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Deceitful Authenticity: Petronius' Trimalchio and the Reconstruction of Freedmen's Lives

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ABSTRACT

Lauren Petersen's concept of "Trimalchio Vision" outlines the scholarly tradition of viewing Roman freedmen through the lens of Petronius' fictional character Trimalchio in the *Satyricon*. This paper demonstrates how Petronius deliberately manipulates techniques to establish literary authenticity, thereby creating a paradox wherein his representation of freedmen cannot be used as historical evidence – a problem present from Veyne's treatment of the *Satyricon* as "an excellent document of history" to D'Arms' argument for Trimalchio's "typicality." Through close reading and linguistic analysis, I show that Petronius utilizes controlled manipulation of details, including specific speech patterns of non-standard Latin, materialistic characterization through figures like Hermeros and Pompeius Diogenes, and sustained death symbolism linking freedmen's status to a metaphorical underworld, to provide a deceptive impression of realism that is merely satiric. A comparison of the implicit strategies of Petronius with the explicit invective of Juvenal, particularly their parallel dinner scenes, demonstrates that greater narrative specificity will result in both more believable yet just as distorted representations of freedmen. This paper also critiques Bagnani's archaeological research, which relies on Petronius' fictionalized descriptions of the homes of historical freedmen and contrasts the archaeological evidence of the House of the Vettii: frescoes that depict sophisticated mythological scenes that refute the stereotype of culturally illiterate parvenus. Ultimately, I argue that the belief that greater detail results in a more reliable depiction is inherently misleading, and that a more responsible methodology would treat elite-authored texts about non-elites as documents of elite attitudes first and sources of historical information only second.

INTRODUCTION

Reconstruction of the past is a valuable yet delicate endeavor, with contemporary judgments on historical figures and events requiring understanding and acknowledgement of latent biases. This is the case in ancient elite-authored stereotypes regarding freedmen in Ancient Roman society. According to the surviving literary record, a Roman freedman's servile past often stained their daily lives and opportunities, especially as the dominant voices of the ruling elite further segregated freedmen, *libertini*, from the freeborn, *ingenui*. Such elitist pejoratives led to a stereotypical characterization of freedmen — based on their subservience, lack of education, and other qualities perceived by the elite — that dominates

the contemporary frameworks used to reconstruct the past.[1] Lauren Petersen argues that this negatively affects our contemporary memory of freedmen, as the layers of assumption undermine recognition of their diversity and limit our understanding.[2] With historians referring to this elite-authored testimony, these biased views are sustained in our existing literature and face little questioning, making it difficult to uncover the unheard voices of Rome's past.

Petersen demonstrates a specific instance through the portrayal of fictional character Trimalchio in Petronius' novel, *Satyricon;* Trimalchio, one of the best-known Roman freedmen – and a literary character – is a rich but unrefined ex-slave, who throws an extravagant dinner party in the section *Cena Trimalchionis.* Specifically, Petronius portrays him as a stereotypical vulgar freedman, who excessively presents himself as having adopted the lifestyle of the Roman elite, yet whose servile past, in Petronius' framing, renders his status immutable. Trimalchio's self-commemoration, which involves lavish banquets, vulgar displays of wealth, and grandiose speeches, is a parody of the social climbing of *libertini* in general.[3] Due to the lack of written testimony, scholars and historians refer to Trimalchio as if the fictional character represents the lives of historical freedmen, which risks perpetuating elitist attitudes regarding ex-slaves; Petersen terms this notion "Trimalchio Vision" — the tendency to see Roman ex-slaves from the elite perspective, so heavily dependent on the fictional figure of Trimalchio.[4]

