

## Wielding *Fama* as a Weapon: Augustine's *Epistula* 151

*Epistula* 151 shows Augustine trying to exert pressure on Caecilianus, a high-ranking imperial official, from his position outside of the senatorial elite. Caecilianus had served in Carthage during the aftermath of Heraclian's revolt in 413 CE that resulted in the arrest and execution of Flavius Marcellinus, to whom Augustine dedicated *City of God*. Caecilianus had later written a letter, now lost, chastising Augustine for his lack of correspondence. Augustine's reply in *Epistula* 151 begins and ends according to typical epistolary conventions. The heart of the letter, however, narrates Augustine's harrowing experience of the deaths of Marcellinus and his brother Apringius at the hands of the imperial commander Marinus.

This paper argues that Augustine deploys rumors about Caecilianus' involvement in these judicial murders to compel the imperial agent to pursue posthumous justice for Marcellinus. The argument begins with the premise that Augustine, as now understood, knows his limitations and is painfully aware of his distance from the senatorial elite (McLynn 1999; Shaw 2015). He needs leverage to move a weighty figure like Caecilianus. Such a man undoubtedly values his reputation, as Pliny the Younger had made clear three centuries earlier in the opening sentence of his brief missive to Valerius Paulinus: *ego beatissimum existimo, qui bonae mansuraeque fama praesumptione perfruitur* (*Ep.* 9.3.1). In Augustine's own era, Ammianus Marcellinus affirms this political reality as he depicts an assault on the reputation of the general Ursicinus through a whispering campaign of the chamberlain Eusebius: *apud principis aures nimium patulas, existimationem viri fortis invidia gravi pulsarent* (*Hist.* 18.4).

Augustine targets Caecilianus' concern for his reputation by directing his attention to the widespread belief that he colluded in the executions (*Ep.* 151.4). Augustine allows that such a

belief had justification. First, Caecilianus and Marinus were often together and often in private conversation so that public opinion concluded that they were old friends. Second, Marcellinus and Apringius were thought to have an adversarial relationship with Caecilianus. Rumors linked the arrests to a secret discussion between Caecilianus and Marinus. Caecilianus himself claimed that he had expressed his concern to Marinus that the executions would strengthen such rumors (*Ep.* 151.5). The timing of the subsequent executions stunned the friends of the victims because of Caecilianus' own assurances, so Augustine does not find it unreasonable that so many were convinced of Caecilianus' involvement (*Ep.* 151.6).

The reputation of Caecilianus is thus another victim of Marinus' violence (*Ep.* 151.7), a claim that Augustine reiterates: *famam graviter laesit* (*Ep.* 151.10). Caecilianus must, according to Augustine, look out for his reputation: *sic existimationi tuae...consulendum* (*Ep.* 151.11). He will do this by heeding Augustine's injunctions: *detestare* and *exhorre* (*Ep.* 151.11). For the sake of his reputation, Caecilianus must spurn Marinus and the evil he represents.

Rejecting both the conclusion that Augustine, as bishop, focuses on the spiritual well-being of Caecilianus (Moreau 1973) and the conclusion that Augustine intends to antagonize an imperial official (Shanzer 2018), this paper concludes that Augustine wants to push the emperor's man into a corner by emphasizing the damage to his reputation. Caecilianus has what Augustine does not: power (Shaw 2015). This representative of the Earthly City can use that power to redress the wrongs committed against the City of God.

## Works Cited

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