

# WHAT COULD MARCUS AURELIUS FEEL FOR FRONTO?\*

Christian Laes

## Abstract

Were Marcus Aurelius and Fronto in love? Does the correspondence between master Fronto and prince Marcus Aurelius prove that their relationship was a fully sexual one? Were both lovers playing dangerous games? This article explores the various possibilities in a relationship which may at first sight seem like a relationship of sexual passion. Contrary to the Amy Richlin thesis, I will contend that it is not justified to interpret the letters as a correspondence between a gay master and his beloved pupil. Taking a closer look at both the literary and the socio-cultural context, one comes to understand what we can and what we cannot know about language games and bodily games of sex in antiquity.

By the middle of the fourth century, it seems as if the Roman elite got weary and somewhat suspicious of the eulogies of love between a somewhat older man and a male partner of considerably younger age.<sup>1</sup> Such discourse involved abundant display of affection, tears and emotions, and could easily arouse the suspicion of weakness and effeminacy. In both Greek and Latin literature, it was well elaborated in the second half of the first century A.D. by Martial and by Statius in some of his *Silvae*.<sup>2</sup> In the second century, several pieces of writing praised the relationship between the emperor Hadrian and his favourite Antinoüs.<sup>3</sup> Herodes Atticus publicly announced his predilection for his three pet-children or *trophimoi*.<sup>4</sup> All of these cases have been studied in detail in recent scholarly literature.

So has another second-century instance: the intensive correspondence of imperial teacher Marcus Cornelius Fronto, with his pupil and prince, the future emperor Marcus Aurelius in the years 139–148. At this moment, Fronto who was born in about 100 A.D. was in his forties, while the young prince, born in 121 A.D, was in his late teens and early twenties. In a provocative booklet, Amy Richlin, a distinguished scholar in the field of ancient sexuality, has used these letters to prove that the relationship between Marcus Aurelius and Fronto was in fact a fully sexual, physically erotic

---

\* Many thanks go to Toon Van Houdt (Catholic University of Leuven), to Beert Verstraete (Acadia University) as well as to the anonymous referees of *Studia Humaniora Tartuensia* for valuable suggestions.

<sup>1</sup> Aurelius Victor, *Caes.* 14 (*Nos rem in medio relinquemus quamquam in remisso ingenio suspectam aestimantes societatem aevi longe imparilis*; on the relationship between Hadrian and Antinoüs); *Scriptores Historiae Augustae, Hadr.* 14.5–6 (*Antinum suum, dum per Nilum navigat, perdidit, quem muliebriter flevit. De quo varia fama est aliis eum devotum pro Hadriano adserentibus, aliis, quod et forma eius ostentat et nimia voluptas Hadriani*). See the article by N. Boymel Kampen, 'What could Hadrian feel for Antinoös? Emotional possibilities in a story of sexual passion' (Boymel Kampen 2007). As is clear from the title, Boymel Kampen's very interesting study has been a major source of inspiration for this article.

<sup>2</sup> A poem on the boy Glaucias, the deceased pet child of Atedius Melior (*Silv.* 2.1), another hexametrical poem on Philetus, the beloved boy of Flavius Ursus (*Silv.* 2.6), a remarkable encomium on the hairlocks of Flavius Earinus, the castrated favourite of the emperor Domitian (*Silv.* 3.4), and a mournful poem on the death of Statius' own beloved boy (*Silv.* 5.5). For recent literature on these Statius poems and their peculiar discourse of love, I refer to Bernstein 2005 and Laes 2010 [forthcoming].

<sup>3</sup> Vout 2007: 52–135.

<sup>4</sup> Pomeroy 2007: 46–65.

relationship.<sup>5</sup> Richlin's assertion raises intriguing questions on the relationship between the language of homoeroticism and the physical practices of homosexuality in the Roman world. Since I do not agree with Richlin's central argument, I will elaborate upon this point, passing over the numerous merits which her publication unquestionably possesses.<sup>6</sup>

