Concerns of dating, authorship and manuscript errors are typical of ancient texts and are notably problematic in the *Satyricon*. While it is generally accepted that the text dates to Neronian society and was written by Petronius, this remains impossible to prove.¹ Its literary prose and raunchiness has been associated with Neronian times, but as Auerbach notes, the lack of references within the text to places, times or specific political and economic situations prevent a more precise dating.² The survival of the manuscript is also quite problematic as it exists in multiple fragments. Consequently, the text cannot be read as the author originally intended, although the *Cena* remains the most complete section.³ Manuscript corruptions and copyist errors are also quite problematic and are sometimes hard to distinguish from other elements of the text such as the colloquial forms used by the freedmen.⁴ When corrections are proposed and inserted, potential meanings of the text can differ significantly. Consider the amendment of *per* at §76: *coepi per libertos faenerare* (‘I began to lend money at interest through freedmen’, Sat. 76.9).⁵ This statement forms part of Trimalchio’s autobiography near the end of the *Cena*. The omission of *per* would imply that Trimalchio lent money at interest to freedmen while the addition of *per* suggests he lent money to people through freedmen which D’Arms suggests is far ‘more ambitious’ and more reminiscent of senatorial practices.⁶ Such an amendment has significant implications for the interpretation of the *Cena* as a socio-historical source and must be carefully considered and acknowledged. Therefore, various issues arise immediately concerning the surviving manuscripts which limit the

¹ Schmeling (1999), 19.
² Auerbach (1946), 60.
³ Slater (2009), 17.
⁴ Ibid., 17.
⁵ The translations in this essay are the author’s.
usage of the *Cena* as a source for Neronian society and attitudes.

The genre and style of the text also provide their own limitations. Unlike other surviving Greek and Roman texts, the *Satyricon* has characteristics of multiple styles and genres from both the Greek and Roman literary traditions.\(^7\) Such definitions provide guidelines to illuminate authorial intentions and any social commentary, as well as helping to distinguish truth from fiction.\(^8\) This is particularly problematic when considering elements of satire in the text and Encolpius’s narrative voice. If the work is to be considered satirical some form of moral commentary would normally be expected.\(^9\) However, as expressed by Sullivan, ‘Petronius lacks the coherent moral standpoint from which satire ideally springs’.\(^10\) Petronius’s voice remains absent throughout the novel as the story is instead relayed through Encolpius, a naïve and unreliable narrator whose voice is divorced from Petronius.\(^11\) His naivety is established early on as he enters Trimalchio’s house, tripping over at the sight of a painted dog (*Sat. 29.1*). He admits his ignorance multiple times through the numerous questions he asks during dinner and the embarrassment he feels in doing so:

\[
\text{damnavi ego stuporem meum et nihil amplius interrogavi, ne viderer nunquam inter honestos cenasse.}
\]

I damned my stupidity and asked no more questions so as not to seem as if I had never dined among respectable people.

*Sat. 41.5.*

This ignorance discredits his voice, suggesting that he cannot reliably relate and interpret the events of the dinner.\(^12\) Additionally, Encolpius’s judgements are further undermined by his own disgraceful behaviour in other sections of the *Satyricon*, particularly his sexual exploits preceding the *Cena*.\(^13\) There is therefore no clear authoritative moral voice throughout the piece that suggests whether the text is meant to condemn the actions of Trimalchio and his guests, or contrarily, if they are intended merely as vulgar entertainment and not to be taken seriously.\(^14\) Without this voice to guide some sort of social commentary, it is difficult to consider the text as a socio-historical source.

These limitations are not to suggest that the *Cena* is completely fictitious, but rather draw attention to the issues of accepting the text as a source head-on. The *Cena* partly makes for a great comedy because of its realistic aspects. Plausible claims are skilfully intermixed with implausible claims, disguising them. This makes it difficult to interpret the *Cena* for authentic comments on Neronian society without the introduction of other sources. This is evident when considering Trimalchio’s epitaph:

> C. Pompeius Trimalchio Maecenatianus hic requiescit huic serviratus absenti decretus est, cum posset in omnibus decuris Romae esse, tamen noluit. pius, fortis, fidelis, ex parvo crevit; sestertium reliquit trecenties, nec unquam philosophum audivit. vale: et tu.

