

AUTHORSHIP AND NARRATIVE DESIGN IN RENAISSANCE LATIN LETTER COLLECTIONS

MARSILIO FICINO AND CONTEMPORARIES

A thesis submitted for the degree of PhD

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I, Simon Smets, confirm that the work presented in my thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

PRELIMINARIA

ABSTRACT

It is well-known that letters were the most popular humanist genre, on the edge between private and public life. Many authors made a careful selection from their correspondence and published it either in manuscript or print but generally with a wide audience in mind. Recent scholarship has demonstrated how the ancient and medieval forerunners of Renaissance Latin letter collections were carefully crafted compositions with strong intertextual connections. My thesis examines humanist letter collections from this point of view and shows their underlying strategies of narrative patterning and engagement with other works of literature. It considers especially their allusions to epic poetry from Vergil to Dante. The interpretation of literary macrostructures is inextricably linked with questions of authorship and reader reception, a methodological concern with which the thesis deals explicitly. I closely examine the production and reception of Ficino's letters through extant manuscripts and the marginal annotations in around one hundred incunable copies of his *Epistole*. The thesis further argues that contemporary letter compilers like Angelo Poliziano recognised the structure of the *Epistole* and consciously parodied it. With this combined approach of textual interpretation and book historical analysis, the thesis traces the pedagogical layout of Ficino's *Epistole* which guides the reader through the *vitae voluptuosa* and *activa* to a sun-drenched contemplation of the divine.

IMPACT STATEMENT

My project belongs to the rapidly expanding field of Neo-Latin studies, that is, the examination of the Latin literary heritage from fourteenth century Italy until today. Its expected results clear the way for research into humanist reception and emulation of earlier letter collections by e.g. Pliny, Seneca, St Ambrose, or Petrarch. While my project begins this work, it mostly shows how much there is still to discover. The result of my study will also have far-reaching implications for how we use epistolary sources to historical ends. Letters often illustrate their author's actions or opinions on a given topic, explain them from a biographical perspective or belong to a larger narrative. This is significant since letters were the most popular of all humanist genres and remain a crucial tool for literary scholars and historians. Finally, my thesis exemplifies the rewards of studying literary texts in dialogue with their physical realisation. It hopes to set an example in this way for future research.

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ABBREVIATIONS

<i>Ad.</i>	Desiderius Erasmus. <i>Adages</i> .
<i>Aen.</i>	Vergil. <i>Aeneid</i> .
<i>BosE</i>	Matteo Bosso. <i>Epistolae familiares et secundae</i> .
<i>Conf.</i>	Augustinus. <i>Confessiones</i> .
EBDB	Einbanddatenbank. https://hist-einband.de
<i>Ecl.</i>	Vergil. <i>Eclogues</i> .
<i>EL</i>	Marsilio Ficino. <i>Epistole</i> . 1495.
<i>Fam.</i>	Francesco Petrarca. <i>Rerum Familiarium</i> .
<i>FileE</i>	Francesco Filelfo. <i>Collected Letters</i> .
<i>FonE</i>	Bartolommeo Fonzio. <i>Letters to Friends</i> .
GW	Gesamtkatalog der Wiegendrucke: https://gesamtkatalogderwiegendrucke.de
<i>Il.</i>	Homer. <i>Iliad</i> .
ISTC	Incunabula Short Title Catalogue: https://data.cerl.org/istc
MEI	Material Evidence in Incunabula: https://data.cerl.org/mei
<i>Plie</i>	Pliny the Younger. <i>Letters</i> . 1969.
<i>PoIE</i>	Angelo Poliziano. <i>Letters</i> . 2006.
<i>SenE</i>	Lucius Annaeus Seneca. <i>Epistulae Morales</i> .
<i>SidE</i>	Sidonius Apollinaris.
USTC	Universal Short Title Catalogue: https://ustc.ac.uk
<i>Disp. Cam.</i>	Cristoforo Landino. <i>Disputationes Camaldulenses</i> .

STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS

I begin with a long introduction in two parts. The first one focuses on the methodology comprising macrotext theory, reader-reception theory, and book history. The second one focuses on the source material of my thesis and introduces the incunables and manuscripts with Ficino's *Epistole*. The core of the thesis consists of two parts as well. While the first part analyses the intratextual structure of the *Epistole*, the second part discusses intertextuality with epic poetry as a macrotextual device.

Part 1 consists of six chapters, four of which are dedicated to Book 1. This imbalance is due to the high number of letters in the first book, which equals the combined letter count of Books 4-6. Moreover, Book 1 displays a greater complexity than the following books. As I will explain in more detail, the need for intricate structuring devices greatly decreases once the reader of the *Epistole* has become accustomed to the macrotextual layout of the collection. Chapter 1 discusses the first 21 letters as a programmatic statement for the entire collection and puts this in connection with other letter collections from Antiquity until the Renaissance. Most importantly, it forecasts a threefold structure according to the three ways of life, namely the *vitae voluptuosa*, *activa*, and *contemplativa*. Chapter 2 analyses the first thematically coherent section of Book 1, which is dedicated to two amatory exchanges with respectively Lorenzo de' Medici and Giovanni Cavalcanti (*vita voluptuosa*). It then compares these two dossiers, and dwells on their reception by contemporary copyists and letter compilers. Chapter 3 moves on to the civically oriented letter series (*vita activa*), with special attention to Ficino's correspondence with Lorenzo de' Medici. Chapter 4 shows how the conclusion of Book 1 is dedicated to philosophy and religious themes (*vita contemplativa*). This chapter is shorter than the previous ones, because the contemplative sections of the *Epistole* contain fewer structural shifts due to their more homogenous field of interest.

The structural layout of the *Epistole*, rather than the content of individual letters, remains at the heart of this thesis. In Chapter 5, I argue that the macrostructure of Book 1 is replicated in the macrostructure of the *Epistole* as a whole. I show how the first half of Book 3 returns to the *vita voluptuosa* and how the second half progresses towards a self-contained mindset which is continued in Book 4. In Chapter 6, I trace the *vita activa* in Books 5-6, demonstrating the role of addressees as a macrotextual structuring device. At the end of this chapter, I briefly sketch the shift in tone which makes of the second half of the collection a homogenous entity with little structural complexity.

Part 2 consists of three chapters and demonstrates that intertextuality with ancient and renaissance epic poetry is a genre-defining feature of humanist letter collections. The seventh chapter points

out the precedents for poetic intertextuality in prose letter collections from Antiquity to the Renaissance. It further argues that we may expect contemporary readers to have paid attention to poetic references in Ficino's letters. Based on those observations, I focus in Chapter 8 on the role of Vergil in the *Epistole*. Again, I focus on the structuring role of the allusions. First, I highlight the placement of bucolic intertexts at turning points in Book 1. Then, I show how storm metaphors, first put in a Vergilian context, are used to criticise King Matthias of Hungary in Book 3. I show how storm metaphors continue to colour the turbulent *modus* of Books 3-6 until they finally subside in the second half of the collection. The interpretative framework for analysing Ficino's epistolary engagement with Vergil comes from Cristoforo Landino's *Disputationes Camaldulenses*, a contemporary allegorical interpretation of the *Aeneid*. In the final chapter, I take the topic of epic intertextuality one step further and argue for a Dantean ending in the *Epistole*. I demonstrate that the multiple letters on light in Book 12 can be read as an imitation of the light in *Paradiso*. To underpin this hypothesis, I show Ficino's reliance on and association with vernacular poetry, in particular his successful attempt to present himself as an heir to Dante.

INTRODUCTION

METHOD

This thesis analyses narrative patterns in humanist letter collections, primarily through the example of Marsilio Ficino's *Epistole* (1495). Letter collections are the result of an essentially simple procedure, which is applicable to most fourteenth- and fifteenth-century examples of the genre. A humanist author like Ficino (1433-1499) decided to contact a friend, an acquaintance, or a potential patron and conceived of a letter. Then, the letter got drafted on a piece of paper and was subsequently corrected: Spelling mistakes were fixed, inappropriate passages deleted, and supplementary thoughts added. Next, Ficino or his secretary copied the resulting draft into a neat version for dispatch to the addressee. Sometime later, the letter writer wished to publish his correspondence and collected the original missives into a letter collection. (I only consider those collections in which the compiler also wrote most of the letters.) The collection, too, begins as a draft with several additions and deletions made in consideration of its wider readership. Upon completion of that final revision, the draft collection is copied into a tidy manuscript, sometimes with beautiful illuminations. If a printer considers the collection economically interesting, the work may be printed and undergo some final alterations in the process. One concern of my study are the shifts that occur at every stage of the letter's journey from its author's mind to its inclusion in a book. Such shifts include, but are not limited to, the addition of individual letter titles and the division into books.

The previous paragraph conjures a distinction between the letter writer and the letter compiler. Although they are often the same person, their function is radically different, since the first one creates individual letters while the second one produces a book. My focus is on the second type of author. He lifts the letter from its historical *Sitz-im-Leben* and adds it to an epistolary mosaic, where it assumes new meaning through contextual relationships. Admittedly, I have depicted in an idealized manner the creative processes underlying letter collections. Exceptions to the normal procedure can only be identified through a comparison of both the original letter and a draft copy of (part of) the collection. This opportunity rarely exists for the period under consideration, because such evidence is usually lost. Nevertheless, proof exists that one letter by Marsilio Ficino did, probably, not exist as a draft nor as a neat copy before it became part of his epistolary collection. Sebastiano Gentile has demonstrated that *EL* 5.6 originated in the Florentine working copy of Books 5-6, henceforth referred to with the siglum *N3*.¹ Gentile's analysis rests on a comparison of *N3* with the Ferrarese manuscript BCA, II 162 containing original letters from

¹ Gentile 1990, CXIII–CXIV.

Ficino to Bernardo Bembo. The neat text of the autonomous letter in Ferrara includes all of Ficino's corrections scribbled in the margins of *N3*. It follows that the letter sent to Bembo was copied from the working manuscript of Book 5 of the letter collection. Interestingly, a second correction took place after the letter had been sent, so that the final version of the letter differs from the versions in both the Ferrarese and Florentine manuscripts. In short, the letter was originally drafted as part of the collection, sent only in a second phase of its textual development, and revised one last time for wider publication when Book 5 was integrated into the full collection of twelve books.² While it is not clear why Ficino first drafted the letter as part of the collection, we can nevertheless draw an important conclusion from this. The letter and its variations indicate that humanist letter collections were not simply repositories for past exchanges but a possible source for new interactions. They were at once archive and laboratory, as much a place for recycling the old as for creating something fresh.

In the following paragraphs, I will introduce three theoretical frameworks which I have found helpful to think about letter collections and their literary analysis. The first of them is macrotext theory, the second one reader-reception, and the third one book history.

FROM *LITTERA* TO *LITTERAE*

The previous paragraphs describe the creative process leading up to humanist letter collections as a succession of rather mechanical interventions applied to single letters. Yet, the coherence of letter collections mainly depends on their internal arrangement. Although chronology and addressee-based grouping are common ways of ordering, these are usually disrupted in conspicuous ways. The subversion of those structural principles, which can be easily recognised, draws attention to subtler patterns. Contrastive juxtapositions and thematic pairings, for example, are two techniques used by letter compilers to develop narratives and build up discursive arguments. Those structures transcend the historical context of the letter; they exist only by grace of the collection's arrangement. Herein lies the very difference between the letter collection as an archival repository and the letter collection as a literary work. Ironically, the strongest of interventions contributing to this difference remains invisible: the selection process, which predetermines the possible arrangement of the letters. Ficino's *Epistole* numbers just over six hundred constituents, which must be far below the actual number of letters he wrote during the two decades it covers. The same can be easily observed in the letter collections by Angelo Poliziano (1454-1494) and Bartolommeo Fonzio (1446-1513). Since Ficino included brief notes to friends wishing them well or asking back borrowed books, only one letter every fortnight seems an unlikely letter writing ratio even

² Gentile 1980, 95–100.

according to today's standards, let alone in a society heavily dependent on written correspondence. Thus, we must ask of every letter what its function is within the larger fabric of the collection and try to understand the reason for its inclusion.

Mario Marti was, to my knowledge, the first to point out that the internal arrangement of letter collections is deserving of our attention. He was primarily interested in how to edit letter collections and argued that it was preferable to preserve their original shape over reorganising them chronologically.³ Whereas Marti's proposed method has, indeed, been commonly adopted by editors of humanist letter collections, we are yet to pluck the fruits of this paradigm shift.⁴ There is almost no scholarship on the compositional techniques of letter collections. Because we have no view on how authors stitched their collections together, it follows that there is no scholarship on the meaning generated by the resulting patterns either. While three articles, one by Josef IJsewijn on Marc Antoine Muret (1526-1585), one by Christoph Pieper on Francesco Filelfo (1398-1481), and one by Timothy Kircher on Lapo da Castiglionchio the Younger (1406–1438), convincingly move in this direction, they still adhere to a biographical interpretation of the patterns they discovered.⁵ I propose that we should look beyond this level and, to use the words of Ilaria Marchesi with regard to Pliny's letters, 'bracket the author in favour of the autonomy of his writings'.⁶ I do not suggest that humanist letter collections are fictional in the same way as, for example, the ancient letter collection attributed to Phalaris.⁷ Most of the letters found in humanist *epistolaria* once belonged to a genuine correspondence. By this I mean that they were sent to a specific addressee to convey an immediately relevant message. We can still choose to understand them by reconstructing the entire correspondence they belonged to, as well as its original historical context. But humanists usually invite us to do the opposite, namely, to read the letters within the new *textual* context of the collection. At this point, a tension arises between viewing a letter as a historical artifact and understanding it within the broader framework of a collection. In the following paragraph, I elaborate on this tension and explain my approach to navigating it.

³ Marti 1961.

⁴ Resta 1964; Bracciolini 1984; Ficino 1990; 2010; Poliziano 2006; Fonzio 2008; 2011; Filelfo 2015. Notable examples of chronological reordering are Erasmus 1906-1958 (cf. Jardine 1993, 153); Bracciolini 1832-1861; Salutati 1891. Sabbadini 1884 and Luiso 1898 undertook a schematic *riordinamento* of respectively Francesco Barbaro's (1390-1454) and Ambrogio Traversari's (1386-1439) letters without editing them. Non-Renaissance examples are the Maurist editions of the Church Fathers' letters (cf. Klein 1970) and John of Salisbury 1979. See also Gibson 2012 on early modern reorderings of ancient letter collections. An early exception was Lorenzo Mehus (1717-1802) on whom Hankins 2007 states that he was 'the first editor to understand that the book divisions and the order of letters within books were arranged by [Leonardo] Bruni himself and therefore should be preserved as part of the author's intentions.'

⁵ IJsewijn 1985; Pieper 2017; Kircher 2018.

⁶ Marchesi 2008, 5.

⁷ On Phalaris, see Hinz 2001.

The debate on the literariness of pre-modern letters is too long to repeat and too complicated to solve here.⁸ Warren Bouthcher, for one, distinguishes between genuinely private letters, private letters composed with publication in mind, and fictitious letters. He further differentiates between ‘the letter carefully prepared for literary appreciation and collection and the less carefully presented and collected documentary letter.’⁹ Petrarchan scholarship illustrates the debate caused by such categorisations. It is clear that several letters in his *Rerum Familiarium Libri* are forged or at least manipulated.¹⁰ Nevertheless, distinguished scholars such as Hans Baron have felt the need to save as much of the ‘genuine’ Petrarch in the letters as they can.¹¹ This kind of distinction functions on the level of the single letter and its rhetorical refinement. If we accept that letter collections are self-contained works with an internal coherence resulting from the author’s careful arrangement of their constituents, Bouthcher’s categorisation does more harm than good. For if a letter collection is to be interpreted as a coherent piece of literature, we must come to grips with the literariness of each constituent. Would we distinguish between ‘literary’ and ‘non-literary’ chapters in a novel even if some pages are less elegantly written? While fake letters highlight the literary fashioning in a collection, they do not take away the need for interpreting the genuine letters. A solution to the problem may be found in the concept ‘littérarité conditionnelle,’ developed by Gérard Genette. Whereas fiction is automatically literary in Genette’s view, works that cannot be simply categorised as fictitious, draw their literariness from the way in which they are received. Conditional literariness derives from the reader’s subjective appreciation of a work’s style, its *diction* in Genette’s terms.¹² Naturally, a genuine letter remains a historical document after inclusion into a letter collection. However, a reader of the collection may decide to bracket its historicity in favour of its literariness. This literariness can be activated by the rhetorical style of a single letter, or, as I argue, by the sophisticated interlinkage with other letters. In the second case, the letter transcends its historical singularity to acquire new significance from its position within a collection.

The dynamics in which a constituent text adds to the overall meaning of the collection to which it belongs, but also derives additional semantic value from it, has been theorised by proponents of

⁸ I refer the interested reader to a couple of studies dealing with the matter. For the Renaissance, see: Marti 1961; Cecil H. Clough 1976, 35; Judith Rice Henderson 1993, 143; Jardine 1993, 153; Enenkel 2002, 396; for Seneca: Cugusi 1983, 196–200; Griffin 1976, 416–419; Cancik 1967, 5.54; for Pliny: De Pretis 2003, 133; Marchesi 2008, 1; for the Middle Ages: Köhn 1996, 691–693; Ysebaert 2015, 54–57 which is an update of the seminal work done by Constable 1976, 19-24.56-60; Verbaal 2017, 105.

⁹ Bouthcher 2002, 137.

¹⁰ See Nicholas Mann, Victoria Kahn, and Evelyne Luciani for some proponents of this view.

¹¹ Cf. Baron 1985, 196ff.

¹² Genette 1991.

macrotext theory since the 1970s.¹³ Cesare Segre soon discerned the applicability of macrotext theory to ‘private letters, brought together by their author in the form of a collected correspondence arranged according to dates, addressees, topics, and so on.’¹⁴ However, stricter definitions of the concept may put this applicability to the test. One of its early and most visible proponents, Maria Corti, considered the recurrence of the same pattern in each constituent of the macrostructure as well as in the macrostructure itself a requirement to speak of a macrotext at all.¹⁵ This definition originates in a study of modern short story cycles and proves untenable in the context of humanist letter collections. The latter genre has many more constituents and, because it builds on material that pre-exists its literary use, lacks the creative manipulation common to fictional texts. Other theorists, like Enrico Testa, have narrowed down the textual features underpinning a macrotext. He mentions in particular ‘le strutture isotopiche, semantiche, spazio-temporali e di *personae*, che definiscono rispettivamente la continuità dei temi, delle indicazioni topologiche e verbali, e delle figure e dei ruoli presenti nelle poesie e nelle loro relazioni’.¹⁶ Following Testa’s pointers, I will tackle the humanist letter collections with careful attention for precisely the narrative functions of space, time, and characters, in addition to thematic developments and expressions of particular interest such as unusual metaphors, meaningful citations, and recurring idioms.

Before moving on to the next part of this introduction, it is worth looking at some examples of macrotext theory applied to letter collections. Wim Verbaal has examined macrotextual structures in the twelfth-century letters between Abelard (c.1079-1142) and Heloise (c.1100-1163), as well as in the letter collections by Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) and Hildebert of Lavardin (1055-1133).¹⁷ It is worth noting that those are among the few medieval letter collections which enjoyed popularity during the fifteenth century. Fonzio’s personal copy of Hildebert’s letters is preserved and contains, apart from a possession note, several annotations in his hand.¹⁸ Bernard’s letters were printed five times before the end of the fifteenth century, which testifies to their perceived value.¹⁹ Petrarch, who I will argue was the most influential humanist letter compiler, adored the letters of Abelard.²⁰ Tempting as it may be, the hypothesis that those collections’ careful design, in addition

¹³ Viti 2014 provides an essential overview of the concept’s development. For a briefer discussion, see D’Hoker and Van den Bossche 2014, 13–14; Santi 2014, 147; Formisano 2016, 149. Verbaal 2015, 13–17 and 2017, 106-107 defines macrotextuality with respect to letter collections.

¹⁴ Segre 1988, 32.

¹⁵ Viti 2014, 109.

¹⁶ Testa 1983, 27.

¹⁷ Verbaal 2015; 2017.

¹⁸ MS Firenze, Biblioteca Riccardiana, 371. Cf. Caroti and Zamponi 1974, 95.

¹⁹ ISTC ib00383000: Strasbourg, c.1472; ib00384000: Brussel, 1481; ib00385000: Paris, 1494; ib00386000: Basel, 1494; ib00387000: Milano, 1495.

²⁰ Nolhac 1965, 2:219–223.

to their authors' polished Latin and moral authority, made humanists particularly appreciate them, must remain tentative. Macrotextuality is also present in the introduction to a collected volume on late antique letter collections. The editors hoped to 'bring a collection's "macrotextual" dimension to the forefront of critical analysis and, consequently, offer readers the tools to more fully understand the nature and purpose of this genre without falling into atomism or formalism.'²¹ They have managed to achieve this goal, as several of the chapters—in particular those on St Ambrose and Symmachus—consider the overarching structure of the collections under consideration.

Most scholars conduct research that could be called 'macrotextual' without using the term or its theoretical footing. In the past fifteen years, much work has been done on the composition of Pliny's epistles. Only Ilaria Marchesi designates his letter books as 'authorially controlled macrotexts,' and mentions their 'macro-textual disposition' and 'epistolary macro-text' in her studies.²² Yet, she does not explain what macrotextuality means for her and appears to use it interchangeably with 'macrostructure', the 'author's design,' and 'artful arrangement.' Perhaps, Marchesi became familiar with the concept during her university education in Italy, where macrotext theory originated. That may also explain why Plinian scholars who followed Marchesi's lead but without an Italian background have not used it as a critical framework. This does not at all detract from the value Marchesi, Roy Gibson, Ruth Morello, and others have made to our growing understanding of Pliny's epistles as a unified whole. Their focus on the role of intertextuality in the constitution of a coherent collection is especially valuable and I will return to it in the second part of this thesis. Even if the concept of 'macrotextuality' is evidently no requirement for meaningful research into the literary phenomenon itself, I believe that it helpfully captures how the combination of autonomous constituents leads to a new semantic unit which is more than the sum of its parts. Because it emphasises the two-way relationship between single element and composite whole, macrotextuality still recognises the original autonomy of the constituents and allows for their meaningful interpretation in isolation from each other.²³ This, I believe, is particularly helpful in the case of epistolary collections, where the separation between individual letters is so evident but the desire to gather them into well-defined collections so culturally pervasive during most of Latin's literary history.

²¹ Sogno, Storin, and Watts 2017, 2.

²² Marchesi 2023, 283; 2015, 7; 2008, 6–8.

²³ Cf. Verbaal 2017, 106–107; with reference to Santi 2014.

IMPLIED AND HISTORICAL READERS

Scholarship on Latin literature uses ‘macrotextuality’ interchangeably with ‘intratextuality,’ a concept recently discussed in a dedicated collection of essays.²⁴ Intratextuality can be defined as ‘a critical term used to explore the relationship between the parts and the whole in texts, including issues of unity (and disunity), the relationship between digressions and their surroundings, interactions between disparate parts of texts (such as ring composition), juxtapositions that may reflect surprisingly on their neighbours, or any structural issue within a single work of literature.’²⁵ Wolfgang Kofler deftly opened his contribution to the volume mentioned with the observation that ‘questions concerning the relationship between the whole and its parts, as well as the relationships between the parts themselves, are hardly different from questions raised by reader-response theory.’ ‘In the end,’ he continues his argument, ‘it is the act of reading which identifies parts of a given text, relates them to each other, and generates what we may call the “meaning” of a text.’²⁶ Wolfgang Iser’s *The Act of Reading*, a major contribution to reader-response theory, proposes two important features of literary texts: the implied reader and the *Leerstelle*.²⁷ The implied reader is a set of textual mechanisms, devised by the author, that guide a concrete reader in his attempt to arrive at a coherent understanding of the text at hand. The implied reader invites the connection of textual schemata by means of allusions, thematic links, and other rhetorical strategies. Without this reconstruction of textual patterns, a literary text cannot be complete. A text demands to be completed in the mind of the reader because it includes information gaps, the so-called *Leerstelle*. The act of reading fills these gaps and thus gives coherence to the text. In a novel, these blanks are mostly invisible and consist of withheld information and time skips. The interruptions between chapters and paragraphs to a certain extent visualise these textual leaps. In contrast, the many blank spaces between letters in an epistolary collection, enhanced by closing formulae, addressee lines, and salutations, are a particularly striking instance of the *Leerstelle*. Clearly, Iser accorded an important role to the reader in determining what a work of literature is about. In the following paragraphs, I want to apply this consequence to the genre under consideration.

The important role played by the reader in (re)constructing the meaning of an epistolary collection’s structure may raise two main objections. The first one concerns over-interpretation and the danger of arbitrariness. In an article on Pliny’s letters Jan-Wilhelm Beck expressed his disapproval of the

²⁴ Stephen Harrison, Frangoulidis, and Papanghelis 2018.

²⁵ Sharrock 2019.

²⁶ Kofler 2018, 199.

²⁷ Iser 1978.

Publikation neuester und keineswegs glücklicher Ansätze, die die Briefbücher in ihrer Konzeption und ihren angeblichen, versteckten Einzelbezügen wie sorgfältigst gestaltete Dichtung zu bewerten suchen und mit dem neuerdings erhobenen Postulat des „re-reading“ ein innovatives, aber überaus fragwürdiges Konzept zur wiederholten und dadurch intensivierten, korrigierten Lektüre entwickeln.²⁸

Mary Beard, when she looked at the order in Cicero's letters, also recognised that 'the search for order and arrangement in a work of literature is always liable to be self-fulfilling.' Acutely aware of her interpretive acumen, she remarked that 'it is not just that the clever reader can almost always construct a narrative logic out of an arbitrary jumble, but "no order at all" can always be understood as one particularly loaded form of "order."²⁹ Beard was undaunted by those dangers and went ahead looking for ordering principles adopted by the editors of Cicero's posthumously published letters. Convincing as her article may be, it pays little to no attention to *how* she has been 'treading the usual tightrope between two different but related questions: on the one hand, that of editorial design; on the other, that of the reader's experience.'³⁰ In the following paragraphs, I explain how I have tried to check my interpretative imagination by returning to a historicising viewpoint.

Especially when we study literatures of a distant past, as Robert Jauß has argued, the study of their historical reception is indispensable for understanding any given work.³¹ On the basis of contemporary comments about a genre and its proponents, it is possible to reconstruct the 'horizon of expectations' in front of which a work originated. For the author operates in view of this horizon, which he must address if he wants to successfully convey a message to the public.³² Metaliterary comments on epistolary collections are rare for the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, but I will refer to them where I can. Notable examples are Ficino's letter about his mother, which attracted much attention over the centuries, and Girolamo Cardano's (1501-1576) assessment of ancient and humanist letter collections in his intellectual autobiography *De libris propriis* (1544). However, most of our information must come from humanist comments on letter collections from the past. In a letter by the Florentine chancellor Coluccio Salutati (1331-1406), we learn that humanists appreciated the authorial composition of letter collections. From the following excerpt, it becomes clear that they were looking for examples of ancient letter compilers when the possibility was discussed to collect their own correspondence:

²⁸ Beck 2018, 120–121.

²⁹ Beard 2002, 124.

³⁰ Beard 2002, 124–125.

³¹ Jauß 1982, 28.

³² Jauß 1982, 22–26.

So, you order me to collect my letters for the sake of fame, since you believe they will immortalise me? ... Cassiodorus and his contemporary Sidonius, I admit it, gathered their letters themselves ... We have Cicero's letters, which, however, both the sequence of events and many other factors show, were not collected by him but after him. We have the letters of Seneca; does it seem to you that he has collected them in the same way as you are advising me to do with mine? Why should I mention Pliny, Ausonius, Symmachus, or Ennodius, among whom no trace of their own editorial work is to be found? And—to continue with Catholics authors—did Augustine, Jerome, Ambrose, Peter Damian, who was wont to call himself Peter the Sinner, or Gregory, who ought to be preferred because of his sweet style, ever collect their own letters into any volume? ... But, you will say, Cassiodorus and Sidonius did, as you admit, collect their letters. They did, I say; and so did the glory of our own age, Francesco Petrarca; and before him, Gerius Aretinus had done so.³³

It is surprising that Salutati excludes Pliny's letters. For in his first epistle, the Roman author clearly states that he had collected them himself. Perhaps, Salutati alludes to the fact that Pliny claims not to have ordered his letters? This would reveal an interesting distinction in Salutati's mind between the authorial collection and the authorial collection with a deliberate design. The more likely explanation is, however, that Salutati was not very familiar with Pliny's letters. After all, they had recently started to attract attention and were only imitated by avant-garde epistolary writers like Geri d'Arezzo (c.1270–1339).³⁴ As far as Ambrose's letters are concerned, modern scholarship has concluded that they are carefully arranged by the author in spite of Salutati's claim.³⁵ With regard to Cicero, however, Salutati's assessment corresponds with today's consensus that he himself did not edit nor publish his letters.³⁶ This is, perhaps, the most important insight to take away from Salutati's letter: Although Cicero is often seen as the prime influence for the publication of

³³ *SalE* 9.9: 'Et tu me iubes ob famam epistolas meas colligere, que me debeant, ut iudicas, eternare? ... Fecit hoc, fateor, Cassiodorus, fecit et coetaneus eius Sidonius, ut ipsimet suas epistolas congregarent ... Habemus Ciceronis epistolas, quas tamen non ab eo, sed post ipsum fuisse collectas tum rerum gestarum ordo, tum alia plurima persuadent. Habemus Senecę epistolas; nunquid ipsemet tibi videtur suas, sicut michi de meis consulis, collegisse? Quid referam Plinium, Ausonium, Symmachum vel Ennodium, apud quos sue congregationis vestigium nullatenus reperitur? Et – ut de catholicis prosepar – an Augustinus, Hieronymus vel Ambrosius, Petrus Damianus, qui se Petrum peccatorem inscribere consuevit, aut, qui preferri debuit, dulcissimi stili Gregorius epistolas suas in volumen aliquod redegerunt? ... Sed, inquires, collegerunt – ut fateris – Cassiodorus atque Sidonius epistolas suas. Collegerunt, inquam; fecit et hoc idem seculi nostri decus, Franciscus Petrarca; fecerat et ante eum Gerius Aretinus.'

³⁴ On the fortune of Pliny's letters, see Ciapponi 2011. On Geri as a Plinian innovator, cf. Witt 2000, 227.

³⁵ There is a long series of articles by Michaela Zelzer 1975; 1987; 1989; 1990b; Klaus Zelzer and Zelzer 2002. Zelzer's view, and especially the hypothesis of a Plinian influence, was criticised by Savon 1995; 2014. A more balanced interpretation of Ambrose's involvement in the letters' organisation is offered by Nauroy 2012; 2013; 2014; 2017. Cf. Klein 1970; Cutino 2014.

³⁶ White 2010, 31–34.

humanist letters, Salutati disproves this idea. The force of private letter writing and its linguistic stylisation were, so much I want to concede, rethought by Petrarch after he found Cicero's letters to Atticus. But the idea of a carefully planned *epistolarium* like Petrarch's and those by later humanists, is not at all indebted to Cicero. It should therefore not surprise us that Seneca, Pliny, Ambrose, and Petrarch will be recurring points of reference in this thesis, while Cicero will be largely absent.

Jauss' 'horizon of expectations' became an 'interpretative community' at the hands of Stanley Fish, another influential figure in the development of reception-based literary studies. When Fish described how a reader shapes a text by relying on previously acquired strategies, he made clear that the author and the reader are in fact not so far removed from each other: 'Interpretive communities are made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading (in the conventional sense) but for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions. In other words, these strategies exist prior to the act of reading.'³⁷ Again for Fish, contemporary assessments of individual authors and their contribution to a given genre are the most unequivocal indicators of how much (near-)contemporary readers believed a work to meet the expectations. It must be said that the premise that authors answer to broadly shared expectations is a weakness of Jauss' and Fish' theories, because it obfuscates how radical change comes about.³⁸ However, we will see that the humanists under consideration—save Petrarch—largely subscribed to the literary tradition and conventions of their time. Overall, their differences and originality stay within the limits of what could be expected from them in light of the tradition.

Jauss' horizons can be understood in terms of an established canon. I have briefly illustrated my adherence to this approach when I pointed out that artfully arranged letter collections from Antiquity and the Middle Ages were read by humanists and thus shaped their expectations of the genre. I will later show how those preceding examples could have encouraged humanists to interpret the first letters of a collection as programmatic for the entire work. It is more difficult to also take the interpretative communities of Fish on board, since they remain a relatively vague concept. This is somewhat ironic, since Fish's main objection against Iser's phenomenological approach was that the latter's implied reader is not a human being but an abstract entity only accessible through the text. A couple of years after Fish had tried to relocate the reader into his social context, Gunnar Hansson proposed three methods to empirically study shared interpretive strategies.³⁹ The first is out of reach for the study of centuries past, as it requires a sizeable set of

³⁷ Fish 1980, 171.

³⁸ Schmitz 2007, 130.

³⁹ Hansson 1989.

detailed reading protocols about one text. The third one is sociological—a direction favoured by several other followers of Fish—and tries to hypothesise reader reception through analysis of the correspondence between the ethical values of possible readers and the representation of those values in a given text. The second method, ‘statistical analysis and verbal scales,’ is most useful for our present goals. It uses a reduced form of the questionnaire to gauge reader response, which asks participants to judge a work by means of abstract scales and to select five aspects they consider especially relevant. The results of an international survey taken according to these methods showed clear patterns of interpretive strands, which could then be explained further. Although it is impossible to ask fifteenth-century readers to fill out set questionnaires, their interests and reading strategies are recorded in manuscripts and incunables. They asserted ownership of their copy, annotated or defaced the text and passed judgment over it as they pleased. Genette does not consider such secondary engagement ‘paratexts,’ in line with his strictly author-centred view on the matter. However, these traces of readership(s) are invaluable sources of information to arrive at a historically grounded interpretation of humanist letter collections. The next paragraph explains in more detail my methodology for this analysis.

Using marginal annotations as a hermeneutic touchstone is somewhat risky. The reading process takes mostly place within the mind, even where there is an abundance of notetaking. Moreover, the attention spike that leaves a trace in the margins of a letter can be caused not so much by the annotated sentence as by the preceding one(s). I will therefore take a conservative approach focusing on broad trends across books and letters rather than on individual passages or sentences. To ensure that at least in this respect my findings are as accurate as possible, I have worked with a large sample. What constitutes a representative sample in this kind of research is hard to determine since there are few to no examples I could follow, let alone authoritative ones. In her history of the incunable title page, Margaret Smith settled on a 15 percent sample and mentions that 5 percent is sufficient for statistical purposes.⁴⁰ However, more technical explorations of the ideal sample size in historical sciences, such as an article from 1972 by the demographer Robert Schofield, complicate the matter.⁴¹ It is safe to say that neither Smith nor Schofield are particularly relevant for my own endeavour, since my approach is qualitative rather than quantitative. That means, I am not interested in the total number of annotated copies. Instead, I look at how often each letter was annotated in a representative number of copies to reveal patterns of interest. The complexity and variety of those data makes a real statistical analysis impossible. Moreover, because of finite resources I could not randomly select copies to inspect but was bound to mainly European libraries

⁴⁰ Margaret M. Smith 2000, 48n2.

⁴¹ Cf. Schofield 1972.

(although I was able to include several American copies), and even to those countries where I was already carrying out other research, attending conferences, or taking vacation. Nevertheless, I compensated for these limitations with a sample size that exceeds Smith's 15 percent sample with more than ten percentage points: I have inspected 106 out of 421 copies in public institutions. In a statistical analysis—which is the only conventional method comparable to my own—this would result in a confidence level of 95% and a standard error of 0.04226.⁴² Although these numbers are technically meaningless since my analysis is not quantitative, they underline my sample's high degree of representativeness.

EUROPE READING THE *EPISTOLE*

Moving away from the abstract concept of the reader it is time to ask: Who were the historical readers of Ficino's *Epistole*? This section deals with the circulation of Ficino's letter collection in the 1495 and 1497 editions. As I will show in the epilogue, they are considerably different from the editions in which Ficino's letters have become part of his *Opera omnia*. I first give general information about where the two editions are mostly found today and how this reflects their contemporary circulation. I will then tell the story of one particular reader, Ficino's close friend Bernardo Bembo, whose engagement with the *Epistole* I traced in detail. It should not surprise us that a fourth of the extant copies of the first edition are currently in Italy.⁴³ Germany holds a second place with 22 percent, and the United Kingdom comes third with 17 percent. All of the Italian copies and most of the German copies that I have inspected were already in those countries during the fifteenth or early sixteenth centuries.⁴⁴ As far as Germany is concerned, the Venetian edition was mainly owned by scholars in Bavaria and Saxonia with the areas around Augsburg, Tübingen, and Leipzig as important centres. For example, Daniel Pemler († 1609), whose father Sebastian († 1563) had been chancellor in Augsburg, owned BSB 2 Inc. c. a. 3205. Since Pemler designates himself as 'Neuburgensis,' it is likely that he already owned the book before 1567 by which time he had moved to nearby Landsberg.⁴⁵ The same volume bears a second inscription with the name of Wolfgang Agricola, who was Dean of Spalt in the second half of the sixteenth century.⁴⁶ Arsaz Prunner, who was a canon at Freising, owned BSB 2 Inc c. a. 3122, probably until his death in 1550.⁴⁷ Finally, we have the copy of Hartmann Schedel († 1514), a contemporary of Ficino, which

⁴² I used the online Sample Size Calculator of the Australian Bureau of Statistics with a sample size of 106 on a finite population of 421 incunables.

⁴³ The *Gesamtkatalog der Wiegendrucke* (GW) lists a total of 200 preserved copies in public institutions.

⁴⁴ See the list of annotated incunables in the second section of my bibliography.

⁴⁵ Kink 2007, 74.

⁴⁶ On Agricola, see Ulsamer 1960.

⁴⁷ Seufert 2010.

was later bought by Johann Radenecker († 1504), abbot of St. Egidien in Nürnberg.⁴⁸ Grantly McDonald further lists copies owned by Josue Eglinger, who matriculated at Freiburg im Breisgau in 1548, and Wolfgang Andreas Rem († 1588), who bequeathed his copy to the Augustinian canons in Augsburg.⁴⁹

The situation is quite different if we look at the British copies, of which several were acquired later and have provenance notes that point to Italian or German families. For example, Aby Warburg's copy—now at the Bloomsbury institute named after him—first belonged to the Florentine Albizzi. The Wellcome Collection in London holds a copy which was probably owned by a family member of the Augsburg humanist Georg Herwart. Their kinship transpires from a handwritten note to *EL* 11.1: 'Georgius Herivart Patricius Augustanus. Olim cognatus noster charissimus.'⁵⁰ A porcupine coat of arms embossed in a leather cover indicates that the Wren library received its copy from a nineteenth-century benefactor, William Grylls, who had bought it from the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek in Munich, judging from the library's stamp on the first page.⁵¹ Around the same period, the Weston Library at Oxford acquired their copy which at least until 1823 was in the possession of a German teacher at the Gymnasium in Freiburg and supposedly circulated in Germany before that.⁵² The Weston Library's second copy did not circulate in England either before the second half of the eighteenth century. The only provenance note is of Antonio Francesco Gori, an erudite priest and antiquarian who lived in Florence until 1757.⁵³ The only copies I was able to locate with certainty in Britain shortly after their publication are now at Cambridge University Library and at All Souls College in Oxford, where is preserved the copy of the well-known educator and Dean of St Paul's Cathedral John Colet (1467–1519).⁵⁴ The two Cambridge copies belonged to Henry Bennet, who gained his B.A. there in 1569, and to either John Boys or John Gower, both seventeenth-century scholars.⁵⁵

Several copies in other countries, including Hungary, Belgium, Spain, and the USA can also be traced back to Germany and Italy.⁵⁶ We can thus conclude that the *Epistole* were received primarily in those two regions. The reason for this is to be sought in their burgeoning humanist culture. It

⁴⁸ Reimann 1944, 161. Schedel's copy is now Inc München, BSB, 2° Inc. c.a. 3202.

⁴⁹ McDonald 2022, 374n82.

⁵⁰ 'George Herivart, a Patrician of Augsburg. Formerly our dearest relative.' The first two letters of Book 11 are respectively from and to Herwart. Cf. McDonald 2022, 69.

⁵¹ On the person and the history of his collection, see Grylls 1999, 1:215; Woolcock ... Foster 2020.

⁵² Franz Karl Grieshaber was a respected philologist and collector of manuscripts, which explains his possession of this incunable; Scherer 1879.

⁵³ On Gori, see Vannini 2002.

⁵⁴ Sears 1963 edits Colet's annotations in this copy and discusses them in the context of his intellectual orientation.

⁵⁵ Cf. MEI Id 00560031 and 00560032.

⁵⁶ Inc Brussel, KBR, B 1.027 belonged to Bernardo Bembo—see below. From June 1554, Inc Budapest, MTA, Ráth F 1489 belonged to Johannes a Via who was active in the Bavarian cities of Ingolstadt, Moosburg, and Landshut; Malisch 1983b.

should therefore not surprise us that already in 1497, the second edition of the letters was printed in Nürnberg. It has been suggested that the humanist Willibald Pirckheimer (1470-1530) inspired Koberger to publish the *Epistole*. A citizen of Nürnberg, Pirckheimer was in Italy at the beginning of the 1490s, searching for books and seeking a humanist education.⁵⁷ However, there is no conclusive evidence for this hypothesis. Whoever launched the idea of reprinting Ficino's letters rightly sensed their marketability. Their continuous popularity is evidenced by the survival of slightly more copies issued by Koberger than are preserved of Capcasa's edition.⁵⁸ Most copies are in Italian and German libraries or can be situated in either country during the sixteenth century. Inc Oxford, Bodleian Library, Toynbee 1051 was probably in a Bavarian monastic library before ending up in the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek who then sold it in the mid-nineteenth century.⁵⁹ Inc Budapest, MTA, Ráth 1494 and OSZK 857b once belonged to respectively Georg Lauther († 1610), a counter-reformatory cleric who operated in Ingolstadt, Freising, and Munich, and to the seventeenth-century theologian Daniel Hartnack who bought it from a certain Mr Neuhan in Jena in 1666.⁶⁰ Like the Venetian edition, Koberger's print of the *Epistole* also circulated in Tübingen: The Pierpont Morgan Library's copy was bound there.⁶¹ One of two copies held in Stuttgart was bound before 1520 in the university town of Erfurt.⁶² The second copy was bound in the workshop of a Benedictine Abbey between Augsburg and Tübingen, which fits the larger pattern of provenance.⁶³ The exception proving the rule is a Madrilene copy which was gifted to the Royal Society by Henry Howard, who was duke of Norfolk from 1672 until his death in 1684. It is not unlikely that the volume was in the library of the family—which produced notable writers and book collectors—long before the duke gifted a part of this rich collection to the Royal Society around 1666.⁶⁴

It is clear that many copies were resold by their owners, but that during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries books rarely moved between countries. Nevertheless, we must be aware that books may have travelled around before ending up in one country especially in the first years after publication. A copy recently auctioned in Cirencester, a market town in the Cotswolds, bears the following ownership inscription: 'Nicolaus Pelliparius artium et medicine doctor hunc librum emit

⁵⁷ Reimann 1944, 152n2; Hase 1885, 380.

⁵⁸ The GW lists 221 copies. It is likely that there were in fact substantially more, and that fewer of them have survived due to their material properties. Whereas nearly all the copies of Capcasa's edition which I examined are undamaged, several of Koberger's edition are seriously incomplete or have fallen apart. The bindings are often less luxurious, which impacted their chance of long-term survival.

⁵⁹ Cf. MEI 00206717.

⁶⁰ On Lauther, see Malisch 1983a; Frymire 2010, 369–370.

⁶¹ Cf. *The Morgan Library & Museum Corsair Online Catalog*, ChL412.

⁶² EBDB k004900.

⁶³ EBDB k011475.

⁶⁴ On Henry, see Miller 2004; on his ancestors see Brigden 2004 and Smuts 2004.

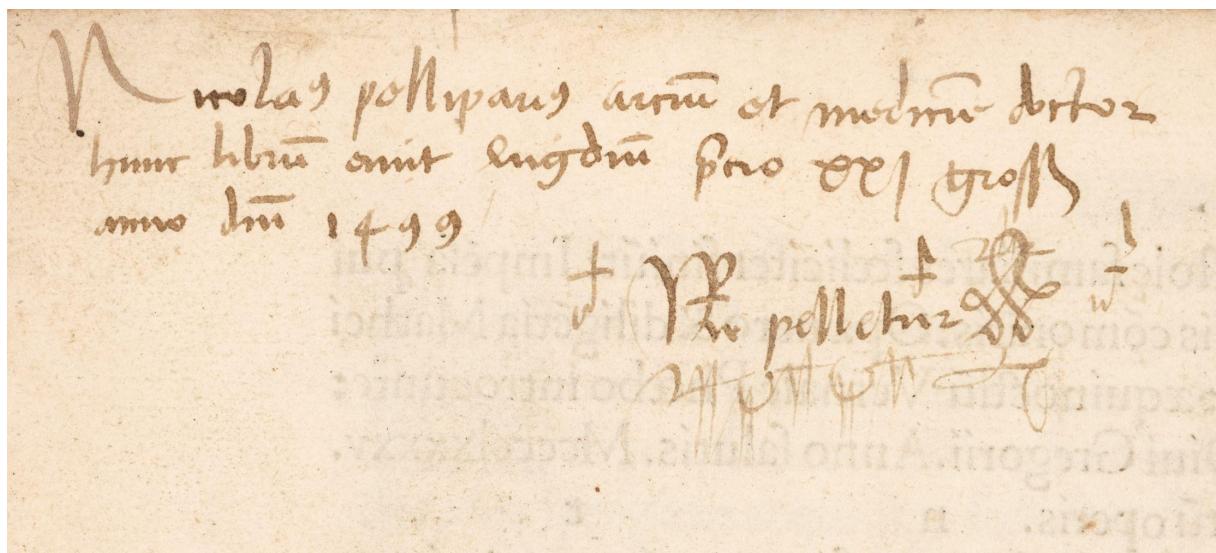


Figure 1 M. Ficino. *Epistole*. Venezia, 1495. Copy auctioned by Dominic Winters Auctioneers: *Printed Books*, Lot 200, fol. [198^r].

Lugduni precio 21 gross. anno domini 1499' (see Figure 1).⁶⁵ This tells us that Nicolas Pelliparius bought the book in Lyons in 1499. It would be interesting to know if an English or German reader bought the book in France and then took it home. Unfortunately, I was not able to trace down this person and cannot even say with certainty whether he was a Skinner, a Pelletier or a Pelletario. The only certainty is the presence of Ficino's letters at one of the biggest international book fairs in Europe. Indeed, Lyon was Anton Koberger's main trading point with the Romance world. Nicolaus' copy had perhaps been shipped there for the big sale that Koberger envisaged in the first half of 1499, and for which he had sent several letters to his partners and employees in Nürnberg and Basel.⁶⁶

A final word on the circulation of the *Epistole* in France is appropriate. Although I was able to consult only four copies myself, my findings in combination with four catalogue entries lead to the tentative conclusion that the copies currently held in French libraries were already in the country in the sixteenth century. The Abbey of Clairvaux acquired a copy of the letters before 1503, when it is for the first time attested in the abbey's catalogue of printed books.⁶⁷ The 1495 copy at the Arsenal library once belonged to a Franciscan monastery in Paris, which indicates that there was a monastic interest in the letters in France, like in Germany. One of two copies in the Bibliothèque Mazarine comes from the Collège de Navarre, where Petrus Ramus and Pierre de Ronsard studied.

⁶⁵ Nicholas Pelliparius, doctor of arts and medicine, bought this book in Lyon for the price of 21 groschen in the year of the Lord 1499. Dominic Winter Auctioneers 2023, Lot 200.

⁶⁶ Hase 1885, 285–286.

⁶⁷ Inc Troyes, Bibliothèque Municipale, 87; Mathurin de Cangey's sixteenth-century catalogue entry can be found in MS Troyes, Bibliothèque Municipale, 2616, fol. 98^r. Inc Troyes, Bibliothèque Municipale 53 with Ficino's letters also belonged to the library of Clairvaux, but does not appear in the catalogue. Arnoult 1979 gives a brief history of the library; see also his annotated catalogue, no. 609.

The other one was originally in the possession of Antoine Mizauld (1520-1578), a Parisian astrologer and physician. As it appears, only the 1497 copy now held at the Sorbonne has a foreign provenance, and once stood on the shelves of a Benedictine monastery in the Eifel region.

In conclusion, it appears that most annotations stem from the sixteenth century. Later provenance notes reveal a bibliographical interest rather than an interest in the letters themselves. This means that my reconstruction of historical reading patterns remains relatively close to the period when the *Epistole* were created and published. The readership falls into two categories, being humanistic and religious, and its geographical spread is relatively limited. While there are several copies in France and the United Kingdom, most of the identifiable annotators are Italian or German, an observation which can be extrapolated to the anonymous annotators. Thus, it is possible to assume a relatively homogenous reader community

BERNARDO BEMBO READING THE *EPISTOLE*

Let us look in more detail at how the *Epistole* could be used by individual readers. I was able to locate Bernardo Bembo's copy of the *Epistole* in the Royal Library of Belgium.⁶⁸ There are three remarkable features of the volume. First, the annotator was very fond of Bembo. Every letter addressed to him is accompanied by a wriggly cross of which the beams do not touch each other. In one instance, Bembo's name is written in epigraphic capitals next to the address line. The antiquizing shape of the letters would be enough to settle on a humanist annotator. It is also clear that the annotator was someone close to the Florentine environment of the final quarter of the fifteenth century. The fact that the annotations focus on Bembo and add appreciative notes to a couple of other Florentines suggests someone from Ficino's immediate circle. Indeed, contemporary readers often focused on letters with direct relevance to their activities or social environment.⁶⁹ In *EL* 3.53, which lists the duties of different professions, annotations sometimes have a biographical link with previous owners of the volume: priests, musicians, and merchants tend to highlight the duties of their own profession.⁷⁰ In the same vein, we find remarks about acquaintances or fellow countrymen. The annotator of Inc London, Wellcome Collection, EPB/INC/2.E.14 recorded that he was family of Georg Herwart. Inc Wien, ÖNB, 24.D.11 was clearly annotated by a Hungarian, judging from their interest in all things Pannonian. Similarly, the marginalia next to praising comments about Francesco Bandini and Pietro Nicholini in Inc London, UCL, A QUARTO 5 ddd suggest a personal acquaintance since the highlighted passages

⁶⁸ Inc Brussel, KBR, INC B 1.027. Bembo's library has only been studied with respect to the manuscripts it contained; cf. Giannetto 1985, 259–358.

⁶⁹ Contrary to the analysis in Rees 2013a, 145 of the letter's layout, *EL* 3.53 is not often annotated.

⁷⁰ For example, Inc London, Westminster Abbey Library, CC.24 and Leipzig, UB, Libri sep 653^{da}.

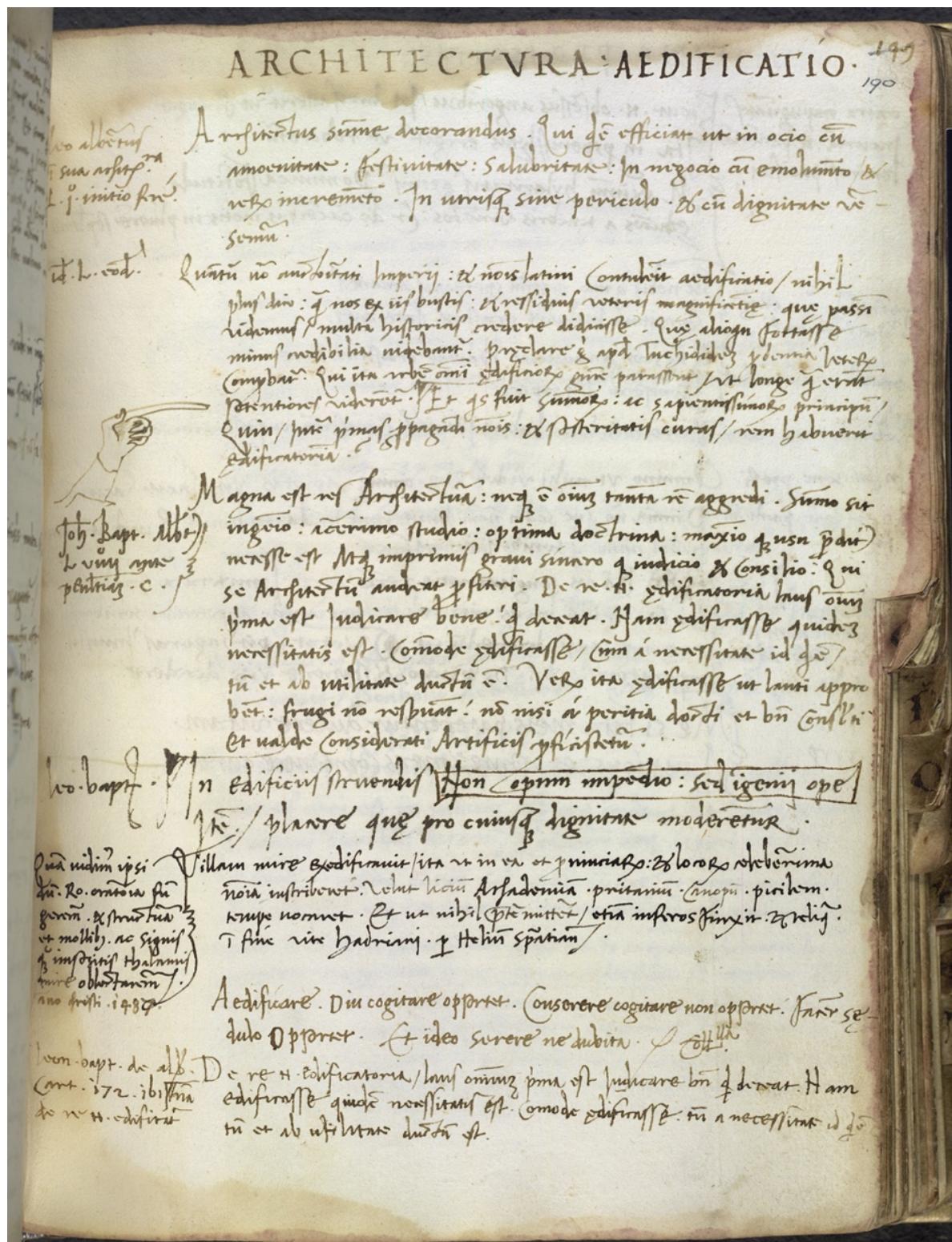


Figure 2 Bembo's *Zibaldone*, British Library, Add. MS 41,068A. Reproduced from Grafton 2020, 1169.

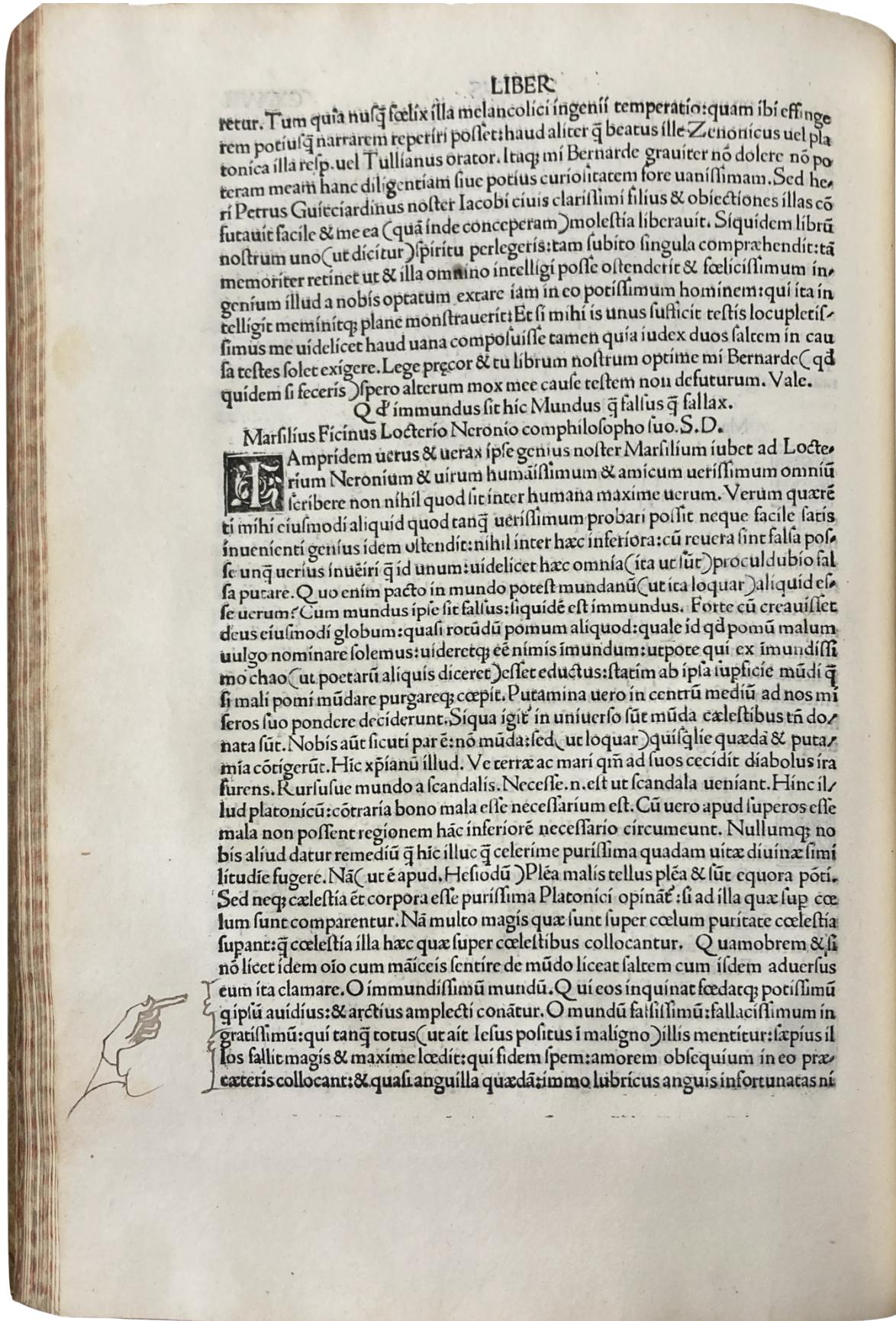


Figure 3 Bembo's copy of the *Epistole*, Inc Brussel, KBR, B 1.028, fol. CXXVIII^v.

are otherwise unremarkable.⁷¹ What really gives Bembo's authorship of the annotations in the Belgian copy away, however, are the handful of *manicula* scattered through the volume. William Sherman has examined in detail a large number of the little hands with one or two fingers pointing at notable passages in early modern books. But 'the most lifelike manicules I have come across to date,' he writes, 'appear in the late fifteenth-century *zibaldone* (or commonplace book) compiled by the illustrious Venetian scholar-statesman Bernardo Bembo ... Bembo uses careful shading and sharp angles to position the hands in dramatic acts of pointing.'⁷² Where the arm should be is a characteristic curl which distinguishes Bembo's hands from those by his contemporaries. The thumbnail, slightly curving upwards, is equally recognisable (Figures 2 and 3). This idiosyncrasy of Bembo's manicules, clearly visible in the Brussels incunable (Figure 3), removes any doubt that we are indeed dealing with the Venetian ambassador's copy of the letters.

I have examined more than one hundred copies of the *Epistole*, about half of which were printed in 1495. Only in Bembo's copy have the letters of each page left their imprint on the facing page. This must have happened during the binding process, which apparently happened soon after the printing was finished and before the ink had dried. The fault lies not with Capcasa since printers did not usually bind the sheets of their publications themselves. This was done by specialised binders or book retailers.⁷³ Although there is no proof that Bembo was immediately involved in the printing of the *Epistole*, he was a close friend of Ficino and probably knew about their imminent publication. Since he also lived in Venice, it is possible that he got his hands on them as soon as they left the press. Eager to read the work, did he not care to wait for the ink to dry and thus ended up with murky pages? It is an attractive thought. As I have already indicated, Bembo's annotations are rather self-centred. While he has some praise to spare for Amerigo Bencio at *EL* 1.3 and for Niccolò Michelozzi at *EL* 3.16, he was mainly keen to find his own name. Apart from highlighting himself and a few friends, Bembo draws attention to certain topics like 'Deus,' 'Philosophia,' 'Convivium.' While the marginalia are banal, the volume is of interest when put in the context of Bembo's further engagement with Ficino's letters.

In the same *zibaldone* where Sherman first found the manicules, there is a quotation from Ficino's *Epistole*.⁷⁴ Bembo has copied a phrase from *EL* 3.2: 'Apud Hypocratum summa corporis valitudo

⁷¹ Fol. XXVIIIV: 'Veridicus enim vir qualis est Bandinus cum pollicetur praestat officium'; fol. CIXr: Frater eius Petrus Nicholinus vir egregius.'

⁷² Sherman 2010, 36; one folio with several manicules is reproduced on p. 35.

⁷³ Nuovo 2013c, 136-137.389-390.

⁷⁴ Neilson 1895 is an enthusiastic description of the *zibaldone* by its new owner, whose first sentences conjure a wondrous scene: 'Amidst the wrack stranded on the outside shelf of a bookshop in London, I lately bought a parchment-bound anonymous fifteenth century MS folio.'

suspectissima iudicatur.⁷⁵ This expression is different from the one found in the printed editions, where ‘suspectissima’ is replaced with ‘fallacissima.’ Ficino appears to have changed ‘suspectissima’ into ‘fallacissima’ to have the letter match the title, *Quod fallax sit humana prosperitas*, which sounds more catchy with ‘fallax’ than with ‘suspecta.’ The question remains why the *zibaldone* refers to a pre-canonical version of the text. It is possible that Bembo quoted the original letter from memory, made a mistake, and added the bibliographical reference without cross-checking the text. The more likely explanation, however, lies in the fact that *EL* 3.2 is addressed to Bembo himself. He would have had his own personal copy of the original missive, and probably quoted this version rather than the published correspondence. Further on in Bembo’s *zibaldone*, there is another quotation from the letters, this time from Book 2.⁷⁶ The folio number given is xiii, which does not correspond to any of the manuscript or printed editions of the collected letters. Instead, Bembo references his presentation copy of Ficino’s treatise *de raptu Pauli*, which later became *EL* 2.6. This luxurious manuscript still exists in Leiden and features one of Bembo’s elegant manicules in the margin next to the commonplacéd passage.⁷⁷ This observation corroborates my hypothesis that Bembo preferred to quote from his personal, earlier copies of Ficino’s letters rather than from the printed publication. The case is not unique: In a manuscript produced by Fonzio full of inscriptions and drawings collected during a trip to Rome in the company of Francesco Sassetti, we find a copy of *EL* 5.33 from Ficino to Sassetti (Figure 4). Here, too, the manuscript copy does not fully agree with the version in the printed collection and also has no title. Therefore, we must assume that the model was the original missive. Finally, Sebastiano Salvini (c.1430-c.1512) copied a letter from Ficino into his own letter collection, now at the Vatican Library, from the original missive even though he had privileged access to the collection as Ficino’s *amanuensis*.⁷⁸ We may conclude that it was usual practice to copy letters from the original missive rather than from the edited collection.⁷⁹

The story of Bembo’s engagement with Ficino’s letters continues. His *zibaldone* contains several passages from Pliny’s epistles. For example, on folio 13^r, he links to ‘Pli. L. I. Epla. 13’ and ‘Pli. L. III. Ep. XI.’ It is understandable that the author of a commonplace book wants to link the quotations he has collected with the original sources in which he has found them. This allows him at a later moment to reconsider the isolated quotation in its original context. The previously cited letter by Salutati describes how annoying it is that different editions of a letter collection have

⁷⁵ MS London, BL, Add. 41,068A.

⁷⁶ Ficino 1495, fol. lxxii^r; MS London, BL Add. 41,068A, fol. 306^r: ‘Diffidant ergo diffidant de sua immortalitate homines flagitosissimi quorum animulae quaerentes vitam solum in regione mortis iandiu mortuae sunt vitiorumque caeno sepultae.’ Cf. Ficino 2010, *EL* 2.6.335-338.

⁷⁷ MS Leiden, Universiteitsbibliotheek, BPL 160 A, fol. 14[17]^r. On the circulation of this letter, see Gentile 2010, xvii.

⁷⁸ Gentile 1980, 116-117.

⁷⁹ Cf. Gentile 1980, 108-109. The manuscript is described by Saxl 1940.

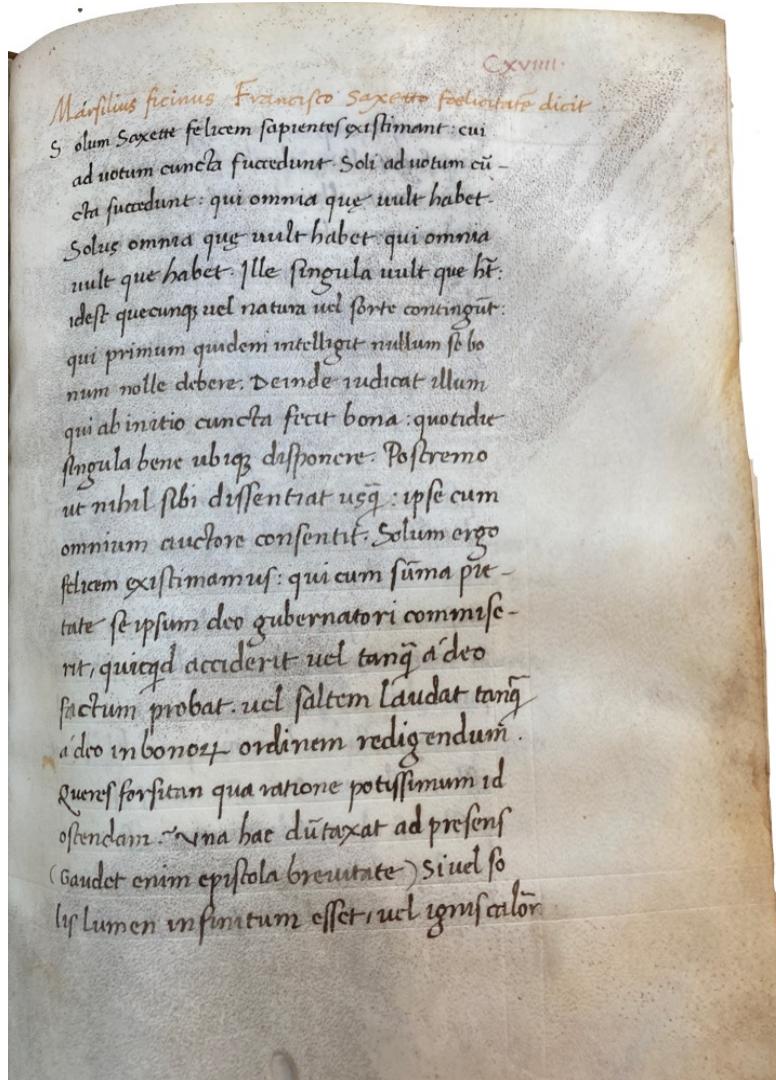


Figure 4 MS Oxford, Bodleian Library, Lat. Misc. d. 85, fol. 119^r

different or no numberings. This makes it necessary to have access to the same printed edition or manuscript copy referenced to make sure that the letter or folio numbering corresponds.⁸⁰ Because neither of the printed editions numbers Ficino's letters, Bembo was bound to add a folio number to his quotation of *EL* 3.2. Surprisingly, he did not use the Venetian edition at this point but references folio 80 in Koberger's edition. The letter is not dated in the printed edition, but the context of Book 3 strongly suggests the year 1476, when most letters in this book were written, or 1480, the same year in which *EL* 3.1 was written, with which it is thematically connected. The first manuscript publication of Book 3 dates to 1482, which serves as a definite *terminus ante quem*. That means that Bembo's personal copy of the letter predated Koberger's printed edition by at least fifteen years. It is hard to say whether the same is true for his entry in the *zibaldone*. The dates mentioned on its pages range from 1471 to 1518, and Bembo could have added his quotation of

⁸⁰ *SalE* 9.9: '... invenies aliquos tum in epistolarum ordine, tum in numero non concordes ... si quotare voluerint epistolam, notanter ad sui voluminis ordinem se referre.'

Ficino at any moment within this time frame. However, given the fact that he used the individual letter which he had received, it is likely that he copied it shortly after delivery when it was still easy for him to retrieve it from the rest of his correspondence. Only when he had lost track of the original missive did he add the reference to folio 80 in the printed edition.

There is another reason to date the addition of the quotation from *EL* 3.2 to around 1480. The Leiden manuscript of *De raptu Pauli* was probably given to Bembo around the same time, that is, during or shortly after his embassy to Florence.⁸¹ Perhaps, the two Ficinian references in the *zibaldone* can be connected to this period of intimate contact between the two men. If my theory is correct, the folio number was then added much later, presumably when Bembo revised the *zibaldone*. The question remains why he used the Nürnberg edition and not his Venetian copy? Bembo was an active diplomat and took up political roles in various cities. Often on the move, he may have preferred to take the smaller Koberger quarto with him instead of the Venetian octavo. Alternatively, he relied on the book collection of his hosts or on the holdings of a public library in one of the cities he visited after 1497. They may not have owned the first edition, so that Bembo had no other choice but to use Koberger's foliation. From 1497-1499, Bembo was in Ferrara after his election as *visdomino*. The city's Biblioteca Ariostea now holds a copy of the 1497 edition.⁸² During his Ferrarese period, Bembo demonstrably spent much time working on his *zibaldone* despite his many political duties.⁸³

What I wanted to demonstrate with my detailed account of Bembo and his perusal of three different versions of one letter from Ficino to himself is the complexity of reading practices surrounding the *Epistole*. My analysis of the work is, I believe, an important step towards understanding the literary qualities of humanist letter collections and Ficino's intentions with publishing his correspondence. Throughout this thesis, I will refer to annotations by several historical readers from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Some of them responded to Ficino's careful arrangement of the letters in ways that confirm my own findings. But the macrotextual artistry of the collection never stopped readers from privileging their own interests in isolated letters. Their approaches could be intellectual, as when Bembo shows an interest in the organisation of *convivia*, commemorative in the case of acquaintances from Ficino's circle of friends, or self-affirming by the systematic accentuation of one's own name.

⁸¹ The dating of the Leiden manuscript is uncertain; Bouwman 2023, 107; Lieftinck 1964, vol. 1, sec. 184; Gentile 1990, CXXXIV–CXXXV.. In any case, it must have been produced before 1491, since text-critical analysis has shown that it predates MS Firenze, BML, Plut. 83.11, finished on 7 September 1491; Gentile 1990, XCIV.

⁸² Giannetto 1985, 213–222.

⁸³ Giannetto 1985, 220.

PARATEXTS AND LAYOUT

I finally turn to the space where author, text, and reader meet: the page of a physical book. Here, I want to focus on paratexts and layout. Paratexts have occupied scholarship since Gérard Genette first coined the term in 1979 and further explored its countless instances in a dedicated monograph eight years later.⁸⁴ The value of Genette's study for the discussion of paratexts is often taken for granted. However, from a medieval and early modern perspective, he is not all that helpful.⁸⁵ He engages neither with *privilegia* nor with printed marginalia, both typical features of early modern books. He mentions the *privilège* only in a footnote to a section on typesetting and printings, and looks no further back than its function in the *ancient régime*.⁸⁶ Printed marginal notes in incunabula are only considered as a prototype of the later footnote, which shows that Genette regarded Renaissance phenomena merely as forerunners of modern ones.⁸⁷ To be clear, I am not trying to quibble with Genette. He established useful categories and never claimed that his book had broad historical applicability—on the contrary, he explicitly denied its diachronic value.⁸⁸ I merely try to explain why I will mostly rely on scholars who have taken Genette's analysis further and adapted his conceptual groundwork to the medieval and early modern periods.

In addition to the paratext, it is useful to consider the purely visual presentation of the text. Roger Chartier speaks of 'les formes typographiques elles-mêmes : la disposition et le découpage du texte, sa typographie, son illustration'.⁸⁹ The *mise-en-page* guides our reading experience in subtle ways that are often hard to pinpoint. It concerns such properties as the size of the book and of the margins, the blank space in between text segments, the variation of fonts within one volume, the colours of the characters and possible illustrations, and—especially relevant for the incunable period—the space left for manuscript additions such as initials or phrases in a different alphabet. Genette, partly because of his specific focus on modern literature, considered the paratext an authorial element of a text. He took a radical approach by suggesting that 'by definition, something is not a paratext unless the author or one of his associates accepts responsibility for it, although the degree of responsibility may vary'.⁹⁰ However, Renaissance authorship was not so clear as in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Moreover, the collaboration between printers, scribes, publishers and authors did not always allow that last category to exert much control over the production of their

⁸⁴ Genette 1979; 1987.

⁸⁵ See Brown-Grant ... Ventura 2020; Ruokkeinen and Liira 2019.

⁸⁶ Genette 1997, 33 n23.

⁸⁷ Genette 1997, 320.

⁸⁸ Genette 1997, 13–15.

⁸⁹ Chartier 1988, 58.

⁹⁰ Genette 1997, 9.

work.⁹¹ Chartier takes great care to warn us that ‘ces procédures de mise en livre ne relèvent plus de l’écriture mais de l’imprimerie, sont décidées non par l’auteur mais par le libraire-éditeur, et peuvent suggérer des lectures différentes d’un même texte.’⁹² He thus expands Genette’s scope of the paratext to include not only non-textual features but also agents other than the author.

From the previous paragraphs, the division between reader, printer/scribe, and author appears to be absolute. This is partly because methodological discussions in the 1980s were often clear-cut and polemical in nature. In the same year when video killed the radio star, Alan Purves described the situation of literary scholarship also in terms of murder, of a regicide, to be precise, by the reader, who took over the author’s reign.⁹³ The borders drawn then have not yet vanished, although the situation is less tense now. Chartier, who initially denied the author any say in how his work should be presented to the public, accepted a couple of years later the author’s return in typographical matters: ‘Understanding the reasons and the effects of such physical devices (for the printed book) as format, page layout, the way in which the text is broken up, the conventions governing its typographical presentation, and so forth, necessarily refers back to the control that the authors but sometimes the publishers exercised over the forms charged with expressing intention, orienting reception, and constraining interpretation.’⁹⁴ The author is a more nuanced concept now, determined by social, economic and cultural factors and working in collaboration with various agents.

Since then, Chartier’s thinking on the subject has further developed. He has decidedly addressed ‘the longstanding division between the sciences of interpretations and those of description, hermeneutics and morphology,’ adding that ‘the same can be said of the notion of “graphic culture.”’ Chartier argues that ‘we need to bring together what western tradition has long kept apart: on one side, interpretation of and commentary on works of literature, and on the other, analysis of the technical and social conditions of their publication, circulation, and appropriation.’⁹⁵ He notes that while bibliographers often neglect the interpretation of literary texts and instead focus solely on their materiality, the ‘platonic’ understanding of texts as closed hermeneutic systems does not sufficiently question their physical realisation or sociological context. While New Historicism partly corrects the latter view by paying attention to the transformation of everyday objects, concepts and practices into literary symbolism, it does not sufficiently explore the materiality of the text itself. *Si parva licet componere magnis*, the opposition between strict bibliography and the opposite strand of

⁹¹ Helen Smith and Wilson 2011, 7–8.

⁹² Chartier 1988, 59.

⁹³ Purves 1980.

⁹⁴ Chartier 1994, 28; originally published in French in 1992.

⁹⁵ Chartier 2007, VIII–IX.

New Criticism bears similarities with the feud between Platonism and Aristotelianism in the Renaissance. In the same way as Ficino tried to work away the polarisation between those two philosophical approaches, then, the present study aims to incorporate the physical description of texts with a historically justified but literarily focused analysis of their content.

SIGNIFICANCE OF LAYOUT: TRAVERSARI'S AMBROSE

My theoretical ruminations so far partly result from the anxiety that comes with trying to analyse something that perhaps should have been noticed already if there is any truth to it. I erected the three-fold construction of macrotextuality, reader-reception, and book history to protect my interpretation of Ficino's *Epistole* from the attack of subjectivity. I hope that it will become clear throughout this thesis that analytical rigour was applied towards the discovery of deliberate arrangement and narrative patterns in Ficino's letter collection and those of his contemporaries. To illustrate that the integration of different methods can also be applied to other collections, I want to turn briefly to the letters of Ambrogio Traversari (1386-1439). After this, I will outline the publication history of Ficino's letters and the differences between the various editions.

Traversari was a Camaldolese monk and humanist who was in close contact with famous scholars and philosophers including Manuel Chrysoloras, Guarino Veronese and Francesco Filelfo.⁹⁶ His translations of Greek philosophers into Latin would turn out to be instrumental for Ficino's work, who would himself maintain good relations with the Camaldolese monastery of Santa Maria degli Angeli in Florence.⁹⁷ The following quotation is taken from a letter written between April and August 1437,⁹⁸ and accounts for the meaningfulness which I attribute to the layout of Ficino's letter books. The final version of Traversari's collection has not been found yet. Nevertheless, we are better informed about its creation than of any other humanist collection. Traversari offers us this information by repeatedly talking about it in his letters.

Epistolarum novarum libros quatuor proxime misimus ad te sex item alios
fortasse missuri paullo post. Id abs te cupio, cum librario⁹⁹ transigas, ut eas
habeat secretissimas apud se, neque a quovis alio transcribi patiatur. Sane
volumus, ut principiis librorum spatia maiora sint, ut est solemne, et lineae
quinque aut sex ex anteriore parte paginae locum principali literae faciant,
singulis autem epistolis¹⁰⁰ lineae duae, namque singulis adponi ex minio

⁹⁶ Stinger 1977, 38–39.

⁹⁷ Lackner 2002.

⁹⁸ Luiso 1898, 39.

⁹⁹ Common word for 'scribe.'

¹⁰⁰ The edition erroneously reads 'epistolae.'

principales literas placet; *ut illae sunt Beati Ambrosii, quas manu propria in Monasterio scripsimus*. Placet item, ut inter epistolas linea una inanis relinquatur, ubi nomen eius ad quem sequens epistola dirigitur, ex rubro ponatur, vel communibus vel maiusculis literis, ut v.g. Hieronymo fratri. Quod si minus quam dimidiam lineae partem finis occuparet praecedentis epistolae, in eadem linea titulus¹⁰¹ ille poterit inseri.¹⁰²

The letter from which the above is taken was addressed to Traversari's most trusted collaborator Michele di Giovanni, a younger monk and disciple of his.¹⁰³ It contains detailed instructions about the exact way in which Traversari desired his letter collection to be copied. Ample space should be left at the beginning of each book, and two thirds less before each letter. Furthermore, the addressee's name, to be written in red, could be stuck to the previous letter if the final words of that letter occupied less than half of the line, as per Traversari's instructions. For an example of the desired layout, Traversari refers to a manuscript of St Ambrose's letter collection, which he had made a copy of himself.¹⁰⁴ Both the Ambrosian manuscript and the copy ordered from Michele are now lost or unidentified, but the latter probably consisted of an early version with ten books, a number that would ultimately increase to twenty.¹⁰⁵

As a monk at Santa Maria degli Angeli, Traversari was expected to take part in the activities of the monastery's *scriptorium* and he would have copied and illuminated many manuscripts during his time there.¹⁰⁶ Why did the friar choose the codex with Ambrose's epistles as the model for his own letter collection's layout? I argue that visual similarity to the epistles of St Ambrose suggests a thematic

¹⁰¹ I suspect that 'titulus' does not mean 'title' here, but the red-inked address formula—*pace* Iaria 2004, 244; Stinger 1977, 54. Neither MS Civitas Vaticana, BAV, Vat.lat.1793 with the letters, nor Mehus' edition have titles, and secondary literature never mentions them.

