



The Secret of Marcus Aurelius

philosophical drama

by Christian Lanciai (1995)

The characters :

Hadrian
Svetonius
Antoninus Pius
Marcus Aurelius
Faustina, his consort, daughter of Antoninus Pius
Lucius Verus, co-regent
M. Cornelius Fronto, Marcus' Latin tutor
Aelius Aristides, orator
Justin the Martyr, Christian
Junius Rusticus, Marcus' stoic tutor
Doctor Galenos, physician
Martius Verus, general, governor of Cappadocia
Avidius Cassius, general, governor of Syria
Herod Atticus, Marcus' Greek tutor
Commodus, son and heir to Marcus Aurelius

senators
messengers
soldiers
retinue and people at court

The action is within the Roman Empire 138-180.

Suggestions

The first two acts are set in Rome with predominantly bright and splendid scenes. From the third act all scenes are simple and intimate, like in a chamber play, with the actors without makeup and rather dirty, especially in the scenes from the arduous war against the Germans. Only in act IV scene 2 in Athens something of the splendour and brightness of the introductory scenes could show again, while the last scene should be the most meagre of all, if possible in the dark lights and obscurity of Rembrandt.

Gothenburg 2.4.1996

Footnote. All characters are authentic, and the whole action tries to illustrate what really happened, where not the least important was the purely philosophical argument, since philosophy always dominated the life of Marcus Aurelius.

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Act I scene 1. Hadrian's deathbed.

Hadrian Svetonius, you dirty old man, what will you write about me when I am gone?

Svetonius I don't know yet, Caesar.

Hadrian Yes, you do, but you don't want to tell me. You know everything about me, and therefore you wisely keep your mouth shut until I am dead. Isn't that the case?

Svetonius Not until a Caesar is dead, his real character will show in his posthumous reputation, how much he will be bewailed and if he will be deified or not.

Hadrian I have asked for the avoidance of all ridiculous nonsense like deification and all other pomp and circumstance, which only is staged to mask the embarrassing emptiness. My life was filled with joy and fun, plays and festivities, beauty and happiness, and I wish Rome to keep it up after my death. My demise must not break up the party.

Svetonius Caesar, if I may say so, I think you are something of a philosopher on the throne and the very first one.

Hadrian An epicure in that case. Epicurus was the vainest of all philosophers and therefore the wisest and most popular. Everything is but vanity, but vanity is something good. What would life be like without all the splendid entertaining vanity offered by life? What would our world be without the pyramids of Egypt and the seven wonders of the Greek world? Still all these delights to the eye are but vanity like all Rome, but it is worth living for being vain and build vain enterprises for life.

They may crumble and vanish, but they are always delightful in their vanity as long as they last.

Svetonius I don't agree with Caesar. If there was any Caesar free from vanity, it was Hadrian and no one else.

Hadrian I loathe flattery. Go home and write your gossip columns, Svetonius, if you can't be honest here. Antonine, come to me.

(Antonine treads forth.)

You are like a son to me and has long been so, but not until now on my deathbed I adopt you as my son and heir, to make sure that no one will wreck my plans for the future of Rome. I want Rome to remain as it is. Therefore I concentrated on my government, securing its borders and consolidating its administration and constitution. I rather made peace than war. I have acquired no new territories for Rome, on the contrary I let go some of Trajan's conquests like Armenia and Mesopotamia, but instead I secured Rome's backbone and future. As the richest and most moderate man in Rome I have found you its most reliable administrator. But my plans have proceeded further than that. Your adoption involves a condition. When I now adopt you, I want you to adopt the youth Marcus Aurelius.

Antonine Of course.

Hadrian No problems?

Antonine None at all. Your plan for the future of Rome is my own.

Hadrian Tread forth, Marcus Aurelius. *(He is 18 years old.)*

You will now be adopted by my adopted son as his successor as Caesar some time in the future. You have long been the apple of my eye, ever since Antinoos died, but don't misunderstand me. My love has been pure. With Antinoos I enjoyed myself perhaps a little too much, the whole world knows how we toured all the eastern Mediterranean, but you have never been stained by any too intimate friendship, for you are a born philosopher, and I always respected that. I chose a wife for you, and you pleased me by accepting her, but you don't have to marry her if you don't want to. You will decide that for yourself when you get older. But do you want to know why I chose you?

Marcus I can't even guess.

Hadrian You are by nature a serious nature, so serious that I know no one so convincing in his natural seriousness as you. I observed that immediately in you, and therefore I immediately set your course in the direction of the greatest responsibility for the good of Rome. Your choice of philosophy for your life's preference confirmed that I had understood you correctly. So just carry on being naturally serious.

Well, Svetonius, are you still there?

Svetonius Caesar has not given me permission to leave.

Hadrian You knave, I expressly asked you to go home and gossip if you can't gossip here.

Svetonius But I can gossip here.

Hadrianus That's the sound of it! Remember then to bring all my crimes into your gossiping column. Don't omit anyone of those I executed to secure the title of Caesar after Trajan. Don't forget anyone of all those senators that had to be disposed of, and don't forget that the Senate was always right in being hostile to me. Neither forget my cruel war against the poor Jewish people in Palestine. They rebelled under that fanatic Bar Kochba, but I massacred them utterly ruthlessly like a field of wheat to the scythe without sparing anyone. Neither forget all those boys that I loved. Antinoos was just one of them if though the only one I insisted on deification of. If you want to be just, you must neither forget that I always loved beauty most of all. Therefore I was always a Greekophile and wasted liberally on further beautification of my favourite beloved city of Athens. And if there are any more crimes and

weaknesses you wish to document, by all means don't omit anything. My life has been wicked, alas, so wonderfully wicked.

Svetonius (touched) Caesar may be certain that I will not expose Hadrian to the same treatment as the first twelve Caesars.

Hadrian What do you mean?

Svetonius My chronicle of gossip is completed and will not comprise also Trajan and Hadrian, since we honour them too much.

Hadrian (jokingly) Avaunt, you flatterer!

Well, that's that. All that is left of my sick life in my sick body is only my poor little soul. Where will you wander then, little soul, little restless wanderer, old charmer and trickster, the puzzling pal and guest of my old sick and tired body? Will you go on jesting with me as you made a jest of my whole wasted life? Travel on, my lost soul, and may Rome not suffer for it.

Marcus (falls down on one knee) Farewell, my old uncle.

Hadrian (patting him gently on his hair) Farewell, my favourite son.

(to Antonine) Take well care of Rome.

Antonine As you said yourself, Caesar, you couldn't find a better administrator.

Hadrian I trust you, strenuous and pious Antonine.

Antonine I will never betray your trust.

Hadrian And take care of the boy here.

Antonine Your soul will follow him and me.

Hadrian Right you are. Convey my apologies to the senate. Ask the dirty old men to forgive a dirty old man. I did wrong, but I don't regret it, since it was necessary.

Svetonius History will pardon you, Caesar.

Hadrian Don't forget the suicide of my brother-in-law, Svetonius, and his grandson Fuscus Salinator.

Svetonius On the contrary, Caesar, we will gladly forget all such things just to remember you as the one you were.

Hadrian (jokingly) Avaunt, flatterer! *(dies)*

Svetonius (after a pause) Caesar has passed away. Long live Caesar!

all (with their attention on Antonine) Long live Caesar!