Petronius' use of what historians deem "undiluted realism"[5] — an accurate depiction of contemporary life and his great attention to detail — has made the *Satyricon* seem to provide a convincing framework to reconstruct the lives of former slaves, giving so realistic an impression that one readily forgets it is not a document of social life.[6] Yet the temptation to read Petronius as a historian has proved remarkably durable. In 1961, Paul Veyne proposed treating Trimalchio as a real person, concluding that the *Satyricon* was "profoundly realistic and even typical" — "an excellent document of history."[7] Two decades later, D'Arms devoted an entire chapter to "The 'Typicality' of Trimalchio," drawing on epigraphic evidence from Puteoli and Ostia to argue that Petronius' portrait reflected genuine patterns among wealthy freedmen.[8] But calling Trimalchio "typical" means accepting Petronius' own categories as the framework through which real freedmen ought to be understood — which is precisely the trap that Petersen's "Trimalchio Vision"

[1] Petersen, Lauren Hackworth. *The Freedman in Roman Art and Art History*. Cambridge University Press, 2006. p. 2.

[2] Petersen, 2.

[3] All Latin and English translations are cited from the following:
Petronius. Satyricon. Edited by Michael Heseltine, William Heinemann, 1913. Perseus Digital Library, http://www.perseus.tufts.edu. Accessed 1 Mar. 2026.

[4] Petersen, 10.

[5] Jones, Christopher. "Dinner Theater." Dining in a Classical Context, edited by William J. Slater, University of Michigan Press, 1991. p. 185.

[6] Jones, 185.

[7] Veyne, Paul. "Vie de Trimalcion." *Annales. Économies, sociétés, civilisations*, vol. 16, no. 2, 1961, pp. 213–247. p. 213. Translations from the French are my own.

[8] D'Arms, John H. *Commerce and Social Standing in Ancient Rome*. Harvard University Press, 1981. pp. 97–120.

seeks to expose. As Mouritsen observes, "the fictional Trimalchio and his dinner guests have in many respects become the representation of the freedman against which other evidence has been judged."[9]

Contrary to popular belief that such attention to detail contributes to an authentic depiction of a largely unexplored part of Roman cultural life, I argue for its paradoxical effect: the manipulation of greater detail makes it harder to distinguish an accurate depiction from one shaped by elitist attitudes. Petronius' techniques — from the sympathetic foiling of individual freedmen to the linguistic naturalism of their speech to the cultural specificity of their domestic lives — feed into notorious stereotypes while simultaneously lending them the credibility of documentary evidence, as if his details and narratives from the perspective of freedmen truly represent their behaviors and attitudes. Given that this false pretense of credibility serves his literary purpose in highlighting the immutability and social limitations of freedmen, Petronius further reinforces the "Trimalchio Vision."

TECHNIQUES OF AUTHENTICITY

Petronius skillfully fashions a convincing depiction of freedmen through a calculated manipulation of details, indirectly delineating characters through their own words, reactions to other characters, and their behavior. The detailed narrations from the perspective of freedmen endow each character with unique personality traits and distinct lives, creating a credible pretense of freedmen's reality. For instance, Petronius uses specific varieties of non-standard Latin to characterize different freedmen speakers. The classic points of differentiation often noted among the diners are Hermeros' linguistic 'tic' of beginning many sentences with *ad summam* as well as Echion's abuse of the rhetor Agamemnon.[10] Their diverse speech habits are determined by Petronius' desire to convey an artistic impression of authenticity, and it is precisely this impression that makes the Satyricon more effective, and more dangerous, than any straightforward polemic against freedmen.

The difference becomes clear when Petronius is set beside Juvenal, whose satires offer criticism of contemporary persons and institutions filled with angry moral indignation. Freedmen were frequently subject to such criticism by the traditional aristocracy, who viewed them as vulgar

[9] Mouritsen, Henrik. *The Freedman in the Roman World*. Cambridge University Press, 2011. p. 280.

[10] Horsfall, Nicholas. "'The Uses of Literacy' and the 'Cena Trimalchionis': I." *Greece & Rome*, vol. 36, no. 1, 1989, pp. 74–89. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/643187. Accessed 27 Dec. 2025. p. 77.

