

Trimalchio's Imperial Pretense

COMMENT 3 & TRANSLATION, HPLA 7010

CHRIS MILLER – 1806060

17 NOVEMBER, 2019

1,426 WORDS

At various points in the *Cena Trimalchionis*, Petronius alludes to a few events of imperial life, which he has Trimalchio attempt to imitate. John Bodel describes these attempts as "incidental parallels" that comically highlight Trimalchio's aspirations, and offer a bit of "gentle teasing by the emperor's *arbiter elegantiae*."¹ However, the contrast between Trimalchio and the emperor, when examined more closely, also serves a literary purpose. By juxtaposing some aspect of an emperor's practice with Trimalchio's less than convincing imitation, Petronius illustrates the ridiculousness of the freedman's ambitions, and underscores his inability to rise above his station, despite having the means to do so.

One of the most obvious parallels between imperial extravagance and Trimalchio's *cena* is the dining room with hidden compartments behind the ceiling panels. Suetonius, describing Nero's *domus aurea* says, "The dining rooms had rotating ivory ceiling panels and were fitted with pipes, so that flowers and perfume could be showered from above" (*cenationes laqueatae tabulis eburneis versatilibus, ut flores, fistulatis, ut unguenta desuper spargerentur* 31.2). As a member of Nero's literary circle, it is likely that Petronius saw this room. Working from that example, he has Trimalchio attempt to impress his guests with a similarly showy trick ceiling: out of the ceiling, a large hoop bearing gifts of perfume and crowns descends to his guests (*diductis lacunaribus subito circulus ingens [de cupa videlicet grandi excussus] demittitur, cuius per totum orbem coronae aureae cum alabastris unguenti pendebant* 60.3). But the opening of the ceiling panels creates such a noise that the dining room shakes and Encolpius is terrified that an acrobat has fallen through the ceiling and crashed to the ground (*repente lacunaria sonare coeperunt totumque triclinium intremuit. Consternatus ego exsurrexi et timui, ne per tectum petauristarius aliquis descenderet* 60.1-2). From Encolpius' reaction, readers can see that this

¹ Bodel, 1999, p. 43.

ceiling contains a frightful shock rather than a delightful surprise. In this way, Trimalchio's ceiling falls short of the impressive elegance of Nero's dining room. Indeed, Encolpius' reaction must have been a stark contrast with reactions to Nero's ceiling: while the emperor's ceiling was criticized by Suetonius for being ostentatious, it was admittedly impressive enough to serve as an example of Nero's grand architectural ambitions. Trimalchio's ceiling, on the other hand, is merely comically frightening. The contrast between his attempt to imitate imperial finery and the result he achieves illustrates Trimalchio's ineptness: though he has the money to install a surprise in the dining room ceiling for his guests, Trimalchio, unlike Nero, fails to pull it off convincingly.

We should not see the trick ceiling as merely a coincidental or chance echo of imperial practice, because Petronius has Trimalchio make other attempts to match the Caesars. Suetonius says that Augustus, during holiday feasts, was known to give out gifts with double entendres attached to them: "Meanwhile, he gave nothing but rough cloth, sponges, rakes, tongs and other such things, but with hidden and ambiguous names" (*interdum nihil praeter cilicia et spongias et rutabula et forpices atque alia id genus titulis obscuris et ambiguis*, Suet. Aug. 75.1).² We see Trimalchio playing similar word games with his guest-gifts, but his attempts amount to bad puns rather than clever double-meanings.³ Although his double entendres draw appreciative laughter from the freedman guests, their appreciation of his humour serves to underscore its lowbrow nature.⁴ On the other hand, Ascyltos, being a better educated and more sophisticated guest, finds

² Although Suetonius wrote after Petronius' time, it is entirely plausible that the arbiter elegantiae had access to the same sources Suetonius did.

³ Rankin, 1962, pp. 135 & 137, calls Trimalchio's wordplay "unsophisticated puns," and says the juxtaposition of words creates "chaos instead of the hoped-for contrasts." Even the many puns that Encolpius does not report to the reader were probably just as bad or worse: "...Petronius manages to convey to the reader the suspicion that the unrecorded witticisms were even more imbecile than the sample which he has given..." Smith, 1975, p. 154.

⁴ Plaza, 2000, p. 130, says these "buffoonish" and "non-aristocratic" jokes attest to the type of humour that appeal to his freedman guests.