(Antonine accepts the salute with dignity.)

Scene 2. The Senate.

senator 1 Hadrian was a fake.

2 No one wants him deified.

3 He was a murderer and homophile.

4 Antonine will make a bad start if he will demand his deification.

1 Here he is now. Let's see what he is good for.

2 He will make his career himself. If he starts badly he will end badly.

Antonine My gentlemen senators, friends and collaborators, I am your friend and wish no more than to be your friend.

3 Stop this nonsense then about deifying the murderer of senators!

Antonine He must be deified. We can't get away from it.

4 We know Antonine Caesar as a wise man without vanity and affectations. He has always worked well with the senate and succeeded in cancelling many unwise decision made by the sick and dying Hadrian. Will Antonine Caesar depart from his course of wisdom and become like Hadrian?

several senators Hear! Hear!

Antonine The only Caesars who were not deified were Tiberius, Caligula, Nero and Domitian. These have gone down into the annals of Rome as despicable tyrants

and abortive bunglers. Was then also Hadrian one of those? I am the first to admit that Hadrian never reached the level of an Augustus, but who could ever do that? But he surely was as good as a Titus and Vespasian and better than a Claudius.

several senators He is right.

1 But Hadrian was a notorious homophile, and we know our Antonine Caesar as a man detached from such foolery. Will he then not also detach himself from Hadrian?

Antonine I renounce every kind of homosexuality and would rather that all such tendencies were completely removed from our society as a source of corruption and unsound problems, which no society can benefit from. But I can't detach myself from Hadrian as a state constructor, his excellent preservation of peace and his noble constructivism.

2 But Hadrian was not democratic. He opposed the senate in everything. He persecuted the senate. He had senators executed! How could you then, Antonine Caesar, demand the deification of a murderer by the senate?

3 We must not only oppose his deification! We must demand that all his regulations be cancelled and declared null and void! For he was not divine!

Antonine My friends, if we cancel all his regulations, also his adoption of myself would be cancelled, I am then no longer Caesar and no one will be. Do you desire anarchy? – If you cancel all of Hadrian's regulations, you must reintroduce the republic with all its chaos.

1 Hadrian was not completely as stupid as he seemed. Let us grant the wishes of our good Antonine.

2 He did after all build many beautiful monuments.

3 First of all his own mausoleum.

4 Let's acknowledge Hadrian as a god. We are at least rid of him as Caesar.

Antonine Do you approve of his deification?

1 Yes, good Antonine, for your sake.

2 We offer you another title at the same time. We would like to give you the name of Pius for the sake of your righteousness.

Antonine I thank you for the honour and regard it an extra exhortation for minding my duties and for living well up to my responsibility.

4 We trust you, Antoninus Pius.

(The senate approves of the ordinances.)

Scene 3. The wedding between M. Aurelius and Faustina.

Antonine Welcome into the covenant of happiness, my son Marcus Aurelius and my daughter Faustina. This is an important moment for Rome and for history. Hadrian engaged you with Ceionia Fabia and your brother with Faustina. I found it wiser still to break these bonds and also make you my son-in-law besides my son. Hadrian wisely decided the future for all of us, so that you will be Caesar after me, and what could then be wiser than to confirm this succession and make you my son-in-law, the husband of my most beloved child?

Marcus Antoninus Pius, you are not only the wisest of all possible regents but also the most generous.

Antonine Lucius Verus, what have you to say to lose a bride to Marcus Aurelius?

Lucius I wouldn't be here if I had any objections.

Antonine Still I ask you to tell us what you think.

Lucius That Marcus has deserved the best of brides. I concur with everyone's praise of your wisdom, Pius Caesar, and to thus stabilize and ensure the safety of a peaceful world empire by such wise and generous arrangements for the succession.

Antonine Don't forget that you yourself will be co-regent with Marcus when I am gone.

Lucius That I would gladly forget. Don't forget, o Caesar, that Marcus really most of all is a philosopher and I a poet.

Antonine And what could possibly be better for an empire than to be governed by philosophy and poetry? Many have criticised me, Marcus, for relying on philosophers and artists more than on bankers and realists. But did not Plato and Homer create our entire cultural world by their philosophy and poetry? What is there in our world that cannot be traced back to Homer and Plato? Our world would be nothing but vanity if it were not for their works, which will remain although the world would perish. I am more concerned about your philosophy and poetry than I am about your delicate health, Marcus.

Marcus I am sorry that it is not what it should be. All I can say to the defence of my sensitive stomach is that even Cicero, the greatest of Romans and authors in our language, suffered from a stomach which constantly caused him problems.

Antonine But yours are worse, for you also have pains in your chest.

Marcus Let's say like this, father, that I have an inborn barometer and an extra sensitive conscience. The lability of my physical nature comes from that. May I with this extraordinary sensitivity to what is right and wrong become the more useful as a servant of Rome instead.

Antonine You have a talent for turning everything in a positive direction, Marcus. Where did you learn that?

Marcus By the tutors you gave me yourself, first of all Fronto and Herod Atticus.

Antonine Fronto, come forth. Your training has done well for my son and heir. Carry on like that. Bring him further on the most difficult of all roads, the course of virtue and righteousness, and never stop urging him on.

Fronto No teacher ever had a more grateful and gratifying student.

Marcus And no student ever had a more gratifying teacher.

Antonine But could you really accept, Fronto, that Marcus would be lost to philosophy by entering marriage?

Fronto The philosophy is always there. He will never lose it. Philosophy can never importune into his marriage, and neither can his marriage importune into his philosophy.

Antonine No wonder you are his teacher. I bow to you, Fronto.

Marcus So does the entire world and especially I myself.

Antonine Well, Faustina, now it is your turn.

Faustina What does my father wish me to say?

Antonine Say what you will.

Faustina That I am very happy. You know I always loved Marcus, like the whole world viewed him as a favourite, but I also desired him. My happiness is now complete when I at last will have him. And I hope that father by me and him now will have many perfect grandchildren.

Antoninus I hope so too, my child. I always said that I would rather go into exile than live without my daughter next to me. But now when I have given her to Marcus it feels like having cheated destiny. I have lost her but still managed to keep her under my roof. For Marcus is more than like a son to me, like he was to Hadrian, a born Caesar, born to the highest office, the very image of Hadrian and myself, more like one of the family than if he really should have been.

Faustina I would like to hear Aelius Aristides.

Marcus You know he would only flatter us.

Faustina That's precisely why.

Aelius No, dear consummate wedding couple, I could not flatter you, for you stand above and are beyond the highest reach of any toweringly ambitious spires of

flattery. But I may say something to commemorate the memory of the extremely important event of this day. In some way it sets a seal to the eternally continuous and wonderful Rome. There have been earlier empires, like the Persian and the Macedonian, but none of them accomplished that harmony and peace, persisting ground and continuous prospect that Rome has reached under its fifteenth Caesar. Never before has any realm reached such perfect order and been so perfectly well organized. Caesar is no despot but like Pericles and Trajan the best of the best, who is the ruler of free men and not of slaves. In addition the Roman constitution protects the poor and weak, which never occurred in any Greek democracy. Thereby the Roman order of state unites the best aspects of both democracy, aristocracy, oligarchy and monarchy. There has never been a greater or better realm, so what more could you wish for than that it would remain forever and continue expanding as it is forever?