Here lies Gaius Pompeius Trimalchio, freedman of Maecenas. The title of Priest of Augustus was decreed to him in his absence. He could have been a member of every decuria in Rome, but he refused it. Dutiful, brave, faithful, he came from little, and left behind thirty million sesterces, he never listened to a philosopher. Farewell Trimalchio: and farewell you, passer-by.

*Sat. 71.12.*

\(^{12}\) Rudich (1997), 186.

\(^{13}\) Knight (1989), 337.

This epitaph, which Trimalchio requests as the inscription on his tomb, perfectly bends plausible freedmen goals with completely impossible ones. This is achieved through association with the equestrian class, the highest social rank a freedman could realistically aspire to imitate. There are however some clear aspirations attainable by a freeborn equestrian but not a rich freedman, which are subtly intermingled throughout the epitaph. Inscriptions confirm that the title of Priest of Augustus was the highest municipal honour that could be awarded to a freedman. However, to be awarded it *in absentia*, as Trimalchio suggests, was an honour not worthy of a freedman, but only the most honourable freeborn man. Similarly, freedmen were allowed to buy membership into some of the *decuriae*, however, certain *decuriae* were restricted to freeborn men. Hence, Trimalchio exaggerates his claim that he could have been a member of every *decuria*, perfectly disguising an impossible freedman objective among plausible equestrian aspirations. Such examples of how Petronius skilfully combines possible and impossible goals for freedmen caution the use of the *Cena* as an historical document without first consulting other sources.

Despite these limitations, with much awareness of the novel and social context (independent from the text), it is possible for the *Cena* to be used as a source for Neronian attitudes, particularly regarding freedmen. The freedmen of the *Cena* embody two realities of the ancient world: that masters would sometimes educate their slaves, and that such an education could result in luxury for freedmen. However, this education was limited purely to practical skills that could make a slave more valuable. These skills meant that for many freedmen, ‘professional success was the only way...to achieve social standing’. As Verboven states, Roman social standing was largely determined by birth, gender, ethnicity, wealth, education, talent, and life-style. Thus, while the freeborn elite may consider other traits of social standing more honourable, particularly education, for freedmen, honour was achieved almost exclusively through wealth. However, wealth was considered honourable by freeborn men only through honourable means such as land possession. While some freedmen did acquire wealth through land possession, many acquired it through trade, considered by some of the elite as a shameful source of income because of its risky nature and a law which prohibited senators from owning merchant ships. Thus, freedmen came to have a very different definition of honour than the freeborn elite. This is manifested in the social interactions between the two groups, in which the freedmen openly discuss wealth. This is illustrated by Philostratus, who, when describing the deceased Chrysanthus, notes his rise from nothing to riches and concludes: *honeste vivit, honeste obiit* (‘he lived honourably, he died honourably’, *Sat.* 43.1). Similarly, Trimalchio is equally proud of his merchant achievements and his land possessions. His house is decorated with symbols that allude to these origins including bronze naval beaks on doors (*Sat.* 30.1), and depictions of Mercury, god of trade (*Sat.* 29.5). With consideration of many factors of Roman society pertaining

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20 Verboven (2009), 130.
21 Ibid., 130.
22 Ibid., 129.
23 Ibid., 131.
24 Goldman (2008), 59.
25 Ibid., 59.
26 Verboven (2009), 132–3.
to social standing, authentic social attitudes of freedmen can be sourced within the Cena, such as their different definition of honour.

The Cena Trimalchionis is a unique text, masterfully crafted so that reality and fiction blend smoothly together. There are many limitations when approaching the Cena as a socio-historical source for the Neronian period. These limitations can include common problems such as dating, authorship and corruptions in manuscripts, as well as an ambiguous style and an unreliable narrative voice. Furthermore, Petronius skilfully mixes plausible goals with ludicrous ones making it hard to distinguish between the two without consulting other sources. Despite these limitations, with careful consideration of the historical context and societal values, genuine attitudes, particularly regarding freedmen, can be deduced in the text. Thus, the Cena Trimalchionis can be an insightful source into Neronian society, providing its limitations are acknowledged and compensated for through the use of other sources.

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