

The Triumphal Entry and the Limits of Satire

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Abstract

As its name implies, Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem in Mark 11:1-11 is often interpreted as a satire of the Roman ritual of the military triumph. In contrast with the parades of Roman generals celebrating their conquest of imperial foes, Jesus' triumph hails the imminent arrival of God's kingdom. However, scholars have suggested that authorial intent is only half the equation of satire and we must also consider its wider reception by audiences other than those for whom the text was written. This article locates Jesus' triumphal entry among other mock triumphs of Republican and Imperial Rome, arguing that an unsympathetic (i.e. elite, Roman, and non-Christian) audience would be unlikely to see the scene as satirical or "subversive" in the manner scholars often suggest. Rather, they would likely have regarded the scene as more akin to depictions of slaves and other socially marginalized figures who were unaware of their own inability to achieve military excellence.

Key Words

Triumphal entry; Mark 11:1-11; Roman triumph; Roman Empire; satire and subversion

Introduction

In Gaius Petronius Arbiter's fictional work *Satyricon*, Trimalchio, a freedman, commissions a mural to commemorate his own ascent from slavery to Roman "greatness" at the guidance of the goddess Minerva (*Satyricon* 29). The mural bears an image that may be familiar to us: a Jewish man of humble origins with an unkempt beard is ushered by a god into the holy city. There, the man will meet Fate and ascend to greater heights than his detractors could ever imagine. But the man depicted in the mural is Trimalchio, not Jesus, and his triumphal procession to Rome is at best a pale imitation of the military ritual. Petronius depicts Trimalchio as a nouveau riche freedman prone to the most ludicrous excesses that money can buy: a gold casket to hold the trimmings of his first beard, a toothpick made of silver, gaudy jewellery, and so on. That a man lacking taste would depict his own manumission in the vein of an ostentatious Roman triumph is hardly surprising.

Like Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem in Mark 11:1-11, Petronius' narrative satirizes, or at least plays with the conventions of, the Roman triumph—a ritualized celebration of military victory over Rome's foes.¹ The precise ritual varied

¹ For more on Jesus' triumphal entry in Mark 11:1-11, see, for example, Catchpole (1984); Duff (1992); Collins (2007, 514-21); Leander (2013, 255-67); Gombis (2018); cf. MacDonald (2000, 102-110); Schmidt (1995; 1997). This article proceeds on the relatively non-controversial assumption that Mark was composed with Christians as its intended readers. That is, Mark was not intended to

depending on instance, though certain “beats” were common in its various iterations.² Official triumphs generally took the form of a three-part parade that began at Rome’s triumphal arch and ended at the Capitoline Hill. The first part celebrated the act of conquest itself, bearing images of the enemy’s military defeat and bringing forth the spoils of war. The second part honoured the victorious general, who rode upon a chariot dressed in a fine toga, with a laurel wreath on his head and a slave holding a gold crown above his head. The final part of the parade lauded the victorious soldiers, who were also given laurel wreaths to wear while processing through the city. After the parade, various sacrifices and executions (e.g. of prisoners of war) took place. These events were sufficiently significant that they needed to be approved by the Roman Senate and added to the *fasti triumphales*—a complete list of Roman triumphal parades (see Degraasi 1954, 90-110).

The triumph and the similar ritual “ovation” only occurred in the city of Rome itself, though other military parades are attested throughout the Mediterranean, including Palestine. David Catchpole (1984) cites twelve examples from Judaea alone, including Alexander the Great (Josephus *Antiquities of the Jews* 11.325-39), Apollonius (2 Macc. 4:21-22), Simon Maccabee (1 Macc. 13:49-51), and Marcus Agrippa (Josephus *Antiquities of the Jews* 16.12-15), all of whom made a triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Catchpole (1984) notes that these stories follow a fairly consistent formula: a) a recognized person achieves victory, almost always military victory; b) they make a formal ceremonial entrance; c) there are greetings from the triumphator or acclamation on his behalf with an invocation of a god; d) the entry to the city climaxes with the person visiting the temple; and e) the triumphator engages in cultic activity, which can be either positive (e.g. sacrificial offering) or negative (e.g. expulsion of unclean elements from the temple).

