



Commodus and the Five Good Emperors

Jasper Burns

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Biographical sketches of the "five good" Roman emperors: Nerva, Trajan, Hadrian, Antoninus Pius, and Marcus Aurelius, as well as the "bad emperor" Commodus. These short biographies are followed by an allegorical exercise in the form of imaginary letters from emperor to emperor that reveal a progression in their characters that parallels the moral development of a single individual. To simplify: from shrewdness (Nerva) to activity (Trajan) to knowledge (Hadrian) to virtue (Antoninus Pius) to wisdom (Marcus Aurelius).

How could Marcus Aurelius' son Commodus (the bad guy in "Gladiator" and "Fall of the Roman Empire") surpass his excellent predecessors? According to history, he didn't. He broke the string of good emperors and his reign began an unrelenting decline in the Empire. However, he certainly tried to outdo all previous rulers – by attaining god-consciousness. He proclaimed himself to be the reincarnation of Hercules and the "son of God".

This book is not a serious reappraisal of Commodus, but it may give a greater understanding of his aspirations in light of his predecessors and his father's values and advice (as shown in selected passages from the famous "Meditations").

By the author of "Great Women of Imperial Rome", "Roman Empresses", "Bulla Felix: The Roman Robin Hood", and "Vipsania: A Roman Odyssey".

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