Petronius subtly modulated his freedmen's speeches to reflect differing emotional states and the different attitudes of the speakers toward their social position. In 46.1, Echion reveals that he feels self-conscious about his status, making indignant remarks at Agamemnon: "Agamemnon, you look as if you were saying, 'What is this bore chattering for?'".

nouveaux riches[11] seizing the comfortable life of the upper classes. Juvenal critiques the rise of freedmen through relatively straightforward remarks, furious at the sight of a tribune and praetor being set aside by a wealthy freedman: "Give the praetor his! Then to the tribune. But the freedman must first be served! 'I was before him!' he says. 'Why should I fear or hesitate to stand up for my turn, though I was born on the banks of Euphrates?'"[12]

The pattern is even clearer in Satire 5, where Juvenal depicts a dinner party hosted by the patron Virro — a scene that directly parallels the *Cena Trimalchionis* but operates by entirely different means. Both texts use the dinner table as a stage for social hierarchy, yet their methods diverge sharply. In Juvenal, the disparity is declared through systematic contrast: Virro is served "a huge lobster...all garnished with asparagus" while his client receives "on a tiny plate a crab hemmed in by half an egg — a fit banquet for the dead"[13]; Virro "drinks wine bottled in the days when Consuls wore long hair" while the client is given wine that "fresh-clipped wool would refuse to suck up."[14] The hierarchy is itemized, course by course, so the reader cannot miss the humiliation. Juvenal then makes his judgment explicit: "you think yourself a free man, and guest of a grandee; he thinks — and he is not far wrong — that you have been captured by the savoury odours of his kitchen."[15] Petronius stages the same social dynamics — lavish food, competitive display, anxious performance of status — but filters them entirely through the freedmen's own voices. Where Juvenal declares the hierarchy course by course, Petronius has Trimalchio proudly narrate his own extravagance: a tray arrives bearing a wooden hen with outstretched wings brooding over peahen's eggs, which Trimalchio presents as his own ingenious idea — *pavonis ova gallinae iussi supponi*, "I had peahen's eggs put under a common hen."[16] The excess is visible, the theatricality unmistakable, yet the mockery arrives through Trimalchio's enthusiastic narration rather than through authorial condemnation. Where Juvenal itemizes the disparity so the reader is told what to think, Petronius lets the reader arrive at judgment independently — which is precisely what makes his stereotypes so much harder to detect and so much more durable as a framework for understanding real freedmen. It is this appearance of reliability — the sense that Petronius is showing us real people rather than attacking them — that allows his stereotypes to operate unchallenged.

Petronius perpetuates these stereotypes not through direct assertion but through foiling — constructing a sympathetic freedman whose virtues become the standard against which others are measured, so that the resulting typology appears to emerge from the characters themselves rather than from authorial judgment. Petronius portrays a successful independent freedman, Hermeros, and sets him in contrast to Trimalchio. Hermeros chose slavery over provincial taxation, preferring the opportunity of eventually

[11] López Barja de Quiroga, Pedro. "Freedmen Social Mobility in Roman Italy." Historia: Zeitschrift Für Alte Geschichte, vol. 44, no. 3, 1995, pp. 326–48. JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org/stable/4436383. Accessed 8 Feb. 2026. p. 326.

[12] Juvenal. Satires. Edited by G. G. Ramsay, William Heinemann, 1918. Perseus Digital Library, http://www.perseus.tufts.edu. Accessed 1 Feb. 2026. 1.101–105.

[13] Juvenal 5.80–85.

[14] Juvenal 5.24–30

[15] Juvenal 5.161–162.

