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M. CORNELIUS FRONTO AND THE CHOICE OF WORDS

Brief summary

In antiquity, oratory glory of M. Cornelius Fronto was second only to Cicero's, but today he is known as a tutor of M. Aurelius and L. Verus. Their correspondence reflects Fronto's didactic principles and gives an account of his archaistic literary tastes. Fronto creates a reading canon based on stylistic hierarchy and ability to find appropriate words in pre-classical authors. One can speak of almost obsessive Fronto's concern about the right choice of words. Even Cicero does not meet these requirements perfectly: he enjoys the fame of a great orator but does not seem to be careful enough about word selection.

Keywords: M. Cornelius Fronto, Cicero, literary canon, archaism, choice of words, Marcus Aurelius.

M. Cornelius Fronto, a 'literary lion' – how some call him (Kennedy 1972, 592) – was the leading figure of Roman letters of the mid second century. He was considered to be 'the best orator of his time' (Dio LXIX, 18, 3) and 'not second, but a twin glory of Roman oratory' (Eumenius *Panegyrici Latini* 8 (V), 14). Unfortunately, his speeches are almost completely lost,¹ and the largest part of his literary heritage preserved to this day is his correspondence with the members of Antonine dynasty – Marcus Aurelius, Lucius Verus and Antoninus Pius.

Being a highly educated and wealthy man, he made his house the center of an elite community, which was called by Fronto *contubernium*² ('a band, crew, or brotherhood' – Ad amic. I, 9), and he speaks of them not as 'pupils' (*discipuli*) but his 'followers' (*sectatores*) or 'fellows' (*contubernales*).³ Due to this high reputation, Fronto was appointed a teacher of Latin rhetoric of the two adoptive sons of the Emperor Antoninus Pius – at first of Marcus Aurelius (122–180) and sometime later – of his younger brother Lucius Verus (130–169).⁴

We know that the most extensive and famous literary canon of antiquity was compiled at the end of the first century C. E. by prominent rhetorician and teacher M. Fabius Quintilianus in the tenth book of his *Institutio oratoria*. This list was part of Quintilian's didactic program: that is why he deals with the authors "from the standpoint of their appropriateness in the training of aspiring orators and in shaping their styles" (Dominik 1997, 42). Unlike Quintilian, Fronto was not a professional teacher,⁵ and he did not associate himself with any formal educational institution.⁶ At the same time, he also had fixed didactic principles and, as a tutor of two future emperors, had opportunities to implement them: this is why it makes sense to look at Fronto's literary preferences illustrated by his reading list. I would not call it 'canon' for one main reason: as far as we know, he did not write treatises or textbooks on the topic, and private letters are not a suitable place for a systematic discussion of the issue.⁷

What authors did Fronto believe to be a new standard for those who would like to achieve success in the field of rhetoric and what criteria of choice did he apply in his list making? Though literary issues are discussed throughout the whole body of correspondence with Marcus and Lucius, detailed accounts are not numerous,⁸ hence, it is not appropriate to talk about a 'fixed list' as such. Nevertheless, Fronto's literary preferences can be detected from his observations and comments. In the history of literature, Fronto is associated with the most significant trend of the period, which can be defined as archaism⁹ (the term, dating back to the end of the nineteenth century, was introduced by E. Norden (1958, 361). One can see that Fronto favored pre-classical authors, which included prose writers prior to Cicero and poets before Virgil. This is very true in general, but the chronological criterion was not the only one: Fronto, for example, has a very high opinion of the historian Sallust, who was twenty years younger than Cicero was. This means that stylistic account was also taken into consideration because Sallust was known for an abundant use of archaism. Besides Sallust, Fronto's list of favorite authors included such names as Ennius, Cato the Elder, Plautus, Lucretius, and a number of others known to us only as titles and fragments.¹⁰ Although Ennius and Cato seem to be number ones to Fronto in poetry and prose respectively,¹¹ he never recommends his pupils to follow one particular model and believes that a speaker should be able to use various styles (Steinmetz 1982, 185). One can see from the correspondence that the

teacher was very effective in sharing his taste for old authors with his students and that his ideas commanded their respect.¹²

What is really striking about Fronto's reading list in comparison to Quintilian's canon and the later tradition (including Fronto's admirer Aulus Gellius) is the omission of certain names considered to be 'classical'. In his letters, Fronto never refers to the greatest Latin epic Virgil to whom he prefers the mentioned above author of the *Annales* Ennius.¹³ Another outstanding poet Horace is mentioned only in one letter: he is called, at least, a 'remarkable poet' (*poeta memorabilis*), but then Fronto jokingly says that he has a connection with Horace 'through Maecenas' and his (Fronto's) 'gardens of Maecenas' (*Ad Marc. Caes.* II, 2, 5) having in mind his villa at the Esquiline Hill.¹⁴

