

The Letters of
MARSILIO FICINO



Translated from the Latin by members of the Language
Department of the School of Economic Science, London

VOLUME I O

being a translation of
Liber XI



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Publisher's Note:

The beehive motif shown on the title page appears on a number of Ficino Manuscripts which were illuminated for Lorenzo de' Medici's library. The endpapers show two pages in Ficino's own hand from a manuscript containing Book 1 of his *Letters*. This is now in the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Florence (Cod. Naz. II IX 2)

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Thanks are due to the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Florence, for permission to use the jacket illustration, from MS Acquisti e Doni 665, p.1 recto.

The translators wish to express their gratitude for suggestions and help from a number of scholars on individual points; in particular, their thanks go to Mr Geoffrey Pearce for carefully considering the astrological passages in this volume. Their indebtedness to the wider community of scholars is acknowledged, with gratitude, through the Bibliography.

Letter Titles

- 1 Epistola in dono argentei calicis
A letter accompanying the gift of a silver chalice
- 2 Responsio pro dono argentei calicis
Response to the gift of a silver chalice
- 3 Quomodo aliquis sub aliena persona cogitanti sibimet occurrat
How a person in reflection meets himself under the guise of another
- 4 Ad magnos pertinet beneficia conferre etiam non merentibus
It befits great men to bestow kindness even on the undeserving
- 5 Charitas et pietas potissimum est sapientis officium
Love and devotion are particularly incumbent on the wise man
- 6 Purgatio de litteris non redditis
Apology for letters not delivered
- 7 Pro adolescentibus e Suevia missis ad Academiam Florentinam
Concerning the young men sent from Swabia to the Academy in Florence
- 8 De quattuor speciebus divini furoris. Item laudes Medicis Laurentii verae.
On the four kinds of divine frenzy; and true praises of Lorenzo de' Medici
- 9 Vera laus Marci cardinalis sancti viri
True praise of Cardinal Marco, a holy man
- 10 Rationes negotiorum suorum amico reddendae
Accounts of all one's activities should be given to a friend

- 11** De simplicitate et integritate morum
On simplicity and integrity of character
- 12** Prooemium in Platonicas institutiones
Preface to the 'Principles of the Platonic Teachings'
- 13** Gratiarum actio
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- 14** In librum de vita dono datum
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- 15** Philosophica ingenia ad Christum perveniunt per Platonem, ut Augustino Aurelio contigit
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- 16** Commendatio
A commendation
- 17** Commendatio
A commendation
- 18** Actio gratiarum. Item de ostentis in obitu principis.
An expression of thanks, and thoughts on the portents accompanying the death of a ruler
- 19** Actio gratiarum
Giving thanks
- 20** Causae prodigiorum in obitu principis contingentium
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- 21** De vita solitaria, et quanti facienda sit fama
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- 22** Laudes amici scilicet Bindacii Recasolani
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- 24 Qui futuris praedicendis incumbunt infortunati sunt
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- 25 Opiniones non temere divulgandae Item Orphei carmina
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- 26 Exhortatur amicos ut Plotino foras prodeunti faveant
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- 27 In librum de Vita missum ad amicum
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- 28 Catalogus familiarium atque auditorum
A list of my friends and students
- 29 Prooemium in compendium Proculi
Preface to a selection from the writings of Proclus
- 30 De Daemonibus
On daemons
- 31 Philosophia cum fortuna et divitiis non coniungitur
Philosophy is not linked with fortune or wealth
- 32 Ubi plus fortunae, ibi sapientiae minus, atque vicissim
Where there is more fortune, there is less wisdom, and vice versa
- 33 Prooemium in comparationem Solis ad Deum
Preface to A Comparison of the Sun to God'
- 34 Laudes saeculi nostri tanquam aurei ab ingeniis aureis
Praises of our age as golden on account of its golden minds

Appendix Letters

- A Sortes humanae vitae et cura Dei erga Medices
The lots apportioned to human life, and God's care for the Medici

- B** Laudes Petri Medicis
In praise of Piero de' Medici
- C** De fortuna Platonis et miraculis in obitu Laurentii
On Plato's fortunes and the marvels attendant upon Lorenzo's death
- D** Primo de daemonibus communiter, secundo de daemonibus familiaribus, tertio de daemone Socratis
First, on daemons in general; secondly, on familiar spirits; thirdly, on the daemon of Socrates

Introduction

THE LETTERS in this volume span the seventeen months from 13th April, 1491 to 13th September, 1492. This is a crucial period for Marsilio Ficino and for the whole of Florence, for it witnesses the death of Lorenzo the Magnificent, whom Ficino praises in Letter 18 as 'the great and god-like Lorenzo'.

