humiliating experience of dining considered by Seneca was not the only meal occasion to which the Roman slave was privy; meals in *collegia*, and perhaps early Christian communities and religious festivities, like those of the cult of Mithras and Eleusis, provided a chance for slaves to recline and to eat with friends (even if rare), and even to be served.³³

²⁸ See Roller, *Dining in Ancient Rome*, 21-22.

²⁹ Sen. *Ep.* 95.24, cited by Pollini, *Flavian Rome*, 157.

³⁰ Sen. *Ep.* cited by D’Arms, *Dining in a Classical Context*, 176.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² On the various kinds of slaves and entertainers, particularly at the meals of the elite, see D’Arms, *Dining in a Classical Context*, and Christopher Jones, “Dinner Theater,” in the same volume, 185-198.

³³ See Nancy Evans’ paper, “Did Slaves Ever Recline at Meals?” SBL meeting fall 2008 as well as Richard Ascough “Forms of Commensality in Greco-Roman Associations” SBL meeting fall 2005 who points out the presence of both slaves, and children, at association meals, and Taussig, *In the Beginning was the Meal*, 68.

More dynamic, however, is the possibility that the cup-bearer could use his desirability in ways that would secure his own enjoyment in the course of the meal, or at least, aid in the advancement of his status within his own household, or among other slaves. Key to my argument here is that the intimate setting of the meal provided perhaps one of the best opportunities for doing so. It was a space constituted around the production of intimacy and pleasure as well as the maintenance of social boundaries. The first goal meant that diners were somewhat vulnerable and choose to make themselves such, through taking in wine, through the sharing of food, through the exchange of affections (think back to the rebuffed Alcibiades). This tension, between vulnerability and the maintenance of hierarchies, demanded the slave not over-reach or transgress social distinctions in the meal. But the “success” of the banquet, more particularly of the *convivium*, presumed that he engage with the guests—that he would in a sense “join” them in the revelry. By the end of the night, he could be seated on the couch with his master, or another guest, “partaking” in the festivities with them.³⁴ The erotic excitement of the meal relied on this possibility of his sexuality (and that of other entertainers and slaves).

This erotic charge was a kind of power that was his to use in order to secure better living arrangements and social networks. Could he make himself the pet of a master with a more prosperous house? Could he negotiate better sleeping arrangements, new clothes, softer shoes, a promise of his manumission or that of others, a promise to be treated more kindly? Here we might imagine no end of a slave’s creativity in seeing through these goals (satirical sources certainly do not).³⁵ He might catch the eyes of guests, pour liberal or better wine for some than others, perhaps to get his master drunk in order to illustrate subtle affection for another diner. He could sing his master’s favorite tune and impress the guests. The stakes of this “game” would be high; indeed, literary sources are full of instances in which slaves transgress particular

³⁴ Again see Roller for literary examples, *Dining in Ancient Rome*, 21-22.

³⁵ One only need think of the numerous Plautine plays that feature a wily slave who outwits his master, who manages to negotiate his superiors to his own advantage; see also J. Albert Harrill, “The Domestic Enemy: A Moral Polarity of Household Slaves in Early Christian Apologies and Martyrdoms,” in *Early Christian Families in Context: An Interdisciplinary Dialogue*. Edited by David Balch and Carolyn Osiek (Eerdmans, 2003), 231-254.

protocols, when they disrupt the pleasure of guests and are severely punished for it.³⁶ (Yet Roman sources also are not kind to masters' whose use extensive, corporeal punishment is a negative mark of his excessive passion). But we should not doubt that such negotiations were part of the cup-bearers' experience, and that he was keenly aware of the opportunities and explosive dangerous that the meal scene entailed.