Mark 11:1-11 coheres especially well with Catchpole’s schema (providing we link it with Mark 11:15-19), but there are certain elements that cannot be easily incorporated into a Roman schema, such as the allusion to Zech. 9:9, where Jerusalem’s king “comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”³ This allusion to Jewish scripture suggests that the proceedings are not to be viewed through a Roman lens alone. Moreover, the donkey’s presence is hardly becoming of a would-be triumphator. Some scholars (e.g. those listed in n. 1) have consequently hypothesized that the strong elements of irony in the episode hint that Mark presents a *satire* of the imperial parade, contrasting the humble donkey and Jesus’ kingdom of God with the splendour and hubris of emperors and generals. In other words, Mark deploys irony, a significant component of satirical discourse, in service of a deeper satire of Roman power.⁴ Thus, early Christians may have interpreted Mark 11:1-11 as Jesus thumbing his nose at Roman imperialism. Though Mark evokes the ritual of the triumph, he undermines its politics by turning the ritual on its head. Jesus’ parade might thus be characterized as an example of situational irony, where the expected outcome of events simply does not occur: the triumph of the son of David eschews overt

“convince” outsiders, but to be read among those already sympathetic to the nascent Christian religion.

² See the definitive discussion in Beard (2007, 80-106).

³ Mark 11:1-11 also has further parallels to Ps. 118:25-26 and Zechariah 14.

⁴ The precise relationship between irony and satire is contentious, but see the helpful discussion of the state of the debate in Kreuz and Roberts (1993).

militarism in favour of a much understated affair, creating a gap between the readers' expectations and the sequence of literary events. For Mark, this counter-triumph, unlike the military ritual, brings about *real* peace, *true* kingship, *authentic* Judaism, and so on, in contrast to preceding regimes. Indeed, the crowd's call of "Blessed is the kingdom of our father David" (Mark 11:10) suggests that Jesus represents an alternative to the present administrative order comprising Roman emperors, governors, and client kings.

There is thus a growing sense among interpreters of Mark 11:1-11 that Jesus' triumphal entry is intended to be read as satire. Hans Leander (2013), for instance, reads the pericope alongside the mockumentary *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* (2006). The protagonist Borat's rendition of a fictional Kazakhstan national anthem to the tune of "The Star-Spangled Banner" at an American rodeo initially excites then outrages the patriotic crowd. Mark's approximation of post-battle rituals and Borat's approximation of American pre-sports rituals both pretend to "learn" from the hegemonic state ideology (whether of Rome or the USA), while undermining it in practice. Scholars often conflate satire with subversion, evidenced in the audacious claims of N. T. Wright, who contends that Jesus imitated and subverted Maccabean military parades as part of a peerless politico-theological programme: "Within his own time and culture, his riding of a donkey over the Mount of Olives, across Kidron, and up to the Temple mount spoke more powerfully than words could have done of a royal claim" (1997, 490). One gets the impression from Wright that the emperor would have abdicated had he only read the gospel of Mark's devastating critique of Roman power.

Readings such as those by Leander and Wright tend to focus upon authorial intent: Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem is interpreted as Mark's deliberate satire of the Roman military triumph. In contrast with the parades of Roman generals celebrating conquest of imperial foes, Mark seeks to showcase Jesus' entrance as the triumphal and imminent arrival of God's kingdom. Such a focus on Mark's aims in this passage may simply be a residual aspect of biblical scholarship's broader (and increasingly unfashionable) tendency to locate meaning primarily in terms of authorial intent.⁵ In this case, scholars have generally determined that the best way to make sense of Mark's satirical enactment of the triumph is by comparing it with "official" renditions of this ritual and then ascertaining those elements where Mark deviates from the official script to understand his satire. This is somewhat out-of-step with literary theorists who note that authorial intent is only one among several components of satire: audience reception can also play an important role in deciding the "satirical" power of a text (e.g. Phiddian 2013; Simpson 2003). Although theoretical work on satire does draw attention to the satirist's re-organization of meaning, there is also a strong emphasis on the circulation of other possible meanings and interpretations, especially among those who are not "in" on

⁵ For example, major commentary series almost universally adopt an "exegetical" perspective that understands their goal as unearthing a biblical text's "original" meaning by excavating the author's intent. Similarly, articles in many major journals are assumed to be "exegetical" unless the author explicitly states otherwise, while mainstream introductory textbooks still treat "exegesis" as the centre of gravity in biblical studies. Of course, excellent work on reader-response theory and reception history has been produced in recent years, but these approaches are still routinely sidelined in biblical studies.

the joke. That is to say, readers often “misinterpret” satire, whether due to their own ignorance, lack of sympathy with the satirist’s goals, or for other reasons. Thus, while Mark’s depiction of the triumphal entry may contain satirical and parodic elements (including those intended by the author) which the gospel’s earliest Christian readers were able to identify, there were other audiences in Roman antiquity, namely those outside the Christian community, who would have had little sympathy for (or interest in) the tale of a Jewish man from an obscure Levantine village and his arrival in Jerusalem.