In order to get an understanding of Fronto's correspondence, it is indispensable to know that scholars generally believe that Fronto did not intend to publish his letters. They were preserved by his son-in-law and daughter and later published by an anonymous admirer of Fronto's archaic Latin. The collection was known to the fourth century grammarian Charisius, but somehow disappeared in the transition from late antiquity to the early Middle Ages, one copy on a manuscript being erased in the late seventh century. Already in antiquity, Fronto had been renowned for his brilliant eloquence and mastery of archaic Latin. For centuries, classicists intensely deplored the loss of his collection of letters. In 1815, a discovery in the Ambrosian library in Milan by the future cardinal A. Mai elicited high scholarly hopes: on a palimpsest the Fronto text appeared to be hidden beneath the text of the first council of Chalcedon. Mai published 'his' Fronto for the first time hastily in the same year. Since then, his edition has become a popular playground for textual criticism and textual emendation by nineteenth and twentieth century philologists. S. Naber produced an edition which was itself not viewed as perfect, with the Teubner series in 1867. E. Hauler devoted more than half a century to the study of the almost illegible codex, publishing his partial results and emendations in more than forty scholarly publications, always looking forward to the new and final edition, which never appeared. The Loeb edition by C. R. Haines made the text available in a good English translation, and attempted a chronological arrangement of the correspondence. The merit of producing the standard edition up till now (though not definitive at all) goes to the Dutch scholar M. P. J. van den Hout who produced his text in the Teubner series in 1988, as well as an extensive commentary in 1999.<sup>7</sup> However, ever since Mai had first published his text, Fronto's star immediately fell. The content of the letters appeared to be trivial and boring: „the man was fatuous and pedantic, the contents of his letters insipid when their emotions were not downright embarrassing“.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps it was this bad reputation that kept social and cultural historians away from approaching these letters. This is all together unjustified, since they prove to be a rich source providing us with vital information on for instance Roman attitudes towards children and childhood.<sup>9</sup> Recently, the

---

<sup>5</sup> Richlin 2006.

<sup>6</sup> It is a joy to read Richlin's vibrant translation. Besides, in an introduction of about thirty pages, Richlin succeeds in bringing together information on very diverse matters as Fronto's life, the text tradition, sex and gender in the Roman empire, literature, rhetoric and pedagogy, marriage, illness of the body, kissing, as well as suggestions for further reading both on ancient sexuality and on nineteenth century Victorian scholarship on same-sex male relationships in Greece and Rome. Richlin astonishingly succeeds in writing both for a general and a specialist audience. The general index and the concordance make this book a valuable tool for classicists (the difficulties in tracing down a particular Fronto passage in various editions are indeed notorious).

<sup>7</sup> van den Hout 1988 (on p. LXIII–LXXIX the editor lively describes the history of former editors and editions); van den Hout 1999.

<sup>8</sup> Champlin 1980: 2 (reporting on nineteenth and twentieth century scholarly opinions on Fronto).

<sup>9</sup> Recent studies have acknowledged Fronto's importance in this respect: Rawson 2003 and Backe-Dahmen 2006. See also Eyben & Laes 2005; Laes 2005; Claassen 2007.

Canadian scholar Pascale Fleury has been important in pointing out Fronto's literary merits.<sup>10</sup>

Richlin strenuously repeats her central thesis. The correspondence between Fronto and Marcus Aurelius would be of great value for students of gay history (2006: 6), the letters being one of those rare cases where we actually hear about the boy's side in a pederastic relation (2006: 8). Still, according to Richlin, in this love relation the master Fronto was playing a much riskier game than his pupil (2006: 25). This sounds as a John Boswell revival. Many classical scholars will remember Boswell's engaged quest for homosexuals, always concerned of detecting gay people and homosexual attraction in Roman antiquity, Christian late antiquity, the western, Islamic and Greek early Middle Ages up to celibatary and mystically inspired monks as Aelred of Rivault to the gay literature of the high Middle Ages. Indeed, Richlin mentions Boswell as one of the very few scholars who have ventured to say that Fronto's letters were loveletters (2006: 6)!<sup>11</sup> Though Richlin never goes as far as claiming a homosexual identity for Fronto and Marcus Aurelius, altogether her approach comes quite close to the rather old-fashioned habit of „detecting gays in history“. As for the fact that virtually no previous scholars have noticed the amatory character of the letters, she refers to the generalisation that these letters could express extreme devotion as a polite matter of form or that sentimental friendship does not necessarily imply physical expression, as well as to the widespread cult of Marcus Aurelius as a saintly hero which continues up to now, a reputation he earned from his *Meditations* (2006: 6–8).<sup>12</sup> While she may very well be right in thinking about the social mores that have consistently silenced scholarly explorations of homoerotic language and practice, her claims do not necessarily prove anything on the nature of Fronto's and Marcus Aurelius' relationship.