¹⁰² Traversari 1759, cols. 622–623 (italics are mine): 'We have sent you four books of new letters, and six others shall probably be sent in short time. I want from you that you make clear to the scribe that he should keep them with the greatest discretion, and that he should not allow them to be copied by anyone else. Furthermore, we want large margins at the beginning of the books, which is elegant, and that five or six lines are left blank from the top of the page for the initial letter. For each single letter, however, two lines should be left blank; for it would be nice if to each letter were added capital letters in red—*like those of St Ambrose are, which I have copied in the monastery with my own hand*. Likewise, there should be a single blank line between the letters, where the name of the person to whom the following letter is addressed, is to be put in red ink, either in normal or capital letters, e.g. 'Hieronymo fratri'. But if the final words of the previous letter occupy less than half of the line, this rubric can be added on that same line.'

¹⁰³ On Michele, see Iaria 2004.

¹⁰⁴ Traversari received a manuscript of the Ambrosian letter collection in 1426 (Traversari 1759, col. 380). If this was his model, it would mean that he attached great importance to copying it out personally: By 1426, Traversari had already moved from copying in the *scriptorium* to studying texts in a scholarly manner, and even his letters from before his appointment to the priorate make clear that he did not dispose of enough time to rest or take on side projects (Traversari 1759, col. 277.300.307.314). In 1436, the amount of letter writing and translating imposed on him had as their result that 'tremoris quiddam patiuntur articuli, brachiumque indoluit dexterum.' (Traversari 1759, col. 232) If possible, he would rely on dedicated scribes to copy out books for him (Traversari 1759, col. 78.82.101). For the respective dating of the letters, see Luiso 1898, 6.35.38–40.

¹⁰⁵ Favi 2001, 94; Iaria 2004, 244–246; Pontone 2010, 85–96.

¹⁰⁶ Caby 1999, 607–608.

similarity between the saint's and Traversari's own published correspondences. The letters of the Church Fathers were considered particularly instructive for a Christian audience. They were a testimony to their authors' venerable learning, leadership, and, most importantly, religious virtue.¹⁰⁷ Traversari himself repeatedly commended the reading of St Jerome's letters, that other Church Father so cherished by the humanists, when he was giving spiritual council to others.¹⁰⁸ On one occasion, he wrote a younger monk who was experiencing a spiritual crisis: 'For from these [Jerome's letters] you will conceive a great penchant for virtue and you will profit greatly.'¹⁰⁹ Traversari wanted also his own letters to edify their readers, and he was genuinely worried about publishing trifles instead of serious matters.¹¹⁰ As has been argued for his translations from Greek, his letter collection was not so much a self-fashioning vanity project as an expression of monastic devotion.¹¹¹ Traversari's readership considered this aim achieved, in the opinion of Michele, 'because from reading them you will learn the holiness of his life.'¹¹²

A second reason why Traversari could have thought of St Ambrose as an ideal model was their shared first name. In the fifteenth century, there was increasingly more value attached to one's name than mere identification. With the name received at the baptismal font came a special connection with the eponymous saint or saints.¹¹³ This tendency was especially strong in the fifteenth century, as reflected in the growing custom of taking on a new name when taking holy orders.¹¹⁴ Possibly, Traversari copied out St Ambrose's letters not only as a practical duty but also as a spiritual exercise that allowed for concentrated reflection. By means of this fascinating vignette, I simply want to illustrate the care humanists devoted to the material realisation of their own letter collections, but also the subtle ways in which their engagement with earlier letter collections left its trace on their contributions to the genre. It shows how book historical and material aspects are intertwined with the close-readings and textual interpretations that stand at the centre of this study. For also in Ficino's case, we will see a keen involvement on the part of the author in the creation of new copies of his letters, from the earliest versions to the first printed edition and beyond. Moreover, the interest in Ambrose reveals that we must think beyond our own epistolary canon and consider what the humanists themselves considered suitable models. After these methodological considerations, we will now turn to the publication history of Ficino's letters.

¹⁰⁷ Traversari and Matteo Bosso's appreciation shows that a supposed humanist disregard for Ambrose's letters (see Klein 1970, 337) were not absolute in fifteenth-century Florence, especially not in religious humanist circles.

¹⁰⁸ On the popularity of Jerome in the Renaissance, Rice 1985 is still an excellent starting point.

¹⁰⁹ Traversari 1759, col. 265: 'Ex his enim concipies magnum virtutis adfectum multumque proficies.' Cf. col. 249.

¹¹⁰ Traversari 1759, col. 126.

¹¹¹ Caby 1999, 609; Stinger 1977, 66–82.

¹¹² Traversari 1759, col. 1063: 'quia ex earum lectione addisces vitae illius sanctimoniam.'

¹¹³ Klapisch-Zuber 2017, 66.

¹¹⁴ Rolker 2011.

MATERIAL

PRINTS

MATTEO CAPCASA, 1495

The first printed edition of Ficino's letters was produced by Matteo Capcasa, also known as de Codeca or Capodecasa. He was originally from Parma but spent most of his life in Venice, where the *Epistole* were printed in 1495. By that time, according to the *Incunable Short Title Catalogue*, Capcasa had already produced 55 other titles, mostly well-known classical and religious-moralistic texts such as Persius' *Satires*, Livy's *Histories*, the anonymous *Fiore di virtù* (*Flower of Virtue*) and Pseudo-Bonaventura's *Meditations on the Life of Christ*. Interestingly, three out of seven Neo-Latin texts printed by Capcasa were of an epistolary nature: Franciscus Niger's *Modus epistolandi* (1492), Ficino's *Epistole* (1495), and sixteen books of Filelfo's letters (1495). In 1491, Capcasa created a will that provides insight into the size of his print runs. While it is always hard to extrapolate such numbers and make assertions about the scale of early modern publications, they are the best information available. It appears that Capcasa's average print run consisted of circa 1300 to 1400 copies.¹¹⁵ If the print run of the *Epistole* was in line with this—and there is no reason to assume it was not—the work had a more than average distribution.¹¹⁶ The large number of extant copies, more than 200 in public institutions only, confirms this.¹¹⁷ We can conclude that Capcasa was a commercially intelligent printer who was more inclined to print large editions of works with a proven market value than to take a risk with new works.¹¹⁸ Printers owed their success to their insight into the intellectual currents that shaped the market.¹¹⁹ Therefore, Capcasa's choice to print Ficino's *Epistole* indicates its expected appeal to a wide audience.

On the verso of the first leaf, we find the *privilegium*, the Renaissance copyright, granted to Biondo.¹²⁰ This page is bordered by a fine architectural design consisting of four blocks. The lower panel is a plinth with a heraldic shield supported by cherubs. On the sides are two columns with at their foot a sphinx with a long winding tail. On top of them, two humanlike figures, leaning on classically inspired vases, support a pediment on their backs. This pediment contains a semi-circular opening from which a radiating and haloed man, presumably God, shows a book. On both sides

¹¹⁵ Cecchetti 1885.

¹¹⁶ Nuovo 2013a; cf. Eric White's database on the website of the Consortium of European Research Libraries.

¹¹⁷ These numbers are taken from the GW. When Gentile commented on the large group of extant copies in 1990, he refers to the number 169; Gentile 1990, ccxvi. The number of copies based on the holdings of public institutions does not give a complete picture, as it is easy to find private sale catalogues listing the *Epistole*.

¹¹⁸ Cioni 1975.

¹¹⁹ Flood 2003, 143.

¹²⁰ On the book privilege system in this period, Nuovo 2013b.

of the semi-circle stand heraldic lions and, again, ancient-looking vases.¹²¹ Capcasa and other printers had already used or would later reuse this very same design, as was customary in Venice in this period.¹²² Two of those prints that share the same frame with the *Epistole* are of Dante's *Comedia*. I will not go as far as to claim that Capcasa intended a visual connection between the two works, but it does accentuate the cultural and literary proximity of the two works, which will prove instrumental in my interpretation of Book 12 of the collection. On passing this printed threshold, we arrive at the table of contents, *tabula*, discussed in the epilogue.

The first page of text, which includes the *prohoemium* to the first book, replicates the outer frame of the *prohoemium* to the entire collection on the opposite page. Only the upper and lower panel have switched places. This page also contains the first figurative initial: a capital M with a phoenix sitting between its two diagonal legs. While the first letters of the following books likewise start with a large woodcut initial, the initials of the other letters are smaller, but also decorated. This facilitates navigation through the work, since normally there is no blank space in between the epistles. The exception to this is Book 9, where space is left before and after the titles of several letters. Book 9 is the shortest of all books in length as well as in number of letters, the total of which amounts to only twenty-six. The extra blank space is a clear attempt to inflate the physical length of Book 9 to the level of the other books. Apparently, the desire to create a balanced collection was not confined to the careful arrangement of its constituents but extended to its material production. It is these details indicating the level of investment in the production of the book which further justify the importance I attribute to its layout.

ANTON KOBERGER, 1497

The second printed edition followed only two years after the first, in 1497. It was printed by Anton Koberger (c.1440–1513), descendant from a family of bakers and goldsmiths, who had become one of the most important printers and book dealers in Germany and Europe soon after entering the trade.¹²³ His success led him into the patriciate of his hometown Nürnberg, and put him in contact with the leading printers, humanists and artists of his time, including Johann Amerbach, Josse Bade and Albrecht Dürer. Around the time he printed Ficino's letters, Koberger's business was flourishing and had already made him a wealthy man.¹²⁴ As a young man, the well-respected writing master Johann Neudörffer (1497-1563) had become acquainted with and worked for

¹²¹ Cf. Margaret M. Smith 2000, 138.

¹²² Hind 1935, 2:502. The prints in question are Francesco Petrarca, *Triumphi, Soneti, & Canzone* (Venice: Bartolomeo de' Zanni, 1508), Dante Alighieri, *La Commedia* (Venice: Matteo Capcasa, 1493), and Dante Alighieri, *La Commedia* (Venice: Bernardino Benali and Matteo Capcasa, 149[2]).

¹²³ Unless indicated otherwise, the following information is based on the still authoritative study of Hase 1885.

¹²⁴ In 1498 and 1499, he bought two houses.

Koberger in the early sixteenth century.¹²⁵ In 1547, he recollects that Koberger's shop housed 24 presses and 100 employees. These numbers are unverifiable but the labour division and the output of Koberger's printing house demonstrate that his business was proto-industrial. In Josse Bade's prefatory letter for a 1499 edition of Poliziano's letters, the French humanist and printer called Koberger 'easily the most important bookseller and highly ranked among trustworthy and honest merchants.'¹²⁶ In the same letter, he praises especially Koberger's diligence in printing accurate texts, free of errors.

Koberger's immense success cannot only be traced back to his adequate proof-readers, nor to his financial acumen and the head start he gained from his and his first wife's family capital.¹²⁷ Like Capcasa, Koberger was above all a cautious printer who mostly printed authors which he knew that they would sell. Since his business model depended on the profitability of large print runs, niche publications were uncommon. Koberger's focus on famous authors and traditional religious works is reflected in a letter from 1498 in which the famous printer Amerbach wrote from Basel to his colleague in Nürnberg:

For you do not print books new or deprived of the names of their authors, but old ones that have been discovered and edited by the most famous and pious students of our faith.¹²⁸

The only humanist texts printed by Koberger before 1495 were Poggio's *Facetiae*, Platina's *Lives of the Popes*, and three editions of Pope Pius II's letters. Like his edition of Ficino's *Epistole*, Platina's work was printed after an earlier Venetian edition.¹²⁹ We can conclude that Koberger, like Capcasa, was not so much interested in the content of the works as in their marketability. Possibly, it was the Nürnberger Willibald Pirckheimer or another acquainted humanist who made Koberger aware of Ficino's Venetian success with the *Epistole*.¹³⁰ This advice was justified, as even slightly more copies of Koberger's edition are preserved than of Capcasa's.¹³¹

There is a notable difference between Capcasa's edition, with its folio size pages, decorated initials, and beautifully framed prefatory letters, and Koberger's edition: a quarto sized book with a simple

¹²⁵ Neudörfer 1875, 173.

¹²⁶ Poliziano 1499, 1v: 'librariorum facile princeps et inter fideles atque honestos mercatores non inferiori loco positus.'

¹²⁷ Cf. Burkart 2019; Flood 2003, especially 141-143.

¹²⁸ Hartmann 1942, 1:89: 'Imprimis etenim libros ... non novos aut inventorum ipsorum nominibus orbatos, sed vetustos et a clarissimis atque sanctissimis fidei nostrae indagatoribus et inventos et aeditos.'

¹²⁹ Hase 1885, 228.

¹³⁰ Pirckheimer was in Italy during the first half of the 1490s, searching for books and seeking a humanist cultivation; Holzberg 1981, 41-48.

¹³¹ It is likely that there were in fact substantially more, and that fewer of them have survived due to their material properties. Whereas nearly all the copies of Capcasa's edition which I examined are undamaged, several of Koberger's edition are seriously incomplete or have fallen apart. The bindings are often less luxurious, which, it can be argued, would impact their chance of long-term survival.

title page and without any kind of decoration. While the second edition leaves space for larger initials, these had to be added by the reader. The most industrious owner cut out letters from another publication and pasted them into the empty squares at the beginning of each letter.¹³² The resulting patchwork of fonts and styles is certainly more frivolous than the elegant red letters found in most of the other copies. It appears that Koberger, who did usually not print in quarto format, wanted to provide an affordable edition of the letters.¹³³ At the same time, he reproduced the first edition with a remarkable accuracy. Of course, he left out the colophon and the *privilegium*, which effectively prohibited him from printing the letters, but every other detail is faithfully maintained. The few printed marginalia from Capcasa's edition did not fit in the narrow margins of Koberger's, but we find them in small text boxes pushed into the main text. Likewise, the table of contents, which could easily have been abridged or left out to save paper and man hours, is also kept in its original form. Even the white spaces that separate paragraphs are meticulously copied, so that every reader of the *Epistole* would have been steered through the text in the same way, whether they used the Italian or the German edition.¹³⁴ In the next edition of Ficino's letters, this approach would be wholly abandoned.

MANUSCRIPTS

BOOKS 1-2

This section presents the 16 manuscripts with at least one complete book of the *Epistole* from which the printed editions ultimately stem and which record the genesis of the work over the course of two decades. I will describe their unique features, as well as their relationship to the canonical version of the collection in the Venetian edition of 1495. The oldest manuscript dates to 1475/1476 and is held by the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana in Florence (*L3*).¹³⁵ It is a modest copy without illuminations and provides insight into what must have been an early stage of Book 1. It lacks 14 letters that would subsequently be included (*EL* 1.46-48; 1.101; 1.122-131) and still contains two letters that would eventually disappear. Furthermore, *L3* presents the letters in a notably different order than the canonical version. In the following chapter, I will examine the implications of these differences for our understanding of the letters' eventual concatenation. For now, I will concentrate on the material and paratextual side of the story. Almost simultaneously with *L3*, an anonymous scribe produced a sumptuous copy of Book 1, which is currently in the Vatican Library (*V*). On

¹³² Les Hauts-de-Seine Inc. Desguine A 109.

¹³³ Only 37 out of 276 prints from the Koberger printing house are in quarto.

¹³⁴ Since Koberger was so far removed from the more humanistically inclined presses of his time, he was not used to dealing with Ancient Greek. Consequently, his typesetters and correctors did not improve the mangled quotations from the 1495 edition, but made them worse by further mixing up α/σ and μ/ρ .

¹³⁵ Cf. Gentile 1990, XCIX.

the page to the left of the dedication, the miniature artist Francesco Rosselli painted a red medallion, surrounded by a floral motif interspersed with gold-coloured dots. The dedicatory letter to Giuliano de' Medici itself is framed by a geometric pattern interlaced with violas and daffodils, and the golden initial M[agnus Cosmus] bears a medal portrait of Cosimo de' Medici.

The refined execution of *V* corresponds to its advanced stage in the editorial development of the *Epistole*. Although it lacks the same letters as *L3*, plus one (*EL* 1.76), and includes an additional foreign letter (*EL* 10.37), the remaining 119 elements are in the following order maintained in Capcasa's edition. There is a second manuscript with only Book 1 and which features the letters in the canonical order: the relatively simple *N2*, currently kept in Firenze. This manuscript probably dates from a later period than the other manuscripts of Book 1.¹³⁶ It adds two letters that would eventually end up in Book 6 (*EL* 6.9; 6.12) but is closer to the Venetian edition as it omits the two previously mentioned letters that never made it into print. Furthermore, it includes all the canonical letters except for *EL* 1.132, which anyway only appears when Book 1 is published in combination with other books.¹³⁷ The same is true for all other manuscripts with only Book 1 (**L4**, **N1**, **L2**, **P**). However, those manuscripts feature different variations on the pre-canonical order of the letters and are thus further removed from the final version.¹³⁸ The manuscripts that combine Book 1 with other books (**B**, **L1**, **G1**, **R**) contain all the letters and *B*, *L1*, and *G1* present them in the canonical order. Only *B* and *G1*, probably due to a material loss in their shared model, lack *EL* 1.114-117.

The second book remains largely stable throughout the manuscript tradition but took the longest to reach its canonical form. Of the five manuscripts containing Book 2 (*B*, *G1*, *L5*, *R*, *L1*), four present its eight letters in the same order (*EL* 2.7, 3, 4, 2, 5, 1, 6, 9). Only in *L1* (ca. 1480) does that order change to *EL* 2.1-5, 7, 9, 6, prefiguring what the series will look like in the printed edition. Finally, *EL* 2.6 moved up two places and *EL* 2.8 was added, but not until the printed edition.

BOOKS 3-6

In contrast to the first two books, Books 3-4 are never subject to alterations, despite appearing in no less than six manuscripts—more than any other book except for the first. I propose that the stability of Books 3-4 in the manuscript tradition follows from the fact that they were explicitly dedicated as 'twin books' to King Matthias of Hungary.¹³⁹ After being sent to Buda, they entirely

¹³⁶ Cf. Gentile 1990, CCXXXIX.

¹³⁷ I use 'publication' and 'to publish' for both manuscripts and prints in as far as the manuscripts concerned were circulated by Ficino. Where relevant, I will specify whether I mean only the manuscript or only the printed publications.

¹³⁸ Manuscript *W* is an exception, but this florilegium does not belong to the manuscript tradition over which Ficino exerted control.

¹³⁹ *EL* 3.1.

escaped Ficino's control. He was no longer able to manage their reception, either by changing the manuscripts, or by superseding them with a new version. Upon sending them to Matthias' court, Ficino fixed the shape of Books 3 and 4. Nevertheless, their fate as material objects was more adventurous. In **G2**, a dedication letter by Valori, the sponsor of the manuscript, precedes the letters. Valori narrates how **G3**, the original manuscript of Books 3-4 copied by Salvini, was stolen by brigands on its way from Florence to Buda, 'obiter a latronibus interceptum!' It is unclear how **G3** reached the Corvinian library in the end, but a note from the legal scholar Thomas Lansius (1577-1657) indicates that **G3** was at some point united with its twin in the royal library in Buda.¹⁴⁰ This story explains why there are two closely related manuscripts of Books 3-4, with similar visual programs in the miniatures. I will return to them in my analysis of Book 3.

Like Books 3 and 4, Books 5 and 6 circulated together without the preceding books. However, in contrast to **G3** and **G2**, the manuscript containing Books 5 and 6 only (**N3**) is not a finalised presentation copy, but a heavily annotated working copy with countless deletions, additions, and corrections. Gentile has masterfully described **N3** in a long article, where he identifies four different hands. In addition to Ficino's own hand, he distinguishes two of the author's closest collaborators, including Luca Fabiani, as well as one occasional amanuensis.¹⁴¹ Scribal annotations like 'incipit' and 'hinc incipito' prove that this manuscript formed the basis for at least one later, but now lost, copy of Books 5 and 6. Although the letters in **N3** follow each other in the canonical sequence with only two exceptions, the manuscript still bears several traces of an earlier order. For example, the beginning of *EL* 5.19 features before *EL* 5.18 on folio 14^v but is crossed out. It is copied again, now entirely, on folios 15^r-16^v and after *EL* 5.18. On folio 19^v, we read in the margin of the 'Prohemium Marsili Ficini in opusculum eius de vita Platonis ad Franciscum Bandinum' that this letter needs to be moved to the previous book and, crossed out, the earlier idea to move it to the next book: 'hec epistola ~~vacat hic nam posterior~~ in libro superiore ponenda est.' The letter fits best in Book 4, which also contains Ficino's actual biography of Plato. Yet, it is interesting to note that Ficino initially considered to move it to Book 6. Perhaps the biography's focus on Plato's political engagement made a reference to this work suitable for inclusion in the conclusion of the civically focussed theme of the collection, as we will see later.

¹⁴⁰ 'cum [...] intelexissem Celsitudinem Tuam solito studio conquirere reliquias Bibliothecae illius, quam olim Matthias I Hungariae Rex fortissimus budae instruxerat maximis sumptibus; existimabam ego non importunum fore me, si istam veluti ex ingenti naufragio superstitem et vario reciprocantis ludentisque fortunae flatu ad me delatam tabellam, nempe Marsili Ficini, in membrana scriptas Epistolas tibi iam mitterem.' The note was dated in Tübingen on 15 March 1623.

¹⁴¹ Gentile 1980, 85-86; on Fabiani, see Arrighi 2005 and Gentile 2006.

BOOKS 7-12

Unlike the coupled Books 3-4 and Books 5-6, Books 7 and 8 have no attested circulation on their own. They are from the first witnesses onwards attached to Books 1-6. Although at first sight, the pattern of paired publication seems interrupted, closer consideration suggests the opposite. *B* lacks not only Book 8, but also the last letters of Book 7. In light of the close connection between Books 3-4 and 5-6, it seems probable that instead of a few folios, half of the volume got lost.¹⁴² While Book 7 appears without Book 8 in manuscripts *B* and *R*, Book 8 only appears in combination with Books 1-7 (*L1* and *G1*). The manuscript versions of both books are very similar to the final edition. The order of Book 7 remains the same, and in Book 8 only two letters ever change their position. As far as missing letters are concerned, Book 7 consistently lacks the first letter after the *prohoemium*. Book 8, on the other hand, lacks *EL* 8.6 and 8.64-70 in *G1*, and this is clearly not due to material loss or a scribal mistake: It concerns a well-produced presentation copy from Valori to Matthias, and there is space for the addition of other letters after the last one included. The removal of the thirteen letters in question seems to put extra focus on a series of letters to Francesco Bandini and the Hungarian court which I discuss on p. 190.

Books 9 to 11 only appear in *M*, where the former has already reached its ultimate arrangement in *M*, and Books 10 and 11 differ only marginally from the canonical order. Codicological criteria suggest that *M* is the continuation of *L1*, which contains Books 1-8.¹⁴³ To the arguments presented by Gentile and Kristeller, I would add one more: the connection of *L1* and *M* would mean that the former constitutes a version of the *Epistole* closer to the canonical sequence than the only other manuscript containing Books 1-8 (*G1*). This would in turn explain why the order of Book 1 is canonical and of Book 2 nearly canonical in *L1* but differs significantly in *G1*. Moreover, *G1* lacks *EL* 8.6 as well as 8.64-70 and repeats *EL* 4.35 in Book 5. Neither of these anomalies are present in *L1*. The joint dedication of Books 10 and 11 to the same person—if only from the printed edition onwards—means that the pairing of books is interrupted in Book 9.¹⁴⁴ The late addition of a dedication letter to Book 10 suggests that the reason behind the abandonment of linking every two books is actually the dedication of Book 12 to Girolamo Rossi, who is also the dedicatee of the entire work. Indeed, Ficino wanted to put the sponsor of the whole project at the beginning and end of its dedicatory chain, ‘so that I might dedicate the conclusion of this long work

¹⁴² My analysis is in line with the hypothesis of Kristeller 1937, 1:xciii. Arguments for the other option are presented in Gentile 1980, 155.

¹⁴³ Gentile 1990, CI, CXLI; Kristeller 1937, 1:cvi.

¹⁴⁴ *EL* 10.1: ‘Cum duodecim epistolarum libros iam absolvisse eosque recognoscerem, deprehendi decimum undecimumque librum certa adhuc inscriptione carere. Itaque cogitanti mihi cuinam potissimum hoc opus geminum dedicarem, tu mihi in primis occurristi, mi Valor.’ Translations from the letters are taken from Ficino 1975-2020 with adaptations by me.

specifically to you, to whom I had long intended to dedicate the entire work until the end.¹⁴⁵ No manuscript of Book 12 is preserved, as the printed edition had made small-scale distribution pointless. From *EL* 12.1 we know that Ficino kept the archetype of this book open for the continuous inclusion of letters. However, we will see that this book is deliberately repetitive. It is unlikely that the creative process for its composition came even close to that of the earlier books.

PUBLICATION PROCESS

Previous literature has not sufficiently stressed how extraordinary the story of Ficino's *Epistole* is. Each of the extant manuscripts shows how much Ficino was invested in its creation. Whereas the letters are not his largest or most complex work—not like *On Life* or the translations of the Platonic corpus, they were certainly a long-term project. More than twenty years separate the earliest drafts of Book 1 from the final publication of the printed *Epistole*. It will nevertheless become clear from my discussion of its careful composition that Ficino developed a blueprint to which he adhered from beginning to end.

A recurring theme in published letter collections from Antiquity to the early modern period is the difficulty of collecting one's letters from addressees. Traversari laments how awkward it is being forced to ask his letters back from his friends.¹⁴⁶ Neither did the Florentine humanist Matteo Bosso (1427-1502), at some point general of the Canons Regular of the Lateran, always keep copies or drafts of his letters. In the dedication letter of their first edition, we read: 'They were partly so dispersed that they could no longer be recalled to the banners by any usual signal for retreat, partly in the possession of brothers throughout various monasteries all over Italy, and partly had long lain in the blind corners of our cell, almost rotting because of neglect and dust.'¹⁴⁷ The general title of the miscellaneous volume to which Bosso's first book of letters belongs is *Recuperationes Faesulanæ*, a hint to the process of getting back, of *recuperating*, letters from their various addressees.¹⁴⁸ Although some letters reveal other aspects of the *Epistole*'s genesis such as the transcription and circulation of separate books, or the proof-reading process for the printed edition, there is no trace that Ficino had to retrieve his original letters from their recipients. The composition of his letter collection seems to have never escaped his thoughts, and he must have carefully kept copies or drafts of the letters he sent.

¹⁴⁵ *EL* 12.1: 'ut diuturni operis finem tibi singulariter dedicarem ad quem summatim universum opus iamdiu destinaveram ut ad finem.'

¹⁴⁶ Traversari 1759, col. 126.224.

¹⁴⁷ Bosso 1493, 2r: 'ea ipsa erant partim ita dispersa ut receptui classico nullo quidem signo ad vexilla revocari amplius possent, partim etiam in fratrum manibus habebantur per Italiae totius diversa coenobia, partim caecis nostræ cellulæ angulis situ ac pulvere pene tabentia diu iacuerant.' On Bosso, see Giovanni Soranzo 1965.

¹⁴⁸ Bosso 1493, 2r-v.

Ficino's investment in the *Epistole* is also clear from the authorial control he exerted over their reproduction. The scribes copying separate books are mostly his close collaborators Sebastiano Salvini and Luca Fabiani.¹⁴⁹ Furthermore, many of the corrections and annotations in the manuscripts and in the Durham copy of the first edition are in Ficino's own hand, revealing that he kept a close eye on the letters' distribution. It has become something of a commonplace that letters were both a public and a private genre.¹⁵⁰ But we should not underestimate how even its public side, brought to its extreme in the published letter collection, was subject to a paradigm of trust and confidentiality. Traversari, as ever concerned about the creation of his collection, writes to the person in charge of compiling the letters: 'I beg you, while you have them copied, not to scatter them everywhere, but to keep them with you.'¹⁵¹ Likewise, Ficino allowed his friends to commission and distribute further copies of his letter books, as in the case of Books 3-4 for Matthias Corvinus. But also in those cases, he remained closely involved in the production process and scribes close to him were usually hired for the job.

Ficino's approach stands in contrast with that of his contemporaries. Returning to the first edition of Bosso's letters, it is worth remarking that it was so marred by typographical errors that he decided to pretend as if it did not exist and had the first book of his collection reprinted in another city (1493).¹⁵² Bosso's subsequent publication strategy was on the whole poorly coordinated. The first book was included in a collection of shorter writings on various topics and was reprinted two times within a year but with different paratexts.¹⁵³ The second (1498) and third (1502) books each appeared separately. Ficino operated in a different way. He understood perfectly well the mutability and flexibility of manuscript transmission, in which a version is never fixed but can be superseded by a revision. He would lend the latest versions of the letter books to friends, who could then read them or have them copied out for personal use. Yet, the independent circulation of the first book as well as the paired publication of Books 3-4 and 5-6 shows that Ficino would not release his letters in an uncoordinated way. During the twenty years between the first and last book, instalments were brought to the public. The final product towards which the entire process led was the Venetian edition of 1495. This shows that Ficino had understood better than Bosso the requirements of a successful print publication. Although enthusiasm for the printing press had a slow start in Florence, Ficino was one of the first to take advantage of the new technology.¹⁵⁴ Through the impressive project of publishing all of Plato's works in translation, as well as with the

¹⁴⁹ On Salvini, see Kristeller 1961 and Vasoli 1999a.

¹⁵⁰ Judith Rice Henderson 2002 provides an excellent discussion of the topic.

¹⁵¹ Traversari 1759, col. 133: 'te oro dum transcribi eas feceris, ne passim effundas, sed apud te habeas.'

¹⁵² Respectively ISTC ib01044000 (1492) and ISTC ib01046000 (1493).

¹⁵³ In addition to the editions mentioned in the previous note, there is ISTC ib01045000.

¹⁵⁴ Pettegree 2010, 51–52; compare his enthusiasm in *EL* 11.34.

publication of *On Life* and the *Platonic Theology*, Ficino had built up considerable experience with the new medium.¹⁵⁵ Relying on this experience, he understood that the fixed nature of printed text in large runs best fitted works that had reached their final version and that it necessitated great editorial care. This mindset secured him an international readership for the *Epistole*.

¹⁵⁵ See *EL* 7.36; 8.21; 10.8; 10.15; 11.10 for Ficino's concerns about the printing process of his works.

PART 1 – INTRATEXTUAL PATTERNS

CHAPTER 1

EPISTOLARY BEGINNINGS: *EL* 1.1-21

LITERARY CONVENTIONS: PLINY TO POLIZIANO

Studying the order in a composite text implies that we read sequentially from beginning to end. Otherwise, ‘order’ becomes wholly dependent on the single reader and ultimately unverifiable—as we have seen, this is a serious concern for the analysis of macrotexts. Therefore, the first letter is privileged as the starting point from which we develop our interpretation. Several scholars who have tackled the artistic composition of epistolary collections have, indeed, observed the programmatic function of first letters.¹⁵⁶ I start this chapter by looking at the first epistle in Pliny the Younger’s collection and its reception by Poliziano. Then, I balance the literary scholar’s intuition with contemporary evidence found in editorial notes and readers’ annotations regarding epistolary beginnings.

FROM PLINY TO POLIZIANO

Two features recur at the beginning of letter collections from Antiquity through to the Renaissance: stylistic self-awareness and references to a request for compiling one’s letters. The first words of Pliny’s collection excuse the casual style of his letters and defer responsibility for their publication to his friend Septicius Clarus: ‘You have often urged me to collect and publish any letters of mine which were composed with some care.’¹⁵⁷ This device was picked up by Sidonius Apollinaris in his opening letter to Constantius, where he states ‘For a long time, you have been urging me, my lord, ... that if I produced any letters, which are somewhat more polished ... I should gather them all, after reviewing and refining the originals, and collect them in a single volume.’¹⁵⁸ Sidonius immediately admits that he sees this endeavour in light of Pliny’s collection and highlights the literary artificiality of his epistolary corpus by pointing out the letters’ revision (*retractatis enucleatisque*). Both Pliny and Sidonius use these claims as a marker of modesty, a defence against the accusation of forcing a flattering image of themselves on others. The concern of perceived

¹⁵⁶ For example, Van Waarden 2021, 1028; Noens 2023, 252; Marchesi 2008, 20.22.36; Hanaghan 2017, 251; Papy 2011, 48; Cancik 1967, 140–141.

¹⁵⁷ *PliE* 1.1.1: ‘Frequenter hortatus es ut epistulas, si quas paulo curatius scripsissem, colligerem publicaremque.’

¹⁵⁸ *SidE* 1.1.1: ‘Diu praecipis, domine maior ... ut, si quae mihi litterae paulo politiores varia occasione fluxerint ... omnes retractatis exemplaribus enucleatisque uno volumine includam.’

vanity would become even more acute in the Middle Ages, especially for religious people.¹⁵⁹ Peter of Blois hastened to stress how unenthusiastic he was to obey the king's (!) long-standing request to publish his correspondence. 'Asked by you to gather the letters which I have sent here and there to various persons, and to compile them, as it were, into one miscellaneous collection, I am seized by feelings of doubt.'¹⁶⁰ While his unease may well have been genuine, it also pointedly stands in a recognisable tradition of epistolary overtures.

It is a widely accepted view that the beginnings of literary works are highly allusive and contain intertextual links that direct our interpretation of them.¹⁶¹ Given the humanists' general poetics of imitation and emulation, it is no surprise that they opened their own *epistolaria* with self-conscious remarks about their style and motivations for publishing. Fonzio blames his nearing death as 'the fault' (*vitium*) that led to the composition of his letter books. By calling them 'striking reminders of my youthful ineptitude' (*insignes notae invenilium mearum ineptiarum*) he subscribes to the traditional self-depreciation found at the beginning of epistolary collections. Poliziano adheres to these conventions with words that clearly echo Pliny's: 'Egisti mecum saepenumero magnanime Petre Medices, ut colligerem meas epistolas et in volumen redactas publicarem.' While 'egisti' and 'saepenumero' are synonyms for 'hortatus es' and 'frequenter,' 'colligerem' and 'publicarem' are directly borrowed from Pliny. The allusion did not go unnoticed, and in 1520 Franciscus Sylvius remarked in his commentary to Poliziano's letters that 'the argument in the first letter of C. Pliny, to Septitius, is not at all different.'¹⁶² Unsurprisingly, the ever-self-assured Poliziano does not detract from the rhetorical quality of his letters. Instead, he describes the dazzling range of authors who inspired him. By thematizing his letters' style, he imitated the meta-literary comments of his ancient model. Like Pliny, he also claims that his collection is randomly composed with those materials that were at hand. Through this second-hand conceit, he hints at the careful composition of his letters, for which he had found a precedent in the Roman author's epistles.

READERS' RECEPTION

Was the importance of opening letters, for which I have argued by referencing modern studies, also perceived by Renaissance readers? Pierre de Montmartre, a monk from Cluny and editor of Peter the Venerable's correspondence in 1522 explicitly mentions the importance of a suitable beginning. The book market was so saturated, he writes, that people suffered from intellectual

¹⁵⁹ Enenkel 2008, 10.

¹⁶⁰ Peter of Blois 1855, col. 1: 'Rogatus a vobis epistulas, quas passim et variis direxi personis, colligere, et quasi diversas species in unum fasciculum comportare, rapior ad incertos affectus.'

¹⁶¹ Cf. Gale 2000, 8: 'It is conventional in classical literature for the beginnings of both poems and prose works to be densely allusive, or, to put it another way, to establish intertextual links which will condition our reading of the work as a whole.'

¹⁶² Poliziano 1520, fol. 2v: 'C. Plini epistola prima, que est ad Septitium, non longe dissimili argumento est.'

indigestion. As a result, they would not buy a book that did not immediately delight them. He goes on to cite the banquet master from the wedding at Cana, who says that 'Every man should serve the good wine first.'¹⁶³ Pierre's argumentation originates in the proliferation of printed books during the early decades of the sixteenth century. Nevertheless, he makes some poignant remarks about the ways in which readers around the turn of the fifteenth century would have approached a letter collection and how their first impression was likely to determine their attitude towards the work as a whole. Pierre decided to pull one of the later letters to the first position, foregoing the order of the manuscripts he had at his disposal in the monastery of Cluny.¹⁶⁴ He chose a letter whose words 'would kindle and make you burn to read them, so that your soul would take delight in them as in richness and you would be pleased as with treasures, and, most of all, you would be encouraged to read on.'¹⁶⁵ Pierre wanted readers to focus on the theological value of Peter's letters, and hence decided to move a theological letter to the front of each of the collection's six books.

The strategy of Pierre de Montmartre appears rooted in his own reading experience and that of others. For, on the other end of the book market, readers indeed paid special attention to the beginning of a letter collection. A copy of the 1498 edition of Seneca's letters, currently in Durham, attests to this. It was owned by Johannes Sprenz, a Bavarian law student from Dinkelsbühl who completed his studies at the University of Siena in 1497 and died young in 1509.¹⁶⁶ Little is known about Sprenz, but he appears to be a figure of humble stature compared to the humanists at the centre of this study. Still, he is the type of reader that someone like Ficino could have expected for his letter collection: well-versed in Latin, not looking for complex philosophy but interested in literature dealing with moral concerns, living in northern Italy when the *Epistole* were published, and with the means to build a personal library. The annotations in Sprenz' copy of Seneca's letters are few and strikingly monothematic: Large capital letters spelling out the word MORS highlight the theme of death in epistles IV, XXIV, XXVI, XXX, and DCVII. It is not surprising that Sprenz, or whoever it was, picked up on this theme. 'Having introduced death in *ep.* 1, Seneca's attention upon it and the responsibilities it engenders, never wavers throughout the *Epistulae Morales*'¹⁶⁷ It is noteworthy, on the other hand, that Sprenz identified a principal theme in the opening letter(s) and followed it through to the end. Judging from his annotations, it is safe to say that he extrapolated

¹⁶³ John 2.9.

¹⁶⁴ Constable 1967, 2:46–47, 75–76.

¹⁶⁵ Peter the Venerable 1522, fol. 1v: 'ad sui lectionem merito accenderent inflammarentque ut in eisdem sicut in crassitudine delectaretur anima tua et oblectareris sicut in omnibus divitiis, ampliusque ad sequentia perlegenda promovereris.'

¹⁶⁶ Hesse and Schwinges 2019.

¹⁶⁷ Richardson-Hay 2006, 127.

a topic from the first letter to the rest of the collection. This shows a specific way of reading, in which a series of separate units become linked through a single theme.

Do we find similar kinds of reader engagement in the first editions of Ficino's letters? Yes. A quantitative comparison of annotations between the letters in a sample of 106 incunable copies shows that the first nine letters are most heavily marked. After a decrease in annotations from *EL* 1.9-12, the marginalia become denser again in *EL* 1.13-21. After this, there are no more distinct blocks of letters which are annotated in a comparatively high number of incunable copies. A sceptical mind may wonder whether this simply reflects a drop in the readers' attention after engaging intensely with the text for one or two hours. The same group of readers who had embarked upon the *Epistole* with great zeal and commitment to every letter, could have grown tired of them afterwards and would consequently have continued their reading with scattered attention resulting in heterogenous patterns of annotation. This possibility cannot be excluded altogether but is no sufficient explanation. In fact, the annotations at the beginning also share an interest in the same set of themes. Especially the topic of happiness and how to achieve it—discussed in more detail below—is a recurring point of attention. This and the related concept of a 'good life' are repeatedly underlined in the text itself and spelled out in full at the bottom or top of the page.

THEMATIC OUTLINES

POLITICAL GROUNDING: FATHERS AND SONS

The well-established tradition of starting letter collections with meta-literary self-effacement provided Ficino with the opportunity of standing out by abandoning the trodden path. He does not comment on his epistolary style nor on his motivations for publishing the *Epistole*. Instead, the first book opens with a staged teacher-pupil relationship, in which he answers a philosophical question addressed to him.¹⁶⁸ This harks back to a tradition of philosophical epistolography of which Seneca is the most prominent representative. The question-answer mode of epistolary exchange is also present in the letter collections of the Church Fathers. Indeed, Gérard Nauroy has observed that in the letters of St Ambrose 'hermeneutics in the service of answering questions posed by correspondents take centre stage'.¹⁶⁹ As we have seen in the introduction, this strand of the epistolary tradition was highly valued by religious humanists like Traversari and would have been valued by Ficino, too. In the following two sections, I dwell on the political undercurrents as

¹⁶⁸ Cf. Tröger 2016, 133.

¹⁶⁹ Nauroy 2017, 153.

well as on the instructive mode of the first letter and place it within Ficino's broader philosophical interests.

The first letter of Ficino's letter collection, after the dedicatory epistle to which I will return shortly, pretends to be written by the successful banker Cosimo de' Medici. Cosimo's influence on the city of Florence through patronage and political involvement cannot be overestimated.¹⁷⁰ This is remarkable because only eleven letters in Ficino's collection are not professedly written by him.¹⁷¹ Moreover, the letter is almost certainly forged.¹⁷² While Cosimo had a reading knowledge of Latin, there are no Latin writings attributed to him for which we should not assume a ghost writer, nor do we find any trace of literary fashioning in his *volgare* letters.¹⁷³ Michael Allen rightly speaks of 'Cosimo's freshman Latin.'¹⁷⁴ Consequently, the highly charged reference to Ficino's 'Orphic lyre' and the metaphorical turn of phrase 'non agri sed animi colendi gratia' sound much more like Ficino's own voice than like that of his famous patron. The implications for the whole collection are considerable. Ficino's contemporaries may have sensed that this letter was not actually from Cosimo but crafted by Ficino in his name, probably after his death. Thus, from the very start, Ficino leaves an overt trace of fictionalisation which we ought to keep in mind as we progress through the rest of the collection. The forgery of the first letter is programmatic for the way in which we must read the entire work: as a compilation of Ficino's actual correspondence which through its arrangement and the addition of artificial elements transcends the purely historical level. By falsely attributing the letter to Cosimo, Ficino draws attention to his own authorial creativity and highlights the artificial design of the *Epistole*.

Cosimo died in 1464, and it is generally accepted that Ficino translated Plato's *Philebus* dialogue 'on the highest good' in the same year.¹⁷⁵ Since the translation is mentioned in the letter, its imagined composition must be placed in 1464. This would make it the earliest letter in the entire collection, of which only sixteen letters are anterior to 1474.¹⁷⁶ Moreover, the year 1464 predates the first manuscript circulation of Book 1 by more than ten years. Thus, I believe that the real composition of the letter should be dated to around 1475 when Ficino was compiling the first book. For *EL* 1.1 is not an original letter integrated into the collection later but was written *for* the collection presumably in an advanced stage of its creation. The question is why Ficino thought it necessary to include this letter? The publication of a major work, like a letter collection of this size with

¹⁷⁰ On Cosimo, see Kent 2000; Ames-Lewis 1992.

¹⁷¹ *EL* 1.1; 1.21; 1.23; 1.26; 1.61; 1.83; 1.123; 8.19; 8.62; 10.26; 11.1.

¹⁷² Gentile 1990, CCXLVIII.

¹⁷³ Hankins 1992, 73–75.

¹⁷⁴ Michael J. B. Allen 2014a, 362.

¹⁷⁵ Kristeller 1937, 1:cli; Ficino 1975, 3; Robichaud 2018, 81.

¹⁷⁶ Cf. Gentile 1990, CCLVI.

potentially a wide audience in Florence and beyond, offered an important opportunity for creating new or confirming active patronage networks. It is for this reason that the *prohemium* to the first book is addressed to Giuliano de' Medici. So, why does Ficino's choose a past and long-deceased benefactor for the first actual letter of Book 1?

Cosimo had played a crucial role in Ficino's life, or so the philosopher wanted us to believe. Documents attest that he provided Ficino with critical support, notably by letting him use a Greek codex of Plato's collected works as well as a villa in Careggi topped up with a property generating a modest revenue.¹⁷⁷ From a letter to Cosimo that did not make it into the collection—apparently an earlier version of *EL* 1.2—we learn that Cosimo inquired about the progress of Ficino's Plato translations.¹⁷⁸ Still, Ficino liked to exaggerate the personal interest Cosimo took in him and his work. Making the immensely valuable Plato manuscript available surely was a generous deed, but I agree with James Hankins that Cosimo's investment in Ficino did not go beyond funding the translation of Plato's dialogues and certainly did not extend to the revival of a Platonic academy.¹⁷⁹ Moreover, the banker's interest in Plato was most probably overshadowed by his Aristotelian involvement unlike the idealised picture painted by Ficino. Peripatetics outnumbered committed Platonists in his close circle as well as in his library.¹⁸⁰ While the idea of a Platonically inclined Cosimo cultivated by Ficino certainly contained at least a grain of truth, we must be aware of the possibility that the philosopher discreetly inflated it into something more substantial.



Figure 5 MS Civitas Vaticana, BAV, Vat. lat.1789, fol. 7^r, detail.



Figure 6 Unknown medallist, medal of Cosimo de' Medici, bronze, probably 1465–1469, British Museum, London.

¹⁷⁷ Kristeller 1986, 172–173; Gentile, Niccoli, and Viti 1984, 175–176.

¹⁷⁸ Kristeller 1937, 1:37–38.

¹⁷⁹ Hankins 1990a, 152; for a different view, see Field 2014.

¹⁸⁰ Hankins 1990a, 148.



Figure 7 Unknown medallist, medal of Cosimo de' Medici, bronze, original probably 1465-1469, later cast 1480-1500, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

to him by the previous man in charge.¹⁸² The dedicatory letter to Giuliano de' Medici, Cosimo's grandson, draws on a broader political discourse about the legitimacy of Medicean power based on Cosimo's virtue. Tellingly, its first two words are 'Magnus Cosimus.' In a sumptuous copy preserved in the Vatican library and possibly produced for Giuliano himself, Cosimo is made even more present through a detailed portrait in gold (Figure 5).¹⁸³ This portrait is based on a bronze medal from the final quarter of the fifteenth century (Figure 6) which celebrates Cosimo as the Father of the Fatherland. It resonates with another medal (Figure 7) which notably contains the epithet 'magnus.' These portraits in bronze participate in the exaltation of Cosimo as an exemplary leader in the republican tradition by bestowing the same title on him as was first created for Cicero.¹⁸⁴ More importantly, the coins kept his memory alive to bolster the authority of his descendants. In the rest of the dedicatory letter, Ficino praises Cosimo and remembers how the old banker, whose wealth was unmatched, used to say that true richness consists of prudence and wisdom.¹⁸⁵ 'And what is most rare and wonderful,' he continues, 'he left a son and grandchildren who inherit this treasure. So it is that in my Giuliano I recognise that old man.'¹⁸⁶ In *EL* 1.26, Ficino likewise equates Giuliano's brother Lorenzo with Cosimo, in a dramatic use of mythological imagery where Lorenzo like a phoenix reincarnates the virtues of his deceased grandfather:

The needle of truth that could have made Ficino's 'propagandistic' balloon explode, namely Cosimo himself, was long dead when the letter book was first published. But Ficino's demonstration of a special relationship with him was not so much oriented to the past as to the future. Together with other humanists, he participated in the consolidation of a Medicean dynasty, in which each member of the lineage would be entitled to the privileged position of his predecessor—albeit in constant negotiation with the city's other prominent families.¹⁸¹ From Ficino's perspective this also entailed that each successor had the moral obligation to continue the favours shown

¹⁸¹ Fubini 2015, 71–72.

¹⁸² Alison M. Brown 1961, 203; cf. Tröger 2016, 130.

¹⁸³ MS Civitas Vaticana, BVA, Vat.lat. 1789; see the previous chapter for the place this manuscript occupies within the genesis of the collection.

¹⁸⁴ Alison M. Brown 1961, 194.

¹⁸⁵ Leonardo Bruni had claimed the opposite in 1427; Alison M. Brown 1986, 391.

¹⁸⁶ *EL* 1.26: 'Atque id quod rarissimum et mirabile est, filium et nepotes huius omnis thesauri reliquit heredes, quo fit ut in Iuliano meo senem illum agnoscam.'

I recognised in that old man not human virtue, but the virtue of a *heros*. I now acknowledge within this young man all the qualities of the old man. I see the Phoenix in the Phoenix, the light in the ray. That splendour of Cosimo now shines daily from our Lorenzo.¹⁸⁷

At this point, Cosimo is no longer a real person but a malleable concept through which Ficino wants to shape his relationship with consecutive generations of patrons both Medicean and non-Medicean.¹⁸⁸ Tellingly, Ficino compared Francesco Valori, his most important patron after Medici support waned, to Cosimo even in 1496.¹⁸⁹

PISTOLARY SKOPOS: HAPPINESS AND THE HIGHEST GOOD

Now that we have established the fictionalising and political aspects of the letter, we must turn to the content of *EL* 1.1, which is short enough to reproduce in full:

De felicitatis desiderio

Cosmus Medices Marsilio Ficino Platonico s. d.

Contuli heri me in agrum Charegium, non agri sed animi colendi gratia. Veni ad nos, Marsili, quam primum, fer tecum Platonis nostri librum *De summo bono* quem te isthic arbitror iam e Greca lingua in Latinam, ut promiseras, transtulisse: nihil enim ardentius cupio quam que via commodius ad felicitatem ducat cognoscere.

Vale et veni non absque Orphica lyra.

As usual in the *Epistole*, the letter does not quite correspond to its title, *De felicitatis desiderio*. Indeed, it is not so much *about* the desire for felicity as an expression *of* this desire on Cosimo's part. Instead of making any claims himself, Cosimo asks Ficino for his philosophical advice on how to reach happiness. As course material for this lesson, Cosimo asks Ficino to bring his translation of Plato's *Philebus*. Although the subtitle used for the dialogue is 'de summo bono,' Ficino also considered 'de felicitate' a worthy alternative 'because, as Plato often repeats, it investigates everything for the sake of finding happiness.'¹⁹⁰ Happiness is the attainment of the highest good and therefore, the *Philebus*' guide to the highest good also leads to happiness. The choice is highly significant as the work takes a special place among Plato's dialogues from antiquity onward. It belongs to the later

¹⁸⁷ *EL* 1.26: 'Cognovi in eo sene non humanam virtutem sed heroicam, agnosco nunc in isto adolescente penitus, agnosco totum illum senem: fenicem video in fenice, in radio lumen. Emicat iam ex Laurentio nostro foras Cosmianus splendor ille multis quotidie modis.'

¹⁸⁸ Cf. Vasoli 1999b, 62.

¹⁸⁹ Cf. Jurdjevic 2004, 52.

¹⁹⁰ Ficino 1975, 127: 'cum felicitatis inveniendae gratia, ut ipse [Plato] millies repetit, haec omnia investiget.'

period of the Greek philosopher's writing and was soon considered a culmination of his teachings. Iamblichus made it the capstone of a self-contained decade of Platonic dialogues, and gave it a prominent role in his educational work *Protrepticus*.¹⁹¹ The decade of dialogues was complemented with two additional dialogues, the *Timaeus* and the *Parmenides*, which were understood to crystallise all knowledge contained in the preceding ten dialogues. Considered the high point of Plato's theological thinking, the *Parmenides* provided the culmination of the twelve dialogues in the same way as the *Philebus* brought the decade of dialogues to an end.¹⁹² Ficino was most probably not aware of the place attributed by Iamblichus to the *Parmenides* and *Philebus* dialogues since this information was contained in a manuscript not known to him.¹⁹³ Yet, he probably drew on the pedagogical development in Iamblichus' *Protrepticus*, the second part of his *De secta pythagorica*, to put the *Philebus* at the end of a series of ten dialogues translated for Cosimo in 1463-64.¹⁹⁴ The ten dialogues, he explained later, were a compendium of all necessary knowledge comprising 'all the precepts of life, all the principles of nature, all the sacred mysteries of the divine realm'.¹⁹⁵ The *skopos* of this universal knowledge is logically contained in the *Philebus* dialogue which in the Florentine philosopher's mind deals with the highest good for man and the universe, in concrete terms the vision of god. Thus, it is a fitting text for someone at the end of his life, who had, as Ficino claimed, perfectly understood all of philosophy's teachings.¹⁹⁶

Ficino's answer to Cosimo's desire for happiness in *EL* 1.2 follows the same line of thought as we find back at the start of his *Philebus* commentary. This further encourages us to read them in conjunction. The commentary was composed between 1469 and 1474 and stands chronologically closer to the compilation of the letter book than the translation from 1464.¹⁹⁷ *EL* 1.2 begins by quoting Plato's *Euthydemus* 278e that 'all people want to act well, that is, to live well'.¹⁹⁸ This proposition is the same as we find in section three of the *Philebus* commentary.¹⁹⁹ The two preceding sections had established that there must be a final end in every action, an argument that fits within the systematic exposition of a commentary but not within a letter. In the letter as well as in the commentary, Ficino then goes on to explain the importance of wisdom for the attainment of happiness with arguments taken from *Euthydemus* 280d-e. The relevant passages are almost literally

¹⁹¹ Robichaud 2018, 86.93.169.

¹⁹² Westerink 1990, 26.26-44.

¹⁹³ Robichaud 2018, 89.

¹⁹⁴ Robichaud 2018, 92-93.

¹⁹⁵ Ficino 1576a, 2:1965: 'omnia vitae paecepta, omnia naturae principia, omnia divinarum rerum mysteria sancta.'

¹⁹⁶ Ficino 1576a, 2:1965: 'Haec omnia Cosmus et accurate legit et absolute comprehendit cumque Platonis librum de uno rerum omnium principio et de summo boni iam peregisset, duodecima deinde dei quasi ad id principium bonumque fruendum redditurus ex hac vitae umbra ad superna lucem revocatus accessit.'

¹⁹⁷ Michael J. B. Allen 1975, 56.

¹⁹⁸ *EL* 1.2: 'omnes homines bene agere, hoc est bene vivere, volunt.'

¹⁹⁹ Ficino 1975, 87; cf. 125.

the same in both texts, although I have not found a common source in Plato or elsewhere.²⁰⁰ The connection between the two texts is undeniable; their shared message is that to live well is not only to possess goods but to use them well according to wisdom. Thus, the commentary's opening sections and the letter to Cosimo were adapted to a broad readership interested in translating philosophical ideas into more practical precepts.²⁰¹ In fact, Ficino's choice to work on the *Philebus* from so early on in his scholarly career can probably be traced back to the widespread interest in moral philosophy at the time. This interest balanced on the one hand the ideal of contemplation upheld by Ficino and other philosophers and on the other hand the reality of a mercantile society which funded them. Ficino's readers would have been attracted to the *Philebus* because of its resonance with what they had learnt from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, considered a handbook for the good life more suited to a broad public than Plato's writings.²⁰² Vespasiano da Bisticci tells us that the *Ethics* were read to Cosimo in the year before he died and thus—if we may trust Ficino—while he was waiting for the *Philebus* and *Parmenides* translations to be read on his deathbed.²⁰³ This further highlights the strong connection between the three texts.

One important question remains regarding the place of the *Philebus* at the beginning of the letter book and its narrative function there. As I mentioned before, the *Philebus* was the *culmination* of Platonic teaching in the mind of Neoplatonists, including Ficino himself. So, when Ficino mentions the dialogue and its lessons at the *beginning* of his letter collection, he is not establishing it as a starting point. Instead, he looks ahead to what will come and prefigures the work's *skopos*: happiness. It is worth dwelling a bit longer on the term 'skopos', which I have now used for the second time. It was introduced in its Latin form 'scopus' by Fortunatianus of Aquileia in the fourth century, together with the related terms 'ductus' and 'modus'. The three terms are described in detail by Mary Carruthers, who defines *ductus* as 'the way(s) that a composition, realizing the plan(s) set within its arrangement, guides a person to its various goals, both in its parts and overall.'²⁰⁴ The goal or intention, then, is called the *skopos*, while the *modus* is 'the movement of particular parts of the composition'.²⁰⁵ This may well be the best non-modern set of concepts to describe macrotextuality. They helped me to avoid reading for the plot too rigidly, and to embrace 'les jeux, les fantaisies, les explorations, les paresses' which Roland Barthes considered integral to the idea

²⁰⁰ Compare Ficino 1975, 121: 'ii duntaxat, quibus bona plurima adsunt, beati dicuntur ... sola enim sine usu possessio nihil momenti ad felicitatem habet' with *EL* 1.2: 'item beatos dicimus eos qui bona habent plurima ... neque posessione horum sola beatos nisi utantur dicimus.'

²⁰¹ Cf. Kessler 2017, 109–111.

²⁰² Celenza 2013, 391; Ebbersmeyer 2010, 150–185; Michael J. B. Allen 1977, 165–168; Marcel 1958, 310.

²⁰³ da Bisticci 1976, 2:210–211: 'Volle per passare tempo, inanzi circa uno anno che morissi, farsi legere l'*Etica d'Aristotle*.' *EL* 1.86 to Lorenzo de' Medici: 'Itaque postquam Platonis librum *De uno rerum principio* [viz. Plato's *Parmenides*] ac *De summo bono legimus*, sicut tu nosti, qui aderas, paulo post decessit.' Cf. McClure 1991, 140–141.

²⁰⁴ Carruthers 2010, 200; see also Carruthers 1998 and Carruthers 2000.

²⁰⁵ Carruthers 2010, 198.

of *ductus*—albeit in a very different context.²⁰⁶ Indeed, Ficino’s letters do not reach their goal *linea recta*, since the program behind the letter collection in true humanist fashion yields to the demand for *varietas*. The notion of *skopos* was not unfamiliar to Ficino; like the Neo-Platonists, he believed that each dialogue had its own intention. Since the *skopoi* of individual dialogues built on knowledge acquired in other dialogues—as in the curriculum previously mentioned—we may perhaps also surmise a macrotextual understanding of *skopos*.²⁰⁷

EL 1.1-2 established the didactic mode of the *Epistole*. Ficino’s wish for his readers to learn something is unmistakably tied with his desire to teach them. This is evident in the early letters of his collection, where *Exhortatio ad scientiam* is the title of both *EL* 1.13 and 1.21, an uncommon repetition especially within such close distance. Moreover, the exhortation of *EL* 1.21 is prominently placed at the first turning point in the collection, after which two long addressee-based blocks of correspondence follow. Secondly, *EL* 1.1-2 seem to conceive of this didactic process as a narrative. By means of Ps.-Cosimo’s request for the *path* to happiness, Ficino tentatively presents the learning experience as a gradual movement. We may say with the words of Don Fowler that ‘the most obvious plot of all is the progress of the pupil from ignorance to knowledge,’ which is ‘also the path through the text, the path on which reader and author are setting out together.’²⁰⁸ Ficino appears to be taking us, the reader of his *Epistole*, on an ascending journey through the text at the end of which lies happiness. The communicative situation of the first two letters strengthens this impression. Ps.-Cosimo explicitly refuses to initiate an epistolary exchange but invites Ficino to discuss the matter in person at the Medici villa in Careggi. This is remarkable since letters are precisely used to overcome physical separation through written discourse.²⁰⁹ A published letter collection relies on the separation of two people, so that their exchange remains textual and thereby traceable by the external reader. Yet, through his invitation to Careggi, Ps.-Cosimo accentuates the notion of movement which underlies the didactic plot of the *Epistole*.

Careggi, located on the slopes of Monte Vecchio not far from Florence, is where Ficino was able to work on his Platonic translations in Cosimo’s villa. In a revision of his preface to the philosophical dialogue *De amore*, Ficino fashioned Careggi as a meeting place for like-minded scholars and notables.²¹⁰ Throughout his life, he tried to construct the image of a formal Platonic

²⁰⁶ Barthes 2016, 47 on the paintings of Cy Twombly. Cf. Carruthers 2010, 191–192.197 on the variety of movement that characterises a work’s *ductus*.

²⁰⁷ Cf. Robichaud 2018, 94: ‘The *Philebus*, the final dialogue in Ficino’s series, has its own “wonderful order,” whose aim (*skopos*) sums up the totality of the aims of the Platonic corpus as a whole.’ Additionally, Verbaal 2015, 16 argued that ‘the medieval mind is still more acquainted with the concept of macro-text and its macro-narrative than the modern mind,’ because it was used to read the Bible as a single text despite its collected nature.

²⁰⁸ Fowler 2000, 205.

²⁰⁹ The *topos* of a letter as half of a dialogue goes back to ps.-Demetrius’ famous definition; Demetrius 1995, 478.

²¹⁰ *De amore* 1.1; cf. Gentile 1981, 9; Hankins 1990a, 455–458.

Academy there, established with the support of Cosimo himself. The existence of such an Academy has been the centre of debate, but Careggi always stood for more than just the physical location.²¹¹ It was a central part of the previously described mythography about Cosimo's commitment to spreading Plato's teaching through the person of Ficino. When Ficino relocated the dialogue in *De amore* from Francesco Bandini's house in the city of Florence to the Medicean villa in Careggi, he made the work symbolise his special relationship with Lorenzo.²¹² In his answer to Cosimo's letter in *EL* 1.2 Ficino idealises Careggi even more by calling it with an etymological pun 'gratiarum ager'.²¹³ It turns the place into a refuge from city tribulations, an idealised place of graceful contemplation, where time is suspended, and encounters are raised above the normal.²¹⁴ In other words, Careggi is the place where philosophy happens and consequently where happiness may be found. Ficino responds to Cosimo's invitation to Careggi that he 'will come,' and later writes that he has 'decided to spend some time in Monte Vecchio'.²¹⁵ The repeated postponement of Ficino's arrival in Careggi during the first few letters gives the collection its first suspense and pulls us into its narrative. After *EL* 1.10, Careggi remains absent for more than hundred letters, leading more than one scholar to conclude that Ficino 'was apparently unable to reach Cosimo'.²¹⁶ However, at the end of this chapter, we will see how Careggi returns as a symbol of happiness and of Cosimo's reincarnation in the person of Lorenzo.

What did readers make of this focus on happiness? One of them has underlined and repeated in a marginal note below the first folio of the 1497 edition a sentence from *EL* 1.2: 'omnes homines bene agere hoc est bene vivere volunt'.²¹⁷ The verbal quotation regarding the good life shows that this question appeared more substantial to the eyes of the anonymous annotator than other *notabilia* on the same page. There are, indeed, strong indications that the thematic announcements in the first few letters of Ficino's collection were kept in mind by readers as they made their way through the rest of the collection. Ficino's interest in merging Platonic philosophy with Christian theology leads to a repetition of several topics such as the immortality of the soul and the ephemerality of earthly goods. However, none of those topics assumes an overarching importance for the collection like the notion of a happy life does. Because it recurs in letter titles and underlies the discussion of other issues, happiness appears to be a fundamental concern of the collection and is therefore aptly put at its start. A second reader noticed this feature and commented upon the

²¹¹ Fubini 1984, 9–11; Hankins 1991; Field 2002; Monfasani 2011; Poncet 2013.

²¹² Gentile 1981, 9–11.

²¹³ Cf. *EL* 7.17.

²¹⁴ *EL* 6.28; 7.38; 10.16. Cf. Tröger 2016, 131–132.

²¹⁵ *EL* 1.2; 1.10.

²¹⁶ Robichaud 2018, 81.

²¹⁷ Copy consulted via the online catalogue of James Gray Booksellers on 14 May 2023.

broader significance of individual letters about felicity for the entire collection. He twice wrote ‘nota per totum’ at the beginning of a letter dealing with happiness, once next to the title of *EL* 1.19, *about the wise and happy man* and once next to *EL* 5.33, *Happy is the man who has all he desires; only he has all he desires who desires all he has.*²¹⁸ The letters themselves are too short to be referred to as ‘totum.’ The second reader’s annotations can be compared with those by Sprenz in his copy of Seneca’s epistles; they highlight the relevance of one theme for larger sections of the collection.²¹⁹

THREE MODI: *VITAE VOLUPTUOSA* – *ACTIVA* – *CONTEMPLATIVA*

I will now argue that the *Philebus* reference in *EL* 1.1 implicitly hints at the thematic structure—or the different *modi*—of the epistolary path to happiness. Iamblichus’ subtitle ‘de voluptate’ highlights the specific question whether pleasure or intellect leads to the best life, two positions defended in Plato’s dialogue by respectively Philebus and Socrates. Ficino’s subtitle ‘de summo bono,’ in contrast, points at more fundamental concerns. Nevertheless, the concrete choice between pleasure and contemplation recurs in Ficino’s preface to his *Philebus* commentary which in 1490 he dedicated to Lorenzo de’ Medici. It is worth looking at that text to deduce how our author may have practically conceived of the best way to live and hence of the way to happiness. The preface distinguishes between the contemplative, the active, and the pleasure-seeking life. Each of them has a different end, respectively wisdom about liberal arts and religion, power in civil society, and sensual pleasure combined with the absence of worries. Ficino links each way of life with a different goddess and illustrates with the mythological and historical analogies of Paris, Hercules, and Socrates, that none of them should be neglected.²²⁰

In a series of afterthoughts to his *Philebus* commentary, which originated in public lectures probably delivered at Florence’s Santa Maria degli Angeli church, Ficino said that most people are naturally attracted to Venus. Juno has the second-most followers, while Minerva is the least popular of the three although she is the best. Surprisingly, Ficino argues that the active life is furthest removed from the highest good because the tribulations of political engagement prevent the sought after tranquillity.²²¹ Thus, the contemplative life is for Ficino always the best option and ultimate *skopos*. The pleasure-seeking and active lives change positions according to the context. If the former is philosophically or religiously oriented, it takes precedence. If it is focused on earthly benefits and enjoyment, it constitutes the lowest form of human existence, following previous judgements of it

²¹⁸ Inc München, BSB, 4 Inc. c.a. 1388.

²¹⁹ Also Gori—in Inc Oxford, Weston Library, Douce adds. 123—showed a special interest in the theme of happiness.

²²⁰ Ficino 1975, 480–483.

²²¹ Ficino 1975, 446–455. The relationship between pleasure and reason in the *Philebus* has been studied by Harte 2014 and Evans 2007. It would be interesting to see if and how Ficino’s preference for Venus over Juno is influenced by his interpretation of Plato, but the question lies beyond the scope of this thesis.

as essentially flawed.²²² Only within the context of the *Philebus* commentary, the active life is conveniently marginalised to fit the original dichotomy of Plato's dialogue.²²³ It is important to keep these ideas, which Ficino evidently considered central to the *Philebus* and the issue of a happy life, in mind since they provide a continuous frame of reference in our reading of the *Epistole*.

The indirect allusion to the *Philebus* commentary's paratext in *EL* 1.1 would be insufficient to make us look for an implementation of the hierarchical structure in the *Epistole*, but adjacent letters pick up on it more explicitly. The distinction between active and contemplative lives is present in *EL* 1.4, where Ficino reminisces about his conversations with Michele Mercati on moral, natural and divine philosophy. Moral philosophy, which leans closer toward the active life, 'must be acquired by practice' and divine philosophy 'is to be asked from God through prayer,' he writes. The distinction between action and contemplation is here represented by the contrast between habitual actions and prayer. The rest of the letter is a dialogue between Ficino's soul and God himself, which has overall little to do with different forms of philosophy. In fact, the introduction has more in common with other nearby letters than with the content of the very letter in which it features. The issue of the different lives is only presented obliquely in *EL* 1.4 through a comparison of different philosophical subject matters. The nearby letter *EL* 1.6, *on divine frenzy*, mentions it in more concrete terms. Ficino explains the nature of divine frenzy to Pellegrino Agli, a contemporary humanist who was at the time of writing in good standing with the Medici.²²⁴ In the first paragraph, Ficino describes the incarnation of the soul from heaven where it happily (*feliciter*) enjoyed knowledge of the Platonic ideas, most notably Justice, Wisdom, and Harmony. The only way for the soul to return to its divine nature is by cultivating two virtues 'one of which he calls by the common name justice, and the other wisdom. ... Socrates discusses in *Phaedo* how we attain these through two types of philosophy, namely, active and contemplative.'²²⁵ Hence, *EL* 1.6 presents the same two strands of philosophy as in *EL* 1.4. Now they are named *activa* and *contemplativa* which links them more closely to the aforementioned ways of life.

This early in the collection, we can only base our assumption of a meaningful order in the book at hand on our familiarity with the literary epistolary tradition. Hence, we may be unable to perceive connections between the letters on the active and contemplative life. For this reason, I argue, Ficino has unambiguously signalled the self-referential unity of the *Epistole* in *EL* 1.6-7. Their interplay

²²² Cf. *De amore* 6.7; *EL* 7.42. An earlier depreciation of earthly love can be found in Thomas Aquinas, *Summ. Theol.* 2.Q69.A3: 'Nam beatitudo voluptuosa, quia falsa est et rationi contraria, impedimentum est beatitudinis futurae.'

²²³ Kristeller 1943, 358.

²²⁴ Miccoli 1960.

²²⁵ *EL* 1.6: 'quarum alteram communi vocabulo iustitiam, alteram vero sapientiam nominat. ... Easque duabus similiter philosophie partibus, activa scilicet et contemplativa, consequi nos in *Phedone* Socrates disserit.'

draws attention to the collection's internal links which bestow on the macrotext more meaning than the sum of its parts. Let me specify what I mean. *EL* 1.6 is a very long letter despite Ficino's initial promise to keep it short.²²⁶ In the following letter, however, he defends with characteristic humour Lorenzo Pisano's long interpretation of the relatively short Song of Songs. I will come back to the content of this work and its place in the epistolary macrotext. Here, I want to stress the humorous link Ficino established between otherwise unrelated letters with different topics, different addressees, and no contextual similarities. Nevertheless, the sequential reader will not fail to see what Ficino did and perhaps chuckle at the self-deprecating comment on not following proper epistolary theory in which *brevitas* is always praised.²²⁷

The difference between the active and contemplative lives returns once more in *EL* 1.18, at the finale of the introductory letter series, right before two well-defined sections centring on Lorenzo de' Medici and Giovanni Cavalcanti. From this prominent position, *EL* 1.18 highlights the different ways of life from yet another angle. It focuses on the virtues that shape each way of life, and which were briefly introduced in *EL* 1.6. The title, *De virtutibus civilibus, purgatoriis, purgati animi, exemplaribus* lists the four principle categories. While in a sense they specify the distinction between active and contemplative life, the virtues do not entirely correspond to this dilemma. The notion of civic, purgative, purged and exemplary virtues ultimately goes back to Plato,²²⁸ and was developed in the third century by the Neoplatonist Plotinus in his *Enneads*. Later, Macrobius picked up on it in his *Somnium Scipionis*, Thomas of Aquinas referred to its thesis in *De virtutibus* 5.4.7, and Ficino's teacher Cristoforo Landino adopted its hierarchical structure in his *Disputationes camaldulenses*.²²⁹ Ficino was intimately familiar with all those authors, and he may even have known of Porphyry's view on the matter.²³⁰ The four virtues enable personal change by first controlling earthly passions. The purgative virtues purify the mind of earthly concerns altogether to make place for contemplation. The purged mind consequently focuses on contemplation only. Exemplary virtues only reside as ideal models in the divine mind.²³¹ Thus, the virtues can be considered steps between the different ways of life. In the voluptuous life, one needs civic virtues to ascend to the good life of action in this world. Once this has been achieved, the purgatory virtues move away from the active life towards the contemplative life in ascending degrees of intensity.²³² The virtues of the purged mind are the driving force behind as well as the resulting mentality of contemplation itself. Plotinus'

²²⁶ *EL* 1.6: '[E]a de re Platonis nostri sententiam paucis et ea brevitate quam epistola exigit referam.'

²²⁷ Cf. *EL* 1.15.

²²⁸ O'Meara 2005, 40–41.

²²⁹ Thomson 2020, 70–71.

²³⁰ Catana 2014, 688.

²³¹ Bejczy 2011.

²³² Finamore 2021, 69.

conception of civic or political virtue covers a broader range of activities than what we understand under the denominator ‘political’ today. However, Porphyry and Macrobius had already narrowed its definition down to the care of society.²³³ Macrobius’ description is worth quoting here, as it would have been very familiar to Ficino, who owned a manuscript of it from early on in his career.²³⁴

The political virtues belong to man, because he is a social animal. With them, good men decide about the welfare of the state and defend cities; they honor their parents, love their children, cherish their relatives; they take care of the safety of citizens; they protect their allies with cautious foresight, and win them over with just generosity.²³⁵

By the mid-fifteenth century, civic virtues clearly stood on one side as concerned with the life on earth, while all the other virtues stood on the other side moving away from it. Despite this inferiority to the other three, civic virtue could not be discarded. For ‘it is necessary to achieve the lower types of virtue, in particular ‘political’ virtue, in order to be in a position to reach the higher, purificatory virtues.’²³⁶ In *EL* 1.4, 1.6, and 1.18, Ficino has put the question of how to live best in three different ways: once methodologically by distinguishing between moral and divine philosophy, once by verbally linking those philosophical strands to the active and contemplative life while introducing the role of virtue, and finally by adding to this complex web the four virtues that lead to and characterise each way of life. Perhaps the most important addition of the third perspective is the dependence of higher stages of virtue on the perfection of lower virtues.

EXEMPLARY EPISTOLOGY

The superiority of practised virtue and imitation over verbal instruction is a recurring theme in the opening series of letters. I have pointed out that the glorification of Cosimo de’ Medici at the beginning is meant as an instructive method for his heirs, in particular his grandchildren Lorenzo and Giuliano. In *EL* 1.3, entitled *Imitatio utilior est quam lectio*, this advice is extrapolated to a general truth. Ficino starts off by presenting Cosimo once more as the perfect model, this time for Amerigo Benci. Amerigo’s father had been a close collaborator of Cosimo, and the Benci family was at some point the second richest family in Florence after the Medici. Like Cosimo, Amerigo had died by

²³³ O’Meara 2005, 44–45.

²³⁴ Garin ... Chastel 1986, 3–4; Rees 2013a, 157–159.

²³⁵ Macrobius. *In Somn. 8.6*: ‘Sunt politicae hominis, quia sociale animal est. his boni viri rei publicae consulunt, urbes tinentur: his parentes uenerantur, liberos amant, proximos diligunt: his ciuium salutem gubernant: his socios circumspecta prouidentia protegunt, iusta liberalitate deuincent.’

²³⁶ O’Meara 2005, 43.

the time the first book of letters was published and there would have been no need for public flattery anymore.²³⁷ Ficino appears to have used this short letter to make a broader point on how to educate people. In the second half, he writes:

Sane quemadmodum harmonia dum presens aures nostras illabitur
vehementius afficit quam dum preterita cogitatur ac prelum cum spectatur
acrius movet quam cum narratur, sic egregia viventium herorum opera ardentius
ad virtutem inflammant exactiusque formant quam veterum philosophorum de
moribus disputantium verba.

In the following letter, *EL* 1.4, Ficino repeats the same message. Building on the previously mentioned distinction between moral and divine philosophy, he states that ‘divina [philosophia] ob vite puritatem revelari potius quam doctrina verbisque doceri.’ Ficino expresses his preference for the realisation over the explication of virtue a third time in *EL* 1.17, *Laus opificis non a verbis sed ab opere*. This letter congratulates two authors by comparing them to painters whose work testifies of its excellency without the need for external praise. ‘When a painter speaks he speaks badly, but when his painting speaks it speaks well. Vain is that artist who seeks honour from anyone rather than from the work itself.’²³⁸ While this does not deal with the value of imitation as such, it does stress the idea that it is better to put something into practice than to argue for it in abstract terms.

From the above, we can conclude that Ficino presents imitation and exemplary virtue as two important keys to happiness. But why make this a topic at the beginning of an epistolary collection? How can letters teach by example? Of course, there is a famous precedent for the didactic mode in Seneca’s letters. Already in the middle of the sixteenth century, Girolamo Cardano had identified the principal concern of the *Epistulae Morales* being ‘in qua sit constituenda foelicitas,’ precisely the opening theme of Ficino’s collection.²³⁹ Unsurprisingly, Rocco Pilorci compared Ficino’s epistles to those of Seneca around the same time as Cardano.²⁴⁰ Ficino’s letters about imitation being better than intellectual absorption are even directly inspired by Seneca’s sixth letter to Lucilius.²⁴¹ However, the *Epistole* are not like Seneca’s epistles at all; they contain more ‘familiar’ pieces interspersed with more theoretical ones. The didactic force of Ficino’s letters, I believe, does not stem from those theoretical ruminations only but from the combination of occasional and

²³⁷ Ragni 1966.

²³⁸ *EL* 1.17: ‘Cum loquitur pictor, loquitur male; cum pictura loquitur, bene loquitur. Vanus est opifex qui ab alio magis quam ab ipso opere expectat honorem.’

²³⁹ Cardano 2004, 314.

²⁴⁰ Pilorci 1578, 56: ‘Quare, inquit Demetrius, si quis epistola sua acutas disputationes persequatur, quales fuerunt eorum, qui Sophistae dicebantur, sive naturae ipsius rationem explicet, hic nequaquam epistolam scribere dicendus est. ... In eadem navi est Seneca maior, cuius epistolae quid sunt aliud, nisi volumina de Philosophia? et Marsilius Ficinus, qui in epistolis suis de Platonicis quaestionibus perpetuo fere disputat.’

²⁴¹ Cf. Daniele Conti 2014, 66.

philosophical letters. From this mix, a personality emerges, and while it mostly remains aloof, it gradually takes on flesh in the *Epistole*. Indeed, ‘collections of letters may constitute true autobiographical monuments designed for contemporary readers and posterity.’²⁴² To consider Ficino’s collection as a form of literary autobiography agrees with other assessments of humanist epistolography. Diana Robin, for one, observed that ‘the letters in [Francesco Filelfo’s] *Epistolae* are ordered so as to form an autobiographical novel containing a series of plots and subplots, structured for suspense.’²⁴³ It is the autobiographical personality, I believe, which is the imitable example that Ficino wants his reader to consider and learn from.

EXEMPLARY AUTOBIOGRAPHY

The connection between (auto)biography and moral instruction was keenly felt in the Quattrocento and early Cinquecento.²⁴⁴ Indeed, Traversari considered the portrait of Jerome evoked by his letters an excellent tool for moral improvement. Petrarch, in the *Rerum memorandarum libri*, wrote that ‘we walk more safely along a path which has been marked out by the footsteps of others, so in life we adhere more easily to the examples of others than if we were to undertake a new way without any guide.’²⁴⁵ History, including biography, maps the path taken by others so that we can successfully follow it. This goes on to show the potential of the previously mentioned metaphor of learning as a path through the text which Ficino has artfully employed. Poliziano stated in his introduction to Suetonius that ‘history lets us have part in felicity,’ thereby establishing the instructive quality of historical accounts.²⁴⁶ I like to think that it is not a coincidence that precisely this text was printed together with Poliziano’s letters in a Strasbourg edition from 1513.²⁴⁷ It is not impossible that the printer or editor saw the opportunity of presenting Poliziano’s life in letters as a model for its readers. Further on in the same text, the Florentine humanist astutely remarks that biographies are good didactic material because people are naturally attracted to them, ‘because people are curious by nature’ (*quod sunt natura homines curiosi*). The words can be very well applied to an epistolary work, since they are taken from a letter by Pliny the Younger in which he considers whether he should apply himself to historiography or not.²⁴⁸ The kind of curiosity mentioned by Pliny and Poliziano is documented by Robert Gaguin, a French humanist and minister general of the Trinitarian order from 1472 until his death in 1501. In a letter to Ficino, Gaguin describes the popularity of the Florentine philosopher in Paris. His letters are particularly popular with students, we learn, not

²⁴² Enenkel 2019, 566.

²⁴³ Robin 1991, 6.

²⁴⁴ Frazier 2013; Ebbersmeyer 2017, 196–198.

²⁴⁵ Petrarca 2014, III.42.

²⁴⁶ Poliziano 1533, 3:126: ‘historia felicitatem participat nobis.’ Cf. Ferra 2004, 155–156.

²⁴⁷ Poliziano 1513, with the preface to Suetonius on fol. [195^r–202^v].

