

## Fronto on the Christians

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Et de convivio notum est; passim omnes loquuntur, id etiam Cirtensis nostri testatur oratio. ad epulas sollemni die coeunt cum omnibus liberis sororibus matribus, sexus omnis homines et omnis aetatis. illic post multas epulas, ubi convivium caluit et incestae libidinis ebriatis fervor exarsit, canis qui candelabro nexus est, iactu offulae ultra spatium lineae, qua vinctus est, ad impetum et saltum provocatur. sic everso et extincto conscio lumine inpudentibus tenebris nexus infandae cupiditatis involvunt per incertum sortis, etsi non omnes opera, conscientia tamen pariter incesti, quoniam voto universorum adpetitur quicquid accidere potest in actu singulorum.<sup>1</sup>

That *Cirtensis nostri* is Fronto is certified by Minucius Felix himself in a subsequent (31. 2) passage of the *Octavius* where he returns to the charge of incestuous banqueting, saying *Sic de isto et tuus Fronto non ut adfirmator testimonium fecit, sed convicium ut orator adpersit*. Fronto on the Christians is a much discussed matter,<sup>2</sup> but three issues remain unresolved: 1) To what extent does Minucius preserve the actual words of Fronto? 2) Was Fronto influenced by the fulminations of Cato and Livy on the Bacchanalia and cognate sexual scandals? 3) Is the passage taken from an entire speech against the Christians or an oration on another matter in which the Christians were brought in as an aside or a paradigm of evildoing?

On the first point, both Clarke and Champlin are sensibly undogmatic. The former rightly observes that (as with Cicero and Tacitus) Fronto could

<sup>1</sup> Minucius Felix, *Oct.* 9. 6-7, reproduced in the Loeb edition of Fronto by C. R. Haines (II 282-84) and that of M. P. J. van den Hout (Leiden 1954) 242-43; cf. B. Baldwin, *An Anthology of Later Latin Literature* (Amsterdam 1987) 42.

<sup>2</sup> The leading modern contributors (hereinafter referred to by name only) are: T. D. Bames, *Tertullian* (Oxford 1971) 161; E. Champlin, *Fronto and Antonine Rome* (Cambridge, MA and London 1980) 64-66 (with concomitant notes); G. W. Clarke, "Four Passages of Minucius Felix," in *Kyriakon: Festschrift Johannes Quasten* (Münster 1970) II 502-04; P. Frassinetti, "L'orazione di Frontone contro i cristiani," *GIF* 2 (1949) 238-54; A. Henrichs, "Pagan Ritual and the Alleged Crimes of the Early Christians," *Kyriakon* (details as above) I 18-35, esp. 24-27; M. von Albrecht, "Minucius Felix as a Christian Humanist," *JCS* 12 (1987) 157-68.

have written in different styles for different occasions, and we have little of his oratory to go on. Champlin, remarking that "just how much of Fronto is embedded in the *Octavius* is very unsure, particularly with such a stylistic 'mosaicist' as Minucius Felix," feels that elements in the extract are "certainly" or "possibly" Frontonian, but does not elaborate. The vocabulary is unremarkable, and there is no particular phrase or conceit that catches the eye as distinctively Frontonian in the sense that it recurs elsewhere in his writing.<sup>3</sup> The one significant phenomenon is that a number of the words in the extract, plain as they are, occur rarely or nowhere else in Fronto, and when they do crop up outside this passage they tend to do so in the letter to Marcus Aurelius *De feriis Alsiensibus*. Shared words include *canis, convivium, dies, epulae, lumen, spatium* (accepting van den Hout's supplement at 218. 17), and *tenebrae*. In general terms, it is worth noting how infrequent these common words are in Fronto's extant pieces. The concordances between the letter and the extract are provided by the fact that they have something of a common theme in that there is much talk of banquets and other nocturnal pleasures in the *De feriis Alsiensibus*.

