

Equestrians and Social Status in Petronius' *Satyricon*

Petronius' *Satyricon* has garnered much attention due to its unique portrayal of lower class people in the Roman world. The character who has undoubtedly received the most attention, Trimalchio, is a fantastic representation of a freedman with newfound riches. While much attention has been given to the depictions of Trimalchio and the numerous lowbrow characters throughout the story, less attention has been paid to members of the upper classes. Admittedly, characters of this sort are for the most part absent from a story focused on the poor and/or uncultured. However, references to characters of higher social standing occur throughout the novel. These references range from reports of off scene events, such as an equestrian's advances toward the naked Ascyltos (92.9-10), to personal opinions of characters, such as Hermeros' insecure rant about his status (57-58) or Circe's maid's haughty declaration that she prefers men of higher status (126.10). Men of high status never actually appear center stage but instead remain in the background while characters like Trimalchio attempt to fill their place. Viewing the upper class from the perspectives of the novel's predominantly uncultured and lower class characters enables us to see how Petronius envisions the relationship between rich and poor, cultured and uncultured.

I argue that appearances of and references to higher status individuals in the *Satyricon* reveal how the lower class characters viewed both their own status and the status of those of higher social standing. The references to upper class individuals are overwhelmingly negative. Just as the elite reader of Petronius' time may have felt contempt towards Trimalchio, so too can we detect the contempt that lower class characters feel, or are shown by Petronius to feel, towards those of higher status. The elite ancient reader would recognize the moralizing critique directed towards Trimalchio, but would perhaps not as readily identify the critique directed

towards those of higher status, such as himself. Similar questions have been discussed by Slater (1990) and scholars arguing to what degree Petronius was a moralist (Highet 1941, Sullivan 1967, 1968, and Walsh 1974), but there has been little focus on the relationship between the social classes in the *Satyricon*. Schnur (1959) offers helpful social commentary about equestrians in the assumed setting of the *Satyricon*, the Neronian period. This discussion of the relationship between those of low and high social status in the *Satyricon* will reveal new insights about the work.

Bibliography

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