²⁴⁸ *PliE* 5.8.1: ‘Historia quoquo modo scripta delectat. Sunt enim homines natura curiosi.’

because of their philosophical content but because they give an impression of the person behind the scholarship. ‘They burn to see you face to face and look at the man from whom such famous monuments of learning have emerged.’²⁴⁹

Another biographical genre which flourished in the Renaissance and was widely valued for its moral exemplarity are *vitae* of saints. Humanists adapted this medieval genre to their own intellectual and literary tastes. At the same time, they thought hard on how to make them more useful for readers. At the centre of many *vitae* stood *imitatio*. Indeed, readers were not to read these works out of mere curiosity but rather to become a better person, that is a better Christian. A hagiographer from Ficino’s immediate circle, Antonio degli Agli, opened his collection of saints’ lives by expressing this hope in a beautifully decorated dedication letter to the Pope:²⁵⁰

The lives and deeds of saints should be for readers like laws and rules, a definite pattern and model of virtue to which we model can shape ourselves. For in history there is a certain force and power by which the mind of the reader, unless it is entirely corrupted, becomes deeply affected and inspired to imitate what it has read.²⁵¹

To achieve identification and enhance the imitability of their subjects, humanists choose to describe figures whose spirituality was of this world. For this reason, they favoured bishops, whose activities were not too far removed from civic life, over reclusive personalities that had achieved sainthood by turning their back on the world.²⁵² Humanists also came to realise that perfection, traditionally the hallmark of saints, negatively impacted their imitability, simply because the average person could never achieve it. Around the turn of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, it was understood that ‘evidence of human imperfection was needed for the exemplary function of a narrative to fulfil its full effect.’²⁵³

BOLSTERING EXEMPLARITY

Of course, Ficino was not a saint and to successfully turn his *Epistole* into a model of living well, he had to invest himself with some objective authority without appearing self-congratulatory. This, I propose, is the role of the remaining letters in the introductory series. Most prominently, *EL 1.20*

²⁴⁹ Gaguin 1904, 2:20: ‘Ardent te facie nosse et intueri hominem a quo tam preclara doctrine monumenta prodierunt.’

²⁵⁰ He is the addressee of *EL 1.112*.

²⁵¹ MS Civitas Vaticana, BAV, Vat.lat. 3742, fol. 1^r, edited in Frazier 1997, 551–559: ‘sanctorum vitae gestaque lex quaedam ac disciplina legentibus sint, virtutis certum rursum exemplar ac forma ad quae ipsimet nos effingere atque componere valeamus. In historia enim quaedam vis est atque potentia qua mirum in modum animus legentis, nisi depravatus penitus sit, affiliatur et ad imitandum quae legerit animetur.’ Cf. Frazier 2005, 294.

²⁵² Frazier 2005, 31.

²⁵³ Frazier 2005, 299.

lists all of Ficino's translations and original writings to date. Despite its title, *Bona scribere prestat quam multa*, the letter commands respect by the sheer quantity of Ficino's output—one may sense the same irony as in *EL* 1.6-7. Notably, the list was updated in subsequent versions of the collection to further increase its rhetorical force. It firmly establishes Ficino as a link in the long chain of Platonic philosophers. Something else is worth noting, although it does not immediately touch on Ficino's authority. In each version of *EL* 1.20, the last entry of the list is conspicuously self-referential. It is the 'philosophicum *Epistolarum* volumen,' a surprising addition which undoes the impression of authenticity in the collection. For if the collection was already finished at the time of writing *EL* 1.20, as the letter implies, then *EL* 1.20 must have been written specifically with its inclusion into the collection in mind and at the very final stages of compiling the work. Technically speaking, the collection would not yet have been finished even then, but it certainly was not finished in the 'pool' of autobiographical time to which *EL* 1.20 belongs.²⁵⁴ The collection seems to get ahead of itself, and for a good reason. A reference to the *Epistole* in one of its first letters signals the abandonment of chronological order. Moreover, it suggests a considerable level of artificiality by revealing the ongoing process of editing and conscious arrangement. When we return to the epistolary construction of Ficino's authority, *EL* 1.11 and 1.12 stand out. Respectively from and to the famous cardinal Bessarion, they do not directly comment on Ficino's work and character, yet they praise Plato and especially his followers with great verve. This naturally reflects on Ficino, who identifies himself as a Platonic philosopher. Already in *EL* 1.15, he writes to this end: 'As everyone knows, I have followed the divine Plato from my youth.'²⁵⁵

Recognition as a proficient scholar was not enough. After all, the ground for moral imitation is not knowledge but exceptional character. I do not believe for a moment that Ficino intended to present himself as a saint or anything like it. Nevertheless, I want to argue that *EL* 1.8 creates the ideal conditions for moral exemplarity by presenting Ficino as a visionary soul, in the tradition of several saints and notable authors like Dante. In the letter, we get a rare insight into the family that nurtured Ficino. Even more remarkable is that it focuses on his mother and grandmother, since women are otherwise absent from the *Epistole* even though they famously partake or get mentioned in the correspondences of other humanists such as Filelfo and Poliziano.²⁵⁶ The letter is remarkably anecdotal and recounts how Ficino's deceased grandmother communicated her own death to her daughter and son-in-law through a dream. She appeared a second time to console her daughter whose other son, and thus Ficino's new-born brother, had died at the hands of his murderous wet

²⁵⁴ I borrow the notion of a 'pool of time' from Gibson and Morello 2012, 36.

²⁵⁵ *EL* 1.15: 'Ego enim a teneris annis divinum Platonem—quod nullus ignorat—sectatus sum.'

²⁵⁶ E.g., *FiE* 19.1; 22.18; 31.65; *PolE* 3.17.

nurse before the daughter had learned about this event. The story of how Ficino's mother foresaw her husband's horse-riding accident is only mentioned in passing, as only one among 'alia multa.' There was a strong belief in meaningful visions and dreams from Antiquity onward.²⁵⁷ Not the story itself but the fact that Ficino illustrates it with his own family is noteworthy. While the visions are not immediately related to Ficino, I believe that he wants to use his mother's prophetic powers to place himself in a league of personalities like St Augustine and Dante. Both of their mothers had famously dreamt about the future of their sons, and the same has been claimed for other saints or *poetae rates*.²⁵⁸ The casualness with which Ficino mentions 'many more' visions which he does not relate is suspicious. It seems as if he wants to suggest, without overstepping the boundaries of modesty, that some of them concerned him too.

To a modern reader, the letter about Ficino's mother seems oddly anecdotal and its lack of philosophical reasoning have kept it away from the centre of scholarly attention. But the idea of visions blurring the boundary between life and death became a prominent part of Ficino's life in later times.²⁵⁹ Around 1600, Cesare Baronio writes in his *Annales Ecclesiastici* that Ficino appeared to his friend Michele Mercati right after his death.

Ad vocem amici Michael admirans, assurgens, fenestramque aperiens, quam audierat, vidit post terga, ad cursum iterum acto equo candido, candidatum prosecutus est eum voce, Marsilium, Marsilium invocans; prosecutus et oculis, sed ab eis evanuit.²⁶⁰

The story gets picked up by Nathaniel Crouch in the seventeenth and by Angelo Maria Bandini in the eighteenth century.²⁶¹ A similar interest in the supranatural vision of Ficino's parents is found in a passage from André Tiraqueau's (1488-1558) *De nobilitate et iure primigeniorum* where he refers to the passage in which Ficino recounts how 'the virgin Mary appeared in a dream to his father, a doctor, and admonished him to provide the gifts of his knowledge freely and generously to those in need.'²⁶² *EL* 1.8 and the influence it appears to have had on the posthumous storytelling about Ficino draws our attention to how Ficino wants us to perceive him as a person before we

²⁵⁷ Kruger 1992; Harris 2009; Gowland 2017. See also Synesius, *On Dreams* (translated by Ficino); Ficino, *Platonic Theology* 13.2; *EL* 6.17; 11.18.

²⁵⁸ See Monnica's dream in August. *Conf.* 3.11.19 and the final chapter of Giovanni Boccaccio's *Life of Dante* in Boccaccio 1991, 109–121. Ficino's friend Cristoforo Landino opened his biography of Dante with this dream; Gilson 2005, 182. Cf. Vergil's mother, who dreamt of a laurel branch (*Vita Donati* 3) and the influence of Monnica's dream on the biography of Guibert of Nogent's; Grimes 2012, 5–9.

²⁵⁹ Cf. McDonald 2022, 669–679.

²⁶⁰ Baronio 1609, vol. 5, col. 371.

²⁶¹ Crouch 1682, 223.

²⁶² Tiraqueau 1566, 174: 'virginem Mariam in somnis patri suo medico apparuisse, monuisseque eum, ut artis munera egentibus gratis abundeque largiretur.' The earliest edition of this work in the USTC is from 1549.

accompany him on his epistolary journey. His attempt at building authority by claiming to be the son of visionary parents is his most overt moment of self-fashioning. However, this self-fashioning is at the same time an instrument for ‘fashioning others.’ It is there to make him a valid example whose life story can attract the kind of imitation leading to happiness. Thus, he tries to achieve what Traversari had achieved with his letter collection according to Michele: to teach *sanctimoniam*.²⁶³

²⁶³ See p. 40.

CHAPTER 2

LOVE: *EL* 1.22-51

The section from *EL* 1.22-51 consists of two sections, the first of which is dominated by the figure of Lorenzo de' Medici (*EL* 1.22-28), the second by Giovanni Cavalcanti (*EL* 1.29-51). Grouping letters into correspondent-based dossiers is a hallmark of several letter collections from Cicero's *Ad Atticum* onward and including Poliziano's *Epistole*. However, the two blocks of letters to respectively Lorenzo and Cavalcanti are unique in Ficino's collection which has no other sections dedicated to individuals. Lorenzo and Cavalcanti are the two most prominent correspondents in Book 1 as well as in the entire collection (see Tables 1 and 2). How does their early and elaborate portrayal colour their appearance later in the collection? How do they impact Ficino's self-characterisation and influence our conception of later figures? Apart from the remarkable focus on two individuals, *EL* 1.22-51 also display a discursive coherence unique for the collection. The letters are characterised by love tropes and expressions of desire, which exceed the usual professions of love and friendship in humanist epistolography. Thus, they emphatically introduce a recurring theme in the collection. Was this in some way announced in the introductory series of letters? I have previously mentioned Lorenzo Pisano's commentary on the Song of Songs, for which Ficino excused the (excessive) length in *EL* 1.7. This work is now lost, but it likely tried to allegorise or otherwise explain the eroticism of the well-known Biblical poem with a philosophical account of love. Indeed, Pisano wrote a dialogue *de amore* where he relies on Plato and other philosophers to establish love as the basis of everything—from animal life to higher principles.²⁶⁴ Perhaps, Pisano followed Origen and St Bonaventure, who linked the Song of Songs to the previously mentioned *virtutes purgati animi* and hence to the highest stage of human life.²⁶⁵ He could have found this interpretation in accordance with the one by Bernard of Clairvaux. The Cistercian abbot had analysed the Song of Songs as a description of divine contemplation which is entered through the highest form of human virtue.²⁶⁶ In any case, Pisano's dialogue conceives of love as a 'rein innerseelisches Erlebnis' and the possibility that Plato would have propagated pederasty is explicitly rejected.²⁶⁷ It is plausible that Ficino's reference to Pisano's work in *EL* 1.7 is meant to

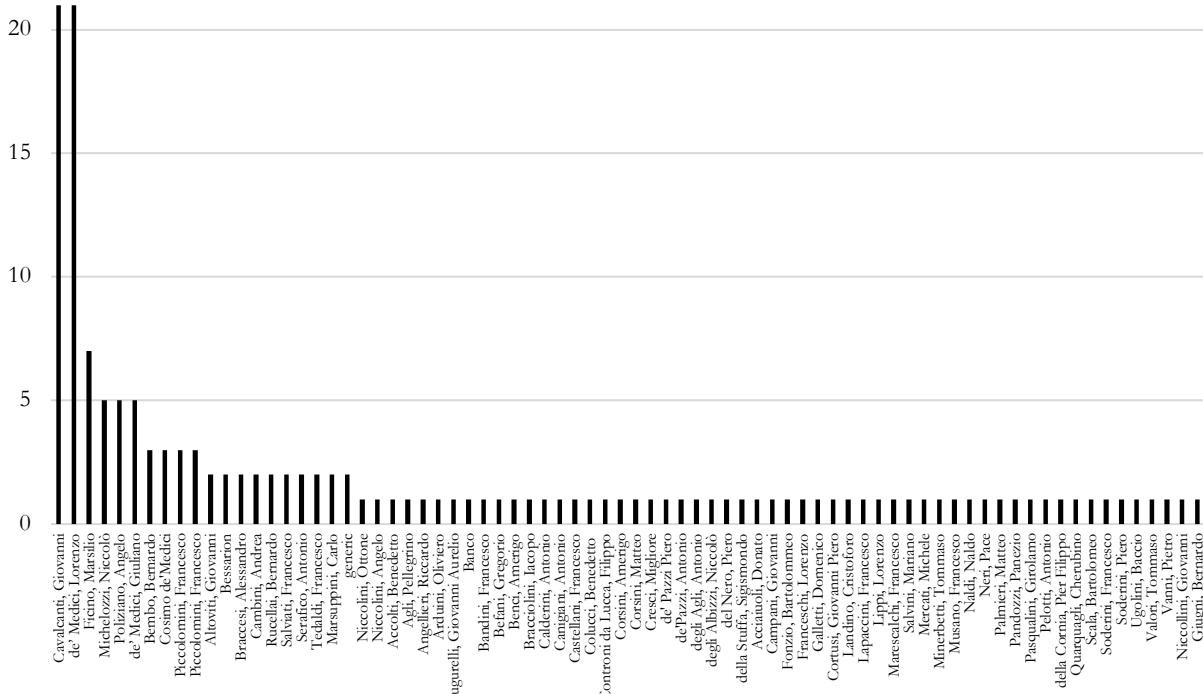
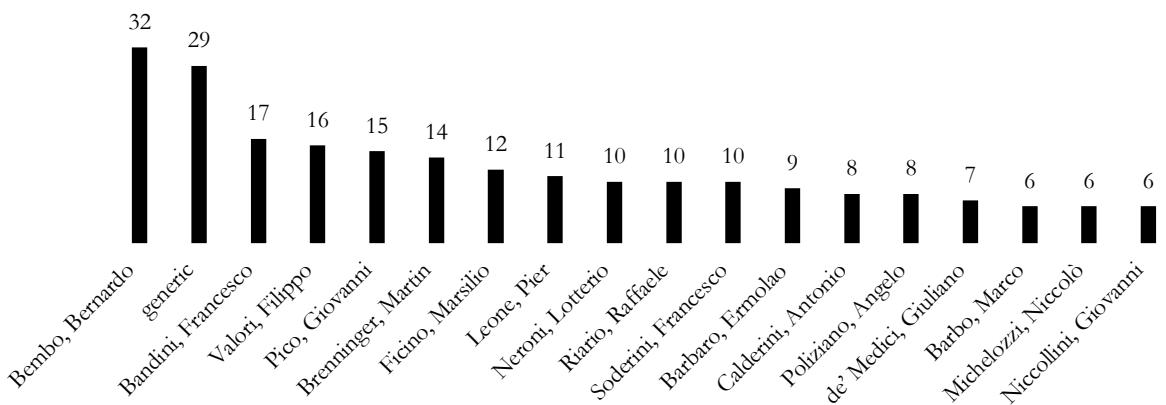
²⁶⁴ MS München, BSB, Clm 109. Cf. Edelheit 2014; Ebbersmeyer 2002, 68–71; Field 1988, 163–174.

²⁶⁵ In *Hexaëmeron* 6.23: 'Et de his agit Salomon, ut dicit Origenes, de politicis in Proverbiis, de purgatoriis in Ecclesiaste, de animi iam purgati in Canticō canticorum.'

²⁶⁶ On Cistercian interpretations of the Canticum and their diffusion, see Cavadini 2021.

²⁶⁷ Ebbersmeyer 2002, 70.

TABLE 1 CORRESPONDENTS IN BOOK 1

TABLE 2 CORRESPONDENTS WITH MORE THAN FIVE LETTERS IN *EPISTOLE*

announce and simultaneously contextualise his forceful use of love in the second section of Book 1. That this could have been a stumbling block for Ficino's readers is evident from the letters' manuscript tradition—which we will return to—as well as from Ficino's defence against critics of his epistolary style in *EL* 1.15. There, he writes to Angelo Poliziano that 'if occasionally there is anything in my letters in some way relating to love, it is certainly Platonic and honourable, not

Aristippian and wanton.²⁶⁸ Apparently, the love in Ficino's letters risked causing offense and therefore needed an explanation of its nature and aims. The following sections will investigate what 'siquid amatorium' stands for in the context of the letter collection and how it relates to Ficino's interpretation of Plato's writings.

LETTERS OF/ON LOVE

EL 1.22-28: LETTERS TO LORENZO

The resemblance of *EL 1.22* with *EL 1.1* makes it a perfect 'second beginning' for the collection. While the *EL 1.1* contained an *invitatio ad Chareggium* from Cosimo, the first letter after the introductory section is entitled *invitatio ad scribendum*. Moreover, it is written by Cosimo's grandson Lorenzo. Still, there are important differences between the two epistles. Instead of asking Ficino for concrete advice, like his grandfather had done, Lorenzo laments Ficino's failure to answer an earlier letter. Kristeller used the word 'pathetic' for this and following expressions of disappointment, uncharacteristically but with good reason.²⁶⁹ Lorenzo arouses pity not so much by the injustice he claims to suffer as by his incapacity to control his emotions. Not only is it a mere four days since he wrote his first letter to Ficino, but he also admits expecting an answer within hours, not days.²⁷⁰ His attachment to Ficino further manifests itself in a somewhat melodramatic style. The philosopher's late response is presented as a crime against love and a neglect of his duties. Lorenzo puts him on a symbolic trial for this with love itself as the righteous judge. On love's authority, Ficino is required to answer within three days.²⁷¹ If he lacks inspiration, Lorenzo continues, he should simply entrust to paper 'whatever comes to your mind' for 'you think nothing that is not right; nothing written by you can be unuseful or unpleasant for us.'²⁷² As was the case for Cosimo, it is the instructive value of Ficino's letters and company which Lorenzo valued.

The next letter is from Ficino to Lorenzo. Although at first sight it fulfils the latter's wish, it turns out a silent criticism at the second. At least, that is what the letters' juxtaposition suggests, although there is no concrete link between *EL 1.22* and 1.23. Ficino thanks Lorenzo for granting him the benefice of St Christopher Church one week earlier on 6 January 1474. The parish did, in fact, not fall under Lorenzo's patronage, but he exerted considerable pressure on the families in charge of

²⁶⁸ *EL 1.15*: 'siquid interdum quodammodo amatorium inest, Platonicum illud quidem et honestum, non Aristippicum et lascivum.'

²⁶⁹ Kristeller 1943, 284.

²⁷⁰ *EL 1.22*: 'Cum vero que ego horis metienda ducebam, pluribus diebus metiri me oportere perspexerim.'

²⁷¹ *EL 1.22*: 'Is tibi trium tantum dierum spatium ad scribendum tribuit, quibus preteritis, te, nisi scripseris, rerum futurum pollicetur.'

²⁷² *EL 1.22*: 'quecunque in mentem veniunt ... nihil cogitas non rectum; nihil itaque scribi a te potest non nobis utile, non iocundum.'

it to elect Ficino to the position.²⁷³ In his letter, Ficino shows that he is as aware of the political strings pulled as he is ill at ease with thanking his patron for what is ultimately a religious office that was not Lorenzo's to give away. 'But why have I not thanked you,' he asks. 'Because I knew that it was bestowed upon you and not me; for whatever was done in this matter was done because of you and for your sake.'²⁷⁴ Ecclesiastical positions were regularly sought by or given to humanists as a way of providing them with a secure income and not all of them would take the responsibilities attached equally seriously.²⁷⁵ But Ficino, who styled himself as a doctor of souls and a religious philosopher, must have appreciated the spiritual side of the job.²⁷⁶ Thus, *EL* 1.23 seems to condemn the political opportunism and muscle-flexing of religious appointments.²⁷⁷ In the second half of the letter, Ficino hides behind the towering figure of St Christopher and ventriloquises his gratitude through the saint's persona while assuring Lorenzo that he himself prays for him to St Christopher. By not repeating any of the love tropes that dominate Lorenzo's letter, Ficino's words feel distant. More importantly, the letter's awkward focus on showing gratitude to Lorenzo portrays the young Medici—Lorenzo is twenty-five at this point—as self-important. It implies that Lorenzo is not so much hoping for a philosophical friendship with Ficino as for the customary sense of obligation for received benefits.

My interpretation of *EL* 1.23 as an unpleasant reprimand to Lorenzo is confirmed by the latter's response in *EL* 1.24. He writes how 'you [viz. Ficino] have read my letter and noted my complaint about your slowness in writing. Warned by this, you have no longer put off sending a reply to me.'²⁷⁸ By mentioning that Ficino is answering Lorenzo's explicit request for a letter, *EL* 1.24 corroborates the implicit connection between the previous two letters and simultaneously highlights how Ficino has failed to properly answer Lorenzo's affection. Moreover, Lorenzo regrets Ficino's expression of gratitude because it is unbecoming of their friendship as he imagines it to be. 'Please, do not use that tone with me again.'²⁷⁹ He repeatedly contrasts Ficino's detached tone with his own expression of love for the philosopher. Despite Lorenzo's objections, the established

²⁷³ Fubini 1984, 35–36.

²⁷⁴ *EL* 1.23: 'Sed cur nondum tibi gratias egi ... Quia neveram non mihi sed tibi illud fuisse collatum: quicquid enim hac in re factum est, per te est et tui gratia factum.'

²⁷⁵ Cf. Oppel 1989, 125. Poliziano and Fonzio also took holy orders, in 1477 and in 1494. Although Poliziano wrote some sermons (cf. Tarugi 1970), his principal occupation remained philology. Fonzio, on the other hand, took his profession seriously but only after it was clear that a university career was off the charts for him.

²⁷⁶ Cf. Serracino-Inglott 2002.

²⁷⁷ In 1468, at a time of grave conflict between Florence and the papacy, Ficino had translated Dante's *De monarchia* into Tuscan and thereby made an early contribution to the debate about the balance of secular and ecclesiastical power; see Prudence Shaw 1978. In the treatise, Dante argues that religious and civil authority should be kept separate, with the former belonging to the Pope and the latter to the emperor; cf. Vasoli 2007, 423–424.

²⁷⁸ *EL* 1.24: 'te et legisse nostras litteras et accusationem tarditatis in scribendo tue isthinc perspexisse, qua monitus diutius ad nos dare litteras non distuleris.'

²⁷⁹ *EL* 1.24: 'Nolim amplius hoc scribendi genere mecum utare.'

pattern continues in the following letters. Ficino's reply in *EL* 1.25 does little more than inspire Lorenzo with modesty. The young Medici may be wealthy and intelligent, powerful and prudent, eloquent and disciplined, but none of that, Ficino writes, is down to himself. The letter's central message for Lorenzo is modesty in face of God's omnipotence. Lorenzo's most important task, his mentor writes to him, is to ask from God what he should do and obey that command.

So far, my reading has revealed a tacit criticism of Lorenzo. But Ficino appears more forgiving in his last two letters in the series. *EL* 1.26 is addressed to Niccolò Michelozzi, who was Lorenzo's secretary, and so indirectly speaks to Lorenzo himself. It abundantly praises Ficino's and Michelozzi's mutual patron with special attention for his achievements in the liberal arts. I have discussed this letter in the first section of this chapter, where I described how it compares Lorenzo to his grandfather Cosimo and thereby holds out an example for him to imitate. *EL* 1.28 is again addressed to Lorenzo and continues the congratulatory tone. For the first time, Ficino talks of a mutual love between him and his pupil. Despite this rapprochement, Lorenzo's 'philosophical quarantine' never seems to be lifted.²⁸⁰ The praise Ficino bestows on him, directly and through the mediation of Michelozzi, appears more an exhortation for Lorenzo to do better and live up to his potential than a celebration of his virtues. This is precisely how Ficino will later characterise his letters to Lorenzo.²⁸¹ Especially in *EL* 1.28, Ficino indicates how Lorenzo should improve himself. He counters Lorenzo's reproach of neglecting him by claiming that it is not St Christopher, the personification of his priestly duties, who stands in the way, but the 'lightning and thunder' of Lorenzo himself. Given that St Christopher is the patron of travellers and a protector against storms, the contrast between him and Lorenzo is accentuated. Evidently, the latter turns out less important in this comparison, and his excessive self-confidence is once more exposed. At the end of the letter, Ficino insists that Lorenzo should focus on developing his virtues rather than triumphing in his youthful successes. Only this will save him from envy later in life and defend him against the dangers of flattery. He drives his point home with a poignant weather metaphor: 'The morning sun causes fog, but at noon, it dissolves the fog.' The letter ends with a repetition of the lesson from *EL* 1.25: 'To God alone be all glory sung from age to age by everyone.'²⁸²

²⁸⁰ Fubini 1987, 289.

²⁸¹ *EL* 1.103: 'Laurenti, quas ad te scripsi hactenus, semper te ita laudavi ut admonerem simul atque exhortarer.' Cf. Rees 2011, 50–53; Fubini 1987, 289.

²⁸² *EL* 1.28: 'Sol matutinus congregat nebulas, meridianus sol nebulas disgregat; 'Deo itaque soli gloria omnis omnibus ab evo canatur in evum.'

ARGUMENTATIVE BIOGRAPHY

Scholars have attempted to interpret Ficino's intimate feelings from the *Epistole*, and the previously described exchange with Lorenzo has been a rewarding source for this.²⁸³ The articles in question were steeped in a biographical paradigm, while more recent scholarship has acknowledged the public context in which the letters must be interpreted.²⁸⁴ Indeed, a self-published correspondence does not quite allow for the kind of analysis that tries to uncover hidden passions. Given the relatively wide circulation of the letters during the author's lifetime in addition to the humanist practice of self-fashioning, the *Epistole* cannot throw new light on Ficino's feelings like 'an archive of unpublished letters' does on 'E. M. Forster's last love'.²⁸⁵ Still, Ficino's correspondence with Lorenzo can be analysed biographically, as a symptom of their apparent conflict in the early 1470s. From an extant letter to Michelozzi, dated October 1473 and not attested in the collection, it appears that the gift of St Christopher's parish was too little too late in the philosopher's view. Ficino, it seems, had long hoped for an honorary post which came with more financial benefits but fewer actual responsibilities than associated with an active parish in the Florentine countryside.²⁸⁶

It is plausible that Ficino's coolness in the published letters to Lorenzo was caused by his frustration about the inadequate patronage he was receiving. In this way, the unpublished document helps us to better understand the background of the published collection. However, for a better understanding of the collection itself we must ask, what precisely is the relationship between the published and unpublished letters? Even the most critical readers sometimes forget that Ficino's *Epistole* are a deliberate selection. We should therefore not overestimate the value of the letter to Michelozzi for our interpretation of the *Epistole* as a self-contained work. In fact, the macrotext cannot be understood by means of completing elements with material from outside of the collection but only by combining elements within the collection. Few readers would have been privy to the details of Ficino's falling-out with Lorenzo and very few readers were still aware of them when the collection was printed near the end of the fifteenth century, a period when more dramatic events were on the Florentine minds. In fact, Ficino's letter to Michelozzi remained hidden in the Archivio Borromeo until it was brought to the attention of Paul Oskar Kristeller in 1985.²⁸⁷

²⁸³ An unmistakable example is Wadsworth 1955, who still makes valid points about the abandonment of chronological order in the Lorenzo letters.

²⁸⁴ Especially Tröger 2016, 139–140.

²⁸⁵ Conradi 2023, 3.

²⁸⁶ Kristeller 1986, 40–41; discussed in Fubini 1987, 287–288.

²⁸⁷ Kristeller 1986, 35.

What does the omission of the archival document teach us about how Ficino conceived of his collection? In a tightly knit work like the *Epistole*, each thread has the power to change the hue of the overall text. Exclusion is therefore as creative a deed as inclusion. Again, the selection process reflects historical reality and omission can be a way to settle real-life scores.²⁸⁸ However, the technique of omission works best when it is glaringly obvious. Otherwise, the absence goes simply unnoticed. We will later see that Ficino knew perfectly well how to employ this strategy. Some of the most shattering events of his days, most notably the assassination of Giuliano de' Medici in 1478, are absent from the letters. But the issue raised in the letter to Michelozzi hardly belongs to this category and its exclusion would only stand out for a small group with inside knowledge. In contrast, the manuscript and ultimately printed circulation of the *Epistole* is proof that Ficino envisaged a wider European readership, most of whom would have had a limited interest in his personal quibbles. They were approaching the letters from a broader viewpoint, mainly shaped by their acquaintance with the philosopher Ficino. In the following paragraph, I argue that he catered to the needs of exactly this audience by leaving out the concrete reason for his discontentment.

An epistolary collection tells the story of a life through a series of documents that shaped and reflect the letter writer's interaction with others. As I have written before, Ficino's *Epistole* are a work of autobiography. Nevertheless, we are not reading the life Ficino lived with all its daily conflicts and worries. Instead, the author has filtered out details such as the wish for, perhaps, a canonry in Florence instead of a parish in the city's countryside.²⁸⁹ In this way, he has distilled from his personal experiences a more abstract set of scenarios. The Lorenzo letters conjure the more general scene of a young man eagerly trying to connect with his reserved mentor. To arrive at this, details about the church benefice were cut out. Taken together, the different epistolary scenarios across the *Epistole* form a larger narrative, which allows Ficino to present a broader argument. Indeed, the narrative is discursive; it is not meant to entertain or self-present, but to demonstrate and instruct. In this sense, it is comparable with the letters of Seneca whose sequential build-up is 'not only a mode of representation but also a mode of understanding and argument.'²⁹⁰ The Lorenzo letters, as we will see, are the first step in a bigger line of thought wherein different scenarios dialectically clarify and determine each other.

²⁸⁸ Fubini 1984, 37–38: 'E a differenza dallo scambio precedente tali nuove epistole di Lorenzo (solo in parte conservate in una minuta) non furono più accolte nella silloge ficiniana: una volta ancora l'armonia del legame platonico era stata rottata.' Preston 2021, 64 discusses omission as veiled criticism in Seneca's letters.

²⁸⁹ In 1487, Giuliano di Giovenco de' Medici and his close family would give up their claim to the canonry in favour of Ficino; Kristeller 1986, 47–48.

²⁹⁰ Wilson 2001, 185.

The power of narrative to communicate philosophical reasoning was broadly acknowledged in the Renaissance. Poliziano at the beginning of his *Lamia* states that ‘stories, even those that are considered the kinds of things that foolish old women discuss, are not only the first beginnings of philosophy. Stories are also—and just as often—philosophy’s instrument.’²⁹¹ With *fabella*, the diminutive of *fabula*, Poliziano meant a fictional story; Boccaccio had defined the term as ‘exemplaris seu demonstrativa sub figmento locutio.’ Within the context of love, however, Ficino believed that true stories were better suited for instructive purposes. In *De amore*, he writes that examples ‘express the force and authority of love more vehemently if they are narrated as *actual events in history* than if they are considered to be said *allegorically*.’²⁹² He does not go on to put this idea in practice, as *De amore* is for the most part devoid of storytelling apart from the evocation of a banquet on Plato’s birthday and a summary of Aristophanes’ myth about spherical (wo)men. In the letters, however, Ficino had the opportunity to put his idea into practice. By means of his own correspondence, which at least pretends to be genuine, he presented the reader with a factual narrative dramatically revealing the nature of love before our eyes.

I propose that the different scenarios evoked by Ficino’s letter arrangement can best be interpreted in comparison with each other, especially with nearby, structurally similar, and thematically related ones. In the following paragraphs, I will show that the letters to Cavalcanti in *EL* 1.29-51 are immediately relevant for our understanding of the Lorenzo letters. There are several reasons why this makes sense. The Cavalcanti letters come directly after the Lorenzo letters, share a preoccupation with passionate love, and introduce the most frequently featured correspondent in the collection, with Lorenzo being the second most frequent. As I have previously mentioned, these two series are the only correspondent-based dossiers of the entire collection. Yet, more important than their similarities are their differences, most notable in Ficino’s *persona*. While he hardly participates in the exchange with Lorenzo, he brings in all his passion for Cavalcanti. Although this change has been noted by Tröger, she has not duly acknowledged its significance.²⁹³

EL 1.29-51: LETTERS TO CAVALCANTI

After *EL* 1.28, the addressee switches from Lorenzo to Giovanni Cavalcanti (1444-1509). The shift stands in the middle of a ring composition which consists of two letters dealing with divine frenzy in their title and main text: *EL* 1.6, *de divino furore*, and *EL* 1.52, *poeticus furor a deo est*. *EL* 1.52 also marks off the Cavalcanti series which ends in *EL* 1.51. A second symmetrical structure highlights

²⁹¹ Poliziano et al. 2010, 193: ‘fabellae, etiam quae aniles putantur, non rudimentum modo sed et instrumentum quandoque philosophiae sunt.’

²⁹² Ficino 2002, 19 (italics mine): ‘vehementius ista vim amoris et imperium exprimunt, si tamquam *historia gesta* narrentur quam si *per allegoriam* dicta putentur.’

²⁹³ Tröger 2016, 148.

TABLE 3 DATED LETTERS FROM *EL* 1.13-1.36.

13	VIII Novembris 1473.	}
14	Primo Augusti 1473, Florentie.	
23	XIII Ianuarii 1473, Florentie.	}
24	Pisis, XIII Kalendas Februarias 1473.	
25	XXI Ianuarii 1473, Florentie.	}
26	XXI Ianuarii 1473, Florentie.	
30	I Mai 1473.	}
31	V Iunii 1473.	
32	Nonis Octobris, Charegii.	}
33	Ex Charegio, XIII Kalendas Octobris 1468.	
35	XXX Augusti 1468, Marciniani.	}
36	Florentie, Idibus Octobris 1468.	

this pattern, consisting of four groups of dated letters between *EL* 1.13-1.36. The number of undated letters between the pairs and quatrains of dated letters is irregular, so that the symmetry becomes most visible when they are left out. As Table 3 shows, *EL* 1.28 stands in the exact middle between two groups of four dated letters, *EL* 1.23-26 and *EL* 1.30-33. Those two groups are in turn flanked by two pairs of dated letters, *EL* 1.13-14 and *EL* 1.35-36.

Turning to the content of the Cavalcanti letters, one must start by noting the passionate voice with which Ficino tries to establish a relationship with his addressee. The first letter to Cavalcanti begins with a series of exclamations: ‘Come back, my hero! Hurry! Fly here, I beg you!’²⁹⁴ But Ficino thinks again and decides to play hard to get: ‘I deemed it wiser to dissemble my longing so that you would return all the more speedily, thinking me angry.’²⁹⁵ His mind is full of Cavalcanti, to the point of misaddressing a letter to him which was actually destined for Carlo Marsuppini.²⁹⁶ The most notable feature of Ficino’s love for Cavalcanti is that it is not reciprocated. Ficino writes ‘How shall I contain myself to not quietly grumble like this: “Too unmindful of me”?’²⁹⁷ He bewails the fact that he and his friend appear to be in a contest of silence, wondering why Cavalcanti is so hard on him.²⁹⁸ It appears that Ficino’s unique friend, as he consistently calls Cavalcanti, does not share his

²⁹⁴ *EL* 1.29: ‘Redi, heros, propera queso, advola obsecro.’

²⁹⁵ *EL* 1.29: ‘prestare visum est ut meum hoc desiderium dissimularem: fore enim ut redeas ocios si me subiratum putas.’

²⁹⁶ *EL* 1.30.

²⁹⁷ *EL* 1.29: ‘quonam pacto me continebo, quin parumper saltem ita susurrem: “Ha nimium oblivious mei”?’

²⁹⁸ *EL* 1.32.

sentiment that ‘there is always a reason for a letter to friends.’²⁹⁹ Ficino, in contrast, feels ‘compelled to make the first approach and commence battle,’ but cannot provoke Cavalcanti to an answer.³⁰⁰

Next, we find the philosopher in a state of deep distress, with physical illness seemingly beginning to take hold. From this state, he asks Cavalcanti to have mercy and writes:

I previously begged you to send me, if you so pleased, harshly-worded letters rather than none at all. Now, on the other hand, I ask you for no letters rather than harsh ones, for the sick heart needs comforting, not goading.³⁰¹

The following letter further explains Ficino’s anguish and describes him searching frantically himself, that is, his soul. His attempts are in vain, as it is now with Cavalcanti. Desperately, he asks for his friend to come back, so that his misery—symbolised by black pebbles³⁰²—may come to an end:

Return then, and render yourself—or rather, myself—back to me, since I cannot do it. Return today, and do not always delay until tomorrow. I beseech you, do not let me number off more days with black pebbles.³⁰³

This is the culmination of Ficino wanting to see and hear from Cavalcanti, who has been unreachable throughout their one-sided correspondence. When Ficino’s love for Cavalcanti has thus brought him to the limits of what his soul can endure, the epistolary *modus* abruptly changes. Instead of the previous letters’ *amatoria*, *EL* 1.38’s title promises *seria ad Iohannem*. The contrast is marked by the obvious parallelism between this letter to Cavalcanti and the first one, which was entitled *Iocosa ad Iohannem*. The idea behind it seems evident: Ficino tries to build a strong relationship with his pupil, *in casu* Cavalcanti, before moving on to moral and philosophical education.³⁰⁴ In this way, he imitates Socrates, who—as we read in *De amore*—‘took on himself the care of young people and first won them over with the sweetness of his pleasant familiarity.’³⁰⁵

²⁹⁹ *EL* 1.33: ‘nunquam deest amicis causa litterarum.’

³⁰⁰ *EL* 1.35: ‘tibi tamen venire obviam cogor et prior inire certamen.’

³⁰¹ *EL* 1.36: ‘orabam quippe, ut acerimas, si placeret, potius quam nullas litteras mitteres; nunc contra, nullas potius quam acerimas postulo: non enim instigatione sed consolatione eger animus indiget.’

³⁰² Vaahtera 1990, 172: ‘Marking a day with a white or a black pebble is a common metaphor of a happy or unhappy day in Latin literature.’

³⁰³ *EL* 1.37: ‘Redi igitur et te, immo me redde mihi, quando ego id nequeo; redi hodie neque semper venturas differ in horas; ne patiare, obsecro, plures a nobis dies nigro numeravi lapillo: quot enim isthic tu serenos agis, totidem nos hic nubilos agimus atque nigros.’

³⁰⁴ Cf. Tröger 2016, 107–108.

³⁰⁵ *De amore* 7.16: ‘iuniorum suscipit curam eosque primum iocunde consuetudinis captat suavitate.’ Cf. Hankins 2005, 191: ‘Ficino saw himself as the Socrates of Florence, reclaiming for piety and true religion young men exposed to the intellectual corruptions of the day.’

Once the young men are ensnared, he sets out to improve them ‘censura rigidiori.’ However, this explanation is not satisfactory as Cavalcanti does not seem charmed by Ficino at all.

In the same way as the *amatorios iocos* occupy various letters, the subsequent *seria* stretch beyond *EL* 1.38. Several of them define love and the reason behind Ficino’s love letters as ‘not so different from that honest freedom of Socrates and Plato.’³⁰⁶ *EL* 1.41 states the full potential of love, attainable when man surmounts his earthly desires. By this kind of love, ‘the soul is drawn upwards as if by a fishhook so that it may become like God.’ Its starting point and fulfilment are the same ‘single beginning of everything, which he has called rather appropriately the “One itself”’.³⁰⁷ This Oneness of all flows forth from God’s unique truth, in whose likeness everything is created, and which manifests itself in all things bright and beautiful. I will leave aside Ficino’s words on the separability of soul and body in *EL* 1.38 and his interpretation of Plato’s *Timaeus* in *EL* 1.42 as they do not immediately bear on the narrative structure of the letters. More relevant in this regard are the repeated references made to the *Theologia Platonica*, which were written at Cavalcanti’s estate in Regnano. They evoke a proximity between the two men, if only in memory, that stands in sharp contrast with their distance in the first part of the Cavalcanti series where Ficino’s *amicus unicus* failed to write back. It appears, then, that the progress on the thematic level is matched by an emotional development. The anguished desire of *EL* 1.29-38 is replaced with for Ficino’s gratitude for his friendship with Cavalcanti. Even though he regrets that the latter could not join him for the feast of saints Christopher and James, he concludes that God has destined them for a similar way of life (*moribusque similibus*) with a single will (*eadem voluntate*).³⁰⁸

To interpret the *ductus* of the final letters of the Cavalcanti series, we must consider the manuscript tradition of Book 1. *EL* 1.46-48 were originally omitted (*L3*; *V*) or located elsewhere (*L4*; *R*). *EL* 1.46 first became part of the Cavalcanti dossier at the beginning of Book 1 in 1477 (*L2*). Before that, in 1475 (*L4*) but again in 1483 (*R*), it was placed near the end of the collection right before, after or in between *EL* 1.47-48.³⁰⁹ When it first moved up toward the rest of the Cavalcanti letters in 1477 (*L2*), it became detached from *EL* 1.47-48, which remained in their original position among the final fifteen letters of the book. Only in the manuscripts with more than Book 1 are they joined with *EL* 1.46 in the canonical following order. Why did Ficino decide to change the position of these letters? There are several explanations that together offer a plausible reconstruction of Ficino’s motives. Chronology is not one of them: *EL* 1.47-48 were written later than the adjacent

³⁰⁶ *EL* 1.38: ‘ab honesta illa Socratis Platonisque libertate non ... alienum.’

³⁰⁷ *EL* 1.41: ‘quasi hamo trahi[tur] sursum, ut Deus evadat;’ ‘unum rerum principium, ... quod et “ipsum unum” proprio vocabulo nominavit.’

³⁰⁸ *EL* 1.44.

³⁰⁹ An overview of the letter arrangement in different manuscripts is given in Gentile 1990, CCXXII–CCXXIII.

letters and this may explain their original position at the end of the book.³¹⁰ But their dates of composition are not clear for an average reader and should not be considered a literary strategy. At some point, Ficino decided to bring all the Cavalcanti letters together and this caused *EL* 1.46 to move back in the collection. At this stage, recorded in manuscript *L2*, *EL* 1.46 came immediately after *EL* 1.51. The reason could be that its conclusive remarks on the definition of love were well suited to close the outburst of affection in the previous letters. Its final sentence even announces the transition to a new theme: 'But about this we have already said enough above,' in which *above* refers to both the letter and the larger Cavalcanti series.³¹¹

Eventually, *EL* 1.46 moved back another six positions and was reunited with *EL* 1.47 and 1.48. The latter puts love in the broader context of religion, arguing that one cannot exist without the other. Although it is not addressed to Cavalcanti, its topic fits within the thematic focus of the Lorenzo/Cavalcanti series and in a way hints at the thematic shift from love to religion, which also occurs in the macrostructure of Book 1. Thus, only *EL* 1.47 appears somewhat misplaced. It explains the connection between love, music, and theology, which heal respectively the body, the spirit, and the soul. In Ficino's worldview, everything is ultimately related to Love, and it would be possible to explain with some ingenuity the dissonance of *EL* 1.47 through a thematic comparison with *De amore*. But this explanation does not convince, and it seems that *EL* 1.47 simply followed in the slipstream of *EL* 1.48. Nevertheless, its pausing effect on the sequence of letters to Cavalcanti seems intentional, as it concretises the lesson Ficino gives in *EL* 1.49. In this letter, entitled *de toleranda iniuria*, Ficino dwells on the virtue of patience and observes that 'impatience upsets the soul, erases past good, taints present good, and constricts future good.'³¹² At the same time, one should focus on today's opportunity's instead of expecting better times tomorrow. *EL* 1.49 contains a concrete echo of the first letter to Cavalcanti, and if read against the backdrop of those anxious letters from before, highlights a turning point in Ficino's relationship with Cavalcanti. In *EL* 1.29, Ficino had been concerned about the rumour going around that he had been abandoned by his friend:

You ask what is going on in town. Serious matters are afoot. Listen! But tell no one! Many of the chief citizens are saying: 'Oh Marsilio, why have you been

³¹⁰ Gentile 1990, CCLXI.

³¹¹ *EL* 1.46: 'ergo de his hactenus satis superque sit dictum.'

³¹² *EL* 1.49: 'impatientia turbat animum, preterita bona delet, presentia inficit, futura impedit.'

alone in town for so long?’ ‘Because the man who never leaves me on my own so wishes it.’ He has not returned, then?’ ‘Not yet.’³¹³

In contrast with this uncommonly dramatic outburst, *EL* 1.49 explicitly denies the talk of the town any importance: ‘One should not listen to the voice of the worthless crowd if it urges one to vengeance. What is the crowd? A kind of octopus, that is, a multilegged beast without a head.’³¹⁴ *EL* 1.51 finally concludes the passionate sequences that started with Lorenzo’s letter to Ficino by explicitly putting it in a religious perspective. It is a long letter, which serves as an equally valid closing point as *EL* 1.46. However, it significantly differs from it by using *amicitia* and not *amor* for what Ficino feels toward Cavalcanti. While it is true that ‘the mixing up of friendship and ideal love lies at the conceptual heart of Ficino’s project’,³¹⁵ the terminological change is remarkable. It explains why *EL* 1.46 was moved upward from its original position after *EL* 1.51. It could only provide a provisional closure, from which Ficino’s *persona* had to make one final step towards self-possession. After the blazing passion and its unwelcome disturbances from *EL* 1.29-37, *EL* 1.51 shows that Ficino has now mastered the art of love. In the last two paragraphs, he ranks himself amongst ‘the theologians of antiquity, whose memory we revere,’ and who ‘are said to have entered into a sacred bond of friendship with one another.’³¹⁶ At last, his friendship with Cavalcanti is like the one of Zoroaster with Arimaspes, of Mercurius Trismegistus with Esculapius, of Plato with Dio, of Musaeus with Orpheus.³¹⁷

LOVE COMPARED

What is gained from a comparative reading of the meticulously composed dossiers to Lorenzo and Cavalcanti? In the following section, I argue that it offers a complete picture of Socratic love and its pitfalls. While Lorenzo is the pathetic lover from *EL* 1.22 to 1.28, Ficino assumes that role from *EL* 1.29 to 1.37. The latter are not framed in the same way as the former, and it is consequently easier to sympathise with the amorous Ficino. His emotional outbursts appear more genuine and less imperious. In essence, though, they are alike. Both Ficino and Lorenzo feel that their correspondent should write out of love, not obligation. Moreover, they insist that there is always something worth writing about and chastise their addressee if they stay silent for too long.³¹⁸ As

³¹³ *EL* 1.29: ‘Queris quid agatur in urbe: tractantur gravia. Audi, sed aperias nemini: magni plerique cives “O Marsili,” aiunt “cur tandiu solus in urbe?” “Quia solum incedere nunc me vult qui nunquam sinit esse me solum.” “Nondum rediit ergo?” “Nondum.”’

³¹⁴ *EL* 1.49: ‘Neque rumori vilis plebecule prestande sunt aures, si invitaverit ad vindictam. Quid plebs? Polypus quidam, id est animal multipes sine capite.’

³¹⁵ Aasdalen 2011, 82.

³¹⁶ *EL* 1.51: ‘prisci illi theologi, quorum memoriam veneramur, sanctam inter se amicitie copulam inisse traduntur.’

³¹⁷ Rabelais 1955, 889 quotes this passage, perhaps mocking the obscurity of the references, without naming his source.

³¹⁸ *EL* 1.24 and 1.31; *EL* 1.22 and 1.33.

Ficino takes on the role of *amator* vis-à-vis Cavalcanti, the latter becomes a kind of anti-Lorenzo. The young and talented aristocrat had put his thunder and lightning between Ficino and himself, thereby causing the very distance between him and the philosopher for which he blamed St Christopher. Cavalcanti, in contrast, shields Ficino from stormy weather ‘because while I am completely absorbed in reading your letters, I neither feel the storms of the winds nor hear the thunder and lightning.’³¹⁹ Whereas Lorenzo and St Christopher are depicted as competitors, Ficino equals the bond between St Christopher and St James—whose festivities are celebrated on the same day—with the bond between Cavalcanti and him.³²⁰

Why does Lorenzo play the role of *amator*, which is usually reserved for the mentor, not the pupil? The reason is Ficino’s concern for detractors unable to understand and appreciate his conception of love and its philosophical value. He points out in *De amore* that the same criticism had been launched against Socrates and Plato but counters the allegation of their self-interested love by claiming that the two philosophers were sometimes more desirable than desiring. ‘As Alcibiades said, Socrates was much more passionately loved by the young men than he loved them.’³²¹ He refers to a remarkable scene near the end of the *Symposium*, when Alcibiades drunkenly proclaims that ‘they found his [viz. of Socrates] way of loving so deceitful that he might rather be their favourite than their lover.’³²² In *EL* 1.46, Ficino remarks that he often receives the same accusations as Socrates:

The more I strive to prevent the people from loving basely all the more will these insane and ungrateful people suspect my love is excessive. This is said to have happened also to those heroes, Socrates and Plato, our divine guides.³²³

The contrasting series of Lorenzo and Cavalcanti letters perfect the characterisation of Ficino as a new Socrates. Plato presents Socrates as ‘one who can both lead and be led, as he demonstrates by jauntily switching roles to suit his purpose.’³²⁴ Thus, Socrates shows himself an absolute master in the art of love—an assessment wholly endorsed by Ficino.³²⁵ If the Florentine wants to cast himself as a new Socrates to the best of his abilities, he too needs to show himself capable of playing both parts, that of *amator* and of *amatus*. At the same time, Ficino’s double role acts as a defence of his

³¹⁹ *EL* 1.35: ‘nam dum litteris tuis legendis totus incumbam, nec ventorum procellas sentiam nec fulmina et tonitus audiam.’

³²⁰ *EL* 1.44.

³²¹ *De amore*, 249: ‘Multo ardenter ab adolescentibus, ut Alcibiades ait, dilectus fuerit Socrates quam dilexerit.’

³²² Plat. *Sym.* 222b.

³²³ *EL* 1.46: ‘Forte quanto magis conabor ne vulgus turpiter amet, tanto magis insanum ingratumque vulgus suspicabitur me nimis amare, quod etiam divinis illis heroibus Socrati et Platoni, nostris ducibus, dicitur contigisse.’

³²⁴ Blondell 2006, 150–153.

³²⁵ *De amore*, 211.

Platonic experience of love. In the same way as Alcibiades' love exculpated Socrates and Plato, Lorenzo's desire shields Ficino from the slanderers that depict him as an amatory predator.³²⁶

From my analogy it follows that Lorenzo becomes a second Alcibiades, which has wider ramifications than I initially perceived. The two men are *mutatis mutandis* remarkably similar. Alcibiades and Lorenzo were both considered exceptionally talented by contemporaries and descended from influential families. Because of their elevated position in society, they attracted the attention of leading philosophers in their communities: Alcibiades was tutored by Socrates and Lorenzo by Ficino. This similarity is only enhanced by the fact that Socrates was, through Plato's writings, Ficino's archetype of the pious philosopher. Yet, Alcibiades famously fell from grace by betraying his native city and, perhaps more importantly in this context, by profaning its sacred rites. In Plato's dialogues, there are traces of Alcibiades lack of restraint also in his relationship with Socrates. While Ficino adduces Alcibiades love for Socrates in his defence of Socrates as an appropriate lover, the way in which Alcibiades chased Socrates is problematic. First, Alcibiades was not supposed to take the role of *erastes* and go after Socrates at all. Second, as Frisbee Sheffield has observed, 'Alcibiades desires to exchange his physical charms for those of Socrates' soul. ... If Alcibiades thinks that wisdom is the sort of thing that can be exchanged for the physical charms of his body then he has not understood what wisdom is, or how one should go about getting it.'³²⁷ Also Lorenzo, by bestowing the benefice of St Christopher in return for Ficino's attention, seems to have misunderstood the kind of relationship Ficino is striving for. As we will see, Lorenzo will also fall into the trap of profaning some of Ficino's holy grails. However, his downfall, unlike that of Alcibiades, does not take place.

PERCEPTION AND PARODY

LOST IN TRANSLATION

Not all Renaissance readers have understood the close connection between the Cavalcanti and Lorenzo letters. Their heuristic interconnection is wholly abandoned in an early sixteenth-century Italian translation of Book 1. The manuscript, now preserved in the Casanatense library, leaves out the entire series of letters to Cavalcanti from Book 1.³²⁸ There are two possible reasons for this, which correspond to the hypotheses proposed by Pierre Laurens for the removal of the original dedication letter to Cavalcanti from subsequent versions of *De Amore*.³²⁹ One would be the desire to foreground the importance of the Medici family by erasing Ficino's strong attachment to his

³²⁶ Cf. Akopyan and Smets 2021, 340–341.

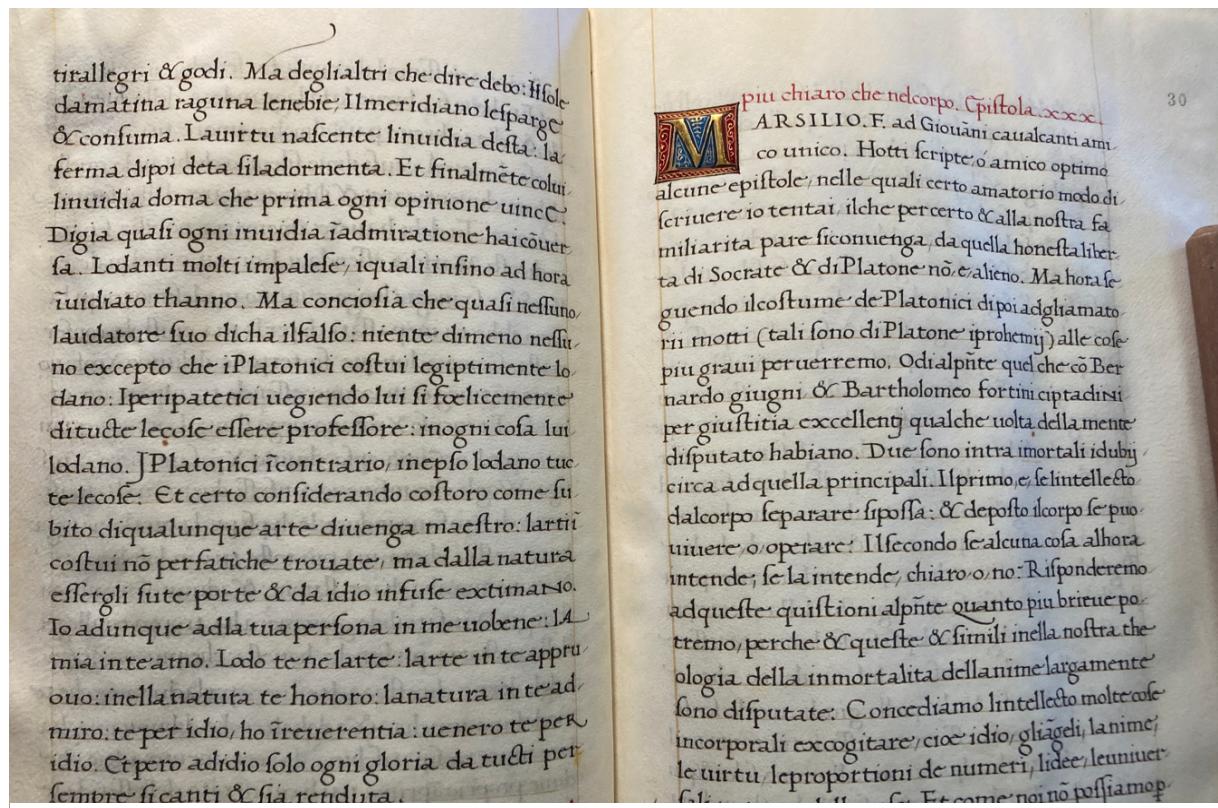
³²⁷ Sheffield 2006, 204.

³²⁸ MS Roma, Biblioteca Casanatense, 1297.

³²⁹ Laurens 2014, 441–444.

unicus amicus. Another would be the perceived need to do away with the passionate letters, which could offend because of their homoeroticism or the incompatibility of intense emotions with philosophical eminence. The first reason is possible, but not the most likely one. Multiple copies of the *Epistole* featured in Medici libraries, and those copies all contain the letters to Cavalcanti.³³⁰ It is improbable that only the Italian translation excludes them for the sake of not offending Ficino's patrons. Moreover, the translation was not made by Ficino himself, and is dedicated to Lorenzo and Antonio di Bernardo de' Medici (1476-1552), both of whom had no connection with Ficino. We would have to assume a translator who wants to flatter members of the Medici by obfuscating Ficino's friendship with Cavalcanti but still shrouds himself in anonymity.

The second explanation is more convincing. Ficino's longing for Cavalcanti did not sit well with the translator or commissioner. Perhaps, the communicative difference between Latin and Italian played a role in this. Latin may have ensured a correct, religious-philosophical interpretation of the love letters, whereas Italian might lend a different, perhaps more personal character to it. Another possible explanation is a change in intellectual attitudes towards philosophical love which occurred between the composition of the letters and their Italian translation. Sebastiano Gentile has corrected the view of Arnaldo della Torre that the manuscript stems from the 1470s and proposes



³³⁰ MS Berlin, SBB, Lat. fol. 374, fol. 1^r, which has the Medici coat of arms; MS Firenze, BML, LI 11, fol. 1^r which has the inscription ιτήμα τοῦ Λαυρεντίου Μέδικος Φλορεντίου ('property of Lorenzo de' Medici of Florence'); and, possibly, MS Civitas Vaticana, BAV, Vat. lat. 1789, of which the provenance is discussed in Gentile 1990, LXXV.

a new dating at the end of the 1520s based on its illuminations and the identification of its copyist.³³¹ More than thirty years after the first publication of Ficino's letters, non-Latinate readers may have lacked the conceptual framework for understanding the function of the love letters. In fact, Ficino's 'subtle rhetorical move of donning a rhetorical persona, which was probably quite apparent to many of Ficino's closer convivial and intellectual friends as well as many of his letters' recipients, was lost on some of his contemporaries.³³² Whatever the reason is, the omission of the Cavalcanti letters shows that they stood out, not only as single letters but as a coherent block that could and even should be removed at once. A small detail indicates that the translator of the Casanatense manuscript still appreciated the structural pointers in the letter titles. 'Seria ad Iohannem' from the title of *EL* 1.38 is not translated, because it only makes sense in contrast with the 'Iocosa ad Iohannem' in *EL* 1.29's title (see Figure 8). Not only did the translator eliminate the passionate letters, but he also cancelled the now obsolete announcement of a thematic transition. Moreover, the exclusion of the first letters to Cavalcanti shows that readers of Ficino's letters were not looking for the sensation and personal details which make modern letter collections sell nowadays. Their attraction was based on the author's central position in Florentine society, and his philosophical exemplarity.

PIQUANT IMITATION

As I have tried to demonstrate, the letters to and from Lorenzo and Cavalcanti must be seen within the context of humanist friendship letters on the one hand and Ficino's philosophy of love on the other hand. The author expects us to take them seriously and to consider them in comparison with each other. Only thus can we appreciate the artful characterisation of Lorenzo, Cavalcanti and Ficino himself, as well as the exploration of love in its different forms. As we will see in the following chapter, *EL* 1.22-51 are a distinct block within a broader pattern of philosophical ascent. But Ficino was not the only letter compiler to open his collection with an amatory dossier. Poliziano followed his example, and, if I am right to see a direct relationship, provocatively subverted it.³³³ After the first two letters in his collection, addressed to Piero de' Medici, follows a batch of six letters between Poliziano and the philosopher Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, which presents itself as a continuous exchange of letters.³³⁴ However, a fifteenth-century manuscript containing earlier versions of Poliziano's letters in a different order than the canonical one, tells us

³³¹ Ficino 1990, CCLXXIII; della Torre 1902, 843–844. Although the translation itself is still dedicated to the same two Medici, the fine Cinquecento manuscript bears the Gaddi family's coat of arms.

³³² Robichaud 2018, 146.

³³³ It was not the first time that Ficino's concept of love was the object of ridicule. In 1470, Lorenzo, who was close with Poliziano, had already parodied it in his *Simposio*, edited in de' Medici 1966; the connection with Ficino is discussed by Fubini 1984, esp. 15-21.

³³⁴ *PoIE* 1.3-8.

otherwise. It dates the first letter from Pico to Poliziano, *PoIE* 1.3 to 1483 and the last one to 1481.³³⁵ Moreover, the same manuscript omits *PoIE* 1.6-7 which fit seamlessly in the series of the published edition. In fact, the two letters provide the short exchange with narrative closure. They mention the destruction of Pico's erotic epigrams, which their author was first beginning to assemble for publication in *PoIE* 1.3.³³⁶ We are dealing once more with a carefully composed block of letters.³³⁷ Here too, love is the unifying factor, this time not in the form of a spiritual ideal or unwelcome passion but as a playful eroticism in which the literary pursuits of both men turn into an unexpectedly sadomasochistic play.

The sequence starts with a letter from Pico to Poliziano, which allegedly accompanied a collection of youthful poetry. The letter calls attention to the fact that Pico and Poliziano were high up in the hierarchy of the learned republic of letters.³³⁸ However, Pico appears apprehensive of publishing the poems and sends them to Poliziano 'on the condition ... that they be punished, beaten, and pay the penalties of their mistakes with nails and with obelisks'.³³⁹ With this, Pico introduces an unmistakably physical undertone which quickly turns sexual.³⁴⁰ Poliziano's answer leaves no doubt about the amatory innuendos of their exchange and immediately confesses that he is up for it: 'You're a witty man, trying to set me up with your loves and yet demanding from me, a man not at all of furrowed brow, to accept such handsome boys sternly and severely'.³⁴¹ Poliziano's description of how he handled the poems uses metaphorical language of penetration ('confodi igitur versiculos aliquos'),³⁴² agitated fondling or even assault ('se a nobis vexari paulum paterentur'),³⁴³ and sexual intercourse in general ('me concertare cum toto Veneris grege quam putas posse').³⁴⁴ The game goes on in Pico's reply, whose *amores* told him 'quod amice quidem confossi sunt,' which the philosopher can well believe since 'quis enim nolit ab isto ense mori?' The sword as a phallic symbol is nothing but cliché, and before Pico gets carried away too far in such boyish banter, he changes the topic. The love poems skip one letter and return in *PoIE* 1.7, which contains a Greek epigram by Poliziano on Pico's decision to burn them. Unless Poliziano was aware that *νεῦρον* and cognates

³³⁵ MS Firenze, BML, Plut.90 sup.37, fol. 66^r-67^v.

³³⁶ *PoIE* 1.3 'Cum musas tenues meas, quibus, dum per atatem licuit, de amoribus meis iocatus sum, in libellos, quinque digesserim.' *PoIE* 1.7: 'Audio te versiculos amatorios quos olim scripseras combusisse.'

³³⁷ Cf. Bettinzoli 2004, 380–381.

³³⁸ Cf. Shane Butler 2018, 257–258.

³³⁹ *PoIE* 1.3: 'ea enim lege ... ut castigentur, ut vapulent, ut erratorum poenas et ungue et obeliscis luant.'

³⁴⁰ For a contextualisation of the ensuing homo-erotic word-play, see Burch 2019 and Shane Butler 2018, 266–271.

³⁴¹ *PoIE* 1.4: 'tu homo es lepidus qui me cum tuis *Amoribus* committere tentes quique adeo severe et tetrica a me, homine haud sane rugosae frontis, tam bellos accipi pueros postules.'

³⁴² (*Con*)*fodio* was a widespread synonym for penetration in the Middle Ages; cf. Adams 1982, 151–152.

³⁴³ For the sexual connotations of *νεῦρον*, cf. Adams 1982, 200.

³⁴⁴ Fighting repeatedly stands for sexual intercourse in ancient literature; cf. Adams 1982, 157–159.

can mean penis,³⁴⁵ the eroticism is toned down considerably here and finally absent in the concluding letter *Po/E* 1.8.

Poliziano was a clever rhetorician and knew how to captivate his audience. The correspondence with Pico is amusing in more than one way. Sex sells itself but Poliziano added extra charm to the erotic allusions by playing with the Latin and Greek vocabulary of which he showed himself a master. As a result, the exchange is lewd and learned at the same time. Additionally, I believe, Poliziano wanted his readers to recognise the letters as a pastiche of Ficino's first letter series. He was on friendly terms with the Platonist philosopher, but critically distanced himself from the latter's idolising sentiments towards Plato and the pre-Platonists. In one of his letters, he refuses to participate in mutual praise initiated by Ficino, and ironically declines the nickname Hercules offered to him by the latter.³⁴⁶ Pico had himself launched a fierce attack against Ficino's philosophy of love in a commentary on a canzone by one of his friends, Girolamo Benivieni.³⁴⁷ Hence, he was the perfect partner for a humorous attack on Ficino's correspondences with Lorenzo and Cavalcanti.

Although they have very different *skopoi*, the amatory *modi* by which Poliziano and Ficino lure the reader into their collection still have one important thing in common. They are the *dulce* that makes the *utile* of the entire collection more palatable. While Ficino's letters are perhaps not as entertaining as those by Poliziano and Pico, their poetic character and overwhelming emotionality offer an attractive reading. But love between two people, between the pupil and the teacher that is, constitutes only the first step in Socratic didactics. One is seduced by the wise mentor to morally improve and finally ascend to philosophical insight. Similarly, in the *Epistole* the love letters 'seduce' the reader of the collection and get him hooked on the characters of Ficino, Lorenzo and Cavalcanti so that they want to continue reading this work. As we will see in the following chapter, the letters then turn to more elevated topics, in the same way Socrates' conversations with his pupils would have progressed to philosophical inquiry.

Poliziano too promises a more serious program in his letter collection. His is not narrative as we will see in Ficino.³⁴⁸ Neither is it philosophical—much of the *Lamia* revolves around him not being or wanting to be a philosopher—but *humanist*. Humanism is famously difficult to define, and any definition would need further nuancing.³⁴⁹ Nevertheless, the simplest description can sometimes

³⁴⁵ Galen 1821, 8.442: ή ἐκ τοῦ συριγγώδους γεύρου.

³⁴⁶ Kraye 2001, 379–382.

³⁴⁷ Aasdalén 2011.

³⁴⁸ Cf. Bettinzoli 2004, 380–381: 'Poliziano aggrega le sue epistole in blocchi tematici o in nuclei variamente identificabili, li accosta ulteriormente fra di loro in base a rapporti di analogia o di opposizione.'

³⁴⁹ Cf. Witt 2000, chap. 1.

be the most insightful. If we consider humanism ‘a well defined cycle of teaching subjects listed as (1) grammar, (2) rhetoric, (3) poetry, (4) history, and (5) moral philosophy,’³⁵⁰ then Poliziano’s first eight letters offer a textbook illustration of its scope. His opening letter on the variety of epistolary styles represents rhetoric (2). After all, letter writing was since Late Antiquity and increasingly during the Middle Ages, the most essential part of rhetorical training.³⁵¹ History (4) appears in *PoIE* 1.2, where Poliziano demonstrates his acquaintance with ancient historiography regarding the city of Florence. The name of the city allows Poliziano to showcase his grammatical prowess (1) through etymological analysis.³⁵² The erotic poetry by Poliziano and Pico ticks the third box of the *studia humanitatis*. This leaves moral philosophy (5), which enters the collection by means of Poliziano’s Epictetus translation and Pico’s account of using this work as a moral guide.³⁵³ Unlike Ficino, Poliziano does not prepare to fight for philosophical truth, faith and Love, but for his own fame and, at best, ‘to save Latin [and Greek] culture from its decay.’³⁵⁴ Their goals are very different, and the tone of their respective opening letters notably discordant. Their overall method, however, is the same and shows the author’s deliberate composition of their letters into something more than an archival repository. While self-presentation is certainly at play in both Ficino and Lorenzo, the didactic impetus is equally if not more prominent. For Ficino, it takes the shape of Socratic love; for Poliziano, it consists of the university curriculum, in line with his professional occupation as professor of philology at the Florentine *Studio*.

³⁵⁰ Kristeller 1960, 246.

³⁵¹ Mack 2011, 229: ‘For many people the letter-writing manual would be the main or only systematic rhetoric manual which they had read.’

³⁵² Copeland and Sluiter 2012, 339: ‘With the development of the discipline of (Greek) grammar, it [sc. etymology] becomes one of the six canonical tasks of the grammarian.’

³⁵³ *PoIE* 1.5.

³⁵⁴ *PoIE* 1.8.

CHAPTER 3

SOCIETY: *EL* 1.52-1.89

In my discussion of the Cavalcanti letters, I indicated that they begin precisely in the middle of a ring composition opened by *EL* 1.6, *de divino furore* and closed by *EL* 1.52, *Poeticus furor a deo est*. Moreover, the latter epistle marks off the love-centred letters, so that its structural function—which appears to be its only function—cannot be overlooked. Ficino has further drawn our attention to its calculated position by retaining the date of 4 March 1474 which is chronologically inconsistent with the previous date of 30 March 1474 in *EL* 1.49. Immediately after the Cavalcanti letters—and with them the whole section of love letters—have thus been brought to their end, Ficino introduces the second theme of Book 1 with the title of *EL* 1.53: *Cura patriae, familiae, amicorum*. The letter starts with a reference to Plato and quotes Socrates saying ‘that two things should be taken care of before everything else, namely one’s fatherland and family.’³⁵⁵ Ficino advises his friend Francesco Tedaldi, a little-known philosopher, to be more at home and involved with his son and friends.³⁵⁶ All in all, *EL* 1.53 contains little more than friendly advice, the kind of which Ficino likes to share. Yet, the letter title extrapolates this advice to an all-embracing principle of which the desired shift in Tedaldi’s priorities is only a small part. While *EL* 1.53 merely initiates the new *modus* of civic matters, its header designates the thematic range of the entire following section.

As I have shown on p. 64-76, *EL* 1.1, 1.4, 1.6, and 1.18 prefigured a gradual ascent from pleasure to societal responsibility to philosophical contemplation. Within this framework, the *vita voluptuosa* is left behind in favour of the more noble *vita activa*. The pattern of moral growth established in the opening letters is achieved by the collection’s *ductus* from a *modus* of private passions to one of societal matters, the latter of which is signalled by the title of Ficino’s letter to Tedaldi. The active life, reached by means of civic virtue, is most often associated with political engagement (*res publica*). However, Macrobius’ *Commentarii in Somnium Scipionis*, quoted in the previous chapter, have civic virtue include the care for family (*parentes, liberos, proximos*) and friends (*socios*).³⁵⁷ Likewise, *EL* 1.53 blends family, friendship and political responsibility into one virtue, comparing the dependence of a family on the paterfamilias to that of the citizen on the fatherland.³⁵⁸ On the one hand, this fusion

³⁵⁵ *EL* 1.53: ‘Duo pre ceteris rebus humanis esse curanda, patriam videlicet et familiam.’

³⁵⁶ On Tedaldi, see Kristeller 1985b.

³⁵⁷ Macrob. *In Somn.* 8.6.

³⁵⁸ *EL* 1.53: ‘Civis enim patrie membrum est, familia corpus patris.’

underwrites a broadly shared metaphor in a republican ideology trying to mimic family dynamics, in which leaders assumed a role of unquestionable authority like of a father towards his children.³⁵⁹ On the other hand, it captures the sphere of the *vita activa* in its broadest sense as a coherent but diverse middle zone between the narrow self-interest of the *vita volup tuosa* and the all-embracing perspective of divine vision in the *vita contemplativa*.

Before we continue to analyse the collection's structure according to a tripartite hierarchy of possible lives, we must return to the question how the love letters reflect distinct features of the *vita volup tuosa*. In constructing an epistolary narrative of moral improvement with as its *skopos* the attainment of happiness, as I argue, Ficino could not cross certain limits of propriety since the letters were written in his own *persona*. The pleasure-seeking life is inferior to the active life in as far as it is ruled by greed, sexual desire, and violence. Ficino could not convincingly embody those vices without undermining the moral authority with which he was intent on educating his readers. Nor could he claim to have been materialist, lascivious, or irascible, given his public image of a philosopher-priest. Such self-fashioning would not have been credible. At the same time, it was important for Ficino to present himself as fallible and perturbed. Not only was it important for the construction of a narrative of ascent but also for facilitating readers' identification with him. As I have argued before, humanists understood that it is difficult if not impossible to turn someone into a role model without also acknowledging their fragility and flaws. I propose that Ficino solved this problem by replacing the *vita volup tuosa* with his own version of Socratic love approached from different angles. This allowed him to present his character as subject to strong passions that were potentially harmful while justifying the experience of those passions as integral to the philosophical way of life which he promoted. As I will explain in the next paragraphs, this strategy raised new challenges. I will especially consider Ficino's carefulness not to devalue Socratic love by placing it at the lowest virtue level. It must be said that the following analysis is not of Ficino's moral system—if something like that exists³⁶⁰—but of the literary techniques he employed to construct a narrative according to pre-existing concepts.

LOVE REVISITED

SOCRATIC LOVE

What does Socratic love have in common with the lowest-ranking kind of life? To answer this question, it is good to revisit the speech in which Socrates recounts Diotima's words on the nature

³⁵⁹ Najemy 2000, 101.

³⁶⁰ Kristeller 1943, 289: 'We must keep in mind from the outset that Ficino has no real system of morals.' For a correction of this view, see Catana 2014, 683–684.

of love.³⁶¹ He describes love as a process of moral and intellectual growth comparable to a ladder. On the lowest rung, there is physical attraction, higher up is the love of souls, and the highest point is a contemplative understanding of Beauty. It is possible to map those three levels against the three ways of conducting one's life. The first level has two subdivisions, wherein physical attraction to one person is perceived as lower in status than physical attraction to many people. Both of those types, in as far as they would not be redeemed by the lover's greater interest in the soul of the beloved, belong to the *vita voluptuosa*, which is ruled by the senses. In contrast, the love of souls is distinguished by different types of knowledge, one of which consists of loving 'action and laws.' Clearly, this inclination corresponds to the *vita activa* which is concerned with serving society not through self-gratification or theoretical reflection but through lawgiving, political decision-making, and military service. The third rung, in which a person contemplates the essence of Beauty, is easily identifiable with the contemplative life. As regards the different kinds of virtues which were alluded to in the opening letters, they can be understood as the muscle strength that pushes us up the rungs. The parallel I have drawn between the *vitae* and Diotima's ladder is, admittedly, not seamless. While an interest in 'pursuits and laws' belongs to the active sphere, the other 'types of knowledge' on the second rung may belong to the contemplative life if they include theoretical branches of learning like mathematics and music. Nevertheless, Socrates' ladder evidently resembles the hierarchy of life with its three types and their corresponding virtues. In this respect, it is worth nothing that Ficino's *Symposium* commentary skips several instances where Plato introduces short or longer discussions of virtue. However, the three kinds of life as well as an elaborate theory of virtue appear in Ficino's section corresponding to Socrates' speech of which Diotima's explanation of love forms part.³⁶²

Our focus here is on the first rung, which for Ficino posed the biggest problem. In Plato, sexuality plays an ambiguous but accepted role in the early stages of the Socratic love curriculum.³⁶³ Even if only the first step to something nobler, this carnal aspect was intolerable for Ficino and his environment.³⁶⁴ In his commentary on Plato's *Phaedrus*, Ficino described the 'intemperate' kind of love as inherently detrimental, serving as a barrier to attaining the desired insight into Beauty.³⁶⁵ In the *Apology of Plato's habits* and the final chapters of *De amore*, we see that Ficino was aware of the problem with Plato's concept of love. George of Trebizond had recently accused the Greek philosopher of sexual perversion in his *Comparatio phylosphorum Aristotelis et Platonis* from 1458.

³⁶¹ Plat. *Symp.* 210.

³⁶² *De amore* 6.8 and 6.18; cf. Catana 2014, 691–692.

³⁶³ Politis 2022, 22–23.

³⁶⁴ Reeser 2015, chaps. 3–4; Crawford 2004, 5–13; Ebbersmeyer 2002, 74–79; Hankins 2005, esp. 187–190.

³⁶⁵ *Comm. Phaedr.*, 113–115.

Almost immediately after its publication, cardinal Bessarion wrote a Greek defence of Plato upholding Plato's morality.³⁶⁶ This work circulated in Latin from 1466 onward, and a heavily revised version was printed three years later. Interestingly, one of the first letters in Ficino's *Epistole* is from Bessarion, who mentions the recent publication of his book 'in defence of Plato.'³⁶⁷ Together with Pisano's commentary on the Song of Songs, Bessarion's letter may well serve as an advance defence of Ficino's love letters by pointing out the philosophical respectability of Socratic love. In fact, Bessarion defended Plato's *verba amatoria* by adducing the authority of the Biblical king Solomon who wrote the very Song of Songs commented on by Pisano.³⁶⁸ For Ficino Socratic love was *a priori* wholly good and chaste; to prove this was only a matter of rephrasing and reframing its physical aspect. Consequently, Ficino's Platonic translations obscured 'pederasty' (paiderastein) under the cover of 'amare,' and turned the love of boys into a loving friendship between equal men.³⁶⁹ He further harmonised Plato's original teaching with his own moral beliefs by restricting the role of the senses in matters of love to sight and hearing. These were the most spiritual of the senses, he argued, and therefore most conducive to a contemplative appreciation of God's beauty.³⁷⁰

VITA VOLUPTUOSA

Reinterpreting Socratic love according to the moral framework of his time allowed Ficino to uphold his unquestionable faith in everything that Plato had written or said. But if there was no fault in Socratic love, how could it be merged with the *vita voluptuosa*? The *vita voluptuosa* is inferior precisely because it is inclined to carnal love and cares too much about pleasing the senses, which Ficino denied was the case for a Socratic lover. The first stage of Socratic love had to be made defective for it to fit the intended pattern of moral improvement without being discredited entirely. To do so, Ficino pictured his engagement with Lorenzo and Cavalcanti as initially unbalanced and overly passionate. In this way, he could highlight the weakness of his *persona* for the two reasons stipulated above. From a reader-response perspective, a confused and doubtful *persona* made it easier for readers to see in Ficino an attainable model. From a narratological point of view, his flawed understanding of love provided the first step in a storyline of ascent and spiritual growth. It is important to note here that the ensuing improvement was never meant to overcome the power of love, but only to steer it in the right direction. Indeed, Ficino's *Phaedrus* commentary explains that even harmful love can turn into something good.

³⁶⁶ Bessarion 1927.

³⁶⁷ Cf. Monfasani 2008, 1–5.

³⁶⁸ Bessarion 2023, III.2.24–25.

³⁶⁹ Reeser 2015, 102–103.

³⁷⁰ Cf. Ebbersmeyer 2002, 74.

Love, even when mixed with a harmful appetite, does not cease meanwhile to lift up the rational soul as far as it is able. If, as is probable, therefore, with the process of time, the soul, being honourable, cuts off desire while retaining the sublimity of love, it can establish friendship.³⁷¹

Now that we have sufficiently described the philosophical background, it is time to consider the narrative unfolding of love in the Cavalcanti letters. Never does Ficino imagine a homoerotic relationship in the modern sense.³⁷² The intemperance of his attachment to Cavalcanti is always a matter of emotional turbulence and not of physical desire. Nevertheless, as Ficino's amatory persona gradually masters the proper way of loving, he circumscribes appropriate love in physical terms. When *EL* 1.46 brings the Cavalcanti series to a preliminary conclusion, Ficino clearly states that one can engage with somebody through the senses of hearing and seeing only: 'The right end of love is familiarity, which consists in these three: thinking, seeing, and hearing.'³⁷³ Of course, he has never claimed anything else, but the establishment of concrete boundaries puts an end to the unrestrained emotions of the earlier letters. I have previously shown that Ficino's attitude towards Cavalcanti changes most drastically in *EL* 1.49. The two letters separating *EL* 1.46 from 1.49 are not addressed to Cavalcanti and one of them has nothing to do with love. This break in the series of love letters is intentional and allows both the reader and Ficino's *persona* to catch breath before bringing the first thematic section of the *Epistole* to an end. This, it could be said, is 'the process of time,' in which Ficino 'cut off desire while retaining the sublimity of love.' Finally, the last Cavalcanti letters illustrate how the soul 'can establish friendship' after it has overcome the harmful appetite of love. In *EL* 1.51, the final letter of the series, Ficino calls his relationship with Cavalcanti 'friendship.' The terminological shift is easy to overlook but highlights a narrative shift in light of the passage from the *Phaedrus* commentary cited above, in which Ficino describes how harmful love can turn into something honourable which he calls 'friendship'.

Before we move on to discuss the next theme in the *Epistole*, the question arises how absolute the transition is from a *modus* of personal love and self-centred passions in *EL* 1.22-51 to one of a broader perspective on social relationships beginning with *EL* 1.53? Does the shift constitute a complete rupture with the previous theme? No. Given the importance of love and friendship in Ficino's thought, it is not surprising that they return at regular intervals throughout the *Epistole*.³⁷⁴ For Ficino, love remains 'a factor of life in a state (*patria*/ *civitas*/ *città*) in the form of care for children

³⁷¹ Ficino 2008, 1:169.