It may be something of a shock to realise that Lorenzo was only forty-three at his death, for his association with Ficino seems to have been of immense duration. The first letter we have to him from Ficino (Letter 17 of Volume 1) is undated, but it would have been written almost twenty years prior to the letters of the present volume. Ficino's first sentence in this early letter praises Lorenzo's actions: 'Almost all other rich men support servants of pleasure, but you support priests of the Muses.' This is immediately followed by an exhortation and a prediction: 'I pray you, continue, my Lorenzo, for those others will end up as the slaves of pleasure whereas you will become the delight of the Muses.' Now, two decades later, Ficino speaks of Lorenzo's continuing support. In Letter 7 he writes to two eminent lawyers in Germany about the care that is being given to the young men who have been sent to Florence for the furtherance of their education: 'Let your princes know that the magnanimous Lorenzo de' Medici, on whose support we depend, has most generously undertaken to provide for the young men.' Of Lorenzo as the delight of the Muses, Ficino proclaims in Letter 8: 'Truly inspired from on high, he pours forth upon mankind celestial songs in elegant form, whose profound thoughts no one may ever penetrate unless his spirit has been seized by a similar frenzy.' In Letter 11 Ficino applies to Lorenzo the appellation that many would ascribe to Ficino himself: 'restorer of the Platonic teachings'. 'I believe,' Ficino writes to Martin Prenninger in the autumn of 1491, 'that the printing of the books of Plotinus will be completed by next March, in princely style and at great expense on the part of Lorenzo de' Medici.'

It is little wonder, then, that Lorenzo's death on 8th April, 1492, made a great impact upon Marsilio, who seventeen days later, in a letter to Filippo Valori (Letter 20), calls Lorenzo 'protector of his native Florence' and writes, with reference to the unusual occurrences that took place in the sky and on the earth at the time of the death: 'Bereft of her father, unhappy Florence thus grieves and shudders at these portents.' Three nights before Lorenzo's death, news was brought that two lions caged in the Signoria as symbols of liberty had fought each other to the death. On the same night lightning had struck the lantern atop Brunelleschi's dome and one of the marble balls had shattered on striking the piazza. When Lorenzo heard of this, he was anxious to know where the ball had fallen. Learning that it was on the side nearest to his house, he exclaimed that this was a sure sign of his impending death. Other portents were reported: of she-wolves howling in the night and of strange lights appearing in the sky.

Lorenzo's body was taken from Careggi to San Marco, and from there to the old sacristy of San Lorenzo, to be buried next to his brother, Giuliano. In 1559 his coffin was moved to the new sacristy designed by Michelangelo, where it lies in a vault under the statue of the Madonna.¹

Of the thirty-four letters in this volume, as many as five are addressed to Martin Prenninger, Professor of Ecclesiastical Law at Tübingen University and counsellor to Count Eberhard. To Martin's name Marsilio often adds 'Uranius', which he construes in Letter 33, written to Eberhard, as the 'heavenly one', adding 'and he really is a contemplator of the heavens'. An earlier letter, also addressed to Eberhard, refers to Martin as 'a most reliable witness and surety in our midst and a herald of your praises most worthy of everyone's trust'. In three letters Marsilio calls Martin his 'unique friend', and in the other two 'his especial friend' and 'his most beloved brother'. In Letter 17 he declares 'how often I speak of Martin as my second self', and Letter 22 confirms this.

Letter 29, also written to Martin Prenninger, is the longest in the volume. It consists mainly of extracts selected by Ficino from the commentaries by Proclus on Plato's *Republic*. The letter has a short introduction by Ficino, who speaks of the recent arrival in Florence of many books from Greece, among which are Proclus' commentaries to the first six books of the *Republic* and the beginning of the seventh book. Ficino points out to Prenninger, whom he here calls

‘a man noted for his religious faith’, that the letter contains specially chosen passages, or ‘little flowers’, which are ‘more fragrant with holy religion than the rest’. The first passage states that the three attributes of every divinity are goodness, power, and knowledge. The second – and much longer – extract expatiates on the proposition that a god causes no evil, never changes form, and never deceives anyone. The third declares that souls separated from the body have three states or dispositions: the contemplative, the active, and the pleasure-seeking. Prenninger is then offered a brief consideration of the three lives of the soul – divine, human, and bestial – before being introduced to a fourfold division of creation, to the crucial and perennially controversial proposal that the Good is above being and essence, and, finally, to Plato’s view that the Good has a threefold location: within us, within Ideas, and above Ideas.