What brings Richlin to her thesis is the constant mention of exuberant sentimentality, bodily affection and kissing in the letters — a habit which is indeed striking to modern ears. Fronto plainly writes to Marcus Aurelius that nothing is more agreeable to him than his kiss. He senses delicious scent in Marcus' kiss and neck. When he receives letters from his travelling pupil, he compares his feelings to the emotions of a lover who watches his beloved approaching him over a rough and dangerous road. The romance between Hero and Leander is even alluded to.<sup>13</sup> Writing to the emperor's mother Domitia Lucilla, Fronto claims to have composed a eulogy for her and her son in the same way as Greek lovers picture their beloved ones on vases.<sup>14</sup> Marcus Aurelius boasts that Fronto deserves a Greek honorary inscription, as a winner in the contest of lovers. He would even consider a twosome with Fronto's wife Cratia: undoubtedly he would win the contest, since he loved Fronto more than any one else.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> A French translation by her appeared in 2003. Fleury (2006) has repeatedly demonstrated how Fronto's literary games are occasions *par excellence* to show off his concepts on the ethics of language. See also Fleury 2007.

<sup>11</sup> Referring to Boswell 1980: 134, note 40.

<sup>12</sup> Note the fact that in *Meditations* 1.16 Marcus Aurelius claimed to have refrained from relationships with boys, as well as to have preserved his youth and not to have made proof of his virility before the proper season.

<sup>13</sup> Letter 45 in Richlin's translation = *Ad M. Caesarem et invicem Liber* 3.13. See p. 46, 15–17 van den Hout on Marcus' kisses; p. 46, 25–27 van den Hout on the travelling lover; p. 47, 1–2 van den Hout on Hero and Leander.

<sup>14</sup> *Epistulae Graecae* 1 (p. 23, 9–10 van den Hout).

<sup>15</sup> Letter 17 in Richlin's translation = *Ad M. Caesarem et invicem Liber* 2.5 (p. 26, 3–5 van den Hout).

But do we really need to consider these expressions of corporal affection and kissing as indications that Marcus and Fronto were homosexual lovers?

Firstly, ancient epistolography and ancient literature in general are permeated by what one could call „rhetorical practice“: genuine feelings are firmly embedded in rhetorical conventions, so that we have the impression that ancient writers always somehow conceal themselves. Expressions of *amor* in letters are indeed sometimes commonplaces when correspondents actually felt no real warmth towards each other. We may of course assume the possibility that Fronto’s utterances are so exuberant that they must be more than mere clichés. But it might also be the case that Fronto and young Marcus were, in a literary game of allusions, as *personae* playing the parts of *erastēs* and *eromenos* — this does not bring us any closer to a possible reality behind the letters (which, according to some modern literary theorists, would be pointless to inquire into, a point of view which I as a social historian do not endorse).<sup>16</sup>

Secondly, kissing is very much a culturally determined matter, and it is methodologically unsound to transfer our habits and conceptions to other civilisations or periods of time. It is well known that Romans in daily life were frantic kissers: in a society where close physical proximity reigned, high class social equals kissed each other when greeting.<sup>17</sup> The habit of kissing was so widespread that it was at times forbidden to avoid the spread of contagious disease.<sup>18</sup> From Catullus (*Carm.* 9.9) we know about good friends passionately kissing each other on the mouth and the eyes, a demonstration of tenderness which seems strange to less expansive people from other cultures. Travellers nowadays experience how certain body gestures (men kissing each other) are approved of and most usual in certain countries and disliked in others. Cultural anthropology has taught us to be cautious in judging gestures: in the Manchu tribe a mother will routinely suck her small boy’s penis in public, but never kiss his cheeks. The latter deed is considered sexual, so fellatio turns out to be the best way for expressing motherly affection.<sup>19</sup> In her comments, Richlin appears to be well aware of those various functions of kissing. However, she failed to notice two important French contributions on Roman kissing, which brings her to remarkable statements about taking the fourth century scholar Servius at face value, believing that *savium* is associated with sexual pleasure and the kiss you give to a whore. When the word is used in the context of Marcus Aurelius and Fronto, it is understood as yet another proof of the sexual relationship between the two. However, *savium* also occurs in other situations, as when a mother or a daughter are involved. Richlin then wonders whether the word is jocularly used by Fronto (2006: 26). In reality, there is no use in drawing these kind of strict and artificial distinctions, which the Romans did not make for themselves. *Savium* does not always have to be associated with sexual pleasure.<sup>20</sup> Even more importantly, in the case of the imperial house, the habit of kissing had a highly symbolic

---

<sup>16</sup> For these possibilities, see Fleury (2006: 25) and the review of her book by L. Holford-Stevens in *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* 2007.04.48 [<http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/bmcr/2007/2007-04-48.html>].