Lucius You flatter the whole world by your flattery of Rome, Aelius.

Aelius On the contrary. I deplore all those people who haven't yet joined the Roman empire and taken part of its culture and knowledge. That is what is unique about Rome, that it is obvious to everyone that we are the only divine and leading race, and still everyone can become like us.

Lucius Even Dacians, Libyans and moors?

Aelius Why not, if they just stop making war against us.

Marcus As long as they make war against us, we have to fight them.

Aelius Yes, precisely, and for that we have the most splendid army in the world, a perfect instrument to bring lower people up to our level.

Antonine (is very amused by Aelius) You only see the rosy side of things and no back sides or thorns, Aelius, but never mind? A medal could have a back side or do without, but it could never do without its beautiful front.

Marcus So let us all at last move over to the expecting wedding supper!

Lucius A wise suggestion, Marcus!

Fronto That's what we all have been waiting for!

Antonine Come on, then! Let's go!

(The company leaves in procession to festive music.)

Act II scene 1.

senator 1 Greetings, Caesar, and my sincerest congratulations to your son and heir!

Marcus I thank you, senator.

senator 2 This must be a highlight in your life, Marcus Aurelius Caesar and Faustina. You must be happy indeed!

Marcus The delivery went well indeed.

senator 2 (aside to 1) He seems so insensitive. Has anything happened?

1 (back) You must know that he is a stoic.

(Marcus and Faustina receive the greetings and congratulations from others meanwhile)

2 What does it mean to be a stoic? A cold-hearted cynic?

1 Not at all. It is very simple. According to Arrian you keep certain things under your control and others not. We can control how we think, our choices, our desires and what we hate, that is all our actions. What we can't always control is our body, our property, our reputation or our position, that is everything that makes us dependent on others. What we can control makes us free and unrestrained. What we can't control makes us weak and dependent as slaves and victims. So we should stick to what we can control, that is just ourselves, and not desire what makes us dependent on others, that is power, position, honour, reputation and all matters of vanity.

2 Who has let him in?

1 Who?

2 That one, He is a Christian. He is notorious. He is called Justin.

1 He will probably also bring Caesar his good wishes and congratulations.

2 I am not so sure. I consider every Christian a potential conspirer against the Roman state.

Justin Be blessed, Marcus Aurelius Caesar, the saviour and light of the world. And praised by your newborn son, and may his life be full of blessings!

Marcus (to Fronto) Who is this?

Fronto A Christian. He just wants to further the cause of his community.

Marcus You are a Christian. What is your errand?

Justin (on his knees) O noble Caesar, I have written several petitions but never had any answer, and I don't even know if Caesar has read them. I plead mercy for my Christian brothers, who are persecuted without reason.

Marcus It has been said, that you Christians scorn the gods of Rome and claim your god to be the only right one. Is this correct?

Justin It is true that our Christian faith is superior to all old idolatries.

Marcus Perhaps it is you yourself who have mocked the deification of Hadrian and his deification of Antinoos?

Justin Who can but despise a homosexual's deification of his male favourite sexual partner?

Marcus You speak boldly, and your disdain of homosexuality is shared by our present Caesar Antoninus and his entire family and court. But we can't accept scorn and disdain against Hadrian and Antinoos as deceased. It does not match your Christian profession of universal tolerance.

Fronto The Christians are known for their double standards. They preach love and pacifism while they celebrate meals in which they eat human flesh and drink his blood.

Marcus Of a living man?

Fronto No, of a sacrificed child.

Marcus You Christian, never show yourself to my eyes again. I will confidently reveal to you, that the son, whose delivery was proclaimed to the whole world yesterday with joy and festive glory, today has passed away. It is our duty to still receive all these sincere good wishes by people who wish us well, no matter how painful it is. But you have no place in this company and do not wish us well, when you in pretension of congratulating us for our deceased child wish to promote your doctrine, which uses for a ritual to eat and drink the flesh and blood of murdered children... You are a false prophet, my friend. Get lost!

Justin Great Caesar...

Fronto (kicks Justin down the stairs) Get lost, Caesar said!

Justin Caesar will one day come to regret this! (*is lost*)

Fronto I very much regret this importunity.

Marcus So do I. Unfortunately I fear that this was not to be my first confrontation with a fanatical Christian. But I can never forgive the Christians that it was a first time at all and under these circumstances.

Fronto Your grandfather Hadrian successfully fought the rebellious Jews.

Marcus But these Christians are more insidious. There is nothing more insidious than double standards. The Christians preach love and pacifism but try to undermine civilization. You don't fight such worms. You can only defend yourself against them and keep away from them.

Faustina I am sorry, Marcus, that this has made you so upset. But you may be certain that my grief is greater.

Marcus Our sorrow is greater than the whole world, Faustina, but we can have another son.
Faustina Not just one.
Marcus That's the spirit. Let us now retire. (*They retire.*)
senator 1 Has Caesar's son died then?
2 So it seems.
1 What a disaster!
2 They concealed it well. And then a Christian comes along ruthlessly trampling into their inconceivable pain!
1 Yes, you could call that clumsy indeed. But no one knew about it.
2 No, they wished to spare the world their own outrageous pain. It is hard to have to be Caesar.
1 Yes, probably the hardest and most difficult of all.

Scene 2. The senate.

Marcus I am sorry, gentlemen, but I am not willing to accept the burden of the highest responsibility of the realm.
senator 1 Marcus Aurelius Caesar, we all know you as a most qualified regent. During the whole reign of Antonine, that is 23 years, you never mismanaged once. The only alternative to you would be your adoptive brother Lucius, who is ten years younger and as self-indulgent a poet and actor as another Nero. You have to accept the burden.
Marcus I can only do it on one condition.
senator 2 We are willing to grant it if we may hear it first.
Marcus I don't agree with you about my brother being less competent than I. We have lived in peace and luxury during the whole reign of Antonine, which has given him ample space to his poetical aspirations, but it was already Hadrian's will that we should rule together after Antonine. So I ask of you to let Lucius be installed in office with the same power and authority as I, according to Hadrian's wishes.
senator 1 Is that your only condition for running?
Marcus Yes.
senator 1 Can we accept Caesar's wish?
all Yes.
senator 1 So may we then have two emperors until further, but only one of them may be Pontifex Maximus. Could you accept this sovereignty, Marcus Aurelius Caesar?
Marcus It is just a title, and its responsibility is no worse than the other. Yes, I accept it.
senator 1 So we are to install Emperor Caesar Marcus Aurelius Antoninus Augustus as Pontifex Maximus and his brother Emperor Caesar Lucius Aurelius Verus Augustus as Pontifex and co-regent.
many Hail Marcus Aurelius! Hail Lucius Verus! Hail Caesar!

Scene 3.

Lucius Will Caesar arrive?
Fronto Don't worry, Lucius. He will be as sure to come as the weather.
senator 1 Marcus Aurelius' immediate presence is most desirable since the empire is facing its collapse if he doesn't.
Fronto There now, it's not that dangerous.

senator 2 Here he is. (*enter Marcus Aurelius.*)

Lucius Sorry to have to break up your holiday, Marcus, but we need your advice and decision.

Marcus Don't be sorry. I did get four days' leave after all. But what is the matter?

Lucius The Tiber has flooded, and thousands are threatened with having their homes washed out.