³⁷² Cf. Kristeller 1943, 282.

³⁷³ *EL* 1.46: 'Legitimus amandi terminus est consuetudo; hec tribus constat: cogitatione, aspectu atque auditu.'

³⁷⁴ For an overview, see Akopyan and Smets 2021; on divine love in the letters, see Tarabochia 1975.

and youth.³⁷⁵ It operates in the Christian sense of charity but also for didactic aims in the Platonic tradition. Even someone as advanced as Socrates had made himself ‘equal to the younger men in purity of life, simplicity of words, games, jokes and jests.’³⁷⁶ Ficino’s puns on his addressees’ names and the letters’ occasional simplification of philosophical arguments, in addition to his continued letter writing in an amatory *modus* can be understood as his variation on ‘making himself a boy in order to render boys old men by domestic and agreeable familiarity,’ like Socrates did.³⁷⁷ The blurring of the boundaries between different kinds of life makes sense for yet another reason. As mentioned in the previous discussion of purgative virtues, perfection of one stage does not mean that its achievements are given up in ascending to the next stage.

LOVE CONTINUED

What does the recurrence of a distinct theme mean when we think about the order of the letters and the structure of the letter collection as a whole? The section dedicated to Lorenzo and Cavalcanti is so coherent that even order-sceptic readers acknowledge the pattern.³⁷⁸ It introduced the theme of love from various angles and, more importantly, guided the reader to an understanding of the text as intended by the author. The twin letter sequences make us aware of authorial arrangement and implicitly encourage us to look for it in the rest of the collection. However, the coherence of the Lorenzo and Cavalcanti series is unique, only matched by the highly repetitive character of Book 12. In contrast, neither the final two sections in Book 1 nor Books 2 to 10 have the same degree of consistency. Does this mean that the reader should abandon their attention for structural patterns and thematic continuities? The following paragraphs argue that this is not the case by analysing a handful of love letters that interrupt the civically focused section of the *Epistole*. While love and friendship permeate the entire *Epistole*, they do not obstruct our view on the larger patterns of which they form part. Each instance of love after *EL* 1.52 harks back to the exploration of love in the letters before that point and reminds the reader that they should interpret it according to the guidelines that were set out there. Only when doing this, can they be assured of the correct interpretation of each subsequent instance. In this way, a complex theme like love becomes a leading thread that stitches together the different sections of the books and their subdivisions.

Before we go on to discuss the main topic of the second section, civic virtue, I want to show in the following paragraphs how the insertion of a small batch of love letters ties this second section to

³⁷⁵ Blum 2022, 205.

³⁷⁶ *De amore* 7.16.

³⁷⁷ *De amore* 7.16.

³⁷⁸ Tröger 2016, 107.

the first one. The connection not only depends on their shared topic but on carefully placed intratextual allusions. The cluster ranging from *EL* 1.61 to 1.66 is concerned with love and friendship and repeats notions that we have encountered in *EL* 1.22-52. The first of those letters, *Quod amicus est in amico*, is addressed to Giuliano de' Medici. Its title illustrates how strongly it relates to what Lorenzo, who is briefly mentioned in this letter to his brother, had written to Ficino and to what Ficino in turn had written to Cavalcanti. The letter itself confirms that impression:

But in truth my great love for you has long impressed your image on my soul.
And just as I sometimes see myself outside myself in a mirror, so very often I
see you within me in my heart. ... Long enough has Love [*Cupido*] called both
of us to each other, and to himself.³⁷⁹

We recognise the migration of the lover's soul into the heart of the beloved, and the authoritative voice of Cupid from *EL* 1.22.³⁸⁰ In the following letter, Carlo Marsuppini, to whom I will return later, writes to Ficino that he is 'sane and healthy as long as I am with you; and I seem to live for myself only when I live with you; whenever I am away from you, I die.'³⁸¹ The description of love as a health threat resonates with Ficino's concerns in the earlier letters to Cavalcanti, and there is again the relocation of the soul into the beloved which we encountered in both the Lorenzo and Cavalcanti letters.³⁸² The new sequence of love letters does not end with Marsuppini but continues to include other members of Ficino's close circle. With *EL* 1.65, the Florentine philosopher had originally intended to praise Poliziano, we read, but Cupid objected saying 'if you praise Cupid [instead], you will praise Angelo and Marsilio at the same time; for I am your shared Love.' Ficino concedes and admits that with regard to Poliziano his love is 'always fully grown and ever-growing.'³⁸³ In *EL* 1.66, the final letter of this love cluster, Ficino is rather apologetic about his latest *litteras amatorias*, calling them 'foolish' (*ineptiores*), as if to remind us of the dangers of love which were hinted at in the previous section. The plural and the time indication *hodie* in combination with the same date shared between *EL* 1.64-66, ensures that we read the preceding five pieces in conjunction and with attention for their amatory *modus*. In contrast to the previous

³⁷⁹ *EL* 1.61: 're vera ingens in te amor meus iandudum figuram tuam animo impressit meo, atque, ut me extra me in speculo nonnunquam, ita te sepissime intra me in meo corde speculor. ... satis iampridem, satis Cupido nos et invicem et ad se convocavit utrosque.'

³⁸⁰ *Convocare* is often used in a military context, while Cupid was imagined as a judge by Lorenzo.

³⁸¹ *EL* 1.62: 'Tandiu enim sanus salvusque sum, quandiu tecum sum; ac tum denique vivere mihi videor, cum tecum vivo; quotiens absum, totiens perii.'

³⁸² Cf. *EL* 1.33-37.

³⁸³ *EL* 1.65: 'Si Cupidinem, Angelum una atque Marsilium: ego enim communis vestrum Amor sum.' 'Semper adultus est meus amor (quis credat?), semper et adolescens.'

series of love letters, Ficino has an unwavering trust in his own love which is firmly based in reason: ‘love does not deceive me, since I have judged before I started to love.’³⁸⁴

The miniature recapitulation of love repeatedly harks back to the more elaborate exploration of the same theme in *EL* 1.22-52. For example, the final lines of *EL* 1.66 ask Michelozzi to commend Ficino and Cavalcanti to Lorenzo and thus recall the initial triangle of love letters. A more complex case is *EL* 1.64, *Quantum possit desiderium amicorum*, addressed to Lorenzo de’ Medici. It is the first appearance of Lorenzo after the end of his unrewarding exchange with Ficino in *EL* 1.28. The temporal distance between *EL* 1.64 and *EL* 1.28 is thematised. Ficino states that lovers measure time by emotions and that, given Lorenzo’s impatience for an answer, his love for Ficino must be strong. We may think of the role that time played in the positive development of Ficino’s relationship with Cavalcanti. In fact, a verbal echo further highlights the association of *EL* 1.64 with the issue of time and patience in the letters to Cavalcanti. Ficino writes that Lorenzo ‘called the silence of one day a long-lasting silence (*diuturnum silentium*).’³⁸⁵ He may be referring to a letter which Lorenzo wrote to him around 20 March 1474, in which the former describes how his frustrations about Ficino’s ‘long silence’ disappeared after receiving a batch of letters from him.³⁸⁶ Indeed, the expression is not uncommon in Renaissance epistolography, and returns at less significant moments in the *Epistole*.³⁸⁷ However, this context does not matter within the macrotextual fabric of the collection. Until this point, the phrase ‘diuturnum silentium’ had appeared only in *EL* 1.36 from Ficino to Cavalcanti. Knowing that ‘memory for surface details is relatively poor compared with that for semantic content’ might problematise my claim that the repetition of those two words, so far apart from each other, can be the basis of serious textual interpretation.³⁸⁸ However, we have proof that the two words caught the attention of readers, perhaps because they recognised it from the beginning of a well-known speech by Cicero.³⁸⁹

One contemporary annotator highlighted *diuturnum silentium* with a special sign ↔ in *EL* 1.118, 5.39, and 7.29.³⁹⁰ Did he not notice its appearance in *EL* 1.36 and 1.64? I argue he did notice both instances because it was probably the fact that the two words recurred as often as three times that

³⁸⁴ *EL* 1.66: ‘Neque tamen me decipit amor, ubi antea iudicavi quam amavi.’

³⁸⁵ *EL* 1.64: ‘Amantes [metiuntur] tempus affectu: quo enim maius est desiderium, eo tempus possessionis quidem brevius, expectationis autem longius opinantur. Quantum ergo tu me ames, ex eo precipue tuis litteris declarasti, quod diei unius silentium «diuturnum silentium», et litteras meas, que velocissime advolarunt, “expectatissimas” appellasti.’

³⁸⁶ de’ Medici 1977, 1:515: ‘... littere tue, que adeo nostrum animum oblectarunt ut instar nobis Lethei fluminis fuerint ad oblitterandas indignations, quas ex diuturno silentio tuo conceperam.’

³⁸⁷ The collocation can be found, for example, in Traversari 1759, col. 155.297.391.578; Erasmus 1522, 349 (trl. in Erasmus 1971, 214); *FilE* 1.30. It also appears in *EL* 5.39; 7.29; 9.24; 12.16; 12.27.

³⁸⁸ Sharrock 2018, 24.

³⁸⁹ *Pro Marcello*, which was studied during the Middle Ages and early Renaissance; Marsh 2013, 310. Note that Whitton 2019, 456 attributes enough significance to this passage for it being a possible intertext of Tacitus’ *Agricola* 1-3.

³⁹⁰ Inc London, UCL, A QUARTO 5 ddd. I believe the annotator is a near-contemporary of Ficino because he seems to be familiar with some of the addressees in the *Epistole*; see p. 29-30.

moved him to annotate *EL* 1.118 in the first place. Anyway, the intratextual marker ‘appellasti’ (‘you called’) would have drawn the attention of the less attentive reader too. As it is, it prompts us to look for the citation in a previous letter from Lorenzo included in the collection. Finding it there would have been unsurprising, since it is in the letters to and from Lorenzo and Giuliano that we find the first references to ‘their own Cicero’ in the *Epistole*.³⁹¹ The margins of several incunables testify that readers sometimes liked to look for links between distant letters and cross-referenced them within the volume.³⁹² Based on the previous observations, we may assume that Ficino could expect his readers to notice the expression ‘diuturnum silentium’ and even to remember seeing it in a letter to Cavalcanti and not to Lorenzo. With this kind of literary techniques, he cultivated the reader’s continuous attention for the macrotextual coherence of the collection. Furthermore, enclosing *EL* 1.61-66 as an exponent of the first section into the second one reinforces the narrative *ductus* that runs through the entire *Epistole* sometimes as an undercurrent, sometimes patently on the surface.

CIVIC DUTIES

Let us leave behind the love letters and follow the letters’ *ductus* towards the overarching *modus* dealing with the active life. By means of its title, *EL* 1.53 announces a critical shift in focus to societal matters, but it does not elaborate on what exactly they comprise. That topic is mostly relegated to the following letters. This, I believe, is one of Ficino’s literary techniques in the *Epistole*. Unlike Petrarch, who worked out a single theme in lengthy epistles, Ficino has put together a mosaic depiction of the good life and its pitfalls with mostly small tesserae of various shades and colours. The following paragraphs describe the tesserae which together evoke the image of civic virtue. In *EL* 1.54, to the scholarly poets Fonzio and Alessandro Bracessi, Ficino praises Lorenzo’s secretary Michelozzi ‘because I find in him nothing effeminate, nothing brutish, nothing deceitful, nothing which does not carry the force of virtue before and within itself’.³⁹³ In the following letter, Ficino further specifies what he means with ‘a true man.’ He first opposes humanity to cruelty and then positively defines it as love and care for all men ‘as if for brothers born from one father in a long line of descent’.³⁹⁴ When Ficino speaks about *humanitas*, he uses a term which in the fifteenth century had multiple meanings including both charity and learning. Those were not mutually exclusive, and Poliziano wrote that ‘when I say “humanity”, I do not think more of φιλάνθρωπιαν

³⁹¹ Rees 2013a, 148–149.

³⁹² Ficino’s *Epistole*: Inc London, Warburg Library, ACH75. Poliziano’s letters: Inc München, UB, 2 Inc. lat. 919.

³⁹³ *EL* 1.54: ‘quia nihil reperio in eo viro effeminatum, nihil efferatum, nihil mendax, nihil quod non virtutis vim pre se ferat et intra se ferat.’

³⁹⁴ *EL* 1.55: ‘Quodammodo ceu fratres ex uno quondam patre longo ordine natos diligit atque curat.’

(charity) than of *παιδεῖαν* (education)—for in Latin it means both according to those who know.³⁹⁵ However, Ficino carefully avoided the association with intellectual training in *EL* 1.55. Originally, the letter ended in praise of Carlo Valguli, whose ‘humanity,’ Ficino wrote, consisted of charity as well as great learning in the ‘humanities’ of Greek and Latin literature.³⁹⁶ At this point in the letter collection, however, Ficino wanted to focus on moral values rather than on intellectual accomplishment. He therefore deleted the last two lines of the letter so that its canonical version only represents one meaning of *humanitas*, namely charity. *Humanitas* is not itself a virtue like manliness, decency, and honesty. Instead, it is the quality of possessing all these virtues at once. Rather than breaking down the civic virtues, *EL* 1.55 is still building up the conceptual framework of the entire civic section.

With *EL* 1.56, the letters start specifying societal values. They first do so by negative examples. After a short praise of Bernardo Rucellai as ‘a lawful citizen and happy man’ follows a triplet of letters on the *Stultitia et miseria hominum*.³⁹⁷ These share a reference to Democritus’ laughter and Heraclitus’ weeping about the folly of man. Ficino scolds mankind, which he calls ‘a monstrous, mad and miserable animal’.³⁹⁸ The overall message of the letters is that most people care more for worldly affairs than for the well-being of their soul. At the same time Ficino looks ahead at the peace and happiness that awaits the philosophically minded. ‘Let us climb,’ he writes ‘into the high watch tower of the mind, leaving the dust of the body below ... So, cherishing the divine, and disregarding the mortal, we will no longer be foolish or miserable, but indeed wise and happy.’³⁹⁹ However, the contrastive pairs of examples he gives to bring out the advantages of a God-oriented life and to reveal the pitfalls of ambition, greed, and abandon mostly apply to societal life. The blessings of the contemplative life are hardly mentioned, and care for the soul is in the first place presented as a means to fulfilling one’s civic duties. Self-control plays a key role in this. Early on, Ficino asks the rhetorical question ‘Who will deny that those men are foolish who attend to other people’s affairs but neglect their own?’⁴⁰⁰ Those who strive to rule others cannot master themselves, and they desire honours without desiring to be worthy of them. At the same time, they fail to cultivate the virtue in themselves which they admire in others.⁴⁰¹

³⁹⁵ *PoE* 3.11: ‘Humanitatem cum dico, non magis φιλάνθρωπιαν quam παιδεῖαν etiam intellego—utrumque Latine quidem scientibus signifit.’ For a discussion of Poliziano’s conception of scholarship, see Scaglione 1961, esp. 61.

³⁹⁶ *L3*, fol. 64v: ‘est enim vir humanitate humanitatisque studiis tam grecis quam latinis excellens.’

³⁹⁷ *EL* 1.56-59.

³⁹⁸ *EL* 1.58: ‘animal monstruosum, insanum et miserabile.’

³⁹⁹ *EL* 1.57: ‘Ascendamus in altam mentis speculam infimo corporis pulvere derelicto quapropter diligentes illa [divina] et ista [humana] negligentes neque stulti amplius erimus neque miseri, sed sapientes iam atque beati.’

⁴⁰⁰ *EL* 1.57: ‘Quis negabit stultos esse homines qui curant aliena, sua negligunt.’

⁴⁰¹ *EL* 1.59: ‘Quare aliis contendimus dominari cum nobis ipsi non dominemur ... et dignitates consequi conamur magis quam ut dignitatibus digni simus? ... Virtutem in alio admiramur; nos autem ut admirandi videamur nitimur, potius quam ut simus.’

People's focus on external goods leads to a corrupted society. While administrators desire 'an excellent crop of men,' they neglect 'the seedling of the child.'⁴⁰² More care goes to breeding horses, dogs, and birds than to the upbringing of a family. People value money more than their fellow men and do evil while expecting to receive good.⁴⁰³ Without the soul's discerning power, they fail to recognise the root of evil and legally allow the production of weapons whilst upholding the prohibition of murder.⁴⁰⁴ In Ficino's rant against the vanity of an outwardly good life without the spiritual grounding that brings it closer to God, he uses comparisons taken from family and public life: The soul's beauty is more important than household furniture; peace with others depends above all on internal peacefulness; the layout of buildings must be carefully planned, but the harmony of the soul is of greater consequence.⁴⁰⁵ The three letters about the folly of man are a rhetorical intensification of Ficino's argument that the soul should always strive to ascend to the highest good. However, I do not agree with Kristeller's assessment that they are 'merely an indirect exhortation to the contemplative life and must be understood with all [their] rhetorical form in terms of this exhortatory purpose.'⁴⁰⁶ I explain my reasons in the following paragraph.

Ficino considered the three letters so effective that he published the third one in an Italian translation as part of his *Sermoni morali*, a collection of eleven exhortatory texts.⁴⁰⁷ It seems unlikely that they were delivered as actual sermons, but the generic qualification in combination with the choice for Italian rather than Latin is interesting. It suggests a broader audience, one that could not reasonably be expected to abandon their ordinary activities and aspire to commit themselves fully to the contemplative life.⁴⁰⁸ Moreover, the adjective 'moral' indicates that they belong to their own kind of virtue, distinct from the speculative one. In *EL* 1.106, *Virtutum definitio officium finis*, Ficino has given us an overview of how he saw the relationship between the different kinds of virtue. The passage reappears virtually unchanged in the *Platonic Theology*:

There are two kinds of virtues, those in the intellect and those presenting the appetite, whether rational or irrational. The first are known as the speculative virtues, the second as the moral. The first are speculative because they are acquired through speculation, and once acquired are used in speculation. The second are moral because they are acquired by custom and habituation, and

⁴⁰² *EL* 1.58: 'Magistratus ... optimam virorum segetem optant, sementem vero virorum, id est pueritiam, non satis excolunt.'

⁴⁰³ *EL* 1.58: 'Cum male agant, accepturos bona. ... Quot reperies, qui tanti aestiment hominem quanti pecuniam?'

⁴⁰⁴ *EL* 1.58: 'Homicidium prohibent et ubique instrumenta permittunt ad necem hominum fabricari.'

⁴⁰⁵ *EL* 1.58.

⁴⁰⁶ Kristeller 1943, 292.

⁴⁰⁷ Edited in Davie 2005.

⁴⁰⁸ Rees 2013b, 85.

once acquired they govern our moral conduct and what we do. In the second are justice ..., courage ..., and temperance.⁴⁰⁹

The sermon collection, characterised by an inclination towards community-oriented imagery and designated as ‘moral,’ is not aimed at the contemplative life but at the active life. Accordingly, the letter about the *Stupidity and misery of mankind* which was included in the sermon collection, should be interpreted as pertaining to civic life. By extension, the other two letters from the triad on this theme are also thematically linked to the *vita activa* and not the *vita contemplativa* as Kristeller suggested. They are immediately followed by the short series of amatory letters which I discussed above. When this interlude has come to its end, the civic letters pick up where they stopped. *EL* 1.68 recalls Democritus’ laughter from *EL* 1.57-59, now directed against human arrogance.⁴¹⁰ The title of *EL* 1.69 begins with *De stultitia hominum*, exactly like *EL* 1.57-59, and shares every other feature including the condemnation of hypocrisy and the use of professional metaphor.

After the general introduction of moral virtues in *EL* 1.53-56 and their negative definition in *EL* 1.57-59 and 1.68-69, a *modus* with positive descriptions starts with *EL* 1.70. In this letter to Lorenzo de’ Medici, Ficino praises generosity and almsgiving, which are subcategories of justice.⁴¹¹ He used language that would have resonated with Lorenzo’s family background of successful merchants:

Only he who is generous towards the poor imitates God exactly, for the principle of giving is the same both for the generous man and for God. Very fortunate is the merchant who for such a paltry sum buyshimself free from his enemies, that is his imperfections, and at the same time buys men and God! He, who in the midst of great riches often reflects on what it is to be poor, will never become poor. ... A great man can do nothing better than generously descend to the lowest places.⁴¹²

As we have encountered a few times before, the letter to Lorenzo is followed by an accompanying note to his secretary Michelozzi. This follow-up praises Lorenzo’s kindness and his compassion to

⁴⁰⁹ Ficino 2001, 2:289.

⁴¹⁰ ‘Rides unquam mortalium arrogantiam, quam ego sepe derideo.’

⁴¹¹ *EL* 1.106: ‘Justice is accompanied by generosity and magnanimity.’

⁴¹² *EL* 1.70: ‘solus homo in pauperes liberalis exacte hunc imitatur: eadem enim in dando ratio est liberalis hominis atque Dei. O felicem nimium mercatorem, qui exiguo pretio se ab hostibus, id est vitiis, redimit simulque emit homines atque Deum! Nunquam erit pauper qui hominum Deique dives est, qui in summis divitiis sepe considerat quid est pauperem esse; nunquam evadet infimus nihil maius vir magnus agit quam magnifice descendit ad imum.’

the poor, while two letters later his and Giuliano's generosity towards scholars is celebrated in a letter to Poliziano.⁴¹³

In *EL* 1.77, we find a more oblique reference to civic virtue, which warrants closer inspection. The short letter contains a rare reference to a work by a contemporary author: Ficino commends a vernacular poem in *terza rima* by his friend Sebastiano Foresi to Lorenzo the Magnificent. The letter thus resembles *EL* 1.7 where Ficino tries to sell Lorenzo Pisano's commentary of the Song of Songs to Cosimo de' Medici. I have argued that *EL* 1.7 prepares readers of the *Epistole* for the series of love letters that follows. If we can replicate this argument here, how does the citation of Foresi's poem fit into *modus* of the second section? Foresi was Ficino's trusted notary but otherwise an unexceptional member of the humanist circles around the Medici family. Apart from small excerpts, his works remain unedited and virtually unstudied—according to the judgment of one scholar, this is due to Foresi's mediocrity. At the end of his life, he translated a book from Vergil's *Georgics*, preceded by a politically charged introduction to which I will return in the second section.⁴¹⁴ However, the work which Ficino mentions in his *Epistole* dates from an earlier period. It is at once a praise of virtue and of Cosimo as the epitome of virtue. As a result, it is known under two titles: *Trionfo delle virtù* and *Trionfo di Cosimo*. The *Trionfo* is handed down to us in three Florentine manuscripts, and in a presentation copy for Lorenzo de' Medici now in Harvard.⁴¹⁵ The Richardson manuscript and its Landau copy contain Ficino's dedication letter which is now *EL* 1.77 and so testify to the philosopher's investment in the success of Foresi and his work.

The opening verses of the poem picture Foresi as the personification of Sense, whom Intellect takes under its protection. The latter narrates the history of the world until the foundation of Florence, which leads to a discussion of Fortune. After Foresi and Intellect have considered Fortune's past victims, they identify strategies to guard oneself against its blows. The best strategy, they conclude, is the practice of virtue. This is illustrated with two examples from classical antiquity, Scipio Africanus and Cato the Younger, who were widely seen as the embodiment of moral excellence. Then, Foresi hails Cosimo de' Medici as the successor of their ancient perfection. He describes the banker's triumph over different vices as well as the company of virtuous men that follows him. Finally, Romulus, the mythical founder of Rome, laments the decline of the city,

⁴¹³ *EL* 1.73: 'Iusti sunt et felices qui in summis divitiis constituti se Dei ministros, pauperum tutores, pecuniarum distributores existimant. Fortunata nimium adolescens, qui tales nuper nactus es patronos; ego tales nactus sum iamdiu.'

⁴¹⁴ Pignatti 1997; Ponte 2004.

⁴¹⁵ MSS Cambridge (Mass.), Houghton Library, Richardson 46; Firenze, BML, Palatino 345; BNCF, Landau 263; Magl. VII.816. Cf. Lenzuni 1992, 2.61-2.61.a.

before the poem ends with a praise of (Florentine) humanist culture.⁴¹⁶ The core of the *Trionfo* is the exaltation of the late Cosimo, especially in his role as family head and city leader:

In pace et in quiete, se ben scerno,
sollecito d'ingegnio in exercitio,
di buon ricordo et con amor paterno;

Lieto nel uolto et in qualunque offitio
constante et ne l'andar tutto seuero,
come s'aspecta a ogni buon patritio:

Date agli studi, ma maxime intero
a quella che fa gli huomini immortali
et fa discerner il falso dal vero.⁴¹⁷

The normative function of Christianity as well as the denunciation of corruption within the Church are leading threads in Foresi's moralising *trionfo*. However, its focus is unmistakably on the civic virtues which Cosimo represented above all. The poem concerns itself not with abstract ideals but with 'la condotta dell'uomo nella società e il senso della sua missione terrena,' as Eugenio Garin wrote.⁴¹⁸ It aspires to be comprehensive in its evocation of individual virtues and their historical fulfilment. While Ficino's allusion is indirect and intelligible only for those who know Foresi's *Trionfo*, it is well-placed to wrap up the civic letter sequence.

The series of societal letters which I have described thus far purposively leads to *EL* 1.78, which bears the self-explanatory title *de officio civis*. No letter is so visibly concerned with the civic life as this one, because of its title as well as its content. We read that 'it is the duty of a citizen to consider the state as a single being formed of its citizens who are the parts; and the parts should serve the whole, not the whole the parts. ... Let each man love and reverence his country as he would the founder of his family. Let the ordinary citizen obey the ancient, well-tried laws, just as he would obey God. ... Let the magistrate remember that he is subject to the laws in just the same way as the ordinary citizen.'⁴¹⁹ Several of the themes which were previously introduced return in a synthetic exhortation to contribute to the welfare of the society. It underscores the precedence which the

⁴¹⁶ Foresi 1883, 7–14.

⁴¹⁷ Foresi 1883, 17.

⁴¹⁸ Garin 1952, 72.

⁴¹⁹ *EL* 1.78: 'Est autem civis officium considerare civitatem esse tanquam animal unum ex civibus tanquam partibus constitutum, ac partem toti, non totum parti, servire debere: ... Patriam quisque tanquam parentum parentem amet et colat; privatus antiquis probatisque legibus obediatur tanquam Deo ... Magistratus meminerit non aliter se legibus quam privatum magistratibus esse subiectum.'

communal benefit has over the individual, a conviction which transpired from the earlier letters on liberality in which wealth was only good in as far as it was put to other people's use.⁴²⁰ Ficino restates his equation of the fatherland with the *paterfamilias*, and immediately puts into the context of law and the equality of everybody before that law.

Several letters before *EL* 1.78 point toward the theme of religion and philosophy that concludes Book 1. One of them is *EL* 1.74 *on the goodness and dignity of the lawyer*. Someone professionally occupied with law, Ficino writes, 'is the defender of the citizens as a whole, the general oracle of the state, and the interpreter of the divine mind and will.'⁴²¹ The final part of this definition links civic duties with theology, the second of which dominates the third section of the collection. The next two letters, *EL* 1.75-76, build on this association and deal with the dignity of priesthood. Ficino elsewhere stresses the sacrality of holy office, placing it above the changeability of ordinary lives.⁴²² However, at this point he appears to think rather of its social function. We read that a priest is 'an angel of God standing in God's place, performing His work *amongst men*'.⁴²³ Ficino also warns that no one with the right notion of priesthood would dare to abuse it. He does not specify what he means with 'abuse' (*abutetur*), but the expression suggests that we should not think of theological misinterpretation or liturgical carelessness but of wronging others from a position of spiritual authority. This was a general concern in fifteenth-century Florence, where priests naturally played a role in organising the state. Indeed, this is one of the recurring themes in Foresi's *Trionfo* to which Ficino refers in *EL* 1.77. The city's clerical class was closely connected with politicians and educators, and their involvement in civic affairs was widely recognised.⁴²⁴ Moreover, as Amos Edelheit has observed,

Ficino was concerned about the separation of religion from practical life. He was troubled by the lack of ... a deep connection between religious ceremonies and other intellectual or political practices in civic life. [This] demand for reunification of religion and politics stems from Ficino's new and very wide notion of the spiritual crisis and of the nature of religion.⁴²⁵

After *EL* 1.78, the letters' connection with the civic life becomes notably less pronounced, and metaphysical issues gain prominence. While several of them remain concerned with mankind's general wellbeing within society, theological reasoning enters the discourse ever more explicitly.

⁴²⁰ *EL* 1.70; 1.73.

⁴²¹ *EL* 1.74: 'hic publicus civium patronus, hic commune civitatis oraculum, hic divine mentis et voluntatis interpres.'

⁴²² Cf. Serracino-Inglott 2002.

⁴²³ *EL* 1.75: 'Angelus vicem Dei gerens apud homines.' Italics are mine.

⁴²⁴ Cf. Vasoli 1999b, 52–53; 2007, 422–423.

⁴²⁵ Edelheit 2008, 208.

For example, two accounts of medicine are set in a religious context, where prayer and divine revelation are key.⁴²⁶ Furthermore, the happiness of society is said to depend on religion, as the latter provides the necessary complement to our rationality and guards us from succumbing under ‘regret for the past, dread of the future, anxiety over the present, knowledge of evils and insatiable desire for innumerable possessions’.⁴²⁷ In the next few paragraphs, I will point out the shift in thematic material after *EL* 1.78, which affirms the three-stage *ductus* announced in the introductory series of letters.

DISCIPLINING LORENZO

LUIGI PULCI

We have seen that *EL* 1.61-66 link the second with the first section by rehearsing the theme of love within the section dedicated to civic matters. The figure of Lorenzo de’ Medici played an important role in this thematic recapitulation, and one could say that his changing relationship with Ficino is one of the uniting factors in the *Epistole*. In fact, he continues to be a prominent correspondent in the third section of the collection, which moves beyond the amatory *modus*. In *EL* 1.82-89, the philosopher tries to turn Florence’s *de facto* ruler away from vain pleasures and towards committed self-cultivation. It has been rightly suggested that we should understand Ficino’s advice to Lorenzo in the context of his own conflict with Luigi Pulci.⁴²⁸ The latter was a vernacular poet who exerted considerable influence on Lorenzo and inspired him to write satirical works like the *Simposio*, which ridiculed some of the main tenets of Ficino’s philosophy. Pulci and Ficino lived in peace with each other even though they competed for Lorenzo’s support.⁴²⁹ Despite a few provocations, perhaps as early as 1473, Pulci still counted on Ficino to plead for him with Lorenzo in February 1474.⁴³⁰ However, in 1475 the poet launched an attack against Ficino with a series of polemical sonnets and thereby escalated a conflict that probably started brewing in the second half of 1474.⁴³¹

EL 1.82, *de tempore parce expendendo* appears to be an attempt at detaching Lorenzo from Pulci’s influence. It warns him for the dangers of losing time over trifles and ends in an admonition to avoid flatterers and disparagers. The advice Ficino gives is very practical and contains such tips and tricks as setting apart ‘an hour each day for nourishing the mind with liberal studies’ and to put his

⁴²⁶ *EL* 1.80-81.

⁴²⁷ *EL* 1.83: ‘propter preteritorum penitentiam, futurorum metum, presentium anxietatem, malorum cognitionem, insatiabilem innumerabilium rerum cupiditatem.’

⁴²⁸ Gentile 1990, lvi-lvii; cf. Signoriello 2017, 84–85.

⁴²⁹ Lebano 1974, 492–495.

⁴³⁰ Maher 2018, 66–69; Kristeller 1937, 2:285–286.

⁴³¹ Maher 2018, 72–73.

resolutions into practice today rather than tomorrow. While the letter already foreshadows the philosophical priority of the third and final section, it still alludes to the contemplative life from a civic perspective. Ficino focuses on Lorenzo's political duties in line with the second section's overarching theme. He writes that Lorenzo cannot allow himself to be a slave of empty pastimes, since he is 'born to rule.' His self-development, which necessitates a partial retreat from public life, is thus presented as a prerequisite to serve others in a political capacity. As in the earliest letters, Cosimo is the model which Lorenzo should imitate. The founder of the Medici dynasty is all the more present in our mind after *EL* 1.77 brought him back through its reference to Foresi's *Trionfo*. While the late banker's interest in philosophy is mentioned, the main virtues that Ficino wants to kindle in Lorenzo are of the civic kind. In *EL* 1.86, he mentions above all magnanimity towards men, even-temperedness, and humble care for one's family as well as for the state. Cosimo was, Ficino argues, the realisation of Plato's philosophy in the active life and this should become Lorenzo's ideal:

The virtues of which Plato had showed me once the conception, Cosimo put into practice every day. ... Just as God created the cosmos on the model of the world, so you must mould yourself on the model of Cosimo as you have already begun to do.⁴³²

Although I agree with the suggestion made by distinguished scholars that *EL* 1.82 is implicitly directed against Pulci,⁴³³ the letter itself admittedly gives little information indicating this. Nor does Lorenzo's *response to the letter about the sparing use of time*, which contains no criticism of Pulci other than a reference to 'others who attend to us with their kindness [and] bestow riches, honours, or pleasure' but cannot offer 'the gifts of friendship' which Ficino has in store.⁴³⁴ The vagueness partly results from a conscious decision to anonymise the conflict. Early manuscripts named Pulci in the *ad hominem* attacks of *EL* 1.113-114, but his name is removed from subsequent versions, perhaps at the request of Lorenzo de' Medici himself.⁴³⁵ Equally puzzling is the remarkably obsequious and self-deprecatory tone of Lorenzo's response to Ficino. It is true that 'their rapport, though intimate, remained that of a master with his pupil,' as Miriam Bullard remarked.⁴³⁶ But that is true for their entire correspondence and does not explain the clear change in Lorenzo's attitude at this point in time. Nor is the content of *EL* 1.82 and 1.84 alarming enough to account for his immediate

⁴³² *EL* 1.86: 'quam enim virtutum ideam Plato semel mihi monstraverat, eam quotidie Cosmus agebat ... sicut Deus cossum ad ideam mundi formavit, ita te ipse, quemadmodum cepisti, ad ideam Cosmi figura.'

⁴³³ Gentile 1990, LVI–LVII; cf. Signoriello 2017, 84–85; Maher 2013, 64; Marcel 1958, 400.

⁴³⁴ *EL* 1.84: 'ea amicitie munera abunde prestare valeas, que ceteri nequeant: ceteri nempe, qui nos benivolentia prosecuntur, aut divitias iuvare possunt aut honoribus aut voluptatibus.'

⁴³⁵ The changes can be traced in *L2*, fol. 74v; *L4*, fol. 110v–111v; *L3*, fol. 93r. Cf. Vasoli 1999b, 60.

⁴³⁶ Bullard 1990a, 479; cf. Tröger 2016, chaps. 4, *passim*.

submission. Perhaps, Lorenzo's letter was an outburst of emotion—uncommon but not unique in Ficino's letters? This is unlikely, since the autograph manuscript shows that he wrote the letter with the assistance of Michelozzi and with several rounds of careful editing (Figure 9).⁴³⁷ I believe that the answer to our questions regarding the root of Ficino's indignation and of Lorenzo's seemingly genuine remorse is contained in the rearrangement of the letters that can be traced in several manuscripts. In earlier versions of Book 1, *EL* 1.84 followed immediately on *EL* 1.82 and the intermediate letter *EL* 1.83, to the rhetorician Benedetto Colucci, came five letters later.⁴³⁸ The next paragraph explains why Ficino ultimately decided to move the latter piece forward in the chain.

In its final position, I propose, *EL* 1.83 forms a perfect bridge leading from Ficino's reprimand to Lorenzo's submission. Under the title *Homo sine religione bestiis est infoelior*, the insertion defends religion as the light that brings happiness to men. Contemporary readers would have known that it was precisely religion and theology against which Pulci directed his satirical verse. His enmity towards the church was so patent that he was even denied being laid to rest in a consecrated cemetery when he died in 1484.⁴³⁹ For the informed reader, *EL* 1.83 shows the dangers inherent in Pulci's nihilism and it is this seriously bleak image that provides the ideal backdrop for Lorenzo's outspoken regret. In the slipstream of this exchange follows, as usual, a letter to Lorenzo's secretary Michelozzi.⁴⁴⁰ Ficino praises Lorenzo's natural diligence and wonders how much more he would achieve if he also willed to be diligent. The systematic accompaniment of letters to Lorenzo with letters to Michelozzi shows that Ficino did not consider his guidance of the former as a private endeavour. It was, from the beginning, a state affair which required mediation from within the system of power. Ficino knew that Lorenzo was always reading along over Michelozzi's shoulder,⁴⁴¹ and uses this to his rhetorical advantage. The letters to Michelozzi are an indirect praise of Lorenzo, meant to encourage him but steering away from outright flattery. Whereas his letters addressed to Lorenzo chastise and correct the young Medici, the letters to Michelozzi demonstrate his allegiance.

In the earliest manuscripts, Ficino's letter to Michelozzi was followed by two other letters to Lorenzo, namely *EL* 1.120-121. They are very brief recommendation letters for two fellow priests, respectively Pace Neri and Gregorio di Piero Befani. As such, they would have interrupted the Senecan mode of *ammaestramento*, to use Cesare Vasoli's term, that characterises *EL* 1.82-89 in their

⁴³⁷ Fil. Firenze, MAP, 88, fol. 218^r.

⁴³⁸ *L3; L2; R*.

⁴³⁹ Scardeone 1560, 423 (cited in Marcel 1958, 432): 'Pulcio nobili Florentino qui Patavii defunctus ob scripta prophana, prophano in loco iuxta coemeterium S. Thomae martyris prope puteum absque solitics sacris sepultus iacet.'

⁴⁴⁰ Cf. *EL* 1.26; 1.66; 1.71.

⁴⁴¹ *EL* 1.103: 'You read these whether I like it or not; for you are so close to Niccolò that you consider that what is written to him is written to Lorenzo.'

Figure 9 Fil. Firenze, MAP, 88, fol. 218^r (EL 1.83)

current shape. After *EL* 1.120-121 followed *EL* 1.83, which, we have seen, was better placed between Ficino's advice on spending time wisely and Lorenzo's response. By moving *EL* 1.120-121 and 1.83, as well as deleting a fourth letter,⁴⁴² the aforementioned praise of Cosimo in *EL* 1.86 comes immediately after *EL* 1.85 and is thus made an integral part of Ficino's paraenetic endeavour. The next letter to Lorenzo is already *EL* 1.88, but first comes a letter to Francesco Salviati, entitled *Durate, et vosmet rebus servate secundis*. The position of this letter is remarkable, and it adds another political dimension to Ficino's tutoring. The philosopher congratulates Salviati on being appointed as the Archbishop of Pisa, an appointment which Ficino had 'prophesied.' Chronologically, the letter clearly belongs after *EL* 1.117, where Salviati has not yet been promoted which is clear from Ficino writing that he waited for something to happen 'which would prompt me to write a congratulatory letter to you.' Indeed, the earliest manuscripts (*L3, L2, R*) still respect this chronology. We have seen before, in the letters to Cavalcanti and in the ring composition of *EL* 1.7 and 1.52, that Ficino's disregard for chronology serves as an incentive for the reader to look for an alternative organising principle. The following section explains why *EL* 1.87 was moved to its current place.

FRANCESCO SALVIATI

Ficino was clearly in favour of Salviati, perhaps on the assumption that a priest like him had better be on friendly terms with a prelate of this calibre. But Salviati's rise to the Pisan archbishopric was against the will of Lorenzo who considered it an attempt to undermine his power.⁴⁴³ Manuscript evidence suggests that Ficino foresaw tensions resulting from his praise of Salviati. *L3* does not include his name in the address line, and it was only added to *L4* in a second instance and by a different hand.⁴⁴⁴ In 1478, Salviati was a key figure in the conspiracy that tried to topple the Medici regime and led to the death of Lorenzo's brother Giuliano. He paid for this with his life and was hung from one of the windows of the Palazzo Vecchio. While the Florentine propaganda put Salviati at the centre of the conspiracy, the Pope took issue with the brutal execution of an Archbishop by lay authorities and consequently took measures against Lorenzo to which we will return later.⁴⁴⁵ Despite all this, *EL* 1.87 was not removed from the collection unlike less incendiary letters, nor relegated to a less conspicuous position.⁴⁴⁶ Moreover, the luxurious Vatican manuscript which possibly served as a presentation copy to Giuliano de' Medici and which was certainly not

⁴⁴² Appendix VI in Ficino 1990, 252.

⁴⁴³ Lorenzo had previously blocked Salviati's accession to the Florentine archbishopric against the wish of the Pope. Cf. Fubini 1984, 39–41; Najemy 2006, 354.

⁴⁴⁴ Respectively fol. 114^r and fol. 93^v.

⁴⁴⁵ Celati 2019, 333–334.337–339.

⁴⁴⁶ See Appendices I–VI in Ficino 1990, 143–252.

destined for clandestine circulation, restores Salviati's name and title which remained also in subsequent editions.⁴⁴⁷

Most studies have focussed on self-censorship in the manuscript copies of Ficino's letter books.⁴⁴⁸ As a result, they leave undiscussed those letters which were reinserted or preserved in the collection against all odds. What inspired the provocative placement of a letter to Salviati in between two letters to Lorenzo? It is not the first nor the last time that I mention Ficino's ideas on the separation of worldly and spiritual power. The letter thanking Lorenzo for providing Ficino with a benefice at St Christopher is ambiguous in tone, and I have argued that Ficino was unhappy with the political wrangling that had gone on behind the scenes. The conspicuous addition of a letter to Salviati raises once more the point that a city ruler should not seek conflict with the church, especially not on matters like the investiture of bishops. While Dante's *Monarchia* primarily aimed to put checks on the authority of the Pope, its argument works in both ways. In *EL* 1.82 and 1.86, Ficino had censured the 'foolish cares ... and unnecessary activity' (*inanibus curis ... negotiis non necessariis*) of Lorenzo and urged him to imitate Cosimo's dutiful and humble way of doing politics. I believe there may be an archival clue that Lorenzo understood Ficino's awkwardness in those matters, at least by the Autumn of 1487. In October that year, Lorenzo tried to secure a third benefice for Ficino, for which a special dispensation from the Pope was needed. Lorenzo made his petition via an intermediary, Giovanni Lanfredini, in the hope that Ficino could be granted the bishopric of Cortona. Evidently, Lorenzo was trying to showcase his powerful relationships as well as trying to promote Ficino's interests. Both of those aims did not ask for secrecy, on the contrary. Nevertheless, he urged Lanfredini to 'keep in mind that this is my idea and that I have not discussed it with him [viz. Ficino]. So, I would really prefer the matter be done so that neither he nor others learn of it beforehand.'⁴⁴⁹

'The quiet manner in which Lorenzo went about it is curious,' as Melissa Bullard has noted.⁴⁵⁰ A possible explanation is Ficino's sentiment about Lorenzo's arm-wrestling on behalf of his ecclesiastical career and the latter's sensitivity towards it.⁴⁵¹ As I have claimed in the previous paragraphs, Ficino's inclination to support Salviati comes naturally with his function as a priest. The following letter to Lorenzo, *EL* 1.88, starts with an evocation of the circumstances in which Ficino wrote it, namely 'when [he] had left the church after reciting Holy Office.' The letter's

⁴⁴⁷ *V*, fol. 73v.

⁴⁴⁸ Tröger 2016, 47–49; Gentile 1990, ccxlv; Fubini 1984, 48; Gentile 1980, 144–145.

⁴⁴⁹ de' Medici 2004, 11:270: 'advisandovi che questo pensiero è mio sanza haverlo conferito con lui, et vorrei volentieri la cosa fussi facta che lui et altri non ne havessi ad intendere prima.'

⁴⁵⁰ Bullard 1990a, 469.

⁴⁵¹ Cf. de' Medici 2004, 11:270n18.

allusion to Ficino's work *On Christian Religion* further stresses the sacerdotal position from which the philosopher was writing. The last time Ficino had mentioned his priestly duties, the reader remembers, was in the first series of love letters to Lorenzo, in which his dedication to St Christopher was a source of friction between the mentor and his pupil.⁴⁵² In Ficino's priesthood rests his quiet opposition to Lorenzo's policies. Within the hierarchy of allegiances, the Church took absolute precedence for Ficino, and the arrangement of the collection underlines this.

EL 1.88 continues with an extravagant play on the concept of rhetorical invention. Ficino starts by claiming that he does not know what to say and, building on this problem, goes on to find a string of things to write down. He points out that he has enough to say but lacks the invention to come up with what to say exactly. Next, he points out that poverty is recognised from abundance. Turning this last observation round, he concludes that 'since desire has its natural origin in poverty, it is always poverty stricken'.⁴⁵³ This lesson has broader implications when read in conjunction with *EL* 1.82-87. It identifies the weakness underlying the ambition to have more and thereby reflects on Lorenzo's conflict with Salviati and the Pope over the Pisan archbishopric. Ficino ends the letter, unsurprisingly, by drawing Lorenzo's attention to the ever-rich abundance found in the soul, 'where the good things of God are seen'.⁴⁵⁴ The letter is accompanied by a note to Poliziano, who by this time is assisting Michelozzi in his secretarial tasks. Ficino asks him to read out the letter to Lorenzo 'nicely, sometimes in soothing tones, sometimes with a sonorous ring'.⁴⁵⁵ This request can be read as a final, if implicit, criticism of Lorenzo for being too focused on the appearance of things instead of on their content, so that he needs to 'be deceived by guile' (*foco deceptus*) into appreciating the philosopher's words. In this respect, *EL* 1.88-89 are the continuation of Ficino's previous attempts at correcting Lorenzo's carelessness, which has spun out from *EL* 1.82 to 1.86. In the following section I will show how yet another letter to Lorenzo, *EL* 1.95, finally brings the theme of civic virtues to a close and initiates a more philosophically oriented section.

⁴⁵² *EL* 1.23-24; 1.27-28.

⁴⁵³ *EL* 1.88: 'quod appetitus, cum naturalem ab inopia trahat originem, semper est pauper.'

⁴⁵⁴ *EL* 1.88: 'in qua Domini bona videntur.'

⁴⁵⁵ *EL* 1.89: 'eleganter, partim quidem voce suavi, partim ore rotundo.'

CHAPTER 4

THE HIGHEST GOOD: *EL* 1.90-1.131

FRAYING PATTERNS AND SOLID STRUCTURES

As we advance in Book 1, the clearcut structure identified in the introductory series, which appeared to be accurately applied in the first and second sections, starts to fray in the lead-in to the third section. Philosophical-religious and political concerns started to slide into each other when Ficino focused on the dignity of priesthood, on the need for reflective calm in Lorenzo's life, and on the latter's involvement in ecclesiastical affairs. Yet, the civic aspect of those matters was carefully preserved. Henceforward, it becomes more difficult to point out the thematic unity in distinct sections of Book 1. While *EL* 1.90-94 are coherent within themselves they do not thematically tie into each other like the letters described thus far. Moreover, their function within the macrotext of the *Epistole* is unclear. It is therefore unsurprising that the position of *EL* 1.90-96 is remarkably variable between manuscripts *L3*, *L2*, and *R*, and the final version. In the following paragraph, I try to explain how the letters could be read in conjunction with each other. However, the connections I make are tentative. Explaining this inconsistency by referring to Barthes' praise of 'les jeux, fantaisies, explorations, paresses' inherent in an artful *ductus* could be seen as an admission of analytical weakness.⁴⁵⁶ Yet, the veracity of the collection relies on its lack of structure as much as its meaning relies on the articulation of a structure. After showing how his collection functions as a macrotext, Ficino gradually abandons strict ordering principles in favour of looser connections.

While both *EL* 1.90 and 1.94 are love letters, the first one mainly discusses perseverance, which according to Ficino 'springs from virtue'.⁴⁵⁷ This creates a thematic bridge with *EL* 1.91, which briefly praises the balancing virtues of prudence and restraint. Cambini's adherence to those qualities, Ficino writes, is clear from his desire for spiritual and physical health. Music is the central theme in both *EL* 1.92 and 1.93, of which the first is a long exposition on its healing power. However, the faint connection between music's salubrious qualities as discussed in *EL* 1.92 and the remark about health in *EL* 1.91 is too weak to make a convincing case for meaningful arrangement. Only the very short *EL* 1.93 fits well with the preceding two letters since it revolves

⁴⁵⁶ See p. 61-62.

⁴⁵⁷ *EL* 1.103.

entirely around playing the lyre and singing. It is therefore no surprise that most manuscripts present these three musical letters in immediate succession.⁴⁵⁸ However, I have not come up with a satisfactory reason why music is discussed in the first place. The Venetian Giorgio Valla (1447-1500), who translated Cleonides' *Introduction to Harmonics* into Latin, described music as the artform that leads to understanding the principles of a harmonious society.⁴⁵⁹ However, this connection between music and society is absent from Ficino's letter. Perhaps, *De musica* is another stepping-stone to the philosophical section. In the platonic curriculum, music was the last of the mathematical subjects which had to be studied before advancing to dialectics.⁴⁶⁰ Ficino wrote that through it 'the mind is liberated from the commotions of desire,' after which 'it will begin to become loosened from the body.'⁴⁶¹ The following paragraph lays out how Ficino finally closes the societal sections and leads our attention to a more spiritual realm.

After this intermezzo of structural vagueness, Ficino returns to discernible patterns. The transition from the second to the third and final theme is highlighted by three different ring compositions. We have already observed how the transition of the first to the second section was indicated by the pair 1.52~1.6. Nearer the place currently under consideration, we are prepared to watch out for ring compositions by *EL* 1.86. This letter not only repeats the title of *EL* 1.3, *imitatio potior* ('utilior' in *EL* 1.3) *est quam lectio*, but even an entire phrase in precisely the same wordings.⁴⁶² Moreover, both *EL* 1.86 and *EL* 1.3 centre on Cosimo de' Medici as the single model to imitate. Now, the first ring composition providing closure to the letters on civic virtues consists of *EL* 1.7 and 1.95, which have conspicuously similar titles: *Lex et iustitia* and *De lege et iustitia*. I will return to the latter's content below. The second one consists of *EL* 1.53 and 1.96, which are both addressed to Francesco Tedaldi. He was a relatively insignificant character who is otherwise completely absent from the *Epistole*, and his return is therefore all the more conspicuous. The third ring composition links *EL* 1.14 and 1.97, consolations on the deaths of respectively 'someone' and 'a friend.' Note that *EL* 1.53, the very first letter of the second section, not only forms a ring composition with

⁴⁵⁸ *EL* 1.93 is isolated from *EL* 1.92-93 in *L3* and *L2* so that *R* becomes the first to join *EL* 1.92 and 1.93. At the same time, *R* is the only manuscript to separate those two letters from *EL* 1.91.

⁴⁵⁹ Valla 1497, fol. 1^r; on Valla's life and work, see Smets 2019.

⁴⁶⁰ *EL* 4.18: 'Postrema sit musica quae ordinem uocum ex motione nascentium indagat. His perceptis Plato dialecticam, id est demonstrandae ueritatis scientiam, tradit.'

⁴⁶¹ Robichaud 2018, 149.

⁴⁶² *EL* 1.3: 'quemadmodum harmonia dum presens aures nostras illabitur vehementius afficit quam dum preterita cogitatur ac prelium cum spectatur acrius movet quam cum narratur, sic egregia viventium heroum opera ardentius ad virtutem inflammant exactiusque formant quam veterum philosophorum de moribus disputantium verba.' *EL* 1.86: 'Quemadmodum harmonia dum presens auribus nostris illabitur vehementius afficit quam dum preterita cogitatur, ac prelium cum spectatur nos acrius movet quam cum narratur, sic egregia illustrum virorum opera ardentius ad virtutem inflammant exactiusque formant quam oratorum philosophorumque de moribus disputantium verba.'

EL 1.96, but is also equally far removed from *EL* 1.51 and 1.55, which are respectively the middle letters of the two pairs 1.7~95 and 1.14~97.

After putting so much analytical weight on abstract structuring techniques, we may want to pause for some methodological reflection. Ring compositions have an epistolary precedent in the letter collection of Pliny the Younger, although his do not display the near-mathematical accuracy of Ficino's.⁴⁶³ I believe this difference is important, as it bears on our hermeneutic attitudes and on the question of authorship, two concerns which are central to macrotextual analysis. If one sets out to find whether artistic arrangement is present in a work, it is good to remember that 'if pattern is what we want, pattern is what we are bound to find.'⁴⁶⁴ The spectre of *Hineininterpretierung* always hovers over intratextual analyses. This is especially true for numerical arrangement, where the distance between letters supposedly aides us in our interpretation of macrostructures. Because numbers have no meaning in themselves, they tend to precisely fulfil the function which an interpreter has in mind rather than the function assigned by the author. For this reason, structural analysis of this kind is best restricted to those instances where 'the pattern traced [is] an obvious one and [is] incapable of any other arrangement.'⁴⁶⁵ I believe that the *Epistole* fulfil this requirement in two ways. First, Ficino uses letter titles and names of addressees, which are highly marked elements resulting in easily recognisable symmetries. Second, Ficino's symmetrical arrangements often interlock around the same centre or appear in sequences. The fact that the three ring compositions *EL* 1.7~95, 1.53~1.96, and 1.14~97 simultaneously highlight the transition from the first to the second and from the second to the third section is sufficient proof that we are dealing with an intended structure: Together, they form an intricate pattern that is, indeed, incapable of any other arrangement. It is good to remember that they are the result of Ficino's repositioning of letters at various editorial stages.

After this brief intermezzo, I want to return to the letters proper. The opening of *EL* 1.95, written to Lorenzo, harks back to a theme first encountered in the early love letters from Lorenzo to Ficino and from Ficino to Cavalcanti: the desire for a voluntary correspondence instead of letters sent from obligation.⁴⁶⁶ Ficino jests that he 'shall write because [he] must,' both, he continues, 'by the law of love' and 'for the love of law.' The result is, we read, 'a letter written of [his] own accord and in accordance with the law.'⁴⁶⁷ In the letter, Ficino explains how divine law inspires natural law,

⁴⁶³ Gibson and Morello 2012, 38–45.

⁴⁶⁴ Røstvig 1966, 6.

⁴⁶⁵ Røstvig 1966, 11.

⁴⁶⁶ See *EL* 1.25; 1.31.

⁴⁶⁷ *EL* 1.95: 'in presentia scripturus sum quia debeam ... Accipe igitur iustum legitimamque epistolam. Immo, ut rectius loquar, quotiens volo, totiens et debo, sed amoris lege; rursus quando debo, tunc et volo, sed legis amore, unde iustum accipies hodie voluntariamque epistolam.'

which in turn gives rise to written law. From this triad, he argues, man learns what justice is. Ficino further elaborates on themes he has discussed in the previous letters and puts everything under the authority of God. He stresses the importance of due reward for good deeds, imagines the unity of the state ‘as if it were one body,’ demands the submission of magistrates to the law, and calls for clemency and humility in rulers. This grand finale of the civic virtues eventually flowers into an evocation of Justice:

Mother and Queen of the golden age, sublime Astrea seated among the starry thrones! Goddess, we beg you, do not abandon your earthly abode, lest we miserably sink into the iron age. Heavenly goddess, we beseech you, ever live in human minds, that is, in citizens who belong to the heavenly country, so that for the present we may imitate the divine life as well as we can, and that in the time to come we may live it to the full.⁴⁶⁸

THE CONTEMPLATIVE LIFE

After *EL* 1.95, the soul takes centre stage in the final section of Book 1. A definition of the soul and of reason is provided in *EL* 1.96 *on the soul* and in *EL* 1.107 about *the nature and duty of the soul* (accompanied by a *praise of history*). The same theme is addressed in *EL* 1.111 *de divinitate animi ac religione*, while *EL* 1.128, an expression of gratitude for a letter that brought Ficino comfort in a moment of distress, bears the title *Solus divinus medicus curare morbos animi potest*. In *EL* 1.99, Ficino concludes that the soul must possess spiritual wings, since Giovanni Altoviti’s soul wants to fly to Ficino and would not desire this if it did not know it had wings. Two consolation letters try to turn the reader’s attention away from the physical absence of the deceased and toward the continued life of their souls.⁴⁶⁹ Ficino’s consolation quickly turns into advice if not an injunction for those alive to reconsider their priorities. Sadness about a lost friend can be simply overcome by leaving behind one’s own attachment to the body:

You should never complain about his absence then, unless perhaps you object that it is not the way of the free soul to commune with the one now imprisoned in your body. Separate the mind from the body, Bernardo, if you can, and believe me, your souls will quickly meet.⁴⁷⁰

⁴⁶⁸ *EL* 1.95: ‘aurei seculi mater atque regina, Astrea sublimis, que thronos sidereos habitas, terrenas sedes, diva, ne deseritas, obsecramus, ne in ferreum seculum miseri prolabamur! Habita, precamur, habita semper, celeste numen, mentes humanas, celestis patrie cives, ut celestium vitam et in presentia quoad possumus imitemur et in posterum penitus consequamur.’

⁴⁶⁹ *EL* 1.97; 1.112.

⁴⁷⁰ *EL* 1.97: Nunquam igitur queri de absentia debes, nisi forte illud nobis obicias, quod animo nunc tuo in corpore clauso soluti illius animi consuetudo non congruat. Segrega, Bernarde, si potes, a corpore mentem; crede mihi, subito

Several other letters call on their addressees to devote their lives to contemplation. That is the best course of action, we read in more than one letter. While this was already intimated in the three letters about the folly of mankind, the fervour with which Ficino instructs his readers in the final 32 letters is unparalleled in Book 1. A few examples illustrate this better than a summary could:

Optima vero vivendi ratio est ut cogites conerisque quam maxime potes secundum mentem vivere: hoc est enim semper feliciterque vivere, in mente siquidem status et tranquilitas reperitur; qui de mente cadit ad inferos labitur.⁴⁷¹

Probo quod ais, in arcis culmine te otium repperisse: nempe in summa serene mentis specula solum Elisea illa felixque tranquillitas reperitur, infima sensum vallis undique Acherontis, Stygis, Cocytii, Phlegetontis fluctibus agitatur.⁴⁷²

An entire letter is dedicated to a fourfold *praise of philosophy*, which interestingly starts with an enumeration of how it benefits society.⁴⁷³ But after this civic opening, Ficino realises that the true value of philosophy can only be measured by philosophical standards and is impossible to praise with the kind of rhetoric reserved for political persuasion and decision-making.⁴⁷⁴ He thus makes explicit the inferiority of the civic life compared to the contemplative life. Ficino restarts his praise in a different tone, but from a surprisingly similar angle. Philosophy, he says, is the inspiration of poets and historians and orators; it is the source of legislation, of agriculture, of architecture, medicine, and so forth. It is, Ficino continues, what allows humans to distinguish good from evil. But again, Ficino is unsatisfied with his praise of the highest intellectual discipline. A third and final attempt follows, this time in a ‘dialectical and theological’ manner. He explains why the previous two approaches to philosophy were flawed with the following words:

artes omnes que ad externa, corpus, sensum, actionem pertinent, speculationi tanquam regine cedere et obsequi debeant. Et merito: propria enim Dei est huiusmodi operatio, non indiget certo vel instrumento vel loco, non servit externis, maxime omnium continua est, immo perpetua.

Only through philosophy, the soul becomes divine and reaches ultimate happiness. The third section of the letter mirrors the victory of the *vita contemplativa* in the entire Book 1.

congruet; sin minus potes, ne dubita: paulo post, velis nolisve, congruet.’ For a discussion of this letter in the context of Ficino’s other consolatory writings, see McClure 1991, 144–147.

⁴⁷¹ EL 1.108.

⁴⁷² EL 1.126.

⁴⁷³ EL 1.123: ‘Tu urbes peperisti, tu dissipatos homines in societatem vite convocasti, tu eos inter se primo domiciliis, deinde coniugiis, tum litterarum et vocum communione iunxisti, tu inventrix legum, tu magistra morum et discipline fuisti.’

⁴⁷⁴ EL 1.123: ‘Suavis nimirum huiusmodi melodia; quoniam vero philosophiam, que tam cantus cuiusque quam rei canende regula est, non aliter quam philosophice cantare debemus.’

God and religious devotion characterise the final *modus* of the collection. There is, for example, *EL* 1.117 which states *quod soli virtutis Deoque confidendum et serviendum*. It is the previously discussed letter addressed to Francesco Salviati, written before his appointment as Archbishop of Pisa. Although it comes chronologically earlier, the letter thematically fits well here: Ficino makes a remark about the death of the former archbishop Pietro Riario, who had ordained him a priest in 1473.⁴⁷⁵ The letter resonates with the earlier consolation letters through its insistence on the lesser importance of earthly life in comparison with the eternal happiness hereafter. Only five letters later, Ficino counsels yet another high-ranked cleric, Giovanni Niccolini, the twenty-five years old archbishop of Amalfi. We will return to him in the discussion of Books 5-6. For now, it suffices to note that Ficino indirectly exhorts Niccolini to study Paul's Epistles as a guideline for his ministry and so reaffirms the theological keynote of Book 1's final *modus*. The most famous of the religious letters is *EL* 1.116, a *Theological prayer to God*, which gleams with a passion that matches the flowery style of the earlier *Praise of philosophy*. Ficino turned this long prayer into sapphic verses, and Lorenzo de' Medici translated it into Italian verse as part of *L'Altercazione*.⁴⁷⁶ Perhaps not coincidentally, the *Theological prayer* is equally far removed from *The praise of philosophy* with which it shares the grand style, as from *EL* 1.130 in which Ficino argues that *true poetry is from God and for God*. A brief allusion to Lorenzo's version of the prayer in *EL* 1.116 provides closure to his character development in Book 1. Ficino lauds the young ruler's divine frenzy, indicating that he has grown since his entry as a self-centred young man in the first series of love letters.

Yet another element is brought to its conclusion in a letter to Lorenzo, namely the question about happiness with which the collection opened. For this, Ficino uses all the narrative devices which he has capably prepared in the preceding letters. The letter in question, *EL* 1.115, is entitled *Quid est felicitas, quod habet gradus, quod est aeterna*. It is the first time this question is addressed since Cosimo de' Medici asked Ficino to join him in Careggi, at the very beginning of Book 1. Of course, it should not surprise us that Ficino readdresses the topic to Lorenzo, who has been equated with his grandfather several times.⁴⁷⁷ The addressees are not the only element that link the two letters from the beginning and at the end of the collection. Cosimo had asked Ficino to come to Careggi in *EL* 1.1, and its subsequent disappearance led scholars to the conclusion that Ficino 'was apparently unable to reach Cosimo'.⁴⁷⁸ This interpretation overlooks the fact that Ficino mentions Careggi again in *EL* 1.115 and reminisces about a discussion held there on precisely the theme which Cosimo had asked to debate: happiness. Indeed, this letter opens with the recollection that 'in

⁴⁷⁵ Kristeller 1985a, 88.

⁴⁷⁶ Cf. Kristeller 1956b, 216–217

⁴⁷⁷ See p. 58–59.

⁴⁷⁸ Robichaud 2018, 81.

Careggi, you and I have recently discussed much about happiness.⁴⁷⁹ For the first time after Cosimo's invitation to Careggi and Ficino's intention to spend some time there, we are told that Ficino reached the place. The path through the text, which is also the path of moral and spiritual growth on which we embarked in the first letters of the *Epistole*, is walked. The *skopos* of the collection, namely the attainment of *felicitas* appears to be reached. After stating that happiness is not attained with the senses and that it does not reside in moral virtue, he argues that it is found through contemplation, specifically of God. The connection between *EL* 1.1 and 1.115 is underlined by their unique decorated initials in the Vatican manuscript of Book 1 (see Figures 5 and 10).⁴⁸⁰ Given its clear employment in patronage relationships, the lavish presentation copy was almost certainly produced under Ficino's supervision. Therefore, we can assume that the second initial was not placed randomly but as a link with the initial of the opening letter to underline the thematic and ideological connection between the two letters.

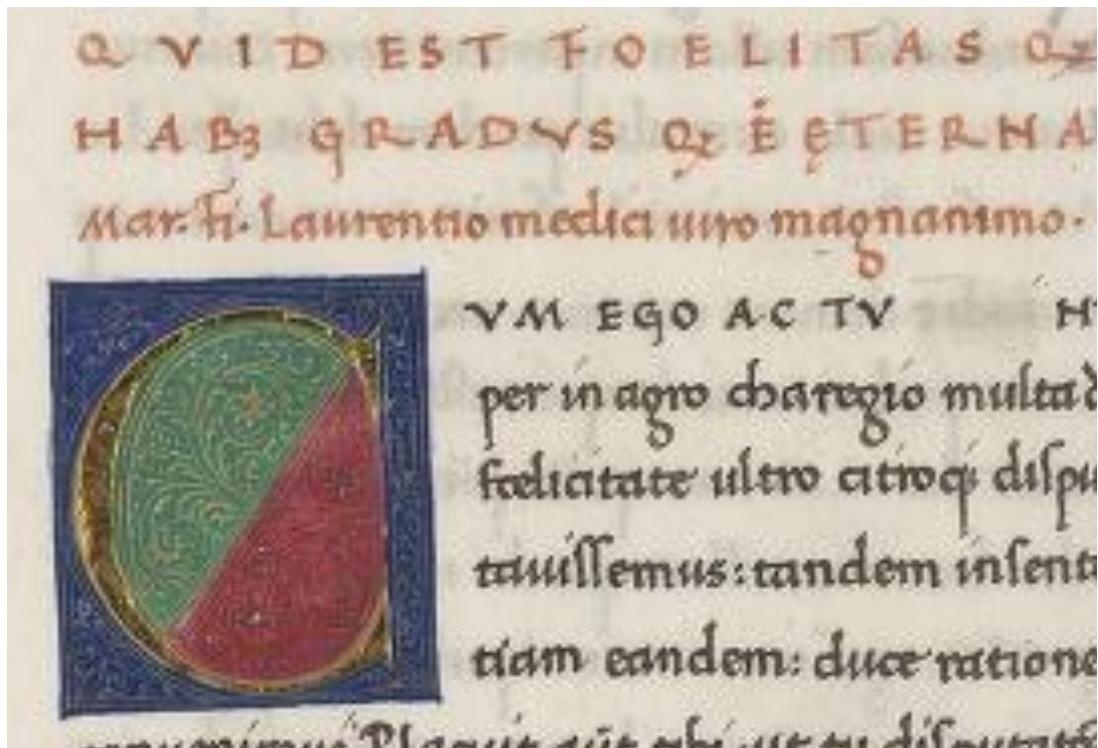


Figure 10 MS Civitas Vaticana, BAV, Vat. lat. 1789, fol. 94^v

The narrative of Book 1 has been brought to a close. Originally, this was also Ficino's feeling. Two manuscripts (*L4*; *N1*) show how the collection originally continued with letters that would eventually end up in Book 3. *N1* adds those letters tacitly, but *L4* adds a header 'Liber secundus.' From this it becomes clear that they were not a continuation of Book 1 but commenced a new

⁴⁷⁹ *EL* 1.115: 'ego ac tu nuper in agro Charegio multa de felicitate ultro citroque disputavissemus.'

⁴⁸⁰ MS Civitas Vaticana, BAV, Vat. lat. 1789, fol. 7^r and fol. 94^v.

book. As we will see in the next chapter, the letters from Book 3 do not build further on the narrative of the first book, which had really been concluded. However, at some point, Ficino decided that the ascent to contemplation could be pushed further. It was at this point that he added a short book of only philosophical letters, which amount to little treatises. He describes the nature of this book as follows:

While I was arranging my letters, collected from everywhere, into books, I decided to gather those pertaining to theology, especially Platonic theology, into one volume, to set apart those that are, as it were, divine by their very subject matter, from the other, so to say human letters.⁴⁸¹

Consequently, the second book can be considered the true *skopos*, uninterrupted philosophy, of the development traced in Book 1. In spite of this, the theoretical writings of Book 2 were never popular among readers. It is the least annotated book of all, and several copies suggest that readers were consciously trying to skip it. An anonymous annotator of Inc Munich, BSB, c.a. 1389, for example, has thoroughly scribbled in the margins and between the lines of Books 1 to 4, except for Book 2, which is nearly blank. Moreover, the letters that are annotated in Book 2 are mistakenly headed as 'LIBER TERCIUS,' so that we can safely assume that this particular reader used the paratexts in order to avoid reading Book 2. The exception that proves the rule is Inc Leipzig, Universitätsbibliothek, Epist. lat. rec. 39, where the majority of annotations are in Book 2. This can be explained together with the fact that the annotations in other books focus on philosophical topics as well. The reason is that this copy, in Koberger's octavo format, belonged to the theologian and Reformer Johann Heß (1490-1547) who clearly read it for advanced scholarly purposes.⁴⁸² Indeed, the annotations can be assigned beyond reasonable doubt to Heß and not to his grandson Samuel Aurifaber von Wolpen (1550–1624), who added his name to the title page, as they do not reflect the latter's occupation as Stadtholder.⁴⁸³ The length of the second book makes it less interesting to study its structure. Moreover, the limited macrotextual fashioning bears important similarities to the composition of Book 12, so that I will delay my discussion of it until the end of this thesis.

⁴⁸¹ EL 2.1: 'Cum epistolas meas undique collectas in libros distinguerem, placuit eas quae ad theologiam praecaeteris platonicam pertinerent quasi ob materiam ipsam divinas ab aliis epistolis velut humanis secernere in unumque redigere.'

⁴⁸² On Heß, see Kretschmar 1972.

⁴⁸³ On Aurifaber, see Hammann 1953.

CHAPTER 5

VITA VOLUPTUOSA AND BEYOND: *EL* 3.1-4.39

REPEAT OR RENOUNCE: STRUCTURAL REPLICATION?

The first letters of Ficino's *Epistole* promised a pattern of spiritual progress from pleasure on earth to contemplation of heaven. The threefold structure of Book 1 met that expectation, and the philosophical apotheosis of Book 2 brought it to a definite end. The two most obvious possibilities are for the next ten books to repeat or to abandon that initial program. In the first case, Book 1 becomes a miniature version of the collection's overall structure. This would correspond to what we know about the structural function of opening books in ancient letter collections. For example, Hildegard Cancik and Gilbert Nauroy have convincingly argued that the first books of Seneca's and St Ambrose's collections serve as introductions to the whole.⁴⁸⁴ It will become important to note that these introductory opening books were an integral part of the collection. This can be gauged from the way ancient collections were published. Although Seneca did not immediately publish his epistles in their entirety, it is almost certain that the books were published in groups of two or three.⁴⁸⁵ The same publication process has been convincingly argued for Pliny's epistles.⁴⁸⁶ According to St Ambrose's own words, also he conceived from the beginning of a coherent collection in several books.⁴⁸⁷ In sum, the opening books of ancient collections functioned as introductions inseparable from the larger collection even if the latter was still in the making.

The manuscript tradition of Ficino's letters shows that they were mostly published in grouped instalments as well. Books 3 and 4, Books 5 and 6, and Books 9 to 11 were copied together before they were joined with other books. It is likely that the gap between Books 6 and 9 was once filled with a now lost manuscript containing Books 7 and 8. However, Book 1 is an exception to this pattern. With 132 letters, it is by far the longest of all the books and the only one with an isolated circulation in six manuscripts.⁴⁸⁸ That is nearly half of the entire extant manuscript tradition of the *Epistole*. Therefore, I argue that it fulfils completely the expectations set at its beginning because it was originally conceived as a complete and self-standing work. Book 1 was not composed as an inseparable introduction to the collection, in the way that Seneca, Pliny, and Ambrose thought of

⁴⁸⁴ Cancik 1967, 4; Richardson-Hay 2006, 15–17; Nauroy 2017, 154.

⁴⁸⁵ Cugusi 1983, 200–201.

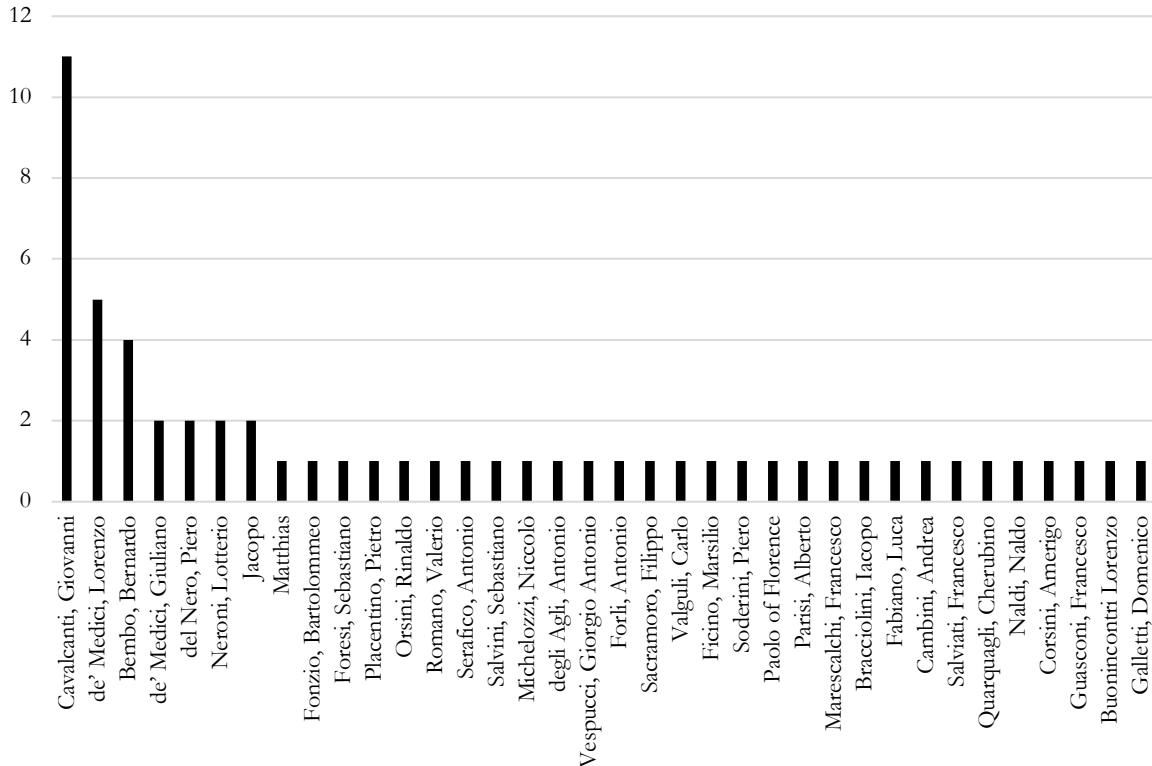
⁴⁸⁶ Bodel 2015, who critically reviews older literature.

⁴⁸⁷ Nauroy 2012.

⁴⁸⁸ That is, if we discount the Florentine manuscript with a version of Book 2 that was not yet styled as a letter book.

their first letter books. Instead, it is a self-contained unit which prefigures the composition of a full-fledged *epistolarium* but is more than only its introduction. This does not answer our initial question whether Ficino returned to the original plan of Book 1 when he decided to undertake a much larger epistolary project sometime in the late 1470s. Did he use Book 1 as the blueprint for the *Epistole* as a whole or did he adopt a new ordering principle? The former would turn the collection into a remarkable feat of macrotextual embedding, where the parts themselves reflect the structure of the whole.⁴⁸⁹ The series of Cavalcanti letters in Book 1, moving from anxious love to philosophical reasoning,⁴⁹⁰ prefigured the macro-development of Book 1. Does the structure of Book 1 mirror the macro-structure of the collection? In this case, we would expect Book 3 to start with a new exploration of the *vita voluptuosa*. A quick look at the addressees reveals that Giovanni Cavalcanti and Lorenzo de' Medici account for a quarter of the letters in Book 3 and even a third if we focus on the first half of the book (see Table 4). In this respect, at least, a certain similarity to the beginning of Book 1 emerges. Do the two correspondents once more appear in the context of Ficino's emotional tribulations? This question will be at the centre of the following paragraphs.

TABLE 4 ADDRESSEES IN BOOK 3



⁴⁸⁹ Some theorists consider this a *conditio sine qua non* to speak of macrotextuality at all; cf. Viti 2014, 109.

⁴⁹⁰ Tröger 2016, 107.

DESPAIR AND CONVERSION: BOOK 3

TOUGH TIMES

The opening letter of Book 3 is addressed to the king of Hungary, Matthias Corvinus. Since a manuscript combining Books 3 and 4 was sent to the king, it is no surprise that he is given such a prominent place. The gesture would have been appreciated since the court in Buda famously aspired to take part in the newest cultural trends on the European continent. Matthias' commissions of Italian art, manuscripts, and luxury textiles were greatly welcomed by Florentine merchants.⁴⁹¹ The city's elite was equally keen on a good relationship with the Hungarian kingdom, a major political force. It was this political-economic dimension combined with a genuine sympathy for Ficino, that moved Filippo Valori to sponsor a luxurious manuscript of the two letter books.⁴⁹² The dedicatory epistle fulfils its diplomatic function and first celebrates the king as one who 'joins surpassing wisdom with highest power.' However, its second half is a cry of distress about the Ottoman threat. There is no reason to doubt that Ficino's fear for the military successes of Sultan Mehmed II was real.⁴⁹³ In a dramatic turn of events, the Ottoman fleet had conquered Otranto, a town in the heel of Italy, in August 1480. Eight hundred citizens who refused to convert to Islam, were reportedly murdered.⁴⁹⁴ This happened only a couple of months before Ficino wrote this letter dated 1 October of the same year. Ficino's plea to Matthias is in line with the military and political role of Hungary. The king had successfully stopped Turkish attacks before, and the Pope repeatedly called on him to defend Christianity.⁴⁹⁵ What was at stake, in Ficino's view, was not merely the political safety of Europe but the survival of its history and culture. He pictures how the philosophers, poets, orators, and historians of Antiquity from their graves ask Matthias to save them from limbo in which the Turks have cast them. 'Not only do they [the Ottomans] impiously trample with filthy feet on the disciplines of all laws and liberal arts, as well as on Holy Religion—the worst of all! They also obliterate them from mankind's memory as much as they can.'⁴⁹⁶

Although the following letters do not dwell further on war and oppression, they sustain a pervading sense of gloom. When Ficino apologises to Matthias for the severity and sorrowful tone of the two letter books, he rhetorically asks: 'Who creates works of gold or silver in a time and place of iron?'⁴⁹⁷ This reference to Hesiod's five ages of man, I argue, points at a general crisis in Ficino's life of

⁴⁹¹ Cf. Farbaky and Waldman 2011; Graciotti and Vasoli 1994.

⁴⁹² Jurdjevic 2008, chap. 2.

⁴⁹³ Kristeller 1956a, 112.

⁴⁹⁴ Pilat and Cristea 2017, 186–188.

⁴⁹⁵ Pilat and Cristea 2017, chap. 4.

⁴⁹⁶ *EL* 3.1: 'Legum omnium liberaliumque artium disciplinas atque id—quod miserrimum est—religionem sanctam non solum sordidissimis pedibus impie calcant verum etiam quantum i' eis est ex omni hominum memoria delent.'

⁴⁹⁷ *EL* 3.1: 'Quis nam in seculis regionibusque ferreis aurea unquam opera uel argentea condat?'

which the Ottoman threat was only a part. The following letter, titled *How false is human prosperity*, explores this very theme at considerable length. It describes earthly happiness as a lie of the Devil since ‘in the very moment in which it is seen at its peak, it relapses suddenly and swiftly into the opposite.’⁴⁹⁸ Transient prosperity, Ficino writes, reminds us that we are not at home in this world but exiled from our divine origin. Moreover, within the intricate system of divine, natural, and moral laws, changing fortune corrects the behaviour of powerful men. The higher a person is carried above others by his success and consequently becomes more unrestrained and arrogant, the deeper he must fall to remind him of his true place within society and under God. Finally, the letter exhorts its addressee, the Venetian ambassador Bernardo Bembo, to not count on fortune but to put faith in truth and the infinite good that is God. Remarkably, Ficino does not spur on his friend in second-person imperatives. The precepts are exhortative subjunctives in the first-person plural, thereby suggesting that the author tries to also convince himself of their urgency:

Let us not believe the lie, not put our hopes in the wind, not follow what is fleeting and escapes us, not choose what hates and harms us. But let us believe in the truth, who so easily and so long believed in lies. Let us believe in the truth ... and follow the infinite good.⁴⁹⁹

The detachment from worldly success called for in this passage is not reflected in the following letters. On the contrary, Ficino appears increasingly despondent, despite a flare of optimism in *EL* 3.7-10. The main source of Ficino’s unhappiness appears to be a perceived lack of recognition for his work, which threatens his standing in the Florentine community of letters and negatively impacts his financial situation because of flailing patronage. On top of this, the philosopher seems trapped in an astrological fatalism which contradicts his intention to follow the infinite good’ from the previous quote. The combination of those anxieties brings out several outbursts of anger and enmity. They are the only ones in Ficino’s writings, which are normally characterized by a conciliatory attitude and a focus on the resolution of problems rather than on the pain they cause.⁵⁰⁰ In *EL* 3.4, he turns to his friend Cavalcanti and laments their forced separation by a ‘suspicion of the plague.’ Fear of infectious diseases is ubiquitous in literature from this period when the plague had been endemic in Europe for more than a century. As it happened, Florence suffered a new

⁴⁹⁸ *EL* 3.2: ‘in eo ipso momento in quo summa videtur et quoniam apparent summa ideo et foelicitas iudicatur repente in contrarium absque mora relabitur.’