[16] Petronius 33.5.

becoming a Roman citizen,[17] and is proud of his modest fortune as a man of principles who prefers his reputation to any riches: *assem aerarium nemini debeo; constitutum habui numquam; nemo mihi in foro dixit 'redde quod debes,*' "I owe nobody a brass farthing; I have never been in the Courts; no one has ever said to me in public, 'Pay me what you owe me.'"[18] The specificity of this self-portrait — the legal vocabulary, the pride in financial solvency, the appeal to public reputation — gives Hermeros a depth and dignity that Trimalchio conspicuously lacks. It is precisely this depth that makes the foil effective: the reader accepts Hermeros' values as a reasonable standard for freedmen, and Trimalchio's failure to meet that standard then appears to reflect genuine character rather than authorial manipulation. Yet it is here where Petronius' technique is most deceptive. Hermeros' individuality — his specific pride, his specific principles — is genuine enough to suggest that Petronius is capable of seeing freedmen as complex individuals. But that complexity is ultimately instrumentalized: Hermeros exists in the narrative not as an end in himself but as a device for making Trimalchio's vulgarity appear representative. The very fact that Petronius can create a nuanced freedman makes his decision to reduce the others to types all the more difficult to detect, because it implies a range of characterization that the text does not actually sustain. By juxtaposing both portraits, Petronius establishes a pattern that will repeat throughout the Cena: the freedman who earns sympathy becomes the measure against which others are judged, and those who fail the comparison confirm the stereotype.

This pattern of foiling extends beyond Trimalchio to the broader community of freedmen. Through Hermeros' own remarks about his fellow freedmen, Petronius constructs a shared materialist outlook — an obsession with money and entertainment over intellectual pursuits — through the accumulated details of individual portraits. Petronius provides another portrait of ostentatious wealth through Hermeros' remarks about Pompeius Diogenes: "He has a fine opinion of himself. So he has just put up a notice on his hovel: 'This attic, the property of Caius Pompeius Diogenes, to let from the 1st of July, the owner having purchased a house.'"[19] Diogenes carried loads of wood on his back until he gained 800,000 sesterces,[20] a rise to success which he boasts by displaying his ability to buy a house. This characterization recurs through Hermeros' description of Julius Proculus, who cunningly advertises his sale as spare stock in order to hide his bankruptcy: "Julius Proculus will offer for sale some articles for which he has no further use."[21] What matters here is not simply that Proculus is vain but that Petronius renders his vanity through a specific, plausible social gesture — the euphemistic sale notice — that makes the portrait feel observed rather than invented. The reader encounters what appears to be a real document of freedmen's social behavior, when in fact it is a carefully constructed illustration of a type. Overall, the accumulation of these individual portraits produces a composite type, as if the materialistic outlook and self-absorption of a few characters were representative of all freedmen.

Having established this composite type through their words and values, Petronius turns to an even subtler technique: encoding the same hierarchy into the very structure of their language. He uses

[17] Petronius, 57.4.
[18] 57.5
[19] 38.10
[20] 38.7
[21] 38.16

varieties of non-standard Latin to reflect elements of vulgar language and the cultural environment Petronius attributes to freedmen as opposed to the more urban, refined speech of the upper class. In addition to their concentrated use of proverbs[22] — a marker of limited formal education — many of the freedmen's speeches show numerous analogies with the language of Pompeian graffiti.[23] First, at 39.3, Trimalchio quotes three words of Vergil, *sic notus Ulixes*,[24] found in one of the most intensely studied books of Vergil in Roman schools. Petronius mocks Trimalchio's attempt to imitate the educated elite, raising a question of "whether he is relying on vaguely relevant verses already committed to memory."[25] Moreover, this initial line is a common citation among Pompeiian Graffiti, which may have been transferred from the classroom by local youth, but Horsfall reminds us that Vergilian graffiti is also easily accessible beyond the classroom: "in a brothel, an ironmonger's, and in the gladiatorial barracks."[26] Given that these quotes were not exclusive to the educated elite nor to formal education, Petronius further segregates freedmen's lowly status from the educated, refined elite through a calculated manipulation of Trimalchio's language.