Marcus Construct new homes for them when the old ones are ruined. Take care of the homeless in the meanwhile. What else do we have a government for?

Fronto The Scots are rebelling in Britain. The Antonine wall will not hold and has to be abandoned.

Marcus But Hadrian's wall is standing. It should hold. Let's hold our stand behind it.

senator 1 The greatest peril though is in the far east. The Persians have attacked Armenia, deposed our friends there and set up a puppet king of their own.

Marcus There is our weakest spot. What else?

senator 1 Sedatius Severianus, governor of Cappadocia, allowed himself to be tricked with his army into Persia where the army has perished and Severianus himself committed suicide.

Marcus Then he needs a replacement. What else?

senator 2 The Germans have crossed the border at Taunus and fallen into Raetia.

Marcus That was the only disaster missing.

Fronto I am sorry, Marcus. Military concerns is the last thing you and Lucius have had to know and bother about. Therefore all foreign armies now believe they have got a chance.

Marcus Lucius, you have more military training than I. You have to go to Armenia while I have to care for the state.

Lucius Do you think I could manage the Parthians on my own?

Marcus As soon as Statius Priscus has the situation in Britain under control, we will send him to Armenia. Only he can cope with the Parthians.

senator 1 That sounds reasonable. Then Lucius Caesar will also come away from his pleasures and indulgences in Rome.

senator 2 And the Germans?

Marcus If necessary I will have to deal with them personally.

Lucius I will go, Marcus. I could need some change.

senator 1 That's the sound of it.

Lucius The gods know that it is not always so funny to just amuse oneself.

Marcus As soon as possible we will send Statius Priscus to assist you.

Lucius I will count on it.

Fronto I am sorry, Marcus.

Marcus About what?

Fronto That you will have to bother about war.

Marcus It's only the fault of the enemies, which is why we must defeat them.

Fronto Yes, I suppose so, but I fear this is only the beginning.

Scene 4. The trial against Justin.

Rusticus Justin, you are accused of having blasphemed the gods and of undermining the state by your Christian subversive writings.

Justin Who is accusing me?

Rusticus Crescens the philosopher.

Justin Of the cynic school. He is just tired of me for always having defeated him in our debates. He therefore wants to get rid of me.

Rusticus Still you confess to being Christian?

Justin Yes.

Rusticus That is the essence of the accusation, whatever the motives may have been to induce Crescens to denounce you. Others accuse the Christians of the plague, just like Nero accused them of the fire of Rome, but we don't deal with absurdities. We have though a normal procedure concerning the Christians.

Justin Get on with it.

Rusticus The only thing demanded of you by the state is that you should believe in the gods and obey Caesar.

Justin We believe in Jesus and his commandments, and that is no crime.

Rusticus What are the dogmas then that you Christians follow, since they mean more to you than the state and world order?

Justin Our dogmas don't appeal to those who suffer under the slavery of the world order.

Rusticus Explain these dogmas.

Justin We believe in the God of the Christians, who we think is the only creator of the universe and all life, and in Jesus Christ God's Son, who has come into the world to redeem all people from sin and the temptations of this world with all its beguiling illusions, which many prophets before him said that he would do.

Rusticus I am a philosopher myself and a stoic and have tutored Caesar myself in the stoic philosophy. Are you aware that what you say fits rather well into stoicism?

Justin Stoicism is a godless materialism and an outdated philosophy like all others. You have no God, since you are atheists.

Rusticus Most people regard you as atheists, since you reject all our gods. Still you believe in one God, whom you say is the only God, and still you believe he has a Son who is as much God as his father. How can you make this add up?

Justin As easily as you stoics claim that everything is predestined while at the same time you believe in the free will.

Rusticus A good answer. You are an educated man, you answer with reason, and you seem quite sure that your belief is the only right one in life. Do you believe then, if you are scourged and decapitated, that you will come to Heaven as a God when you are dead?

Justin I know that all Christian martyrs are rewarded with divine blessedness and eternal life if they die as witnesses of the only true Christian faith.

Rusticus So you are certain that you will be rewarded after death for having died as a martyr?

Justin Yes, more certain than of anything else.

Rusticus So you would rather die than sacrifice to the gods and swear allegiance to Caesar?

Justin I have nothing against Caesar, but I can't sacrifice to the gods since I don't believe in them.

Rusticus He who will not sacrifice to the gods or obey Caesar will be taken away and scourged to then be executed according to the law.

Justin You may do with us what you will, but you can still not make us sacrifice to idols.

Rusticus I can't understand how an educated man like you could be such an idiot. All you need is to be a law-abiding citizen. Is that so hard? Is it so revolting? Is it so impossible for you to compromise with reality? Rome is today threatened by war on all borders and by the plague in all cities, and you Christians then choose to spite and oppose Rome. Is that sensible?

(Justin does not answer.)

Take away the miserable fool! May all Christians blame themselves! We give them the chance to live and remain Christians, but the hopeless fanatics refuse to

cooperate! How could such crazy people exist in our Roman well-organized world? They are just spoiled! Take them away!

Act III scene 1.

Marcus Doctor Galen, I have asked you here to get qualified advice from an expert. No doctor has a greater reputation in the world than you. The plague is ravaging all cities and barracks, and the epidemic won't stop. Most people believe the plague to be a divine punishment, but what then have we done to deserve it?

Galen All ignorant people like to believe in fantasies and superstition. It is very simple. The illness is no divine punishment. When you so successfully made war in Armenia, you came down into Mesopotamia, which is a much warmer and more dangerous climate, since there are many bogs that give rise to fevers. There the first Romans were attacked by the disease. There are still worse diseases even further east in still more humid and tropical countries, which your ambassadors to China and Assam have met with and told us about, and we Romans have no natural resistance against more exotic illnesses in alien countries. Therefore so large parts of the population have fallen victim to this contamination when it was brought here by your own men from Mesopotamia.

Marcus Is there any hope of any end to the epidemic?

Galen Of course. No epidemic goes on forever.

Marcus Many believe that this means the end to Rome and to humanity.

Galen Ignorant people are always ready to believe in any superstitions.

(*enter Lucius.*)

Marcus Lucius, here is doctor Galen from Pergamum. He will cure the world from the plague.

Lucius That sounds good. Is he an actor?

Marcus Lucius, the plague is no play.

Lucius Then I want nothing to do with it. You can't imagine what talents we have been able to import from Ctesiphon and Babylon! I have never seen or heard so brilliant artists!

Marcus Lucius, the plague is devastating the entire empire, and all you can think of is your pleasures.

Lucius Life is short but art is long. You are far too serious, Marcus. Didn't you ever have any fun?

Marcus What do you mean, doctor Galen, about Lucius Caesar's attitude?

Galen Carefree and irresponsible but healthy.

Marcus Go to your artists, Lucius, and act your plays with them and leave me to handle the wars in the north and the plague of the world.

Lucius Brother, you know what we both are best for. (*leaves*)

Marcus What am I to do with such a brother and co-regent? He became quite impossible after the victories in Mesopotamia although he did not do anything. It was the old Staius Pricus and then Avidius Cassius who settled the whole war. Maybe it was Lucius who brought home the plague?

Galen You must not think like that. Lucius is respected as Caesar no matter how much a poet he is, and although he has the same birthday as Nero, he is still no Nero.

