

Imperial Love Letters?:

Homoerotics in the Correspondence of Marcus Aurelius and Fronto

Marcus Cornelius Fronto has been, and still remains, a bit of an enigma. Although famous as an orator and as the imperial tutor of the Antonine dynasty, Fronto was not been a topic of much research in 20th century classical scholarship. However, in the new millennium, scholarship on Fronto has begun to recognize his letters to Lucius Verus and Marcus Aurelius as valuable both in terms of the primary sources they provide the social historian and in the literary artistry they employ. Moreover, the relationship between Fronto and Marcus has been of particular interest to scholars, as their relationship is often painted as amorous throughout the corpus.

Scholarship on the relationship has tended to take one of two approaches to it. One branch, perhaps best exemplified by Richlin 2006, delineates a potential arc of the relationship and argues for the strong possibility of homoerotic dimensions. Another branch, including Laes (2009), downplays much of the potential eroticism, explaining the intimacy displayed as part of the long-standing tradition of *amicitia* in Roman epistolography.

A perfect example of the complexities of this relationship can be seen in a pair of letters between the two men: *ad M. Caesarem* 4.1 and 4.2. Throughout these letters a clear homoerotic dimension can be detected, as well as a yearning by Marcus for an opportunity to act on his emotions, an opportunity that seemingly is denied to him. In 4.1, Fronto writes a letter of effusive praise to Marcus, in which he extols the *virtus* of the young man, comparing his masculinity to that of Orpheus, who was famous in antiquity for his non-normative sexuality. Fronto goes on to argue that Marcus' *virtus* was innate and did not need to be shaped at all by

Fronto's teachings, a potential reference to a pederastic relationship. In 4.2, Marcus responds to Fronto's praise with his own effervescence, lavishing complements and gratitude for Fronto's love for Marcus. Marcus' response reaches a climax with the statement that his only regret is that he be able to pursue Fronto's love to the highest height (*summum columnen*), as it has caused him to burn with passion (*suscenseo*). Marcus concludes his letter with multiple references to the *Sota* of Ennius, a lost work whose topic was known to have been the non-normative lives of *cinaedi*.

This paper will offer a close reading of these two letters and will argue that, at the minimum, the relationship between Fronto and Marcus is constructed on homoerotic lines. Moreover, attention will also be given to potential socio-cultural constraints that could be causing Marcus to curtail his love for Fronto.

Bibliography

- Laes, C. (2009). "What Could Marcus Aurelius feel for Fronto?", *Studia Humaniora Tartuensia* 10.A.3, pp. 1-7.
- Richlin, A. (2006). *Marcus Aurelius in Love: The Letters of Marcus and Fronto*. Chicago.