This then raises the question of how non-Christians from this period may have read biblical satire. New Testament texts had relatively little political effect on broader Roman culture, especially as far as non-Christian readers were concerned. When these texts were noticed by outsiders, surviving evidence suggest their reception was negative. Celsus claimed that the evangelists “had not even a primary education,” to which Origen responded by admitting the deficiencies of the gospels, claiming they were produced by lower-class men lacking the education necessary to compose more erudite literature (*apud* Origen *Contra Celsum* 1.62). Casual perusal of anti-Christian polemic indicates that the lack of education among Christians and the poor literary quality of the gospels were common refrains among critics (e.g. Lucian *Passing of Peregrinus* 11-13; Porphyry *apud* Jerome *Tractatus in Psalmos* 81; Hierocles *apud* Eusebius *Contra Hieroclem* 2). There is thus every reason to think that non-Christians would not have been particularly sympathetic to biblical satire, including the Markan triumphal entry, or to have seen it as especially “subversive” in the manner contemporary scholars often suggest. In the rest of this article, I would like to consider the triumphal entry in light of such polemic: however brilliant a satire of Roman military hubris it might strike modern commentators, we can also consider the possibilities of its non-Christian reception in antiquity. Drawing on literary theories of satire, I read Jesus’ triumphal entry in Mark 11:1-11 alongside “pagan” satirical representations of the Roman triumph in antiquity, arguing that non-Christian readers would likely have regarded this gospel scene as far less subversive than Christian audiences.

When Satire “Fails”

Paul Simpson (2003) suggests that there are three subject positions with respect to any satirical text: the *satirist* (who produces the text, in this case, the author of Mark), the *satiree* (who reads the text, in this case, Mark’s earliest readers), and the *satirized* (the target, whether a person or episode, in this case, the ritual of the Roman triumph). Simpson continues:

Two of these three participants, the satirist and the satiree, are *ratified* within the discursive event. The third entity, the target [i.e. the satirized], is *ex-colluded* and is not normally an “invited participant” in the discourse exchange ... The interactive bonds between the three subject positions in satire are, moreover, open to redefinition in the context of particular satirical humour events. Whereas satire which is successfully “taken up” may draw closer the satirist and the satiree, a failed or “misfired” satire tends to destabilise and reshape the relationships in the triad by serving on the one hand to distance the satirist from the satiree, and on the other, by drawing together the satiree and the satirised target. (2003, 8; original emphasis)

To maintain the desired relationship between satirist, satiree, and satirized (or ex-colluded), the text must not only echo the target discourse (i.e. the satirized discourse) but also impose an ironic distance between the satirist's voice and the satirized. That is to say, it is vital that satire is recognized as ironic and (critically) humorous, rather than a sincere iteration of that which it satirizes.

Robert Phiddian (2013) offers an example of when this relationship does not work as anticipated and satire "fails," illustrating why we might need to look beyond authorial intent when it comes to analysing satire:

On 11 February 2009, the *New York Post* published a cartoon by Sean Delonas that depicts two policemen who have just shot a monkey. The obvious context was the recent killing of a chimpanzee called Travis, who had gone on a rampage in Connecticut. As is often the case in political cartoons, this event in popular media was linked to politics, in the voice bubble that reads "They'll have to find someone else to write the next stimulus bill." The simple implication of the cartoon is that the federal government's fiscal stimulus bill, recently passed by Congress, is so bad that a chimp must have written it. Behind this lies some fairly hackneyed allusion ... to the old idea of an infinite number of monkeys with typewriters eventually writing the works of Shakespeare at random. The explosive thing, however, is the link with the racist cliché concerning African Americans and monkeys. Given that President Obama was the ultimate sponsor of the bill the cartoon attacks, many construed the cartoon as a racist slur on the president and some saw it as an incitement to shoot him. (2013, 49-50)