Here we approach the main criterion of Fronto's list making. Unlike Quintilian, he does not select best representatives in a particular genre, but makes instead a sort of stylistic hierarchy established according to the ability of writers to find suitable and appropriate words that should be looked for in pre-classical authors. He distinguishes, of course, between poets and prose writers,¹⁵ but otherwise in his didactic letters he easily compares and recommends those who wrote epic, tragedy, and comedy: thereby Fronto states, for example, that the epic poet Ennius was more careful about word selection than Plautus, a writer of comedies was (*Ad Marc. Caes.* IV, 3, 2).

Fronto and Quintilian share attitudes towards Cicero and Seneca who were still considered to be major literary figures of the period. They similarly find limitations and imperfections of Seneca's the Younger style (Quint. *Inst.* X, 125–131; Fronto *De orat.* 2–3) and speak high of Cicero. The latter has received the longest account of all in Quintilian's discussion of Greek and Latin writers, having been treated in two sections (though, according to the author of the canon, he 'is great in any department of literature' – *Inst.* X, 123): Cicero is spoken of as an orator, been compared to Demosthenes (X, 105–112), and as a philosopher who can rival Plato (X, 123). To Quintilian, "the name of Cicero has come to be regarded not as the name of a man, but as the name of eloquence itself" (X, 1, 112).

In the following section, I shall compare this purely panegyric discussion of Cicero with Fronto's attitude, which is more diverse and mixed. Whatever Fronto's personal literary tastes were, he could not omit, of course, Cicero in his teaching program.¹⁶ Moreover, he

underlines his good knowledge of Cicero's writings and states that 'he has most attentively read all his works' (<...> *qui scripta omnia studiosissime lectitarim* – *Ad Marc. Caes.* IV, 3, 3). So, in a number of letters Cicero is spoken of – in a quite Quintilian's manner – as the main Latin orator, and Fronto calls him 'the head and source of Roman eloquence' (*caput atque fons Romanae facundiae* – *Ad Marc. Caes.* IV, 3, 3).¹⁷

Does Fronto always approve of his great predecessor? On the one hand, Cicero is more than once mentioned among Fronto's beloved prose authors, such as Cato, Sallust, and Gaius Gracchus,¹⁸ which proves his high opinion of the famous orator. On the other, he does not seem to be Fronto's favorite in the art of oratory: the latter explicitly says that he prefers Cicero's letters to his speeches:

All Cicero's letters, however, should, I think, be read in my opinion, even more than his speeches. There is nothing more perfect than Cicero's letters.

Omnes autem Ciceronis epistulas legendas censeo, mea sententia vel magis quam omnis eius orationes: epistulis Ciceronis nihil est perfectius.
(*Ad Ant. Imp.* III, 8, 2)

This was an answer to Marcus' request to provide him with a selection of Cicero's letters, either in full or in parts. Fronto sends what he had himself excerpted on the matter of eloquence, philosophy, and politics, as well as some expressions that seemed to him elegant and remarkable. At the end of his epistle – and this is a sign of sincere adoration – he says that **all** Cicero's letters are worth reading. To describe Cicero's epistolary style, which he wants Marcus to study and follow, he uses an adjective *remissus* (relaxed) (*Ad Marc. Caes.* II, 2, 4). This very well coincides with Cicero's own definition of epistolary style as 'intimate and full of jesting' (*familiale et iocosum* – *Fam.* II, 4, 1). His unsurpassed epistolary skill is mentioned once more in a letter addressed to Lucius Verus: Fronto discusses at length the importance of rhetoric for the ruler – a subject of great importance for him – and states the preference of a letterform for some treatises. In this connection, he discusses a today non-extant work of Cicero *De consiliis suis*, which was posthumously published by his son and which dealt with accusations against Crassus and Caesar.¹⁹ From Fronto's point of view, the whole thing would have become better if compiled in a letterform in order to make it 'shorter, more readable, and compact'²⁰ (*brevius et expeditius et densius* – *Ad Ver. Imp.* II, 1, 15).

