

A NOTE ON TRIMALCHIO'S ZODIAC DISH

IN their recent article on this subject,¹ Rose and Sullivan suggest that we read : *super scorpionem locustam, super sagittarium oculatam, super capricornum caprum et cornutam*, etc. This is attractive and can, I suggest, be supported by a further argument.

I propose that *locustam* be regarded as a pun on the celebrated lady poisoner of the period, Locusta.² According to Tacitus,³ she was already infamous by the year 54, and continued to be a valuable tool of Nero throughout his reign.⁴ Petronius is fond of puns, and the passage under discussion contains more than one.⁵ And the suggested play on *locusta* may be confirmed by Trimalchio himself, a little later on, in his lecturette on astrology: *in scorpione venenarii et percussores*.⁶

This pun would be in keeping with Petronian humour. It underlines Encolpius' gloomy comment on the zodiac dish.⁷ Finally, it could provide one more small argument (if any more are needed) for the traditional ascription of the *Satyricon* to Nero's Arbiter. A play on the name of the woman who provided the poison for the murders of Claudius and Britannicus, both at dinner parties, seems grimly appropriate to the context of Trimalchio's extravaganza.

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¹ K. F. C. Rose and J. P. Sullivan, 'Trimalchio's Zodiac Dish', *CQ* n.s. xviii (1968), 180-4.

² Her name also appears as Lucusta, but this does not seem fatal to my suggestion.

³ *Ann.* 12. 66: *nuper veneficii damnata et diu inter instrumenta regni habita*. He repeats this information in *Ann.* 13. 15.

⁴ Suetonius, *Nero* 33, 47; Dio, 60. 34; 64. 3. Locusta was finally executed by Galba.

⁵ See J. P. Sullivan, *The 'Satyricon' of Petronius* (Indiana University Press, 1968), 225-8.

⁶ 39. 4 ff.

⁷ 35. 7.