

The Principate of Trimalchio: *Imperium* in the *Satyrical* of Petronius the Arbiter

Richard Ciołek, '20

Trimalchio, the eminent host of the *Cena* in the *Satyrical* of Petronius, seems to control the proceedings of his guests and household with autocratic authority. With rich diction and a sweeping array of allusions, Petronius seems to, thus, portray the power wielded by the balding host as akin to that of the Roman emperors'. Yet, Trimalchio's handling of his power is depicted as irrational, impulsive, and wholly improper. This depiction, therefore, suggests that Trimalchio may have been a vessel for Petronius to critique the principate and the specific mishandling of power on the part of Nero. Indeed, it is nearly impossible to divorce the *Satyrical* from the age of Nero as there appear to be a significant number of allusions to his reign. However, allusions to the reigns of other emperors suggest that Petronius may have intended to critique the institution of the principate itself. After assessing of Nero's reign, his handling of imperium, and a discussion of Petronius's audience in order to provide context for the climate in which Petronius wrote in, this essay will establish that Petronius: employs a parlance to describe Trimalchio that conveys his almost absolute power over his household; colors Trimalchio's threats of execution as frivolous, thereby establishing grounds for abuse of *imperium*; and develops several motifs emblematic of Imperial authority to portray Trimalchio's power as synonymous with that of the emperor.

Nero's Rome Assessed

After the so called *Quinquennium Neronis* (54-59 B.C.E.), the reign of Nero is characterized by murder, paranoia, financial mismanagement, and, according to the conservative senator, cultural degradation. *Maius imperium*, wielded by the *princeps* and exercised through control of the military, granted Nero the authority to conduct himself in this manner.¹ *Imperium*, in its most literal sense, is the power to command. Roman domination of the Mediterranean was based on the concept that provincials would submit to the command of magistrates

subservient to the senate during the Republic, and to the emperor and his subordinates during the principate. Control over life and death, specifically the authority to condemn a Roman citizen, represented the ultimate exercise of *imperium*.² *Maius imperium* (literally “greater command”) gave the emperors *imperium* that superseded that of other Roman commanders, and allowed this power to be wielded within the city of Rome itself.³ Therefore, Nero would have been able to exercise command over his citizens in a reckless manner without any legal challenge to his authority.

Thus, Nero and his indiscriminate condemnation of various Roman citizens to death represent the absolute abuse of *imperium*. Suetonius reports in his *Life of Nero* that Nero killed his aunt for seemingly no reason other than to take her estates (34.5). He also writes that the Emperor had Antonia, the daughter of Claudius, killed on fabricated charges of rebellion because she would not marry him. (35.3) These indiscriminate killings of Roman citizens, many of whom were members of the Imperial family and court, likely would have alarmed senators and high ranking officials, including Petronius. Nero’s severity and injustices provided context for his own condemnation in literature—both covertly by his contemporaries, and openly by later writers.

Although criticizing Nero in such a political climate was dangerous, Petronius’s subtleties and careful selection of his audience ensured him a platform to mock him. Walsh notes that the *Satyrice* is often suggested to be a type of “court entertainment,” and had nuanced this view by asserting that courtiers who were present at such readings would have been small circles of Petronius’s trusted confidants. Walsh argues that Nero would not take criticism lightly, and is thus these small gatherings needed to be constrained.⁴ Therefore, despite the present dangers of criticizing Nero, it is not unreasonable to infer that Petronius was still able to include critiques of Nero or the principate in his work.

The Parlance of Autocracy

There is a constant pattern of words which convey and establish the power and tyranny of Trimalchio. Frequently, Trimalchio’s authority is made evident through his statements.

For instance, the very first words the Roman reader would hear from Trimalchio's mouth insinuate at his autocratic control over the *Cena*. Trimalchio, having entered the *triclinium*, apologizes for his absence, and states he decided to finally arrive "lest my long absence be a delay for you all any longer" (§33). Aside from implying that Trimalchio's absence delays all festivities, demonstrating his central role in the *Cena*, Petronius's use of "long absence" is rather peculiar. The Latin of this phrase, *absentivus*, is its only appearance in extant Latin. This suggests that it would have been a rather rare word, and underscores that Petronius made a deliberate selection. *Absentivus* is stronger than a similar word such as *absens*, and more accurately means "absent for a long time." Therefore, Petronius's intended audience, would infer that Trimalchio could keep his guests waiting for a long duration of time. Such an observation suggests the dominion Trimalchio has over his guests and household. Trimalchio later goes on to say to his guests "permit the games to, nonetheless, be finished" (§33.2). The mood of "permit" here is odd. It cannot be a command because it is indicative, yet, in the context of the passage, the phrase appears to be a command. Thus, Trimalchio is either stating a fact—that is, the guests have already given up their own power over themselves to Trimalchio and he is merely declaring what is to come—or he is asking a rhetorical question. If it is the latter, he doesn't seem to give the guests much time to respond as the board games are immediately brought in. Either way, Trimalchio is undoubtedly in command. In Latin, *permitto* may also mean "give in" or "surrender." Thus, Trimalchio is indicating that his guests must surrender to him. Petronius's choice of both the verb and its mood subtlety suggests Trimalchio's supremacy.