⁴⁹⁹ *EL* 3.2: ‘Ne credamus mendacio, ne speremus in vento, neque fugacia volantiave sequamur, neque inimica nobis et noxia diligamus. Sed credamus veritate qui mendacio tam facile tamdiu credidimus. Credamus inquam veritate ... quoque infinitum sectemur bonum.’

⁵⁰⁰ Rees 2008, specifically on anger: 25-26.

outbreak in the Summer of 1476, when this letter was likely written.⁵⁰¹ However, historical reality and literary conceit need not exclude one another, and I propose that the ‘plague’ here stands for the general adversity that assailed Ficino. Indeed, the plague was for Ficino closely linked to lawlessness and moral corruption.⁵⁰² In a letter to Aldo Manuzio from 1497, Ficino evokes how ‘for some time, three furies have constantly vexed miserable Florence: a pestilent disease, hunger, and strife.’ To these three he adds a fourth bane: ‘what is worse, together with the other deceits of mortals, there is a deceitful plague.’⁵⁰³ *Dissimulata pestis* is a not-so-subtle allusion to the Dominican friar Savonarola who was at the time tightening his grip on the city to turn it into a theocracy.⁵⁰⁴ In an earlier letter included in Book 1, corruption among priests is described as the plague as well.⁵⁰⁵

The figurative interpretation of *pestis* in *EL* 3.4 is strengthened by the following letters, which equate Ficino’s slanderers to lice and mad dogs.⁵⁰⁶ Although the dogs are not explicitly called rabid, their compulsive tearing and snarling appears pathological. Ficino compared *rabies* to the plague in a medical treatise, so that the metaphorical references to contagious diseases and vermin link *EL* 3.4-6 into a diagnosis of sick times.⁵⁰⁷ The mention of lice is a pun on the target of Ficino’s attack, the previously mentioned poet Luigi Pulci whose name means ‘lice’ in Italian. I already discussed Pulci in the context of Book 1, where Ficino tried to extract Lorenzo from the poet’s influence and criticized him in two letters near the end of the book.⁵⁰⁸ The two letters in Book 1 most clearly concerned with Pulci, *EL* 1.113-114, were drowned in the overwhelmingly philosophical *modus* of the final section. They were dissonant tones of frustration in a predominantly optimistic and self-contained *modus*. In contrast, Ficino’s attack on Pulci in Book 3 adds to an established sense of pessimism about his own status. They translate the belligerence of the first letter to Matthias into a socio-intellectual battle for patronage. Addressed to Lorenzo and Giuliano de’ Medici, they directly apply to the most powerful patrons available to the philosopher. However, news of this strategy’s success remains absent, leaving the letters as a testament to Ficino’s isolation rather than as evidence of strong connections.

The question of patronage is directly tied to that of livelihood. The financial repercussions of a seemingly unfavourable climate for Ficino transpire from *EL* 3.10. He tries to convince the

⁵⁰¹ While *EL* 3.4 itself is not dated, the nearest dated letter is from 11 August 1476. On the plague outbreak, see John Henderson 1989, 173.

⁵⁰² Katinis 2007, 140–141.

⁵⁰³ Kristeller 1937, 2:95: ‘tres furie Florentiam iamdiu miseram assidue vexant: morbus pestilens et fames atque seditio. ... id quod acerbius est, una cum ceteris mortalium dissimulationibus dissimulata pestis.’

⁵⁰⁴ Vanhaelen 2010, 136.

⁵⁰⁵ *EL* 1.75: ‘Nihil in terris honesto sacerdote pulchrius esse, turpi vero nihil turpius. Ille religionis hominumque salus, iste pestis.’

⁵⁰⁶ *EL* 3.5: ‘pulices ... quae primo adventu frigoris opprimentur;’

⁵⁰⁷ Russell 1999, 93: ‘Ficino compares the spread of the plague ... to the progress of rabies in animals.’

⁵⁰⁸ *EL* 1.81, 1.113, 1.114; see p. 108-112.

Florentine Archbishop to confirm a promise made by the Papal Commissary regarding tax exemptions from a newly imposed levy destined for the Pisan university.⁵⁰⁹ Six letters later, he writes to Antonio degli Agli, Bishop of Volterra, with a similar request. ‘According to common standards, fortune is meagre and lowly to us,’ Ficino complains. Although hesitant to bring the matter before degli Agli, he continues with a warning that ‘a long and continuous illness, in a delicate body is considered very grave’.⁵¹⁰ Again, disease is used to comment on issues with a negative impact on society in general and on Ficino in particular. The message is clear: While priests can never expect to become rich, long-term poverty seriously threatens their existence. The letter raises fears over a priesthood weakened by attacks from outside as well as by a lack of support from the Church hierarchy.⁵¹¹ Ficino’s worries about money include the unfortunate situation of his closest family members. In *EL* 3.11 and 3.14, he tries to secure an income for his cousin, the theologian Sebastiano Salvini.⁵¹² The latter’s hardship is attested in his own correspondence, which he collected and copied into a small manuscript now at the Vatican library.⁵¹³ Ficino may well have been the inspiration for Salvini to compose a small *epistolarium*, since the former employed him for copying Books 3 and 4 of his collection.⁵¹⁴ We will later see that this employment further attests to Ficino’s interest in Salvini’s well-being as it was a way to present Salvini to yet another possible employer, king Matthias. *EL* 3.11 and 3.14 are letters of recommendation, which could not sound embittered like the previous letters if they were to be successful. As individual requests for support, they add little to the downheartedness of Book 3. Seen together in rapid succession, however, they suggest a situation of need and, given the absence of a subsequent note of thanks for one or two favours granted, of failure.

More than once, Ficino adopts a fatalistic approach to his unhappiness in Book 3, which contains more references to astrology than any other book in the *Epistole*.⁵¹⁵ For example, the distance between him and Cavalcanti is explained astrologically. Ficino describes how ‘the Moon is in opposition to the Sun and in some degree to Mercury and Saturn, and furthermore, Mars is square to both Sun and Moon.’ He concludes that ‘according to the astrologers, this could hardly be a more inauspicious time’.⁵¹⁶ The previously mentioned suspension of the archbishop’s promise regarding a tax exemption is also explained with reference to planetary influences. The astrological

⁵⁰⁹ Cf. Kristeller 1985a, 88.

⁵¹⁰ *EL* 3.16: ‘diuturnum continuumque morbum … in levi corporis habitudine gravissimum iudicari.’

⁵¹¹ *EL* 3.17: ‘Ferunt multi rem oneriam contra sacerdotes iterum iterumque fervere.’

⁵¹² On Salvini, see Vasoli 1999a; Gentile 1987; Kristeller 1961.

⁵¹³ MS Civitas Vaticana, BAV, Vat.lat.5140.

⁵¹⁴ Vasoli 1999a discusses Ficino’s philosophical influence on Salvini.

⁵¹⁵ Clydesdale 2011, 119.

⁵¹⁶ *EL* 3.4: ‘sub oppositione lunae ad solem quodammodo etiam a Mercurium et Saturnum ac etiam sub Martis ad Solem Lunamque quadratua.’ … ‘quo tempore nihil ferme apud astrologos infoelicius.’

references are more playful here and focus on the Jovial character of Orsini which alone can repair the damage done by an unnamed Saturnine man.⁵¹⁷ While in *EL* 3.17, to bishop Giovanni degli Agli, Ficino does not explicitly endorse the idea that the difficult situation for priests has its origins in the stars, he still mentions that some ‘claim that the cause of this misery is Saturn retrograde in Leo and Jupiter in Pisces’.⁵¹⁸ In *EL* 3.22, the philosopher complains to Cavalcanti that ‘I do not really know what I want; it may be that I do not really want what I know and that which I do not know.’ While his friend’s future looks bright, Ficino writes, for himself ‘things are far from settled under the malign influence of my Saturn retrogressing in Leo’.⁵¹⁹ This final example elicited an answer from Cavalcanti, the first one included in the *Epistole*. In *EL* 3.23, Cavalcanti chides Ficino for overestimating the influence of the heavens. If the stars are ruled by God, then how can they possible harm men since God cares for the world as a father for his children? Moreover, Saturn may make Ficino melancholic, but is also the source for his great intelligence and strong memory. After a subsequent praise of Ficino, Cavalcanti concludes with the question: ‘Will you therefore accuse Saturn, he who purposed that you should rise above other men as far as he himself rises above other planets?’⁵²⁰ In the next letter, Ficino yields to Cavalcanti’s arguments, albeit reluctantly. He refuses to praise Saturn but otherwise agrees with the words of his friend.

TURNING THE TIDE

What to make of the downhearted frustration that outweighs the scattered letters of hope and joy in *EL* 3.1-32?⁵²¹ A comparison with earlier sections of the collection is illuminating. The letters *on the folly and misery of men* in Book 1 were pessimistic too, as they deplored the *condition humaine* from a philosophical viewpoint. In contrast, Ficino’s concerns in Book 3 are often personal and practical; they are consistently about *his* reputation, about *his* money, about *his* family. This self-centredness reminds us of the love letters stretching from *EL* 1.29 to 1.37, where Ficino had little concern for anything but his own emotions. In Book 3, love is replaced with worldly benefits, care for which belongs to the same *vita voluptuosa*. Ficino’s self-portrait, suffused with strain and stress, makes of Book 3 the most intimate one in the letter collection. Ficino is no longer a wise teacher, but a man of flesh and blood vexed by anxiety. The design of the earliest manuscripts, I propose, accentuates

⁵¹⁷ *EL* 3.10.

⁵¹⁸ *EL* 3.17: ‘Saturnum in Leone Iovemque in piscibus retrogrados esse asserunt.’

⁵¹⁹ *EL* 3.22: ‘autem his temporibus quid velim quodammodo nescio. Forte et quod scio nolim et quod nescio volo.’ ‘mihi Saturni mei his diebus in Leone retroradi malignitate non constant.’

⁵²⁰ *EL* 3.23: ‘Tu ne ergo Saturnum incusabis qui te tantum caeteros homines superare voluit quantum ipse caeteros planetas superat?’

⁵²¹ A triad of letters from *EL* 3.7 to 3.9 reminds us of Ficino’s continuing friendships and his faith in the value of philosophical work. He congratulates Piero del Nero on his appointment to the *Signoria* (cf. Arrighi 1990), reminisces about the harmony between his lyre and that of Sebastiano Foresi, and imagines himself as a soldier of Pallas who defends divine wisdom (a reference to his writing of *De christiana religione*). *EL* 3.18 gives a glimpse of the intellectual community that still gathered around him by collectively expressing love and reverence for Bernardo Bembo.



Figure 11 MS Wolfenbüttel, HAB, Guelf. 12, fol. 1^r in full and in detail.

this unique quality. The rich decorations by Attavante and Francesco di Antonio del Cherico in the two manuscripts containing Books 3 and 4 set Matthias' heraldic crow (the *corvus* in *corvinus*) in thick borders with a flowery pattern inhabited by putti, sea nymphs, and angels.⁵²² In the initial *M* of Ficino's first letter, the author, dressed in a red gown and wearing a characteristic cap, obliquely gazes into the world outside the page (Figure 11). The slender capital letter and its dark-coloured background make the man in the front look small and vulnerable. Other manuscripts always show Ficino engaging with a text, looking immediately into the page, holding an opened book, or writing at his desk.⁵²³ Such an iconography, which focuses on the author as a property of the text rather than a person, is the most common type in medieval manuscripts.⁵²⁴ It imagines him 'in figural conversation with ancient philosophers and fellow intellectuals,' especially when he is surrounded by the faces of other ancient and contemporary thinkers as he is in MS London, BL, Harley 3482.⁵²⁵

In contrast with the usual depiction of authors, the portrait by Attavante shows Ficino with a closed book and not in the act of writing or reading. If author portraits in manuscripts carry symbolic

⁵²² *G3* was illuminated by del Cherico and *G2* by Atavante; Ficino 1990, CLXVII–CLXIX.

⁵²³ MSS Firenze, BML, Plut.73.39, fol. 4^r, 80^r; Plut. 82.10, fol. 3^r; Plut. 82.15, fol. 1^r; Plut. 83.10, fol. 1^r; London, BL, Harley 3482, fol. 4^r. MSS Firenze, BML, Strozzi 97, fol. 1^r holds the middle ground between the type of representation in the letters and that in other manuscripts: The book Ficino holds against his chest is closed, and he looks halfway into the world from the page; at the same time, he points demonstratively at the volume in his hands and at the text on the page. I have considered all the Ficino portraits in contemporary manuscripts listed in Kristeller 1986, 195–196.

⁵²⁴ Cf. Meier 2000.

⁵²⁵ Robichaud 2018, 4–11.

meaning and if variations like this demand interpretation, the visual presence of Ficino stresses the previously mentioned intimacy that results from the careful selection and ordering of the letters.⁵²⁶ Mindful of Gaguin's words that readers 'burned to see you face to face and look at the man,' we may assume that this was what they expected.⁵²⁷ One later manuscript of the letters, containing Books 1-8, has adopted the same portrayal of Ficino in direct engagement with the reader.⁵²⁸ It brings the man before our eyes 'en son naturel, ... l'expression d'une individualité qui fonde l'authenticité de l'œuvre.'⁵²⁹ We should here preserve the two meanings of 'authenticity.' There is on the one hand Ficino's creation and authorisation of the book, and on the other hand the sincerity of his self-presentation. As contemporary discourse on the lives of saints indicates, Renaissance authors understood the importance of fallibility for the construction of moral exemplarity.⁵³⁰ It helped readers to identify with the author and subsequently to imitate them. Moreover, integrating moral flaws in an exemplary life story was the prerequisite for narratives of conversion and improvement that could inspire readers to reflect on their own lives and change their behaviour.

The previously discussed astrological discussion in *EL* 3.22-23 forms part of a longer section dedicated to Cavalcanti, comprising the eight letters from *EL* 3.19 to 3.26. In this series, Ficino's pessimism increasingly gives way to a focus on his writings and philosophical investigation. He mentions 'three short theological works on the threefold ascent of the mind into God,' and lists the five treatises that form part of Book 2.⁵³¹ We also find two presentation letters for *De christiana religione* to a priest and a canon lawyer.⁵³² In the second letter of Book 3, Ficino included himself in a set of exhortatory subjunctives that urged him and his friends to live well. This grammatical detail foreshadowed the difficulties he had living by the moral standards which he upheld. In *EL* 3.29, Ficino comes back to the dangers of fortune and faith in the future:

I have often noticed that a person who depends on external things always lives a disturbed and anxious life and suffers many disappointment, while the only person to live in peace and certainty is the one who leads a life based, not upon the passing show without, but upon the eternal within himself. The only person

⁵²⁶ Cf. Enenkel 2012.

⁵²⁷ See p. 69.

⁵²⁸ *G1; C.*

⁵²⁹ Chartier 1992, 60.

⁵³⁰ See p. 70.

⁵³¹ *EL* 3.25; 3.26. The five treatises are *De divina providentia*, *De ascensu*, *De raptu Pauli*, *De impedimento mentis a corpore*, and *De lumine*.

⁵³² *EL* 3.27; 3.28.

never to be poor is the one who looks for his reward not in the end-product but in the work itself.⁵³³

This time, unlike in *EL* 3.2 and the first seventeen letters of the collection, Ficino is sure where he stands:

I act because it satisfies me now and in eternity, and not with a view to its satisfying me at some future time. Much less do I act to please mortals, for such action is ... superficial and based upon what others may think.⁵³⁴

We have witnessed in Book 3 a conversion from self-centred worries to a self-assured belief in one's life choices. This narrative is artificial, the result not of life but of literary composition. Ficino has made this clear by addressing *EL* 3.33 to himself with the somewhat surprising opening formula *Marsilius Ficinus Marsilio Ficino S.D.* The two Marsilii can be thought of as the two *personae* which Ficino employs in the letters: the one who is vulnerable to the temptations of the *vita voluptuosa*, and the one who through his virtue ascends to a higher form of life. In this introspective letter, if we can call it that, the advanced persona asks critical questions about the less advanced persona's behaviour: 'Have you not sometimes been ungrateful? ... Have you for so long with the aid of philosophy studied so many things pertaining to others that you have forgotten your own?' The answers are equally severe: 'Do not blame either the ingratitude of others or your fortune, but rather your imprudence. ... While evil men displease you, let not you yourself become either evil or less good so that you displease good men.'⁵³⁵ The letter contains several echoes of topics raised in the preceding part of Book 3. On the one hand, it shows how Ficino has come to dislike his anger towards Pulci and his desire for financial gain. On the other hand, it repeats moral precepts which Ficino had already proclaimed, although not with the same vigour and the same degree of self-awareness as here in *EL* 1.33.

The conversion is placed at a conspicuous place in the book, precisely in the middle. We have seen in Book 1 how fond Ficino was of symmetries, and how he constructed several parallel structures around one gravitational point. Indeed, the centrality of *EL* 3.33 is highlighted by several other patterns. First, it is the last in a unique series of five letters with the same date. This underlines its

⁵³³ *EL* 3.29: 'saepe animadverti qui a rebus externis pendet semper sollicitum anxiumque vivere et saepissime falli, solus autem tranquille certeque vivit qui non extra se in rebus mortalibus sed intra seipsum in ethernis vitam agit, solus numquam pauper qui mercedem suam non in opere ponit sed in opera.'

⁵³⁴ *EL* 3.29: 'ago quia mihi in praesentia aethernitateque placet non ut mihi placeat in futurum tempus ad tempus. Multominus ago ut mortalibus placeam.'

⁵³⁵ *EL* 1.33: 'Quinetiam tu nonnumqua erga alium ingratus fuisti vel hominem vel certe Deum? ... Nunquid tam diu sub magistra philosophia tot aliena discere studuisti ut tua dedisceres? ... Noli vel aliorum igratitudinem vel fortunam tuam sed tuam potis imprudentiam crimina. ... Absit dum displicent tibi mali ut ipse vel malus euadas vel minus bonus bonisque displiceas.'

climactic function after the previous letters demonstrating Ficino's regained *persona* of a wise philosopher. The group of five letters with the same date is in turn marked by its middle position in the entire set of dated letters. As a result, *EL* 3.31 and 3.33 are in the middle of respectively the dated letters and the entire book. This is further stressed by 5 groups of letters with the same addressee. The middle of the letters to Cavalcanti, to Bembo and to Piero del Nero is *EL* 3.31, of the letters to Lorenzo and to Giuliano *EL* 3.33. The pivotal role of Ficino's letter to himself in his moral growth throughout Book 3 is thus repeatedly emphasised by concentric patterns of dates and addressees.

THE TIDE TURNED

After Ficino's *persona* has finally distanced himself from the *vita voluptuosa*, frustrations from the first half are subsequently resolved. Some of the distressing circumstances remain unchanged, and *EL* 3.34 relates how Ficino was mocked by someone from Lorenzo de' Medici's circle. Since Ficino calls him 'a plague of this city and the whole world' (*urbis orbisque pestem*) there is little doubt that he means Pulci. But the philosopher does not take the attack personally as he did in *EL* 3.5-6. While the anecdote clearly concerns himself, he only mentions 'a certain friend of ours' who was ridiculed for losing his reason. Surprisingly, Ficino does not defend himself by stressing the dignity of priesthood or the usefulness of philosophy. Instead, he ironically embraces the accusation, thereby adopting the Socratic strategy of feigning ignorance to display his wisdom.⁵³⁶ This new tactic proves successful, and *EL* 3.36 to Cavalcanti reports that 'a few days ago, the two Medici each used against our adversaries in our cause not only rebuke but even invective.'⁵³⁷ At last, Ficino has won the skirmish with Pulci for which he had asked support thirty letters ago. This strategy of narrative delay is comparable to the disappearance of Careggi in Book 1 after Cosimo's invitation to join him there and its reappearance towards the end of the book. He now advocates against 'loud scolding' since it is 'either rash or bigoted; or dangerous or completely useless'.⁵³⁸ In only two letters after *EL* 3.33 does he dwell at length on the cruelty of men. *EL* 3.40, addressed 'to mankind', recapitulates financial and societal worries. As in *EL* 3.2, the honeylike colour of bile is used to illustrate that what appears to be sweet, is really the most bitter. But unlike earlier vociferations, *EL* 3.40 is a detached reflection on adversity rather than an expression of personal grievance. As to underline once more the change from past distress to the present insight and self-possession, it states towards the end: 'ex praeteritis disce presentia.' A second outburst of despondency in *EL*

⁵³⁶ Ficino 1576b, 1:1297. Cf. Knox 1989, 122: 'feigning ignorance or moral baseness [by] the well-bred would display the opposite characteristics.'

⁵³⁷ *EL* 3.36: 'Medices utriusque paucis ante diebus in causam nostram aduersus adversarios nostros non correptione tantum usi sunt sed etiam invectiva.'

⁵³⁸ *EL* 3.46: 'Memento praeterea increpationem temerariam aut rigidam esse vel periculosam vel prius inutilem.'

3.44 leads to the well-known *dictum* that ‘man is a wolf, not a man to others.’⁵³⁹ But the following letters, addressed to a generic ‘man full of disgust and aversion’ and ‘to a man who cannot bear an injury,’ swiftly correct this return to pessimism. The first one teaches that all things are a mix of good and evil. The way forward is to focus on the good so that it can overshadow every evil and nourish the soul.⁵⁴⁰ The second one repeats this idea and argues that ‘to a good man all things, even those which seem very bad, are finally turned into good.’⁵⁴¹ Revenge harms the one harbouring feelings of rancour, Ficino continues, and the only valid reason to remember an injury is to learn and avoid malignant men in the future.⁵⁴²

Another disappointment from the first half of Book 3 was the cancelled banquet in honour of the late Cosimo de’ Medici on the feast day of St Cosmas.⁵⁴³ Although the formal reason was an outbreak of the plague, Ficino’s missed opportunity for celebrating his erstwhile patron symbolised a perceived isolation from the younger generation of the Medici family. Above all, the letter highlighted Ficino’s concern about losing his place in the city’s leading household to his competitor Pulci. The matter of unsuccessful dinner parties appears entirely resolved in *EL* 3.42, where Ficino describes the ‘satisfaction, end, form, provision, regulation, seasoning and authority of the convivium.’ It is a relatively long letter, which lists the physical and intellectual benefits of sharing a meal while discussing philosophical matters. Ficino explains the ideal number of participants, the need for a clean table, and the best wine choice—a smooth and bright one is preferable. A single white space in the letter makes our eyes pause for a moment, just after the evocation of a celestial banquet where the constellations represent various dishes: ‘Heaven itself holds the Milky way; the wine bowl of Father Liber, the Pitcher and the Crab, the Fish and the Birds, the young Ram, the Goat and the Bull.’ This metaphor harks back to Ficino’s description of the banquet Cosimo held in the heavens as described in *EL* 3.15, ‘before them the everlasting milk of the Milky Way, the fishes of Jupiter and the lunar crab. To these he adds the goat, the bullock, the young ram and the heavenly birds.’⁵⁴⁴ Could it be that the typography tries to help us see this intratextual connection?

The description of a perfect *convivium* underlines the sense of community which the remaining letters of Book 3 affirm. This community is on the one hand intellectual and based on the exchange of ideas through writing and lecturing. The numerous dedication letters, especially of *De christiana*

⁵³⁹ The phrase appears in Plautus’ *Asinaria* 495 and was included in Erasmus’ *Adagia*, no. 70.

⁵⁴⁰ *EL* 3.45.

⁵⁴¹ *EL* 3.46: ‘Bono autem cuncta vel quae videntur pessima in bonum denique convertuntur.’

⁵⁴² *EL* 3.47.

⁵⁴³ *EL* 3.15.

⁵⁴⁴ *EL* 3.15: ‘Ecce galaxie lac illis perpetuum ponit et iovios Pisces Cancrumque lunarem. His addit Capreolum, Iuuenium, Agnum, Auemque coelestes.’ *EL* 3.42: ‘Eter quoque lacteum habet orbem Liberique patris craterem; habet et amphoram, Cancrumque et Pisces et Aves. Agnum quoque et Capreolum et Iuvencum.’

religione, as well as recurrent references to a Lenten oration, testify to Ficino's fruitful relationships with a variety of people.⁵⁴⁵ On the other hand, community is again described in terms of love, a unity which is now rooted in shared opinions on religious matters and has its source in the oneness of God.⁵⁴⁶ The power of love is set explicitly against the destructive force of envy which is in fact caused by a lack of love. The escape from this vicious circle is a single commandment: 'to be loved one must love.'⁵⁴⁷ Such imperatives are common in the second half of Book 3, and this instructive mode is an unmistakable symptom of the spiritual recovery achieved by Ficino's epistolary persona.⁵⁴⁸ Instead of describing each instance separately, it will suffice to mention the supreme example of *EL* 3.53, *de officiis*. This letter, whose remarkable popularity must be due mainly to the Ciceronian echo in the title,⁵⁴⁹ lists duties for every possible group of people. There is the prince, the magistrate, the private individual, the citizen, knight, merchant, and tradesman, the farmer, master, servant, husband, and friend, the brother, doctor, philosopher, and even women and men in general are assigned their role in society. The duties are pithily phrased: a husband must love his wife, a father cherish his sons, and adolescents try to be like old men. The fatalism of the first 33 letters is finally rejected by Ficino's conclusion that 'spring returns the leafs to the trees which winter has taken away.'⁵⁵⁰

PEACE AND QUIET: BOOK 4

In contrast to the thematic and emotional shifts in Books 1 and 3, Book 4 maintains a remarkably homogeneous *modus*. It shares this consistency with Book 2, so that the 'twin Books' 3 and 4, as Ficino calls them in his letter to Matthias, mirror the combined macrotext of Books 1 and 2. As I will show, the thematic range of Book 4 is limited to a continuation of topics raised in Book 3. The most important difference is a solid belief in the primacy of the soul and free will over respectively the body and fate.⁵⁵¹ Human freedom was a key concept for Ficino, one which he developed and defended over several decades. In Book 4, it is neatly integrated into the conversion narrative which Book 3 started. Moreover, Book 4 does not import the doubts from the first half of the preceding book but instead reinforces Ficino's persona in self-reliance and philosophical authority. Those

⁵⁴⁵ *EL* 3.37; 3.39; 3.41; 3.57-58; 3.63.

⁵⁴⁶ *EL* 3.56; 3.65-66.

⁵⁴⁷ *EL* 3.50: 'ut ameris ama.'

⁵⁴⁸ *EL* 3.48-49; 3.51-52.

⁵⁴⁹ *EL* 3.53 circulated in manuscript and print independently from the collection: MS London, BL, Add. 16566; ISTC No is00389200 (1499); USTC Nos 693278 (1502); 673623 (1506); 651470 (1519). Nejeschleba 2021 discusses a Czech translation from around 1500. The argument in Rees 2013a, 145 that the 1576 layout even foresees annotation is untenable considering how paragraphs are usually separated in prints of the *Epistole*, namely by blank spaces.

⁵⁵⁰ *EL* 3.53: 'ver arboribus folia reddere quae abstulit hyems.'

⁵⁵¹ An eloquent essay on the topic is Trinkaus 1986.

thematic and stylistic differences are particularly evident in letters dealing with worldly prosperity, astrology, as well as those providing moral instruction.

While we witnessed Ficino asking for money in *EL* 3.10, 3.11, 3.14, and 3.17, his desire for financial welfare is now replaced with a renewed appreciation of friendship. In *EL* 4.6, he writes that ‘there is as much shame in loving money as there is honour in loving a man worthy of love.’⁵⁵² This comparison underlines the relative value of money and emphasises the importance of human relationships over wealth. Love becomes again a recurrent theme in Book 4, and Ficino consistently presents it in its most noble form of spiritual and religious union.⁵⁵³ When he describes how someone gives himself out of love, and thereby hands over everything he has, he draws the comparison with material gifts. ‘He who gives us something, but not his heart, is not offering a gift; he is either leaving something on deposit, or bribing us, or perhaps ensnaring us.’⁵⁵⁴ Money only serves to feed the body while Book 4 insists that one should nourish the soul before everything else. While the mortal body is bound by all sorts of limitations, the soul is free and free to rise to its divine origin in heaven. This freedom exists on a metaphysical level but must be conquered in everyday life as well. For the soul is only free in as far as it has freed itself from the physical world. Book 3 zoomed in on Ficino’s dependence on others, particularly his various patrons. Book 4 now insists on his freedom, and the possibility of freedom for his correspondents and the reader of the *Epistole*.

The only acceptable dependence is mankind’s dependence on God. While the soul cannot be satisfied by mortal possessions, it cannot satisfy itself either. ‘Nothing can satisfy itself but the immeasurable good which comes from itself and returns to itself,’ Ficino writes.⁵⁵⁵ Man should therefore turn to God alone in his quest for happiness. Worship of God is also the remedy for the evils of moral decadence or of mental and physical illness.⁵⁵⁶ Ficino combines those two afflictions in the familiar plague metaphor, which represents ‘everything evil.’ The antidote he prescribes, evidently drawing on his authority as priest and doctor, is ‘everything good’ coming from God. This good is spiritual, above this world, and therefore only attainable for the soul.⁵⁵⁷ In *EL* 4.16, Ficino describes how he personally practised this advice. He is often ill, he writes to his friends, but bears his bad health well. For, ‘when God himself is our strength, we cannot be entirely weak.’ Ficino illustrates how faith in God’s support helps to deal with setbacks. The reader of the *Epistole*

⁵⁵² *EL* 4.6: ‘Quam turpe est amare pecunias tam honestum est amare hominem amore dignissimum.’

⁵⁵³ *EL* 4.22-24; 4.30-32.

⁵⁵⁴ *EL* 4.5: ‘Qui rem nobis aliquam dat non animum, hic non donum offert sed vel commendat depositum vel emit nos vel forsan aucupatur.’ Cf. *EL* 4.17.

⁵⁵⁵ *EL* 4.25: ‘Nihil autem siipsum potest satis esse praeter immensum bonum quod ex seipso est et ad seipsum.’

⁵⁵⁶ *EL* 4.4: ‘Quamobrem non reperitur usque contra terrenos morbos medicina sufficiens praeter amorem cultumque divinum.’

⁵⁵⁷ *EL* 4.4.

vividly remembers the philosopher's polemics with Pulci in Book 3. These public wrangles greatly affected Ficino, or so the letters made us believe. In the second half of Book 3, Ficino countered these attacks with irony and showed how to find praise in criticism.⁵⁵⁸ At the beginning of Book 4, he finally takes pride in the disparagement itself since God is blamed for His gifts as well. The only measure for one's words must be truth and reason; if those are satisfied, condemnation by others is merely a sign of their own bad judgement.⁵⁵⁹

The letter introducing this last line of thought is placed at the beginning of Book 4, roughly corresponding to the position of the Pulci letters in Book 3.⁵⁶⁰ This foregrounds its corrective function regarding the preceding book. It is addressed to 'a fellow philosopher,' and two manuscripts appear to leave space for the insertion of a name.⁵⁶¹ Why did this never happen? This time, the argument of (self-)censorship, which explained why Pulci's name was left out from a critical letter in Book 1, is insufficient. The letter in Book 4 is hardly offensive, on the contrary, it is a warm encouragement to stay true to one's principles. Perhaps, Ficino wrote it specifically for the collection. It serves as a recantation of his previous concern for the opinion of others. A letter to the self like *EL* 3.33 effectively signalled conversion but its singular power lies in its uniqueness and the device could not be simply repeated. Ficino opted for the less conspicuous alternative of a general addressee and safeguarded the link with himself by inventing 'a fellow philosopher.' The following letter uses the same technique to declare that a philosopher should live according to his own moral teaching—something which Ficino repeatedly failed to do in *EL* 3.1-32 but now recognises as his duty.⁵⁶²

In Book 3, Ficino complained that his misery was caused by the stars and submitted to their power. After Cavalcanti had reprimanded Ficino for his astrological defeatism, the latter restrained his frustrations but did not totally renounce his former beliefs. This only happens in Book 4, where Ficino announces the composition of a book about free will and divine providence refuting astrological determination.⁵⁶³ Near the end of the book stands a long *disputation against the judgement of the astrologers*. It is the prefatory letter for a book with the same title, addressed to the nobleman and humanist Francesco Ippoliti. Ficino states that free will, providence, and the justice of the angels are never submitted to the blind force of fate. He does not abandon astrology completely but refers it to a place below human willpower.⁵⁶⁴ Although a single man cannot manipulate the

⁵⁵⁸ *EL* 3.34.

⁵⁵⁹ *EL* 4.2.

⁵⁶⁰ *EL* 3.4-5.

⁵⁶¹ R, fol. 208v; *G3*, fol. 72r.

⁵⁶² *EL* 4.3.

⁵⁶³ *EL* 4.20; 4.29.

⁵⁶⁴ Vanhaelen 2005, 51–53; Bullard 1990b, 688–689.

stars, he can aim to understand their impact and turn it to his advantage.⁵⁶⁵ However, the best way to avoid the blows of fate is giving way and adapting one's course.

Let's return to the initial question of this chapter: Can we see in the *ductus* of Books 3-4 traces of Book 1's governing structure? Ficino's over-attachment to worldly benefits turned the *modus* of *EL* 3.1-32 into an account of the *vita voluptuosa*. After *EL* 3.33, the *modus* changed and led towards a self-contained philosophical serenity. This development is carried through in Book 4, but where does it eventually arrive? Is the endpoint, as in Book 1, the *vita contemplativa*? Does it include letters with a demonstrable relevance for the *vita activa*? Neither seems to be the case. Certainly, Book 4 comprises letters that are essentially connected with philosophy and societal life. It repeats time and again that we should turn away from the body and privilege the soul. However, these injunctions are unlike the contemplative letters at the end of Book 1, which included extended reflections on the soul's nature, a theological prayer to God, and a systematic discussion of happiness. There is also a difference between the letters on, for example, lawgiving from the second section of Book 1 and the societal letters of Books 3 and 4. The latter two books do not contain ruminations on the value of law nor on the necessity of honest magistrates. Instead, Ficino provides short moral precepts facilitating communal life, like the ones discussed above and exemplified by the letter *de officiis*. The only exception is a letter on matrimony and its civic value in Book 4. Ficino describes marriage as a stepping stone to greater duties:

In this fellowship [of matrimony] let him strive,' we read, 'to serve and to learn how to guide the society of mankind itself. Surely, just as the state consists of households, so skill in state affairs consists of the judicious handling of family affairs.'⁵⁶⁶

But civic affairs themselves remain unthematized. It seems that in Book 4 Ficino is more concerned with the ascent from a *vita voluptuosa* to a *vita activa* than with the *vita activa* itself. The civic virtues are developing but have not yet reached their perfection. Ficino insists that his correspondents focus on the soul and distance themselves from worldly goods. This contributes to their upwards movement fuelled by virtue, which Ficino hails as a unified force of good in the world.⁵⁶⁷ In sum, Books 3-4 represent the *vita voluptuosa* in combination with that spiritual growth away from the pleasure-seeking life. The arrival in the *vita activa* proper, we will see, is reserved for Books 5 and 6.

⁵⁶⁵ Bullard 1990b, 700.

⁵⁶⁶ *EL* 4.34: 'Cuius commertio publicam ipsam generis humani societatem et servare nitatur et gubernare perdiscat. Nempe quemadmodum ex domibus civitas, ita ex rei familiaris disciplina reipublicae peritia constituitur.'

⁵⁶⁷ *EL* 4.8.

CHAPTER 6

VITA ACTIVA AND BEYOND: *EL* 5.1-11.34

TOWARDS POLITICS: BOOK 5

Since Books 3 and 4 took us through and away from the *vita voluptuosa*, the expectation is that Books 5 and 6 will thematise the *vita activa*. At least in the first letters of Book 5, this expectation remains unfulfilled since the letters consistently point at a contemplative way of life. In *EL* 5.3 Ficino informs the poet Naldo Naldi that he has gone to his family's estate in Celle, a hamlet not far from Florence.⁵⁶⁸ Celle lies in the countryside, traditionally an environment for withdrawal into philosophy and the arts, opposed to the societal life that takes place in the city.⁵⁶⁹ Ficino makes his contemplative intentions clear: 'I withdrew to our Monte Celle, far from the city, not to relax my mind but to apply it. For to those practising philosophy, solitude should be, and usually is, not so much a relaxation as an application of the mind.'⁵⁷⁰ This letter, as well as the next one, reference Ficino's summaries of his *Platonic Theology*, *On the Highest Good*, and *On the Christian Religion*.⁵⁷¹ The memory of these *argumenta* on Christian doctrine supports the claim that Ficino had gone to the countryside for serious philosophical work. He is still on a contemplative retreat in *EL* 5.5 to Cavalcanti and spurs his addressee to take refuge in the highest good in *EL* 5.6.

Ficino's withdrawal to the solitude of Celle serves as a means for the mind to renounce earthly pleasures and concerns. The philosopher states that 'those who try to combine the pleasures of the lower world with those of the higher are in great trouble. For since they labour so hard in contrary directions, they can enjoy the pleasures neither of the mind nor of the body.' To penetrate the realm of truth, the mind needs to free itself entirely from the obstacle of the body. For it 'will not rise to the truest causes of things, which are separate from bodies, unless it has separated itself from the body, first by cleansing itself of its habits and then by the effort of contemplation.'⁵⁷² Yet Ficino warns his addressees and the reader of the *Epistle* that contemplation alone does not lead to happiness. Several of the letters persuade his friends to accept God's boundless love and to join

⁵⁶⁸ Cf. Marcel 1958, 242.

⁵⁶⁹ Cf. Tröger 2016, 200–206.

⁵⁷⁰ *EL* 5.10: 'Secesi nonis septembribus in montem Celanum nostrum procul ab urbe remittendi immo potius intendendi animi gratia. Nam solitudo philosophantibus non tam remissio mentis quam intentio esset et solet et debet.'

⁵⁷¹ *EL* 5.3, 5.4; the *argumenta* can be found respectively in Ficino 1576, 1206.

⁵⁷² *EL* 5.8: 'multomagis anxi qui voluptates infimas cum supremis frustra copulare conantur. Nam cum nimium utrinque laborent neutra ex parte vel mentis vel corporis voluptatibus perfruuntur.'

His serene unity.⁵⁷³ Reliance on God's omnipresent goodness, Ficino explains, goes hand in hand with the recognition of one's own limitations. For when philosophers rely on their own cleverness only, 'they have no one left whom they may trust or consult. O foolish wisdom, O knowledge more confusing than all ignorance.'⁵⁷⁴

While Ficino praises God as the ultimate guide towards wisdom, he also considers him the best defence against fortune's blows and the transience of prosperity. He had introduced this topic most forcefully in the second letter of Book 3 and came back to it several times in Book 4. Ficino now adds a focus on patience, arguing that the acceptance of the inevitable undoes the impact of fortune's violence.⁵⁷⁵ This advice is first given to Sebastiano Salvini, for whom Ficino in Book 3 unsuccessfully tried to find a paid position in the Church or the household of Tommaso Minerbettii.⁵⁷⁶ In *EL* 5.13, Salvini still appears unable to support himself. This time, Ficino simply recommends him to suffer well, that is to willingly suffer what he cannot presently change. 'Just as he who acts badly turns what is good for him into evil, so he who suffers well turns what is bad for him into good. ... The unabating storm batters us from without, and it is only within that peace is to be sought.'⁵⁷⁷ Patience is, like wisdom and tranquillity, attainable through religion and trust in God's will. Indeed, Ficino writes, 'the whole virtue of patience consists in this alone, that we fully accept as good whatever takes place under the governance of infinite goodness.'⁵⁷⁸ Worldly concerns, dominant in Book 3 and still around the corner in Book 4, are drowned out by the decidedly philosophical opening *modus* of Book 5.

The renunciation of the body and the virtue of patience are two dominant themes in Book 5. There is a third category of letters on love, which are anyway present throughout the *Epistole*.⁵⁷⁹ The letters within each of those categories are minimally different. The result is an impression of repetitiveness, which is increased by several cross-references between letters. For example, *EL* 5.11 recommends *EL* 5.8 to Lorenzo de' Medici, and *EL* 5.13 to Salvini is mentioned in *EL* 5.14 and 5.17 to Cavalcanti. There is no overarching structure like the succession of well-defined themes and moods in Books 1 and 3. Furthermore, fewer letters have a demonstrable influence on the interpretation of nearby elements. What does this mean for a macro-textual reading of Ficino's

⁵⁷³ *EL* 5.6, 5.19, 5.33.

⁵⁷⁴ *EL* 5.6: 'dubitare de cunctis in singulis didicere: et cum neminem credant superiorem se habere vel parem iam neque habent cui credant quicquam neque quem consulant, o insipidam sapientiam, o scientiam inscitia omni confusiorem.'

⁵⁷⁵ *EL* 5.13, 5.40, 5.41.

⁵⁷⁶ *EL* 3.11; 3.14.

⁵⁷⁷ *EL* 5.13: 'sicut qui male agit bona sibimet convertit in malum, ita qui bene patitur mala sibi vertit in bonum. ... Continua nos extrinsecus procella ferit. Intrinsecus tantum nobis est petenda tranquillitas.'

⁵⁷⁸ *EL* 5.40: 'In hoc uno patientiae vis tota consistit ut bene patiamur tamquam bonum quicquid sub infinite bonitatis gubernatione contingit.'

⁵⁷⁹ *EL* 5.20, 5.26, 5.43.

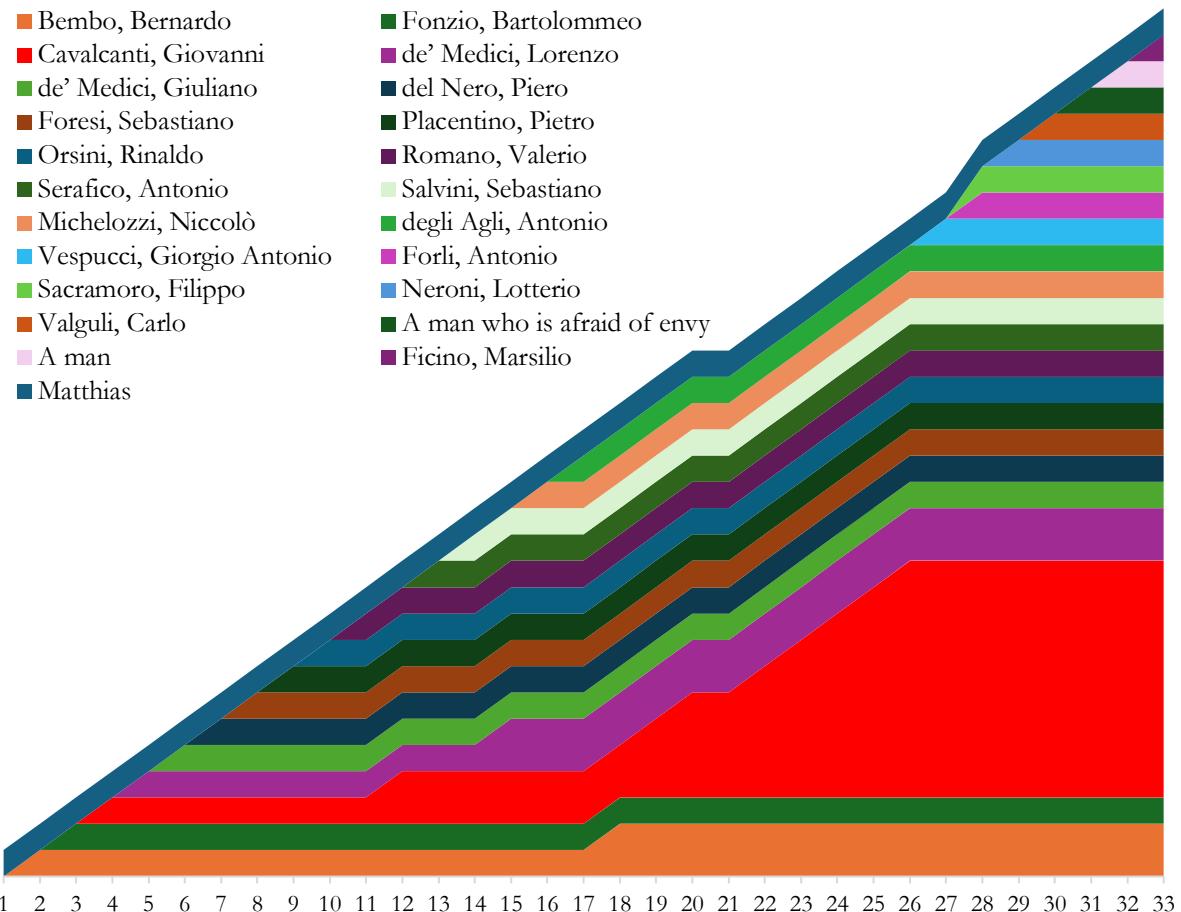
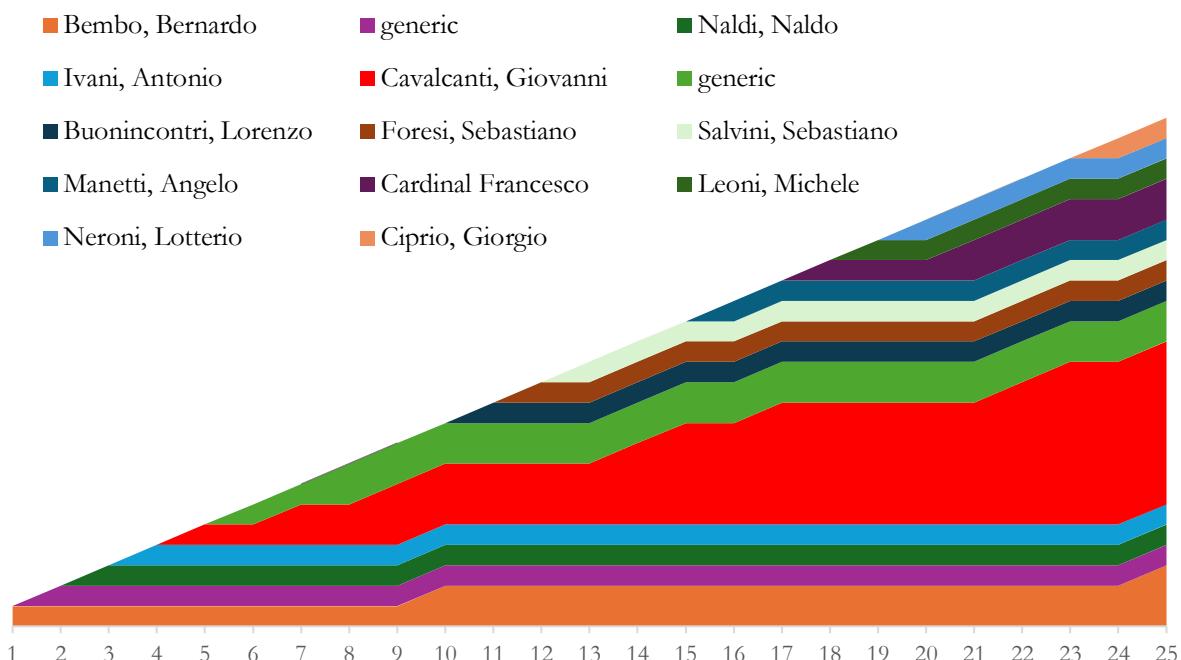
Epistole? The narrative and thematic developments in the *Epistole* appear to move from the level of letters within individual books to the level of entire books within the collection. If there is an increasing redundancy within individual books, then how can we determine the function of each book within the overarching structure of the collection? I propose that we build on observations made in previous books of the *Epistole* to detect meaningful patterns. I have demonstrated that in Books 1 and 3 Ficino used symmetrical arrangements as well as initial and central positions within those symmetries to emphasise specific letters and establish a specific *modus*. Examples are the programmatic opening of Book 1 and the pivotal role of the middle letter in the conversion narrative of Book 3. Another structural principle were micronarratives that focused on individual correspondents, like the series of letters to Lorenzo and Cavalcanti in Book 1. In the next paragraphs, I show how the detection of these structural principles in Book 5 helps us to recognise the shift from a *vita voluptuosa* in Books 3-4 to a *vita activa* in Books 5-6.

A TALE OF TWO FRIENDS

Giovanni Cavalcanti and Bernardo Bembo shape Book 5 through their interaction with Ficino. They are strikingly similar figures, which is highlighted by the fact that Ficino wrote to them about the same topics. For example, there are two long letters on fortune which Cesare Vasoli has interpreted as fundamental sources for Ficino's thinking on the matter.⁵⁸⁰ Tellingly, one of them was written to Cavalcanti, the other one to Bembo. Vasoli included two other letters in his analysis, but neither of them is included in the *Epistole*. Again, exclusion is as important a strategy for the creation of a macrotext as inclusion and purposeful arrangement. Nevertheless, Cavalcanti and Bembo mirror opposing aspects of Ficino's self-characterisation. Ficino's love for his *amicus unicus* was initially flawed and it required much effort to transcend his overly passionate feelings to achieve a more philosophical understanding of friendship.⁵⁸¹ In Book 3, Cavalcanti gradually dominates the tumultuous first half whereas other addressees appear only once or twice (Table 5). In the second half of Book 3, where Ficino regains his self-confidence, he appears only twice. In Book 4, where Ficino confirms the emotionally balanced *modus* of Book 3's second half, he is entirely absent. So, Cavalcanti is tied to a specific aspect of Ficino's epistolary *persona*: the doubtful and self-absorbed one, which despite its best intentions and intellectual potential falls short of reaching the internal calm needed for the *vita contemplativa*. Cavalcanti reappears in Book 5 in a similar way to Book 3. He gradually dominates the first half (Table 6) but disappears from the second half. This time the narrative of Cavalcanti's removal is made explicit, and Ficino openly replaces him with Bembo.

⁵⁸⁰ Vasoli 2005.

⁵⁸¹ See p. 80-85; 124.

TABLE 5 CUMULATIVE TABLE OF THE ADDRESSEES IN *EL* 3.1-33TABLE 6 CUMULATIVE TABLE OF THE ADDRESSEES IN *EL* 5.1-25

In *EL* 5.5, Ficino offers to Cavalcanti ‘the first-fruits of his stay in the country, since whatever is first is quite rightly owed to him who is first.’ Cavalcanti is singled out as the most important of Ficino’s addressees and the philosopher ends his letter by stating that ‘if you do not read it, I shall wish that I had not written to my friends, and I shall have failed to write to myself.’⁵⁸² Eight letters further, he still claims that ‘I would not wish our thoughts to please anyone else until they had first pleased the man who pleases me more than anyone [viz. Cavalcanti].’⁵⁸³ But Ficino’s exchange with Cavalcanti starts to show cracks. *EL* 5.7 even brings back some of the despondency from Book 3 as Ficino complains that his thoughts are divided. He wants to write something humorous but can only produce elegy and tragedy. Again, he asks if Saturn is responsible for this state of mind, and remembers Cavalcanti’s previous rejection of astrological pessimism: ‘Would you have me say, my friend, that in these times Saturn has chosen me alone on whom to test all his stern powers? No. I see you would not want that, my Giovanni, and neither would I.’⁵⁸⁴ Two letters later, he writes: ‘What is it that you are saying so politely about our correspondence? Have I overwhelmed you recently? Are you complaining about the number of my letters? … Why does the number of my letters disturb you? Clearly because I myself am disturbed by the tumult of my thoughts.’⁵⁸⁵ Not much later, he asks ‘I beg you Giovanni, why do you now not reply to so many of my letters?’⁵⁸⁶ Nevertheless, Ficino quickly recovers from these bouts of anxiety and remarks that Cavalcanti does not write to him because they are already one through their intimate friendship. This is summarised in the title of the letter: *True friendship needs no outer formalities*.

In the final two letters to Cavalcanti, Ficino complains about the disregard in which the city of Florence held him: ‘You may perhaps grieve with me over one thing, my Giovanni, that I am overlooked by my country, not perhaps because I am so very great but because I am so very small.’⁵⁸⁷ The following letter implies that we should read this remark in a political context: Ficino’s opinion on state matters in particular is not valued. In *EL* 5.23, he writes that ‘philosophy does not teach us to live with princes. … Truth does not dwell in the company of princes; only lies, spiteful criticism and fawning flattery, men pretending to be what they are not and pretending not

⁵⁸² *EL* 5.5: ‘rusticationis huius nostrae primitas. Quam prima quaeque iura optima debeantur primo … neque ad amicos scripsisse velim neque ad me ipsum possum nisi tu legeris.’

⁵⁸³ *EL* 5.14: ‘Ego vero nolim cuiquam nostra placere nisi ei viro qui ante omnes mihi placet ante placuerint.’

⁵⁸⁴ *EL* 5.7: ‘Vis dicam, amice, Saturnum me unicum his temporibus elegisse in quo cunctas rigiditatis suae vires experiatur? Sed non vis istud (ut video), mi loannes, nec ego volo..’ Cf. 3.22.

⁵⁸⁵ *EL* 5.9: ‘Quidnam ais, o vir, in rebus tantum nostris delicatissime? Obruine te his diebus a nobis quereris copia litterarum? Cur te turbo numero litterarum? Quia videlicet ipse nimia cogitationum turba confundor.’

⁵⁸⁶ *EL* 5.18: ‘Quaeso … Cur tot iam litteris meis non respondes?’

⁵⁸⁷ *EL* 5.22: ‘Hoc unum mecum forte dolebis, mi loannes, quod forsitan non tam quia maximus sit ille noster quam quia minimus censeatur patriae est ignotus.’

to be what they are.⁵⁸⁸ This explicit renunciation of civic engagement is more surprising than the contemplative opening letters of Book 5. For this anti-political *modus* is precisely what we did not expect. However, this attitude is carefully staged in the letters to Cavalcanti so that it can be abandoned more visibly by also leaving Cavalcanti himself behind in a conspicuous manner. In *EL* 5.10, addressed to Bembo, Ficino still added that ‘it is that renowned hero of ours, Giovanni Cavalcanti, who is commended under the name of Marsilio. Or if I say farewell, understand that in Marsilio’s words our hero greatly desires you to fare well.’⁵⁸⁹ But just before Cavalcanti disappears from the scene, we read in *EL* 5.25 to Bembo that ‘like me, he [viz. Cavalcanti] seems to be in darkness’.⁵⁹⁰ Light and darkness are key metaphors for Ficino, and never does he put one of his friends so categorically in the latter. It denies Cavalcanti any kind of helpfulness for curing Ficino’s spells of doubt. Moreover, the *amicus unicus* is at once replaced by Bembo to whom Ficino turns instead. Indeed, for the rest of Book 5 as well as Book 6, Cavalcanti remains absent. The same pattern emerges as the one we observed in Books 3-4. Now, Ficino does not turn away from the *vita voluptuosa*, but rather turns towards the *vita activa*. Bembo is a suitable addressee to underline this transition since Ficino consistently characterises him as civically involved. Bembo is, according to the address lines, ‘a Venetian nobleman, doctor of law, and illustrious knight.’ We know that Cavalcanti was also active as a diplomat, but Ficino consciously avoids presenting him in this way to keep the distinction between him and Bembo clear. Now that I have explained how Ficino dramatized his shift towards the *vita activa* through the figures of Cavalcanti and Bembo, I turn to the structural anchoring of the civic *modus* in Book 5.

TOWARDS THE POLITICAL LIFE

Although the *vita activa* does not dominate by the quantity of letters concerned with society, the political life does emerge at conspicuous moments in the book. The first letter after the short dedication of Book 5 to Bernardo Bembo is titled *Faith in divine law is confirmed by knowledge*. The letter, addressed to ‘his most reverend friends,’ is a comparison between human and divine law. It concludes, predictably, that laws coming from God are better because ‘divine faith is far more certain than human wisdom’.⁵⁹¹ Since God is good, also His laws will not disappoint. Despite its theological tenets, this short letter meets the reader’s expectations of a civic focus in Book 5 after gradually abandoning the *vita voluptuosa* in Books 3 and 4. While Ficino insists on following divine

⁵⁸⁸ *EL* 5.23: ‘Philosophia non docet, immo vetat cum principibus vivere ... Apud principes autem non veritas habitat sed mendacia, simulationes, dissimulationes, obtrectationes, adulatio[n]es.’

⁵⁸⁹ *EL* 5.10: ‘intellige heroem illum nostrum Ioannem Cavalcantem sub Marsilius nomine commendatum. Sive dixero ‘Vale,’ intellige tibi sub Marsilius verbis ab heroe prosperam valitudinem exoptatam.’

⁵⁹⁰ *EL* 5.25: ‘hic similiter una mecum caligare uidetur.’

⁵⁹¹ *EL* 5.2: ‘divina fides longe certior est quam hominum sapientia.’

TABLE 7 LETTERS TO BEMBO IN BOOK 5

1: first letter

10-----15 letters-----25

25-----5 letters-----30-----5 letters-----35-----6 letters-----41

51: final letter (not to Bembo)

truth, the letter explicitly puts this philosophical principle in the civic context of legislation. The first words of the letter are *leges humanae*, human laws whose continued validity, despite opposition by both learned and powerful men, is due to their divine origin. Moreover, a Tuscan translation of the letter belongs to the set of ‘moral sermons’ concerned with just action, of which a selection already featured in the civic part of Book 1.⁵⁹² *EL* 5.2 thus brings back through the main gate an issue which had remained absent since the second section of the first book. As indicated at the beginning of this chapter, the expectant reader is soon disappointed. We are led to believe that Ficino has sent us off in the wrong direction since for the next twenty-five letters there is no more mention of political topics.

Politics return at again a conspicuous moment in the book, right in its centre. It is noteworthy that this coincides with an increase of letters to Bembo in a way that is conspicuously regular (see Table 7). The first and last letters to Bembo (excluding the preface) are equally far removed from the beginning and end of the book. The distance of fifteen letters between the first and second letters, *EL* 5.10 and 5.25, is the same as between the second and last letters, *EL* 5.25 and 5.41 to Bembo. Between the second and last letter, two other letters to Bembo are inserted at regular intervals (5.25~30~35~41) so that the second half of the book seems perfused with Bembo in contrast to the Cavalcantian first half. There is a second symmetrical pattern in Book 5, based on addressees from the ecclesiastical hierarchy. The two central letters of the collection (*EL* 5.27-28) are addressed to Cardinal Raffaele Riario. Six letters to the left and right of this pair are letters addressed Cardinal Francesco Salvini (*EL* 5.21) and to Archbishop Francesco Salviati jointly with Riario (5.34). In an earlier version, both letters were addressed to Francesco Salviati. Almost equally far removed from either side of this quartet are again letters to respectively Salvini and Riario (*EL* 5.18; 5.39). The regularity of their recurrence across the book connects Book 5 with the highest echelons of ecclesiastical politics. The letters to Bembo, an important ambassador, strengthen the impression that Ficino is involved in negotiating power dynamics.

⁵⁹² *EL* 1.59; see p. 103-104.

Not all the letters to church dignitaries and Bembo are directly concerned with political matters. But *EL* 5.27, the middle of fifty-one letters that constitute Book 5, is a long piece about the proper education of a ruler. The definitive version of Book 5 as found in the 1495 edition of the *Epistole* is unique for its lack of dates. However, in a manuscript draft of Books 5-6, *EL* 5.27 is the only one with a date stamp. This further highlights the letter and puts into relief the political involvement of the book to which it belongs.⁵⁹³ The prominence of *EL* 5.27 is enhanced by the length of the letter, a seventh of the entire book, and by the fact that its addressee is a cardinal. Moreover, the next two letters refer to it and one of those is addressed to 'Francesco Soderini, an expert in civil law.' The *Institutio principis*, as *EL* 5.27 is titled, stands in a long tradition of medieval mirrors of princes.⁵⁹⁴ Ficino systematically warns against the pitfalls of a high position and suggests several remedies. Riario should not be overproud, since his position is entirely due to his family connections, which were set in place by God himself. He should not seek advantages for himself nor delight in pomp and circumstance, but put himself in service of his subjects. He must surround himself with 'hunters and fowlers' who are prudent and loyal. They should support him in living a blameless life without angry outbursts, empty promises, or rash decisions. He should take wise councillors who tell him the truth, and avoid flatterers. His house should be modest, 'a temple of God,' where modesty, integrity and love are at home. It is, in sum, entirely tailored to the theme of worldly power even if applied and adapted to an ecclesiastical dignitary.

The first and middle letters of Book 5 reintroduce political questions into the narrative of the *Epistole*. *EL* 5.37, 5.39, and 5.48 retain the reader's interest in this thematic field. Yet, the most explosive politics in the book are found beneath the surface. The letters were written in a period between September 1477 and the early days of 1479. The published collection hides the historical context by erasing all the dates, but comparison with the original letters leaves no doubt.⁵⁹⁵ Why did Ficino try to obfuscate the period in which the letters were written? The answer is found in a series of events that unfolded in April 1478, at the chronological heart of Book 5. Florence had been shocked by an attack on the lives of Lorenzo and Giuliano de' Medici, which resulted in the death of the latter. The plot had first been hatched in Rome by Girolamo Riario, nephew of Pope Sixtus VI, and Francesco de' Pazzi, a political and economic competitor of the Medici family. The third conspirator was Francesco Salviati, whom, we remember, Ficino congratulated on his instalment as Archbishop of Pisa in Book 3. Sixtus IV and Ferdinand of Aragon were most likely

⁵⁹³ N3, fol. 26v.

⁵⁹⁴ Tröger 2016, 231–233

⁵⁹⁵ I consulted the Florentine manuscript letter contained in Inc Firenze, BNCF, Magl. A 7 8, which dates *EL* 5.44 on 29 October 1478. Gentile 1990, CLVII informs us that *EL* 5.48 is dated on 26 January 1479 in Antonio Ivani's transcription of Ficino's original letter to him. The same manuscript of Ivani dates *EL* 5.4 on 15 September but the year 1477 was added later; cf. Ficino 1988, 4:116.

working behind the scenes to bring the coup to a successful end.⁵⁹⁶ Having failed to lure Lorenzo to Rome, the conspirators decided to bring their plans to Florence. To gain access to the Medici household, they summoned the teenage cardinal Raffaele Riario, grandnephew of the Pope, to Florence. The visit of such a distinguished guest, de' Pazzi and Salviati hoped, would create a situation where Lorenzo and Giuliano would unwittingly expose themselves to an attack.

After private meetings were repeatedly cancelled by the two brothers, the plotters finally brought them together for a Mass in the cathedral on 26 April. As Giuliano bowed his head for the confession of sins, Francesco de' Pazzi stabbed him to death. He then attacked Lorenzo and injured him in the arm before the latter managed escape into the sacristy. Meanwhile, Salviati tried to take control of the Signoria, the political heart of the Florentine state. He failed, and the popular fury soon turned against the conspirators. After the mob had taken the law into its own hands, Francesco de' Pazzi was hanged from a window and Francesco Salviati was dragged out of the Signoria to meet the same fate. Jacopo Bracciolini, addressee of two letters in Book 1 of Ficino's *Epistole*, fared no better on the following day. The young Riario, involuntarily implicated in the plot, was incarcerated without regard for his ecclesiastical rank. This, together with the execution of Archbishop Salviati, led to strong indignation in Rome. Moved by the drama of the day and aware of the diplomatic crisis that was unfolding, Poliziano immediately wrote an eyewitness account in which the depiction of the perpetrators as depraved characters obfuscates the involvement of the Pope and of the king of Naples.⁵⁹⁷ A letter from the Venetian humanist Girolamo Donà, which features in his letter collection, also mentions a poem by Poliziano about the murder of Giuliano.⁵⁹⁸ Indeed, Poliziano participated with fervour in the propagandistic effort to cleanse Lorenzo de' Medici from all accusations of unlawful violence and to quickly restore diplomatic ties.

I mention Poliziano's loud response to the coup since it contrasts with Ficino's startling silence. Giuliano de' Medici had been the dedicatee of Book 1 of the *Epistole* and was the brother of Ficino's most important patron. His brutal murder, in the sacred environment of a church and during Holy Mass, remains nevertheless unmentioned in the *Epistole*. Part of the explanation is that Ficino tried to dissociate himself from the events since several of his correspondents were involved in the attack. Multiple letters in *M* are crossed out which tied him to key players in the conspiracy.⁵⁹⁹ Yet, Ficino does not entirely dissociate himself from the plotters. Cardinal Riario is very present, and Ficino offers heartfelt apologies for not following him to Rome after Riario was released by the

⁵⁹⁶ Najemy 2006, 355–357.

⁵⁹⁷ Edited in Poliziano 2015; see Celati 2019 on Poliziano's attempt at mitigating of the political consequences.

⁵⁹⁸ *PoIE* 2.11.

⁵⁹⁹ Gentile 1980, 141–142.

Florentine government.⁶⁰⁰ Even one letter to Salviati is preserved in the published version of Book 5 as well as a letter to Jacopo Bracciolini in Book 4.⁶⁰¹ Moreover, it was unnecessary to pretend nothing had happened in order to discourage people from thinking Ficino was implicated in the plot. He could as well have denounced the events and mourned Giuliano's death.

Why then do the letters not mention that fated day in April? Thus far, the problems raised by the epistolary narrative were relatable. Ficino battled financial worries, feelings of envy, a perceived lack of recognition, overattachment to friends, and we will see how he struggled with civic obligations in Book 6. They are experiences shared by his projected readership. The political murder of a close acquaintance by conspirators who are also one's correspondents does not fall into that category. If Ficino had told the story of Giuliano's death and the reason for Lorenzo's consequent conflict with the Pope, it would have interrupted the pattern of spiritual growth. They would have become the centre of narrative gravity, and the following letters would have fallen into their orbit. It might have inspired readers to adopt a historiographical reading attitude, to try to puzzle together political strategies, diplomatic gestures, and incriminating friendships. That could have undone the personal narrative which Ficino had so carefully constructed. If his life choices appeared too determined by circumstances, this would reduce the imitability of his life story which was meant to be a model for all readers.

PEAKING POLITICS: BOOK 6

POLITICAL LIFE

Marco Fubini has observed that 'la politica, il mondo contingente dell'agire umano appare nel pensiero ficiniano come un margine negativo, fonte delle perturbazioni dell'animo e perenne ostacolo al raggiungimento della "quiete" nella contemplazione del vero.' For Ficino, he argues, politics were a 'dominio soggetto a una cieca fatalità, da cui soltanto evade chi voglia e sappia ripiegare nell'interiorità, sede verace della libertà di cui l'uomo, nell'economia dell'unità armoniosa del mondo, è dotato.'⁶⁰² Fubini's observation corresponds to Kristeller's denial that Ficino had any interest in politics at all.⁶⁰³ As we have seen in the first chapter, Ficino's *Philebus* commentary even puts the *vita activa* below the *vita voluptuosa*. This is remarkable because it usually takes a middle position in the ancient and medieval traditions as well as in other texts by Ficino. This downgrade indicates how opposed Ficino thought the tribulations of public life were to contemplation. However, Fubini recognised in a later publication that the philosopher occasionally felt obliged to

⁶⁰⁰ EL 5.39.

⁶⁰¹ EL 5.34.

⁶⁰² Fubini 1984, 5–6.

⁶⁰³ Kristeller 1943, 15.

bring his philosophical authority to bear on political issues.⁶⁰⁴ Book 5 made the initial steps towards the revelation of Ficino's political persona, but his combined letters to Sixtus, Riario, and Giovanni of Aragon in Book 6 are undoubtedly its strongest instance. Still, Ficino described his letter to the Pope as the reluctant fulfilment of a duty. In *EL* 6.7, we read: 'I call on God as my witness that in this case I have done my duty as well as I could,' but Ficino adds that 'for the rest, others will have to see to it.'⁶⁰⁵

Ficino implies from the beginning of Book 6, as he did in Book 5, that he does not participate in the political life of the city. In *EL* 6.2, he writes to Antonio Vinciguerra and Bernardo Bembo that they should withdraw to the countryside with him. He could hardly expect that the two men would follow his advice, since Bembo was an important Venetian ambassador and Vinciguerra, who had accompanied Bembo on a diplomatic mission to Florence in 1475, was secretary to the Venetian Senate.⁶⁰⁶ Both were men of action; their field of action was the city. Ficino's self-fashioning as an unworldly recluse is disingenuous in the context of his dealings with the Roman Curia that dominate the beginning of Book 6. If it were allowed to take the position of St Augustine's spirit towards Petrarch in the latter's *Secretum*, we could say that Ficino's 'quiet life, solitude, indifference toward so many worldly matters, and even [his] studies are still leading to the same goal of fame' which the Florentine philosopher here converts into political influence.⁶⁰⁷ Understandably, Ficino did not use the same fierce language against the Pope used by the Florentine chancellor Bartolomeo Scala on behalf of the city's government.⁶⁰⁸ After all, he was not a politician and merely presented himself as the spokesperson of the clergy and the faithful. Yet, he consciously used his authority as a philosopher and priest as well as the network he had built through his studies and church career to exercise influence on the power dynamics that were threatening his home city. In the following letters, I will illustrate how Ficino supported Lorenzo's diplomatic efforts.

Book 6 starts *in medias res* with an unusually long epistle to Pope Sixtus IV. Ficino lobbies for lifting the papal reprisals against Florence and for an end to the war between Florence and Rome. The philosopher acts as an ambassador for his city, a spokesperson for its 'Christian flock' mentioned in the letter title *Oratio Christiani gregis ad pastorem Sixtum suadens ut ovibus suis dicat Pax vobis*. The budding involvement in politics that caused Ficino to write a mirror of princes for Cardinal Riario in Book 5 is here transformed into a full-blown commitment to state diplomacy. Ficino frames his

⁶⁰⁴ Fubini 1996, 246.

⁶⁰⁵ *EL* 6.7: 'Testor, amice, Deum me hac in re meum pro viribus officium implevisse. Reliquum reliqui viderint.' Cf. Tröger 2016, 391.

⁶⁰⁶ Malavasi 2022; Giannetto 1985.

⁶⁰⁷ *Secretum* 2.9.6: 'ad quam otium, solitudo, incuriositas tanta rerum humanarum, atque ista tua te perducunt studia quorum usque nunc finis est gloria.'

⁶⁰⁸ Kristeller 1985a, 92.

plea for de-escalation with a long reference to the Ottoman threat, thereby echoing the first letter of Book 3 and underlining the development he has undergone from defeatist despair to taking up civic responsibility. He argues that a united Church is not only desirable but also necessary for its defence against foreign aggressors. The letter further evokes the opposition between Sixtus and the city of Florence in imagery related to sheep and their shepherd. Ficino writes, 'I see how you will accuse us: you will say it is one thing to stray from the pathway from the shepherd, another to butt him with one's horns.'⁶⁰⁹ However, Ficino argues, Florence harbours no such rebellious ram. And even if he had suffered real injury, Sixtus would be obliged to let Christian charity prevail and forgive the sheep which God entrusted to his shepherding. Otherwise, Ficino warns with a remarkable severity, he will entirely lose his authority; 'If you are shepherd of no particular part, you will be shepherd of all. If you are shepherd of a part, you will be shepherd of none.'⁶¹⁰ Ficino goes on to spell out the duties of a Pope to Sixtus and draws comparisons with Jesus Christ and the Apostle Peter.

Which of these would you prefer, and both are within your choice: on earth to be considered a soldier or a pontiff? In heaven to be rejected by Christ as different, for He is completely unarmed, while you yourself are laden with arms; or laying your arms aside, to be accepted by Him as the same? [...] Look up to heaven for a while, we beseech you, as you used to once, before you turned your mind to these earthly battles. You will see Peter, the first pontiff, clearly seeing these wounds of mine, which perhaps you do not yet see yourself. [...] Perhaps, unless you take heed, it is inevitable that he, while pitying us so much, will be angry with you.⁶¹¹

Ficino concludes his letter with two liturgical formulae that wish peace on mankind: 'Pax vobis' ('Peace with you') and 'in terra pax hominibus bonae voluntatis' ('peace on earth to the people of good will') with which he underscores once more the goodwill of the Florentine people.

In *EL* 6.1, Ficino ordered Sixtus to speak words of peace: 'Dic age quandoque beatissime pater' ('Come on say, most blessed father'). His next letter to the Pope, *EL* 6.9, contains a papal prosopopoeia which suggests the fulfilment of that request. Ficino lets the Pope exclaim: 'Peace

⁶⁰⁹ *EL* 6.1: 'At video quid accusabis. Dices aliud esse errare a pastore de via aliud pastorem cornu laccessere. Atque ita de ariete inter nos aliquo forte quaereris.'

⁶¹⁰ *EL* 6.1: 'Pastor iam desinit esse communis. Si nullius fueris, eris omnium. Si fueris alicius, nullius eris.'

⁶¹¹ *EL* 6.1: 'Vide utrum malis, sanctissime Pater, utrumque in tua electione consistit. In terris quidem miles ne haberi an pontifex. In coelo autem respui ne a Christo prorsus inermi ipse armis onustus tanquam dissimilis. An potius armis positis excipi ab eodem tanquam similis. ... Suspice (obsecramus) coelum parumper sicut solebas olim antequam animo praelia terrena coonspiceres. Videbis Petrum illum Pontificem primum vulnera haec mea (quae forte non vides) ipse clare videntem. ... Forsitan necesse est illum (nisi caveris) irasci tibi dum nostri adeo miseretur.'

be with you, my children, in this new Spring. Be not afraid: I am no wolf but a guardian, no hireling but a shepherd.⁶¹² The imagery harks back to the first letter, comparing the care of a shepherd towards his own sheep to the danger posed by a wolf and the careless violence inflicted on sheep by hired keepers. Whereas Ficino in *EL* 6.1 implored the Pope ‘not to conquer your own people in war, but to conquer war itself,’ he is now sure that, indeed, the Pope’s ‘people will not conquer by war but conquer war itself.’ For as the pontiff ‘mistakenly seemed a little while ago to be pursuing his children with malice, so undoubtedly is he soon to attend them with love.’⁶¹³ The imagined response from the faithful picks up on the same liturgical formula that closed *EL* 6.1: ‘Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to people of good will.’⁶¹⁴ The letter is dated on Christmas 1478, when the conflict was, in fact, far from resolved. It would take about another year to reach a peace treaty, and even longer to have the interdict lifted.⁶¹⁵ It was a tried tactic of Ficino to express his hopes under the guise of reality so as to convince his addressees to take the suggested course of action. The more positive tone of the letter suggests that it was really sent to the Pope, unlike the first letter of which the tone is too critical and defiant of papal authority.⁶¹⁶ In a similar vein, *EL* 6.10 praises the Pope for his pastoral qualities. A true fisher of men, Ficino writes, Sixtus catches the faithful by three different nets identified as burning charity (*charitas ardens*), deep understanding (*intelligentia summa*) which allows him to forgive, and (*beneficentia*).

As we have seen in Book 5, some of the letters in Book 6 draw their political importance from the status of their addressees only. In *EL* 6.3, Ficino restores his relationship with Raffaele Riario, whom he had not followed to Rome after the young cardinal’s release from his Florentine imprisonment. In *EL* 5.39, Ficino had hinted at the distance between him and Riario on account of ‘unheard-of events’ under which should understand the murder attempt on the Medici brothers. Ficino’s cautious distance had apparently strained the relationship between him and Riario so that he was forced to rely on Giovanni Niccolini to restore the contact. Niccolini, Archbishop of Amalfi, was also *referendarius* of Sixtus IV, in charge of receiving petitions addressed to the Pope. The letters to Giovanni Niccolini and Riario are, in fact, aimed at reaching Sixtus. This is most evident from *EL* 6.5, where Ficino asks Riario: ‘whenever you can, commend your Marsilio to the supreme Pontiff, [...] but you cannot commend the whole of me if in that commendation you omit

⁶¹² *EL* 6.9: ‘Pax vobis, o filii vere novo. Nolite timere. Non lupus sum sed custos. Non mercenarius sum sed pastor.’ The passage refers to John 10.12: ‘Mercenarius autem, et qui non est pastor, cuius non sunt oves propriae, videt lupum venientem, et dimittit oves, et fugit: et lupus rapit, et dispergit oves.’

⁶¹³ *EL* 6.1: ‘Noli tuos bello vincere. Sed potius ipsum vince bellum.’ *EL* 6.9: ‘non tam bello suos vincere quam ipsum vincere bellum ... quantum paulo ante falso maleficentia quadam insequi filios videbatur, tantum mox beneficentia revera prosequitur.’

⁶¹⁴ *EL* 6.9: ‘oves cunctae clamabunt ‘Gloria in excelsis deo et in terra pax hominibus bonae voluntatis.’

⁶¹⁵ Kristeller 1985a, 91.

⁶¹⁶ Cf. Rees 2002, 354.

the Archbishop of Amalfi.⁶¹⁷ In *EL* 6.11 and 6.12, he further asks Niccolini to read his letter *Spiritus ubi vult spirat* to the Pope. In the last of these letters, Ficino shows awareness that he is skating on thin ice by adopting a prophetic persona to instruct the Pope. He seeks Niccolini's assistance to ensure that his letter does not do more harm than good: 'If you think it can be received by everyone with as much good grace as there was goodwill in its composition, then let it be read to the Pope and others. But if not, keep it to yourself. For if nothing can help us, I do not wish anything to do us harm.'⁶¹⁸

EL 6.6 is addressed to Domenico Bollani, a Venetian jurist. Bollani was politically interesting for the role he played in Venice's foreign affairs—he would later lead an embassy to the Ottoman sultan and held senior civil offices in the Republic.⁶¹⁹ While Ficino liaised with Venetian humanists throughout his life, contacts with politically significant actors in the Serenissima intensified in the period covered by Book 6.⁶²⁰ During the conflict with the Pope and Naples, Florence was particularly reliant on its alliances with Venice and Milan. Book 6 also contains letters to Rinaldo Gavardi, Secretary of the Venetian Senate and to Bernardo Bembo both during and after his embassy in Florence. Other personalities mentioned in Book 6 are the young humanist Ermolao Barbaro, who descended from a family of prominent officeholders, the important diplomat Febo Capella, and the philosopher Leone Michiel whose brother had been the Venetian ambassador to Naples in 1476.⁶²¹ *EL* 6.7 is addressed to Antonio Cocchi, who was in an ideal position to mediate between the warring factions in the wake of the Pazzi conspiracy. Lorenzo mobilised the professors of law at the Pisan university to battle the papal sanctions on legal grounds.⁶²² This group included Cocchi, who was active as a professor of canon law at the Pisan Studio at least since November 1474. Moreover, he had been the principal deputy to Francesco Salviati—killed after the Pazzi conspiracy—but was at the same time on good terms with Lorenzo de' Medici.⁶²³ A high-ranking cleric, he also had access to the Curia and was therefore asked by Ficino to make sure that Pope Sixtus read his calls for peace.⁶²⁴

⁶¹⁷ *EL* 6.5: 'Marsilium tuum quandoque pontifici summo commenda, commenda quaeso me totum, venerande pater. Non potes autem integrum commendare si in ipsa commendatione Amalphitanum archiepiscopum praetermisceris.'

⁶¹⁸ *EL* 6.13: 'Ita demum pontifici caeterisque legatur si tam bona omnium gratia censeatur legi posse quam bona nobis est voluntate compositum. Sin minus penes te ipse servato. Evidem ubi nihil mihi prodesse potest, nihil obesse volo.' Cf. Celenza 2002, 92.

⁶¹⁹ Pillinini 1969.

⁶²⁰ On Ficino's relationships with Venice in general, see Kristeller 1996.