Petronius further encodes this hierarchy through hyperurbanism in his freedmen's speech — the overcorrection of pronunciation in an attempt to hide provincial origins. This is a particularly effective form of deceptive realism because it mirrors a phenomenon widely attested among upwardly mobile speakers, yet Petronius deploys it selectively to mark his freedmen as linguistically inferior while the educated characters speak without error. Specifically, a syntactic approach to the text demonstrates a sparing use of difficult constructions, such as participles and gerunds, compared to more simplistic

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[22] Horsfall, Nicholas. "'The Uses of Literacy' and the 'Cena Trimalchionis': I." *Greece & Rome*, vol. 36, no. 1, 1989, pp. 74–89. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/643187. Accessed 27 Dec. 2023. p. 77

> Their limited education often results in the adoption of conventional and orthodox modes of expression for one's opinions, wisdom, and sentiments.

[23] LaFrance, Adrienne. "Pompeii's Graffiti and the Ancient Origins of Social Media." *The Atlantic*, 29 Mar. 2016, https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2016/03/adrienne-was-here/475719/. Accessed 3 Mar. 2023.

> The graffiti found in Pompeii, which were often created in heavily trafficked places, offer a fascinating insight into the daily lives and thoughts of the people who lived there. Many of these writings are expressions of commemoration, but they also reveal a wide range of literacy levels among the population. In addition to public expressions, these writings also reveal vulgar details and obscene language, providing a glimpse into people's private lives. The combination of commemorative inscriptions and vulgar language highlights the diversity of the Pompeiian population and adds to our understanding of the complex social dynamics of this ancient city.

[24] Vergil. Aeneid. Edited by J. B. Greenough, Ginn & Co., 1900. Perseus Digital Library, http://www.perseus.tufts.edu. Accessed 1 Mar. 2026. 2.44.

[25] Horsfall, 79.

[26] Ibid.

constructions.[27] Overall, a morphological approach to the text demonstrates a general trend toward simplification, with as many as 16 errors in grammatical gender of words, such as *vinus*[28] in the masculine singular rather than its usual gender in the neuter.[29] Such a simplification is found in the inscriptions of Pompeian graffiti, as written by the "semi-educated scribblers of Pompeii":[30] BALNEVS, LVTVS, CADAVER MORTVS.[31] In contrast, these errors in grammatical gender are not found in the language of the educated characters. More explicitly, Petronius highlights freedmen's use of language for "pleasure and gusto"[32] through their puns and jokes about the literal meaning of proper names, in a way that may seem simple-minded.[33] Such language once again parodies the vulgar language on the walls of Pompeii — yet it is the very naturalism of this dialogue that invites the reader to take it as an authentic record of how freedmen actually spoke.

Petronius extends this cultural mockery beyond language into Trimalchio's choice of entertainment, where the same technique of apparent documentation operates: specific, plausible details that frame freedmen's taste as inherently inferior. For instance, Petronius implies that it is a social gaffe to have *Homeristae* – Homeric travesty, with costumes and knockabout heroic warfare – performing in his house; at least in the Greek world, they belong not to the dining-room, with its range of conventional *acroamata*, "entertainment," but to the world of public entertainment.[34] Petronius describes the acrobatic show, saying,"A very dull fool stood there with a ladder and made a boy dance from rung to rung and on the very top to the music of popular airs, and then made him hop through burning hoops, and pick up a wine jar with his teeth."[35] Only Trimalchio enjoys the act and says that in all the world what he most appreciates are acrobats and trumpeters, calling other *acroamata* mere junk.[36] Later, Encolpius says, "I was afraid some acrobat would come down through the roof,"[37] continuing the mockery of such a jarring form of entertainment uncommon among the elite. As with the linguistic parody, the reader laughs at Trimalchio's taste while accepting, perhaps without realizing it, that freedmen's cultural instincts are fundamentally inferior.

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[27] Boyce, B. "The Language of the Freedmen in Petronius' Cena Trimalchionis." Brill, 2018. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004329133. p. 72.
[28] Petronius, 41.12.
[29] Boyce, 47.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Horsfall, 83.

