

Petronian Comments on Parental Influence in Education

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“My education was interrupted only by my schooling.”-Winston S. Churchill,

In his unique style, Petronius offers his opinion on how life ought to be lived. Education and schooling are rightly at the forefront of such discussions. In appealing to his audiences, Petronius harkens to the importance of an education that burdens itself with the improvement of life through learning, and he extolls the educator who tends to draw out inherent interests from the individual. In his *Satyrical*, Petronius focuses sharply on the efficacy of schooling in its goal of offering an education. Lauding the practices that successfully extract the student from himself, he calls attention to the most beneficial of these practices in his satire of the least beneficial ones. Thus, the weighty fist of his reproachful satire lands its fair share of hits on the corrupting parental influence in education. This is most evident in the contemptuous discussion of teaching rhetoric in the opening chapters of the *Satyrical* and the later conversation between Agamemnon and a fellow dinner guest, Echion. In both passages, Petronius pegs the parent as the wedge driving this break from honest education.

In the fiery baptism of the novel's initial action, Petronius wastes no time in immediately introducing his uniquely presented thoughts on education. This first scene sees a dispute erupt between Agamemnon, a rhetorician who teaches at the local school, and Encolpius, one of Agamemnon's pupils. While Encolpius rants passionately and illogically about his schooling (something students often do well), Agamemnon offers an unclouded and mature voice when he airs reasonable grievances concerning the faults of education. Agamemnon's extensive education and resulting expertise provide Petronius with a seaworthy vessel for his own ventures. Agamemnon proves he is above prejudice by assigning fair blame to teachers for the shortcomings Encolpius previously cited. He compares his fellow educators to “contrived sycophants” (*ficti adulatores*, 3.2) who, rather than teach what ought to be taught, cater to the

wants of their student's parents, because they would otherwise lose those students to another teacher. However, Agamemnon diverts the full burden of responsibility away from the teacher (*nil mirum in his exercitationibus doctores peccant*, 3.3, "no wonder teachers are guilty of these [mal]practices") and affixes most of it on the confining circumstances in which the teacher often finds himself. He explains that, by the nature of the system, teachers cannot attract pupils "unless they entertain what the young men approve of" (*nisi dixerint quae adulescentuli probent*, 3.4). This pandering is justified by the clear certainty that "[teachers] will not otherwise obtain what they seek [i.e. students to teach]" (*nec aliter impetrabunt quod petunt*, 3.4). Agamemnon renders the predicament of the teacher, as only a rhetorician can, when he elucidates: "A school master..., as if a fisherman, sets the particular bait on hooks which he knows the little fish are about to approach, or he will wait on a rock without hope of a catch" (*sic...magister, nisi tanquam piscator eam imposuerit hamis escam, quam scierit appetituros esse pisciculos, sine spe praedae morabitur in scopulo*, 3.4). The teacher is hand-cuffed. He struggles to maintain a sufficient following without compromising the integrity of his teaching. Literally stuck between a rock (*scopulo*, 4.1) and a hard place, the teacher relinquishes the brunt of responsibility for educational limitations to his unfortunate situation.

Having proved the teacher is not wholly at fault for the ineffectiveness observed by Encolpius, Agamemnon continues and readily applies this blame to the nosey parent. He overtly calls out the parental propensity to interfere with and thus obstruct filial learning. When Agamemnon rapidly reels off the consequences of such an interference (4.1-4.4), Petronius exposes the irony in the consequence of parental action, which often opposes original parental intent. For example, the student who suffers from a parent's overprotectiveness is often unable to "profit from stern discipline" (*severa lege proficere*, 4.2). Similarly, this peripheral manipulation regularly results in an insufficient and incomplete education. The parent's greed "for ambition" (*ambitioni*, 4.2) regularly "hurried" (*properant*, 4.2) the "immature" (*cruda*, 4.2) student through what ought to have been a gradual and worthwhile progression of his studies. The

parent's impatience is hyperbolized when Agamemnon describes the students being hurried along as "just being born" (*adhuc nascentibus*, 4.3).

Having tasked his audience with interpreting the indirect message present in his sarcastic criticism, Petronius entreats his readers with the outright unveiling of his ideal method of schooling. He proclaims his sentiment through the words of Agamemnon: "...that studious boys were steeped in serious reading, their minds formed by wise sayings, their pens relentless in digging out the right word, their ears giving a long hearing to pieces they wished to imitate..." (*ut studiosi iuvenes lectione severa irrigarentur, ut sapientiae praeceptis animos componerent, ut verba atroci stilo effoderent, ut quod vellent imitari diti audirent*, 4.4). In expressing his endorsement, Petronius makes evident his subscription to the ideal education in which the student can become immersed and with which he can become one.

Over the courses of a famous dinner, Agamemnon's presence again prompts a discussion related to his profession. Echion seeks out Agamemnon to boast of his young son's learning to such a respected educator. Here, Petronius mocks the inclination of a father to live vicariously through his son, and the resulting obstruction of the child's education. In his usual style, Petronius boldly spells out his reproach for parental partiality through absurd exaggeration.