⁶²¹ *EL* 6.14, 6.17, 6.26. On Ermolao Barbaro in general, see Marangoni and Stocchi 1996 together with Maxson 2018 on Barbaro's diplomatic activities in particular; on Febo Capella, see Sesto Prete 1975; Leone Michiel and his brother Niccolò feature in the edition of a contemporary diary with diplomatic visits to the papal court at Burckard 1906, 1:359.

⁶²² Daniels 2013, 29.

⁶²³ Miglio 1982.

⁶²⁴ *EL* 6.19.

Niccolini and Cocchi were Ficino's entry points not only to the Pope but also to cardinal Giovanni of Aragon, son of king Ferdinand of Naples.⁶²⁵ Indeed, Ficino did not restrict his diplomatic efforts to the Church but also engaged with the Neapolitan court to ease the tensions that had arisen after the failed conspiracy. Instead of writing directly to the secular ruler king Ferdinand, he used his position within the ecclesiastical network to address Ferdinand's son Giovanni. In this way, he hoped to influence the court in Naples. The first letter to Giovanni contains a 'A prophecy of King Alfonso to King Ferdinand, first arising between them in the angelic tongue and later translated into human language by Marsilio Ficino of Florence'.⁶²⁶ The pun 'angelic tongue' is employed as a clever allusion to Antonio Panormita's *Triumphus Alphonsi Regis Neapolitanorum* from 1443. This praise of Alfonso contains a notable passage in which an angel addresses Alfonso as 'the king of peace' (*rex pacis*).⁶²⁷ By recalling this scene, Ficino aims to make Ferdinand follow the example of his late father Alfonso's as a peaceful ruler. In the same way as he had tried to educate Lorenzo and Giuliano de' Medici by putting their grandfather Cosimo before their eyes, Ficino hoped to appease king Ferdinand by taking recourse to the example of his illustrious predecessor.

Ficino's prophetic encounter with the soul of Alfonso is strongly influenced by Cicero's *Somnium Scipionis* and Macrobius' commentary on the same work.⁶²⁸ Like Scipio Africanus in the *Somnium*, Alfonso describes the splendour of heaven and how it is only a shadow of the supercelestial regions. Ficino uses the hierarchical differences between earth, heaven and the realm above heaven to remark on the futility of earthly power. The minds of men, freed from their bodies, 'reveal their immortality most clearly when they value mortal things as nothing, especially when weighed against the eternal'.⁶²⁹ From this viewpoint, Alfonso formulates his most political advice:

Be wholly content with the territories you have. Believe me, fate will give you many more gifts, and greater ones, far beyond any won by force. Men you pursue with violence will certainly flee from you; yet if ever they gain power, which God forbid, they will perhaps put you to flight. But those you treat with kindness will willingly follow and serve you. You will conquer successfully only if you conquer through kindness.⁶³⁰

⁶²⁵ *EL* 6.8 to Giovanni of Aragon: 'If I have now commended Marsilio to you, understand that the Archbishop of Amalfi is equally commended.'

⁶²⁶ *EL* 6.13: 'Oraculum Alfonsi Regis ad Regem Ferdinandum inter illos primum angelica lingua pronunciatum, deinde vero in linguam humanam a Marsilio Ficino translatum.'

⁶²⁷ Beccadelli 2021, 46; cf. Matteo Soranzo 2011, 33.

⁶²⁸ Cf. Prins 2020, 45–49.

⁶²⁹ *EL* 6.13: 'Qua tunc immortalitatem suam clarius patefaciunt quando mortalia tamquam minima praeципue aeternorum gratia parvipendunt.'

⁶³⁰ *EL* 6.13: 'Omnino autem finibus tuis contentus esto. Plura tibia admodum crede mihi maioraque dona sors dabit ultro quam lacesita. Quot enim volentia persequeris totidem certe te fugient atque quod absit, si quin poterunt forte

Before Alfonso is called back to the ethereal realm by the archangels and is carried there on the wings of a seraph, he reminds his son: 'In peace alone a splendid victory awaits you, a victory full of triumphs without danger; in victory, tranquillity; in tranquillity, a reverence and worship of Minerva.'⁶³¹

In *EL* 6.36, Ficino returns to the conceit of an allegorical prosopopoeia. While the mirror of princes for Cardinal Riario in Book 5 was delivered through the persona of Truth, Cardinal Giovanni of Aragon receives his instruction from a personification of Philosophy. The actual letter containing this 'philosophical education of a prince' is addressed to Soderini, who was also the middleman between Ficino and Riario, and between Ficino and the Hungarian King Matthias.⁶³² The letter fits into the political tendency of Book 6 mainly because its addressee had previously received the prophecy of the late King Alfonso to his son and successor King Ferdinand. However, Philosophy's speech is dated 20 August 1480 by which time Lorenzo had already reached a peace treaty with Naples. Consequently, its content is much less concerned with state affairs and corresponds to the focus on education and philosophy which generally characterises the letters after *EL* 6.28.⁶³³ Ficino educates Giovanni on the matter of just behaviour for a prince. He warns against excessive pride, against the desire to control many people, against a showy display of rank, and against the kind of self-important that looks down on others. Finally, Philosophy considers 'those men to discern all beings most acutely and to judge them most justly who measure their greatness not by how great they appear to one looking from outside from a distance but by how great they truly are within.'⁶³⁴ There is no call for peace nor an instruction on how to deal with the people over whom Giovanni is able to exert power. Instead, Ficino turns the young cardinal's view onto himself and exhorts him to live up to the dignity of his office by practising self-control.

NO MORE POLITICS

The series of political letters from *EL* 6.1 to *EL* 6.27 is interspersed with different kinds of other letters. There is a recommendation letter for a friend, and a letter promising help for Angelo Poliziano—the latter had recently been discharged from the Medici household where he tutored Lorenzo's son Piero.⁶³⁵ Another letter explains with the words of Wisdom 11:20 that God has ordered everything 'according to number, weight, and measure,' by which Ficino explains why

fugabunt. Quot autem beneficentia prosequeris totidem et sequentur libenter et obsequentur. Totiens bene vinces quotiens beneficio vinces.'

⁶³¹ *EL* 6.13: Praeclara te manet solum in ipsa pace victoria tutis plena triumphis. In victoria vero tranquillitas. In tranquillitate pietas cultusque Minerve.'

⁶³² *EL* 5.29; 6.40.

⁶³³ Cf. Tröger 2016, 234 on the difference between *EL* 5.27 and 6.36.

⁶³⁴ *EL* 6.36; 'Eos postremo et acutissime cernere et rectissime iudicare omnia iudico qui tanta esse singula non quanta eminus prospicienti foris apparent sed quanta intus re vera sunt iudicant.'

⁶³⁵ *EL* 6.16; 6.25.

every person is touched by the sound of music.⁶³⁶ Several letters argue for the necessity of religion and put religion forward as the solution for present evils. For ‘is it any wonder that all kinds of evil pursue us from every quarter when we ourselves, having abandoned the first Good, namely God, wrongly pursue individual things as though they were good?’⁶³⁷ This thought is picked up four letters later, where Ficino writes: ‘If ever there has been a time to be devoted to religion, it is certainly now in these tempestuous days, for this, as you see is the age of all evils.’⁶³⁸ The philosopher further mentions some of his writings, like *De raptu Pauli*, which he had sent to the poet Naldo Naldi and now required back from him.⁶³⁹ From *EL* 6.28 onwards, it is this kind of content matter that occupies the remainder of Book 6.

In *EL* 6.26, Ficino finally situates himself in the countryside as he did at the beginning of the book. ‘Nothing except evil comes to mind when such great evils afflict our state. In fact, I stay in the country as much as possible, from weariness of this wretched city.’⁶⁴⁰ Two letters later, he recounts the case of a Neapolitan friend to Bembo: ‘Being a city man yourself, Bembo, you ask why that Neapolitan friend of ours constantly wants to stay in the countryside. Well, because he cannot be in the city during this storm.’⁶⁴¹ There is no doubt that Ficino is really talking about himself when he mentions the Neapolitan friend. In the working manuscript of Book 6, the text reads as follows: ‘Being a city man yourself, Bembo, you ask why *I* constantly want to stay in the countryside. Well, because *I* cannot be in the city during this storm.’⁶⁴² He thereby indicates that he has put an end to his diplomatic efforts, apparently fearing the consequences of his political involvement: ‘If I could safely express in public the great sorrow with which the once happy but now quite pitiable condition of that city is afflicting me, or if I could at least keep a cautious silence, then I would never have fled so far.’ But things being as they are, ‘dissembling gives no pleasure; it is better to be away.’⁶⁴³ *EL* 6.28 is addressed to Bembo, who had apparently asked Ficino to continue his contributions to bettering the relationships between on the one hand Florence and on the other

⁶³⁶ *EL* 6.21.

⁶³⁷ *EL* 6.20: ‘Quid mirum si omnia nos undique mala sequuntur dum ipsi relicto primo bono, id est deo, male singula sequimur tanquam bona.’

⁶³⁸ *EL* 6.24: ‘Si quando alias religioni indulgendum fuit hac tempestate est potissimum indulgendum. Hoc enim (ut vides) malorum omnium seculum est.’

⁶³⁹ *EL* 6.15 ; 6.26.

⁶⁴⁰ *EL* 6.26 : ‘Nihilque in his tantis patriae malis in mentem nobis venire non malum. Evidem ut plurimum misere huic urbis tedium rusticorum.’

⁶⁴¹ *EL* 6.28: ‘Rogas, urbanissime Bembe, quamobrem tandem Neapolitanus ille noster rusticus esse velit. Quia videlicet Urbanus hac tempestate esse non potest.’

⁶⁴² *M*, fol. 72v: ‘Rogas, urbanissime Bembe, quamobrem tandem rusticus esse velim. Quia videlicet urbanus hac tempestate esse non possum.’ Cf. Gentile 1980, 132–135. I translate the letter in the first person-form to underline that it is Ficino who is speaking. The Latin is still quoted from the printed edition and thus in the third person.

⁶⁴³ *EL* 6.28: ‘Quo ipsum urbis istius neapolitane conditio quondam foelix nunc pene misera praemisit, palam securus praemere vel saltem sciret cautus reticere, nunquam eius urbis quae Bembum suum diligit aspectum procul effugeret. Verum in tantis patriae malis graviter non dolere non potest.’

hand the papacy and Naples. ‘Perhaps you will say,’ Ficino imagines, “‘This is just the work for philosophers; the very care which moves the calm to action?’” But Ficino has adopted a very different attitude, he writes: ‘I am imitating Jesus instead, if only in this one respect, that He wept on the mount over the wretched fate of the city of Jerusalem; and I am also following Pythagoras, Plato and even Aristotle, who all fled far from the face of Athens when her beauty was marred.’⁶⁴⁴

Political tensions shine through in only three letters after *EL* 6.27. While *EL* 6.30 argues that all power is dependent on God, *EL* 6.31 contains the regretful observation that the renewed peace between Florence and Naples after Lorenzo’s successful mission to the court of King Ferdinand had caused a rift between Florence and its former ally Venice. The latter had sided with the papacy since both begrudged their exclusion from Lorenzo’s negotiations with Ferdinand.⁶⁴⁵ Finally, in *EL* 6.37, dated on 26 September 1480, Ficino writes to Lorenzo with a warning that should be read in light of the events from the previous two years: ‘Today and also tomorrow, be on your guard; for Mars, passing into Capricorn, your ascendant, is seen to look with square aspect, today at Saturn and tomorrow at the Sun.’⁶⁴⁶ Ficino admits that he writes this hesitantly, in fear that such advice may be unwelcome and unnecessarily trouble Lorenzo:

I was coming to you the other day to tell you all this, but on the way, it occurred to me that it would be better to wait until now, so as not to burden you with fear and unease any longer than necessary. For by our predictions, we often anticipate evils that are in the far distant future, or sometimes imagine evils that will never come to pass.⁶⁴⁷

This can be read as an excuse for his inability to predict the attack on Lorenzo’s and Giuliano’s lives and the ensuing enmity with Rome. At the same time, it is a step back from the prophetic persona he had adopted in previous letters on politics and which in *EL* 6.28 he wrote to Bembo was not unanimously well received.

The remaining letters include references to his own books *De religione* and *De vita* as well as to a philosophical letter on ‘one of Plato’s enigmas’.⁶⁴⁸ There are also letters of recommendation for again Sebastiano Salvini, the priest Francesco Petrucci, and his student Alamanno Donati. In *EL*

⁶⁴⁴ *EL* 6.28: ‘inquieris forsitan, in iis philosophis labor est, ea cura quietos sollicitat ... At vero is ipse est qui lesum in hoc uno saltem natura quadam potius imitetur. lesum miseram Hierosolymae urbis sortem in monte deflentem. Qui rursus Pythagoram, Platонem, Aristotelem modo sequatur, deformem aliquim Athenarum faciem procul effugientes.’

⁶⁴⁵ Cf. Najemy 2006, 359–362.

⁶⁴⁶ *EL* 6.37: ‘Hodie, Laurenti, atque cras caveto tibi. Mars enim sub Capricorno tuo ascidente percurrents quadrato aspectu hodie quidem Saturnum, cras vero Solem videtur aspicere’

⁶⁴⁷ *EL* 6.37: ‘Veniebam superioribus diebus ad te eadem praedicturus. Sed obiter subcurrit praestare ut in hanc horam usque deferrem. Ne diuturniore te metu et molestia praemerem. Solemus nam saepe praedictionibus nostris mala vel procul futura anticipare diu vel interdum fingere non futura.’

⁶⁴⁸ *EL* 6.32; 6.33; 6.38; 6.43; 6.46; 6.47.

6.42, Ficino commends his uncle Giovanni Maria to the bishop of Arezzo. The second half of this letter is a digression on the value of education, especially for those who are destined for governing the state. 'Nothing is more time-honoured or more necessary than this, according to Plato.' Indeed, Ficino continues, 'if any art whatever, even the simplest, has to be learned from our earliest childhood and practised to the full, surely leadership of the state, being the mistress of all arts as well as the most difficult, should be learned from tender infancy, so far as age allows.'⁶⁴⁹ Evidently, Ficino is carving out a different role for himself in the realm of politics than the one he has played so far. A philosopher need not occupy himself with diplomacy as such, but with the training of future diplomats. *EL* 6.48 repeats the necessity of good education in the context of Plato's allegory of the cave. Ficino summarises the story from Plato's *Republic* and its meaning as follows:

The relationship between that cave and this world which we call visible is exactly the same as the relationship between this world and the one which we call invisible and divine, inasmuch as in this world the wretched souls, shut in by the shadows and the windowless prison of the deathbound body, never in fact look upon themselves, or anything else, or the real Sun, but look instead upon the shadows of themselves and of other thing, and a faint image of the real Sun. For real minds, real things and the real Sun are only in the invisible world.⁶⁵⁰

After this passage, Ficino explains the role of education in bringing people closer to a vision of the divine:

If we try to contemplate them straight away without the proper steps of education and discipline, we are at once blinded and in pain. But when we have been guided through the appropriate steps of moral training, philosophic teaching, and time, we see clearly and judge that those who are deceived, possessed and oppressed by the false shadows and images of this world are blind and miserable.⁶⁵¹

⁶⁴⁹ *EL* 6.42: 'Quo nihil antiquius nihil magis necessarium Plato noster esee illis existimat ... Nempe si quaelibet ars vel minima statim ab ipsa pueritia nobis discenda est et pro viribus exercenda, nimirum publica gubernatio omnium artium domina atque difficilima a teneris unguiculis quantum pro actatem licet ediscenda est.'

⁶⁵⁰ *EL* 6.48: 'Proinde quae comparatio est speluncae illius ad hunc mundum quem visibilem nominamus, eadem ferme mundi huius ad illum quem invisibilem divinumque vocamus. Siquidem hic animae misere moribundi corporis clausae tenebris et carcere caeco: neque seipsas unquam neque alia ulla revera neque verum Solem, immo sui aliorumque umbras et exilem quandam veri Solis imaginem intuentur.'

⁶⁵¹ *EL* 6.48: 'Convenientibus vero tum morum tum doctrinarum tum temporis perducti gradibus sincere discernimus iudicamusque caecos illos et miseros qui falsis mundi huius umbris imaginibusque falluntur occupantur atque praemuntur.'

Ficino has placed two other letters related to insight and learning in between *EL* 6.42 and *EL* 6.48.⁶⁵² In *EL* 6.45, he draws a parallel between evil and good men on the one hand, and ignorant and enlightened men on the other hand. Addressed to Lorenzo de' Medici the Younger—but originally without indication that Ficino did not have in mind his father Lorenzo de' Medici, the letter recalls Ficino's efforts in Book 1 to educate Lorenzo in Platonic philosophy. Ficino describes the ignorant mind as 'the cold and foggy air of night, or like a human body with blind eyes, deaf ears, and mute tongue.'⁶⁵³ Whereas *EL* 6.45 does not mention the role of teachers in the acquisition of knowledge, the following letter urges Jacopo Lanfredini, who was *Priore* in 1461, *Gonfaloniere* in 1477, and envoy to the Pope in 1480, to 'gladly acknowledge as brothers all who have been nurtured by the Muses, wherever they may be, and will support them with every kindness and service.' Ficino is confident that his request will be granted, since 'he [Lanfredini] himself was nursed by the gracious Muses, and later gave his own son, Antonio, to be nurtured by them from a tender age.'⁶⁵⁴ Thus Ficino, places emphasis on the people that stand in for the training of future rulers. The shift from political matters to philosophy and education is indicative for Ficino's reconsideration of his own role in society. Book 6 thus becomes a bridge from the *vita activa* which the philosopher now abandons for good, to the *vita contemplativa*. At the same time, it shows that both lives cannot be entirely separated, as the contemplative scholar bears a responsibility in the formation of political actors. Indeed, as James Hankins has argued, 'Ficino did not abandon the civic Socrates of Bruni and Manetti. Ficino was himself an educator of young men, and his message of spiritual renewal through Platonism was not intended to create contemplatives alienated from society, saving their own souls by leaving 'the world' behind. In fact, Ficino's followers, through the Socratic approach to teaching, would become ideal members of the commonwealth.'⁶⁵⁵

BEYOND POLITICS: BOOKS 7-11

References to Ficino's intellectual work occupy the larger part of Books 7-12. The philosopher underlines how his commitment to the translation of Plotinus and other authors completely absorbs him: 'I am applying myself with all my strength to this great task, so much so that at times

⁶⁵² The three parts of *EL* 6.48, which originally came immediately after *EL* 6.44, were organised differently ('Anima in corpore...', 'Res vere...', 'Quod immundus...'). At the top of the page with the beginning of 'Anima in corpore...', we read that Ficino intended to move 'Quod immundus' up: 'huius epistole preponenda est tamquam prohemium quod paulopost sequitur. Que incipit Iampridem.' Ultimately, he opted for a more radical approach, and cut out the three following folios on which most of *EL* 6.48 was written. Only the first half words near the back of the book remain, just enough to identify them. The next folios present *EL* 6.45-47, after which *EL* 6.48 follows in its canonical version.

⁶⁵³ *EL* 6.44: 'Iterum qualis est nocturnus nubilus frigidus aer. Postremo quale corpus humanum cecis oculis, surdis auribus, linguaque muta.'

⁶⁵⁴ *EL* 6.45: 'cum et ipse primum a musis nutritus fuerit et deinde filium suum Antonium musis almis alendum a tenera aetate devoverit, atque ille patri foeliciter hunc aluerint, nimis utpote musis gratus omnes earum alumnos tanquam fratres ubique libenter agnosceret eosque omni studio operaque servabit.'

⁶⁵⁵ Hankins 2005, 191.

I hardly remember myself.⁶⁵⁶ His work is so consuming that he sees no opportunity to write letters. As a result, the collection's second half is speckled with apologetic notes about late and all-too-short replies.⁶⁵⁷ Nevertheless, the fruits of Ficino's philosophical labour are being sent around to Cardinal Marco Barbo in Venice, King Matthias of Hungary, and less prominent addressees across Italy and Europe.⁶⁵⁸ The philosopher's productivity and the wide circulation of his works are evident from several dedication letters. *EL* 9.8-11 is one such cluster and includes the *prohoemia* to his translations of Theophrastus, Iamblichus, Porphyry, Sinesius, and Psellus.⁶⁵⁹ Only three letters later, Ficino announces to Pier Leone that his Proclus translation is finished and ready to be sent.⁶⁶⁰ All of Ficino's previous and recent accomplishments are listed in *EL* 9.13: *On the Immortality of Souls*, *De voluptate*, *De Vita*, eight books of letters, the *Philebus* commentary, *De amore*, *De religione christiana*, *Consiglio contro la pestilentia*, a translation with commentary of Plotinus, Hermes, Synesius, Psellus, Porphyry, Hermias, and Iamblichus, of Proclus' commentary on Plato's *Alcibiades* and Priscian's commentaries on Teophrastus. The list is impressive and clearly meant to demonstrate that Ficino is a full-time philosopher, no longer distracted by pangs of love or the dutiful desire to meddle in politics. The *modus* of the second half of the letters is that of the contemplative life.

As soon as the Plotinus translation is finished, Ficino moves on to work on his *Philebus* commentary.⁶⁶¹ In this way, Book 10 leads us back to a work which was prominently mentioned in the first letters of the collection, when Cosimo asked Ficino to bring the dialogue on the highest good as an itinerary to true happiness. As discussed, Ficino's interpretation of the *Philebus* commentary deals with the division of human life into three categories corresponding to pleasure, action, and contemplation, which proved an important indicator of the thematic structure of the *Epistole*. Unsurprisingly, then, *EL* 10.44 discusses again how the contemplative life stands under the protection of Minerva and is dedicated to the pursuit of wisdom and religious *otium*; how the active life strives for power and glory with the guidance of Iuno; and how the pleasure-seeking life of Venus seeks to satisfy the five senses. The philosopher congratulates Lorenzo for being able to combine those three forces in his life. Although Ficino presents himself as a philosopher-priest, and thus a representative of the contemplative life, his letters nevertheless testify that he has taken part in the other two kinds of life, too. The reference to the *Philebus* commentary from Book 1

⁶⁵⁶ *EL* 8.16: 'Ego igitur adeo ingenti huic operi vehementer incumbo ut vix mei ipsius aliquando reminiscar.'

⁶⁵⁷ *EL* 8.16; 8.17; 8.22; 8.29; 8.40; 8.41; 9.6; 10.11; 10.28; 10.46.

⁶⁵⁸ *EL* 8.24; 8.35; *passim*.

⁶⁵⁹ Cf. *EL* 10.5.

⁶⁶⁰ *EL* 9.14.

⁶⁶¹ *EL* 10.31-32, 10.47.

draws the collection to a close. It is the beginning of a more elaborate return to Ficino's past, which spills over into the following book.

In Book 11, the *Philebus* commentary and the *Theologia Platonica* are being copied out while Ficino is already working on (Ps.-)Dionysius the Aeropagite.⁶⁶² Shortly after this, we read the *prohoemium* to his youthful composition *Platonicas institutiones*.⁶⁶³ In *EL* 11.8, he recalls an early treatise on love as a *furor*, and in *EL* 11.25, he mentions his early translations of the *Argonautica*, of the Orphic, Homeric and Proclean *Hymns*, as well as of Hesiod's *Theogony* (which in the letter he calls 'Theology'). Ficino's return to juvenilia in Book 11 is remarkable. On the one hand, the reprise of his first explorations of Greek literature near the end of his letter collection suggests a biographical cyclicity. Highlighting a continued interest in the same authors shows an intellectual coherency in Ficino's life which implicitly supports a continuous reading of his letter collection over an episodic interpretation. Ficino presents the story of his life as one, with ups and downs but without a significant breach in its guiding principles. On the other hand, they allow him to highlight his spiritual and intellectual development. The youthful translations of Greek poetry were never published for fear of criticism. Ficino admits that at the time, he burnt these works because he understood the negative impact they could have on people.⁶⁶⁴ That he now returns to them is because he has grown as a philosopher and is capable of appreciating the value of, for example, Hesiod without running the danger anymore of being led astray by the Greek poet's impiety.⁶⁶⁵

Money remains a problem in the second half of the collection as it was in the first half. *EL* 11.31 complains that Ficino's household is unhappy about his income from the Medici. However, the philosopher ascertains that he receives exactly what he desires and therefore refrains from asking more. Other business calls and the letter ends abruptly. *EL* 11.32 repeats the theme of the previous letter, stating that there is less fortune where there is wisdom. Even though philosophers are neglected by the rich, disliked by rulers, and not supported by the people, they are happier because they do not depend on luck. This mentality stands in stark contrast with letters on Ficino's subsistence in Books 1 and 3. Most of Ficino's real frustrations are practical concerns related to various publication projects. He repeatedly scolds careless copyists and printers, 'or rather misprinters,' to the point where he compares them to murderous brigands covered in the blood of

⁶⁶² *EL* 11.10.

⁶⁶³ *EL* 11.12.

⁶⁶⁴ 11.25.

⁶⁶⁵ Cf. Michael J. B. Allen 2014b, 142 on Ficino's view of Hesiod.

a priest.⁶⁶⁶ He further worries about the disappearance and recuperation of manuscripts ranging from his own works to the writings of Neo-Platonic philosophers to the Koran.⁶⁶⁷

Another source of anxiety is again related to his work, namely the reception of *De vita*.⁶⁶⁸ While Ficino's philosophical self-confidence is clear from every letter, his contemporaries were not prepared to accept some of his theories. In *EL* 9.16, he announces that *De vita*, which treats the health of scholars, is finished. The following letters are all concerned with this very work and with its main theme of medicine. It is Ficino's dream, he writes in *EL* 9.18, to make philosophers live longer. *De vita* was close to bringing Ficino in real trouble with the papacy as the work bordered on heterodoxy.⁶⁶⁹ The dedications to Valori, to Bembo, and to Barbaro are meant to rally influential supporters who can successfully plead Ficino's case in Rome.⁶⁷⁰ In *EL* 10.19, we read his request to 'commend my life with your words before the Vicar of God'.⁶⁷¹ 'Life' has a double entendre, as it refers to the title of Ficino's controversial publication *De vita* but also, somewhat exaggerating, to Ficino's personal safety from religious prosecution. Yet he never wavers in his conviction of being of use and appreciated by his readers: 'I never doubted that I would at any time help as many people as possible, or rather everyone, if I took especial care of any who look after the welfare of the people.'

The fact that Ficino managed to raise support for defending *De vita* in Rome leads me to a final characteristic of Books 7-12: the overwhelming sense of community around our author. Book 7 has several references to the Platonic Academy, Ficino's group of likeminded scholars and notables.⁶⁷² Repeatedly, Ficino presents himself as the spokesperson of this group, for example, to praise Federico da Montefeltro and to greet Giorvio Antonio Vespucci and Giovanni Battista Buoninsegni. No longer is he a lone defender of philosophy and religion who is undervalued by his city. The appreciation of his network materializes in gifts, such as luxurious clothes and silver cups. In *EL* 8.17, he thanks Filippo Callimaco for sending presents, and *EL* 11.1 is Georg Herivart's letter accompanying a silver cup. Ficino is, in fact, very happy with the cup and proves this by putting the letter at the head of his eleventh book of letters.⁶⁷³ In the same book, we see the trust put in Ficino by his colleagues in Germany. In *EL* 11.5 and 11.7, he mentions 'young men whom you have recently sent to us to be educated.' Ficino welcomed them, arranged a suitable

⁶⁶⁶ *EL* 8.21.

⁶⁶⁷ *EL* 8.30; 9.26; 10.4.

⁶⁶⁸ Translated in Ficino 1998.

⁶⁶⁹ Celenza 2004, 106–113; Kraye 2001, 77–78.

⁶⁷⁰ *EL* 10.8, 10.15, 10.16, 10.18, 10.26.

⁶⁷¹ *EL* 10.19: 'Commenda vicissim verbis apud ipsum dei Vicarium tuis vitam meam.'

⁶⁷² *EL* 7.1; *EL* 7.5; *EL* 7.24–25.

⁶⁷³ *EL* 11.2.

host, and made sure that they received a good education. 'Please give assurance of my special care to the young men's parents,' he writes, 'to whom you have promised wisdom.'⁶⁷⁴ The international interest in Ficino's writings transpires, apart from the letters from Germany, also from a Parisian correspondent who appears in Book 12. The widening of Ficino's horizon and his growing popularity abroad began in the frustrated *modus* of Book 3 with Hungary. Now, it has reached its peak, and Ficino is consequently self-assured and at the service of his friends.

Annalisa Castellitti wrote that 'I dodeci libri dell'*Epistole* di Marsilio Ficino mostrano chiaramente la rilevanza attribuita dal filosofo neo-platonico alla questione della felicità.'⁶⁷⁵ Evidently, Castellitti perceived the thematic *ductus* set out in the opening letter to Cosimo and its continuation in the following books. It is on the following statement that I must disagree: 'Il tema della felicità, che fa da filo conduttore ai dodici libri della raccolta, e impone maggiormente dal primo al sesto libro e tende ad affievolirci dal settimo al dodicesimo libro ... un'odissea segnata da un estenuante desiderio di piacere.'⁶⁷⁶ Ficino's interest in happiness in the *Epistole* does not collapse in Books 7-12. On the contrary, this is where it is finally realised. Happiness remained the *skopos* of the collection throughout. Near the end, however, it is not so much discussed as demonstrated through Ficino's own life, now free of worldly tribulations and continuously at work in that tranquil high watchtower of the mind. Castellitti's designation of the letters as an *odyssey*, is also misleading. The characterisation of the collection as an *Aeneid* will be discussed in Part II of this thesis.

⁶⁷⁴ EL 11.5: 'Adolescentes enim quos nuper ad nos gratia disciplinae misistis ... Meam saltem euismodi diligentiam, optime mi Martine, parentibus adolescentum vestrisque principibus quibus sapientiam promisisti promittito.'

⁶⁷⁵ Castellitti 2011, 53.

⁶⁷⁶ Castellitti 2011, 66.

PART 2 – INTERTEXTUAL PATTERNS

CHAPTER 7

PISTOLARY EPIC

The third part of this study is dedicated to intertextuality in the *Epistole*. It is well-known that in the Renaissance, authors positioned their works within the literary tradition by establishing connections with works from the past. Canonical authors were favoured for the creation of such intertextual relationships because they increased the recognisability of allusions.⁶⁷⁷ This in turn ensured the desired effect of a text's dialogue with—or use of if the author and/or critic harbours a monologist view on literature—earlier works. Intertextuality can work on different levels and can be studied in different ways. There is the basic identification of verbal allusions which can be highlighted in the *apparatus fontium* of a critical edition. Those allusions can then be studied in more detail for understanding their function within the fabric of the text at large. Since this thesis deals with the structure of letter collections, I focus on the macrotextual function of references to other works of literature. There is no doubt that Renaissance authors were aware of the literary opportunities offered by structural intertextuality. Like Vergil had condensed and inverted the combined story of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, fifteenth-century authors could further emulate those epic structures, for example, by bracketing an Odyssean storyline with two Iliadic parts.⁶⁷⁸ We may expect that such variations were picked up by readers and helped them to understand the author's perspective on the literary tradition, ultimately relevant for a thorough evaluation of the work at hand.

In this section, I build on my previous analysis of narrative structures in the *Epistole* to examine the collection's play with generic conventions, poetic allusions, and recurrent imagery. I show how humanist self-presentation, and perhaps even self-perception, was inextricably bound up with their understanding of the literary tradition extending beyond epistolography. I shall focus on the relationship between Ficino's *Epistole* on the one hand and epic literature on the other hand. It may seem farfetched to look for structural resemblances between epistolary prose and narrative poetry. However, I argue that this interplay is in fact a genre-defining feature of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century *epistolaria*. This seventh chapter may be considered a long introduction to, and lays the foundation for the following two chapters. It first demonstrates the importance of epic poems as structural intertexts in ancient and humanist letter collections. Secondly, it demonstrates that

⁶⁷⁷ Cf. Marchesi 2008, 243.

⁶⁷⁸ See my discussion of the epic structure in Basinio da Parma's fifteenth-century epic *Hesperis* in Smets 2022.

Ficino's poetic quotations are meaningfully integrated into the macrotext of the *Epistole* and that readers were alert to poetic references.

ANTIQUITY

Literature is written and received as part of a tradition and this tradition constitutes the horizon of expectation which allows readers to arrive at a coherent interpretation of a work. Therefore, it is worth looking at some of the letter collections which Ficino and his contemporaries would have been familiar with to see if intertextuality across genres was in their view an established practice. To begin with Antiquity, we see that in Seneca's *Letters to Lucilius*, according to the calculations of Anna Motto and John Clark, 'Vergil is referred to or quoted far more frequently than are the most important philosophers and more than four times as often (119 times) as any other poet.'⁶⁷⁹ As James Ker has remarked, 'quotation from literature was a standard element of ancient epistolary style.'⁶⁸⁰ Yet, quotations could transcend their aesthetic function to play a role in developing specific arguments by introducing new ideas or providing heuristic entry points. For example, John Henderson has demonstrated how Vergil's *Georgics* are relevant for interpreting Seneca's rustic imagery in the *Letters to Lucilius*.⁶⁸¹ Seneca himself made clear that he considered poetry advantageous for moral education if read correctly. After quoting from Vergil's *Aeneid*, the stoic philosopher concedes that 'he who considers these lines in the spirit of a philosopher comments on the words in their proper sense'.⁶⁸² In addition to explaining what he considers the 'proper sense' of a verse, Seneca elsewhere employs poetic quotations to lend force to his own arguments. From all of Vergil's oeuvre, the *Aeneid* appears to be the dominant intertext in the *Epistulae*.⁶⁸³ Ker rightly notes that 'there is a convenient affinity between the overall quest of Aeneas as a hero struggling to make progress in *Aeneid* and the progressing student of philosophy who is the main concern of *Epistulae Morales*'.⁶⁸⁴ Remember the path through the text which Ficino pointed at in the opening letters of Book 1, and one perceives how this remark can, indeed, does, also apply to the *Epistole*. But Seneca's equation of Aeneas' epic journey with philosophical apprenticeship is restricted to individual letters and does not extend to the collection's macrotext. For a clear example of the structural use of poetic allusions, we must turn to Pliny the Younger.

Several scholars have suggested that it was the Neoteric poets who inspired Pliny to carefully arrange his letters into an intricate macrotext. Their verse collections joined individual units into

⁶⁷⁹ Motto and Clark 1978, 3.

⁶⁸⁰ Ker 2015, 113.

⁶⁸¹ John Henderson 2004, chaps. 5 and 10.

⁶⁸² *SenEp* 108.

⁶⁸³ Book 6 is most often quoted, comparable only to Book 1 of the *Georgics*; Maguinness 1956, 92.

⁶⁸⁴ Ker 2015, 114.

cohesive groups based on formal and thematic features, and Pliny applied those compositional principles to his prose work.⁶⁸⁵ In a ground-breaking study, Ilaria Marchesi has taken this idea one step further and examined how poetic allusions have a structuring function in Pliny's letter collection. She has demonstrated that 'by creating areas of higher semiotic density that stand out from the plainer fabric of the rest of the text, allusions emphasize their location on the textual map across which they are scattered. They confer cohesion on the epistolary macrotext.'⁶⁸⁶ While the technique of assembling letters may bear a certain resemblance to that of designing lyrical poetry collections, Pliny's intertextual allusions draw on a variety of genres including prose historiography and epic poetry. In fact, Vergil again plays a prominent role since he is the first author whom Pliny uses to structure his epistles through allusion. As Marchesi has convincingly shown, *P/E 1.2-3* together make a literary statement twice cast in Vergilian terms. The double citation, still according to Marchesi, is meant to raise the reader's attention so that they may better recognise the intended interplay with the epic poet. Remarkably, the same technique is used in Book 9 of Pliny's epistles, so that the text invites us to connect both books which were linked in other ways too.⁶⁸⁷ This is worth mentioning as we will see that also Ficino used paired citations to draw attention to the meaningful interplay of poetic quotations in his letters. I do not want to dwell any longer on the ancients' use of poetic intertextuality in letter collections and will now move on to the early Renaissance.

It is quite unlikely that the letter collections by Seneca and Pliny substantially influenced how humanists fashioned their own epistolary works. As far as the first one is concerned, his letters were too different from the fourteenth- and fifteenth-century *epistulae familiares* to have strongly influenced their macrotextual techniques. When Salutati positioned his own letter collection vis-à-vis the epistolary tradition, he quite simply rejected Seneca's relevance: 'Habemus Senece epistolas; nunquid ipsem tibi videtur suas, sicut michi de meis consulis, collegisse?'⁶⁸⁸ Evidently, he thought that a single-addressee collection with a sustained philosophical tone was no useful model for the typical humanist collection with numerous addressees and a greater thematic variety. Early humanist letter collections, and I will soon turn to their importance for fifteenth-century authors, were probably not influenced by Pliny's epistles either. It is unlikely that Petrarch knew them at all, though several of his friends had read them.⁶⁸⁹ Salutati considered only Cassiodorus' and Sidonius' collections authorised books in the sense that the authors themselves were responsible for their

⁶⁸⁵ Already Beard 2002, 121–123; most recently, Gibson 2023, 26–31.

⁶⁸⁶ Marchesi 2008, 8.

⁶⁸⁷ Marchesi 2008, 27–39.

⁶⁸⁸ See p. 22.

⁶⁸⁹ Apart from the fact that Petrarch does not mention them, see Billanovich 1951, 205 for a refutation of Pierre de Nolhac's hypothesis that Petrarch possessed a Pliny codex.

publication. He surprisingly places Pliny in the larger group of authors ‘apud quos sue congregationis vestigium nullatenus reperitur.’ This is surprising because Salutati’s remark seems to ignore the fact that Pliny’s opening letter clearly states the author’s responsibility for the collection and publication of his epistles.⁶⁹⁰ To be clear, Salutati knew Pliny’s epistles, of which he had possessed a copy probably since the mid-1380s, ten years before he shared his meta-epistolary considerations with Jean de Montreuil.⁶⁹¹ Perhaps, he took Pliny at his word that the letters were put together haphazardly—although this would still constitute an authorial *congregatio*, a word from which the notion of *careful* arrangement seems absent. More likely, Salutati presented the matter in this way to bolster his letter’s overall argument that collecting and publishing one’s own correspondence is a vain enterprise without much historical precedent. The situation had changed by the fifteenth century. I have already shown how Poliziano opened his letter collection in conscious dialogue with Pliny, not only borrowing his words but also the disingenuous claim that his letters were put together without much editorial care.⁶⁹² This indicates that by the end of the fifteenth century, Pliny had reached a position of sufficient fame to become a central point of reference for the advertisement of literary aspirations in epistolary writing. By this time, however, Petrarch had become the single most important model for any epistolary undertaking and macrotextual features of the genre can simply be explained through him without recourse to either Pliny or Seneca.

FOURTEENTH CENTURY

PETRARCH AND VERGIL

The foundational role of Petrarch’s *Familiares* in the development of humanist epistolography forms an indispensable part of the genre’s history. It therefore warrants an extended digression, which will prove indispensable to understand the choices made by Ficino and his contemporaries. I will here focus on one aspect of the work’s influence on later letter collections, which has hitherto received no attention: its engagement with epic poetry. The compositional refinement of the *Familiares*, comparable to that of poetry collections, has long been established. Already Billanovich, later followed by other scholars, related Petrarch’s epistolary collection to his *Canzoniere*. He wrote that ‘oltre l’identico ordinamento a diario, oltre la contiguità immediata con cui si concludeva la sistemazione delle due opere e la consonante affinità dei titoli, e anzi l’identica designazione

⁶⁹⁰ *PlE* 1.1: ‘Frequenter hortatus es ut epistulas, si quas paulo curatius scripsissem, colligerem publicaremque. Collegi non servato temporis ordine.’

⁶⁹¹ Ciapponi 2011, 77.81; Billanovich and Ouy 1964, 342. The manuscript contains the first letter; Firenze, BML, San Marco 284, fol. 41^r.

⁶⁹² See p. 53.

confidenziale (“nuge”), anche la prossimità nel calcolato numero dei componimenti (per cui il ciclo annuale dei giorni offriva la misura più convincente) accostava le trecentocinquanta lettere *familiari* ai trecentosessantasei *frammenti* del *Canzoniere*.⁶⁹³ Given the intricate structure of the *Canzoniere* and its autobiographical implications, Billanovich’ comparison with the *Familiares* applies to the letters a reading strategy that recognises their semi-fictional nature and the importance of intertextual subtleties.⁶⁹⁴ In spite of the suggestive correspondence between 350 letters and 365 poems, Petrarch’s *RVF* are not the poetic work on which their author most obviously modelled the macrostructural framework of his *Familiares*. That role is reserved for the epic poets of Antiquity, which already in Seneca and Pliny were central reference points.

From the very beginning Petrarch decided that his letter collection was to have epic proportions. Initially, he planned a twelve books long collection of which the first book contained twelve letters. Already at this early stage, the final book was reserved for authors from Antiquity and was gradually filled with letters to Cicero and Seneca, then to Varro and Livy.⁶⁹⁵ It is unclear whether Petrarch already had the idea to make this final book contain as many letters as the first to highlight the importance of the number twelve and its epic associations. In any case, to make sure that his readers would recognise the number reference to the *Aeneid*, Petrarch wanted to conclude the entire collection with a letter to Vergil.⁶⁹⁶ However, in 1356 it became clear that twelve books would not be enough to contain the ever-expanding correspondence that Petrarch deemed fit for publication. The solution to this problem was twofold. On the one hand, the *Seniles* were relegated to a separate book, and the *Familiares* were expanded to twenty books. The choice for twenty books was inspired by Seneca’s epistles to Lucilius or, less probably, by the twenty books of Cicero’s letters *ad Atticum*, *ad Brutum*, and *ad Quintum fratrem* combined in the famous Veronese codex that reportedly inspired Petrarch to publish his own letters.⁶⁹⁷

PETRARCH AND HOMER

Two years later Petrarch abandoned the plan to have twenty books and returned to the initial idea of an epic structure. By this time, he had become familiar with the Homeric epics which he asked Leonzio Pilato († 1364) to translate.⁶⁹⁸ He consequently projected a collection of twenty-four books, evidently in imitation of the newly appreciated Greek epic poems. The still growing book

⁶⁹³ Billanovich 1947, 25. Cf. Barolini 2006, 195n10; Rico 1976, 108–114; Bernardo 1958, 237. Also Poliziano’s *Epistole* have been compared to *canzoniere* by Bettinzoli 2004, 380–381: ‘sembra ispirarsi in generale a criteri assimilabili a quelli che presiedono all’allestimento canzoniere piuttosto che alla costruzione di un’autobiografia idealmente paradigmatica.’

⁶⁹⁴ The bibliography is immense. On the narrative structure of the *RVF*, see now Peterson 2016 and his mapping of the question and its scholarship in the Introduction.

⁶⁹⁵ Billanovich 1947, 31ff.

⁶⁹⁶ Billanovich 1947, 35.

⁶⁹⁷ Billanovich 1947, 18.

⁶⁹⁸ Cf. *Fam.* 18.12.

with letters to ancient authors was moved from its final position in the twelve-books collection to the end of the twenty-four-books collection. However, one important change occurred. While Petrarch had concluded the first version of the *Familiares* with a letter to Vergil, highlighting the work's numeric nod to the *Aeneid*, he closed the final version of the expanded collection with a letter to Homer that underlines its new intertextual connection.⁶⁹⁹ This letter primarily alerts the reader to the importance of Homeric epics for the interpretation of the *Familiares*, but also harks back to the original idea of a Vergilian collection. Petrarch imagines that Homer felt insulted because Vergil never mentioned him by name in the *Aeneid*. He then exculpates the Roman poet by recalling that Vergil left the poem unfinished at his death. Otherwise, Petrarch argues, the latter would surely have mentioned Homer at the end.

It is hard to imagine Vergil putting a gilded footnote at the end of the *Aeneid* alerting the reader to an intertextual link which hardly needs explaining. Petrarch knew this. The real goal was to make the reader of the letter collection reflect on Petrarch's own achievement. The humanist shaped his letter collection in a Homeric way and named his model at the end of this work. This is precisely what he said Vergil intended to do in the *Aeneid*, whose twelve books were the original model for the division of the *Familiares*. We are thus dealing with a particular kind of intertextuality, one that does not establish the relationship between two but between at least three texts. The third allusion should not be looked at directly but through the window of the second. By means of such window references, the later author implicitly asserts their own set of values over those of their predecessors, while allowing all three points of view to be simultaneously present, creating a high level of artistic ambivalence and demanding serious reflection on the part of the reader.⁷⁰⁰ We will see how fifteenth-century collections add another layer to this, responding to Petrarch's *Familiares* and each other via their reception of Vergil and Homer.

The question remains whether the 24 books of *Familiares* refer to the *Iliad* or to the *Odyssey*? Petrarch's annotations in the margins of Leonzio Pilato's Homer translations are preserved. While the *Iliad* is entirely and quite densely annotated, the *Odyssey* is only annotated in the first three books. Those books focus on Odysseus' son Telemachus and are not concerned with the adventures of the titular hero himself. Yet, the letters seem to be more concerned with the *Odyssey* than with the

⁶⁹⁹ Technically, the collection ends with a letter to Petrarch's friend 'Socrates,' real name Lodewijk Heyligen. He is also the addressee of the collection's first letter and is thus a good choice to provide closure to the work. However, I am inclined to see this last letter as an envoi that is appended to the work rather than as an integral part of the work. This view preserves the obvious symmetry between a first book of 12 letters and a final book of 12 letters. It further honours the structure of letters to ancient authors in Book 24, which start with an address of the greatest prose author from Antiquity, Cicero, and end with the greatest poet from Antiquity, Homer, whom the other literary highpoint of the period, Vergil, had deemed worthy of imitation.

⁷⁰⁰ Burrow ... Tarantino 2020, 4.

Iliad, and above all with the figure of Odysseus.⁷⁰¹ In the first letter, Petrarch unambiguously establishes a connection between himself and the Greek hero's journey after the Trojan War: 'Compare Odysseus' wanderings to my wanderings: if the renown of our names and deeds were on the same level, he neither erred longer nor more widely than I.'⁷⁰² The figure of Odysseus recurs at several points in the *Familiares* and symbolises Petrarch's restless life as well as the stylistic and thematic variety of his correspondence. This variety, one could say, matches the various ploys and encounters of the Greek hero on his obstacle-ridden voyage back to Ithaca.⁷⁰³ In an essay from 2011, Giuseppe Mazzotta compared the *Familiares* to 'an epic journey or quest: just as St. Augustine casts his autobiographical *Confessions* as the *Aeneid* of the heart, so Petrarch's experience of homelessness [in the *Familiares*] comes through as an existential *Odyssey*'.⁷⁰⁴ I will return to this quotation in the following section to explore in more detail the importance of St Augustine.

Fam. 1.1 was written in 1350, at least eight years before the idea emerged to distribute the *Familiares* over 24 books. So, it initially primed the reader for a Vergilian collection of twelve books. The first six books of the *Aeneid* in which Vergil tells his reader about the *errores* of the eponymous hero are of course based on the *Odyssey*. Nevertheless, it is not self-evident that from the beginning Petrarch looked back at the *Aeneid*'s ancient source, Homer, rather than to its later interpretations at the hands of St Augustine and Dante. Part of the explanation is the novelty of this work, which had been translated only recently. Moreover, it circulated in very limited circles to which Petrarch was proud to belong. Although he was not capable of reading the original himself, he was famously filled with excitement about their impending reappraisal. But in addition to the prestige and the humanistic reflex to explain ancient literature through ancient authors, I want to add a hermeneutic aspect as well. The following paragraphs end my excursus on Petrarch's letters by explaining his choice of a homeric intertext instead of a Vergilian one. This is important, because it will allow me to put into relief Ficino's choice for the *Aeneid* as his principal point of reference.

ODYSSEY VERSUS AENEID

Dante's *Comedia* had permanently fixed the characterisation of Vergil as a *ratus* whose philosophy was relevant to Christians and who could be their spiritual guide. Dante built on previous allegorisation of Aeneas' journey as a developmental scheme of man and as the peregrination of the soul, most notably by John of Salisbury (ca.1120-1180) and Bernardus Silvestris (ca. 1100-

⁷⁰¹ Cf. Pade 2015, 32–33.

⁷⁰² *Fam.* 1.1: 'Ulixeos errores erroribus meis confer: profecto, si nominis et rerum claritas una foret, nec diutius erravit ille nec latius'

⁷⁰³ Carrai 2003, 170–173.

⁷⁰⁴ Mazzotta 2011, 101.

1160).⁷⁰⁵ An important aspect of these interpretations was Aeneas' arrival in Italy. His fate-driven mission to found a new *patria* in Rome stood for the return of the soul to its creator, after abandoning the ruins of Troy which represented the overattachment to worldly pleasure typical of youth. While Homer too had been interpreted in this way, for example, by Porphyry and Proclus, these Greek texts were inaccessible to Petrarch. Thus, for the fourteenth-century author and his readers, the *Odyssey* was the perfect text to stress the wandering of a hero without implying his divine mission and arrival. In Dante's *Commedia*, Odysseus is not even allowed to stay home but must sail onwards until his death, unlike the more exemplary figure of Aeneas whose divine mission is accomplished.⁷⁰⁶ The Greek hero is turned into the opposite of his Latin successor.⁷⁰⁷ Petrarch's use of the word *errores* in relation to his own life and that of Odysseus, again in the words of Mazzotta, 'conveys the sense of the circuitousness and aimlessness of their shared misadventures, the iterative and random patterns of their minds.'⁷⁰⁸ Note that the situation for Ficino had changed very little in this respect, despite his deep familiarity with neo-Platonist authors. He never mentions Porphyry's *Cave of the nymphs* and read Proclus' allegorisation in his *Commentary on the Republic* only in 1492.⁷⁰⁹ Thus, Ficino did not know the main Platonising interpretations of Homer before his letter collection was almost completed. His view on the intertextual opportunities offered by Homer did, therefore, not radically differ from Petrarch's.

Seneca, whom Petrarch read with great attention, adhered to the distinction between Odysseus and Aeneas which I have just introduced. He used them to symbolise two kinds of troubled life which respectively embraced its messiness or contained within it the certainty of salvation. In *SenE* 88, the Stoic philosopher admonishes his pupil not to focus on futile questions of literary scholarship, but to search for their possible application to one's personal life. For 'we ourselves encounter storms of the spirit, which toss us daily, and our depravity drives us into all the ills which troubled Ulysses.' He asks the rhetorical question, implying the impossibility of a satisfying answer, to 'show me, by the example of Odysseus, how I am to love my country, my wife, my father, and how, even after suffering shipwreck, I am to sail toward these ends, honourable as they are.' The waves on

⁷⁰⁵ Thompson 1974, 21–28.

⁷⁰⁶ *Inf.* XXVI.124–142. Cf. Keen 2001, 86: 'His [viz. Dante's] rewriting of Ulysses' story turns his journeying into a kind of anti-pilgrimage, seeking out a "mondo senza gente" (*Inf.* XXVI, 117) rather than a known shrine, and so running counter to incarnational belief, which asserts that the markers left in the world by human history are of fundamental importance to mankind. By contrast, the perils of Aeneas, who travels purposefully from one homeland to a new one, is shown by his carrying with him the Palladium and the *penates*. These precious relics remind the Trojans of their earthly origins, and also of the transcendent beings who can guide and help them in their life-journeys. As a result of his pious journey, Aeneas becomes the *pater patriae* of Rome, the city that Dante reveres for its political and cultural achievements.' Cf. Freccero 1986.

⁷⁰⁷ Cf. Thompson 1967, 41–47.

⁷⁰⁸ Mazzotta 2011, 101.

⁷⁰⁹ Michael J. B. Allen 2014b, 146n20.

which Odysseus sailed are not turned into a moral allegory of difficulties pertaining to spiritual self-improvement; they remain an image of the mind's purposeless tribulations. Moreover, Seneca's interpretation of the epic's final episode is plain: No spiritual Good lurks behind Odysseus' arrival in Ithaca but domestic virtue only. Likewise, in *SenE* 66 Ithaca stands for nothing more than house and home: 'Odysseus hastens back to the rocks of his Ithaca ... For no man loves his native land because it is great; he loves it because it is his own.' In *SenE* 53, Seneca even deconstructs the mythical grandeur of the story by joking that 'you may be sure that the reason why Odysseus was shipwrecked on every possible occasion was not so much because the sea-god was angry with him from his birth; he was simply subject to seasickness.' The *Aeneid*, as I have previously mentioned, has a very different role and repeatedly appears in a philosophical context where it is quoted and alluded to with intellectual reverence and interpretive imagination.⁷¹⁰ In conclusion, Petrarch relied on a long interpretative tradition to ask us to appreciate through his reference in *Fam.* 1.1 the storms themselves, to sympathise with the discomforts of continuous interaction with rulers. While it may be exaggerated to think of Odysseus' separation from his homeland as a spiritual failure in the context of the *Familiares*, it serves as an image of that civic exile and fragmented self which Petrarch embraced as indissoluble aspects of his identity.⁷¹¹ As Thomas Greene wrote, Petrarch 'admires those who achieve their quest, but he is wary of minds with too single a purpose, minds so unlike his own. He wants to cleave to a single path, but he is easily enticed into deviation; he is congenitally an "alma disviata" (*Canzoniere* 365), a *displaced* soul.'⁷¹² That is why Odysseus proved an excellent vignette for the *Familiares* and in any case a better one than Aeneas would have been.

FIFTEENTH CENTURY

Petrarch must have been quite pleased with the idea of linking his letter collection to the epic tradition by a combination of textual allusion and book division. He repeated the strategy in his *Letters of Old Age*, divided into eighteen books, not accidentally the same number as we can count in Ennius' *Annales*. Again, Petrarch chose an epic which he had not read in the original, this time because the work survived only in citations by other authors from Antiquity.⁷¹³ He was rightly pleased with his invention as it came to influence the three most influential letter collections of the fifteenth century as well as less central examples of the genre. Petrarch's collection thus became

⁷¹⁰ Cf. *SenE* 21.5; 28.1-3; 82.7-8; 108.28-29.

⁷¹¹ Zak 2010, chap. 1 and throughout.

⁷¹² Greene 1982, 35.

⁷¹³ He could have deduced the length of the *Annales* from Aulus Gellius, *Noctes Atticae* 13.21.14. It is, however, unlikely that Petrarch knew Diomedes Grammaticus, who also mentions the work's total length; cf. El Matouni 2022, 344-345.

more influential on the macrostructural level than any ancient example.⁷¹⁴ I will leave aside lesser-known authors such as Giorgio Valagussa (1428-1464) and Pietro Dolfin (1444-1525) to focus on the much more popular figures Angelo Poliziano and, of course, Ficino.⁷¹⁵ I should add to those two names that of Francesco Filelfo, who began collecting his letters several decades before Ficino. Filelfo finalised his enormous collection of 48 books in 1477, only two or three years after a first version of Ficino's first book of letters began to circulate in manuscript.⁷¹⁶ It is evident that Filelfo compiled his 48 books of letters in emulation of Petrarch's 24 books of *Familiares*. Like Vergil had emulated Homer by making his work half as long as both of his models, Filelfo doubled the length of Petrarch's collection for his own *epistolarium*. Jeroen de Keyser confirms that

Filelfo's deliberate interest for significant numerical choices and patterns can be determined beyond all doubt: his collection of satires, for example, consists of ten books of ten satires each—all of them running to exactly one hundred verses in length. And all completed books of his *Sphortias* ... run to exactly 800 verses, while Filelfo initially wanted the epic poem to comprise twenty-four books, matching Homer's canonical number of books in both the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.⁷¹⁷

I was not able to find indications of a Homeric intertextuality running through the letters and am for now happy to accept that Filelfo's book count is simply meant to outclass the monumentality of Petrarch's *Familiares* rather than to present himself as a cunning warrior like Odysseus.⁷¹⁸ Nevertheless, Filelfo's implicit introduction of the *Iliad* as a valid intertext for epistolary collections paved the path for later letter compilers.

POLIZIANO

Poliziano took up the tradition established by Petrarch and continued by Filelfo. His collection counts twelve books of letters, clearly inspired by Petrarch's 24 books of *Familiares* and the 48 books of Filelfo's *epistolarium*. We must take a closer look at the letters to see whether his choice for a Vergilian book corresponds to Petrarch's Odyssean focus, or introduces a new, Iliadic

⁷¹⁴ The only alternative, it appears, was Pliny's epistolary collection, which during the Renaissance circulated in three versions with respectively eight, nine and ten books. Leonardo Bruni (Bruni 2007) imitated the shortest of those variants, while Girolamo Alliotti (Caby 2016; 2018; MS Arezzo, Biblioteca Città di Arezzo, 400) and Antonio Loschi (in verse but political; Faraone 2018) published their letters in nine books, and Giovanni Garzoni his in ten (Garzoni 1992).

⁷¹⁵ Valagussa's letters, which only exist in manuscript, are discussed in Resta 1964, 75–86 and partially edited on p. 120-318; Dolfin's collection was published in 1524, one year before the author's death. Resta accompanies his edition with an elaborate biography of Valagussa; for more information on Dolfin, see Zaccaria 1991.

⁷¹⁶ Filelfo 2015, 11.

⁷¹⁷ De Keyser 2019, 103–104.

⁷¹⁸ De Keyser stays silent on the book division of Filelfo's letter collection, but see Pieper 2017 for a macrotextual reading of part of the collection.

intertextuality. Poliziano's correspondence is the perfect illustration of what Jacob Burckhardt already called 'den kolossalsten Ehrgeiz und Durst nach Größe' that inspired Renaissance humanists to try and bring down their intellectual competitors by means of polemics and mockery.⁷¹⁹ Shane Butler has suggested that this humanist's desire to piece back the fragments of ancient culture may stem from his experience of a childhood shattered by the violent death of his father when he was only ten years old.⁷²⁰ While Poliziano energetically raged against the destructive forces of time, he developed a generally combative approach to philology. Perhaps the experience of hardship during his youth accounts for the near-existential need to win every discussion by raging against his contemporaries who in his view further obscured and ruined the texts he so cherished. Even Poliziano's selection of letters that were addressed to him by colleagues share an understanding of philological learning as a competitive activity. Rightly, then, did Juan Luis Vives (1493-1540) write in *De conscribendis epistolis* that 'schoolboys took pleasure in reading them as if they were fights and contests.'⁷²¹

A conceptualisation of scholarship as war is reflected in the choice of metaphors employed by Poliziano to describe his work and that of his colleagues. He repeatedly refers to himself and his friends as triumvirs and centurions, to his intellectual adversaries as barbarian phalanxes, to his work as the military governance of a province, and to the adoption of a scholarly position as planting military standards (Table 8).

TABLE 8 MILITARY TERMINOLOGY IN POLIZIANO'S *EPISTOLARUM LIBRI*

<i>PoIE</i> 1.14	Novi quanta propensione atque adeo inductione animi <u>provinciam</u> duram et inexplicabilem suscepereis
<i>PoIE</i> 1.19	extra doctrinae aleam me ab illo poni, <u>triumphi</u> instar existimem.
<i>PoIE</i> 2.4	indoctorum <u>barbarorumque phalanges</u> , quae totum fere orbem <u>signis positis</u> exultantes tenent
<i>PoIE</i> 2.10	<u>triumviris</u> scilicet literariis
<i>PoIE</i> 3.10	Laurentio Vallae, Domitio Calderino, Angelum Politianum adiicio, et quasi <u>triumviratum</u> creo
<i>PoIE</i> 3.18	cum in his Miscellaneis quae edisti centurionem te esse volueris, iam in reliquo opere ... <u>tribunum</u> ... <u>legatum</u> ... <u>imperatorem</u>

⁷¹⁹ Burckhardt 1860, 152.

⁷²⁰ Shane Butler 2018, 260.

⁷²¹ Vives 1989, 109: 'Allubescunt haec quidem adolescentibus velut pugnae et certamina.' Cf. Coroleu 2018, [4].

In light of those military metaphors drawn from Roman history, it comes as no surprise that the references to ancient epic are all drawn from the *Iliad* and from passages describing the Trojan war and the battle for Latium in the Iliadic second half of the *Aeneid* (Table 9).

TABLE 9 ILIADIC REFERENCES IN POLIZIANO'S *EPISTOLARUM LIBRI*

<i>PoLE</i> 1.11	Ut enim non dubitat Agamemnon quin sit brevi Troiam capturus
[<i>Il.</i> 2.372]	si sibi decem dentur ‘συμφοράδμονες’ Nestoris similes … facile sperem literas, cum Graecas tum Latinas e barbaria media receptum iri.
<i>PoLE</i> 2.5	ii quos recta studia delectant, ‘exiguī sane numero, sed bello vivida
[<i>Aen.</i> 5.754]	virtus.’ Horum armis atque auxiliis fretus, barbarorum phalanges, atque eorum qui a nobis ad illum defecerunt, impetus insolentiasque contemnam
<i>PoLE</i> 3.17	defendas acriter quaestiones praepositas et impugnes vehementer,
[<i>Aen.</i> 1.493]	‘audesque viris concurrere virgo’

The *Iliad* reference in Letter 1.11 aligns Poliziano's learning with the bravery of the Greek heroes fighting against Troy and simultaneously reminds us of Poliziano's familiarity with Homer's epic which he partially translated.⁷²² While the reference to Nestor implies an appreciation of wisdom and experience, rather than of brute force, Poliziano makes sure to echo the original context of war by mentioning the capture of Troy. The two other citations are from the *Aeneid* but refer to events in the Trojan war. ‘Exiguī sane numero, sed bello vivida virtus’ is taken from the fifth book of the *Aeneid*, where the Trojans prepare themselves to leave Sicily and continue their fate-driven journey to Italy.⁷²³ The phrase prefigures the wars that Aeneas and his men will have to fight in Latium while reminding the reader of all the trials they have already endured and which have reduced their number.

Finally, there is the famous letter to Cassandra Fedele, in which several references to the *Aeneid* compete.⁷²⁴ Lisa Jardine has picked up and discussed in depth the ways in which Poliziano lauded the intellectual qualities of the female humanist by comparing her to the Amazon Camilla who

⁷²² See Levine 1979.

⁷²³ *Aen.* 5.754.

⁷²⁴ *PoLE* 3.17.

helps Aeneas to conquer Latium.⁷²⁵ She considered Poliziano's letter together with a letter by Queen Isabella of Spain casting Fedele in the role of yet another—but this time Homeric—Amazon, Penthesilea.⁷²⁶ Jardine made poignant observations about the social exclusion of women from the civic extension of the humanist milieu in spite of their intellectual and artistic accomplishments. Therefore, she focused on Poliziano's quotation from the *Aeneid* which reduces Fedele to her sex by insisting that her virtue is partially found in being 'a maiden'.⁷²⁷ This contrasts, Jardine argues, with the civic responsibilities which the fifteenth century associated with a man's life of (military) action. She illustrates this with a quotation from Bruni:

If a woman throws her arms around whilst speaking, or if she increases the volume of her speech with greater forcefulness, she will appear threateningly insane and requiring restraint. These matters belong to men; as war, or battles, and also contests and public controversies.⁷²⁸

I accept Jardine's argument as well as the results of more recent readings of the correspondence between Poliziano and Fedele that highlight the humanist's willingness to stage Fedele's learning while generally refusing to accept her as a peer in his male-dominated social environment.⁷²⁹ Nevertheless, against the backdrop of imposed virtues like modesty and virginity, Poliziano still portrays Fedele in the traditional garb of combative 'manliness.' With the Vergilian phrase 'audesque viris concurrere virgo,' unmentioned by Jardine and later scholars, he places her in the same context of war and battles which he imagines as the equivalent of his own literary endeavours. I will not further explore the importance of this passage for our understanding of Poliziano's stance on the role of female scholarship in fifteenth-century society. I merely want to point out how much the notion of scholarship as battle pervades Poliziano's correspondence even when it is at odds with his general depiction of intellectually accomplished women as outsiders.

The last letter in which military metaphors are conspicuously present is written by Jacopo Antiquari. In *PoIE* 3.18, the Milanese humanist puns that the hundred entries in Poliziano's *Miscellanea* make its author a centurion.⁷³⁰ In the Roman army, this was the rank of someone who

⁷²⁵ Jardine 1985, 804–805.

⁷²⁶ Jardine 1985, 815.

⁷²⁷ *Aen.* 11.508: 'O decus Italiae virgo.' Cf. Jardine 1985, 805–806.

⁷²⁸ Bruni 1928, 11.20–23: si brachium iactabit loquens aut si clamorem vehementius attollet, vesena coercendaque videatur. Ista quidem virorum sunt; ut bella, ut pugnae, sic etiam fori contentiones atque certamina. Translated and discussed in Jardine 1985, 813; cf. 1983, 233ff.

⁷²⁹ Cf. Feng 2017, 94–103.

⁷³⁰ The *Miscellanea* are edited and translated in Poliziano 2020. The work contains several instances of Poliziano's militaristic understanding of scholarship. For example, Poliziano 2020, 17: 'In the same way that Homer's Teucer hid under Ajax's shield [cf. *Il.* 8.266–272], so I, lying beneath the shadow of your [viz. of Lorenzo de' Medici] name, will offer attack against the barbarians century by century.'

commanded a century which consisted of 100 legionaries. Antiquari encourages his fellow humanist to continue climbing the intellectual hierarchy which remains metaphorically militarised. However, Antiquari continues that Poliziano should not criticise the Roman humanist Domizio Calderini, who had died eleven years earlier. True to his polemic mindset, Poliziano refuses to hold back his opinion on scholarly mistakes and explains that it is best to completely uproot them.⁷³¹ But Antiquari insists and writes with greater commitment:

I would have preferred, while you were aggressively pursuing the problem,
more restraint from personal attacks, though this is no longer an option after
publication.⁷³²

Antiquari's objection is polite and considerate of both Poliziano's character and the fact that once a work is published nothing can be changed. Nevertheless, or perhaps because of this, Antiquari's advice appears to have been successful since further military metaphors stay out in the following letters. It is noteworthy that the development from a militarist to a non-militarist understanding of philology cuts across addressee-based letter groups which themselves are not ordered chronologically. As a result, the pattern cannot be explained historically, but only through Poliziano's arrangement of the letters. Indeed, the high concentration of references to military history and the Trojan war stands out as a well-considered literary conceit.

FICINO: PRELIMINARY REMARKS

READERS' RECEPTION

Petrarch, Poliziano, and Filelfo were famous poets in their own right. Poliziano and Filelfo also commented and taught on ancient as well as on more recent poetry. Naturally, their poetic interests spilled into their respective correspondences. For this reason alone, one can assume that contemporary readers would have been attentive to poetic allusions and perhaps even expected them. Franciscus Sylvius' 1520 commentary on *PoIE* 1.1 confirms this by opening with a long quotation from the *Aeneid* and with numerous other parallels from this and other poems. In contrast to those three authors, Ficino's *Epistole* are a work of moral instruction and philosophical argumentation. Since they are less concerned, if concerned at all, with demonstrating literary scholarship or creativity, could he also expect his readers to notice allusions to poetical texts? Only a few letters deal with poetry from a philosophical point of view by explaining the nature of the *furor poeticus*. The first of those letters has drawn much attention by readers, and the second one

⁷³¹ *PoIE* 3.19.

⁷³² *PoIE* 3.20.

was annotated several times too. It is natural that readers remarked upon poetic quotations in such a context.⁷³³ The question remains whether early readers picked up less obvious references which were not embedded in a philosophical exploration of poetry per se. The margins of the text, on which we have relied several times already, are the best place to find out whether fifteenth- and sixteenth-century readers were willing to apply their poetical memory also to those letters without a clear connection to poetry. However, the situation is more complicated at this point. So far, I have focused on marginal annotations as an indication of broader trends in the macrotextual appreciation of the *Epistole*: a heightened interest in the opening letters, a general neglect of Book 2, a hesitant appreciation of the first letter series to Cavalcanti and of the troubled narrative in Book 3. While from a distance those trends are clearly recognisable, the image of homogeneity quickly fades when we focus on the substance of those same marginalia which is naturally much more varied.

Readers simultaneously did and did not take a similar approach to the *Epistole*. Within broader trends, it is hard to detect why different people marked different passages in the same letter. We run into the limitations of using marginalia as a heuristic tool because reading for the most part takes place in the mind and not on the physical page. Moreover, the process of attaching importance to a specific portion of text is more complex than it may seem at first sight. One annotation can sometimes be the result of a cumulative attention build-up across several letters. On page 100, I have already pointed out how the annotation of the expression 'diuturnum silentium' in *EL* 1.118, 5.39, and 7.29 most likely results from the recognition of a pattern that already started in *EL* 1.36 and 1.64. In a similar way, the annotation of one sentence might be provoked by an increase of attentiveness that is caused by the passage that immediately precedes the annotated sentence. So, whereas the presence of annotations is a clear proof of heightened attention around one sentence, we should not automatically conclude that a lack of annotations indicates a lack of attention on sentence level. Hence, the six copies in which occasional marginalia record readers' observation of poetic intertextuality in Ficino's letters give little to no information about how common or uncommon it was among the audience at large to notice those references.⁷³⁴ Instead, we have to be content with the evidence of several readers paying attention to traces of verse at all. This is still significant since it points to a historical openness for reading across genres even in a work that is not ostensibly concerned with *belles lettres*.

⁷³³ See, for example, 'Vergilii versus' next to *De divino furore* (*EL* 1.6) in Budapest, OSZK, Inc. 357b.

⁷³⁴ Inc Innsbruck, ULB, Inc. 157 E 4 and Inc. 155 C 9; Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional de España, INC/2155 Budapest, OSZK, Inc. 357b (Capcasa); London, Westminster Abbey, Inc. CC.24; Oxford, Weston Library Inc. Byw. C 3.10; Brussel, KBR, Inc. INC B 1.028.

The widespread practice of commonplacing every kind of text sharpened readers' eyes for captivating phrases. It is nevertheless doubtful that this practice was the reason behind annotating Vergilian lines in the *Epistole*, the most highlighted author in the six volumes under consideration. Surely, notable passages from such a famous author would have already found their way into everybody's notebook and did not need the unlikely detour of a Platonist's *epistolarium*. In one of the copies held by the university library in Innsbruck, 'heu! fuge laetales terras, fuge litus amarum' (*EL* 6.2) is underlined, an unmistakable variation on the Vergilian line 'heu! fuge crudelis terras, fuge litus avarum' (*Aen.* 3.45). In another copy in the same library, a citation in *EL* 1.83 from the beginning of the Fourth Eclogue, 'non omnes arbusta iuvant humilesque myrice,' (*Ed.* 4.2) is underlined. The copy in Madrid which was once in the library of the dukes of Norfolk has an annotation identifying Horace as the original author of a prayer to Apollo for the blessing of his lyre (*Carmina* 1.32.13-16/*EL* 3.42).⁷³⁵ The copy at Westminster Abbey notes both Vergilian and Horatian intertexts by categorising 'omne tulit punctum qui miscuit utile dulci' (*Ars poetica* 343; *EL* 10.43) as a 'versus,' and by repeating 'oscula libavit natae' (*Aen.* 1.256; *EL* 9.21) in the margin. Its annotator also restored 'ter quaterque beati' in *EL* 11.19 to the Vergilian halfverse 'terque quaterque beati' (e.g., *Aen.* 1.94).

PERTINENT INTERTEXTUALITY

Gentile's meticulous *index locorum et locum parallelorum* for Book 1 shows that there are few poetic references in the *Epistole*. One wonders whether Ficino cared at all about alluding to authors who did not in one way or the other corroborate his philosophical argumentation. Ficino loved to play with language and willingly explored the semantic range of a single word to great literary effect. But with regards to literary allusions, he exercised much more restraint than most humanists. Book 1 echoes no more than nine poets of whom only the Orphic hymns and Vergil feature more than once.⁷³⁶ The latter actually appears far more often than the other authors. The privileged position of the Roman poet in his *Epistole* is clear also from the fact that he is the only poet who gets named several times in conjunction with verbal or more general references.⁷³⁷ In *EL* 11.8, he is also the only Latin author who is counted, together with Homer, Callimachus, Sappho, and David, among the authors who were stirred by a poetic and an amatory instinct ('poetico simul amatorioque instinctu'). If we exclude the letters that are thematically concerned with poetry—on the one hand

⁷³⁵ 'O decus Phoebi et dapibus supremi / grata testudo Iovi, o laborum / dulce lenimen.' Ficino slightly alters the concluding words 'salve / rite vocant' and places them at the beginning of his quote.

⁷³⁶ I exclude those instances where an allusion is more likely drawn from another author. For example, the image of Democritos laughing and Heraclitus weeping is probable taken from Seneca rather than from Juvenal. Half of the quotations of the Orphic hymns are not self-standing but embedded in fragments taken from Plato.

⁷³⁷ *EL* 1.118-119; 2.8; 7.17; 8.20; 10.39; 11.8; 11.19; 12.11.

EL 1.6 and *EL* 1.52 about poetic frenzy with references to Ovid, Lucan, Vergil, and Hesiod, and on the other hand *EL* 1.92 about music with both Orphic quotes—we are left with a small group of unique allusions to Ovid, Martial, Homer, and Sappho in addition to five allusions to Vergil. The scarcity of the quotes shows that they are not thrown in lightly, and this enhances their significance. Most of them are purposefully placed in the collection's macrotextual fabric and indeed accentuate the narrative pattern. The following paragraph illustrates this by examining the allusion to Ovid in *EL* 1.26.

Ficino's allusion to Ovid is somewhat surprising. Yet, the phrase 'livore rumpantur edaci' unmistakably echoes the hemistich 'rumpere, livor edax' from *Remedium Amoris* 389. This is the only non-Vergilian reference in Book 1 which is not thematically related to poetry nor accompanied by a quotation from Vergil. Before turning to Vergil, it is worth to look at Ficino's use of Ovid since it sheds light on the carefulness with which Ficino applied poetic intertextuality in his letters. The allusion is found in a letter to Niccolò Michelozzi, entitled *Landes Laurentii Medicis mire*. I have already shown how letters to Lorenzo's secretary are simultaneously, if implicitly, addressed to Lorenzo himself.⁷³⁸ This holds especially true for a letter whose title announces 'a marvellous praise of Lorenzo de' Medici.' *EL* 1.26 belongs to the first section of Book 1, in which the theme of love is explored through highly emotional letters first from Lorenzo to Ficino and secondly from Ficino to Cavalcanti. How does the verse relate to the content of the letter and the section's *modus*? In *EL* 1.26, Ficino distances himself from Lorenzo's lovers who are consumed by jealousy of each other: 'Let others be envious of each other and let them be consumed by gnawing jealousy.'⁷³⁹ He personally chooses to simply enjoy his proximity to Lorenzo, with whom he is connected by grace of the latter's *humanitas*, a combination of learning and gentleness. There is an important shift between Ovid's verse and its variation in Ficino's letter. While the Florentine philosopher uses it to describe the envy of competing lovers, the Roman poet comments on literary envy that underlies moral censorship of his poetry. The following verses in the *Remedium* defend the poet and his work against such criticism by insisting that both perfectly adhere to the demands posed by the elegiac genre. Ovid then doubles down on his way of writing with an especially obscene description of how to scare away one's lover.⁷⁴⁰

Ficino knew his audience well and was able, even within the narrow spectrum of his epistolary rhetoric, to cater to its different tastes and demands. The Ovidian allusion makes the letter more palatable to its target audience, Lorenzo. Although Ovid's poems were often read with an eye on

⁷³⁸ See my citation of *EL* 1.103 in footnote 437 on p. 110.

⁷³⁹ *EL* 1.26: 'Invideant alii alienis et livore rumpantur edaci.'

⁷⁴⁰ Cf. Holzberg 2007, 46–51.

their edifying potential, we must credit fifteenth-century readers with a sense for their subversiveness, too. Lorenzo was drawn towards irreverent types of poetry, as is clear from his attachment to Ficino's nemesis Luigi Pulci.⁷⁴¹ In this sense, it was a clever strategy to lift a verse from a context as risqué as Ovid's *Remedium amoris* and integrate it in the letter like intellectual bait. It is Ficino's way of becoming 'equal to the younger men in purity of life, simplicity of words, games, jokes, and jests' as Socrates had done to seduce his pupils.⁷⁴² There is yet another function of the allusion, this one more closely related to its original context. We have seen how Ficino's love letters to Cavalcanti were left out from the Italian translation made not long after their Latin publication. This suggests that at least some readers felt uneasy with his epistolary evocation of love. Possibly, Ficino wanted Ovid's defensive stance in the *Remedium* to show through in his letter. He changed the Ovidian verse into a critique of the common understanding of love which generates envy. In doing so, he underlined his own enjoyment of a well-balanced love free of distress, and, more importantly, defended with literary panache his amatory correspondence with Lorenzo and Cavalcanti against accusations of indecency. Remember that in *EL* 1.38 to Cavalcanti, Ficino found it necessary to explain in some detail why he had previously resorted to such impassioned love letters. In that letter, he set out the interpretive framework within which we should consider the exchanges with Lorenzo and Cavalcanti. In *EL* 1.26, he sets apart his love for Lorenzo from the love others feel towards him. His intertextual reference is to the point here, as it harks back to a passage where Ovid pointed out the elegiac context vindicating his poetry despite its potential offensiveness.

⁷⁴¹ See p. 108-112.

⁷⁴² *De amore* 7.16; see p. 98.

CHAPTER 8

VERGILIAN JOURNEYS

BUCOLIC HINGES

Apart from the Ovidian allusion in *EL* 1.26, all citations from Latin poetry in Book 1 appear in pairs with at least one allusion to a poem by Vergil. This explains why nearly all the annotations highlighting intertextual links in the six copies mentioned above refer to the Roman poet. *EL* 1.33 combines a verse from the *Aeneid* with one from the *Georgics*; *EL* 1.82 contains two lines from Martial with one verse from Vergil's Fourth *Eclogue*; a long Seneca passage in *EL* 1.95 is introduced by a phrase from the *Aeneid*; and the first paragraph of the following letter contains a line from Vergil's Third *Eclogue*. The technique of pairing references to make the reader watch out for intertextual allusions has been observed in Pliny's letters.⁷⁴³ Its effect is comparable to the juxtaposition of seemingly unrelated letters which nevertheless appear to build on each other.⁷⁴⁴ Their semantic concentration makes the reader aware of the collection's careful arrangement. In the case of poetic allusions, it further helps to recognise a detail which, though significant, may otherwise go unnoticed. The next paragraphs focus on Ficino's two references to the *Eclogues* in Book 1 and how they highlight the pivotal function of *EL* 1.82 and 1.95-96.

The citation of the Fourth *Eclogue* in *EL* 1.82 appears as early as the fourth sentence of the opening paragraph, which goes as follows:

A thousand greetings to you, my saviour after God. As soon as my hand could
lift a pen, I considered it wrong to write to anyone else before writing to my
sole patron. On what, then, am I particularly to write? Certainly I shall, if I may
be so free, write to you now about matters more serious than usual. *Non semper*
*arbusta iuvant humilesque myrice.*⁷⁴⁵

The verse 'non omnis arbusta iuvant humilesque myrcae' is found at the beginning of Vergil's Fourth *Eclogue* and is preceded only by an acclamation of the muses: 'Sicelides Musae, paulo maiora canamus!' These verses prepare the reader for a shift in tone which sets this *Eclogue* apart from the

⁷⁴³ See p. 167.

⁷⁴⁴ See p. 65-66; 75.