Fronto was very careful about selection of words and, one can say, even obsessed with word hunting: no wonder that this was the main criterion he used in his judgment about other authors and this was his guiding star in compiling of the list of his favorite writers used for teaching purposes. In his discussion of Fronto's aesthetic principles, A. Leeman even speaks about 'a word-crazed generation' (1963, I, 368). One of the earliest letters about the right choice of words is addressed to Marcus Aurelius and presumably dates from 139 C. E. when Fronto was appointed a royal tutor (Hout van den 1999, 150). The letter discusses his didactic principles and contains the longest passage ever dedicated to Cicero by Fronto: the teacher intends to express and share with Marcus his non-classical stylistic values. Fronto focuses upon the danger of half-knowledge, which, according to him, can be easily concealed in almost all arts but for selection and arrangement of words (*Ad Marc. Caes.* IV, 4, 1).²¹ He argues that even among old authors not all paid due attention to the choice of words, citing as good examples Cato, Sallust, Ennius, Plautus, and some others. A whole paragraph below is devoted to Cicero's word usage: on the one hand, Fronto acknowledges that the orator spoke 'the most beautiful words' (*verba pulcherrima* – *Ad Marc. Caes.* IV, 4, 3), but on the other, he believes that Cicero was not always careful in his choice of words. Three possible reasons are given for this, namely, a) greatness of mind; b) a wish to escape toil; c) or confidence that he does not have to look for the words and the right one will come up without searching (*ibid.*). This observation obviously contradicts Fronto's call for 'unexpected and unlooked for words' (*insperata atque inopinata verba* – *ibid.*) expressed in the text below. Fronto puts a special emphasis on the fact that one should assiduously search for these words and look for them in old Latin authors. One can see that in Fronto's writings Cicero enjoys the fame of a great orator but does not meet, at the same time, his main criterion of careful word selection.

Without any doubt, Fronto was neither the first one nor the only one to criticize Cicero's style.²² Mannerist aspirations of Fronto should be discussed not only against a background of the second century's C. E. tastes but also in a wider context of earlier literary theories. Though the importance of correct word usage was always an essential part of oratory training, its implicit value still remained a matter of discussion. The core of this dispute was a disagreement on content *vs.* form supremacy. The former approach can be best illustrated by an aphorism of Cato

the Elder: ‘grasp the subject, the words will follow’ (*rem tene, verba sequentur* – fr. 15 Jordan). This is really striking, but Fronto, who rates Cato among his favorite authors, fails to understand the essence of his literary priorities. On the other hand, Cicero, who – in spite of Fronto’s assertion – was never careless about word selection, nevertheless, backs up Cato’s opinion and uses it as an argument²³ in his polemics with the so-called Atticists, such as C. Julius Caesar and C. Licinius Calvus. In the first century C. E., Quintilian, a true follower of Cicero, talks about *res* (contents) and *verba* (words) as mutually complementary (*Inst.* X, 1, 4) and mocks those who can never stop to hunt for something better and archaic to the detriment of sense (*Inst.* VIII, praef. 31). As wittily observed by E. Fantham (1998, 293), by saying this he could have predicted Fronto’s appearance.

The aim of the present paper was to look at Fronto’s literary preferences in connection with his teaching program. The most striking difference between Quintilian’s canon and Fronto’s reading list is the preference of the latter for the pre-classical Latin authors, which should be seen against the background of archaizing tastes of the second century in general. However, what is characteristic exclusively of Fronto is his almost obsessive concern about the right choice of words.

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- ² *Ad amic.* I, 9.
- ³ On Fronto’s *contubernium* see: Johnson 2010, 137–156 and Richlin 2011, 98–99.
- ⁴ This is mentioned, for example, in the inscription, which dates from 199 C. E. and is dedicated to Fronto’s great-grandson: *M. Aufidio Frontoni pronepoti M. Corneli Frontonis oratoris, consulis, magistri imperatorum Luci et Antonini* <...> (*CIL* XI, 6334 = Dessau 1129).
- ⁵ See, for example, G. Kennedy: ‘Fronto was not a sophist, nor a professional teacher but a Roman orator who was interested in sophistry and rhetoric and became a tutor’ (Kennedy 1969, 594; see also 597: “<...> Fronto was not a rhetorician, in the sense that Quintilian, for example was”).
- ⁶ As Fronto, Quintilian was made tutor at the imperial palace and in 90 C. E. he began to teach Domitian’s two grand-nephews and heirs. Unlike Fronto’s, Quintilian’s pupils “vanished into exile” (*Quintilian on the Teaching of Speaking and Writing: Translations from Books One, Two, and Ten of the Institutio Oratoria*. J. Murphy (ed.). Edwardville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987, XX).
- ⁷ One can say though that *De orationibus* and *De eloquentia*, in which Fronto discusses rhetoric principles, take intermediate position between letters and theoretical works.