Trimalchio's wordplay so ridiculous that he mocks his host, and laughs till he cries (*Ceterum Ascylos, intemperantis licentiae, cum omnia sublati manibus eluderet et usque ad lacrimas rdieret...*57.1). Moreover, Trimalchio's wordplay, coming immediately after his discourse on literature, creates an unexpected twist: after the discussion on literature builds up Trimalchio's apparent erudition, his wordplay, (like his poetry in other parts of the *Cena*), undermines his attempts to showcase his knowledge. Thus, by having him attempt to bring wordplay into his dinner party, Petronius can suggest a comparison between Trimalchio and the emperor Augustus. And once again, Trimalchio's attempts to measure up to the highest levels of Roman society serve only to reveal his lowly character.

There is, however, one area in which Trimalchio is in the same league as an emperor. In his discussion of Claudius' dinner parties, Suetonius tells us: "It is said that he even considered an edict, by which he would give permission to break wind, either noisily or quietly, at the table, after he learned of a certain person who, out of modesty, risked his health by his continence" (*dicitur etiam meditatus edictum, quo ueniam daret flatum crepitumque uentris in conuiuio emittendi, cum periclitatum quendam prae pudore ex continentia repperisset*, 32.3). Likewise, Trimalchio tells his guests that not only doctors, but Jupiter himself, forbid continence for the sake of modesty, (47.4-5), and he goes so far as saying that he would not object to anyone easing himself in the dining room itself (*Nec tamen in triclinio ullum vetui facere quod se iuuet*, 47.5).⁵ The guests' need to drown their embarrassed laughter in their drinks clearly shows a lack of tact on Trimalchio's part. Nero was openly contemptuous of his predecessor Claudius,⁶ so by

⁵ Admittedly, the Latin could also mean "But I would not forbid anyone in the dining room doing whatever helps him" rather than "I would not forbid anyone doing, even in the dining room, whatever helps him." Given the context, however, the latter interpretation seems more likely: Trimalchio's emphasis is on the need to overcome modesty, because restraining bodily functions is detrimental to one's health.

⁶ Suet. Nero, 33.1

portraying Trimalchio as sharing that emperor's sympathies on the most vulgar of topics, Petronius sets the wealthy freedman in a similarly derisive light. So, in this instance at least, Trimalchio, whether he intended to or not, is able to realise his imperial pretensions, but only because they are so base and risible.

Whatever "gentle teasing" of the emperor Nero sees in Trimalchio's behavior, there also seems to be a bit more involved. Juxtaposed against the imperial standards of Augustus and Nero, Trimalchio looks foolish and low-brow. When he tries to impress his guests with a trick ceiling, or amuse them with wordplay, Trimalchio's attempts come up wanting. It is only when he is compared to Claudius that Trimalchio is on the same level as an emperor. But in that instance, the teasing here is not gentle; rather Petronius uses a vulgar topic to draw the connection between Claudius and Trimalchio, which makes them both appear crass. (Given his open derision of Claudius, this portrayal could hardly have been unwelcome to Nero, and, one can imagine, might even have enhanced Petronius' standing in Nero's court). These comparisons, then, help define Trimalchio as a character, and help to show him as a base and ridiculous figure.

Works Cited

Bodel, J. (1999) 'The Cena Trimalchionis', in Hofmann, H. (ed.) *Latin Fiction: The Latin Novel in Context*.

London: Routledge.

Courtney, E. (2001) *A Companion to Petronius*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Plaza, M. (2000) *Laughter and derision in Petronius' Satyricon: A literary study*. Stockholm: Almqvist &

Wiksell.

Rankin, H.D. (1962) 'Saturnalian wordplay and apophoreta in Satyricon 56', *Classica et Mediaevalia*, 23,

pp. 134-142.

Smith, M.S. (1975) *Petronii Arbitri: Cena Trimalchionis*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Cena Trimalchionis 48 - Translation

And indeed, the cook, warned of his master's power, went to the kitchen, the dish leading the way. Trimalchio, however, looked back at us with a mild expression, and said, "If the wine is not to your liking, I will change it. You ought to make sure you enjoy it. By the kindness of the gods, I do not buy it, but whatever makes your mouth water now, is grown on that suburban estate that I was, up to this point, not aware of. It is said to border on Tarracina and Tarentum. Now I would like to join Sicily to my little estate, so that, when it pleases me to go to Africa, I can sail through my own property. But you, Agamemnon, tell me, what dispute did you declaim upon today? For, even though I do not plead cases, I have learned to read and write for use at home. And so that you should not think I disdain my studies, know that I have two libraries, one Greek, the other Latin. So tell me, if you please, the topic of your speech." When Agamemnon said, "A poor man and rich man were at odds with each other—" Trimalchio said, "What is a poor man?" Agamemnon replied, "How witty," then explained some debate or other. At once, Trimalchio said, "This, if factual, is not a topic for debate; if it is not factual, it is nothing."