⁷⁴⁵ *EL* 1.82: 'Salve milies, mea post Deum salus! Nefas esse putabam, cum primum manus calatum ducere posset, ad alium priusquam ad patronum meum unicum scribere. Quid igitur potissimum scribam? Scriberem certe nunc ad te, si liceret, severiora quam soleam: non semper arbusta iuvant humilesque myrice.'

other nine *Eclogues*. The third verse announces that the poem bears on political matters which are different from the pastoral themes that dominate the other *Eclogues*: ‘Si canimus silvas, silvae sint consule dignae.’ In vv. 4-10, Vergil recounts a divination by the Cumæan Sybil about the birth of a heavenly boy from a Virgin who will renew the world and restore the Golden Age. During the Middle Ages, Vergil’s prophecy about Pollio’s son was read as an announcement of Christ’s coming.⁷⁴⁶ Ficino knew both the historical and the prophetic interpretations. While he accepted that the Sybil had announced Christ’s birth, he nevertheless denied that Vergil had recognised the true meaning of her prophecy. In his book *On Christian Religion*, he writes:

Does Virgil not read in the same books of the Sibyls what the prophets and the evangelists say of Christ? And, most importantly, did Virgil not understand that the predictions in the Cumæan Sibyl’s text, as I imagine, would come true in the Sibyl’s own times, when Jesus was born, although Virgil, to fawn over Pollio, twists the Sibyl’s oracles to be about his newborn son named Saloninus, none of which at all could have corresponded with Saloninus, who died as a boy and accomplished nothing? Whatever one reads in it does, however, correspond with Jesus, who was born in those times.⁷⁴⁷

The poem’s reception between panegyric and prophecy was exploited by fifteenth-century readers. Its messianic undertone was most notably adopted by Cosimo and Piero de’ Medici who presented themselves as harbingers of a new Golden Age in Florence. Their descendant Lorenzo self-consciously took the task of that renewal upon himself and was encouraged in his self-fashioning by a host of contemporary poets.⁷⁴⁸ While Ficino thus played to his audience by means of this reference, he nevertheless moves away from both its historical and providential interpretations. There is no mention of a Golden Age in the letter, nor does he praise Lorenzo as its initiator. Instead, he replaced the word *maiora* with *severiora*, which turns the panegyric associations of the verse into the corrective *modus* of a teacher-pupil relationship. By further adding the comparative subclause ‘quam soleamus,’ Ficino invites us to compare the tone of this letter with his previous letters to Lorenzo. In this way, the quotation is integrated into the macrotextual fabric of the collection.

Until *EL* 1.82, the collection counts eleven letters to and from Lorenzo, of which the majority are love letters. There are *EL* 1.22-28 in the first section of Book 1, and *EL* 1.64, which belongs to a handful of letters that bring back the theme of love after the collection has already advanced to the

⁷⁴⁶ Clausen 1994, 126–129; comprehensive bibliography in Cucchiarelli 2023, 203–204.

⁷⁴⁷ Ficino 2022, 106–107; cf. Luke B. T. Houghton 2019, 316–318.

⁷⁴⁸ Luke B. T. Houghton 2019, 46–56; 2014.

theme of society.⁷⁴⁹ Before *EL* 1.82, only *EL* 1.70 and, tangentially, *EL* 1.77 correspond to one of the letter book's thematic focuses beyond the amatory mode from the beginning. This shows that Book 1 as a whole and the letters to Lorenzo within it develop at different speeds. The progress in Ficino's correspondence with Lorenzo is slowed down compared to the overall development across addressees. However, the *severiora* which Ficino promises in *EL* 1.82 announce the definitive shift from love letters to more serious topics in his correspondence with Lorenzo, even though this shift in the collection at large had already been made in *EL* 1.53.⁷⁵⁰ The following letters between Ficino and Lorenzo indeed cover new ground in comparison to before. In addition to their exchange on the proper use of time, there are letters on moral exemplarity, on the divine nature of the soul, on just legislation, on rightful praise, and on happiness.⁷⁵¹ So, the Vergilian quotation highlights the function of *EL* 1.82 as an important turning point in Ficino's relationship with one of the central correspondents in Book 1.⁷⁵² Its function as a macrotextual marker was well-considered since the thematic development in the letters between Ficino and Lorenzo runs at a slower pace than the development of Book 1 in its entirety. Moreover, the letters to Lorenzo have no other prominent structuring devices like ring compositions involving letter titles and addressees, which highlight the transitions in Book 1 at large.

The Vergilian allusion in *EL* 1.82 is accompanied by a citation from Martial which fits well in a letter discussing the preciousness of time: 'Non est, crede mihi, sapientis dicere 'vivam.' / Sera nimis vita est crastina: vive hodie.'⁷⁵³ *EL* 1.95 also contains an intertextual pair, this time consisting of a reference to Vergil (*Aen.* 1.26) with one to Seneca's *Thyestes* (vv. 607-612). The two citations further highlight the single citation in *EL* 1.96 to Vergil's third *Eclogue*. While the original meaning of *Eclogue* 4.2 is directly applicable to the discursive change in the Lorenzo letters from *EL* 1.82 onwards, this cannot be said of the Vergil quotes in *EL* 1.95-96. In *Aeneid* 1.26, the phrase 'manet alta mente repostum' pertains to the resentment Juno feels towards the Trojans after the Paris judgment. In *EL* 1.95, the same words simply introduce the Senecan verses which, according to Ficino, a lawful man should always have in mind. The tragedy from which the Seneca quotation stems dramatises the conflict between Atreus and his brother Thyestes. Ficino completely ignores the play's gruesome plotline which leads to the titular hero unwittingly eating his own children. Instead, he isolates the passage in question and uses it—*mutatis mutandis*—as an illustration of his argument that a just magistrate has a serving role as the executer of divine justice.

⁷⁴⁹ See p. 99-101.

⁷⁵⁰ See p. 108-110.

⁷⁵¹ *EL* 1.82; 1.84; 1.86; 1.88; 1.95; 1.103; 1.115.

⁷⁵² Cf. Tröger 2016, 155-156.

⁷⁵³ *SenE* 1.15. Cf. Tröger 2016, 163.

The superficiality of the Vergilian quotation in *EL* 1.95 is exacerbated by its juxtaposition with the meaningful citation from *Thyestes*' chorus which perfectly captures the message of the letter's opening paragraphs. The quotation from the Third *Elogue* in the following letter appears to be merely decorative, too. Ficino had been asked to pass judgment on the 'deliberations of western philosophers about the soul' as summarized in a recent book which his addressee, Francesco Tedaldi, had sent to him via his son. This was, of course, Ficino's exact field of expertise, and he recommends the addressee to read his books *de immortalitate animorum*. Before he self-assuredly answers some specific questions with a series of 'scio' ('I know'), he feigns a sense of modesty by stating that 'it is not up to him to settle such a debate.' This phrase is an almost exact quotation of *Elogue* 3.108, 'non nostrum inter vos tantas componere lites,' with the only difference being a replacement of the second person plural 'vos' by the demonstrative pronoun 'hos.' The citation gives no deeper meaning to the letter, nor does the rest of the *Elogue* contain anything that bears upon the immortality of the soul.

At first sight, Ficino's allusions to the *Elogues* and the *Aeneid* in *EL* 1.82 and in *EL* 1.95-96 seem to have nothing in common apart from their appearance in combination with other references—to Martial, Seneca, or more Vergil. Yet, we may want to look closer at the macrostructural function of the allusions. In *EL* 1.82, this function is made explicit by the idea of transition inherent in the immediate context of the Vergil quotation itself: '*maiora canamus.*' In contrast, neither of the references in *EL* 1.95-96 is so obviously related to the shift from one section to another. However, it is hardly coincidence that the two letters are in fact the final letters of the societal section. I have shown in the first part of this thesis that the transition to the contemplative part of Book 1 is accentuated by three intricate ring compositions. Two of those involve *EL* 1.95—with a similar title to *EL* 1.7—and *EL* 1.96—which together with *EL* 1.53 is the only letter addressed to Francesco Tedaldi.⁷⁵⁴ It is likely that Ficino employed such conspicuous hinges at the turning of the second and third sections because the thematic delineation of Book 1 itself already begins to fray at this point. Hence, we may attribute Ficino's decision to add intertextual references in *EL* 1.95-96 to the same desire of highlighting the structure of the collection, especially since also *EL* 1.82 was employed to stress the letters' arrangement.

A MORAL AENEID

Poetic allusions not only serve to gild the hinges around which the sections of the *Epistole* revolve. They also colour the collection's different *modi* by drawing attention to distinct metaphors. Especially references to epic poetry play an important role in the dramatization of Ficino's

⁷⁵⁴ See page 116-117.

confused *persona* in the first half of the collection. His interpretation of the *Aeneid*'s macro-narrative is recorded in *EL* 8.20 and worth quoting at length:

When Aeneas, that is, the heroic soul, is about to descend into the underworld, that is, when he is about to penetrate the secret mysteries of the divine, and likewise when he is about to ascend and bring what was in darkness out into the light, he is led to do this by divine Providence. For Virgil says he was divinely born, even-handed Jupiter loved him, and divine oracles called him to the task. He also comes to this task with a free will when burning virtue carries him back to the upper air and, again, when he ponders on the best course of action and when he consults the oracles of his own accord, at all times consenting wholeheartedly to the divine will.⁷⁵⁵

The above shows that Ficino adhered to the moral interpretation of the *Aeneid* which I have previously introduced. He emphasises the allegorisation of Aeneas as 'a heroic soul,' and of his descent into the underworld as philosophical enquiry. Aeneas' journey is understood as a divine mission, set in motion by Providence but dutifully carried out by the hero. Moreover, it is thanks to Aeneas' 'burning virtue' that he is able of bringing his task to an end.

It is opportune to consider how the *Aeneid* was read by scholars close to Ficino as they bring us closest to how the philosopher himself would have interpreted individual passages in Vergil's poem. The most rewarding work in this respect is beyond doubt Cristoforo Landino's *Disputationes Camaldulenses*.⁷⁵⁶ From 1458 to 1497, Landino taught Latin and Greek literature at the Florentine *Studio*, where Ficino was one of his students.⁷⁵⁷ The two men became close friends, and when in 1481 Landino decided to publish his commentary on Dante's *Comedia*, Ficino wrote a long prefatory letter. Ficino's published correspondence contains few references to works by contemporary authors. Only Landino's *Disputationes* and *Comento* are praised more than once. In *EL* 1.119, a short but powerful letter, Ficino informs Bartolomeo Scala that

I have read the *Questiones Camaldulenses* of Cristoforo Landino. In those books, he goes to Vergil's core, accurately imitates Cicero's dialogues, and depicts in a

⁷⁵⁵ *EL* 8.20: 'Eneas, id est heroicus animus, descensurus ad inferos et iterum ascensurus in secreta divinorum mysteria penetratus et obscura editurus in lucem. Divina ad hoc ipsum providentia ducitur ... Incendit rursus ad idem libero quodam arbitrio ubi eum ardens evehit ad aethera virtus et ubi consultat quid potissimum sit agendum et sponte oracula consulit et semper libentissime cum sententia divina consentit.'

⁷⁵⁶ I refer to the Latin text as edited in Landino 1980. An English translation of Books 1 and 2 is found in Appendix 1 of Thomson 2020, which complements the earlier translation of Books 3 and 4 in Stahel 1968, on respectively pp. 40-155 and pp. 160-268. Landino 1927 contains a German translation of Books 1 and 2 on pp. 3-126. There is by now a substantial bibliography on the work: Field 1988, chaps. 231-268; Thomson 2020; Foley 2018; Chance 2015; Stevens 2010; McNair 1994; 2019; Zintzen 1985; Chance 1984; Cardini 1973; Stahel 1968; Wolf 1919.

⁷⁵⁷ Kraye 2011.

most fortunate way the fortunate man. Read them and I know that you will agree with me.⁷⁵⁸

The first two books of the *Disputationes* are concerned with the highest good, while the third and fourth books analyse how the *Aeneid* is an allegory of man's attempt to reach the highest good. Through the character of Alberti, Landino weighs the *vita activa* against the *vita contemplativa*. Since Alberti wants to discuss 'only the sort of thing which is peculiar to human life insofar as it is present in human beings alone, and in nothing else,' the *vita voluptuosa* is excluded from the discussion.⁷⁵⁹ An inquisitive Lorenzo, born to rule over Florence like his grandfather and father had done, objects twice to Alberti's argument that the contemplative life is superior. Alberti concedes that the active life is praiseworthy but adds that it can only reach its full potential by relying on the kind of contemplation which is 'more excellent than activity because it begets the virtues which we have said are devoted to action and helps to achieve things by them'.⁷⁶⁰ Even though civic virtue is conducive to the highest good, Alberti points out that 'in activity we are drawn in different directions to many things that are different among themselves at almost the same point in time' whereas 'in meditation on great things we commit ourselves on a constant course' and thus arrive at our destination, knowledge of God, more easily.⁷⁶¹ Nevertheless, Alberti concedes in a half-hearted volte-face that 'I will only think him a man who, leading each type of life in the right way, unites them both.'

In the second book, Alberti discusses in more detail what the highest good is to which he has laid out the path in Book 1. Unsurprisingly, he does not believe that the attainment of a perfect society, nor the pursuits of natural science constitute the highest good. 'For the Christians say that God is the highest good, which is also established as being what Plato knew before Christ was born as a man.'⁷⁶² At this point, he refers to Ficino's *Philebus* commentary and directly gives the floor to its author who is present at the meeting. Ficino affirms that 'God is the highest good'.⁷⁶³ Taking up Alberti's compromise position from the end of Book 1, he underlines that both action and contemplation carry us, like two wings, towards the vision of God in which abundant joy can be found.⁷⁶⁴ Finally, Alberti takes over from Ficino and turns to the Christian claim that 'God is not

⁷⁵⁸ EL 1.119: 'Legi *Questiones Christophori Landini Camaldulenses*. In iis libris Maronis adyta penetrat, Ciceronis dialogos imitatur ad unguem, felicem virum fabricat felicissime. Lege illos et tu: scio mecum senties.'

⁷⁵⁹ Thomson 2020, 233.

⁷⁶⁰ Thomson 2020, 251.

⁷⁶¹ Thomson 2020, 247.

⁷⁶² Thomson 2020, 268.

⁷⁶³ Thomson 2020, 269.

⁷⁶⁴ Thomson 2020, 270. It is not relevant here to examine Ficino's changing vision on the precedence of contemplation over joy resulting from the vision of God and Landino's unambiguous choice for the first; cf. Thomson 2020, 124n378; Kraye 1988, 352.

only good, but also the good of all good.⁷⁶⁵ Consequently, earthly goods are cast aside one by one: honour, glory, praise, wealth, political power, and health. Even goods of the soul such as skill, prudence, and the triad of intelligence, scientific knowledge, and wisdom are rejected.

The first two books of the *Disputationes* tie in with the thematic scope of Ficino's *Epistole* through their concern with the best way of life and their rejection of worldly matters for the sake of divine contemplation. However, it is not this connection which I here wish to explore. Landino hints at the usefulness of poetry for reasoning about the best way of life. When he mentions the ancient poets, he notes that 'they acted as theologians in the ancient religion.'⁷⁶⁶ Besides references to Horace's *Odes* and the myths of Medea and Odysseus, Alberti favours Vergil's poetry.⁷⁶⁷ For example, a quotation from the *Aeneid* illustrates the pre-eminence of the contemplative life, and the purposefulness of active life is evoked by three lines from the *Georgics*.⁷⁶⁸ The topic of the second book is even introduced as a preliminary to the interpretation of the *Aeneid* in the third and fourth books of the *Disputationes*. In this way, Alberti intends to answer Lorenzo's question to 'show us what the opinion of such a great man [viz. Vergil] is on the same subject [viz. the different ways of living] through the wanderings and journey to Italy of his Aeneas?'.⁷⁶⁹

From Lorenzo's question it appears that Landino's *Aeneid* interpretation will be limited to the poem's first six books. Indeed, it focuses on those scenes in which the hero is tossed around on the waves or pauses in different regions around the Mediterranean. Consequently, the *Disputationes* show a particular interest in the *Aeneid*'s storm scenes and those recur throughout the third and fourth book.⁷⁷⁰ Yet, they are first introduced at the end of the first book, where Landino already provides a clear interpretation:

When I consider the various swells and storms of our life, which is very similar to a turbulent sea, I think that it is very difficult to attain this goal [viz. 'gradually ascending towards the understanding of God'] unless we retire into that contemplation of the truth which I spoke about, as though mooring in a tranquil harbour. Because even though this has been repeated in the most profound thoughts of all philosophers who are worthy of the name, it has nonetheless been depicted more penetratingly in the beautiful images of the two wisest poets, Homer and Virgil, in such a way that, for this reason in

⁷⁶⁵ Thomson 2020, 273.

⁷⁶⁶ Thomson 2020, 234.

⁷⁶⁷ Cf. Thomson 2020, 235.255.258.276.

⁷⁶⁸ Thomson 2020, 254 and 287.

⁷⁶⁹ Thomson 2020, 255.

⁷⁷⁰ *Disp. Cam.* 133.9-12; 134.15-23; 144.13-145.5; 150.23-25; 151.1-6; 158.10-12; 161.17-162.3; 162.18-19; 163.18-164.24; 165.30-166.2; 170.19-22; 173.1-10; 194.18; 198.18-19; 201.27-202.11; 209.7-13.

particular, reading their work delights me a great deal. For what did they want to show us—one through Ulysses, the other through Aeneas—other than the highest good of humanity? And they did not just want to show us the highest good, but also to demonstrate the most direct way which leads to it without any error.⁷⁷¹

EPIC STORMS

The allegorical import of the *Aeneid*'s storm scenes, as described by Landino, colours the most tumultuous sections of the *Epistole*. Remember how the opening letter of Book 3 is addressed to Matthias of Hungary and urges the king to defend Europe against the Ottomans. Ficino flattered the ruler by calling to mind his previous victories on the battlefield. However, I argue that Ficino took on the challenge of celebrating Matthias while at the same questioning the monarch's supremacy. Indeed, Ficino's undermining of Matthias' success contributes to the general sense of doom in Book 3 which I have discussed in Chapter 5. Before turning to Ficino's use of Vergilian intertextuality in his implicit criticism of the Hungarian king, it is worth considering the historical context informing the Florentine philosopher's view on the court in Buda. The dedication of several works to Matthias shows that he fully participated in the cultural diplomacy between Florence and the Hungarian kingdom.⁷⁷² Collaborative ventures between Florence and Hungary at the time benefited both regions. The Medici gained prestigious financial assignments, craftsmen and artists received profitable orders for sculptures, paintings, and luxury textiles, and several humanists competed for and sometimes won royal patronage from Matthias and his entourage.⁷⁷³ However, from the philosopher's point of view, Matthias was far removed from the highest good. In fact, his *vita activa* posed an existential threat to those who were not in agreement with him, including scholars and priests.

While Ficino undoubtedly felt that Europe needed a strong leader to defeat the Ottomans, it did not sit easy with him that the price for this was the repression of critical minds. Most notably, the humanist Janos Vitéz and his cousin Janus Pannonius, Bishop of Pécs, had been driven to an early grave in 1472 after opposing the king. The latter was one of Ficino's correspondents, to whom he had recently dedicated a manuscript of *De amore*.⁷⁷⁴ The general concern about Vitéz and Janus in

⁷⁷¹ Thomson 2020, 255.

⁷⁷² Cf. Rees 1997; Gentile 1994.

⁷⁷³ Cf. De Roover 1948, 46; Farbaky and Waldman 2011; Pajorin 2008; Farbaky 2003; Daneloni 2001; Graciotti and Vasoli 1994; Branca 1973.

⁷⁷⁴ This copy is now MS Vienna, ÖNB, 2472. Ficino's dedicatory letter to Janus Pannonius, who is addressed in his function of Bishop of Pécs, is edited in Jenő 1880, 202–203 and Kristeller 1937, 1:87–88. It appears unclear whether it is autograph or not; cf. Pócs 2019, 534n41; Kristeller 1986, 124; 1964, 32.

Florentine circles is evident in Foncio's letter collection. The latter's prospects for a Hungarian career were torpedoed by the death of the former two men, who were central figures in the social network which Foncio had carefully built for himself through the mediation of another Hungarian, Mihály Farkas.⁷⁷⁵ Unlike the unsuccessful Foncio, Ficino never travelled far from Florence and did not need faraway patronage. Nevertheless, he has dramatized his unwillingness to get entangled in Matthias' environment with a conspicuous caution towards rulers in general. First, his enthusiastic beginning of twin Books 3-4 is matched with Ficino's refusal to visit Buda in the final letter, where he declines the invitation by stating that 'to live under that sky is difficult.'⁷⁷⁶ There is no explicit criticism of Matthias, but the letter in question resonates with several other letters containing advice against the company of rulers for philosophers. *EL* 4.36 translates Ps.-Plutarch's epistle to Trajan which contains negative examples like Socrates and Seneca, who were respectively sentenced to death and fell victim to the whims of Nero. *EL* 4.38 is more joyful and warmheartedly commends Ficino's *Life of Plato* to Francesco Bandini. Bandini is asked to introduce the work in Hungary, which Matthias has turned into a 'sanctuary to the wise and powerful Pallas.' However, the *Life of Plato* itself, featuring as *EL* 4.19 and taking up a fifth of Book 4, highlights Plato's failed counselling of the Syracusan tyrants. The unhappy episode stands at the beginning of the biography, even though it took place later in Plato's life. The text thus becomes another warning against political engagement for philosophers which is implicitly linked with Hungary, and particularly its king.

In Book 8, Ficino once again declines an invitation to Hungary but promises to send Sebastiano Salvini in his place.⁷⁷⁷ The refusal is part of a longer series of letters to Hungary. This time, the violence of Matthias against seemingly innocent priests is explicitly revealed. *EL* 8.32 asks Bandini 'for the third time' to insist with Matthias to release a priest named Vincenzo. *EL* 8.36 requests help for the same priest, and Ficino puts his hope in Matthias' wisdom although he knows that philosophers can rarely influence rulers. *EL* 8.48 brings the story of the incarcerated priest to a provisional end: Matthias has finally released Vincenzo. However, Ficino asks for additional support for the priest, whose fate clearly hangs in the balance. In the end, Matthias appears much less clement than Ficino obsequiously implies in his letters: In *EL* 8.57, Vincenzo the priest is still in a precarious position and Ficino asks Matthias for financial support. In the first two letters about Vincenzo, Ficino remarks that 'the humility of the philosopher's position is usually such that it has ... little influence with people of great estate.'⁷⁷⁸ This resonates with *EL* 8.46, which states that power and philosophy are impossible to combine, as is confirmed by the planets. So, a parallel can

⁷⁷⁵ *FonE* 1.11-16; 1.18; cf. Daneloni 2001.

⁷⁷⁶ *EL* 4.39: 'vivere deinde sub isto coelo forsitan difficultius.'

⁷⁷⁷ *EL* 8.44.

⁷⁷⁸ *EL* 8.32: 'ea est philosophicae sortis humilitas ut apud maximos [possit] vero minimum.'

be drawn between Ficino keeping Hungary at a distance in Books 3 and 8, which has become a vignette for the dangers posed by powerful men for those devoted to religion and philosophy.

The following paragraphs argue that Ficino problematised his praise of Matthias through a contrastive use of *Aeneid* quotes in the first two letters of Book 3. It was common practice to praise rulers through allusions to the *Aeneid*. Already Servius stated that the poem was, first, written in imitation of Homer and, second, in praise of the Roman emperor, Augustus.⁷⁷⁹ This view was well known during the Renaissance as can be seen from a letter by Francesco Filelfo—perhaps not surprisingly the twelfth letter in Book 1 of his collection. But the same Filelfo also perceived an undertone in Vergil's *Aeneid* which was critical of the empire and its violence.⁷⁸⁰ As Craig Kallendorf has argued, Renaissance interpreters were sensitive to the ambiguity of Vergil's poem which could 'question the very power it helped to sustain'.⁷⁸¹ Nevertheless, as Kallendorf had signalled almost two decades earlier, 'it is difficult to praise virtue at the same time one is questioning its ontological status'.⁷⁸² It is good to remember here that the dark side of the *Aeneid* does not automatically preclude its bright side. When sixty years ago Adam Parry alerted scholars to the poem's tones of regret and suffering, he did not interpret it as an outright accusation of Augustus or Roman politics. Instead, he proposed that 'its purpose is not to tell us that history is good, or for that matter that it is bad. Its purpose is rather to impose on us an attitude that can take into account all the history that is both good and bad and can regard it with the purer emotions of artistic detachment, so that we are given a higher consolation.' Ficino wanted to look at the world not with 'the purer emotions of artistic detachment' but with the clear vision of philosophical examination, which in his view led to perfect happiness. From this perspective, he too was able to comment on the complexity of political virtue, problematised in poetry and visible in the world around him.

Because the *Aeneid* already contained the paradoxical combination of praise and criticism, Ficino constructed his problematisation of Matthias' might around a set of Vergilian allusions. Near the end of *EL* 3.1, he extoled the king with a relative clause lifted from the first book of the *Aeneid*: 'who sets ocean as the limit of his reign, stars as the limit of his glory'.⁷⁸³ *EL* 3.2, thematising the transience of human prosperity, initiates the despondent *modus* of *EL* 3.2-33 and can be read as a corrective to Ficino's preceding exaltation of Matthias. This is underlined by the citation of *Aeneid* 1.102-103 three quarters into *EL* 3.2: 'Very often, after soft breezes and soothing zephyrs an

⁷⁷⁹ Servius Grammaticus 1923, 1:4: 'intentio Vergilii haec est, Homerum imitari et Augustum laudare a parentibus.'

⁷⁸⁰ Kallendorf 2007b, 50–66; cf. Robin 1991, 56–81.

⁷⁸¹ Kallendorf 2007b, 63; for criticism of his thesis, which gained currency in the past years, see Burkard 2010, 41–50.

⁷⁸² Kallendorf 1989, 18.

⁷⁸³ *Aen.* 1.287: 'imperium oceano famam qui terminet astris.'

adverse gale suddenly shrieking from the north batters the sail and lifts the waves to the stars.⁷⁸⁴ The recurrence of marine imagery in combination with stars and the notion of unbridled expansion urges us to make the connection between *EL* 3.1 and 3.2. Whereas the first reference was an unproblematic metaphor to describe the greatness of Matthias' achievements, the second one draws attention to the violence of the sea as a metaphor of fortune. The ocean and the stars are turned from symbols of triumph and power into representing the sudden violence of changing fortune. The connection between the Vergil quotations allows us to recognise the tension between Ficino's letter about Matthias and his letter about the volatility of success. The semantic reversal of the sea imagery underlines that also the king's military fame is a transient good.

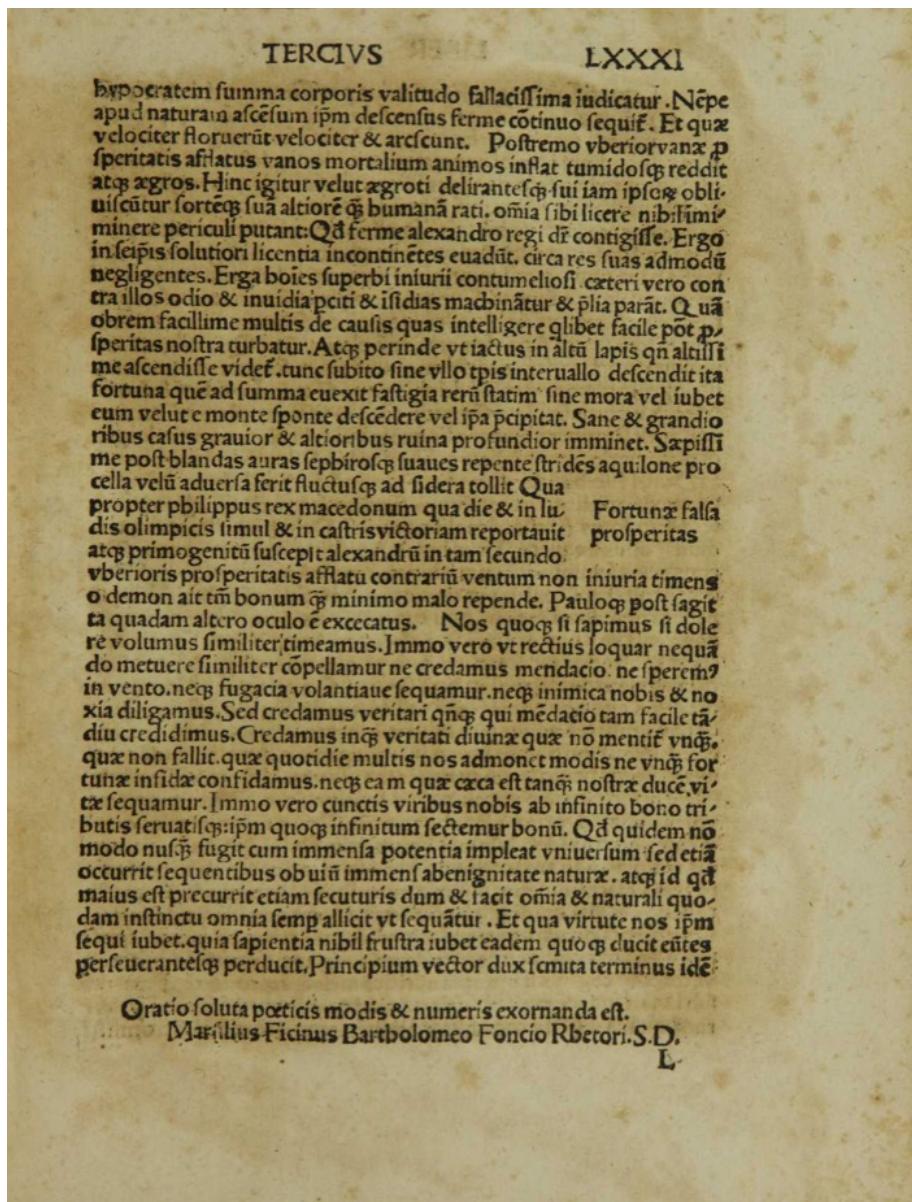


Figure 12 Marsilio Ficino. *Epistole*. Nürnberg: Anton Kober, 1497.

⁷⁸⁴ *Aen.* 1.102-103: 'repente stridens aquilone procella / velum adversa ferit fluctusque ad sidera tollit.'

I believe that the presence of a full hexameter in a prose letter warrants the level of attention I have accorded it, especially since Ficino uses poetic lines so sparingly and mostly with a clear aim. The paired appearance of the two quotes shows that they belong to the category of clustered references of which I have already given several examples. Nevertheless, our author believed that it was necessary to add three intertextual markers. These help readers who had initially failed to grasp the relevance of the quotes to perceive the connection between *EL* 3.1 and 3.2. The first one appears in the printed marginalia, of which there are only five in the entire collection.⁷⁸⁵ Koberger considered them important enough for inclusion in his 1497 edition. This is noteworthy, as his typesetters had to make some effort to insert the marginalia into the main text because of the edition's narrower margins. The point of preserving the five marginalia, which are barely advancing one's understanding of the respective letters, is unclear. Yet the second one is placed precisely next to the Vergilian quotation (Figure 12) and is clearly meant to draw our attention to this intertextual moment in the letter. Moreover, it explains the meaning of the storm metaphor as 'falsa prosperitas,' and thereby repeats the overall theme of the letter as indicated by the title.

The second clue is found in *EL* 3.3, of which the content is entirely out of tune with the other letters in Book 3 and, in fact, with the collection in general. It comments on stylistic matters, more specifically on the insertion of verse fragments into prose. It responds to a criticism from the previously mentioned Fonzio, who had accused Ficino of immoderately interspersing poetic quotations in his letters. Since Fonzio's provocation is found in his letter collection at *FonE* 1.23, we have a complete view on his and Ficino's exchange on the matter. However, the historicization of their quarrel does not remove the question why Ficino included this letter in his *Epistole*, which are otherwise indifferent to purely stylistic issues. Fonzio's provocation did not circulate—at least as part of the collection—for another 15 years and there was consequently no need for a public self-justification on Ficino's part.⁷⁸⁶ In fact, one could say that the profile of Fonzio's letter, and by extension the collection to which it belongs, was raised by Ficino's publication of his response. It allowed Fonzio to establish the kind of intertextual link between his own *epistolarium* and that of a major contemporary writer which Poliziano had denied him by not responding to the virulent attack found in *FonE* 1.24. If anything, Ficino's publication of his reply would have encouraged Fonzio to publish his own disapproval. We may best explain the insertion of *EL* 3.3 at this point in the collection as a means to affirm perceptive interpretations of the *Aeneid* quotes in the two

⁷⁸⁵ 'Nota hic quod opifex mundi est summus Deus' (1495: fol. xii^v; 1497: fol. xv^v); 'Fortunae falsa prosperitas' (lxv^r; lxxxix^r); 'Quales principes et rempublicam gubernantes' (lxxxix^v; cx^r); 'Traducta / Compositae' (clx^v; cxcix^v); 'Bonitas. Immutabilitas. Veritas. Bonitas. Potentia. Cognitio.' (clxxxii^r; ccxxv^r). Only the first one is present in MSS Firenze, BML, Plut.51.11, fol. 40^v and Civitas Vaticana, BAV, Vat.lat. 1789, fol. 43^v.

⁷⁸⁶ On the dating of Fonzio's first collection, see Daneloni 2018, 136.

preceding letters. It simultaneously spurs on less perspicacious readers of the *Epistole* to pay closer attention to metrical lines in the letters.

Finally, there is an element in *EL* 3.2 which invites us to apply its message to king Matthias. Ficino clarifies the fickle nature of success through the *exemplum* of Alexander the Great. It is a negative example, which describes how Alexander's success made him arrogant, corrupt, and contemptuous of others. It is contrasted with the example of Alexander's father Philippus, who, following the birth of Alexander and several victories, prayed to his demon asking for a small evil to restore the balance of his great fortune.⁷⁸⁷ The anecdote about Alexander's father appears immediately after the Vergilian quotation and is jointly highlighted by the printed marginal note. There would be no obvious connection between the exemplum of Alexander the Great and the Vergil quotes if Landino's ethical interpretation of the *Aeneid* did not draw on an extended evaluation of the Macedonian ruler related to fortune and prosperity. After discussing the vice of avarice, Alberti asks Lorenzo to 'imagine for yourself those two men of very different fortune (but of nearly the same age): Alexander, king of the Macedonians, and Cynicus Diogenes. Which will you judge the richer?' Lorenzo confidently answers:

I will not hesitate to declare Diogenes most happy and Alexander most wretched. For I very much agree with those who, in considering riches, judge that what should be taken into account is not how much may be lacking to anyone but how satisfied he is with that which is present.⁷⁸⁸

There is a second reason to believe that the ancient example is aimed at Matthias. The royal propaganda in Buda systematically represented the Hungarian king as a new Alexander. As Enikő Békés has convincingly demonstrated based on documentary and art historical evidence, the comparison of Matthias with the Macedonian ruler was well-known also in Italy.⁷⁸⁹ The manuscript of Books 1-8 of Ficino's *Epistole*, illuminated by Atavante, contains a medal portrait of Matthias (Figure 13) which clearly resembles another portrait by Atavante in a luxurious missal now at the Royal Library of Brussels (Figure 14). The latter is accompanied by a cameo style portrait of Alexander which underlines the physiognomic parallel between the two figures. Finally, a set of reliefs by Verrocchio was commissioned by Lorenzo de' Medici as a gift to Matthias. Representing Alexander the Great and Darius, they evidently played a role in supporting Hungary's military battle

⁷⁸⁷ *EL* 3.2: "O demon," ait "tam bonum quam minimo malo repende."

⁷⁸⁸ Landino 1980, 148.23-25; 149.7-11; Stahel 1968, 95-96: 'propone tibi duos diversissimae quidem fortunae, sed eiusdem paene aetatis viros, Alexandrum Macedonum regem et Cynicum Diogenem, utrum ditiorem iudicabis? ... beatissimum Diogenem, miserrimum Alexandrum proferre non dubitabo. Vehementer enim iis assentior, qui in divitiis pensitandis non quantum cuique adsit.'

⁷⁸⁹ Békés 2009, 30-46; 2004, 85-92; cf. Fisher 2017, 82-84.



Figure 13 Matthias and Alexander in MS Brussel, KBR, 9008



Figure 14 Matthias in MS Wolfenbüttel, HAB, Guelf. 73



Figure 15 Marble relief of Alexander, Washington, National Gallery

against the Ottomans. Although the originals are lost, copies like the one at the National Gallery in Washington (Figure 15) confirm that the features of Matthias in the Wolfenbüttel manuscript are modelled after the imagined features of Alexander the Great. There is no doubt that Ficino would have been aware of this connection between the two rulers. It is probable that he used it to add a third layer to his silent criticism of Matthias which he had already expressed through the Vergilian allusion.

We have seen that the structuring devices from the beginning of Book 1 and Book 3 do not recur in the same pronounced manner later in the collection. The same is true for the Vergilian allusions and sea metaphors, which are not as carefully put in dialogue with each other as in *EL* 3.1-2. However, they do not disappear from view altogether. In *EL* 6.9, Ficino praises Pope Sixtus by evoking the difficulties he must overcome and predicting his valour in doing so. At some point in the letter, Ficino describes the situation of his city and Christianity in general as follows:

Divine providence has, during the care and rule of Sixtus, permitted many stars and the elements to conspire one after another for the general ruin of the human race, and in particular for the battering of the Christian ship by raging waves. This is so that Sixtus, like Neptune rising in the midst of the storm with the trident of power, wisdom and benevolence, may soothe angry Aeolus, still

the raging winds, calm the tumultuous sea and govern by divine virtue rather than by the dictates of the stars.⁷⁹⁰

The storm metaphor including sea and stars is familiar. The comparison of Sixtus with Neptune is probably indebted to Landino's allegorisation of the sea god as the superior intellect of man in contrast with the lower intellect represented by Aeolus.⁷⁹¹ The storm of civil unrest is still raging in *EL* 6.28 and prevents Ficino from returning to the city. In *EL* 6.30, he unequivocally compares the *vita activa* to a storm in which 'those who hold public office are like the helmsmen of ships and, like those who are forever tossed among rocks by wind and wave, are perpetually in need of protection by divine powers.'⁷⁹² That the connotation of storm metaphors was deeply negative for Ficino is clear from *EL* 6.44, in which he compares the evil soul to 'a swelling sea, tossed by battling winds, waves, and wild storms'.⁷⁹³ It is therefore no surprise that with the conclusion of the *vita activa* in Book 6 and the realisation of the *vita contemplativa* in the second half of the collection, there are no more storm metaphors. After the *ductus* of the collection has led Ficino's persona and the reader to the still waters of self-contained contemplation, the imagery has changed along.

FLEETING VIRTUE, FLEEING VICE

The storm metaphors draw their dramatic efficacy from the collection's sustained use of Aeneas' journey as a reference frame for Ficino's life. When Ficino nicknames his friends, there is usually a direct connection with the content of the letter—for example 'Orpheus' when he addresses a musician. However, the striking recurrence of Achates and Aeneas as nicknames for his closest friends is opaque unless we read the whole collection as an epistolary *Aeneid* in which the ordinary life of a philosopher is equated with the perils of a sea voyage and friends with loyal companions on that dangerous journey.⁷⁹⁴ The metaphor of a journey for Ficino's life is not neutral. For when tranquillity is the aim—and Ficino considers the contemplative life a state of tranquillity, then movement is nothing more than a necessary evil.⁷⁹⁵

⁷⁹⁰ *EL* 6.9: *Providentia divina permisit curante et gubernante Sixto stellas aliquando plurimas et elementa invicem conspirare cum in communem generis humani pernitiem tum vel maxie in navem Christianam saevis admodum fluctibus agitandam. Ut Sixtus quasi Neptunnus in media tempestate surgens ipso potentiae, sapientiae, benignitatisque tridente ira tum temperet Aeolum furentes sed ventos, mare placet tumidum, virtute plusquam coelesti motibus coelestibus imperet.*

⁷⁹¹ Cf. Landino 1980, 164–165.

⁷⁹² *EL* 6.30: 'Scite oratores atque poetae eos qui publicis praesunt muneribus tamquam navium gubernatores esse aiunt? Et quasi qui semper inter scopulos, fluctus procellasque versentur perpetuo numinum praesidio indigere'.

⁷⁹³ *EL* 6.44: 'animus moribus perversis infectus ... quale est mare tumidum contrariis inter se ventis sevisve procellis fluctibusque iactatum.'

⁷⁹⁴ Ficino again calls Cavalcanti 'his Achates' in *EL* 1.44; 1.111; 1.123. Bembo is called Aeneas in *EL* 3.61; 5.30; 6.14

⁷⁹⁵ Cf. *EL* 1.126: 'Divina vero cum et intra nos sint et ubique quiete, ocio, tranquillitate compraehenduntur.' *EL* 6.23: 'Cum veritas ipsa sit immobilis et aeterna felicitas soli vere immobiliter beate vivunt qui in veritatis studio vitam agunt.'

The first reason why Ficino's persona in the epistolary collection stays on the move is because his destination continues to escape him. The goal is contemplation, which in Landino's interpretation of the *Aeneid* is represented by Italy: 'Italy, where they would find a tranquil home ... In Italy, there will be that greatest pleasure which comes from a contemplation of diviner things, a pleasure true, simple, eternal, and followed by no sorrow.'⁷⁹⁶ In *EL* 3.15, Ficino plays on this association to underscore the negative impact of personal setbacks on his spiritual growth. The letter is written to Lorenzo de' Medici and links their patron-client relationship to the longstanding support which Ficino had already enjoyed under Cosimo and Piero. Yet, the letter presents a narrative of interruption rather than of continuation. The fear of plague, the figurative meaning of which I have discussed on p. 127, makes it impossible to hold the customary celebration of St Cosimo's feast day, which was also the birthday of Cosimo de' Medici. This expresses Ficino's concern about failing patronage bonds, which is a leading thread in Book 3. The letter further abounds in astrological metaphors which paint a heavenly banquet to which Cosimo invites his divine friends. The description of this feast is enhanced by a poetic allusion to Vergil's Fourth *Eclogue*. The phrase 'redeunt sacra illi divi Cosmi solemnia quae integrum *Saturni* cursum colere consuevimus' clearly echoes the half verse 'redeunt saturnia regna' from *Eclogue* 4.6. In other words, the cyclic celebration of the Medicean *pater familias* ensured the continued return of the Golden Age which the Medici family adopted as a propagandistic trope, and which was partly popularised by Vergil's *Eclogue*.

Ficino then expresses his gratitude for being always invited to Cosimo's parallel but equally divine banquets on earth. He does so with a phrase taken from *Aeneid* 1.79: 'epulis accumbere divum.' They are spoken by Aeolus when he submits to Juno's demands, recalling the gifts he has received from her. The quotation thus becomes a hint at Ficino's infelicitous dependence on worldly rulers and the abandonment of his ideals for personal benefit, given that Juno stands for political power and Aeolus relinquishes his duties for her.⁷⁹⁷ If we may consequently match the Medici family with Juno and Ficino with Aeolus, the following sentence from Landino's *Disputationes* becomes particularly significant: 'If in this passage [viz. *Aen.* 1.64-100] Juno represents a longing for the civic life, we may very properly interpret Aeolus as the inferior part of a man's mind.'⁷⁹⁸ We have seen how Book 3 displays an imperfect Ficino. Here, his persona fittingly speaks the words of an *Aeneid* character who at the time was understood to represent the inferior part of one's mind. If Ficino's

⁷⁹⁶ Landino 1980, 174.21-27; Stahel 1968, 135: 'Italiam ... ubi demum sedes quietas invenient ... In Italia autem voluptas summa proveniet a divinarum rerum speculacione, quae vera simplexque sit voluptas, quae perpetua, quae aeterna, quam nullus meror subsequatur.'

⁷⁹⁷ Landino 1980, 161.21-25; *EL* 10.44. Cf. Stevens 2010, 15-20.

⁷⁹⁸ Landino 1980, 161.21-22; Stahel 1968, 115: 'si vitae civilis cupiditas sit Iuno, commode Aeolum inferiorem ... hominis rationem interpretabimur.'

use of Vergil was already capable of criticising the power it celebrates, it here demonstrates its capacity to infuse the gratitude for past benefices with a strain of moral inadequacy.

Later in the letter, Ficino adds another *Aeneid* reference from the same passage as before: 'Terque quaterque beati,' he writes 'who, far from the storms of Aeolus, the waves of Neptune, and the fogs of Pluto, breathe the limpid air of highest Jove in the Elysian fields.'⁷⁹⁹ 'Terque quaterque beati' appears in *Aeneid* 1.94, only fifteen verses after the previous citation from the same poem. While the storm metaphor itself is phrased in Ficino's own words, it unmistakably harks back to the previous examples that were verbal quotations from Vergil. It is noteworthy that also in *Aeneid* 1.81-91, Aeolus' words to Juno are immediately followed by the description of a violent storm. Even more remarkable is the fact that both Ficino's letter and still the same *Aeneid* passage express envy for the dead who have escaped the turmoil experienced by respectively Ficino and Aeneas. The multiple parallels raise our awareness about the strong Vergilian intertext in this letter and highlight the significance of the allusions. More importantly, they give direction to Ficino's despondency. The hopelessness in the first half of Book 3 is potentially sinful. The explicit desire to give up and join those that have already lost their life fails to inspire the reader and promotes no virtue. However, when read with Aeneas' trials in mind, it can easily be understood as a phase within a larger development that will ultimately lead to the desired end.

Whereas most of *EL* 3.15 describes past events and expresses hope for better times, the final paragraph hints at difficulties which Ficino was experiencing at the time. This happens again through a reference to the *Aeneid* 5.629: 'nos miseri frustra Italiam semper sequimur fugientem.' Ficino explains that his misfortune comes from a wrong understanding of what Italy is: 'If a man pursues an Italy which escapes him pursues in vain, it seems obvious that only one who pursues an Italy which does not escape, but stays in one place, follows it reasonably and is successful in attaining it.'⁸⁰⁰ Evidently, Ficino hints at the difference between a political Italy and an allegorical Italy.⁸⁰¹ At this point in the collection, his persona has not yet made its final choice and is thus unable to reach the latter. Like Aeneas, he has to overcome future crises before the inescapable Italy comes within reach. Concluding my analysis of *EL* 3.15, I want to add that the following letter explicitly comments on it and, somewhat reluctantly, justifies it. It furthermore dwells on poetic inspiration and thus highlights the poetic allusions in the previous letter in the same way as *EL* 3.3 had drawn attention to the interplay between the several citations from the *Aeneid* in *EL* 3.1-2.

⁷⁹⁹ *EL* 3.15: 'qui procul ab iis Eoli procellis et Neptuni fluctibus nebulisque Plutonis serena summi Iovis aura in campis vescunt Elisiis.'

⁸⁰⁰ *EL* 3.15: 'si frustra sequitur Italiam quisquis sequitur fugientem necessarium esse videtur ut solus ille et recte suam sequatur Italiam et foeliciter assequatur qui non fugientem sequitur sed manentem.'

⁸⁰¹ Cf. Tröger 2016, 191-192.

The second reason why Ficino stays on the move is because he must continuously flee vice if he ever wants to reach his *skopos*. The danger does not only come from within himself, but also from the outside. The most perilous period in the *Epistole* is when Florence is at war with the papacy after the Pazzi conspiracy. We have seen that Ficino is involved in making peace between the two parties. However, at the beginning of the book, Ficino was still hesitant about his commitment and wanted to retreat to the countryside to seclude himself from the events.⁸⁰² In *EL* 6.2, he writes this to Antonio Vinciguerra and Bembo: ‘Twin guardians, cannot you drive away this plague? For everyone is cursing it. If not, flee at least, flee as fast as you can from this deadly land, flee this bitter shore.’⁸⁰³ The plague evidently refers to the conflict, as it has done repeatedly from Book 3 onwards. The addressees’ possible capacity to drive away the plague is due to their role as influential diplomats. Ficino is asking them to intervene and, if they cannot, leave the situation for what it is lest they be harmed by it.

What interests me here is the phrase ‘flee as fast as you can from this deadly land, flee this bitter shore.’ This is a citation from *Aeneid* 3.44: ‘Heu fuge crudelis terras, fuge litus avarum.’ We have seen that it was noticed by several readers, who annotated it.⁸⁰⁴ Apparently, Ficino was familiar with a version containing the textual variant ‘amarum’ instead of ‘avarum’ or misremembered the quote. In any case, he was familiar with ‘avarum,’ too, which he had encountered in Landino’s *Disputationes*. The latter’s interpretation of Thrace, where the coast intended by Vergil is located, plays on its greediness. He writes the following:

‘Fuge litus avarum’ [Flee the greedy shore]. But there are two kinds of avarice.

Both of the following are avaricious men: he who takes something when he should not take it, and he who does not give when he should give; and it is the first kind which is meant by Thrace. For in Thrace Mars is worshipped, and of course wars are waged by men with an acquisitive impulse.⁸⁰⁵

The shores Bembo and Vinciguerra must flee are the shores of Thrace, which is dedicated to the war God. This is fitting in the context of Book 6, which is set in a current war. Moreover, Ficino implicitly relates Sixtus’ war against Florence to the Pope’s *cupiditas habendi* and not to any honourable motives for starting a conflict. Most importantly for my thesis, however, is how Ficino

⁸⁰² See p. 149.

⁸⁰³ *EL* 6.2: ‘Aut fugate gemini servatores (si fieri potest) pestem istam cui pestem quilibet imprecatur. Aut fugite saltem. Heu fugite quo primum laetales terras. Fugite litus amarum.’

⁸⁰⁴ See p. 179.

⁸⁰⁵ Landino 1980, 137.5-11; Stahel 1968, 78: ‘Nam ipse paulo post: fuge litus avarum. Verum cum duplex avaritiae genus sit—est enim avarus et is qui inde rapit unde minime convenit et is qui, cui dandum est, ei minime dat—primum illud genus per Thraciam exprimitur. Si enim in illa Mars colitur, quis nescit habendi cupiditate plurima a mortalibus bella geri?’

draws a political event of proportions that far exceed his personal experience into his heroic *ductus* which he maps on Aeneas' quest for Italy. The movements, or even better commotions, in the letters are always of a soul striving for peace. One of the ways Ficino has presented them as such is by a metaphorical and allegorical set of references to the *Aeneid*.

AENEID OF THE HEART

How should we interpret Ficino's choice for the *Aeneid* in the wider context of epic epistolarity from Antiquity to the fifteenth century? I want to return to the previously quoted comment by Mazzotta, that 'just as St. Augustine casts his autobiographical *Confessions* as the *Aeneid* of the heart, so Petrarch's experience of homelessness [in the *Familiares*] comes through as an existential *Odyssey*.'⁸⁰⁶ Of those two categories, Ficino's collected letters squarely fall in the first one. Let us begin with the characterisation of the *Confessions* as an alternative *Aeneid*, which Mazzotta proposed without much explanation. I refrain from dwelling too long on Augustine's use of the *Aeneid*, about which there is a considerable body of literature.⁸⁰⁷ For example, scholars have long noted the significance of Augustine's youthful memories about reading the epic poem which moved him to the point of crying for Dido.⁸⁰⁸ And when Augustine stealthily sails away from Carthage to Rome, we cannot fail to see him abandoning his mother like Aeneas had abandoned Dido with the same destination ahead of him.⁸⁰⁹ Thus alerted to the Vergilian hypotext, readers may notice that Augustine's spiritual tribulations are described through storm metaphors which then become reminiscent of Aeneas' wanderings.⁸¹⁰ Because of the allegorising readings by Neo-Platonists and its centrality in late antique education, the *Aeneid* was the most evident narrative text for Augustine and his readers to cast as an extended metaphor for the experiences of a spiritual *peregrinus* on his way to salvation.⁸¹¹ Even if the links between the *Aeneid* and the *Confessions* are not unanimously accepted by scholars, it is safe to say that Renaissance authors made the connection quite naturally.⁸¹² In Petrarch's *Secretum*, Augustinus becomes the *alter ego* of a confessing Franciscus grappling with his own conversion but in constant dialogue with his spiritual model's *Confessions*.⁸¹³ It is no coincidence that Petrarch uses storm metaphors echoing those in the *Confessions* to describe

⁸⁰⁶ Mazzotta 2011, 101; see p. 170.

⁸⁰⁷ Ó'Meara 1963; Ramage 1970; Ó'Meara 1988; Bennett 1988; Burton 2007; Hunink 2009; McCarthy 2009; Kotzé 2020.

⁸⁰⁸ *Conf.* 1.13.20.

⁸⁰⁹ *Conf.* 5.8.15.

⁸¹⁰ Ramage 1970, 55–56.

⁸¹¹ Cf. Fuhrer 2011, 40–41.

⁸¹² A lonely but reasonable voice arguing against structural intertextuality between the *Aeneid* and the *Confessions* is Müller 2003. His objections, which insist on concrete allusions rather than loose allusions, are drowned out by the combined—if repetitive—arguments of the authors listed in footnote 807.

⁸¹³ Mann 1984, 13–14; cf. Alexander Lee 2012 on the *Invectiva contra medicum*.

his own doubts and confusions. Unlike Augustine, however, Petrarch explicitly relates these metaphors to the *Aeneid*, thereby providing a clever interpretation of the Augustinian hypotext.⁸¹⁴

Continuing with the import of the *Confessions* in the *Epistole*, we may first observe that Ficino references this extraordinary work multiple times even though Latin authors are rarely mentioned by title.⁸¹⁵ In Book 3, the Church Father is the only Latin author whose work gets mentioned when in *EL* 3.20, Ficino has ‘just been reading’ the *Confessions*. We previously discussed how Ficino introduced Landino’s *Disputationes Camaldulenses* and Pisano’s lost commentary on the Song of Songs as interpretive keys for the structure of the collection.⁸¹⁶ We can now add the *Confessions* to this select group of works that are tagged as especially relevant for our interpretation of the *Epistole*. Augustine’s epithet ‘dux et magister noster’ in *EL* 3.59 highlights the extraordinary position which the African bishop occupied for Ficino.⁸¹⁷ Furthermore, his presence spills over into the pursuits of Ficino’s most prominent correspondent: At the beginning of Book 7, Cavalcanti is so absorbed by Augustine that he does not have any attention left for Ficino.⁸¹⁸ The continued presence of Augustine in the *Epistole* had, in fact, been subtly announced in one of the introductory letters. *EL* 1.4 stands out because of its psalmic tone, full of rhetorical bravura and characterised by repetitions, oppositions, *figurae etymologicae*, and rhetorical questions. Remarkably different from Ficino’s usually subdued style, it strongly reminds the reader of Augustine’s prayerful pathos in the *Soliloquies* and *Confessions*.⁸¹⁹

There are several narrative similarities between the development of Ficino’s epistolary *persona* in the *Epistole* and the way in which Augustine’s character transforms over the first nine books of the *Confessions*. Both figures share a strong but conflicted fascination with astrology, which they abandon later in life.⁸²⁰ They struggle with ambition and social recognition, strivings which they eventually leave behind on their journey towards respectively Christian faith and the contemplative life. Both authors express a sense of displacement, Ficino from ‘an ever-fleeing Italy’ and Augustine from his heavenly *patria*. In the second half of the *Epistole*, as well as in the final books of the *Confessions*, a clear shift occurs from personal narrative to abstract discourse which follows the spiritual growth of the authors’ *personae*. But even the earlier books show a continuous attempt to contextualise personal experiences within a larger philosophical-religious context. Finally, it is

⁸¹⁴ E.g., *My Secret Book* 1.13.4-6; 2.16.5-7.

⁸¹⁵ *EL* 3.4; 3.20; 4.16; 4.19; 4.24; 10.18.

⁸¹⁶ See p. 73; 96.

⁸¹⁷ On Ficino’s reading of Augustine, see Sanzotta 2021; Robichaud 2014; Levi 2002; Giannarelli 2001; Vasoli 1998; Tarabochia 1973.

⁸¹⁸ *EL* 7.3.

⁸¹⁹ Cf. *Letters* 1², 173.

⁸²⁰ Bullard 1990b, 693; Vasoli 1999b, 281–301.

noteworthy that the collection starts in 1473, when Ficino was forty years old.⁸²¹ As Baron and Francisco Rico have demonstrated in Petrarch's *Letter to Posterity* and *Secretum*, humanists considered forty the age of moral maturity. They did so in imitation of Augustine who started writing his *Confessions* around this age, after conquering all mortal sins.⁸²² The fact that Ficino became a priest at this age probably played a role as well. Vasoli rightly noted that 'non stupisce, pertanto che l'Agostino delle *Confessiones* e dei *Soliloquia* [...] sia l'autore più vicino all'intima inquietudine esistenziale del Ficino, alle sue depressione, alle sue crisi ed ai suoi timori, alle conseguenze, insomma, del suo temperamento "malinconico", sempre sospeso tra esaltazione e impotenza'.⁸²³

Ficino's choice to mimic the *Confessions* makes sense if we think back to the way in which his letters employ narrative strategies found in the lives of saints.⁸²⁴ The anecdote about his prescient mother is reminiscent of the dream which Monnica, as the name of Augustine's mother is spelled in the manuscripts, received from God in the *Confessions*. Augustine considers this dream a sign of Monnica's deep devotion, which in turn reflects on his own *persona* and gains him credibility through association.⁸²⁵ Contemporary readers appear to have appreciated Ficino's modelling of his life story on that of Augustine. An important 'conversion' moment in Giovanni Corsi's (1472–1547) biography of the Florentine philosopher, namely the latter's first encounters with Latin Neo-Platonists, is notably modelled on the Church Father's initial study of Cicero's *Hortensius*.⁸²⁶ The example of a venerable figure like Augustine could redeem the potentially vain project of creating an ego-document like Ficino's letter collection.⁸²⁷ This is what Dante said on the matter in his *Convivio*:

Speaking of oneself is permitted for necessary reasons ... [For example,] when from reasoning about oneself substantial benefit follows for others through instruction. This reason moved Augustine in his *Confessions* to speak of himself. For through the development of his life—which was from not good to good, and from good to better, and from better to best—he gave us an example and instruction, which could not be received from a more truthful witness.⁸²⁸

⁸²¹ Some letters are older but appear as isolated groups, whereas 1473 is the definite start of the collection's time span.

⁸²² Baron 1985, 209–210; Rico 1974, 194–195.

⁸²³ Vasoli 1998, 17

⁸²⁴ See p. 70–72.

⁸²⁵ *Conf.* 3.19–20; on the spelling of Monnica's name, see Augustine 1992, 3:148.

⁸²⁶ Robichaud 2018, 143.

⁸²⁷ Cf. Enenkel 2008, 10 for humanist pudeur vis-à-vis autobiography.

⁸²⁸ *Convivio* 1.2.12–14, my translation: 'per necessarie cagioni lo parlare di sé è conceduto: ed intra l'altre necessarie cagioni due sono più manifeste. ... quando, per ragionare di sé, grandissima utilitate ne segue altrui per via di dottrina; e questa ragione mosse Agustino nelle sue *Confessioni* a parlare di sé, ché per lo processo della sua vita, lo quale fu di [meno] buono in buono, e di buono in migliore, e di migliore in ottimo, ne diede esempio e dottrina, la quale per

Petrarch appears to have experienced the converting and affirming power of the *Confessions*, when he writes: 'I weep with joy at the impression that what I am reading is not the story of someone else's wanderings, but of my own.'⁸²⁹ The *Confessions* are designed and were received as a paraenetic piece of literature that is concerned with the life of the reader as much as with the life of its author. Ficino had the same intentions with publishing his correspondence as the ones he, too, would have recognised in Augustine's autobiography. Converting readers like he converted himself and defending the philosophical basis for his life choices, especially where his notion of love was concerned, are easily recognisable goals of Ficino's *Epistole*. The letters above all aim to set something in motion within the tertiary reader of the collection. In one of his letters to Cavalcanti, Ficino explicitly says that their private correspondence is being carried out with an eye on its future usefulness for the instruction of others: 'The reason we have often written and shall continue to write to each other is so that others may understand through our letters those matters which our minds, or rather our mind, considers.'⁸³⁰

It is true that Ficino's integration of the *Aeneid* in his letter collection answers to the literary exigencies of his time. We have seen Petrarch's epistolary self-identification with Odysseus. To this we can add, drawing on Karl Enenkel's excellent study of humanist self-writing, the *Commentarii* of the humanist Sylvius Aeneas Piccolimini, also known as Pope Pius II.⁸³¹ He too told his life story with distinctly epic flavours, but focused on the exploratory side of travelling to many regions like Odysseus and Aeneas had done between Troy, Greece, and Italy. Yet, I propose that it was the allegorical tradition of Vergil exegesis that most attracted Ficino, perhaps in imitation of St Augustine. For it was the moral allegoresis of that epic poem in particular which allowed it more than other narrative poems to be turned into a paraenetic hypotext. Even if Petrarch through his *Familiares* wanted to instruct readers on how to live, as Nancy Strüver has argued, I find him primarily concerned with his own experiences and outward image.⁸³² Ficino, on the other hand, is constantly teaching. While Petrarch's *Odyssey*-reference was meant to draw attention to the instability of his life and the variety of his epistolary exchanges, Ficino's *Aeneid* references are meant to place his letter collection in a well-defined ethical discourse. Indeed, the epic allusions are not

[altro] sì vero testimonio ricevere non si potea.' For a modern appreciation of Augustine's paraenetics, see Kotzé 2020, 41–42.

⁸²⁹ *Secretum* 1.6.3: 'letis non sine lacrimis interdum legere me arbitrer non alienam sed propriam mee peregrinationis historiam.'

⁸³⁰ *EL* 5.15: 'hac ratione ultiro citroque saepenumero et scripsimus etscribemus ut quae nostrae mentes immo nostra mens vicissim cogitate et secum ipsa loquitur cogitando caeteri etiam nonnunquam usu intelligent littararum.' Cf. *EL* 1.82: 'I am not warning Lorenzo with this letter so much as Marsilio and other mortals.'

⁸³¹ Enenkel 2008, 319–329.

⁸³² Strüver 1992, 3–4.

self-contained but engage with contemporary reflections about the best way of life. Landino's *Disputationes* help relate the letters' epic allusions to a moral-philosophical discourse.

CHAPTER 9

DANTEAN LIGHT

This final chapter aims to explain why Book 12 of the *Epistole* contains a disproportionate number of letters about light. My hypothesis is that Ficino wanted to imitate the end of Dante's *Commedia*, which famously basks in God's splendour. It is an extravagant proposition, perhaps one step too much towards the precipice of interpretive imagination. Much of what follows, therefore, tries to carefully buttress the argument with text-based and circumstantial evidence. I have shown how Ficino's use of the *Aeneid* for his autobiographical narrative was intricately connected with his reading and imitation of St Augustine's *Confessions*. This helps us to understand the seamless switch from the pagan ideologies of the *Aeneid* to the Christian redemption story of the *Commedia*. As John Freccero argued, the *Commedia* itself is strongly indebted to St Augustine and his *Confessions*. Moreover, it famously stages Vergil as a guide through the underworld and cites the *Aeneid* in Purgatory, Canto 30 in addition to less explicit allusions. In short, Dante's *Commedia* is a natural addition to the intertextual network of the *Epistole*. Before I consider its relevance in more detail, I will demonstrate that Ficino's letters at several points rely on vernacular poetry. I summarise the place of Guido Cavalcanti in Ficino's conception of love and how the philosopher uses the figure of Cavalcanti to dress himself in a Dantean garb. Having paved the way through those observations, I finally advance to my claim that the concluding *modus* of the *Epistole* alludes to the macrostructure of the *Commedia*. I do so in two movements: First, I draw attention to the fact that Ficino abandons the usual technique of dark closure found in both epistolary literature and in the *Aeneid*, the most important intertext in the *Epistole* so far. Secondly, I point out the letters' engagement with Dante, especially through Landino's commentary on the work.

FICINO AND VERNACULAR POETRY

I have gently pushed the boundaries of literary enquiry by looking for poetic intertexts in prose letter connections. This point of view was inspired and corroborated by existing scholarship on the place of especially Vergil in ancient letter collections and by Mazzotta's productive interpretation of Petrarch's *Familiares* as an Odyssean work. Before I make the next step of looking at vernacular poetry in the Latin letters of Ficino, it is worthwhile to examine whether contemporary readers were willing to bridge the divide between Tuscan verse and Latin prose. In one copy with unknown provenance, the annotator picked up on Ficino's simple cue 'ut tradunt poetae' with regard to the

indomitable power of love.⁸³³ Responding to this vague allusion, they transcribed in the margin a *terzina* from Petrarch's *Trionfo d'Amore* on the arrival of Venus.⁸³⁴ This shows that even in those cases where the text itself does not demand the identification of a specific author, readers spontaneously made the connection with vernacular poetry. A single instance like this would be less commanding if it did not also point at the established practice of sixteenth-century academic exegesis which explained Petrarch's vernacular poetry in light of Ficino's philosophical works.⁸³⁵

The association of Ficino with vernacular authors is further corroborated by their joint representation in visual art.⁸³⁶ A painting by Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574) depicts the philosopher standing among the most important Renaissance poets which Florence had nurtured. The idea for the work can be traced back to a commission from 1543 by Luca Martini, who was at that time a heavyweight in the cultural politics of Cosimo I de' Medici.⁸³⁷ He had asked for a portrait of six Tuscan poets: 'Dante, il Petrarcha, il Boccaccio, Guido Cavalcanti, Guitton d'Arezzo, messer Cino da Pistoia.'⁸³⁸ Interestingly, Vasari replaced the figures of Guittione and Cino with portraits of Landino and Ficino. The depiction of the latter two is based on their portraits in Ghirlandaio's fresco *Zaccaria al tempio* in the Florentine church of Santa Maria Novella. Deborah Parker's suggestion that 'Vasari may simply have based their [viz. of Guittione and Cino] portraits on the likeness of other respected men of letters' fails to convince. Vasari knew very well whom he was painting and his correspondence with another client in 1546 shows that the choice for Ficino and Landino instead of Guittione and Cino was recognised by contemporaries.⁸³⁹

Within two decades after Vasari had completed his painting, a print reproduction by Hieronymus Cock explicitly identifies Ficino (but misidentifies Landino as Poliziano; Figure 16, nos. 5 and 6).⁸⁴⁰ Remarkably, he is the only one in both artworks who has not published any poetry.⁸⁴¹ The philosopher's presence is partly due to the patriotic program of Vasari's painting, which brings together the great minds of Florence from the past two centuries.⁸⁴² But it also tells us something about Ficino's place in the literary canon. Despite being a thinker, he firmly belongs to the world of letters. His theorisation of immortality and love through his translations and commentaries of

⁸³³ EL 5.27.

⁸³⁴ Petrarch, *Trionfo d'Amore* 1.151-513: 'Vedi Venere bella, e con lei Marte, cinto di ferro i pie', le braccia e 'l collo, e Plutone e Proserpina in disparte.'

⁸³⁵ Huss 2017, esp. 216-233.

⁸³⁶ On portraits of Ficino, see above all van den Doel 2022, chap. 6; Paolini 1984; Kristeller 1986, 195-196.

⁸³⁷ On Martini, see Angiolini 2008; on the painting, see Parker 2012.

⁸³⁸ Kliemann 1981.

⁸³⁹ Kliemann 1981; cf. Paolini 1984, 175-176.

⁸⁴⁰ Landino is mistakenly replaced with Poliziano who figures in the same group of people on Ghirlandaio's fresco.

⁸⁴¹ Ficino did write one poem in sapphic metre and some Italian verse, but they were never published and probably did not circulate; see Michael J. B. Allen 1998. It would not have qualified him as a poet in the way Cavalcanti, Dante, Petrarch, and Poliziano were.

⁸⁴² Bowron 1973, 50-51.



Figure 16 Hieronymus Cock after Giorgio Vasari, 'Portraits of six Italian writers,' engraving on paper, 1548-1570, British Museum, London.

Greek philosophers became an entry point for interpreting works by the five poets in the painting.⁸⁴³ Even though Ficino did not publish verse, his writings were considered relevant discussions of the very same topics which Cavalcanti, Dante, and Petrarch treated in their poetry. In addition, he made his work, from the letters to theological treatises, sing with a poetic quality.⁸⁴⁴

The connection between Ficino and Tuscan love poets was not the result of an overzealous interpretation by sixteenth-century critics. It has been observed before that the love letters from Lorenzo to Ficino and especially those from Ficino to Cavalcanti are replete with 'fixed formulae and images' borrowed from thirteenth- and fourteenth-century lyric.⁸⁴⁵ Perhaps, Ficino's adherence to this prominent tradition accounts for his self-assessment as 'a willy-nilly poet'—to quote his own words from the preface to his treatise *De vita*.⁸⁴⁶ It is impossible to trace those poetic influences to one poet only since the same imagery and sentiments are found in the works of different *stilnovisti* such as Guittone d'Arezzo (c.1235–1294), Dante da Maiano (13th century), and Dante Alighieri (1265–1321). The next generation of love poets, among whom Petrarch takes a prominent place, also qualifies as a possible source of inspiration for the erotic *topoi* in Ficino's letters. There is no doubt that the latter was intimately familiar with the authors mentioned. Prominent humanists of

⁸⁴³ Gilson 2018, 107; cf. again Huss 2017.

⁸⁴⁴ Garin 1954, 309–310.

⁸⁴⁵ Kristeller 1943, 281; cf. Storey 2003.

⁸⁴⁶ Ficino 1998, 105: 'nolens sum, et si non bonus saepe poeta.'

his time were involved in a reappraisal of Tuscan poetry from the past two centuries. We may think of the so-called *Raccolta Aragonese* as only one example of the fruits produced by this revival of the vernacular tradition.⁸⁴⁷ It is a collection of Duecento and Trecento poetry initiated in 1476 by Lorenzo de' Medici and with a prefatory letter by Angelo Poliziano—precisely the period and social network that shaped the amatory *modus* of Book 1.⁸⁴⁸ Indeed, some of the poems which I will reference in the following paragraphs are in the *raccolta* as well as in other Florentine manuscripts.⁸⁴⁹

So that I may turn more quickly to the main argument of this chapter, I will discuss only some of the ways in which Ficino's letters imitate the anxieties and afflictions customarily found in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century love poetry. For example, his supplication in *EL* 1.36, where he asks Giovanni to show him kindness, is reminiscent of how poets ask their Lady to take pity on them after repeated rejections.⁸⁵⁰ Another recognisable trope is the calm harbour which the lover reaches through his object of desire, and which recurs throughout Petrarch's *Canzoniere*.⁸⁵¹ The harbour is closely connected to the metaphor of storms, which recurs in the verses of Guido delle Colonne and Giacomo da Lentini, as well as in the works of *stilnovisti* like Guido Guinizzelli, who compare the lover's condition to a ship caught on a stormy sea.⁸⁵² It is they, perhaps, who led Dante to write that the region in hell dedicated to lust 'mugglia come fa mar per tempesta, / se da contrari venti è combattuto'.⁸⁵³ Sea and storm imagery continued to pervade love poetry in the fourteenth century. We already saw how Petrarch described his intellectual and social wanderings as a sea voyage at the beginning of his *Familiares*. His *Canzoniere*, in turn, uses storms and navigation-related metaphors to describe the experience of love.⁸⁵⁴ The previous chapter discussed Ficino's repeated comparisons of the tribulations accompanying the *vita voluptuosa*—and, to a lesser extent, *activa*—with storms. I interpreted these from a Latin perspective through Landino's contemporary allegory of the *Aeneid*. It now appears that this imagery has no singular source but simultaneously draws on Latin and vernacular literature. In *EL* 1.44, Ficino merged the two by comparing Cavalcanti in one

⁸⁴⁷ See Breschi 2016 for a discussion of this anthology. Cf. Gilson 2005, 138–141.

⁸⁴⁸ Cf. Breschi 2016; Cardini 1973, 200–204; Barbi 1975, 217–326.

⁸⁴⁹ MS Firenze, BML, Plut.90 inf.37, for example, fol. 31^r [32^r] (Guizzinnelli, *Canzone*, III) and fol. 50^r [51^r] (Cavalcanti, *Sonnetti*, IX); MS Firenze, BML, Redi 9, fol. 105^r, photographic reproduction in Leonardi 2000 (Guittone, *Canzone*, III, CXXV).

⁸⁵⁰ Cavalcanti, *Rime* IX.7; Guittone d'Arezzo, *Canzone* III, CXXV; Dante da Maiano, *Sonnetti*, I.1–4.

⁸⁵¹ Petrarch, *RVF*, CXIX; CLXXXIX; CCLXXII.

⁸⁵² For example, Guido delle Colonne, 2.63–64: 'ch'Amor mi sbatte e smena che no abento, / sì come vento smena nave in onda'; Giacomo da Lentini, *Rime*, I.49–50: 'Lo vostr'amor che m'ave / in mare tempestoso'; Guinizzelli, *Canzone*, III.13–18: 'Nave ch'esce di porto / con vento dolze e piano, / fra mar giunge in altura; / poi vèn lo tempo torto, tempesta e grande affano li aduce la ventura.' Cf. Barolini 2006, 75–76.

⁸⁵³ *Inf.* 5.29–30.

⁸⁵⁴ Kircher 2006, chap. 5.

breadth to the hero Achates, Aeneas' loyal companion, and to the safe harbour that is commonly used as a metaphor for the object of love in vernacular poetry.⁸⁵⁵

CAVALCANTI TO DANTE

Even though the stilnovistic strains in the *Epistole* cannot be pinned on one author, there is a case to be made for the privileged position of Guido Cavalcanti (c.1255–1300). Remember that addressing the first post-introduction letters to Lorenzo offered a perfect parallelism with the actual opening letter to Cosimo.⁸⁵⁶ The question why Ficino then introduced Giovanni Cavalcanti as the most prominent figure in the collection is less evident. We know almost nothing about the man apart from his name and some political roles which he took up in the 1480s and 1490s.⁸⁵⁷ Pierre Laurens' assessment that 'most of all, he is the descendant of the poet Guido Cavalcanti,' is to the point and harks back to a revelatory passage in *De amore*.⁸⁵⁸ Giovanni is the most important interlocutor in this dialogue, which poses as a commentary on Plato's *Symposium*. His expertise on love is explained through his descent from Guido: 'I very much congratulate the family of your Giovanni, which among many famous men both in learning and in illustrious deeds, produced Guido, a philosopher who has served the republic well and surpassed everyone of his age who was an expert in dialectics. He also imitated the Socratic love both in his behaviour and in his poems.'⁸⁵⁹ It is clear that by addressing his letters to Giovanni, Ficino aimed to highlight the increased presence of stilnovistic tropes in *EL* 1.29–51, and to strengthen the connection of his amatory *modus* with both Tuscan love poetry and his philosophical groundwork in *De amore*.

What was Guido's poetry like and why did it attract Ficino? Scholars generally agree that Guido's poetry is characterised by pessimism, and that his verse presents love primarily as a tragic force, a cause of suffering and spiritual death.⁸⁶⁰ The way in which Guido expressed this pessimism was indebted to a scientific Aristotelian-Galenic discourse prevalent at the university of Bologna.⁸⁶¹ Ficino, a doctor himself, would have appreciated Guido's poetic discussion of lovesickness as a medical condition.⁸⁶² Nevertheless, it appears from the letters' passionate tone that his real point of reference are not those technical treatises, but Guido's emotionally charged poetry itself. In

⁸⁵⁵ See p. 197.

⁸⁵⁶ See p. 75.

⁸⁵⁷ Vasoli 2005, 38.

⁸⁵⁸ Laurens 2014, 437; cf. Vasoli 1993, 135.

⁸⁵⁹ Ficino 2002, 207: 'Gratulor Iohannis tui familie plurimum, que inter multos et doctrina et rebus gestis clarissimos equites, Guidonem philosophum peperit de re publica bene meritum et aculeis dialectice cunctis suo seculo precellentem, qui hunc amorem socraticum tam moribus quam carminibus imitatus.' Cf. Aasdalen 2011, 68–73.

⁸⁶⁰ The tragic mode is ubiquitous in Cavalcanti's work so that it is unnecessary to point at specific poems here; cf. Falzone 2016; Kleinhenz 2003, 143–145; Robert Harrison 2003; Fenzi 1999, 15; James E. Shaw 1949, 112–123.

⁸⁶¹ Ciavolella 1976, 137–140; Fontaine 1985; Ardizzone 2002, chap. 1.

⁸⁶² Wells 2007, 19–22; 44–51; cf. *De amore* 2.6, 6.9.

several letters to Cavalcanti, Ficino plays on the restorative power of reciprocal love by highlighting the loss of self and weakened health whenever love is not returned.⁸⁶³ Even though similar ideas are present elsewhere in the collection, their density in the letters to Giovanni is conspicuous and, I argue, connected to Guido's own insistence on this theme. Yet we should be careful not to conflate the dramatic use of love's destructive power in the Cavalcantian sense with Ficino's own view on the matter. While Ficino hailed Guido as an authority on love, he nevertheless found himself incapable of fully embracing the latter's vision in its original form. 'There is no doubt,' Massimo Ciavollella observes, 'that Ficino purposely forces the meaning of Cavalcanti's poem. ... Cavalcanti, the poet-philosopher epitomizing the Tuscan lyric tradition under the banner of the revived Platonism, becomes the bard of Ficino's concept of love.'⁸⁶⁴

The *Epistole* betray a certain discomfort on Ficino's part about adopting Cavalcanti's poetic *modus* unreservedly. Guido's 'pessimistic' conception of love, incapable of transcending itself and thus leading to the lover's destruction, was rooted in an Averroist worldview.⁸⁶⁵ I am inclined to interpret Ficino's self-defence against precisely accusations of Averroism in *EL* 1.39, the first *epistola seria* to Cavalcanti, as a way to distance himself from the philosophical tenets that had inspired Guido's verse. While the letter is an attack on Averroes' philosophy of the single intellect, contemporary readers would have been aware of its broader implications in this context. After all, several commentaries on Guido's poetry circulated from early on and were being read and studied well into the sixteenth century.⁸⁶⁶ It is interesting that at the end of the letter, Ficino underlines that Giovanni shared his opinion on the matter. Guido's heresy, Dante suggests in an infamous dig at his former friend, was immediately connected with the Epicurean errors of his father.⁸⁶⁷ When Ficino in *EL* 1.39 stressed that Giovanni shared his rejection of Averroism, he consciously declared the inherited heterodoxy defunct. As such, the refutation of Averroes' single intellect shared by all men is a well-constructed bridge between the *amatoria* and the *seria*. Looking back, it renounces the ill-fated love of Guido; looking ahead, it announces an accurate conception of the world, the soul, and the role of love therein.

For some time, Guido was the most celebrated author of Tuscan love poetry, and he soon achieved the status of *authoritas*.⁸⁶⁸ So, he exerted considerable influence on the young Dante, who in the *Vita*

⁸⁶³ *EL* 1.33: *Ego meam tibi valitudinem declarare non possum nisi prius ipse tuam*, quippe valeo si tu vales, immo si te valere intelligo; 1.34: *Onerosa mihi tam mei quam paterni corporis cura*, onerosa *absentia tua*; 1.36: *non enim instigatione sed consolatione eger animus indiget*; 1.37: *Redi igitur et te, immo me redde mibi*, quando ego id nequeo.

⁸⁶⁴ Ciavollella 1986, 42.

⁸⁶⁵ Baránski 2003, 172–175; Corti 2003; Kristeller 1993; Nardi 1940.

⁸⁶⁶ Aasdalen 2011; Ciavollella 1986, 44–45.

⁸⁶⁷ Cf. Falzone 2019, para. 4; Contini 1970, 143–148.

⁸⁶⁸ Baránski 2003, 154; Ciavollella 1986.

nuova claims to have presented his first poems to him.⁸⁶⁹ It is noteworthy that Dante called Guido his ‘primo amico,’⁸⁷⁰ an expression which echoes in Ficino’s consistent use of ‘amicus unicus’ for Giovanni. However, the friendship between Guido and Dante soon came under strain. Not only was Dante partly responsible for Cavalcanti’s expulsion from Florence, but there was also an intellectual rift between the two poets. John Took, among others, has charted the growing distance between the two poets in Dante’s *Vita nuova*. Whereas the earlier poems in this book had ‘a psychological finesse and dramatic immediacy wholly Cavalcantian in spirit,’ this was quickly superseded by a ‘sense of love as spiritually reconstitutive.’⁸⁷¹ Took writes that the *Vita nuova* wishes ‘to vindicate over and against Cavalcanti the notion of love as a principle, not of death, but of life, of spiritual renewal through understanding.’⁸⁷²

If we dare to draw a parallel between Guido and Giovanni, we may also want to examine the possible analogy between their respective friends Dante and Ficino. Paolo Falzone points out that the main difference between Dante and Cavalcanti lies in their respective association and dissociation of reason and love.⁸⁷³ From this perspective, we can easily place Ficino in Dante’s camp, if only for his statement that ‘love does not deceive me, since I have judged before I started to love.’⁸⁷⁴ Yet, the amatory *modus* of Book 1 is far from reasonable. Ficino’s immoderate love for Cavalcanti, I argued, is implicitly equated with the *vita voluptuosa*. Although love remains a valuable force in Ficino’s life, his epistolary relationship with Giovanni comes under tension from the weight of his passion. There is in the letters a clear interconnection between Ficino’s troubled state of mind and their friendship, not only because the philosopher appears to rely on Giovanni to recover his psychological balance. ‘Love … is hopelessly ambiguous. On the one hand it holds out the prospect of perfect happiness. On the other, it brings nothing but anxiety.’⁸⁷⁵ Took’s words describe the Cavalcantian chapters of Dante’s *Vita nuova* but are easily applicable to Ficino’s love letters. Both Dante and Ficino wanted to attain perfect happiness through love but only after they had redefined what love is. This redefinition influenced their relationship with respectively Guido and Giovanni Cavalcanti. Ficino’s growing persona leaves Cavalcanti behind together with his own excessive passions and self-interest. When he finally turns his back on Giovanni because the latter

⁸⁶⁹ Dante, *Vita Nuova* XXIV.

