

Fronto's epistolary exchange with Marcus Aurelius has been criticized as being merely a listing of Fronto's favorite rhetorical figures, simile chief among them. C. R. Haines claimed that "he never grasped the fact that *comparatio* is not *ratio*" (1919: xlii). Meanwhile the homoeroticism between Fronto and Marcus remained largely ignored until Amy Richlin (2005; 2006) brought it to light. I would like to demonstrate that there is a relationship between Fronto's love of simile and his love with Marcus, indeed, that Fronto and Marcus use rhetorical figures to redefine the homoerotics of their relationship after they reject the Greek philosophical *erastês/eromenos* model. I maintain, then, that *comparatio* is the *ratio* by which Fronto and Marcus negotiate their love.

In a pair of early letters (van den Hout 250), Marcus and Fronto play out the erotic dynamics of Plato's *Phaedrus*. Each man claims to be the *erastês*, first Fronto, then Marcus; each man claims the other as his *Phaedrus*, his *eromenos*. But since both claim the role of *erastês*, the traditional Greek philosophical model fails. Indeed, the *erastês/eromenos* model is ill-suited to Fronto and Marcus: Fronto may be the older tutor, but Marcus is the future emperor, and in fact becomes the emperor during the course of their correspondence.

But the failure of this model gives rise to a new way for Fronto and Marcus to negotiate their epistolary erotics. In assuming the identities of the *erastai* Lysias and Socrates, Fronto and Marcus liken themselves to them, and thereby enact Fronto's favorite rhetorical figure, the simile. As Marcus' tutor of rhetoric, Fronto assigns him simile compositions, and instructs him on how to construct a simile (van den Hout 40-42). The purpose of the simile, Fronto explains, is to call attention to the object of the simile by emphasizing a characteristic of it. Fronto then encourages Marcus to continue his compositions: the more similes Marcus produces, the more Fronto will love him: *amem te*. As a result simile becomes the new expression for Fronto and Marcus' homoerotics. Their love, Fronto writes, is spontaneous and natural, like logs afire, the steam-caverns of Baiae, and wild trees (van den Hout 4).

Further, Fronto and Marcus shift from defining their love with similes to structuring their love as a simile. That is, Marcus comes to be a simile for Fronto, and vice-versa. Marcus describes Fronto as a ruler, the king of rhetoric (van den Hout 27). Fronto is thus likened to Marcus. Elsewhere Fronto compares himself to Orpheus, whereas he had previously compared Marcus to Orpheus. At other times the simile is more direct: one substitutes for the other. For example, on Fronto's birthday Marcus writes him a letter proclaiming that, while one usually prays for the birthday boy, Marcus will pray for himself, since he loves Fronto as he loves himself (van den Hout 43).

From these observations we may consider why Fronto and Marcus reject the Greek philosophical model, and why they choose simile over other rhetorical figures, e.g. metonyms, antonyms. Perhaps relations between men can be conceptualized not solely by inverses (active/passive, old/young, *erastês/eromenos*), but, as Marcus and Fronto suggest, by similarities. Perhaps, also, Marcus and Fronto are right to see in figurative language a suitably fluid medium in which to explore new dynamics of homoerotic relations.