[33] Trimalchio makes a pun about his meat-carver Carpus (36.8). The vocative case of this word is the same as the imperative singular of the verb "carpere," to carve, and when Trimalchio calls "Carpe," he is addressing his servant and giving him instructions at the same time. Encolpius, the narrator of the *Satyricon,* distances himself with suspicion from the 'urbanitas' of the Carpus-joke (Horsfall, 83), pointing to the hyper-urban, simplistic speech contrasted from the refined speech of the elite.

[34] Horsfall, 80.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Ibid.
[37] 60.1

Petronius further crystallizes the paradox of deceptive specificity through Trimalchio's boast of owning three libraries: *tres bibliothecas habeo, unam Graecam, unam Latinam*,[38] "I have three libraries, one Greek, another Latin." He makes this remark as though it were an exceptional achievement; however, double libraries, both Greek and Latin, were the norm for the educated elite in 1st-century Italy, thus highlighting his ignorance. The suppressed third item has been interpreted as a library of Semitic texts that he sets out to name, but then he thinks better of naming because to do so would call attention to his humble origins as a slave from Asia Minor.[39] Petronius reminds the audience of how the Romans had a strict definition for what counted for literary learning and culture, refusing to acknowledge anything that did not belong in the category of Greek or Latin. Petronius highlights the unread Greek half through comic mistakes in narrating familiar stories of Greek mythology on his silverware. For instance, it was not Cassandra who killed her sons but Medea,[40] and on a silver bowl, Daedalus shuts Niobe in the Trojan Horse,[41] but it was Ulysses who shut himself and his men inside the horse. These errors are precise enough to be amusing — the reader must know the correct versions to appreciate the jokes — yet they function as markers of cultural inferiority, reinforcing the impression that Trimalchio's engagement with Greek learning is superficial and performative. Overall, the libraries crystallize the paper's central paradox: Petronius furnishes Trimalchio with enough specific detail — three libraries, named texts, identifiable mythological scenes — to make the portrait feel documentary, yet every detail is selected to demonstrate cultural failure. It is this specificity, not despite but because of its vividness, that has convinced scholars to treat Trimalchio as representative of real freedmen.

SOCIAL DEATH AND THE FREEDMAN'S STATUS

If Petronius' techniques establish what freedmen *are*, his sustained allusion to death and the underworld reveals what these stereotypes ultimately *mean*. Encolpius describes his experience at the banquet as a *katabasis,* a descent into the underworld;[42] Encolpius and his companions are, as he says, *novi generis labyrintho indusi*, "trapped in a new kind of labyrinth."[43] Holmes notes that Petronius alludes to book six of the *Aeneid,* where Theseus journeys through the labyrinth built by Daedalus, foreshadowing Aeneas' own descent into Hades.[44] Petronius continues this comparison through the character Daedalus[45] – this time, a cook in Trimalchio's home who creates lavish dishes for a banquet from which Encolpius feels there is no escape. Each of these allusions reinforces the same implication: that the

[38] 48.4

[39] Freudenberg, Kirk. "A Note on Trimalchio's Three (Equals Two) Libraries." The Classical Quarterly, vol. 67, no. 1, 2017, pp. 323–27. JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org/stable/26292436. Accessed 1 Jan. 2026. p. 325.

[40] Petronius, 52.1.

[41] Petronius, 52.3.

[42] Holmes, Daniel. "Practicing Death in Petronius' 'Cena Trimalchionis' and Plato's 'Phaedo.'" *The Classical Journal*, vol. 104, no. 1, 2008, pp. 43–57. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/27750212. Accessed 2 Jan. 2023. p. 46.

[43] Petronius, 73.1.

[44] Holmes, 51.