It is not always remarked that the business with the dogs and lamps also turns up in Tertullian, *Apol.* 7. 1, in similar but not identical words: *post convivium incesto, quod eversores luminum canes, lenones scilicet tenebrarum, libidinum impiarum in verecundiam procurant*. What bearing (if any) this may have on the old question of chronological precedence between Tertullian and Minucius need not be gone into here.<sup>4</sup> The immediate point is, Tertullian does not credit Fronto or any individual with this particular canard. Rather, it is a common kind of accusation: *dicimur sceleratissimi de sacramento infanticidii et pabulo inde, et post convivium incesto*, etc. The eye-catching image of dogs as pimps is not in Minucius' extract, and nowhere in the rest of Fronto; *verecundia* turns up only in the *De feriis Alsiensibus*. It is clear both from Tertullian's *dicimur* and Minucius' *passim omnes loquuntur* that the accusations against the Christians had become as standardised in content in Latin as they had in Greek,<sup>5</sup> and standardisation of diction was bound to follow. This obviously makes it all the harder to determine the distinctively Frontonian ingredients. Since he is the only author explicitly adduced by Caecilius in the *Octavius*, one might infer that Fronto had notoriously set the tone for this sort of

<sup>3</sup> These remarks are based upon the Indexes to Fronto brought out by F. Garrone, M. Mattea, and F. Russo (Hildesheim 1976) and by R. Fontanella, M. Olivetti, and M. R. Votta (Hildesheim 1981).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. von Albrecht (above, note 2) 157 for discussion and bibliography.

<sup>5</sup> For instance, Justin, *Apol.* 1. 26. Cf. the illustrative passages assembled by M. Marcovich to illustrate ch. 3 of the *Legatio pro Christianis* of Athenagoras in his new edition (Berlin 1990). I am grateful to Professor Marcovich both for letting me see this and for other valuable bibliographical guidance.

thing, but the proclivity of African authors for quoting other Africans<sup>6</sup> makes even this (by itself) an unsafe speculation.

However, there may be dividends to be had from here importing the second issue of Catonian-cum-Livian influence on the passage. This notion was put forward long ago by Frassinetti, but is now commonly overlooked, no doubt because the article was published after Haines' Loeb and made no impression on van den Hout, Fronto's two most influential modern editors.<sup>7</sup> Clarke scouts the idea on the reasonable grounds that common themes inevitably produce common language. Cato's speech *De coniuratione* does not survive, and Clarke even questions whether it had to do with the Bacchanalia scandal of 186. Still, the popularity of Cato amongst the literary circles of Fronto and Gellius is well attested, requiring no epexegetis here. As a point of comparison with the present extract, we may note the similar *epulantibus iis, cum iam vino incaluissent*, put into Cato's mouth as part of a moralising diatribe by Livy (39. 42. 10).

Livy's long account of the Bacchanalia episode (39. 8–19) contains a number of phrases similar to ones in Fronto. In view of Frassinetti's detailed scrutiny, two will here serve as easy illustration: *additae voluptates religioni vini et epularum, quo plurimum animi illicerentur. cum vinum animos incendisset, et nox et mixti feminis mares, aetatis tenerae maioribus, discrimen omne pudoris exstinxissent . . .* (39. 8. 5–6); *ex quo in promiscuo sacra sint, et permixti viri feminis, et noctis licentia accesserit, nihil ibi facinoris, nihil flagitii praetermissum* (39. 13. 10). By themselves, such concordances prove nothing.<sup>8</sup> And Fronto never names Livy in his extant writings; neither does Aulus Gellius. But it is suggestive that Tertullian, in the section immediately preceding his mention of the orgies and the dogs (*Apol.* 6. 7), himself adduces in explicit terms the suppression of the Bacchanalia: *Liberum Patrem cum mysteriis suis consules senatus auctoritate non modo urbe, sed universa Italia eliminaverunt*. It seems reasonable to see Livian influence here, either first-hand or via Fronto. We know that Lactantius drew on Livy more than once for items from the history of Roman paganism.<sup>9</sup> Tertullian also (*De spect.* 10) couples Venus and Liber in various disreputable ways—an easy conjunction to be sure, but one found in Fronto's *De feriis Alsiensibus* (217. 24–25 van den Hout): *Venerem vero et Liberum multo maxime pernoctantibus favere*.

<sup>6</sup> See von Albrecht (above, note 2) 158, 161, on this feature.

<sup>7</sup> Champlin (above, note 2) 160 n. 21, refers to it only for its attempt to date Fronto's speech, dubbing the effort "imaginative," no doubt a tempered version of Barnes' dismissal ([above, note 2] 149 n. 6) of it as "pure fantasy."

<sup>8</sup> Cf. B. Baldwin, "Apuleius, Tacitus, and Christians," *Emerita* 52 (1984) 1–3, for cognate efforts on a cognate theme.

<sup>9</sup> Documented and discussed by R. M. Ogilvie, *The Library of Lactantius* (Oxford 1978) 42.