To give just one example, I return to Trimalchio's feast in the *Satyricon* in which slaves and entertainers presence at the meal is a major theme of this chaotic, over-abundant, and excessively carnivalesque meal. In keeping with the satirical genre,³⁷ in the *Satyricon* the "grotesque body" appears on nearly every page; bodies do not retain their limits on this occasion: diners crash into each other, fights erupt, slaves keep dropping things, people scurry in and out. But most dramatically, slaves and guests simply cannot stop from colliding into each other. In one scene, in fact, an acrobat actually collapses onto the host, Trimalchio, who in this case wins his freedom.³⁸ Indeed, Trimalchio, the host (and importantly a former slave), cannot stop interacting with and calling attention to their presence. At one point, after a "troupe of slaves" drops hors d'oeuvres, he announces that new tables will be set before each guest, "so that these filthy slaves won't make us so hot by crowding past us (*Obiter et putidissimi servi minorem nobis aestum frequentia sua facient*)."³⁹ Slaves are repeatedly engaged in conversation and made to account for themselves. They are in short, far from the "quiet and silent" slaves experienced by Seneca.

The genre, of course, is not aimed to give us a record of a social occasion, but insofar as satire functions to highlight and use the inherent tensions—between bonding and boundaries, hierarchy and equality in particular—as the source of its humor, this meal is especially telling for considering the ways in which slaves, as ritual actors, could negotiate the space of the

³⁶ See D'Arms, *Dining in a Classical Context*, for examples, 175.

³⁷ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 114-119 and on the *Satyricon* in particular, see 133-134.

³⁸ *Satyr.* 54.

³⁹ *Satyr.* 34. Translation from D'Arms, 177. Critical text from the Latin Library.

meal.⁴⁰ In this meal slaves are twice saved from elaborate punishments by pleading for help to the guests; they are made the object of a scuffle between a husband and wife at the banquet; and their antics result in two occasions in their immediate manumission—the acrobatic slave mentioned and another young slave, a cup-bearer, dressed as Dionysius who sings his master's (rather abhorrent) poetry in a "shrill soprano" while feeding guests grapes from his basket. In freeing him Trimalchio demonstrates the effusive, and somewhat unpredictable, nature of his hospitality, but such acts were important elements of the successful festive meal, of the entertainment it promised its guests.⁴¹ Trimalchio's feast imagines a "free and familiar contact" between slaves and guests, between also women and men at the meal (Fortunata, Trimalchio's wife chastises him and he, her), which bears little resemblance I would submit to meals that were part of Roman experience.⁴² Yet as a counter-narrative to the one reported by Seneca, such literary scenes dislodge the notion that slaves easily fit themselves, and their bodies, into the rigid space allotted it in the elite ideology of slavery. The convivial meal was one occasion in which the status of slave as simply a "body" to be put to work by its master was challenged, its limits' tested, in ways that could (so Petronius imagines) dramatically re-constitute the power dynamics of the household itself.

Section 4:

The Case of the Courtesan: Negotiating Male Desire at the Meal

⁴⁰ On using the *Satyricon* to reconstruct a social history of the meal, see Jones, *Dining in a Classical Context*, 185.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 197.

⁴² I may be overly suspicious in this regard, as Jones, and I am sure others, see in this feast a record of the kinds of antics and theatricality a host might provide for his guests, see *Dining in a Classical Context* (passim).

Another marginalized figure at festive meals was the prostitute, or hired courtesan.⁴³ Her presence, along with other hired entertainers, flute-girls, acrobats, and the like, brought with it the promise of sexual pleasure. Satire, elegy, and comedy all reflect the fact that inherent tension between the courtesan and her client might emerge at the meal. Of course such scenes are again informed by the standard rules of their respective genres. The courtesan's cruelty or vulnerability are often overly determined (as I will elaborate below), yet these generic depictions of the girl, her lovers, and her pimp rely on and play with audience expectations of social power—even if they sometimes “mask” them for dramatic effect. Thus, looking at this literature at how the erotic tensions and dangers that faced the courtesan (and in the case of elegy, her lover) often emerge in the space of the festive meal reflects neatly the insights offered by Taussig, and by Bakhtin, that that meal was precisely a dynamic space of social experimentation and (following Bakhtin especially) intimate, even volatile, bonding. In what follows, then I look briefly at three different sources—in conversation with recent work by Sharon James on elegy—to consider how the courtesan might have negotiated the space of the meal by means of a subtle *corporeal* “choreography” that the convivial space allowed and encouraged.