- ⁸ See especially *Ad Marc. Caes.* IV, 3; *Ad Ant. Imp.* III, 1; *Ad Ver. Imp.* II, 1, 14; *De orationibus; De eloquentia*.
- ⁹ See, for example: Schanz 3rd ed., 1922, 88–100; Teufel III, 6th ed., 1913, 73–77; D’Alton, 1931, 318; Leeman I, 1963, 366; Kennedy 1969, 598; Williams 1978, 307; Kasulke, Christoph. *Fronto, Marc Aurel und kein Konflikt zwischen Rhetorik und Philosophie im 2. Jh. n. Chr.* München; Leipzig : Saur, 2005, 280 [*Beiträge zur Altertumskunde* 218], and others.
- ¹⁰ Such as C. Gracchus, Accius, Naevius, Lucilius, Caecilius, Laberius, and some others.
- ¹¹ Fronto calls Ennius ‘many sided’ (*multiformis* – *De eloq.* I, 2).
- ¹² See, for example, *Ad Marc. Caes.* II, 5, 1; 8, 5; *Ad Marc. Caes.* III, 19; *Ad Ant. Imp.* IV, 1, 3 etc. In a few preserved letters from Lucius Verus to Fronto, the former does not mention his teacher’s favorite authors, but it seems plausible to imply that his literary tastes could hardly vary from that of his tutor and brother.
- ¹³ This demonstrative rejection contrasts with a later account of Aulus Gellius who describes Fronto quoting Virgil (*N. A.* II, 11–12; 18). This can be, of course, a reflection of Gellius’ own adoration for the poet (Holford-Strevens, 3rd ed., 2005, s. v. M. Cornelius Fronto).
- ¹⁴ Fronto’s praise of Horace is over exaggerated by D’Alton (1921, 321).
- ¹⁵ At the same time, he mentions historian L. Coelius Antipater among poets (*Ad Marc. Caes.* IV, 3, 2).
- ¹⁶ Haines I, XXXI–XXXII.
- ¹⁷ One can compare the gloss belonging to *m*², which specifies that *iam M. Tullius summum supremumque os Romanae linguae fuit* (*Ad Ver. Imp.* II, 1, 14).
- ¹⁸ *De eloq.* I, 2; II, 12; IV, 4. See also Marcus’ letter: *Ad Ant. Imp.* IV, 1, 3.
- ¹⁹ On this work see, for example, Schanz I, 4th ed., 1927, 533 and Stone 1998, 487–491.
- ²⁰ These are to be implicitly understood as Fronto’s requirements, which a good letter should meet.
- ²¹ He is also of opinion that it is better not to study philosophy at all than to be a half-baked expert (*Ad Marc. Caes.* IV, 1).
- ²² On Cicero’s polemics with Atticists, see: Hendrickson 1926, 234–258 and Gruen 1967, 215–233.
- ²³ See the words of Crassus in *De oratore* (III, 93): *Verborum eligendorum et conlocandorum et concludendorum facilis est vel ratio vel sine ratione ipsa exercitatio; rerum est silva magna <...>*.

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M. KORNĒLIJS FRONTONS UN VĀRDU IZVĒĒLE

KOPSAVILKUMS

M. Kornēlijs Frontons ir ievērojamākā persona, kas Romā 2. gadsimta vidū darbojusies vēstules žanrā. Senatnē M. Kornēlija Frontona oratora slava piekāpās vienīgi Cicerona slavai, diemžēl viņa augsti novērtētās runas līdz mūsdienām tikpat kā nav saglabājušās. Autors ir labāk pazīstams kā divu augstdzimušu skolnieku un nākamo imperatoru – Marka

Aurēlija un Lūcija Vēra – audzinātājs. Viņu korespondence atspoguļo Frontona didaktiskos principus un vēsta par viņa literāro gaumi, ko varētu raksturot kā arhaisku. Vēstulēs Frontons radījis sava veida lasīšanas kanonu saviem audzēkņiem. Tas balstīts uz stilistisku gradāciju un radīts atbilstoši rakstītāju spējai atrast piemērotus un atbilstīgus vārdus, kuri meklējami pirmsklasisko autoru, tādu kā Katons, Ennijs u. c., darbos. Domājot par pareizu vārdu izvēli, Frontonam raksturīga gandrīz vai apsēstība. Raugoties no šāda skatu punkta, pat Cicerons visā pilnībā neatbilst Frontona norādījumiem: viņš bauda liela oratora slavu, taču nešķiet pietiekoši uzmanīgs vārdu izvēlē, kas ir Frontona teorētiskās domas stūrakmens.