<sup>17</sup> Thraede 2008 is a thorough and excellent treatment of the subject, but nevertheless fails to notice the studies mentioned in notes 20 and 21.

<sup>18</sup> See particularly Suetonius, *Tib.* 34.2 and Pliny the Elder, *NH* 26.3.

<sup>19</sup> Clarke 1998: 15–16.

<sup>20</sup> Servius, *In Aen.* 1.256. See, however, Moreau 1978 and the chapter on kissing in Dupont & Eloi (2001: 243–260). See also van den Hout (1999: 185) for a series of passages concerning kissing in Fronto’s correspondence.

significance. Indeed, only a happy few of intimate friends of the imperial house enjoyed the right and privilege of kissing the members of the emperor's house while greeting and saluting. The custom was called the *ius osculi*.<sup>21</sup> There are some passages in the letters in which Fronto mentions his kissing of the feet and hands of Marcus Aurelius' little baby daughters. These little children are pictured as *dominae* and Fronto pretends to find more delight in kissing their tiny hands and chubby feet than in kissing Marcus' mouth and neck.<sup>22</sup> Surely no scholar will try to prove on the basis of such passages that Fronto was in fact a paedophile with an appetite for little children! The same principle holds for the Fronto's description of passionate kissing with his younger pupil. It is easy to imagine Fronto, in a boast of representation management, displaying his right to this kissing privilege to others and gratefully acknowledging it to the imperials. After all, one should not imagine Fronto's correspondence being an entirely private matter, even though he did not think about publishing the collection. In the ancient literary tradition letters were mainly used to show off social networks and relations.<sup>23</sup>

So what could Marcus Aurelius feel for Fronto and vice versa? And were they really lovers? Of course, I do not want to get involved in a Clintonian controversy about their relationship having been 'sexual' or not (a trap in which Richlin herself does not get entangled, as she knows better than anyone else that there wasn't even a theoretical concept of sexuality in antiquity). I do believe that there may have been more openness to pederastic relationships in this second century correspondence, an openness which would disappear in the third and fourth century even in those sources which do not appear to be Christian.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, I am fully prepared to believe that same sex relations and intimate feelings between a mature master and a young pupil have always existed through history and have been expressed in multiple ways. So, why wouldn't this be the case for Fronto and Marcus? On the other hand, it is not the historian's task to stick to such truths concerning the possibilities of human nature, but to contextualize his evidence by placing it into a broader context. Having done so, I see no particular reason at all to state that Fronto and Marcus Aurelius were playing dangerous games and were engaging in a sexual or erotic relationship which would be regarded inappropriate by their contemporaries. It is one thing to note that Fronto's statements seem strange to modern readers' ears (after all, the ancient were not „just like us"). One gets the same feeling when reading some of his letters on children or on the mourning at their untimely death. But it is another thing to move to a somewhat provocative approach claiming in the latter case that Fronto had an ego-centred approach towards his offspring and grandchildren,<sup>25</sup> or in Richlin's case, to emphasise the presence of a gay relationship.

---

<sup>21</sup> Timpanaro 1987; an important article which Richlin has failed to notice.

<sup>22</sup> *Ad M. Caesarem et invicem Liber* 4.12 (p. 67, 9–15 van den Hout). For another example, see *Ad M. Caesarem et invicem Liber* 5.57 (p. 81, 26–28 van den Hout).

<sup>23</sup> In quite the same way, Swain (2004: 3–40, esp. 20–23) has interpreted the demonstrations of affection between Fronto and Marcus Aurelius as a political strategy.

<sup>24</sup> Suggestion by Boymel Kampen (2006: 202). However, due to the paucity of sources, there is always the danger of the *argumentum e silentio*.

<sup>25</sup> I have tried to contextualize Fronto's texts on children and life course in two contributions: Eyben & Laes 2005 and Laes 2005.

In short, the letters exchanged between Fronto and Marcus Aurelius confront their readers with a nuanced language of male affection, open to various interpretations. But not, of course, to all sorts of interpretation. While the mere possibility of a love relation will not necessarily have to be set aside, both the literary and the socio-cultural context do not allow the interpretation of a gay master and pupil playing dangerous games. This may seem less sensational than the somewhat provocative approach taken by Richlin, which undoubtedly has the merit of spurring debate where there has too long been too little. However, I am convinced that a more nuanced approach puts into context what we can and what we cannot know about language games and bodily games of sex in antiquity.