Thus, regardless of Delonas' intent as a satirist, his cartoon was pregnant with possible meanings that exceeded his purpose and were interpreted in ways he likely did not anticipate, or even ran counter to his rather stale attempt at humour. While Phiddian attributes the controversy to the absence of a shared "satiric frame of mind" between the satirist and his audience, we might more productively return to the categories advanced by Simpson above. The controversy results from a significant gap between the satirist (Delonas himself) and satiree (the audience interpreting a racist sentiment behind his cartoon): the "echo" that many readers heard was not of monkeys-and-the-bill, but of monkeys-and-Obama. This reading was lent credibility by Delonas' previous cartoons that decried purportedly "preferential treatment" for racial minorities (e.g. affirmative action). The satirist's voice was already resonating with a whole other set of associations that extended beyond his intent, some of which were personal (e.g. his own history of publishing cartoons regarding race) and some of which existed in the broader imaginary (e.g. the audience's awareness of racist discourses). Delonas thus seems to have misjudged the distance between satirist and satiree.

There are many other examples of failed satire. Jonathan Swift's famous essay *A Modest Proposal* (1729), now regarded as *the* premier example of English-language political satire, had no discernible effect on British policy in Ireland, nor any significant engagement among Swift's contemporaries (Phiddian 1996)—many simply read it as comedy, such that its more incisive critiques fell by the wayside. It would appear that Swift's "proposal" in the essay—that the best way to solve food shortages was via cannibalism—was too absurd to take the underlying points seriously. More recently, one might think of Paul Verhoeven's 1997 film *Starship*

Troopers, which adapted the straight-faced Robert Heinlein novel of the same name (1959). Initially dismissed by critics as “a nonstop splatterfest so devoid of taste and logic that it makes even the most brainless summer blockbuster look intelligent,” the film is now regarded as one of Verhoeven’s best. Verhoeven took the novel’s militaristic and fascistic politics and rendered them ironic; though the protagonists clearly ascribe to these values, the movie merely *pretends* to do so. Verhoeven encouraged viewers to understand these characters as dupes who engaged in genocide and colonization under the aegis of uncritical patriotism. That is to say, the satire of *Starship Troopers* was initially too clever for its own good. It adapts a novel by Robert Heinlein (an author whose glorification of the military was unrestrained); moreover, few of the actors seem to be “in on the joke,” and Verhoeven’s immediately preceding movie *Showgirls* was widely regarded as atrocious. But perhaps most damning was its resemblance to the genre it satirized: crypto-fascist blockbusters grounded in a righteous campaign of military violence (e.g. the movies of Steven Seagal, Sylvester Stallone, and, since then, Zach Snyder). That is to say, the “ironic distance” between filmmaker and subject matter was not immediately obvious to film critics when it was first released, which led inevitably to its failure as “obvious” satire.

Scholarly discussion of the satirical nature of the triumphal entry has focused largely on authorial intent and its reception among early Christian readers (i.e. the ratified) who were more likely to be “in the know” vis-à-vis its satirical depiction of the triumphal entry. Jesus presents a peaceful and humble (yet still triumphant) entry in contrast with the Roman celebration of war and death. Yet I would like to suggest that this pericope is a prime example of a story likely to misfire among non-Christian readers (i.e. the ex-colluded). In most cases, the failure of satire is a failure of communication between satirist and satiree, but in this case, a third type of failure—one that Simpson did not anticipate—seems to arise. The ex-colluded might reasonably suppose they are *among* the ratified, as we will see that Mark’s triumphal entry bears considerable, possibly unintentional, similarity to other satirical triumphs; in other words, the satire unwittingly draws together the ex-colluded and the satirist. Pivotal to this is the question of ironic distance: where, precisely, does Mark locate the irony in Jesus’ entrance to Jerusalem vis-à-vis the Roman triumph? How does the triumphal entry differ from other satirical accounts of the Roman triumph in a way that might be counter-productive to Mark’s interests? These questions are important. Despite the rise of reader-response approaches in recent decades, the issue of possible meanings and likely interpretation among non-Christians is usually overlooked by biblical commentators. By focusing solely on authorial intent and sympathetic (i.e. Christian) readers, scholars such as N. T. Wright give the impression that texts such as Mark 11:1-11 display “subversive” biblical genius and *sui generis* satire, which has no point of comparison and is without peer. But if we look beyond the early Christian testimonies of the reception of Mark 11:1-11,⁶ and also consider satirical representations of Roman triumphs in “pagan” sources, these texts can further illuminate the pregnant meanings that Mark’s triumphal entry scene might have held for a non-Christian audience at this time.

