

Eloquence rules: the ambiguous image of Hadrian in Fronto's correspondence

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This paper seeks to investigate the image of Hadrian in Fronto's correspondence against the background of the Roman literary culture of the Antonine age (as represented by Fronto, Gellius, and Apuleius). The culture of the Antonine age, for which Fronto was a central trendsetter, was highly indebted to the role model of Hadrian as a learned and eloquent Roman emperor, who aimed to embody the highest authority not only on a political but also on an intellectual level. Hadrian's ambitions and preferences can be shown to be paradigmatic for our understanding of the interrelatedness of those two levels in constructions of elite identity in Antonine literary communication. The literary and rhetorical tastes of Hadrian, who possibly recommended Fronto to Antoninus Pius as teacher of Roman rhetoric for the latter's future successors on the throne (Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus), helped to shape the most important characteristics of Antonine literary culture, such as miscellaneous polymathy, literary excellence in both Latin and Greek, a renewed interest in Roman archaic poetry and a reappraisal of pre-classical orators such as Cato the Elder as models for imperial eloquence (Hist. Aug. *Hadr.* 16,5). Hadrian paved the way for an era in which a broad spectrum of knowledge and literary education could serve as powerful articulations of Roman elite identity – even (or especially!) in cases in which such knowledge appeared outlandish or questionable, such as a curiosity for magic and divination (which Hadrian possessed, according to Dio Cassius 69,11,3; cf. Tert. *Apol.* 5,7) or forms of literary activity which seemed to be trivial or frivolous, for example (homo-)erotic poetry (cf. Apul. *apol.* 11,3; Hist. Aug. *Hadr.* 14,9) or word-splitting debates.

Hadrian's intensive interaction with his circle of learned friends (among them the intriguing figure of Favorinus, the Gallic sophist, stands out; cf. Hist. Aug., *Hadr.* 15,10-13) is an important framework for our understanding of the complex role of the Roman intellectual in the second century A.D. as an engaging companion of those who were in power (Philostratus, *Vit. soph.* 1, 8 p. 490). According to a biographical anecdote on Hadrian, the emperor humiliated his learned friends by deriding their erudition while showering them with honours (Hist. Aug. *Hadr.* 16,8-9). The learned emperor's difficult reputation is also reflected in Fronto's references to his earlier contacts with Hadrian, which he sets in clear contrast with his present affectionate relationship with Antoninus Pius by emphasising his awe and reverence for Hadrian, whom he did not dare to love because of a lack of confidence (*fiducia*; cf. *ad M. Caes.* 2,4, p. 24-25 van den Hout). Hadrian's critical attitude towards intellectuals and his questioning of their authority also allow us to view the competitive or sometimes even polemical nature of interactions between intellectuals in the 2nd century A.D., of which we see reflections in the lively anecdotes of Gellius' *Attic Nights*, in a context of imperial scrutiny.

That the role of the Roman intellectual in the decades after Hadrian's rule moved beyond providing 'balm for the soul' for the busy statesman can be demonstrated especially by the correspondence of Fronto. Both the letter in which Fronto congratulates Lucius Verus on the brilliant eloquence of his report of his victories in the Parthian War (Fronto, *epist. ad Ver. imp.* 2) and the *Principia Historiae* (Fronto's letter containing a kind of prologue to the planned History of the Parthian War) introduce one of Hadrian's heroes from the Roman past, Cato the Elder, as the paradigmatic statesman who embodies rhetorical *and* martial excellence at the same time. For Fronto, Cato's speeches not merely deserve to be read for their language: he is the 'working example' of the Frontonian maxim that Eloquence is the true Emperor of mankind and that a leading role in oratory goes hand in hand with true military leadership – they are two sides of the same coin. Studying rhetoric with Fronto for so many years, the letter implies, has led Lucius Verus to military victory. This letter – in which 'Emperors and Eloquence' is the central theme – acknowledges Hadrian as an emperor who was able to write his own speeches and whose eloquence had a touch of the coloration of archaic Latin (cf. *epist. ad Ver. Imp.* 2,13, a late antique annotation: *ueteris eloquentiae colorem adumbratum ostendit Hadriana oratio*). Moreover, in *epist. ad M. Caes.* 2,4, Fronto had noted that in the Senate he had often praised Hadrian, whose speeches were still in circulation.

Yet, Fronto also draws attention to the contrasts between Trajan and Hadrian as military leaders, setting Hadrian's consolidating policy against Trajan's successful expansion of the Empire (cf. *Principia hist.* 6 *fortissimi imperatoris Traiani*). Just like Aulus Gellius,

who stages Favorinus' discussion of Cato the Elder as an early master of Roman rhetoric in the symbolic setting of the Trajanic Forum (*Noctes Atticae* 13,25), Fronto draws attention to Roman imperial conquest as an important context for the production of literary culture and education (cf. also *De Bello Parthico* 9).