It is from his words to Prenninger that we are kept abreast of Ficino’s scholarly undertakings in this period. Letter 10 informs us of his current work with the *Divine Names* of Dionysius, the copy of the *Philebus* commentary that is being made for Martin, and the re-printing, in Venice, of his translations of Plato’s dialogues, together with the *Platonic Theology*. Letter 16 commends Martin’s excellent qualities to Francesco Soderini, Bishop of Volterra; and the following letter reveals that ‘he even named his son Marsilio after me and organised a celebration of my birthday’.

The Germanic element is notable throughout the book, which indeed begins with a letter from Georg Herivart of Augsburg, praising Ficino’s ‘exceptional abilities’, ‘outstanding virtues’ and ‘sweet-flowing eloquence’. Letter 2 constitutes Ficino’s reply, in which he declares that ever since his childhood he has felt a natural goodwill towards the Germanic peoples. He commends Martin Prenninger to Georg with the highest praise; and he closes the letter by stating that the whole of this book will be a token of his delight with Georg’s letter and the accompanying gift of a silver chalice. Letter 7, addressed to the two German lawyers and mentioned earlier with reference to Lorenzo, proclaims that ‘you, men of great modesty, follow Socrates and disclaim what is your own’ and that ‘you pursue the heavenly splendour of wisdom among all nations.’

For some readers, Letter 28 will prove the most interesting and the most intriguing. It is an answer to Martin’s frequent request to receive a list of Marsilio’s friends. The list that is given is preceded by an expression of Marsilio’s hope that no one will be offended by

thinking that he is drawing comparisons among the names listed or by wrongly evaluating the order in which they are given. The plan he follows is to put the members of the Medici family first as his patrons, beginning with Cosimo de' Medici. He then identifies two groups of friends. The first group are 'friends through close association, conversation-partners so to speak, those who share in to-and-fro discussions and liberal studies.' The second group 'have sometimes listened to us reading and, as it were, teaching.' The first group is then subdivided according to three phases of Marsilio's life: his earliest years (only Naldo Naldi is given here); his youth (Cristoforo Landino, Leon Battista Alberti, and Giovanni Cavalcanti are three of the twenty-two listed); and his mature years (Angelo Poliziano, Pier Leone, and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola appear in a list of fourteen). The letter ends, somewhat abruptly, with a straightforward list of the second group, totalling thirty-four, which includes Piero Soderini, Filippo and Niccolò Valori, and Bindaccio da Ricasoli.

Letter 28, however, is not the only one to reveal fascinating aspects of Ficino's life, thought, and experience. In Letter 3 he expresses his high view of Dionysius the Areopagite: 'No form of knowledge is more beloved than the Platonic, and nowhere is this form to be more revered than in Dionysius. Indeed, I love Plato in Iamblichus, I am full of admiration for him in Plotinus, I stand in awe of him in Dionysius.' He follows this statement with the conjecture that 'Platonists prior to Plotinus, such as Ammonius and Numenius, or perhaps earlier ones than these, read the books of Dionysius before they vanished in some calamity of the Church; and from them the truly Platonic sparks of Dionysius were transferred to Plotinus and Iamblichus: whence such a great blaze has been kindled.'²

Letter 6 shows that Ficino, like a good businessman, kept a copy of his correspondence. On being accused by Cristoforo Marsuppini of failing to write to Cardinal Raffaele Riario, he is able to open his file and show Cristoforo the originals of at least four letters which have been sent to the Cardinal but which have been 'truly ill-fated' in not reaching their destination. With regard to another cardinal, Cardinal Marco Barbo, Ficino, writing to Antonio Calderini in Letter 9, records his indebtedness to Calderini because 'long ago you gave me as a friend that holy man, Cardinal Marco of St Mark's, and on many occasions when I was in danger you provided me with his protection.'

In the following letter, Ficino uncharacteristically discloses something of his own state when he writes, 'For my part, I am well, as far as my condition, my age, the summer heat, and unremitting scholarly studies allow.' Letter 22 connects his protracted illness with that of Lorenzo and refers to the tedium that Ficino experienced during this time. He affirms that 'by the grace of God I have now recovered fairly well from that long period of infirmity.'

In drawing a comparison between himself and Pier Leone in Letter 11, Ficino points to the qualities of honesty and straightforwardness when he writes, 'Neither of us knows how to pretend or deceive.' The next letter speaks of 'the first-fruits of my studies', which Ficino says were four books related to the Platonic teaching which he started to produce when he was twenty-three. Cristoforo Landino and Cosimo de' Medici approved of these works but advised the young man to keep them to himself until he had learned Greek and could 'imbibe the Platonic teachings from their sources.'