[45] Ibid.

freedman's world is not merely constrained but fundamentally deathlike, a space from which no genuine social ascent is possible. This symbolism pervades the *Cena*: the frieze in the portico depicts funerary art,[46] a silver skeleton is brought into the dining room,[47] a water clock and trumpeter remind Trimalchio how much of his life is lost, his will is read aloud, and a mock funeral accompanies his dinner. Trimalchio comments: *Eheu nos miseros, quam totus homuncio nil est! Sic erimus cuncti, postquam nos auferet Orcus. Ergo vivamus, dum licet esse bene,*"Alas for us poor mortals, all that poor man is nothing. So we shall all be, after the world below takes us away. Let us live then while it goes well with us."[48] Trimalchio's preoccupation with death emerges as a direct result of the inescapable status of freedmen — Petronius alludes to labyrinths, tombs, and the underworld to suggest that freedmen are defined, in his portrayal, by their alienation from respectable society, desperately striving to escape the stain of their servile past even as that past remains permanently fixed.

Overall, Petronius constructs his portrait of freedmen through a layered strategy: sympathetic foiling that naturalizes the typology, linguistic naturalism that disguises mockery as documentation, cultural specificity that makes the portrait feel evidentiary, and symbolic architecture that embeds social death into the narrative itself. The cumulative effect is a depiction so internally consistent that it has been mistaken for historical record. Petronius conveys a message that freedmen have no pasts and no futures, and consequently, see no existence other than their own; the materialism, self-conceit, and preoccupation with death that he attributes to them are presented as consequences of their social death — yet these are precisely the qualities his own techniques have manufactured. Given that Petronius uses this specificity to further such elitist pejoratives, his text remains unreliable in providing an accurate depiction of the life of freedmen — a problem that becomes concrete when modern scholars take the Satyricon at its word.

PETRONIUS IN MODERN SCHOLARSHIP

The question then arises: how can we distinguish between a depiction imbued with elitist attitudes and one that is not? When we overlook the satirical nature of Petronius' work, we risk contributing to the homogenization of the typical freedman archetype, reducing the historical lives of former slaves to Trimalchio's fictional representation.

Archaeologist Gilbert Bagnani's reliance on Petronius' *Satyricon* as a historical source brings to light the challenges of using fictional descriptions of structures to analyze historical reality. In his study of Trimalchio's house, he relies heavily on the fictional descriptions to create an

[46] Bagnani, Gilbert. "The House of Trimalchio." The American Journal of Philology, vol. 75, no. 1, 1954, pp. 16–39. JSTOR, https://doi.org/10.2307/291903. Accessed 9 Feb. 2023. p. 24.

In the reconstruction of Trimalchio's house, Bagnani points to the fact that many of the scenes depicted on the walls of the portico can be paralleled by representations on tomb monuments, where allusions to the life of the deceased are fitting and proper.

[47] Petronius, 34.5.
[48] Petronius, 34.10.

archaeological reconstruction and compares it with actual structures in Pompeii and Herculaneum.[49] While doing so, he treats Petronius' descriptions as though they are representative of reality: "no architect would ever pass most of the elaborate plans that writers of such stories so kindly provide."[50] Bagnani fails to examine Petronius' impetus to depict freedmen as he did, although relying on literary sources is often necessary due to a lack of archaeological evidence. By treating Petronius' fictional architecture as archaeological data, Bagnani effectively allows a satirist's imagination to dictate the terms of historical reconstruction.

Specifically, Bagnani conducts a meticulous analysis of the stylistic elements of Trimalchio's house in order to contextualize them within a specific time period. He asserts that Trimalchio's house is a "characteristic type of house of the time of Nero,"[51] citing the Satyricon's accurate depiction of the era's social customs.[52] Bagnani further draws a comparison between Trimalchio's house and the House of Vettii, which is modeled after Nero's opulent Golden House[53] and was owned by former slaves in Pompeii. However, Bagnani's decision to associate Trimalchio's house with the House of Vettii, which is characterized by its extravagance and now serves as a tourist location, reinforces Petronius' portrayal of freedmen's ostentatious materialism, perpetuating a stereotypical view of a typical freedman home. By conflating fiction with reality, Bagnani inadvertently reinforces the homogenization of the typical freedman archetype through an elitist lens.