⁶ Namely, Matt. 21:1-11; Luke 19:28-40; John 12:12-19, *Gospel of Nicodemus* 1:3-6. There is also occasional interest in military parallels among patristic writings, e.g. Justin *1 Apology* 32; Augustine *In Evangelium Johannis tractatus* 51.3-4, Cyril *Commentary on Luke*, Homily 130.

Roman Parodies of the Triumph

Numerous parodies of Roman triumphs survive from antiquity, both visual and literary. Several series of brass tokens depict an emperor celebrating a triumph atop a camel, with a monkey imitating him just out of his sight (see Figure 1).⁷



Figure 1: General and monkey on a camel

Even more provocative is a terracotta medallion depicting a laureled man having sex with a woman, all the while decked out for a triumphal entry (see Figure 2). He, however, is not the true triumphator, as the medallion depicts him holding a crown above the woman's head and saying the words *tu sola nica*, "you alone are victor."⁸



Figure 2: *tu sola nica*

⁷ Brass token, early-first century CE, most examples of this type are 20-24 mm diameter. Photograph: Lutz-Jürgen Lübke. Creative Commons image: Münzkabinett der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin, 18203170 (https://ikmk.smb.museum/object_print.php?id=18203170&lang=en). This is a Roman token, perhaps used for a bathhouse or as a gaming piece. The imperator—possibly the emperor—sits in a chariot on a camel's back waving to an unseen crowd. Behind him is a monkey, just out of his view, imitating the pompous procession. For the various series in which this token is attested, see Buttrey (1973, 62, item 25). For further discussion, see Küter (2016); Jacobelli (1997, 1-28).

⁸ Terracotta medallion, second century CE, 95 mm diameter, discovered in Rhône, France. Drawing: John R. Clarke (1997, 260), after Wuilleumier and Audin (1953, no. 71). Used with permission. On this medallion, an apparent triumph is reversed; instead of a slave holding the crown above the would-be triumphator, a Roman holds the crown above the head of an aloof lover staring at herself in a mirror, proclaiming *her* the sole victor. It was likely originally located in a brothel. See the discussion in Clarke (1998, 260-61). A few scholars prefer a gladiatorial interpretation of the man, e.g. Coulston (2009, 204).

As evidenced with the Trimalchio episode mentioned above, it was commonplace in the literature of the time for slaves who defeated their masters to adopt the language of triumph. This is illustrated further in the comedy *Bacchides* by Roman playwright Plautus, after a slave called Chrysalus tricks a man out of his money:

It has been looked out for—your being the poorest old wretch alive. Here’s the way to carry out your attempts in style! Ah, this is beautiful luck—to be marching along in jubilation, laden with booty. Safe myself, the city captured by guile. I am leading my whole army back home intact. But, spectators, don’t be surprised now that I don’t have a triumph: they’re too common: none of them for me. But the soldiers shall be entertained with wine and honey just the same. Now I’ll convey all this booty to the quartermaster-general at once. (1068-75; trans. Nixon 1916, 437)

The titular character of Plautus’ comedy *Pseudolus* likewise describes his plot against the pimp Ballio in terms of a military triumph:

I have my troops already marshalled in my mind, in double, triple, line of wile and guile, let me meet the enemy where’er I may, I—animated, I may say, by the noble spirit of my sires and by the energy and artful dodges of my own self—shall easily master, easily despoil, my foemen with my flimflam. Now for this common enemy of all of us, mine and yours, this Ballio—I’ll ballistify him in fine shape. Just you watch! Aye, I’ll lead my legions hither; on taking him by storm—an easy matter I’ll make of it for my fellow-citizens—then next lead my troops against this old town forthwith. With that, I’ll load and lavish booty on myself and likewise on my comrades all, on my foemen dismay and flight and let them know that I am I. Such is the stock from which I spring—for me ‘tis seemly to succeed in weighty ventures which will leave me a lustrous name in far days to come. (579-90; trans. Nixon 1930b, 209)