Marcus No, but I am worried about where his irresponsible and superficial course might lead him.

Galen You have reasons to be. Myself I intend to place myself in safety and escape the plague by returning home to Pergamum.

Marcus And I must myself like some other refugee go north to war against the Germans.
Galen How does that suit your mind?
Marcus Not at all.
Galen And it's not very good for your health.
Marcus What does it matter if I die in the plague here or in the war in the north? Both seem inescapable.

Scene 2. Syria.

Martius Verus You are mad, Cassius. You can't rebel against Marcus Aurelius. You can't plunge the whole realm into disaster in that way. You will never get many followers. It is senseless suicide.

Cassius Is it? Only a madman would not raise rebellion in my place. According to certain news Marcus Aurelius is dying if not dead in the swamps of Marcomannia in the north. Even his own wife has given me her support.

Verus Faustina? The daughter of Antoninus? How is it possible?

Cassius Everyone is counting on the near death of Marcus Aurelius if he isn't dead already. He is like a living skeleton with a chronic ulcer and lives on opium. You can't live very long like that. Faustina does not like her son-in-law Pompeianus, and neither does her daughter. Marcus Aurelius chose for her the husband she least of all desired. Pompeianus would be closest at hand as a successor at the death of Marcus Aurelius, since Commodus is under age, and then Faustina and Lucilla would prefer me.

Verus But how on earth do you think you could get away with it? You will be automatically branded as an enemy of the state.

Cassius Marcus Aurelius claimed the honour for the victorious war against the Parthians although his wannabe actor of a brother carried the highest responsibility, but who fought it? Who burned the palace of the Persian kings at Ctesiphon? Who destroyed Artaxata and built a new capital for the Armenians? I did the whole job alone. I am the best general in the world, I am at the peak of my powers, and I hold all Syria, Arabia, Palestine and Egypt with all its legions in my hands.

Verus But Marcus Aurelius has the rest of the world. It's sixteen legions against your seven.

Cassius If he is still alive. I heard from a certain source that he would be dead.

Verus What will you do if he is?

Cassius Then it is my duty to assume power, dispose of Pompeianus and deify Marcus Aurelius.

Verus Your wages are too high for me. Whether Caesar is dead or alive I must write to him and detach myself from your program.

Cassius You are governor of Cappadocia and I am of Syria. We are colleagues of the same rank. You have all the right in the world to choose whatever side you prefer. Marcus Aurelius was as tolerant as I intend to be.

Verus In spite of his ulcer, his drugs and his dreary war in the north, which he isn't fit for at all, I don't think he will run out that easily.

Cassius I have already declared my rebellion. I can't turn back any longer even if he lives.

Verus I am sorry, Cassius, but we can't see each other any more. I regret the loss of such a good general.

Cassius You are too cautious a general for my taste. It's only the bold initiatives that carry the world forward.

Verus And lead it into disasters.

Cassius Rather than to be bored.
Verus Fight the Persians instead. You were better at that. Your new war is no war but just militant folly.
Cassius Farewell, Martius Verus.
Verus Farewell, Avidius Cassius, Caesar's most trusted general with the whole eastern part of the empire in his hands. You had it all from him and ruin it by becoming a traitor.
Cassius Not against him or his family, if he is dead or dying.
Verus But against the senate and the state, which is worse. Farewell. (*leaves*)
Cassius (*shrugs his shoulders*) What's done is done. The suicide is universal, and Marcus Aurelius introduced it himself by wasting his life on wars against the Germans. Rome will never survive it in the long run.

Scene 3. Carnuntum.

Marcus (*to his soldiers*) I am sorry, my friends, but the situation is still critical although we defeated the Marcomanni and now appear to win the war. I can't give you the extra rewards you claim for your extremely brave contribution. If I did, this extra salary would be taken from your parents and families by force. You know how I myself arranged auctions for months of imperial properties to shake up money for the war, and then no one counted with all our great defeats in the beginning. I know that this enforced lack of generosity is risking my position, but it is as little in my own power to do something about it as it is in yours, since only the gods could actually fix it. That's all, soldiers. Go home, or follow me on. (*The soldiers disperse, muttering and mumbling.*)

Help me, doctor Galen. These pains are breaking me up.

Galen You don't sleep. You don't eat. You only work and make war. How could you then expect of nature to keep you well?
Marcus When at last may I die, doctor Galen?
Galen All nature strives to live as long as possible.
Marcus But I have already been dying for years.
Galen You have a weak constitution. That is all. You are over-sensitive and a hypochondriac at that, just like Cicero. For such people the Caesar office is the most unwholesome in the world.
Marcus Then deliver me of it.
Galen Unfortunately I can only do the opposite by keeping you alive. The whole world needs you.
Marcus Those drops you gave me.
Galen Yes. You have grown worse since you stopped taking your medicine.
Marcus It's worse than that. I understand now that I have become addicted to your medicine. That's just what I wished to avoid.
Galen It won't harm you. It will only relieve your pains and make you sleep.
Marcus Give me again that damned drug then, so that I may live on and suffer on and wait a bit longer for dying.
Galen A little bit of medicine a day does no harm if you just keep the measure.
Marcus I will have to rely on you, doctor Galen.
A messenger A letter for Caesar from Martius Verus, governor of Cappadocia.
Marcus Not another war in the east, please. (*opens the scroll, tired out.*)
Galen Is it serious?
Marcus (*tired*) This is worse than war. (*drops the letter. Galen picks it up and quickly eyes it through.*)

Galen Rebellion! Avidius Cassius! In communion with Faustina! And your daughter Lucilla!

Marcus This is the punishment for marrying my daughter to the best man in Rome, whom she didn't happen to be in love with.

Galen But Avidius Cassius! Your best general! And Faustina! Do you think it is true?

Marcus Faustina inherited her mother's talent of taking everything lightly. She has never even met Avidius Cassius, but he has maybe heard something of her less serious and well considered statements. Neither she nor Lucilla is in any way to blame for this. The blame is with the rumour, which has spread that I am dead or dying, which even Faustina seems to believe so firmly that she has taken measures for my succession. She is only betraying Pompeianus, not me nor anyone else. Mothers and sons-in-laws don't usually have the best relationships. Rumour and the war bear the entire blame. I have been sitting isolated here in the forests outside the world in a deplorable war for so many years that the world has begun to think that I must be dead.

Galen What do you intend to do?

Marcus Call on my only remaining son Commodus. All the others are dead, my tutor Fronto, my brother Lucius, my best general Statius Priscus - everyone I could trust is gone. You are the only one I have left, my slowly poisoning doctor, who makes me dependent on your drugs.

Galen They just relieve your pains and makes it possible for you to sleep.

Marcus Yes, yes, my faithful doctor, you always keep telling me that, and I must believe you. But it is time for Commodus to grow up to his responsibility, has his manly toga and is introduced to the world.

Galen He is still not fourteen.

Marcus But he is thirteen. That's enough.

Galen But is he the right person to take over the burden of Marcus Aurelius?

Marcus We don't know that yet, but we have to take that chance. The empire has no other choice at the moment.

Galen Pompeianus? Pertinax? The promising Septimius Severus? The faithful Martius Verus?

Marcus Can I trust anyone any more after my best general Cassius, whom I entrusted half the empire, has shown me his gratitude by becoming my life's greatest traitor?

Galen I admit your position is tragic.