Choosing the form of epistolary correspondence with the Emperor, which recalls Pliny's tenth Book of Epistles, Fronto takes the opportunity to shape his exclusive relationship with the members of the imperial court and to portray his own authority as a man of letters. Yet, in spite of many parallels between Pliny and Fronto, also in their careers as famous advocates, Fronto's epistolary self-portrayal is strikingly different from that of Pliny. Although Fronto's attitude towards Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus sometimes merges into that of the panegyrist, especially when he praises the latter's great deeds in Armenia, he never abandons his role of teacher of rhetoric. In his 'correspondence course' in Roman literary culture, Fronto invites his powerful pupils, Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus, to shape their identity and policy as Emperors by actively engaging with the imperial virtues and vices embodied by the *exempla* from the more distant and more recent past, including Trajan and Hadrian. What is more, Fronto self-consciously articulates and consolidates his own role as the learned friend and tutor of the emperors, which owed so much to the cultural developments in the Trajanic-Hadrianic age, but also marked a further emancipation of the intellectual in his relationship with the emperor since the Antonines were on the throne. By articulating comparative judgments on the qualities and defects of the emperors of the recent past, Fronto empowers his position as a teacher and mentor of the emperors of the future.

In his contrasting references to Trajan and Hadrian, Fronto stages two complementary role models for Marcus, who embodied either eloquence (Hadrian) or efficient military rule (Trajan); Fronto presents himself as the teacher who educates the Emperor to embody both qualities ('Eloquence rules'). This forms part of Fronto's strategy of self-fashioning as a *Prinzenerzieher*, who outshines his predecessors on many levels. We can see Fronto's detracting references to Seneca, the educator and ghost-writer of Emperor Nero, as a part of this strategy. Although Fronto apparently limits his criticism to lampooning Seneca for his effeminate, corrupt style (*De orationibus*, p. 153-160 van den Hout), a deeper programmatic level can be observed in his critical attitude, which unmasks the failures of a famous predecessor and role model. As the pages of Tacitus famously reveal, Seneca not only failed in teaching Nero to become a good speaker (he wrote the emperor's speeches and letters himself), but even more blatantly failed in his role as the emperor's moral educator and guide.

In terms of literary interaction, Fronto's gallery of eloquent emperors from the more distant past, presented in his letter to Lucius Verus (*epist. ad Ver. imp.* 2,1, p. 118-132 van den Hout, see esp. 2,1,10), echoes Tacitus' depiction of the audience's negative reaction to Nero's first public speech, where a similar gallery occurs (*ann.* 13,3,2). By implication, Fronto's educational programme aims at avoiding the defects about which the older Roman citizens in Tacitus' scene are complaining, as they comment upon the young emperor's need of another person's eloquence (*alienae facundiae eguisse*). Behind the critical attitude of the older Roman citizens, who compare the present with the past, we can hear the implicit moral comment of the author Tacitus (compare also the views expressed on rhetorical decline in Tacitus' *Dialogus*). Against this background of 'literary interaction', Fronto's programme can be seen as responding to the past in a corrective mode, motivating his pupils to continue the 'gallery of eloquent emperors' and to avoid defects and failures from the past, while pointing out the essential connection between studying rhetoric and military/imperial success. The implication is: The key to becoming a good and eloquent Emperor, who writes his own speeches and proves to be a good ruler, cannot be in the hands of a ghost-writer with an effeminate style like Seneca, but only in a manly mentor like Fronto, who forms the emperor's character on many levels with authoritative Roman *exempla* like Cato the Elder.

The role model of Hadrian helped to shape the Antonine cultural environment, in which Fronto, Gellius, and Apuleius could thrive as intellectuals and mentors. On a physiognomical level, the transition to a new kind of era with a new kind of emperor is visible in the wearing of a beard: Hadrian is the first emperor to wear the *Bildungsbart*, and his example was followed by Antoninus Pius and Marcus Aurelius. Yet, there is one aspect that forms a clear watershed between the so-called Antonine age and the preceding Hadrianic period, and this is the warm and affectionate atmosphere of loving friendship between the ruler and his mentor (*contubernium*). Warm and personal expressions of love that characterised the relationship between Fronto and Antoninus Pius, Lucius Verus, and