In another situation, Trimalchio's power brought to life by another's description of him, and is not quite as subtle. Later in the *Cena*, when Trimalchio stands up to relieve himself, Encolpius, states, "we obtained our freedom without the tyrant" (§41.9). Petronius stresses Trimalchio's authority in the use of the verb "obtain", the meaning of which insinuates that Encolpius and the rest of the guests do not free themselves, rather are granted freedom momentarily. "Tyrant", a word highly

suggestive of autocracy, further underscores the scope of Trimalchio's power, and hints at his abuses.

The Abuse of *Imperium*

At several points in the *Cena*, Trimalchio threatens his slaves with executions over trivial matters. These passages seem to suggest a connection between many of the senseless killings carried out during Nero's reign, and Petronius's wording accents their absurdity and hollowness, thereby critiquing the *Princeps*' mishandling of *imperium*.

One may note this when Trimalchio orders a slave boy who dropped a cup to "quickly" be killed "because [he] you are stupid" (§52). "Quickly" suggests the pointlessness of the affair as it indicates that Trimalchio himself concedes to the frivolity of the matter (and would, thus, want to get it over quickly). It also implies that Trimalchio has taken the decision without much thought, an indication that Trimalchio is exploiting his ultimate power. "Stupid," moreover, also highlights the pointlessness as that Latin word, *nugax*, is literally defined as "frivolous." Thus, Trimalchio, again, concedes that this is a pointless affair. Something of note is that Petronius seems to directly connect this episode with the Julio-Claudians. An anecdote told just prior to this incident by Trimalchio in which the Emperor killed a craftsman of an indescribable glass cup (§52). The location of this anecdote and its similarity to Trimalchio's outburst make it unlikely that its inclusion was an accident. However, the emperor referred to in the story was Tiberius not Nero. This indicant, may then, either be a censure of all the Julio-Claudians, or perhaps Petronius used Tiberius as a vessel to attack Nero (as Tacitus seems to criticize Hadrian in the *Annals* whilst describing the reign of Nero).⁵

Trimalchio's reckless use of *imperium* is further implied in a later passage, where he has one of his slaves display his funerary garbs. He commands his slave to ensure that "moths and mice [not] touch this [cloak]" (§77.7), otherwise "I will burn you alive" (§77.7). Petronius's diction here amplifies how absurd the punishment is. Mice and moths are rather small and petty creatures, and perhaps allude to the small and petty nature of the crime (if it even is one). Moreover, Trimalchio threatens death if

the smallest of animals merely “touch” his garb. In having Trimalchio specify his method of execution, Petronius juxtaposes a rather meaningless crime with a draconian punishment which highlights the absurdity of the interaction. Trimalchio threatening to immolate his slave also establishes a direct connection with the Nero, who is infamous for his persecution and immolation of Christians. For instance, Tacitus reports in the *Annals* after the burning of Rome, many Christians were affixed to flaming crosses (44). Such a reference would fit in well with the rest of the *Satyrica*. Rose contends that, while many of the allusions in the novel are uncertain, most of them refer to events extant in our literature between 64-65 A.D.⁶ The burning of Rome, in 64 A.D. and the subsequent persecution of Christians in the same year fit in nicely with his assertion. Petronius, thus, not only demonstrates Trimalchio’s absurd abuse of *imperium*, but also directly implicates the Emperor.

Imperial Ascendancy: Emblems of Power

While there are certain instances where Petronius alludes to the power of the Caesars in various anecdotes, he links Trimalchio’s power to Imperial Power through avid use of motifs. Petronius used specific symbols which were emblematic of the Emperor’s authority, typically in passages regarding Trimalchio. In this way, Petronius establishes a direct connection between the *princeps* and Trimalchio.

