

## *Recusatio* as Rhetorical Construct: Self-Fashioning and Social Capital in the *Meditations*

In the last decade, there has been a significant reevaluation of Marcus Aurelius and his role in the Antonine Period (e.g. Grieb 2017; Van Ackeren 2012 moving away from Birley 1987). This paper seeks to contribute to this turn in scholarship by examining Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations* and the relationship of this literary work to the *recusatio imperii* (as well as *cunctatio* and *refutatio*, see Wallace-Hadrill 1982; cf. Béranger 1948; Hammond 1956; Huttner 2004). I offer a more cynical reading of the *Meditations*, which moves beyond the debate concerning imperial authenticity and the narrative of “good” and “bad” emperors. In a post-Flavian, post-Domitian principate, the *Meditations* continue a rhetorical shift inaugurated by Trajan. No longer was the imperial image about asserting absolute power, but rather, projecting an image of consensus between the senate and the imperial persona in the tradition of Augustus.

In this cynical approach to the *Meditations* I demonstrate the outward facing nature of Marcus Aurelius' writing, particularly in the context of the Second Sophistic and the aristocratic prerogative of *paideia* within the Roman elite (following Whitmarsh 2001, and Horst in Grieb 2017). The act of doing philosophy, in writing or otherwise, allowed Marcus Aurelius to compete with his “peers” and developed another arena for aristocratic competition and the accumulation of social capital. Deploying Roller's (2001) concept of the social economy of elites in imperial dining contexts during the Julio-Claudian dynasty, I contend that the *Meditations* are a part of a parallel paradigm in this broader imperial social economy during the Antonine Period.

Critical to this analysis is the relationship of the first book of the *Meditations* to the rest of the collected writings. Marcus Aurelius undergoes a literary *rite de passage*, becoming an authoritative Stoic philosopher; this mirrors his ascension to imperial autocrat. Thus, having

attained a philosophical position of authority, he can declaim Stoic philosophical thought which other elites who are engaged in this social economy will emulate and internalize in their own ideological world view. In this sense, the literary philosopher-king of the *Meditations* compliments and continues the real *recusationes* which are attributed to Marcus Aurelius by Cassius Dio and the *Historia Augusta*. Certain statements throughout the rest of the *Meditations* form a series of authoritative *recusationes* on the part of Marcus Aurelius, which might then be emulated within his social milieu.

In this way, the autocrat does philosophy as a form of *recusatio* which is both a literary endeavor and a form of engagement with his senatorial peer group. Through this reading of the text, it becomes clear that the *Meditations* are not merely an intimate journal, but yet another tool for imperial self-fashioning, representation, and propaganda. Indeed, this self-fashioning was so effective that broadly speaking it remains part of Marcus Aurelius' imperial persona to this day. Such a tool is useful inasmuch as it facilitates the illusion of consensus between the major factions involved in governing the empire and serves to mask the absolute power of the autocrat.

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