Ficino's sense of humour, which is never deeply hidden, becomes obvious in Letter 14, when he declares that he has good reason to entrust his *Three Books on Life* to the distinguished physician Mazzingo, 'for I long ago entrusted to you the care of my own life and that of my dependants.' The humour surfaces again in Letter 19, where Ficino is seeking to outdo the grammarians by going beyond the superlative! 'I have been accustomed for some time,' he writes to Francesco Soderini, Bishop of Volterra, 'to give you the greatest possible thanks for your many kindnesses towards me. Now I give you more than the greatest thanks and I acknowledge myself to be more than most devoted to you.'

Letter 34, addressed to 'Paul of Middelburg, the eminent scientist and astronomer', fittingly brings this volume to a close with a paean of praise to an age which has 'brought back into the light the liberal arts, which were almost extinct: grammar, poetry, rhetoric, painting, sculpture, architecture, music, and the ancient art of singing to the Orphic lyre', an age which 'has united wisdom with eloquence, and prudence with martial prowess'. Perhaps we can forgive Ficino his patriotic exuberance in proclaiming with a flourish, 'And all this in Florence.'

Arthur Fardell
Editor

NOTES

- 1 For information in this and the previous paragraph, the following publications are gratefully acknowledged: J. R. Hale, *Florence and the Medici*, London, 1977, repr. 1983 and 2011; Vincent Cronin, *The Florentine Renaissance*, London, 1967, repr. 1972, 1992; Christopher Hibbert, *The Rise and Fall of the House of Medici*, London, 1974, repr. 1979, 1999.
- 2 For a discussion of the changing views regarding the dating and authorship of the writings attributed to Dionysius, see note 6 to Letter 3 (pp. 60-1).

Translators' Note

THIS volume contains Ficino's eleventh book of letters, comprising letters written from April 1491 to September 1492. There is no separate preface or dedicatory letter, as this book was dedicated jointly with the previous book to Niccolò Valori. The Latin text of these letters is printed on pages 93 to 116, with notes below expanding unusual abbreviations and showing significant variant readings.

Textual Sources

The 1495 printed edition of Ficino's Letters was published in Venice by Matteo Capcasa of Parma. The copy in the library of the University of Durham, used here, shows some corrections in the hand of Ficino Ficini, Ficino's nephew. These may be regarded as corrections authorised by Ficino himself.

Besides the printed edition, there is only one manuscript for the letters in this volume, siglum Mo2, Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, MS lat. 10781, fols. 54v^o to 57v^o. This was a composite manuscript compiled in November, 1492 for Filippo Carducci to whom two letters in this volume are addressed. This manuscript also contains the letters of Books IX and X and the first few of Book XII. It is the source for all the Appendix letters in this volume.

The Latin texts of the Appendix letters are already reproduced: Appendix A and Appendix B in Kristeller, *Supplementum Ficinianum*, I, pp. 62-64; Appendix C in Ficino, *Opera omnia* (Basle, 1576), p. 1538 as a dedicatory letter to his Plotinus commentary; Appendix D as a section within Proclus, *De anima et daemone* in Ficino's 1497 volume of translations of later Platonists (without pagination) and in *Opera*, p. 1912.

I

Epistola in dono argentei calicis

A letter accompanying the gift of a silver chalice

Georg Herivart of Augsburg to Marsilio Ficino the Platonist: greetings.

WHENEVER I call to mind, as I do every day and, to speak more truthfully, every hour, that auspicious and joyful day which brought me the beginning of your sweet acquaintance and friendship, I am pleased to consider it worthy of that celebration with which a birthday is usually honoured and, as the custom was in ancient times, to observe it with a white pebble.¹ For that was the day which also brought me your exceptional abilities, your outstanding virtues and that familiar sweet-flowing eloquence which flourishes abundantly in you. I value all these qualities so much that I have given myself, even devoted my whole self, to you, who are thus endowed. I would like nothing more, should the opportunity present itself, than to be able, wherever I may be, to please you in all matters and for you to be happy to use my services, diligence and talents, however insignificant they are. Again and again I fervently ask you to do this.

I am now sending to you a silver cup or rather, I should say, a very trifling little cup, a small childish gift.² Your virtues are such, of course, that they deserve to be requited with greater gifts, but as you are very kind, you will call this not a gift but in some way a token and evidence of our friendship, recently begun, and of your kindness to me. And so you will consider that I am sending it to you in the same spirit.

Farewell, and love me.

Venice.

13th April, 1491.³