These are hardly isolated cases. Indeed, Plautus’ trickster slaves consistently use overstated military metaphors in their self-descriptions and there are plentiful uses of the trope in works by other authors from the Roman period.⁹ Though the exact words a triumphator would have spoken at the Capitoline Temple have since been lost, many of Plautus’s characters echo what is known of their content. Thus, the slave Toxilus brags in another play by Plautus:

The enemy defeated, the citizens kept safe, the state calm, peace concluded, the war brought to an end, after a successful campaign, with army and garrison intact, now that you have kindly helped us, Jupiter, and all the other heavenly gods, I pay you and express these thanks, because I took a proper revenge on my enemy. Now on this account I shall distribute and share the booty among my comrades. (*Persa* 753-54; trans. Nixon 1930a, 509)

Toxilus’ boast also recalls the words on the triumphal tablet of Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus, quoted by Livy: “Public affairs having been very successfully managed

⁹ Fraenkel (2007, 159-72); Richlin (2017, 224-37). Within the corpus of Plautus alone, see also *Asinaria* 269 (“by my arrival, I bring them greatest booty and triumph”; trans. Nixon 1916, 151), *Pseudolus* 1051 (“go straight this way to the tankard of triumph”; trans. Fraenkel 2007, 161-62), *Amphitruo* 188-92, 655-57, etc. Among other writers, see, for instance, Juvenal *Satires* 10.38-54, Apian *Punic Wars* 66, Apuleius *Metamorphoses* 7.13, Tertullian *Apology* 50.1-4.

and the allies set free, the revenues restored, he brought the army home safe and sound and enriched with booty; for the second time he returned in triumph to the city of Rome” (*History of Rome* 41.28.8-9; cf. *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* 1.541). It is worth recalling that triumphs were not awarded to generals who succeeded in suppressing slave revolts, as slaves were deemed unworthy opponents. At best, such generals received an *ovation*; Crassus was even derided for accepting honours on account of his victory in the Third Servile War (see Diodorus Siculus *Bibliotheca historica* 36.10.1; Plutarch *Crassus* 11.8). Imitations of the triumph, ranging from phrasing with great precision to more vague parallels, abound in the literature from this period.

There is a great deal of diversity to these scenes; satiree, satirized, and the self-positioning of the satirist all differ significantly, as evidenced in their wildly different sympathies and the objects of satire. To use the language of stand-up comedy, sometimes these depictions “punch upwards” (i.e. mock those in power), whereas others “punch downwards” (i.e. mock those deemed lower in the social order). It is significant, however, that these scenes all satirize through comedy: the notion that a slave, a freedman, an aloof lover, or a monkey might consider themselves worthy of the honours of a triumph would have struck a humorous chord among audiences at this time. Roberta Stewart (2013, 178) contends that the humour of such scenes arrives from two distinct angles. First, the attempt at self-definition in terms that were inherently out of reach for the ostensive triumphator—given their lowly legal status, lack of manly virtue, and poor or non-existent military experience—render these scenarios absurd. Second, the purported triumph results from dishonourable—even shameful—behaviour: deception, philandering, theft, and the like. The notion that the success of such activities would warrant public honours is unthinkable and undermines “triumphal” self-characterization. Both comedic aspects would have tapped into widespread prejudices against slaves and the lower classes (regardless of what was actually being satirized): their perceived oft-deceptive nature and outsized ambitions. These mock-triumphs lack specificity to the extent that the satirical target was both broad and obvious, leaving little room for the joke to misfire: any gap between satirist and satiree could only result from peculiar mental gymnastics.

Mark among the Parodies

How, then, might we understand the satirical elements of Mark 11:1-11 in light of such parodies? First, the fact that the triumphal entry was an existing type-scene prone to satire strengthens the argument that some kind of imitation is operating in the gospel accounts of this event. Insofar as other texts did so, and sometimes with fewer points of correspondence to the ritual itself, Mark 11:1-11 would be entirely consistent with the literary satire of the early Roman period. Second, it is apparent how these satirical scenes were perceived by Romans. Mock triumphs are consistently placed in fictional and humorous contexts that highlight their absurdity. This absurdity—importantly—is humorous precisely *because* the ostensive triumphator is incapable of comprehending the gap between his own ambitions and what his social position actually allows him to achieve. This is perhaps most evident in Trimalchio’s tactless frivolity. The absurdity of his celebrations is only intelligible in light of his change in status; no longer a slave, he is now a new-money

entrepreneur who misperceives the sources of social capital in aristocratic Roman culture.