I begin with Lucian of Samosata's *Dialogue of the Courtesans* (*Hetairikoi Dialogoi*) (2nd c. CE) written as exchanges between a series of courtesans, which pokes fun at the tenuous status of the courtesan and her mother (usually also her *lena*, pimp). In Lucian's dialogues the courtesan emerges as a calculating, deceptive creature whose life is marked by poverty, instability, fear, and competition. The comic element in these dialogues rests on showing how the courtesan is forced to manipulate her lovers. Recently Kate Gilhuly has argued that Lucian uses the courtesan to think about and map his own complex identity as a Syrian, Greek-educated rhetor in the Empire. The courtesan for Lucian, as for Atheneaus in his *Deiphosophistae*,

⁴³ On the debates about the status of the courtesan in the Roman Empire, see my paper last year, and

is a figure who stands for an archaic Greek past once glorious,⁴⁴ but in Lucian, Gilhuly explains: “the *hetaira* can function as an allegory for contemporary rhetoric signifying its degraded relation to its classical precursor.”⁴⁵ His rhetorical agenda connects the reader and the courtesan: we are let inside her world, privy to its complex, and even ridiculous schemes, necessitated by her fickle clients, whose world she is never fully a part. It is a world not unlike that of the Syrian-born, Greek educated, colonized orator, Lucian.

Repeatedly Lucian’s suggests that courtesans at the meal must strive to be that object of pleasure their patrons’ demand. This view appears most centrally in *Dialogue 6* (which I considered in my paper last year) in which a mother informs her daughter how to be a successful courtesan. Her advice includes an exacting corporeal performance: she is not to drink much, laugh loud, or eat. In a sense she was to subject her to the desires of her client, to sublimate and hide her own (making herself, we might say, a “philosophical” body and not a grosteque one). (Indeed, this *Dialogue*, as Gilhuly shows, is a fascinating commentary on the corporeal demands also placed on the orator who must please his audience, make his body and his speech what they want).⁴⁶ The meals in these *Dialogues* between fraught scenes where much is at stake, where a courtesan discovers that her lover is no longer enamored with her. In *Dialogue 12*, a courtesan named Joessa, decries her own stupidity at not charging her lover Lysias more at the beginning of their relationship because now he has lost interest, and will not compensate her, a fact that emerges in the course of the meal. Joessa explains:

...you’ve been having jokes with Lycena, before my very eyes, to annoy me, or other times praising Magidium, the harp-girl, when we were dining together...the way you kept on making signs to Pyrallis, and would lift up your cup to her, when you drank,

⁴⁴ On the prevalence of courtesans and prostitutes at the meal, see my paper last year “Slavery and the Sex Trade at the Meal” and also Laura McClure, *Courtesans at the Table* (Routledge, 2003), 1-26, which considers the various classes of female prostitutes and entertainers who might have attended classical and Roman meals.

⁴⁵ Gilhuly, “Bronze for Gold,” 89.

⁴⁶ See Gilhuly, “Bronze for Gold,” 85 and 90 on the similarity of orator and courtesan as illuminated in other rhetorical literature.

and whisper in the slave's ear, when you returned the cup, telling him not to give anyone a drink unless Pyrallis asked for one!⁴⁷

Joessa's complaints—which also include Lysias' attempts to throw apple cores across the room to land between another courtesan's breasts!—not only reveal the fickle (and crass) nature of her lovers, but also of the ways in which the meal itself provided countless opportunities to incite her jealousy: toasts, games, sharing of cups and the “best” wine, were all strategies that her patron could use to manipulate her. The meal, then, was a means to reconfigure the nature of their relationship in which she lost control over him and her financial ties were threatened. But such machinations were double-edged, as Plautus and the elegists reveal.