Livian influence on Fronto has been detected in other passages.<sup>10</sup> We know that the historian was widely read in the first and early second centuries, either in full or in abridgement.<sup>11</sup> It seems more likely than not that Fronto would have known him well enough (at the very least) to exploit his account on the Bacchanalia for an attack on the Christians.<sup>12</sup> A pagan writing for a pagan audience would naturally be drawn to a similar episode in their own religious history. This point can be extended to a particular item in the anti-Christian dossier, namely the dogs and the lamps, a detail which at first blush seems more circumstantial than the vague nonsense about Thyestean banquets. But, on investigation, Fronto can be seen to be milking pagan literary motifs. Thus, for easy instance, Petronius (*Sat.* 64. 10) has a dog knocking over a lamp, his language being strikingly similar: *candelabrum etiam supra mensam eversum*. In Lucian, *Conv.* 46, a knocked-over lamp brings darkness as cover for disreputable deeds, including sexual ones. Fronto is clearly applying the conventional (and especially satirical) details of pagan symposia to those of the Christians.<sup>13</sup>

Both Haines and van den Hout took the extract to be from a lost speech against the Christians, and this view still tends to prevail.<sup>14</sup> However, Champlin<sup>15</sup> has recently argued that the item comes from a speech on an entirely different subject, finding a context in the lost *In Pelopem*, and concluding that the Minucian extract reflects "a learned and rhetorical simile

<sup>10</sup> In addition to the notes of Haines and van den Hout, see T. Schwierczina, *Frontoniana* (Breslau 1883) 36.

<sup>11</sup> Martial 14. 190; cf. P. G. Walsh, *Livy, Greece & Rome* New Surveys in the Classics 8 (Oxford 1974) 32, for repertoire and discussion.

<sup>12</sup> A Frontonian dependence upon Livy adds a little to the historian's *Nachleben*, being unremarked by (e. g.) Walsh. Livy got through into the mediaeval world. His fortunes in the West are well enough known; cf. Walsh 32–33, with bibliography. Add for completeness' sake the Byzantine notions of him preserved by the *Suda* (E 1337 Adler, on Sulla; K 2098—a passage not in Adler's own index!—where Livy is one of the two great Roman historians, the other being Comutus, the subject of the notice).

<sup>13</sup> Cf. the useful remarks and conspectus of references in J. P. V. D. Balsdon, *Life and Leisure in Ancient Rome* (London 1969) 50, 367 n. 200.

<sup>14</sup> Clarke (above, note 2) does not question the idea of an anti-Christian speech; von Albrecht considers the notion of an incidental attack, but rejects it; by contrast, A. R. Birley, *Marcus Aurelius*, 2nd ed. (London 1987) 277 n. 47, apparently favours Champlin's view; J. Beaujeu in his Budé edition (Paris 1964) 88–89, inclines to Frassinetti's belief in a speech against the Christians to the senate between 162 and 166; Henrichs pointed to the trial of Justin between c. 165 and 167 and to the Lyons martyrs of 177 as possible contexts for a Frontonian attack on Christians, the latter involving an acceptance of Mommsen's date of 176 or later for Fronto's death, a view restated by G. W. Bowersock, *Greek Sophists in the Roman Empire* (Oxford 1969) 124–26, but rejected by Champlin 139–42 in favour of the common notion that the orator died around a decade earlier.

<sup>15</sup> Developing a suggestion of Barnes (above, note 2) 161 n. 2. It might be added that, although it seems most natural to take *oratio* as a speech, one does not have to go beyond the notices in *LS* and the *OLD* to see how flexible and varied was the use and nuance of that word. It is not, therefore, inconceivable that Fronto could have passed his animadversions upon the Christians in some other kind of literary production. Minucius' own distinction regarding Fronto (*non ut adfirmator testimonium . . . sed convicium et orator*) is vague rather than precise.

which in turn casually drew upon and embroidered popular contemporary accounts of Christian practices." Champlin develops the theory with his customary learning and verve, and I have no vested interest in wanting to disprove it. However, a couple of reservations should be stated, if only to provoke further discussion. First, would it be in the pagan manner to allude to Christianity in this paradigmatic way in a speech on pagan topics? Secondly, it might be thought odd that Minucius Felix does not adduce the mythological Pelops or any figure from Greek legend in rebuttal, except in the most general of terms; likewise Tertullian in *Apol.* 9, very similar throughout to Minucius.<sup>16</sup> Hoisting the pagans with their own literary and mythological petards was a favourite Christian device, and Pelops could easily and effectively have been reversed upon Fronto, had he supplied the context.

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<sup>16</sup> Though he brings up Oedipus and the disciples of Jupiter as mythological *exempla*.