There is nothing to suggest that elite non-Christian readers would interpret Jesus' triumphal entry any differently from how they would interpret Trimalchio's hubris, or Plautus' plucky slaves, or the woman mid-intercourse, or even the monkey following the emperor. The gospels tell the story of a low-status provincial who purveys counter-intuitive wisdom and tricks those in higher authority through occasional word games. In short, Jesus in many ways resembles tricksters akin to those ascribed such mock triumphs. That is to say, regardless of Mark's intent, a context was already prepared for the interpretation of Mark's triumphal entry by denizens of the Roman Empire unfamiliar with Jewish scripture. The mock triumph was a recognizable type-scene across social spheres: from the low-brow populism of Plautus' plays to a medallion decorating a high-class brothel. The farcical nature of these tales lent no credibility to their purported triumphators' claims. Rather, the humour in these mock-triumphs served to undermine triumphal pretensions by highlighting the absurdity of the triumphator's achievements: tricking a pimp, admiring yourself in a mirror mid-coitus, or (in the monkey's case) assuming the crowd is cheering for you rather than for the emperor. In none of these instances is the mock-triumphator "in on the joke." An ironic distance lies between their pretension and the reality of their situation.

Roman mock triumphs thus consistently deploy *dramatic* irony, where the satiree knows something the characters do not, in this case, the gap between their self-perceived status and their actual status. This contrasts with what biblical scholars often regard as the use of *situational* irony in Mark 11:1-11, where the character's plans produce the opposite result of what the satiree expects. In other words, for Mark, the humour or provocation operates in the gap between the satiree's expectations of a "proper" triumph and the actual triumph that follows; the satirized for Mark is the "proper" Roman triumph. This contrasts with other mock triumphs, where the humour lies in the gap between the purported triumphator's grandiose self-understanding and the satiree's awareness of their inability to achieve such a status; if the defeat of slaves was unworthy of a triumph (as Crassus demonstrates above), how much less so slaves' own petty victories!¹⁰ Consistent across these Roman texts is that the purported triumphator is the satirized. To Roman readers versed in such triumphal satire, the Markan Jesus might thus appear

¹⁰ Here we might recall the contempt many Romans felt for emperors who held unearned triumphs. For instance, Cassius Dio on Caligula: "They also granted him the right to celebrate an ovation, as if he had defeated some enemies" (*Historia Romana* 59.16.11: τὰ τε ἐπινίκια τὰ μικρότερα ὡς καὶ πολεμίους τινὰς νενικηκότι πέμψαι αὐτῷ ἔδωκαν; trans. Lange 2016, 106). Like the slave triumphs above, Cassius Dio loads the situation with dramatic irony. See the discussion in Lange (2016). Perhaps the most significant example of a parodic triumph *lacking* such dramatic irony is the instance when the Parthian general Surena held a mock triumph to celebrate his defeat of the Roman general Crassus (Plutarch *Crassus* 32–33). Surena's elaborate triumph included parading his Roman captives around, dressing a Crassus-lookalike as a woman, and using the decapitated head of Crassus in a play. It is precisely because Surena succeeded militarily that his parody of a distinctively *Roman* ritual takes on a significance different from these other mock triumphs. Note also that the argument here only concerns the literary representation of the triumphal entry in the Gospels—surely, if there is a historical basis to the story, the actual events would have been perceived quite differently by those witnessing it in person.

no different from the other marginalized “triumphator” figures with delusions of military grandeur.

The potential for the Markan triumph to misfire among non-Christians for precisely this reason was recognized over three centuries ago by the Anglican priest Matthew Hole: “This of our Saviour’s will appear to a carnal Eye but as a Mock-Triumph, or a Triumph in Burlesque, wherein the Attendants were mean, and the humble Conqueror came riding on an Ass, the most abject and despicable of all the Beasts of Burden” (1716, 4.1.12). That is to say, whatever subversive brilliance scholars might attribute to the Markan critique of Roman military might, it would not only have had little impact on non-Christian audiences, but Jesus’ triumphal entry would have likely been dismissed as the tale of a man whose outsized ambitions were matched only by his lowly status.

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