Petronius makes Echion's excessive pride in his son Primigenius abundantly apparent in this discussion with Agamemnon. Echion advances the assured observation that Primigenius is "already" (*iam*, 46.3) well ahead of his contemporaries and on an accelerated pace to becoming an educated man, much like Agamemnon. In a most telling line of dialogue, Petronius points out the incongruence of a son's genuine interests and a parent's ambition when Echion condemns the passions of his son: "[Primigenius] is clever and of good character, even if he is crazy about birds" (*ingeniosus est et bono filo, etiam si in aves morbosus est*, 46.5). Attempting to retain the positivity of his pitch to Agamemnon while noting

what he considers to be a fault of his son, Echion asserts that the pursuit of unconventional interests is incompatible with intelligence. In effect, the weighty “even if” (*etiam si*, 46.5) independently portrays the disapproval of Primigenius’s honest and genuinely led out desires. In his roundabout way, Petronius prompts his reader to condemn the actions of a condemning father.

Furthermore, the braggadocious manner with which Echion validates Primigenius’s early academic success leads one to question whether Echion speaks truly or speaks in exaggeration in order to impress. Echion explains that Primigenius “thrust a kick” (*calcem impingit*, 46.6) to his more childish readings in favor of more mature ones. The reader is left to decipher whether Primigenius truly desires to begin more advanced studies or only does so at his father’s command. This ambiguity completely disappears with Echion’s use of the first person (*volo*, 46.7, “I wish...”) when describing his wishes for his son. Regardless of the material Echion wishes Primigenius to become proficient in, the parental manipulation of education is made bitingly clear in the explicit expression of Echion’s desires, inconsequential to the desires of his son. Regarding his son’s material of study, Echion expresses his wish that Primigenius become educated in the ways of a profession that “has bread” (*habet panem*, 46.7), meaning one that will keep Primigenius from the clutches of a breadless poverty. By stating this wish, Echion indirectly asserts his neglect of his son’s studious interests, which he makes directly clear when he later explains he is “determined” (*destinavi*, 46.7) to see his wish through to fruition even “if Primigenius resists” (*si resilierit*, 46.7). This paternally forced compromise is the ultimate corruption of true education. Petronius further highlights his contempt of parental encouragement for professional studies in Echion’s loudly ironic comment: “For [Primigenius] is contaminated enough by books” (*nam litteris satis inquinatus est*, 46.7).

However, knowing no ultimate boundary, Petronius makes his criticism more apparent with a further procession into absurdity when he continues with the polysyndeton in Echion’s

listing of possible breadwinning skills that his son could pursue (*aut tonstrinum aut praeconem aut certe causidicum*, 46.7). In keeping with his tendency to exaggerate, Petronius augments this fatherly ignorance and the decibel level of irony. Echion, per his own assurances, reminds Primigenius every day that “whatever you learn, learn for yourself” (*quicquid discis, tibi discis*, 46.8), when all the while he has failed in giving Primigenius’s desires proper consideration.

As though this prolonged exaggeration is insufficient in substantiating a critical tone, Echion also exhibits certain qualities that undermine his credibility. Classicist Beth Severy-Hoven notes how many linguistic errors in the quotation of Echion, such as the improper active formation of deponent verbs (*loquere...loquis*, 46.1), contribute to the conclusion that Echion has not benefited from a decent education himself.¹ This, in conjunction with the brief description of Echion as a “clothes seller” or “fireman” (*centonarius*, 45.1), concretely cements the characterization of Echion as someone hailing from the lower ranks of Roman society. While this may offer a possible explanation as to why Echion holds so resolutely to the importance of an economically nourishing job, it discredits him. How can a man so poorly educated stake the audacious claim that his judgment, as it pertains to his son’s educational fulfillment, is best?

Echion’s low standing on the social ladder, might also suggest why there appears this aspiration for the graduation of Primigenius from his father’s rung. Classical rhetoric professor Lamp accuses the sort of mobility that Echion wishes for his son as guilty of being the *Satyrica*’s central criticism, especially evident in the satirical presentation of the character Trimalchio, a gaudy and flamboyant dinner host. She describes the showiness of the social climber as an effect of unsophisticated imitation. Lamp reveals a further correlation of this imitation with the imitation that had taken root in schooling and that spoils education.² Thus the teaching that Echion forces upon Primigenius is of the spoiled sort that hinders original thought and promotes imitation.

In the inspection of Agamemnon's early discussion with Encolpius and the indirect inspection of his later discussion with Echion, Petronius's ideal schooling is revealed as one that draws honest ideas from the student. He proclaims a message that implores students to find within themselves what it is they truly desire, while also beseeching parents to let this happen without bias and influence. His exceptional voice still ought to be heard. The strength and pointedness of his words would likely shake loose the failings of a still imperfect system.

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Notes

¹ Severy-Hoven (2011) 127.

² Lamp (2014) 46.