*Christian Laes*

*Free University of Brussels*

*University of Antwerp*

*University of Tampere*

*E-mail: christian.laes@ua.ac.be, christian.laes@vub.ac.be*

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Backe-Dahmen, A. (2006) *Innocentissima aetas: römische Kindheit im Spiegel literarischer, rechtlicher und archäologischer Quellen des 1. bis 4. Jahrhunderts n. Chr.* Mainz am Rhein: von Zabern.
- Bernstein, N. W. (2005) 'Mourning the *puer delicatus*: status inconsistency and the ethical value of fostering in Statius, *Silvae* 2.1.' — *AJPh* 126, 257–280.
- Boswell, J. (1980) *Christianity, social tolerance, and homosexuality: gay people in Western Europe from the beginning of the Christian Era to the fourteenth century.* Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press.
- Boymel Kampen, N. (2007) 'What could Hadrian feel for Antinoös? Emotional possibilities in a story of sexual passion.' — Hartmann, E.; Hartmann, U.; Pietzner, K. (eds.), *Geschlechterdefinitionen und Geschlechtergrenzen in der Antike.* Stuttgart: Steiner, 199–209.
- Champlin, E. (1980) *Fronto and Antonine Rome.* Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press.
- Claassen, J.-M. (2007) 'Fronto avus: the tale of a grandfather.' — *Akroterion* 52, 49–59.
- Clarke, J. (1998) *Looking at Lovemaking: Constructions of Sexuality in Roman Art, 100 B.C.–A.D. 250.* Berkely; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press.
- Dupont, F.; Eloi, T. (2001) *L'érotisme masculin dans la Rome antique.* Paris: Belin.
- Eyben, E.; Laes, C. (2005) 'Een Romein treurt om de dood van zijn kleinkind. Fronto, *De Nepote Amisso* 2.' — *Hermeneus* 77.5, 285–295.
- Fleury, P. (trad.) (2003) *Fronton, Correspondance.* Textes traduits et commentés par P. Fleury avec la collaboration de S. Demougin. Paris: Les Belles Lettres.
- Fleury, P. (2006) *Lectures de Fronton: un rhéteur latin à l'époque de la Seconde Sophistique.* Paris: Les Belles Lettres.
- Fleury, P. (2007) 'Eroticos: un dialogue (amoureux) entre Platon et la Seconde Sophistique?' — *REG* 120, 776–787.

- van den Hout, M. P. J. (1988) *M. Cornelii Frontonis Epistulae*. Schedis tam editis quam ineditis Edmundi Hauleri usus iterum edidit Michael P. J. van den Hout. Leipzig: Teubner.
- van den Hout, M. P. J. (1999) *A Commentary on the Letters of M. Cornelius Fronto*. Leiden; Boston; Köln: Brill.
- Laes, C. (2005) 'Kinderen en de menselijke levensloop in de correspondentie van Fronto.' — *Handelingen van de Koninklijke Zuidnederlandse maatschappij voor Taal- en Letterkunde en Geschiedenis* 59, 161–180.
- Laes, C. (2010) 'Delicia-children revisited: the evidence of Statius' *Silvae*.' — Dasen, V.; Späth, T. (eds.), *Children, Memory, and Family Identity in Roman Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press [forthcoming].
- Moreau, P. (1978) 'Osculum, basium, savium.' — *RPh* 52, 87–97.
- Pomeroy, S. B. (2007) *The murder of Regilla: a case of domestic violence in antiquity*. Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press.
- Rawson, B. (2003) *Children and childhood in Roman Italy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Richlin, A. (2006) *Marcus Aurelius in Love. Marcus Aurelius and Marcus Cornelius Fronto*. Edited, translated and with an introduction and commentary by Amy Richlin. Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press.
- Swain, S. (2004) 'Bilingualism and biculturalism in Antonine Rome: Apuleius, Fronto, and Gellius.' — Holford-Strevens, L.; Vardi, A. (eds.), *The worlds of Aulus Gellius*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 3–40.
- Thraede, K. (2008) 'Kuss.' — *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum* 22, col. 545–576.
- Timpanaro, S. (1987) 'Il 'ius osculi' e Frontone.' — *Maia* 39, 201–211.
- Vout, C. (2007) *Power and eroticism in Imperial Rome*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.