For instance, the entrance of the *triclinium* is decorated with several objects which convey a sense of majesty and power held by the Roman Emperor. The entrance was rather impressive, and our narrator was “particularly amazed” (§30). He then goes on to note that, “on the posts of the dining room were *fasces*” (§30). The *fasces*, which was a bundle of rods around an axe that symbolized a Roman magistrate’s literal power to condemn, appears to be suggestive of the Caesars. Magistrates other than the emperor held *fasces*, and those on Trimalchio’s wall are not described with the typical imperial laurel. However, given the several instances of Trimalchio threatening death to members of his household, and the *fasces* being a symbol closely associated with capital punishment, they seem highly suggestive of Nero’s power. Petronius’s court

position and the variety of other references to Nero make it rather unlikely that they refer to someone else.

Encolpius continues his description of the wall; he describes a “bronze ram of a ship” (§30). This, again, may serve as an allusion to the Julio-Claudians. Schmeling contends that the rams are perhaps supposed to represent the “naval victory” of Trimalchio’s success as a merchant.⁷ However, there may be another reading to the ship’s rams. Following the Battle of Actium, Augustus constructed a war memorial at his command post in Nikopolis. This memorial still exists, and in an influential study, Murray concludes that a series of sockets on the memorial would fit the bronze rams of ships.⁸ Zanker contends that the use of beaks of ships as a symbol of Augustus’ victory would have been popular, for it is an easy to produce image. He cites multiple marble sculptures of rams outside of Rome.⁹ Thus, following Actium, if a ship’s ram was on display in cities across the Empire, it might have become a symbol easily identifiable with Augustus and the power he wielded. As the *Satyrica* was likely read to close associates of Petronius, they would, because of their position, be surrounded by displays of the emperors’ military victory and glory. Thus, it seems plausible that Petronius’s audience would have associated ship’s rams specifically with Augustus, his victory, and (most importantly) his power; it serves to create a direct connection between the power wielded by Trimalchio and the *princeps*.

Though many of these motifs allude to the concept of the *maius imperium* held by the *princeps* rather than Nero specifically, it seems unlikely that Petronius had another emperor in mind. Walsh has concluded that there are simply too many parallels between Trimalchio and Nero for the plethora of allusions to the Emperor to be incidental.¹⁰ Rose seems to agree with this assessment.¹¹ If this is indeed the case, then it would also seem unlikely that symbols of imperial authority would not be referring to Nero. Especially the *fasces*, which, coupled with Trimalchio’s utter abuse of execution, seems to parody Nero’s *imperium* perfectly. Furthermore, had Petronius intended to criticize another Emperor, he wouldn’t have to be nearly as clever and subtle in the matter. Seneca’s *Apocolocyntosis* is proof enough that an author, especially a trusted confidant of

Nero, could explicitly criticize a dead emperor (even if they were deified). Thus, the motifs are most likely referring to Nero's own mishandling of power.

Conclusion

Petronius employs diction and symbolism which suggest a direct criticism of Nero and the principate. The images of the ship's ram and *fasces*, imperial authority personified, juxtaposed with a brash mishandling of *imperium* indicates a scathing criticism. The *Satyrica* includes other allusions and critiques of Nero's *imperium* that are beyond this scope of the essay. Nero's philhellenism and his desire to make a new Rome in his image seems to be similar to Trimalchio's odd habits and rather liberal interpretation of the Trojan War (a story critical in Rome's origin myth). This desire, it may be argued, is an abuse of Nero's power as *princeps*. Petronius's concern with the abuse of power and autocracy is something that parallels growing concerns in recent years on the rise of authoritarianism in some European states and, most recently, the United States.

Bibliography

- Lintott, A. (1993). *Imperium Romanum: Politics and Administration*. New York, New York.
- Rose, K.F.C. (1971). *The Date and Author of the Satyricon*. Leiden, Netherlands.
- Schmeling, G. (2011). *A Commentary on the Satyricon of Petronius*. Oxford, UK.
- Walsh, P.G. (1970). *The Roman Novel: The Satyricon of Petronius and the Metamorphoses of Apuleius*. Cambridge, UK.
- Zanker, P. (1990). *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus*. Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Notes

¹ OCD Imperium.

² Lintott (1992) 22-23.

³ OCD Imperium.

⁴ Walsh (1970) 70.

⁵ Rose (1971) 77.

⁶ Schmeling (2011) 102-103.

⁷ Schmeling (2011) 102-103.

⁸ Murray and Petsas (1989) 95-113.

⁹ Zanker (1990) 82-85.

¹⁰ Walsh (1970), 71.

¹¹ Rose (1971), 77.