Marcus All my ailments come from my loneliness, and my loneliness comes from the fact that I can't trust anyone. Cure that tragedy if you can, doctor Galen.

Scene 4.

Marcus (speaking to the soldiers) It is not to express any harm or anger that I now have chosen to speak to you, but to express my sorrow over our destiny. I don't regret it, for who am I to regret the unfathomable caprices of a divine providence, to which we all are like leaves to the wind? But I have to regret the horrors of the war and especially the unsurpassable horrors of the civil war which we and even you now have to face, for we cannot evade it, as a consequence of a stupid and unnecessary treason from one of our best friends. If he only had risked his own life by his treason it would have been a trifle, but now he is risking the entire empire. If it only had been a matter between the two of us, me and general Cassius, I would gladly have referred the matter to the decision of the senate or the army, accepted their decision and transferred the empire to Cassius without any argument, if it would have been

for the best of all. But the civil war has already been declared and started, and it is already being fought in Cappadocia and Syria. Unfortunately it is therefore for the best of all that I go on working and expose myself to permanent danger of life with you here so far away from Italy, which we haven't seen for many years, although I am already old and weak and can't take food without pains nor sleep with any peace.

Cassius is a man of honour who never spoke or wrote anything against me and who in the belief that I am dead has applied for my deification with the senate to then assume my office and power. All who want peace, that is all Greek provinces in the east, are inclined to support him, while you together with me now have fought the Germans here at the northern frontier to carry on the expansion and development of the empire. Since I am alive it is my duty to resist the self-indulgent initiative of Cassius. Therefore I ask for your loyalty and that you may continue showing your marvellous fighting spirit which has been my best company here at the frontier for six years through diseases and starvation, snowstorms and floods, winters and inhuman conditions of wilderness. On our side we have Martius Verus, the governor of Cappadocia, who has been as successful against the Parthians as Cassius. Perhaps Cassius will regret his action when he learns that I am alive. In that case I hope he will not commit suicide or be killed, which would only deprive me of the pleasure of showing him grace and forgiveness, for all goodness has certainly not left humanity, and the little that remains of the virtues of old times will always have an honorary place in history as long as it is being led by responsible men.

a soldier We are with you, Caesar!

another Lead us to India and further than Alexander!

3 Send us to China! We will follow you!

4 Who knows? Perhaps it is general Cassius who is already dead?

5 This insurrection in this age under this Caesar does not make any sense.

A messenger Caesar, greetings from Martius Verus.

Marcus (disturbed) What is it?

messenger Martius Verus has invaded Syria and defeated Cassius. Here is the head of the rebelling general as a gift. (*a parcel is presented.*)

Marcus Who do you think I am? A king of barbarians who accepts cannibal gifts? If it really is true, then for god's sake bury the head and don't let me see it. Who killed him?

messenger A centurion by the name of Antony.

Marcus Like Antony murdered Cicero. Give the head a decent funeral with all honorary attributes, and let no one see it.

Messenger Yes, Caesar.

Marcus So is the mad dream of greatness of this unfortunate general over after three months and six days. We don't have to move the war to Syria. We just have to bury every trace of this conspiracy before any more are found to be involved in it. Cassius' correspondence has to be destroyed. And Faustina, the daughter of my foster father! What part did you play, unfortunate woman and my consort, in this unnecessary extra tragedy of destiny about ingratitude, misunderstanding and wretched treason?

Act IV scene 1. Halala at Tarsus. Faustina's deathbed.

Faustina Why did you come back, Marcus?

Marcus Why wouldn't I have come back?

Faustina You know me, and you know women enough to avoid them.

Marcus How could a mother of my twelve children speak like that?

Faustina Your twelve children? How do you know they were yours all twelve of them? Rome loves to abuse their Caesars' wives, and you are not so stupid that you would pretend not to hear what words go about. Rome has observed my twelve childbirths, and Rome knows how little you have been to Rome, and Rome is not too stupid not to draw conclusions.

Marcus I never doubted your fidelity, Faustina.

Faustina Not even when Avidius Cassius rebelled against you in my name?

Marcus He thought I was dead and wanted to protect my family.

Faustina You are naïve and too credulous, Marcus.

Marcus I have never been unfaithful to you, Faustina.

Faustina You deceive yourself, Marcus. You were always unfaithful to me. You loved your philosophy, your role as Caesar, your empire and yourself, while I was always just your woman, a necessary evil, a contemptible servant, an adornment to your façade in the capacity of Antonine Pius' only daughter...

Marcus You must not speak like that, Faustina. Were we not happy? Didn't I love you?

Faustina Not enough. You were too much away. You were not made for women, Marcus Aurelius., You were made for the world order and for philosophy. You never should have married.

Marcus Your father married you to me for the sake of the world order. It would secure the succession and increase the security of the office of Caesar.

Faustina He deceived himself like all emperors. The world order is a matter of vanity. Love is the only important thing. You sacrificed your love for the sake of the world order when you should have done the opposite.

Marcus The family is the only foundation of the world order. No world order can exist without a stable family life as its basis.

Faustina See for yourself the result of your world order and your stable family life. Constant wars with Parthians and Germans, constant rebellions in Britain, Spain and Syria, plague and economic ruin all over the country, and six of your children dead, and out of those six who survived only one is a boy, your only possible successor, and he is a rude bully who easily loses his temper and control, whose jokes are crude and base and whose favourite sport is fighting with gladiators.

Marcus Are you trying to insinuate that he is no son of mine?

Faustina I insinuate nothing. I only want to make you uncertain. Is the base Commodus really of your stock, the noble philosopher Marcus Aurelius? I find no trace of you in him.

Marcus He has received all his powers, he will be the youngest consul ever of Rome next year, I waged everything on his education, and nothing can stop him from becoming Emperor after me except his death. And you dare raise the suspicion that he would not be my son?

Faustina You will never be certain about it, Marcus. That's your woman's revenge on you for having preferred the vanity of philosophy and the world order to her. You will consider that problem for the rest of your life, and I will pass away laughing at your perplexity.

Marcus Have I then done anything to deserve such a cruelty of yours?

Faustina Yes, Marcus. You have loved me. (*dies*)

Marcus My love! Don't leave me now! And is this then the only thing a woman leaves behind of her love – sheer premeditated cruelty, just to keep the man's soul in her power? I protest! You must not be that cruel, Faustina! Do you hear? The one who I loved the most must not become the cruelest against me of all! (*cries bitterly over his wife's body.*)

Scene 2. Athens.

Herod Atticus We thank you for your outstanding contributions.

Marcus That was the least I could do.

Herodes Still no Roman emperor has done as much, not even Hadrian.

Marcus Hadrian did more. He gave you an entire theatre.

Herodes But you have confirmed our schools of philosophy. That is more important.

Marcus Is it? Sometimes I must doubt it. Philosophy is a delicate flower, and not many are capable of cultivating it. I have done everything to try to interest my only son Commodus for its essence, but he prefers gladiator vulgarity and the flattery of common people.

Herodes Is it really so optimal that he will succeed you?

Marcus It is too late to change that now. The whole state machinery has been set for his establishment, and not even I can alter the course of the law. I had done too much for him already when I discovered that he really only lived to amuse himself, like a woman.

Herodes There are alternatives like Pompeianus, Maximinaus, Pertinax and Septimius Severus.