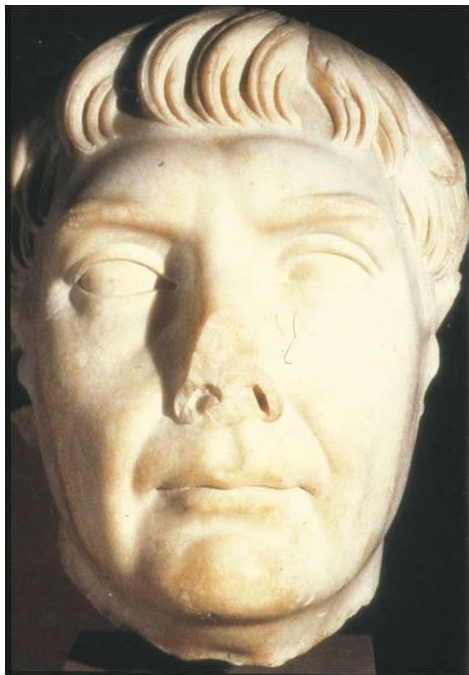
especially Marcus Aurelius permeate the whole Frontonian correspondence. This essential difference from the recent past, where there was no room for personal feelings towards the emperor beyond reverence, is commented upon by Fronto in an early letter to Marcus (*ad M. Caes.* 2,4, p. 24-25 van den Hout):

Divom Hadrianum avom tuom laudavi in senatu saepenumero studio inpenso et propenso quoque; et sunt orationes istae frequentes in omnium manibus. Hadrianum autem ego, quod bona venia pietatis tuae dictum sit, ut Martem Gradivom, ut Ditem patrem propitium et placatum magis volui quam amavi. Quare? Quia ad amandum fiducia aliqua opus est et familiaritate: Quia fiducia mihi defuit, eo, quem tantopere venerabar, non sum ausus diligere. Antoninum vero ut solem, ut diem, ut vitam, ut spiritum amo, diligo, amari me ab eo sentio.

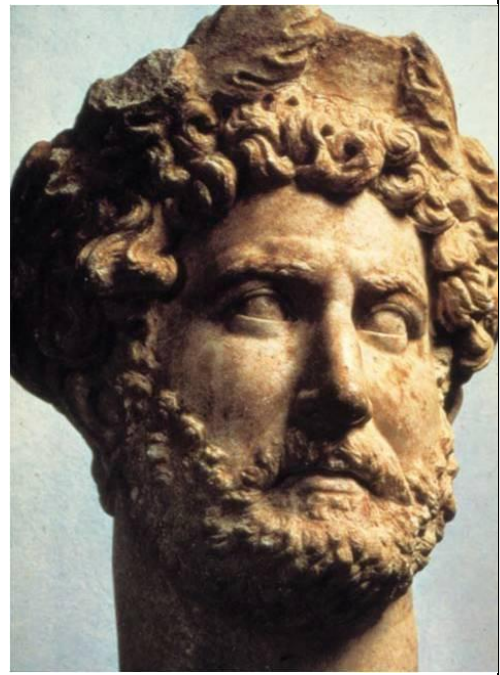
“I praised the deified Hadrian, your grandfather, in the senate on a number of occasions with great enthusiasm, and I did this willingly, too. And these speeches are always in everyone’s hands. But, if it can be said – respectfully acknowledging your devotion towards your grandfather – I wanted to appease and assuage Hadrian as I would Mars Gradivus or Father Dis, rather than to love him. Why? Because the act of love requires a degree of confidence and intimacy. Since I possessed no such confidence myself, it stands to reason that although I showed Hadrian great reverence, I could not love him. I do actually love and esteem Antoninus, as I do the sun, the day, my life and very breath, and I feel that I am loved by him in return.”

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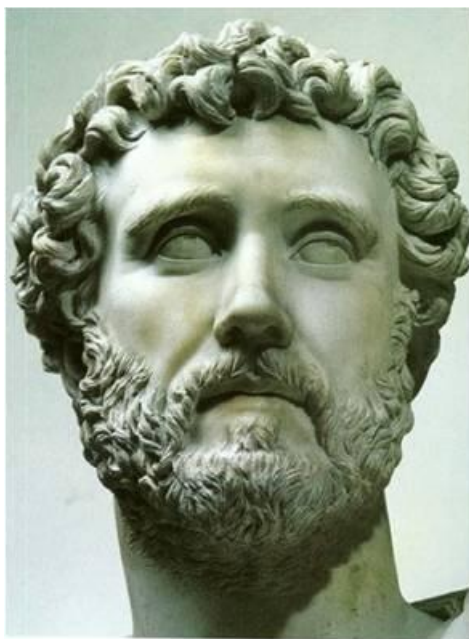
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Trajan



Hadrian



Antoninus Pius



Marcus Aurelius