The most desirable companion for a male symposiast (if Ovid is to be believed) was the *docta puella*, the learned girl. In her recent study, *Learned Girls and Male Persuasion*, James has argued (a point about which I am now persuaded) that this figure is a sexually available, freed or free woman, without a husband. In other words, she is a courtesan though for various generic reasons the elegists often carefully mask her liminal status in order to render her an appropriate, indeed coveted, object of their desire.⁴⁸ Moreover, poets obscure the financial nature of their relationship precisely as a mechanism of sexual persuasion—to insist that the girl give her lover his due, for free, to give him total sexual access to her.⁴⁹ In elegiac poetry, the *puella*, the object of the poet's affections, comes off as a cruel taskmaster who refuses her lover's requests, who begs consistently for gifts in lieu of poetry.⁵⁰ These women are of course fictional characters whose actions proceed in keeping with the demands of the genre, but as James has shown, these poets many rhetorical attempts to persuade, cajole, shame, and control the object of their fictive lust reveals poignantly the threat that an elite male could experience over the

⁴⁷ Luc. *Dial.* 12 (311-312 LCL 7, 434-436).

⁴⁸ James, *Learned Girls and Male Pleasure: Gender and Reading in Roman Love Elegy*, 35-68.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 72-74.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 123-128.

inability to possess totally the object of his desire, the courtesan.⁵¹ This tension arises in the space of the meal once more suggests how potent that ritual occasion was for highlighting and negotiating networks of power.

One of the most humorous examples of such negotiations comes from Plautus' play the *Asinaria*. In this play, Diabolus, a hopeful patron of the courtesan, Philaenium (who ideally wants to be with the young Argyrippus), produces a "contract" for the girl, together with the "parasite." Telling here is not simply, as James notes, that the contract betrays a comic attempt to control the courtesan, but how such control is enacted corporeally. That is, every move that Philaenium might make, moves that could disrupt, change, and undo the power that Diabolus' "should hold" over her (by virtue of their financial arrangement over her). I quote a few sections, which pertain to a convivial meal setting. The parasite reads the contract to Diabolus, as follows:

si quem alium aspexit, caeca continuo siet. tecum una potet, aequae pocla potitet: abs ted accipiat, tibi propinet, tu bibas, ne illa minus aut plus quam tu sapiat.' ..neque illaec ulli pede pedem homini premat, cum surgat, neque <cum> in lectum inscendat proximum, neque cum descendat inde, det cuiquam manum: spectandum ne cui anulum det neque roget. talos ne cuiquam homini admoveat nisi tibi. cum iaciat, 'te' ne dicat: nomen nominet... membri commoveat quicquam in tenebris.'

If she spies another man, she must immediately close her eyes. She must drink only with you, and match you glass for glass. She must receive the glass only from you and toast you, then you drink; so that she will have no more or less than you have...she may not touch any man's foot with her own foot. When she stands up, and when she sits down on the next couch, or gets up from it, she must not give her hand to anyone. She must not give her ring to anyone for looking at, or ask for his; she must pass the dice to no man but you...also, if the lamp goes out, she must not move even a single limb in the darkness.⁵²

⁵¹

⁵² Plaut. *Asin.* 765-785; cited by James, 229-230.

Such detailed instructions derive their comic effect from the live tension that this woman cannot ultimately be controlled in the way that Diabolus' wishes. He is buying her company, and not her affection, her desire, which remains always her secret, and within her control. Thus, the contract aims to make Philaenium's body (at least in the space of the meal) register a desire, or at least total loyalty, to him alone.