Marcus I know, but Commodus is my son, the grandson of Antoninus and the last Antonine. He must have his chance. If he abuses it, he will account for it, and the empire will punish him.

Herodes It has been suggested that he was fathered by a gladiator in your absence.

Marcus Nonsense. It is impossible. I was always with Faustina at that time, and I trusted her. Even she insinuated that she might not always have been faithful to me, but all the world always wallowed in that speculation. Naturally there are doubts. But I can't alter the law of succession. It has already been carried through.

Herodes I believe though that you would like to alter it. You always had a keen instinct for giving the right office to the right person, promoted those who deserved it and gave appropriate rewards. He has not deserved anything.

Marcus I can't change the law. It would be worse if I now tried to exclude him. That would shake the empire. We have had enough of that sort of thing. If Commodus does not behave, then hopefully someone of the better generals will take over. But the succession is not my greatest worry.

Herodes What is?

Marcus That Jewish sect which is detached from the Jews and calls themselves Christians. I have met many Jews, and it would always strike me how dirty and lazy they are, but they are great philosophers. I had many rewarding discussions in Jerusalem with Rabbi Juda I, their most knowledgeable leader. But the case of the Christians is different. They are ignorant and fanatic, despise all traditions and culture, trample all schools of philosophy and other religions under their feet and suffer from hubris unto the unbearable. And the remarkable thing is that this sect, of almost only superstition, is getting around and expanding more than any other religion.

Herodes Many have criticised you for persecuting the Christians.

Marcus I know, but I don't. It's the law that has its course against them. What shocks me is their arrogance and irresponsibility. They are prepared to scrap the whole empire and welcome chaos, as if anything would be better than to tolerate the world order. But that is childish. They are like children who refuse to go to school because they want to play instead. To confess to Christianity is criminal if you don't also confess allegiance to the gods and the state. The Christians consistently refuse to

obey the state and to accept the gods. So they are subject to the death sentence of the law.

Herodes Remarkable is, that the Christians only seem to gain new grounds and get more followers by their martyrs.

Marcus That's what worries me. If the Christians start to dominate and scrap the gods and the empire, the borders will be open to all barbarians to overwhelm the provinces with plunder and destruction. It is of vital interest to the realm to avert barbarian invasions, but the Christians in their folly and ignorance wish to scrap the borders to let them in.

Herodes Your persecution of them will lead to nothing good. They will only grow stronger, and you will be branded as their persecutor. How about tolerating them instead?

Marcus I am not persecuting them. The persecution against them is the result of unfortunate circumstances. The gladiator games became too expensive, the gladiators become too few, since I would have liked to end all gladiator games to instead enlist all gladiators as able soldiers in the army. The expensive gladiator games were financed by the upper class, and with the difficulties we have had with wars, civil war, the plague and inflation, the economic burden became too heavy for the upper class. I then allowed ordinary criminals condemned to death to be used for the games. The bloodthirst of the people then suddenly led to the possible opportunity of prosecuting all Christians. There you have the problem, which by no means occurred by any calculation on my side.

Herodes So you made an effort to put an end to the gladiator games. Instead the Christians were the more persecuted. Thereby Christianity had many new martyrs and a favourable wind. At the same time your son and heir wants nothing more than to be a gladiator. Your position is rather melancholy, Marcus, in view of the future.

Marcus Do you have any recipe how to cure this tragic melancholy in the state of affairs?

Herodes Unfortunately I don't. You are such a good emperor that no one can succeed you. That's really the problem. You have done everything you could, the lands of the marcomanni and the quadi as new provinces north of Vindobona and Aquincum would have made ideal bulwarks against the barbarians in the north and east, and Commodus as Caesar will probably give up these provinces and perhaps ruin the state economy which you actually built and stabilized. That would make way for the disintegration of the empire, new barbaric invasions along the borders and expansion of the Christians, who regard Caesar as their main enemy whoever he is, and they would be greatly promoted if Caesar would remain long as a simple gladiator like Commodus.

Marcus But how could the Christians be so successful when their purpose is so destructive?

Herodes It is not destructive. They want a new world order on the ruins of the past. They want to pull down to build something new. And above all they want to eliminate the ruthlessness of the power.

Marcus But without ruthlessness no power and no state. If we did not fight the Marcomanni and Quadi with ruthlessness they would defeat us and the state would perish.

Herodes The Christians believe in a higher power without ruthlessness.

Marcus And how would such a power be manifested?

Herodes Just by the power of thought and faith.

Marcus But that is sheer philosophy in that case!

Herodes Exactly.

Marcus Do you want to make me believe that the Christians is a philosophy just like the schools of Plato, Aristotle, Epicure and Zeno?

Herodes You have taken these schools under your protection together with the school of rhetoric, but perhaps you also should accept the Christians.

Marcus Unfortunately, Herod Atticus, this is impossible for me as a responsible politician, since they are ambitious for the world order in order to pull it down. I can't see any greater danger to the world than a sect of fanatic believers claiming infallibility, which brands all as enemies who don't join them, who wants to replace knowledge and education with ignorance and one way of thought only, and who want to abolish the state from sheer irresponsibility.

Herodes As I said, Marcus, your position is a melancholy one.

Marcus My ambassadors to China reported that they have a religion there which claims all is just suffering. This comes close to the Hellenic tragic concept of life. Unfortunately I don't believe all the heroism of Rome to be enough to refute this insight, experience, wisdom and realism. Whatever happens I believe more in philosophy and that it will prevail and remain in all its melancholy resignation.

Herodes And if Christianity prevails over philosophy?

Marcus If Christianity prevails over philosophy, Herod, there will be no hope for the world for at least a thousand years.

Act V scene 1. Vindobona.

Commodus How is he?

Galen He is dying.

Commodus Do I have to see him?

Galen You are the only one who can save him.

Commodus How? I am no doctor.

Galen But you are his son.

Commodus Am I?

(goes in to Marcus. The tent opens, and Marcus lies stretched out on a tent bed.)

Marcus So you come anyway, my son. For a moment I thought you would stay away.

Commodus What do you want, father?

Marcus I am dying, Commodus.

Commodus I know. The whole world knows.

Marcus You will be world ruler after me. Do you know what that means?

Commodus That I may do as I please.

Marcus No, Commodus. It means the opposite. You must do everything that you don't want to do. You must put the interests of others before your own. You must be everyone's servant, and you must not let them down. What do you intend to do when I am gone?

Commodus Return to Rome.

Marcus You must finish the war first.

Commodus It is your war, father. I had nothing to do with it, and more than half of the realm was against it.

Marcus I almost succeeded it carrying it through. If we could turn the lands of the Marcomanni and the Quadi into Roman provinces, we have mountain ridges as a border against the Germans and not just one river that is easy to cross. If we can accomplish this new border, Rome will then be protected against the Germans for centuries ahead.

Commodus I have more important things to do as Caesar.

Marcus Like charming the vulgar multitude by acting as a brutal and vain gladiator?

Commodus You are sick, father. Your eternal wars made you sick. I don't want to be sick like you. I want to live.

Marcus A Caesar never gets what he wants, Commodus. He has to subordinate his own will to what's best for the country. If you as Caesar will just force your own will, you will just get murdered.

Commodus Are you threatening me, father?