What makes this comparison particularly misleading is that the House of the Vettii, when examined on its own terms rather than through the lens of Trimalchio, tells a strikingly different story. Its owners, the freedmen Aulus Vettius Conviva and Aulus Vettius Restitutus, decorated their home not with the garish displays of wealth Petronius attributes to Trimalchio but with sophisticated Fourth Style mythological frescoes — scenes of Daedalus and Pasiphae, Ixion and Hera, the punishment of Pentheus — that demonstrate a genuine engagement with Greek literary and artistic culture.[54] Where Trimalchio garbles his mythology, confusing Cassandra with Medea and misplacing Niobe in the Trojan Horse, the Vettii commissioned paintings that reflect careful and accurate mythological knowledge. The archaeological evidence, in other words, resists the very stereotype that Bagnani's reading reinforces: real freedmen, or at least these freedmen, were not the culturally illiterate parvenus of Petronius' imagination. This is not to substitute one typology for another — the Vettii are no more representative of all freedmen than Trimalchio is — but rather to demonstrate that the archaeological record offers a far more varied picture of freedmen's domestic lives than Petronius' satire alone would suggest.

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[49] Bagnani, 17.
[50] Bagnani, 16.
[51] Ibid.
[52] Bagnani, 32.
Bagnani enthusiastically claims that "the *Satyricon* reflects accurately and consistently, the manners of the time of Nero."
[53] Bagnani, 33.
[54] The House of the Vettii (Regio VI, Insula 15) was excavated between 1894 and 1896. The identification of its owners as freedmen rests on bronze seals found in the atrium bearing the names A. Vettius Conviva and A. Vettius Restitutus, along with epigraphic evidence identifying Conviva as an Augustalis — a priestly office commonly held by freedmen.

By repeatedly emphasizing Petronius' accuracy, Bagnani risks reinforcing the "Trimalchio Vision" and obscuring the multifaceted nature of historical freedmen. Had Bagnani examined the House of the Vettii on its own terms before reading it through the lens of the Satyricon, he would have found not confirmation of Petronius' stereotypes but contradiction — sophisticated freedmen whose domestic culture defied the very archetype he set out to illustrate.

CONCLUSION

The Bagnani case illustrates a broader pattern: the difficulty of reconstructing the lives of freedmen in the absence of historical sources is further compounded by the dominant elitist voices that have shaped and distorted the narratives of this marginalized group. Petronius' deliberate techniques in establishing "authenticity" — the foiling that naturalizes typology, the linguistic naturalism that disguises satire as documentation, the cultural specificity that makes fiction feel evidentiary, the symbolic architecture that renders social death as narrative inevitability — do not bring us closer to the reality of freedmen's lives but further from it. As Bagnani's work demonstrates, this deception transfers readily into modern scholarship, where fictional details are adopted as evidence without interrogating the literary motives behind them. The boundaries between "vulgar" and "elite" taste are far muddier than Petronius' satire suggests, and if we approach the task of reconstructing the lives of non-elites with the very categories his work provides, we run the risk of losing sight of what is truly representative of their experiences — even as we acknowledge that perfect reconstruction of past lives may be impossible.

The problem, moreover, extends well beyond Petronius. Nearly every surviving literary depiction of Roman non-elites — from Juvenal's freedmen brawling over cheap wine to Martial's epigrams on social climbers to Horace's portrait of the ambitious freedman's son — was composed by and for members of the elite, each text presumably carrying its own satirical agenda and its own set of distortions that merit the same scrutiny applied here to Petronius.

If scholars have allowed a single fictional dinner party to define an entire social class, we should ask what other "Trimalchio Visions" remain unexamined elsewhere in the literary record. A more responsible methodology would begin by treating every elite-authored text about non-elites as a document of elite attitudes first and a source of historical information only second — reading Petronius, in other words, not for what he reveals about freedmen but for what he reveals about the anxieties, prejudices, and literary conventions of the class that produced him. Only by maintaining that distinction can we begin to recover, however imperfectly, the voices that Roman literature was designed to silence.

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