The attempt is comic precisely because the convivial space offered a cunning courtesan important opportunities to negotiate relationships and affiliations for herself, and to do so with the subtle manipulation of her body as well as the implicit intimacy that comes from sharing food and drink with others. (Indeed, one repeated theme in Lucian, Plautus, and Ovid is the sharing of wine from the same cup as a particular act of intimacy—an act that like reclining together implied erotic affiliation). The poet Ovid uses a very similar scenario to what we see in the *Asinaria*, in *Amores* 1.4, but in this instance advising the courtesan how to “dupe” her man (*vir*) and demonstrate her affections for her poet-lover by intentionally partaking in subtle corporeal signs:

*verba superciliis sine voce loquentia dicam;
verba leges digitis, verba notata mero.
cum tibi succurret Veneris lascivia nostrae,
purpureas tenero pollice tange genas.
siquid erit, de me tacita quod mente queraris,
pendeat extrema mollis ab aure manus.*

Voiceless, I'll speak eloquent words with eyebrows:
my fingers will write words, words traced out in wine.
When the lasciviousness of our lovemaking occurs to you,
touch your radiant cheek with a delicate thumb.
If it's some silent complaint against me you have in mind,
shadow your earlobe with a tender hand...⁵³

⁵³ Ov. *Am.* 1.4.19-24. Critical text from the Latin Library on-line.

Both Plautus and Ovid indicate just how calculated a courtesan's corporeal negotiations could be, negotiations that extend much beyond one's posture at the meal, sitting, standing, reclining. James concludes that texts such as these ones reveal how the courtesan might choreograph her evening, balancing the various male anxieties of the lovers' with whom she was involved or wished to be.⁵⁴ But in the context of our seminar, what is enlightening about such texts is the ways in which they foreground the corporeal nature of the courtesan's strategy, the manipulation of intimacy and bonding that could potentially re-map the social networks in which she traveled: in a positive direction, securing favors, gifts, affiliations,⁵⁵ or negatively, provoking jealousy, anger, even violence. The stakes of this game, as they were for the slave, high, but that did not prohibit Roman authors' from imagining how she played it, and I suspect, they do not stop the cunning courtesan from engaging in it in the course of the meal itself.

Concluding Thoughts

This paper has explored literature that fits Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalized in order to think more closely about how marginalized persons, in this case the slave and the courtesan, negotiate the inherent tensions around bonding and hierarchy that made convivial meals dynamic in the Roman world, a space of contestation as well as construction of social categories and status. The erotic charge of the meal, constituted not only through the meal setting and diners' relaxed posture, but also the sharing of food and drink, gave cup-bearers and courtesan a potential power otherwise denied them in daily life.⁵⁶ I am aware, too, that this potential power brought with it a potential vulnerability as well—indeed, if these people were seen

⁵⁴ Ibid, 241.

⁵⁵ On the elegiac rival, *vir* see Ibid, 98-104.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 72.

transgressing at the meal, were caught in the very negotiations require of them, the result might be deadly.⁵⁷

Satirical literature then offers an important counter-weight to the austere (and utopian) meals we find in literature like Plutarch's *Banquet of the Seven Sages*. In practice these texts suggest meals could foreground deep tensions and anxieties about the maintenance of social hierarchies and the nature of intimacy between diners inside and outside of the meal. This tension was particularly live when the meal was inside the home, where the network of power that ordered daily life could suddenly shift, and also where the corporeal boundaries of diners were extended in the acts of eating and drinking. A meal was an event that unfolded over the course of an evening, wine was poured, food consumed (sometime rapaciously), entertainers appeared, slaves ran in and out, conversations developed, diners, slaves, children, entertainers, dogs, and uninvited guests, inevitably moved their bodies, some more dramatically than others, and pressed their bodies into others—eating, sweating, sneezing, burping, urinating, laughing, talking, simply touching (compassionately, erotically, and even violently)—bodies collide and makes themselves known to one another variously throughout the course of the evening to respond to the dynamics of a festive, social occasion. The ritual character of the meal was a means for constraining and putting to work this dynamic aspect of sharing in a festive banquet, and the texts that I consider here remind us that slaves and courtesans were also ritual actors who partook in them.

⁵⁷ In fact D'Arms suggests, following slave narratives from the American south, that the domestic slave could fall more under the scrutiny of his or her master, and presumptively, suffer greater physical forms of intrusion and surveillance, see *Dining in a Classical Context*, 179-180.