Marcus I am just sharing my experience of life with you. You have to be realistic to survive. To force your own will is supreme lack of realism. You can only achieve your own life by compromises.

Commodus But didn't you always carry through your own will?

Marcus I neither wanted the Christians to flourish or to be persecuted. I neither wanted war nor rebellion. I got all what I did not want, but it doesn't matter. I live in harmony with cosmos, and that's the main thing.

Commodus Do you, father? Although you had my mother killed and your brother Lucius?

Marcus Is this my son speaking thus?

Commodus I am not your son. I am Commodus. I am less your son than you were the son of Antoninus and he the son of Hadrian. And I will not carry on your wars and get as sick as you. (*leaves in anger*)

Marcus Strange. The only son of a Caesar for more than a hundred years denies his father but accepts willingly the imperial purple he got for nothing and was born in – to use it to destroy his father's work. Then I have nothing more to do here. Then it's just to die and get it over with. – Doctor Galen!

Galen Yes, Caesar.

Marcus Let me sleep. Don't let me wake up any more.

Galen My medicine is to relieve your pain and make you sleep, so that you will go on living. I can't give you the eternal sleep.

Marcus Then I will just have to refuse to eat until I die.

Galen Have you resigned so utterly?

Marcus Only death is missing.

Galen I will give you a proper dose, but I will not administer it. You have to take that responsibility yourself.

Marcus You are free from all responsibility.

Galen Then I will just follow your wish as far that I will meet you half way. (*mixes a potion.*)

Marcus A doctor knows better than an emperor to balance life with death. I envy you.

Galen I don't envy you. You shouldn't have talked with Commodus.

Marcus Why not?

Galen He is neither good for the health of you nor of Rome.

Marcus But he is my successor.

Galen Why don't you say 'my son'?

Marcus You overheard our conversation?

Galen Partly.

Marcus Trajan, Hadrian, Antonine, all the best emperors died without sons but had the better adoptive sons instead, who they could choose themselves. Perhaps it was my mistake to get myself real sons. That limited my freedom of choice, especially since only one survived, whom I was not allowed to choose myself.

Galen You can still separate him from the purple.

Marcus No, doctor Galen, I can't. The Roman state machinery is too well greased, and it is my own fault that its judiciary system works so irrevocably perfectly well, that Commodus can't be deprived of his titles. I am the only smith of my own

misfortune, and in the capacity of the best emperor of Rome ever, no one is more guilty than myself of the approaching decline and fall of Rome.

Galen Rome cannot fall as surely as it has been consolidated by the governments of yourself and your closest predecessors.

Marcus You really think so, doctor Galen? Then you can't take the pulse of a state machinery. Just when the state seems to be strongest it will perish and founder with men and all, while the only thing that can hold it together is crises and adversities, inside dissolution and threats from the outside.

Galen You know more about politics than I.

Marcus Still I would rather be a human doctor for men and special individuals like you, than an overhuman state doctor with the destiny of all humanity on my responsibility. - Leave me now, my good doctor. You have done your duty, and I absolve you from my destiny.

Galen You really want me to leave you at this moment?

Marcus I need some rest.

Galen I will return in an hour. (*leaves reluctantly*)

Marcus (*takes the potion*) Welcome dreamworld, my own world, so much better and larger than the mundane world! I feel how my body is gradually fading away, and I enjoy it. Still I can't feel any loneliness. Who is it who keeps me company?

Hadrian (*enters*) My poor too fragile all too talented favourite boy! Do you know what you did wrong?

Marcus Is it Caesar Hadrian? My spiritual grandfather?

Hadrian Don't imagine you will die alone. You gave yourself to women, my boy. I was wiser. I only put my wages on men.

Marcus But wan't that unnatural?

Hadrian Not politically. You can trust men politically – never women. They are just submissive and will give way to anything, while politics demands consistency, which only men can live up to. Therefore I waged only on men – and secured the realm for fifty years ahead.

Marcus But you were ridiculed.

Hadrian What does that matter, if my policies were good for the country?

Marcus You are right, Hadrian. I never should have given in to women. But my spiritual father, your adoptive son, determined his daughter for me.

Hadrian Yes, what's done is done and cannot be undone, and therefore the realm will now perish after your death

Marcus Can you give me any certainty whether Commodus really is my son?

Hadrian It does not matter, Marcus. He is not your spiritual son, and that is fatal. If he is your son by flesh and blood really then does not matter. If a son by your flesh and blood is not your spiritual son, he can never become a real son, no matter how legitimate he is.

Marcus So I should have separated Commodus from power?

Hadrian You should have tried him first.

Marcus So this is then my crime against Rome, which never can be forgiven. At least I can never forgive myself for it. Thereby all my life has been vain and worthless, and all my constructive efforts have just been seeds for the fall of Rome and myself.

Hadrian No, Marcus, your mistake was something else.

Marcus Guide me, Hadrian.

Hadrian You underestimated your own will. That's all that means anything, and you failed to use it enough. The mightiest ruler in the world with its greatest empire under his command is nothing against an ordinary simple man with a will of his own. You allowed yourself to be tied down by the technical structure of the empire, which paralyzed your will. Only way out north beyond the frontiers, when you

wrote your meditations, you succeeded in some way to also mobilize your cosmic will. But you never succeeded in liberating it from all the ties of convention which made it a slave to a vain and mortal state machinery.

Marcus This is a new philosophy too advanced for me. Give me a practical example of what you mean.

Hadrian The leader of the Christians was a certain Jesus. Even he was also a king but renounced all power to instead cultivate his will. By his liberation from all mundane ties, that will grew stronger than that of Augustus, and therefore Christianity will overcome Rome.

Marcus So I did wrong in defending Rome against Christianity?

Hadrian It was not wrong, but it was a political mistake, since Christianity will win.

Marcus So you mean that all my political efforts and hardships were vain and worthless, since it would have been enough if I just had the will to do what was right in the world, and that this will in that case would have been more worth than the entire Roman empire?

Hadrian Something like that.

Marcus That is worth considering, Hadrian. It opens up new horizons. I think I will have to sleep on it.

Hadrian Just don't sleep too long. The world needs you.

Marcus Thanks, Hadrian. And thanks for the visit.

Hadrian It would just have been too bad if I had let you down, when you at last needed me.

Marcus Now I can die in peace from this life. But I will be back.

Hadrian We all will.

(Marcus rises from his bed and walks away with Hadrian.

On a film the body can still remain unmoved.)

Galen (takes a look) So it is all over. Rome, you have a long night ahead. May just this emperor then wake up again and return to us, for if the world ever needed a man, it was Rome who needed their Marcus Aurelius.

The End.

(Finland 15-23 juni 1995,
translated in April 2024.)

After the play. After Marcus Aurelius, Commodus ruled as emperor for twelve years, during which he let down the planned provinces of the marcomanni and quadi (modern Czechoslovakia) as lost and ruined the finances of Rome by expensive gladiator games, whereafter he was murdered 31 years old. The imperial purple was then offered to the highest bidder, and the gradual disintegration of the Roman empire was introduced. Pertinax and Septimius Severus, who both wanted to carry on the politics of Marcus Aurelius, succeeded in halting the disintegration but only temporarily. The conflict with the Christians, which started under Nero and went on until Constantine the Great made Christianity the official religion of state in the 4th century, although he never became a Christian himself. After that the Roman empire went under.