⁸⁷⁰ Dante, *Vita Nuova* XXIV, XXV, XXX.

⁸⁷¹ Took 1990, 17.

⁸⁷² Took 1990, 45.

⁸⁷³ Falzone 2016, para. 16.

⁸⁷⁴ EL 1.66; see p. 99-100.

⁸⁷⁵ Took 1990, 49.

is ‘in the dark,’⁸⁷⁶ there is a sense that the *ductus* towards the *skopos* of the highest good leads, at least temporarily, away from his *amicus unicus*.

Simon Gilson has written that in the preface to the Italian version of *De amore* Ficino refashions both Dante and Cavalcanti in his own image.⁸⁷⁷ I build on that observation to suggest that in the letters Ficino refashions *himself as Dante* by restaging the friendship of the poet with Guido Cavalcanti through his own friendship with the latter’s descendant. It is not surprising that Ficino would want to clothe himself in a Dantean garb. He greatly admired the poet for his literary qualities: Ficino personally copied two of his *Eclogues* and even composed a Dantean *terza rima* in an early treatise.⁸⁷⁸ More importantly, Dante was for Ficino as much a philosopher as he was a poet. In 1468, he translated the former’s *Monarchia* into Italian—the only vernacular translation of a work not by himself. In the introduction to that book, he states that Dante,

benchè non parlassi in lingua greca con quell sacro padre de’ philosophi,
interprete della verità Platone, niente di meno in ispirito parlò in modo con lui,
che di molte sententie Platoniche adornò e libri suoi et per tale ornamento
massime illustrò tanto la ciptà Florentina.⁸⁷⁹

Although Dante did not know Greek, Ficino attributed him a deep knowledge of Platonic philosophy and thus appropriated the poet’s work for his own philosophical program.⁸⁸⁰

In the Florentine Duomo, which today surprises by its austere interior, Ficino and Dante face each other from opposite aisles. A bust of the former (Figure 17), created in 1521, is set high in the wall above a laudatory inscription.⁸⁸¹ The website of the Duomo cleverly observes that the placement of Ficino’s bust evokes the importance of light in his philosophy:

Il filosofo è immaginato volgersi in contemplazione verso la luce del sole che
spiove dalle vetrate del tamburo della cupola, la quale trascende
nell’immaginazione artistica nella luce del Divino, al quale il pensatore sembra
offrire il grande tomo che tiene tra le mani, evidentemente la propria opera.
Non è un caso che la luce rivesta questa importanza nel monumento, giacché
per la filosofia neoplatonica cristiana di Ficino il fenomeno luminoso è
‘immagine’ di Dio trascendente.⁸⁸²

⁸⁷⁶ EL 5.23; see p. 143-144.

⁸⁷⁷ Gilson 2005, 146.

⁸⁷⁸ Kristeller 1983, 8–9.

⁸⁷⁹ Dante 2004, 369.

⁸⁸⁰ Cf. Kristeller 1983, 10; Vasoli 1993.

⁸⁸¹ Cf. van den Doel 2022, 278–280 on the early reception of this portrait.

⁸⁸² Opera di Santa Maria del Fiore 2023.

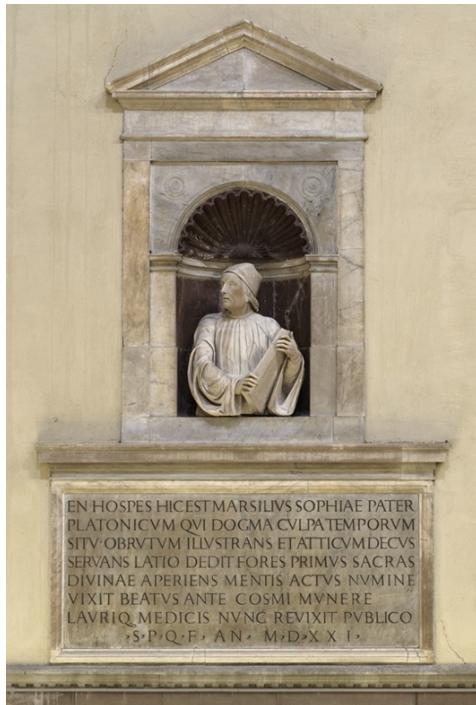


Figure 2 Andrea Ferrucci, Funerary monument for Marsilio Ficino, white and red marble, 1521-1522, Santa Maria del Fiore, Firenze



Figure 18 Domenico di Michelino, 'Dante, Firenze and the *Divina Commedia*', tempera on canvas and wood, 1465, Santa Maria del Fiore, Firenze

On the other side of the nave hangs a famous painting of Dante holding a copy of his *Commedia* (Figure 18).⁸⁸³ His towering figure stands outside the Florentine city walls on his left side, and around him are depictions of the afterlife as described in his prophetic vision. On Dante's right side we see the gate of Hell. In the background Purgatory rises towards the sky, where different shades of blue differentiate the celestial spheres. This artwork, commissioned by the city council in 1465, also evokes the light of reason as a reflection of the divine. Whereas the book in Ficino's hands captures the sunlight falling from the cupola, Dante's *Commedia* illuminates the city of Florence with golden rays. Light, in sum, invigorates the symbolic power of both commemorative monuments. It is also, I argue, the basis of an intertextual connection between the *Epistole* and the *Commedia*.

I will not attempt to prove that Ficino's theory of light was inspired by Dante's *Commedia*. Certainly, their understanding of light drew on common sources: Plotinus, Grosseteste, St Augustine. But, as Gilson has demonstrated, it requires nuanced analysis to trace the influence of individual authors in later considerations of a topic as complex as light.⁸⁸⁴ Not only am I unqualified to undertake that task, but it would also be impossible to do justice to the topic within the constraints of this chapter. Moreover, Ficino's use of light metaphors and contribution to its (meta-)physical understanding

⁸⁸³ See Di Fonzo 2006; Altrocchi 1931.

⁸⁸⁴ Gilson 2000.

are a subject in themselves and of limited importance for my aim here.⁸⁸⁵ While the recurrence of similar imagery itself would not guarantee a direct genealogy between Ficino's and Dante's conception of light, it must be said that even on this superficial level the differences between both authors appear to outweigh their resemblances. For example, Dante repeatedly uses the mirror as a metaphor of the different light gradations on his ascent to the highest circle of heaven. Ficino, on the other hand, never uses this metaphor in the letters and the different gradations in splendour seem to be less central to his views on light in the *Epistole*. However, such dissimilarities must not prevent us to note the structural similarities of a brightly lit ending in the *Commedia* and in Ficino's letter collection. Structural intertextuality, which is at the heart of my argument, must not be matched by philosophical agreement.

DARKNESS

LETTER COLLECTIONS: A LATE GENRE

Ending the collection with a focus on light seems counterintuitive. Literary works usually conclude in a darkish setting, which corresponds to grey weather at the end of the year, to dusk at the end of the day, to an imagination of death as devoid of light. At first, Ficino seems to follow this convention. Death plays a prominent role in Book 11, in a way that is unprecedented in the collection. In *EL* 11.9, Ficino takes leave of Marco Barbo. This moment is more significant than previous allusions to the passing away of acquaintances because Barbo takes such a prominent position in Book 8 and reappears in Book 10.⁸⁸⁶ The end of his life thus bears on the narrative of the collection. An even more prominent loss in Book 11 is the death of Lorenzo de' Medici. Several letters are dedicated to his passing, which seems to naturally conclude the narrative arc in which he played such a central role.⁸⁸⁷ We may also think of Ficino's own death which followed only four years after the print publication of the *Epistole*. Other humanists had conceived of their letter collections as an end-of-life project, too. The authoritative manuscript of Filelfo's letter collection was finished in late 1477, less than four years before his death in 1481.⁸⁸⁸ Poliziano finished his letter collection at the young age of 39.⁸⁸⁹ Because of his untimely death less than half a year later, also Poliziano's collection turned out to be a swan song and it was his student Pietro Critino who

⁸⁸⁵ A comprehensive study is Scheuermann-Pellicke 2000.

⁸⁸⁶ *EL* 11.9.

⁸⁸⁷ *EL* 11.18-22.

⁸⁸⁸ Filelfo 2015, 11.

⁸⁸⁹ Poliziano 2006, viii.

prepared the work for the press.⁸⁹⁰ Finally, Fonzi was still revising and updating his collection in 1513, the year of his death.⁸⁹¹

There is an ancient precedent for projecting epistolary collections, in verse and prose, as the capstone of a literary career. Martin Korenjak showed how Horace and Ovid explicitly linked their epistolary production to their old age. He points out ancient precedents for this perception in Plato, Cicero, Seneca, and Sidonius among others.⁸⁹² In a follow-up article, Korenjak argues that Ovid's and Horace's turn to epistolography at the end of their lives did not stem from a personal need. Instead, he suggests that the letter collection was seen as the crown on one's oeuvre. It provided an alternative to the epic poem which constituted the culmination of the so-called Vergilian career which ascended from pastoral to didactic to narrative poetry.⁸⁹³ The seeming equivalence between epic and epistolary collections may, in fact, be one of the reasons why ancient authors often mixed epic allusions into their letter collections.⁸⁹⁴ As we have seen, this tradition was continued in the Renaissance.

SOMBER ENDINGS

Pliny's epistles exemplify the suitability of darkness for closing a literary work of this kind. At the beginning of his collection, we find a letter to Septicius Clarus, whose cognomen means 'bright'. This draws attention to the name of the addressee in the last letter of Book 9, Pedanius Fuscus, whose name means 'dark.' Fuscus' name resonates with the letter's description of a dark winter evening. In the same way as brightness, associated with Spring and dawn, had inaugurated the collection, darkness looms over its final lines.⁸⁹⁵ Would Renaissance readers have noticed the obscure ending? Sidonius Apollinaris did in the fifth century and played on the meaning of his first and last correspondents' names in his own epistolary collection, opening with a letter to Constantius ('the constant one,' *SidE* 1.1) and ending with a letter to Firminus ('the firm one', *SidE*. 9.16).⁸⁹⁶ St Ambrose, the bishop of Milan whose letters would remain popular during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, likewise addressed the first letter in his collection to Justus ('the just one'), alluding to a key virtue in Christianity, and the last one to Constantius ('the constant one'), the meaning of whose name can extend to 'unwavering,' 'resolute,' 'secure' and therefore fits well with the notion of justice.

⁸⁹⁰ See Dorez 1898 on the interventions by the posthumous editors.

⁸⁹¹ Daneloni 2018, 140–141.

⁸⁹² Korenjak 2005a, 55–59.

⁸⁹³ Korenjak 2005b, 221–230; cf. Farrell 2002.

⁸⁹⁴ Fascione 2023.

⁸⁹⁵ Marchesi 2008, 249–250. Pliny's book actually counts ten books, but the first nine books exist separately from Book 10, which is entirely filled with letters to the emperor.

⁸⁹⁶ Gibson 2011, 657–659.

It is hard to say exactly how much attention Renaissance readers would have paid to the internal micro-allusions in Pliny, Sidonius and Ambrose. In any case, their manuscript and incunable traditions allowed them to notice. Pliny's letters circulated in a dominant version of 8 books during the fifteenth century, but since it was the eighth book that was missing, the play on Clarus and Fuscus did not get lost. Although Septicius' cognomen was normally not included for the first letter in manuscripts and early prints, there is evidence that Renaissance readers confidently assumed he was the same Septicius as in 1.15, where he is explicitly named Clarus in the address line.⁸⁹⁷ While an early edition of Ambrose's letters circulated with an epistle at the front other than the one to Justus,⁸⁹⁸ this was rectified in an edition from 1490 which dedicated an editorial note to the matter.⁸⁹⁹ In sum, the recurrence of the phenomenon across several authors increases the probability that Renaissance authors noticed, and the manuscript and incunable transmission of the texts in question did not prevent this recognition. Moreover, Ficino was fond of (faux-)etymological puns on people's names so that Pliny's, Ambrose's and Symmachus' conceits would likely have resonated with him.⁹⁰⁰

Finally, darkness covers the end of the *Aeneid*, which I identified in the previous chapter as the most important intertext in Ficino's *Epistole*. Vergil's epic poem ends with the word 'umbras,' denoting the shadows of death to which Turnus is sent by a ferocious Aeneas. This moment of closure resonates with the end of the *Elegies*. There, the shadows at the end of the day, still free from the connotation of death, urged the shepherd and his goats to return home: 'ite domum saturae, venit Hesperus, ite capellae.'⁹⁰¹ In the words of Philip Hardie,

the last word of Virgil's last book, *umbras*, has strong closural associations within the poet's oeuvre: it had been used to close the first poem of the major works, *Elogue* 1.83, and also to mark the end of the *Elegies* book, there in connection with a continuation in the form of a 'rising' from one kind of poetry, pastoral, to another. By contrast, the use of *umbras* at the end of the *Aeneid* seems also to mark the end of Virgil's poetic activity altogether.⁹⁰²

Aeneas' final killing of Turnus is an important scene which turns him, and by extension the whole *Aeneid*, into an ambiguous image of heroism and imperialism. Even those Renaissance scholars who subscribed to the Augustan interpretation of Aeneas as an exemplary hero recognised that he

⁸⁹⁷ Pliny the Younger 1506, fol. 1^r.

⁸⁹⁸ Ambrose 1491 (ISTC ia00553000).

⁸⁹⁹ Ambrose 1490 (ISTC ia00552000), fol. [187^r]; cf. Michaela Zelzer 1990a, LXXIIIn1.

⁹⁰⁰ For example, *EL* 4.8 (Pace/pax [peace]); *EL* 5.32 (Medici/medicus [doctor]); *EL* 7.21-22 (Febo/Phoebus).

⁹⁰¹ *Ecl.* 10.77.

⁹⁰² Hardie 1997, 144–145; reprinted in 2023.

acted immorally by not showing mercy to an already conquered enemy. For example, Filelfo in *De morali disciplina libri quinque* wrote that he ‘was perplexed by Vergil … showing Aeneas as subject to anger.’⁹⁰³ He was not the only one to be offended by this passage: Kallendorf has found other commentators from the sixteenth century which respond to the final line of the *Aeneid* with a moral criticism of Aeneas.⁹⁰⁴ The concluding *umbrae* of the *Aeneid* are thus placed in a passage containing the seeds of pessimist interpretations of Vergil’s epic in the Renaissance. Therefore, it could not serve as an appropriate model for the ending of Ficino’s *Epistole*, whose *skopos* is the eternal bliss of contemplating God and ultimately seeing his splendour in the life hereafter. In the following sections, I argue that Ficino chose Dante’s *Commedia* as an alternative epic on which he could model the conclusion of his epistolary *ductus*.

LIGHT

BOOKS 1-2

I have shown in the first half of this thesis how the structure of Books 1-2 prefigures the structure of the *Epistole* as a whole. This is also true for the appearance of light at the end of Book 2, which prefigures the presence of light in Book 12. Light at a moment of closure is not only conspicuous because it goes against the grain of darkness as a favoured sign of closure. It also stands out because there are generally few references to Ficino’s philosophy of light in the *Epistole*. One passage in the *Dialogus inter Deum et animam theologicus* compares the light of the sun to God, and the light of the intellect is mentioned in the *Seria ad Iohannem*.⁹⁰⁵ However, there is no strong interest in light before the end of Book 2. The concluding letter of this highly philosophical book is titled *Quid sit lumen in corpore mundi* and contains paragraphs with subtitles such as *Descriptio luminis visibilis*; *Nihil clarus quam lumen ac deus, nihil obscurius*; *Lux intelligibilis est intelligibilium causa visibilis visibilium*; and *Lumen visibile rationale intelligibile diuinum*. It is fitting that the culmination of the moral and spiritual growth experienced by Ficino’s epistolary persona ends in light. It is an image for mental clarity, for the contemplative life, and for God. Indeed, the final section of *EL* 2.8 is not accidentally titled *Lumen est umbra dei. Deus est lumen luminis*. It can only be achieved by the dissociation from worldly affairs which Ficino has step by step acquired throughout Book 1. In his own words: ‘the eye of the mind turns towards that light once it is not distracted by the anxieties of human affairs.’

Did the arrangement of letters in Book 1 provide any clues for the brightly lit ending in Book 2? So far, we have looked at several symmetrical structures in Book 1 and the ways in which they

⁹⁰³ Filelfo 1552, fol. 72; quoted in Kallendorf 2007b, 37.

⁹⁰⁴ Kallendorf 2005; reprinted in 2007a.

⁹⁰⁵ *EL* 1.4; 1.38.

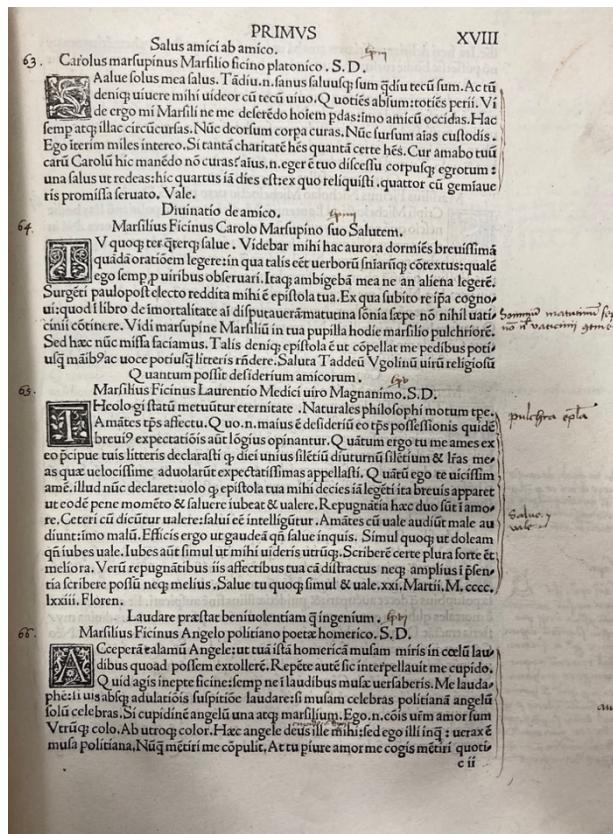


Figure 19 M. Ficino. *Epistole*. Venezia, 1495. Inc Cambridge, University Library, 3.B.3.82[1628], fol. XVIII^r.

knows that the twelfth of March, the day of Saint Gregory, was long ago assigned to the same equinox).⁹⁰⁶ Nevertheless, he used the 21 March because of its symbolic perspicuity. Indeed, the equinox in the fifteenth century was fixed on the 21 March by the Church to ease the calculation of the Easter date. If we look at the Roman missal from Milan, first printed in 1474, shows that by decree the equinox was on the XII kalends of April, which corresponds to the modern dating of 21 March. No doubt Ficino's readers would have recognised the symbolic relevance of the date. Probably, they also made the connection with an Easter allusion in *EL* 1.70 which refers to the Holy Week. The magnificent light symbolism of the Easter Mass, which celebrates the resurrection of Christ would have been intimately familiar to them.

Sceptical minds may object to the observations made in the previous paragraph that the symmetrical structures which I had discussed before at least relied on conspicuous textual elements like letter titles and addressees. They may remark that readers would appreciate the delineating function of ring compositions but would not naturally realise that they were in the middle of the book when they encountered a triad of letters with the same date. But it is not only me, the modern

delineate the different *modus* and accentuate the *ductus* of the collection. We have not yet focused on the middle letters of the book itself. They are remarkable because they are all dated on the same day. The only other time this happens is in *EL* 3.29-33, of which I explained the function on p. 132-133. Whereas the latter dates have no obvious meaning, 21 March does as it is the day of the equinox, after which the days start to become longer again, in short, when light starts to increase after the darkness of winter. Ficino was aware that the astrological equinox did not fall on 21 March anymore during the fifteenth century. As his contemporary Regiomontanus wrote in 1474: 'they know that the vernal equinox in our time occurs on the eleventh of March (but almost everyone

⁹⁰⁶ Regiomontanus [1474], fol. 32r: 'scιunt equinoctium vernum hoc nostro tempore ad undecimam Martii fieri (sed nemo fere ignorat quum iampridem divi Gregorii dies videlicet duodecima Martii eidem concessa sit equinoctio).'

interpreter, who felt inclined to count Ficino's letters. While early modern readers may not have shared my critical search for artful arrangement in the *Epistole*, several of them numbered the work's constituent elements. As a result, those readers would have easily recognised the mathematical centrality of the equinocturnal letters. Notably, Inc Oxford, Weston Library, Auct. 2 Q 2.25 and Cambridge, University Library, 3.B.3.82[1628] number *EL* 1.66 (Figure 19) in precisely the same way as I have. The final letter is numbered 132 so that the numeration in both incunables highlights the centrality of the letters dated on 21 March. Mind that this was only visible in the final version of the *Epistole*. Two manuscripts, *V* and *N1*, number the letters if only in the table of contents. Yet, their pre-canonical arrangement means that *EL* 1.65-67 are not in the centre of the collection. This observation draws once more attention to the care with which Ficino continued chiselling at his collection until all the pieces were in place to mutually reinforce their symbolic meaning and fully achieve their thematic import.

Copies in Spain and Germany were also, and even though their numbering separates some of the longer letters in two parts, the central position of *EL* 1.65-67 remains sufficiently clear.⁹⁰⁷ It is, in fact, remarkable how even wrong numberings placed those three letters in the centre. A Vatican copy of the Nürnberg edition skips 19 while jumping from 30 to 40 and from 144 to 150. At the same time, two letters are numbered 88, and *Laus philosophie oratoria, moralis, dialectica, theologica* is split into three (135-137). The result of these mistakes is that the three letters dated 21 March stand exactly in the middle of the numbering.⁹⁰⁸ Admittedly, I am able to present only a handful of incontestable examples of enumerating reading practices. But this does not mean that there was no 'silent' counting going on in those copies where the letters are not numbered. Such unrecorded counting can be gauged from copies in Padova and Oxford. The first one numbers from *Lex et iustitia* (*EL* 1.5[VI]) through to *Exhortatio ad scientiam* (*EL* 1.21[XXII]).⁹⁰⁹ The second one for mysterious reasons numbers only *EL* 1.1-10, *Philosophia sapientiae gignit* (*EL* 4.35[49]), *Qui colit numen...* (*EL* 6.36[52]), and *Pictura malae mentis* (6.44[60]).⁹¹⁰ Evidently, this was only possible through counting also the other letters which are without numeric annotations.

Let us return to the significance Ficino attributed to the equinox. Apart from the traditional date of 21 March, the *Epistole* draw on the astronomic equinox of 12 March, the feast of St Gregory. It is now known that Ficino found it important to print his works on astronomically propitious dates. Indeed, elections, the type of astrology in which particular moments are considered particularly

⁹⁰⁷ Inc Madrid, BNE, 87; München, BSB, 2 Inc. c.a. 3122. In the eighteenth century, Gori still numbered the letters in his previously mentioned copy Inc Oxford, Weston Library, Douce adds. 123.

⁹⁰⁸ Inc Civitas Vaticana, BAV, IV.22.

⁹⁰⁹ Inc Padova, Biblioteca Universitaria, Sec.XV.336; the first *prohoemium* is numbered, which my numbering excludes.

⁹¹⁰ Inc Oxford, Weston Library, Toynbee 1051; the different sections of *EL* 6.13 ad 4.19 are numbered.

suitable for a specific undertaking, probably constituted the limit of Ficino's astrological activity by the time he worked on *De vita* in the 1480s.⁹¹¹ For example, Gentile, Hankins and Robichaud agree that Ficino delayed the publication of his Plato (and Plotinus) translations until a year in which the celestial position of Saturn was more favourable.⁹¹² I do not believe that he choose to have his letters printed in 1495 for any particular reason, but it is evident that he consciously decided to have them printed on the vernal equinox. This is clearly stated in the colophon: 'aequinoctium vernale Phoebo introeunte ad diem et horam Mercurii, vigilia Divi Gregorii.' In this way, Ficino further presented his work as a turning point from darkness to light. As a man of letters, he opted for the symbolical date of 21 March, which for reasons of recognisability was better suited for a wide readership. As an astrologer, he opted for the astronomical equinox, which not only carried symbolical value for him, but truly benefited the luminary qualities of the work itself.

BOOK 12

The final letters of Book 11 are a foretaste of the resplendent joy that pervades Book 12. *EL* 11.33 is the first preface to *a comparison of the Sun to God* (*Prooemium in comparationem Solis ad Deum*), Ficino's commentary on Plato's and Dionysius the Aeropagite's thoughts on the Sun and God. The letter prefigures the series of prefaces and dedicatory letters of Ficino's writings on the Sun. The final letter of the book, *EL* 11.34, is *a praise of our age as golden on account of its golden minds*. Ficino recalls Hesiod's division of history in a lead, iron, silver, and gold age. He had already played on this characterisation of historical eras to bewail his own time as iron. For the first time now, he unequivocally says that he is living in the best of periods. It 'has brought back into the light the liberal arts, which were almost extinct,' and brought forth rulers who combine wisdom with power.⁹¹³ Astronomy, one of Ficino's favoured disciplines, has greatly advanced through scientific instruments. Moreover, the printing press has made it easier for knowledge on astronomy and other subjects to circulate more quickly and more easily.

In the first letters of Book 12, the optimism from the end of the previous books seems to fail already. At different moments in the *Epistole*, Ficino returned to the threefold structure of life which he first introduced at the beginning of Book 1. The topic is addressed in *EL* 5.6, before Ficino goes on to explore the societal *modus* in Books 5-6 and is picked up on in *EL* 10.44. The first letter of Book 12 after the dedication to Girolamo Rossi dwells on the subject for the last time in the *Epistole*. Ficino opens with the usual idea that 'men given over to a busy life or enslaved by desires are overwhelmed by innumerable evils, since they subject themselves heedlessly to fate and fortune

⁹¹¹ Bullard 1990b, 699.

⁹¹² Robichaud 2017, 140–143; Hankins 1990b, 1:300–304; Gentile 1990, xxxv–xlvi.

⁹¹³ *EL* 11.34: 'hoc enim saeculum tanquam aureum liberales disciplinas ferme iam extinctas reduxit in lucem.'

and frequently encounter agitation as if of their own free will.' Yet, his discourse takes a surprising turn when he goes on to state that 'even men who have renounced the life of pleasure and the active life and have devoted themselves wholly to contemplation'—and here we clearly perceive the tripartite structure of life—'are still troubled by agitation.' This bleak message appears to contradict my hypothesis that Ficino wanted to end his *Epistole* on a positive note of philosophical achievement and rewarding tranquillity. Only at the end of *EL* 12.2, he points out that he has written all this as a final encouragement: I thought it good to remind you of these things, my beloved fellow philosophers, so that you do not believe that you can taste the sweet savours of philosophy without some bitterness, but also so that you do not lose hope that the bitterness can one day, with the help of God, be changed to sweetness, which is what nature commonly does in the case of apples.⁹¹⁴

The hopeful message concluding the first letter is followed by an arresting image right at the beginning of *EL* 1.3: 'Socrates on military campaigns often stood still in his tracks under the heavens, looking up in astonishment at the rising sun, with unmoving limbs and unblinking eyes, like a statue, until he could greet the sun as it rose again the next day.'⁹¹⁵ Ficino quickly explains that 'Socrates was enraptured not by this sun but by another.'⁹¹⁶ For Socrates 'being reminded on occasion by the celestial sun, and surmising from this the supercelestial Sun, contemplated its majesty all the more keenly, and wondered in astonishment at the incomprehensible goodness of its Father.'⁹¹⁷ In other words, Socrates admired the Sun because it reminded him of God.⁹¹⁸ It is striking that Ficino choose to place this letter, which is the final chapter of his treatise *De sole*, at the beginning of Book 12. On the one hand, it makes for a perfect opening, in which the beginning of the book is represented by the start of a day. On the other hand, it is an odd strategy to blow so much fresh energy into what is the final book of the collection, the more because the epistolary convention is—as we have seen—to fade out into the night. In the next paragraphs, I show how the rising sun is an apposite entry point for the following series of light-drenched letters.

⁹¹⁴ *EL* 12.2: 'non debet homines vel negociose vitae deditos vel libidinibus mancipatos malis innumerabilibus opprimi. Quippe cum ipsi se fato passim et fortunae subiiciant et quasi sponte perturbationibus frequenter occurrant' 'Viros quinetiam qui voluptuosa et activa insuper vita neglecta se totos contemplative dediderunt perturbationibus agitari.' 'Opere praecium fore censui ut neque confidatis vos dulces philosophiae sapores absque amarore quodam degustaturos. Neque rursum desperetis vel amaritudinem ipsam, auctore deo quandoque quod et in pomis saepe natura facit in dulcedinem posse converti.'

⁹¹⁵ *EL* 1.3: 'Socrates in castris saepe sub divo solem suspiciens orientem stetit attonitus in eisdem vestigiis, inmotis membris inconvenientibus oculis statue more quoisque solem salutaret iterum resurgentem.'

⁹¹⁶ *EL* 1.3: 'Socratem in eo mentis excessu non solem quidem hunc admiratum fuisse sed alterum.'

⁹¹⁷ *EL* 1.3: 'Socrates igitur sole coelesti nonnumquam admonitus solemque inde supercoelestem auguratus et illius maiestatem contemplabatur attentior et patris illius incomprehensibilem bonitatem admirabatur attonitus.'

⁹¹⁸ For an insightful discussion of this letter, see Michael J. B. Allen 2007, 41–43.

I can make my point most effectively by listing the letters which contain references to the Sun and its light: 12.3; 4; 6; 7; 8; 9; 10; 11; 12; 13; 14; 17; 18; 20; 21; 22; 24; 27; 29; 30; 31; 32; 34; 35; 37; 42; 43. Twenty-seven out of a total of 43, these letters make up more than sixty percent of the book. They are not concentrated in one half but equally spread from beginning to end. Many of them are mere letters of dedication and not particularly significant. But since no other book contains so many dedications of the same work, even those letters gain salience through their number. The light in Book 12 is discussed as a reflection of God and as a natural phenomenon. Yet Ficino makes sure that the reader also thinks of it metaphorically as the achievement of a contemplative life. The following quotation from *EL* 12.4—which I render at some length to do justice to its potency—draws light into the lives of the reader of the collection who has followed Ficino’s didactic *ductus*:

It is with light of this kind that men of true learning and sanctity shall shine, both here and in their homeland, even if they have never taught anyone. Those who have not just contemplated the divine for themselves but have also freely taught others and have given laws for the observance of justice shall shine with clearer brilliance than all the rest, sparkling most brightly like the stars. They shall shine, not for a limited time but for all time, not only for the entire duration of the universe but throughout the span of eternity that is more divine, a span which is never interrupted but is wholly perpetual and continuous. It seems just that instigators of public and divine good, who have always benefitted mankind and have not hidden their God-given light but have used it for the good of all, will be rewarded by God with eternal brilliance and goodness.⁹¹⁹

This letter talks about light not only as something that is enjoyed by men, but also by something that men can become themselves. The letter’s outlook on the hereafter, in which those who have used their light well on earth will continue to shine with it in heaven, plays on a conception of life after death which is strongly indebted to its description in Dante’s *Comedia*. In the next section, I delve deeper in this tentative dialogue between this work and the *Epistole*.

⁹¹⁹ *EL* 12.4: ‘Eiusmodi quadam luce fulgebunt et hic et in patria docti revera sanctique viri, etiam si nullos unquam ipsi docuerint. Qui vero non solum sibi ipsis divina contemplati fuerint, sed alios insuper palam erudierint legesque dederint ad iustitiam observandam manifestiore praecaeteris fulgore lucebunt stellarum instar clarissime coruscantes. Neque id quidem ad tempus certum, sed per omne tempus! Neque per totum mundi tempus solum, sed per ipsum divinioris aeternitatis usum: nunquam videlicet interruptum, sed perpetuum poenitus atque continuum. Iustum enim esse videtur ut qui publici divinique boni fuerint auctores semperque sint hominibus profuturi. Lumenque sibi divinitus datum non absconderint, sed ad commune bonum prorsus ediderint, aeterno quodam splendore divinitus bonoque donentur.’

COMMEDIA

Butler wrote about Poliziano that ‘throughout his writing and like most other humanists, Poliziano is, at the simplest level, playing a kind of game of encryption and decipherment. Fail to break the code and you fail to take full pleasure in the text; succeed and you know that you are no outsider to the world of learning. … And this indeed is where our material leads us: to the conclusion that, even in the midst of spectacular performances of his erudition, Poliziano is constructing meaning behind the scenes that he does not expect—or even especially want—his reader to see.’⁹²⁰ We have arrived at a similar moment in Ficino’s *Epistole*. Indeed, the recognition of a Dantean structure requires a good deal of creative thinking on the part of the reader. Yet, there are textual clues in Book 6 which indicate the right direction. Book 6 is the last book of the collection which is ‘in motion,’ that is, directed towards the achievement of a *vita contemplativa*. Everything in the second half of the *Epistole* squarely belongs to this contemplative *modus*. Even though Ficino continues to encounter some of the same problems as before, his approach to them is now rooted in a philosophical lifestyle and free of tribulations. In the following paragraphs, I show how Book 6 becomes a real turning point which looks ahead to the *skopos* of Book 12.

Understanding the Sun as an image of the divine is essential for correctly understanding the significance of light in Book 12. The collection’s first and most explicit letter on this topic is *EL* 6.27, *Orphica comparatio solis ad Deum atque declaratio idearum*. After explaining how from a single light a multiplicity of colours can flow, Ficino wishes ‘to look up at the celestial Sun’ so that he ‘may decry in it, as in a mirror, that super-celestial One who has set His tabernacle in the Sun.’ This is not the only moment in the book where Ficino encourages his readers to personally confront themselves with divine light. In the second last letter, *EL* 6.48, he translates a large chunk from Plato’s famous allegory of the cave.⁹²¹ It is the second time he inserts such an unusually large portion of translated text into a letter. The first instance was also a translation of the allegory of the cave, albeit of a different section, in *EL* 4.26. The text, it turns out, serves as a marker of the transitional function of Book 4 and 6, opening up respectively the active and contemplative life. Twice, Ficino moved up in the existential hierarchy and thus showed others the way through his letters. In the same way, the captives from Plato’s cave find their way up to the world above, where they see the real light, and subsequently try to convince their fellow captives to exit their confinement. For ‘in this world,’ Ficino interprets Plato’s allegory, ‘the wretched souls, shut in by the shadows and the windowless prison of a deathbound body, never in fact look upon themselves, or anything else, or the real sun, but look instead upon the shadows of themselves and of other

⁹²⁰ Shane Butler 2018, 265.

⁹²¹ *The Republic*, Book 7, 514a–520a.

things, and a faint image of the real Sun. ... Lulled into a deep sleep, they take the shadowy images of good and evil for what is truly good and what is truly evil.'

Returning to the question of intertextuality, Book 6 is also a turning point for the relationship between the *Epistole* and epic literature. *EL* 6.49 is the prefatory letter for the new Dante commentary by Landino, who was already mentioned in *EL* 6.2 and 6.25. *EL* 6.49 is the central letter of the collection, bridging the work's first and second half. Given that central positions are in the *Epistole* often charged with special meaning—see, for example, *EL* 1.65-67 and 3.33—we do well to look at it with special attention. First of all, Dante is immediately incorporated into Ficino's light symbolism. Through the re-edition of the *Commedia*, he writes, 'night is turned to day.' Dante's poem and Landino's commentary are described as 'a double sun,' punning on Dante's model of two suns, being the papacy and the empire.⁹²² He goes on to state that 'the flames of the Empyrean heaven, never seen more fully, blaze before us this day in honour of Dante's coronation.' The flames of the empyrean are, of course, an allusion to *Paradiso*. It is as if Dante's poem has opened the doors of heaven and lets the divine light shine into the world. Indeed, Ficino's letter appears to be a literary variation on the imagery we have already observed in the painting in the Duomo where rays fall from the *Commedia* onto the city. Not *Inferno* nor *Purgatorio* are at the core of Ficino's praise—the two sections which today are most popular—but the final cantos by which Dante, as it were, brought back light to a city clad in darkness.

Dante is the only vernacular poet in the collection who receives such an elaborate discussion and, apart from cameos by Sebastiano Foresi and Giovanni Boccaccio in *EL* 1.70 and 9.2, the only vernacular poet to be named at all. In the case of Vergil, Augustine, and Landino, this kind of display alerted us to key intertextual relationships and there is no reason to assume that Dante is a different case. A second feature of Ficino's epistolary engagement with other authors was their interconnectedness. Landino, Augustine, and Vergil were read within the same moral-ethical framework. Ficino's allusions to each of them mutually reinforced their significance. Is this the case for the *Commedia* as well? Judging from *EL* 6.49, the answer is positive. If we compare the Italian version of the letter, which is also included in the 1481 edition of Landino's commentary, with the Latin version featuring in both the commentary and the *Epistole*, one thing stands out: The latter version hails the return of Dante with ample use of Vergilian hexameters.⁹²³ The fulfilment of Dante's prediction that one day he would return to Florence is affirmed with the following citation from the *Aeneid*: 'Non frustra augurium vani docuere parentes.'⁹²⁴ After four shorter

⁹²² *Purgatorio* 16.106ff.

⁹²³ Landino 2001a, 1:268–270.

⁹²⁴ *Aen.* 1.392.

references to the same poem follows the longest quotation of all.⁹²⁵ Ficino describes the welcoming of Dante by Florence as follows:

venisti tandem, tuaque exspectata parenti
vicit iter durum pietas? datur ora tueri,
nate, tua et notas audire et reddere voces?
sic equidem ducebam animo rebarque futurum,
tempora dinumerans, nec mea cura fefellit.⁹²⁶

It is no coincidence that this conspicuous citation comes from Book 6, in which Aeneas descends into the underworld. For Landino, this is the final step 'before it can settle down to a quiet repose in Italy.'⁹²⁷ It is a fitting conclusion of Ficino's quest for the contemplative life since the final letter in Book 6 is the final threshold towards the corresponding *modus* in the collection.

For Ficino, Vergil and Dante mutually explained each other. In the preface to his translation of *Monarchia*, he explains how the latter became familiar with Plato's thought, 'col vaso di Virgilio beendo alle Platoniche fonti.'⁹²⁸ Stressing the importance of Vergil for Dante in the context of a translation of *Monarchia* seems odd, even if Dante did rely on Vergil to shape his political thought.⁹²⁹ But before Ficino briefly introduces the translated work, he has already spent a third of the introduction on the threefold structure of the *Commedia* and its Platonic-Vergilian origins. The connection Ficino makes between the two authors is clearly indebted to the same interpretative framework which links Landino's interpretations of the *Aeneid* and *Commedia*. In the words of Gilson, 'Landino firmly believes that the *Aeneid* and the *Commedia* share a single underlying structure, and it is the structural homology between them that allows him to read Dante's language and thought on the same level as Virgil's.'⁹³⁰ This is already made clear in the *Disputationes*, where Lorenzo says to Alberti: 'not only have you brought it about that I am a master of the divine teaching of Vergil, but instructed by their similarity, I can now easily conjecture as to what our own Dante meant.'⁹³¹ The remark follows Alberti's interpretation of Aeneas' descent into the underworld but has broader validity.

The threefold structure of the *Commedia* matches the threefold structure which Landino imposed on the *Aeneid*. Even though the three realms in the *Commedia* do not perfectly correspond to the

⁹²⁵ Aen. 3.301; 2.40/2.370/5.76; 1.687; 4.470.

⁹²⁶ Aen. 6.687-691.

⁹²⁷ Landino 1980, 150.25-26; Stahel 1968, 98: 'antea quam quietas in Italia sedes collocet.'

⁹²⁸ Dante 2004, 370. Cf. Gilson 2005, 144-145.

⁹²⁹ Cf. Kallendorf 1988, 48.

⁹³⁰ Gilson 2005, 171.

⁹³¹ Landino 1980, 219.9-12; Stahel 1968, 205: 'non solum effecisti ut haec a Marone divinitus dicta tenerem sed similitudine rerum admonitus iam quid sibi noster quoque Danthes voluerit facile coniector.'

different ways of life—the way to heaven lies open also for those people pursuing the *vita activa*—Landino repeatedly interprets figures in *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso* as representing one of the three types of life.⁹³² In conclusion, it was easy to tie in Book 6 a Dantean thread to the Vergilian thread that had so far run through the *Epistole* since in Ficino's mind they were essentially made of the same (Platonic) material. The *Aeneid* offered no opportunities for a satisfactory ending, because the killing of Turnus, covered in shadows, is too sombre for the achievement of a contemplative life. Instead, Ficino introduced with impressive pomp and circumstance the alternative model of the *Commedia*'s happy end. Not until Book 12 does the reader find out the precise goal of this intertextual shift. But the change is felt much sooner in a more subtle way: the storm metaphors, which were introduced through the *Aeneid* and stayed related to it until well into Book 6, subside after Dante is brought in. A new life asks for new allusions.

SUNNY READERS

As I have tried to do systematically in this thesis, I shall look once more at readers' reception. This time, I wish to focus on their engagement with Ficino's play on light in the letters. There are two instances which are especially worthy of our attention. The first one offers proof that Ficino's contemporaries recognised the value of reading his *Epistole* and Dante's *Commedia* alongside each other. It should not surprise us that the passage in question is by Landino, by now a reliable touchstone for my interpreting the letters' engagement with epic poetry. I want to give the passage in full before analysing it:

Ma dello splendore et lume diremo piú comodamente nel paradiso, et come è
in Dio, nell'angelo, nella ragione, nello spirito, et nel corpo. Et se prima ti dilecti
d'intenderne el tutto, leggi nel secondo libro delle pistole del nostro Marsilio
Fecino, doctissimo di tucti e platonici della nostra età, et rimarrai sattisfacto.⁹³³

The placement of Landino's note on light is odd, since it appears in the seventh canto of *Inferno* and not in *Paradiso*. This is due to Landino's way of structuring his commentary, which prevents him from postponing the discussion of a passage until its topic recurs later in the text. At this point in the poem, Dante cannot yet perceive the light in heaven. Vergil merely mentions it in his praise of God's creative power. Because the presence of light is still so faint, Landino looks ahead at the full realisation of divine splendour and refers the reader to his more substantial treatment of the

⁹³² McNair 2019, 178–183.

⁹³³ Landino 2001b, *ad Inf.* VII.79–81, ll. 113–117.

topic in the context of *Paradiso*. At the same time, he brings in Ficino's letters which are thus connected to the final part of the *Commedia*.

Landino's association of the two texts is as clear-cut as it gets in Renaissance criticism. It clearly demonstrates that fifteenth-century intellectuals naturally connected the *Commedia* and the *Epistole* in their interpretation of both works. I do not want to go as far as claiming that Landino had understood the full scale of Ficino's engagement with Dante for his epistolary closure. It is not even clear whether by this time Landino had read Books 3-4, only in which the complementary Vergilian pattern is fully established. Obviously, Book 12 did not exist yet nor had Book 6 and its conspicuous signalling of the intertextual switch from Vergil to Dante appeared. In fact, the final letter of Book 6 relies itself on the precedence of Landino's *Comento*. Still, I suggest that Landino had grasped the meaningful position of the letters on light at the end of Book 2. For it was not necessary that he should explicitly refer to the letters. They were not yet printed and circulated only in a limited number of manuscripts—the earliest known manuscript of Book 2 was produced after 1483, but there must have been an earlier copy—so that accessibility cannot have been a valid argument.⁹³⁴ Instead, Landino could have simply referred to the independent mini-treatise *Quid sit lumen in corpore mundi, in anima, in angelo, in Deo*. This would have allowed his readers to consult Ficino's work in the manuscript for Bernardo Bembo, now in Leiden, or in a non-epistolary manuscript, now in Florence, containing a pre-canonical version of several letters including *EL* 2.9.⁹³⁵ Instead, it appears that Landino considered his association between light in Dante's *Commedia* and Ficino's treatise on the same phenomenon more to the point in the context of the letter collection than in isolation. We may even conjecture that Landino's fortuitous connection inspired Ficino to extrapolate the bright ending of Book 2 to Book 12.

Landino was a privileged reader of Ficino who shared the latter's intellectual interests and was himself occupied with interpreting and using Dante. Therefore, we cannot assume that he is in any way representative of the wider readership of the *Epistole*. As I have mentioned in the final paragraphs of Chapter 4, Book 2 was remarkably unpopular with readers. However, the tenth and final letter is a notable exception to this. Its paragraphs on light attracted the attention of different types of readers even though annotations in Book 2 are generally attributable to professional scholars and theologians. It is impossible to find out whether some of these readers arrived at *EL* 2.9 via Landino's reference. In any case, it shows that *EL* 2.9 was a highlight in the first two books, and that Ficino's bright ending was noticed and appreciated. Turning to Book 12, we are again

⁹³⁴ R; cf. Gentile 2010; 1990, CCI.

⁹³⁵ MSS Leiden, Universiteitsbibliotheek, BPL 160 A; Firenze, BNCF, Magliabechiano VII 1135. Cf. Gentile 1990, CXXXIV–CXXXV, CX–CXII; 2010, LXXVI.

dealing with a point in the *Epistole* where readers were moving through the collection with less annotatory zeal and perhaps at a higher speed than in the previous books. Yet again, the letters on light attracted more attention than on average. Leaving the exact number of annotations aside, I want to point at a pair of drawings found on the final pages of two copies now held in Budapest and München. While the annotations in the first volume are anonymous, the drawing in the latter copy can be attributed with certainty to Hartmann Schedel (1440-1514).⁹³⁶ Schedel belonged the humanist circle in Nürnberg where we also find Willibald Pirckheimer, and which inspired Koberger to publish Ficino's letters in 1497.

Both the German and the Hungarian copy have a doodle of a sun next to two letters dealing with light (Figures 20 and 21). The facial features of both suns betray that they are meant to represent God. Indeed, the Hungarian copy has written below the drawing the caption 'sol imago Dei.' These are the only two drawings in over 5000 pages of *Epistole* examined by me over the course of my project. Needless to say, they were a source of great joy and amusement, which I think was the sentiment of their artists as well. The question poses itself why they appear at this point in the text. Anthony Grafton has discussed the function of marginal drawings in early modern books:

An image drawn with particular care could be the most effective way to call attention to particular features of a text. ... Sketching—like underlining, adding maniculae in the margins, and jotting notes—was not only an art of memory, a way of marking the text for rapid later use, but an art of interpretation.⁹³⁷

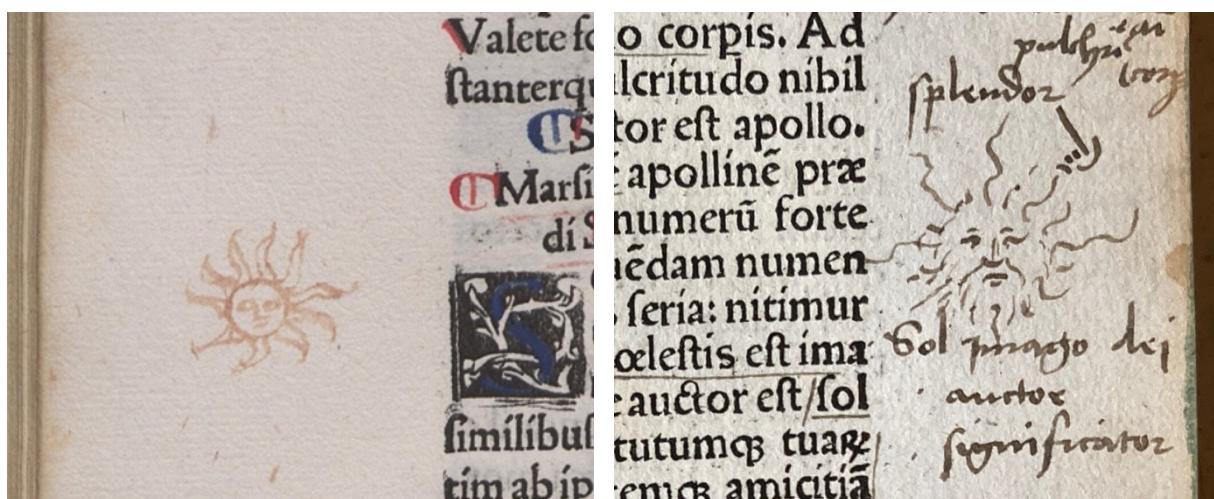


Figure 20 M. Ficino. *Epistole*. Venezia, 1495. Inc Inc München, BSB, 2 Inc. c.a. 3202, fol. CLXXXVII^v.

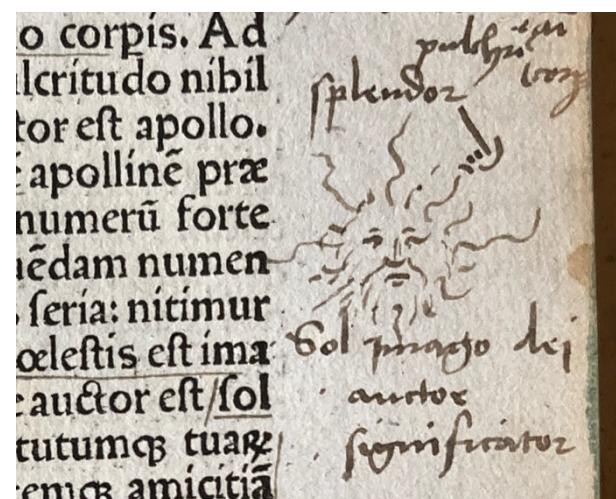


Figure 21 M. Ficino. *Epistole*. Venezia, 1495. Inc Budapest, Ac. 366, fol. CCXL^r.

⁹³⁶ Kyriss 1952, 557 contains a list with books owned by Schedel for which Beyer 2012 outlines the collection principles and use. For a biography of Schedel, see Fuchs 2005.

⁹³⁷ Grafton 2021, 201.

He goes on to state that 'the rules of this period form of visual commentary have not yet been reconstructed in full.' The two suns have no interpretative function; the relationship between God and the sun does not become more intelligible with the help of a small drawing. I see the graphic response of both annotators as an emotional one. Emotional, because of the achievement that is reaching the end of the *Epistole*, a relatively long work which sometimes tests the patience of the reader. Emotional also because Ficino has built in that sense of achievement into the collection. As I have shown in the previous passages, he made them into a journey, into an ascent from love to politics to contemplation. As the reader progresses through the letters, he enters the lofty realm of philosophy which allows him to contemplate God. Schedel and the other annotator marked their arrival there in the most enthusiastic way by drawing what they were reading. Perhaps feeling dissatisfied by the textual culmination of Ficino's letters, they wanted to underscore the revelatory nature of Book 12 by this visual exuberance. In any case, they captured the principal theme of the book very clearly and put themselves eye to eye with the image it conjures. The abstraction is lifted, the onlooker gets a sense of that the outcome of reading the *Epistole* is real: seeing God. Because of their autobiographical character, letter collections lend themselves perfectly as a conclusive literary product. They allow the author to leave an overview of his life for future generations, and the later he publishes it, the more complete this overview will be. In the case of Ficino, however, the end of the collection is not the end of a life. Corresponding to Christian doctrine, which Ficino served as a philosopher as well as in his priestly function, the end of life is the beginning of a new and more genuine existence in the light of God.

EPILOGUE

RECAPITULATION

The aim of this thesis was to analyse narrative patterns in Marsilio Ficino's letter collection. I showed how the opening letters of the first book predicted a structure modelled on the three kinds of life. The three ways of life are pleasure-seeking, active and contemplative. They are evoked by distinct sections—or *modi* as I have called them—in Book 1 which follow on each other in a teleological sequence—the *ductus*—towards the highest good and ultimate felicity, achieved in divine contemplation. The narrative consists in the spiritual growth of Ficino's persona from one life for to the other. As it happens, the structure of Book 1, which incorporates the ten letters of Book 2, is replicated in the structure of the entire collection. This encapsulation of a structure within an identical structure is a typical feature of macrotexts and had already been observed in the ascension from love to philosophy in the dossier of letters to Cavalcanti. The structure of the collection is most obvious in the first half, but frays already towards the end of Book 1, in Book 4, and at the beginning of Book 5. The most logical reason is that Ficino did not perceive the need to guide his readers towards a holistic interpretation of the *Epistole* once he had made clear that this was the preferred method of approaching his work. Hence, the ring structures, date symbolism, stark juxtapositions, and other structuring devices which characterise Books 1 and 3, are much less present in later books.

Renaissance literature is characterised by a deep involvement with past literary traditions. Therefore, I looked at the role of poetic allusions at important turning points in the collection and as a characterising factor of the different *modi*. It turns out that epic poetry had developed a privileged relationship with epistolary literature in Antiquity and especially in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Having demonstrated this through an analysis of Petrarch's and Poliziano's published correspondences, I showed the implications of this intertextuality in Ficino's *Epistole*. I showed that Vergil's *Eclogues* and *Aeneid* provide the most important points of reference, respectively for marking the transitions from one *modus* to another in Book 1 and for underlining the tribulations of the *vita voluptuosa* and *activa* through storm metaphors in Books 3 and 6. The *Disputationes Camaldulenses* of Cristoforo Landino, which contain a detailed allegorical interpretation of the *Aeneid*, proved to be a key hermeneutical lens to interpret the scattered allusions. They provided the necessary background of literary and philosophical discourses from which fifteenth- and sixteenth century readers would have interpreted the interplay of the *Epistole* with the *Aeneid*. A probably unique feature of Ficino's letter collection is that it complements the Latin intertexts with a vernacular intertextuality. This can be explained through a contemporary revival of Duecento and Trecento poetry in Florence. Hence, I demonstrated how Ficino relied on love lyric

to shape the amatory *modus* of Book 1. I showed how this intertextual engagement with lyrical poetry paved the way for a macro-allusion to the vernacular epic tradition, namely Dante's *Commedia*. Through the interpretative continuity between the *Aeneid* and the *Commedia* in Ficino's and Landino's writings, I explained how the intertextual shift from Vergil to Dante could take place quickly and seamlessly.

This thesis has largely been concerned with *how* Ficino's letters are linked into an overarching macrotext. Apart from a brief excursus on 'epistolary exemplarity' in Chapter 1, I have not said much on *why* he decided to compose such a tightly knit *epistolarium*. To expiate such an austere thesis topic, I will conclude with an analysis of the letter titles, and a paratextual comparison of the last early modern editions of the *Epistole* with the 1495 edition. On the basis of those observations, I argue that the *Epistole* are an ethical itinerary towards felicity. Through the letter titles, the collection bridges philosophical ideals and everyday life, thus elevating the reader to a more considerate way of engaging with others and oneself. The *Epistole* were Ficino's attempt at turning his theoretical philosophy, not accessible for everyone, into 'a way of life.' I allude to the title of Pierre Hadot's book, who studied ancient philosophy as 'a method of spiritual progress which demanded a radical conversion and transformation of the individual's way of being.'⁹³⁸

LETTER TITLES

While the body of the letters in the 1495 printed edition is justified, the titles preceding the address lines are centred. Many readers underlined them or added a coloured paragraph mark. In the manuscript versions of the *Epistole*, too, the titles are marked through their layout. In *V*, they are centred and capitalised in contrast with the address line, while *L2* and *L3* leave abundant space before and after them. Although headers are not entirely without precedent in the epistolary tradition, the way Ficino styled his titles is nevertheless unique. From Petrarch onwards, some humanists appended summaries of their letters to the address lines. The second epistle in the *Familiares*, for example, opens with 'Thome Messanensi, de immature laudis appetitu.' Most manuscripts of the *Familiares* preserve the titles, including those copied in fifteenth-century Florence, which Ficino most likely used as a model for his own enterprise.⁹³⁹ Giorgio Valagussa and Matteo Bosso formatted their letter titles in the same way as Petrarch but without the topical detail. Descriptions like 'de occurrentibus multis' and 'familiaris' far outnumber specific titles like

⁹³⁸ Hadot 1995, 265

⁹³⁹ MSS Civitas Vaticana, BAV, Urb. lat. 330 and Firenze, BML, Plut.53.4, both produced in the workshop of Vespasiano da Bisticci; Rossi 1933, XX.XXIII-XXIV. Cf. MSS Firenze, BML, Plut.90 inf.17 and Plut.26 sin.10, owned by respectively an anonymous Florentine and Tedaldo della Casa; Rossi 1933, XXI.XXX.

'quod infirmitates non sunt variis de causis et rationibus in malis habendae.'⁹⁴⁰ Yet Petrarch, Valagussa, and Bosso are exceptions; there are no titles in contemporary manuscripts or even later editions of the letter collections by Filelfo, Poliziano, Salvini, Fonzio, Traversari, Dolfin, Enea Silvio Piccolomini (1405-1464), Leonardo Dati (1360-1425), Antonio Beccadelli (1394-1471), Poggio Bracciolini (1380-1459), and Girolamo Aliotti (1412-1480).⁹⁴¹

Ficino's titles exist on the continuum between plain labels like 'congratulatio' and 'commendatio' to topic descriptions such as 'De divino furore' (*EL* 1.6) to sententiae like 'Quos deus coniunxit moribus coniunget foelicitate' (*EL* 1.44), and even longer sentences such as 'Qui eternam amat formam tam facile saltem tamque secure fruitur quam difficile et sollicite qui temporalem' (*EL* 3.21). Many of them are contextual, by which I mean that they would not make sense without the accompanying letter. Examples are 'De foelicitatis desiderio' (*EL* 1.1), 'Excusatio prolixitatis' (*EL* 1.7), and 'Quis dives iniustus sit quis iustus' (*EL* 1.73). The longer titles tend to be statements which are complete in themselves, short sayings expressing a general truth. Sometimes, this kind of title is taken from another author and may recur in the body of the letter itself. Both are the case in *EL* 3.4, with as its title 'Solus nullum carum amittit umquam cui omnes in illo cari sunt qui nunquam amittitur,' a quotation from Augustine's *Confessions*.⁹⁴²

By adding titles, Ficino lifted the letters from their *Sitz-im-Leben* and elevated them to a more artificial mode of writing and reading. Indeed, we do not normally find them in the original letters which Ficino himself or his amanuensis penned.⁹⁴³ Ficino attributed great value to the titles and

⁹⁴⁰ *BosE* 141.

⁹⁴¹ For Dati, Beccadelli, Salvini, Fonzio (four autographs), Traversari (early redaction stage; see Favi 2001, 92), and Aliotti (autograph; cf. Caby 2016, 107), see respectively MSS Firenze, BML, Plut.53.1; Civitas Vaticana, BAV, Vat.lat. 3371; BAV, Vat.lat. 5140; Bologna, Biblioteca Universitaria, 2382; Civitas Vaticana, BAV, Vat.lat. 1793; Arezzo, Biblioteca Città di Arezzo, 400. See also the incunables featuring Poliziano's letters, the first edition of Dolfin's epistles (1524) and the accurate editions of Filelfo's and Poggio's collections (Filelfo 2015; Bracciolini 1984).

⁹⁴² Aug. *Conf.* 4.9. (14).

⁹⁴³ The letter preserved in Fil. Firenze, AMP, 41, fol. 551 does not have a title, whereas the same letter in Book 10 is titled 'Alludendo nomini declaratur divitias esse bona animi'; the manuscript letter in Inc Firenze, BNCF, Magliabechiano B 5 18, fol. 2v does not have a title, but the longer version of this letter in Book 4 is headed 'Numquid quisquis, sed quo animo det considerare debemus'; the dedicatory letter slipped into a copy of *De christiana religione* destined for Donato Ugolino, now Inc San Marino, Huntington Library, 86759, returns, with another addressee, in Book 3 under the heading *Non cortex nutrit: sed medulla*. In another copy of the same edition, now Inc Firenze, BNCF, Magliabechiano A 7 8, we find an untitled autograph letter which appears in Book 5 of the printed edition with the title 'Non ex humanis divina sed ex divinis humana sunt iudicanda.' A letter to Francesco Gaddi, reproduced in Kristeller 1964, fig. 3, reappears in Book 9 as 'Pauci negotia publica coniungunt cum studio litterarum.' None of the letters which only exist outside of the letter collection bear a title: Fil. Firenze, AMP, 22, fol. 519; 29, fol. 830; 98, fol. 664; the autograph tucked into Inc Cambridge, MA, Houghton Library, 6125; the original letters in MSS Civitas Vaticana, BAV, Reg. lat. 2023, fol. 259 and Vat. lat. 7705, fol. 5; the autograph letter reproduced in Kristeller 1964, fig. 4; the original letter written on fol. 2v. of yet another copy of *De christiana religione*, now MS Napoli, Biblioteca Nazionale di Napoli, XIII G 40. Also copies by the recipients of Ficino's letters and their immediate environment have no titles as is evident from the copies made by Antonio Ivani in MS Sarzana, Biblioteca Comunale, XXVI F 73 and by Bartolomeo Fonzio in MS Oxford, Bodleian Library, Lat. misc. d. 85, fol. 119r-120r. Cf. Gentile 1980, 95.108. The autograph dedication in Inc Reggio-Emilia, Biblioteca Municipale, E 29 is an exception and was almost certainly written after Book 3 had been finished.

even changed the text of one letter to match more closely the wordings of its heading. This we already discussed in the context of Bernardo Bembo's *zibaldone*.⁹⁴⁴ That is why I cannot agree with Tröger's argument that the titles are an attempt to make banal letters of recommendation and gratulatory notes more worthwhile by giving them a philosophical tinge. According to her, 'scheint es Ficinos Intention zu sein, durch die Überschriften eine äußere Einheitlichkeit herzustellen, die nicht der tatsächlichen Vielfalt der Briefe entspricht.'⁹⁴⁵ It is unlikely that a couple of words above a seemingly irrelevant letter would have convinced Ficino's learned readership of its philosophical value. Tröger's analysis also downplays the role of the title as an important heuristic and discursive element of a text. Following Charles Grivel, Gérard Genette stated that 'the functions of the title are (1) to identify the work, (2) to designate a work's subject matter, (3) to play up the work'.⁹⁴⁶ How can we apply those functions to Ficino's *Epistole*?

The first two functions are referential: they allow authors readers to refer to a text and to indicate its content. As for the first, Ficino himself did not exploit the referential function of his titles. In his commentary on Ps.-Dionysius' *Mystical Theology*, for example, he references *EL* 10.34 through paraphrase, not by title.⁹⁴⁷ Ficino's adherence to the second function, to designate the subject matter, is questionable as well. In the words of Jayne Sears, the titles are 'often not a very useful guide to the contents'.⁹⁴⁸ The connection between a sometimes-high-sounding title and the corresponding letter's mundane content can be farfetched. For example, the title of *EL* 6.25 is a generalising statement about the inverse proportionality of physical and spiritual beauty: 'Decrescente corporis pulchritudine: crescit animi pulchritudo.' The letter itself praises Poliziano and while it mentions the humanist's growth from a boy into an adult man, it does not talk about beauty at all. Another example is *EL* 5.47, *Coelum pollicetur bona, virtus praestat*. The discrepancy between title and letter is evident from a quick look at the full text of the short letter:

I am writing a letter to the younger Lorenzo about the prosperity destined by fate, which for the most part we receive as our portion from the stars outside us; and also about the happiness freely available, which we obtain as we will from the stars within us. If necessary, you will expound the letter. You will also advise him to learn it by heart and to keep it stored in the depths of his mind.

⁹⁴⁴ See p. 32-35.

⁹⁴⁵ Tröger 2016, 51.

⁹⁴⁶ Genette 1997, 76.

⁹⁴⁷ *On the Mystical Theology*, 3.1.

⁹⁴⁸ Sears 1963, 11.

Those great things which we promise in that letter he will provide for himself, if only he will read it in the spirit in which we have written it.⁹⁴⁹

If not referentiality nor exaggeration, what is the function of Ficino's letter titles? There is, of course, their structuring function as the building blocks of ring compositions and of a certain continuity across books. Readers noticed these intratextual references: The anonymous annotator of Inc Firenze, BNCF, B 2 18, for example, noted in the margin of 'Sua mittenda sunt ad suos' on folio XXXVII^v that the title will recur on folio LXXII^r.⁹⁵⁰ The same annotator marked on folio LXXII^r that the title had already been used on folio XXXVII^v. Likewise, on page LVI^r, he indicates that the title 'Tres sunt contemplationis platonice gradus' also appears on page LXXVII^v. But that is not what I want to focus on here. Let us return to Genette, here quoting the writer Jean Giono: 'A title is needed because the title is the sort of banner one makes one's way toward; the goal one must achieve is to explain the title.'⁹⁵¹ The challenge posed by Ficino is to connect the content of the letters with the philosophical maxims of the titles. That is easily done when the letter itself deals with the same philosophical topic, as is regularly the case in the *Epistole*. It is much harder when the letter is concerned with an everyday event such as recalling books from a friend or arranging dowries for one's nieces. Yet the second case holds, I believe, the explanation for the titles in general. Ficino did not want to 'play up' his letters with the titles, but rather tried to make his readers think about their everyday lives from a philosophical viewpoint and to follow his example in leading their lives according to philosophical principles. In short, the titles are moral precepts, not offered to us in textual isolation, but exemplarily embedded in the lived experience of Ficino and his correspondents.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

The letter titles lend a unique character to the table of contents of Ficino's letters. Only two manuscripts of the *Epistole* have one, both copied at an early stage of the collection and containing only the first book. *V* was copied either for Giuliano de' Medici or Pope Sixtus IV, whose coat of arms it now bears.⁹⁵² *N1* represents a pre-canonical version of Book 1 with Ficino's own corrections. It is no coincidence that only the longest and most independent of the letter books received its own table of contents. Its addition implies a degree of self-sufficiency which subsequent

⁹⁴⁹ *EL* 5.47: 'Scribo ad Laurentium iuniorem epistolam de fatali prosperitate quam a stellis quae extra nos sunt plerumque sortimur. Ac etiam delibera felicitate quam pro arbitrio a stellis quae in nobis sunt adipiscimur. Tu eam (si opus erit) interpraetabere. Monebis quoque ut eam ediscat et servet alta mente repostam. Quod magna isti nos pollicemur tam magna sibi ipse praestabit: si modo eadem ipse mente legerit qua nos scripsimus.'

⁹⁵⁰ *EL* 1.131; 3.35.

⁹⁵¹ Genette 1997, 67

⁹⁵² Ficino 1990, LXXV.

books did not possess. The manuscript tables of content stood as a model for the edition of Capcasa, who was followed by Koberger. The information they provide is at the same time simple, because the tables only give the letter title and the folio number, and remarkable, because they leave out all information about the addressees of the work. In contrast, the earliest editions of Poliziano's letters prominently list the addressees at the beginning of the collection. His editors and printers were evidently more concerned with the *dramatis personae* of his intellectual life than with the themes of his letters. The same goes for the 1513 manuscript of Fonzio's letters, which begins with a list of addressees as the only guide through the collection.⁹⁵³ By placing themselves amidst the *fine fleur* of humanism, Poliziano and Fonzio safeguarded their cultural significance for their own era and for posterity.

Readers were curious about the social networks of letter compilers. A sixteenth-century reader of *L4* added an index of Ficino's addressees on the blank leaves at the end of the manuscript. However, Ficino himself never gave in to this focus on personalities. He could have boasted of his proximity to the Roman curia, to Florence's leading families, to notable scholars in Italy as well as abroad, to the royal houses of France and Hungary. But he did not. Instead, he, his copyists, and the printers listed only the titles of his letters at the beginning of the collection. This draws the attention to the content of the *Epistole*, not to their context. I have argued that Ficino's attempt at dehistoricising the letters served his aim of remaining relatable and exemplary for as large a readership as possible.⁹⁵⁴ His experiences, his battles, his achievements are not about him or other individuals, but are universal. When we read the table of contents on its own we encounter one life lesson after the other. The Renaissance was famously fond of commonplace books to collect witticisms and wisdom in a handily organised format.⁹⁵⁵ This is what the list of Ficino's letters most resembles. The difference between a standard commonplace book and the table of contents is that the latter immediately relates the abstract thoughts to a concrete exchange between Ficino and someone else, to a lived moment of a figure whose *persona* is fully explored in the *Epistole*.

A notable example of the commonplace trend were Erasmus' *Adages*, which gained widespread readership after their publication in 1500. Ficino's titles bear a strong resemblance to Erasmus' collection of sayings (Table 10). Even though Erasmus was mainly driven by a love for language, he dwells in the introduction of his collection of sayings on their moralising value.⁹⁵⁶ He considered his collection of proverbs useful for decorating Latin texts but did not lose sight of their ethical force. Indeed, Peter Mack has listed them as a central text of informal ethics, 'the discussion of

⁹⁵³ MS Firenze, BNCF, V Capponi 77, fol. [1]^v.

⁹⁵⁴ See p. 78-80; 147-148.

⁹⁵⁵ The bibliography is large, but for this context Moss 2013 is most relevant.

⁹⁵⁶ *Adages*, Introduction, v.49-96; vi.

TABLE 10 ERASMIAN ADAGES AND FICINIAN TITLES

Bis gratum quod ultro offertur (<i>Ad. I</i> ix 53)	Quod gratis fit gratius est quam quod ex debito (<i>EL</i> 1.31)
Nosce te ipsum (<i>Ad. I</i> vi 95)	Cognitio et reverentia suipsius omnium optima (<i>EL</i> 1.110)
Ne quicquam sapit qui sibi non sapit (<i>Ad. I</i> vi 20)	Frustra sapit qui non sibi ipse sapit (<i>EL</i> 4.3)
Omnium rerum vicissitudo est (<i>Ad. I</i> vii 63)	Omnium rerum vicissitudo est (<i>EL</i> 7.43)

ethical topics with a view to instructing the audience, in a non-systematic way, outside the educational system.⁹⁵⁷ Mack does not count letter collections as a genre typically used for this purpose, but the ethical instruction taking place in Ficino's *Epistole* suggests it should. Something along that line has already been suggested by Struever who wrote about Petrarch's letters that they 'engage in ... assigning moral values to individual acts'.⁹⁵⁸ Ficino has bundled those individual acts into a macrotext as a model for one's entire life.

... IN 1576

After two individual editions, the *Epistole* only appeared as part of Ficino's collected works. The first to take on this publishing project was Heinrich Petri from Basel. His printing house dated back to at least 1496, when his great-uncle Johannes collaborated on a biblical concordance with the famous Johannes Froben. From around 1509, the shop was managed by Johannes Petri's cousin Adam, who expanded its business and produced more than 300 editions. Heinrich, Adam's youngest son, took over the printing house together with his mother after his father's death in 1527. He was only nineteen years old at the time, and under his long direction, the company would deliver approximately 500 editions. Thanks to his success, Heinrich sat on religious and academic commissions, and was knighted by Charles V in 1556.⁹⁵⁹ Between 1560 and 1580, when he printed Ficino's collected works, several ancient Greek and Latin authors came off his presses alongside works by Renaissance authors such as Girolamo Cardano, Francesco Diaceto, Paolo Giovio and Nicolaus Copernicus.⁹⁶⁰ Of course, Ficino was most famous for his commentaries on Greek philosophers, and the importance of his posthumous *Opera omnia* cannot be attributed to the *Epistole* alone. Nevertheless, their third edition is again from the workshop of a major printer.

⁹⁵⁷ Mack 2013, 189.

⁹⁵⁸ Struever 1992, 27

⁹⁵⁹ Hieronymus 2010a; 2010b; 2013; 1997a, 1:E6–E27.

⁹⁶⁰ Hieronymus 1997, 2:1767–1768; the entire production of the Petri's is catalogued on <https://swisscollections.ch>.

Ficino's *Opera* appeared twice, the first time in 1561 and a second time in 1576.⁹⁶¹ The two editions are practically identical with broad margins, decorated initials at the beginning of each book, and generous blank space between the letters.

The only table of contents in the *Opera* is not connected to any individual work, but to the publication as a whole. We find the *Epistolarum libri 12* indicated there, with a folio number 478 that corresponds to the first page of the *Epistole*.⁹⁶² In contrast with the two earlier editions, not every individual letter is included in this table of contents. Instead, Petri has selected letters that he assumed would be of special interest to readers.⁹⁶³ He singled out letters to notable heads of state such as King Charles of France, King Ferrante of Naples, and the Pope; letters with Plato in the title seem like a logical choice considering Ficino's profession as a Platonic philosopher; Petri may have assumed the contemporary popularity of 'Oratio ad Deum Theologica,' 'De officiis' and 'Philosophica principis institutio' from a small Swiss publication (1519) in which they had already been printed together.⁹⁶⁴ Two of them were even translated into Czech and circulated separately one year later.⁹⁶⁵ 'Philosophica principis institutio' is an extension of the second *institutio*, and the two theological dialogues seemingly follow in the slipstream of the *oratio theologica*. The other letters are more loosely connected through their moral-religious content focused on felicity, Christian law, charity, virtue and providence, in addition to generally popular topics like the battle against the Turks and astrology.⁹⁶⁶

The list is bibliographically interesting because it does not distinguish between letter titles and the titles of independent works, but numbers them consecutively. It appears that Petri has dismembered the letter collection and guides the reader to individual letters as if they were there to be consulted in isolation rather than to be read in their context. If we consider a comprehensive index like Capcasa's and Koberger's as a visual representation the *Epistole*'s unity and internal structure, removing it simultaneously indicates and causes a change of approach to the work.

⁹⁶¹ Respectively USTC 602586 and USTC 607684; see Hieronymus 1997, 2:1188–1194.

⁹⁶² Ficino 1576, fol. A1v.

⁹⁶³ *Dialogus inter Deum et animam Theologicus; De divino furore; De foelicitate; Oratio ad Deum Theologica; Quaestiones quinque de mente; Compendium Platonicae Theologiae; Dialogus inter Paulum et Animam, quod ad Deum non ascendatur sine Deo; Exhortatio ad bellum contra barbaros; De officiis; Oratio de laudibus Philosophiae; Oratio de laudibus Medicinae; De Philosophia Platonica; Vita Platonis de Moribus Platonis; Disputatio contra iudicia Astrologorum; De institutione principis; Oratio Christiani Gregis ad Pastorem Sextum Pontificem; Oraculum Alphonsi Regis ad Regem Ferdinandum [...]; Orphica comparatio Solis ad Deum, atque declaratio idearum; Philosophica principis institutio; De Christianae legis divinitate; De Platoniconrum contemplationibus; Oratio de Charitate, habita in collegio Canonicorum Florentinorum ad populum; De Adoratione divinae virtutis; Apologia de Voluptate; Excerpta ex Proculo in Remp. Platonis; Apologia in lib. suum de Sole et lumine; Oratio ad Carolum Magnum Gallorum Regem; De Providentia, vaticiniis remediisque malorum*

⁹⁶⁴ Ficino 1519, USTC 651470.

⁹⁶⁵ Nejeschleba 2021.

⁹⁶⁶ See p. 125 and Höfert 2003 on the first; on astrology, the bibliography is vast.

Breaking up the unified collection into (part of) a reference work by means of a selective table of contents, does not prevent anyone from reading the letters cover to cover, as it were, but it certainly does not encourage taking that path either. I believe Petri's choice is related to the decline of the genre in the second half of the sixteenth century when it was largely, although not completely, replaced by the publication of vernacular correspondences.⁹⁶⁷ This development possibly went hand in hand with a disregard for the generic conventions and literary fashioning of Latin letter collections as they had blossomed in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

More than the other editions, however, the 1561 and 1576 editions highlight the ethical import of Ficino's letters. They contain a commonplace book of 20 folios which collects 'sententiae pulcherrimae cum multarum rerum definitionibus' culled from Ficino's *Opera omnia*. Despite having its own specific title page, the commonplace book is bound before the second volume of the *Opera omnia* in 1561, and at the end of the first volume in 1576.⁹⁶⁸ The general title page of the first volume prominently advertises this 'gnomologia,' in line with usual marketing strategies on the early modern book market, where the pre-digestion of texts into commonplace books and alphabetical indexes was considered a major selling point.⁹⁶⁹ The compiler of the florilegium turns out to be Heinrich Petri's son Adam,⁹⁷⁰ who also wrote a preface for the edition. Moreover, the list of quotes is preceded by a short poem written by Michael Petri, another family member.⁹⁷¹ In the distichs of the prefatory poem, Michael plays on all of the *topoi* associated with commonplace books. He mentions how much more efficient his compendium is than reading the whole book and underlines its general usefulness. Distinguishing broad categories such as law and medicine, he also assures the reader that he will find an opportunity for moral improvement: 'quae clemens virtus te liber iste docet.'

Among the *sententiae* culled from the main texts in the *Opera*, an overwhelming majority is taken from the letters. Some of them are simply titles, unsurprisingly. Even though the life narrative which Ficino carefully crafted in the *Epistole* was now wholly dismembered, the work's morally

⁹⁶⁷ Almási 2010, paras. 4–7; Fragnito 1981, 67–68; Cecil H. Clough 1976, 34.

⁹⁶⁸ Hieronymus 1997, 2:1194 wrongly claims that the 1576 edition does not contain the *sententiae*.

⁹⁶⁹ Moss 2005, 39; Blair 2003, 18.

⁹⁷⁰ After Heinrich Petri was knighted in the mid-1550's, his children adopted the family name Henricpetri. On Adam, see Hieronymus 2010a; Nuovo 2013c, 189–192.

⁹⁷¹ Cf. Hieronymus 1997, 2:1188–1193. In the academic year 1560–1561, around the time when the collected *opera* were first published, Adam and Michael together entered the university of Basel. Whereas the latter would graduate as a doctor in law, Michael obtained a baccalaureate in liberal arts. Their matriculation at the university of Basel would have allowed them to be more closely involved in the printing shop—before 1560, Adam took lessons from the humanist Gilbert Cousin in Nozeroy, France, while the older Michael had until then studied in Wittenberg, Germany (Wackernagel 1956, 2:126; Förstemann 1841, 1:336)—and the publication of such a didactic type of work as a commonplace book would have made for a fitting closure of their pre-university education (cf. Moss 1996). Adam's recent time with Cousin led him to dedicate the works of Ficino to Cousin's friend and patron, Guillaume de Poupet, a nobleman and abbot of no less than three monasteries.

instructive force remained. Lately, I was struck by an illuminated initial in a fifteenth-century manuscript of Seneca's letters in Italian translation (Figure 22). The scene shows Seneca, writing his first letter to Lucilius. On the parchment in front of the bearded philosopher, we read: 'Ita fac.' This is also the message of Ficino's letters for their tertiary reader: Do like this, and you will find the way to happiness asked for and promised in the opening letters to my collection.



Figure 22 MS Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional de España, RES/7, fol. 7^r

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX I MANUSCRIPTS OF THE *EPISTOLE*

	CITY	LIBRARY	SHELFMARK	YEAR	HAND	BOOKS	ORDER
L3	Firenze	BML	Plut.90 sup.40	1475- 1476		1	≠
V	Civitas Vaticana	BAV	Vat.lat. 1789	1475- 1476		2	=
L4	Firenze	BML	Strozzi 101	1475- 1476	Sebastiano Salvini / Luca Fabiani	1-2[3]	≠
N1	Firenze	BNCF	II IX 2	1475- 1476	Sebastiano Salvini	1	≠
L2	Firenze	BML	Plut.51.11	1477	Sebastiano Salvini	1	≠
N3	Firenze	BNCF	Magl. VII.1135	1477- 1480	Luca Fabiani	5-6	≈
G3	Wolfenbüttel	HAB	73 Aug. 2°	1482	Sebastiano Salvini	3-4	=
R	Firenze	Ricc.	797	1483- 1499	Sebastiano Salvini	1-7	≠
G2	Wolfenbüttel	HAB	2 Aug. 4°	1484	Luca Fabiani	3-4	=
B	Berlin	SPK	Lat. fol. 374	1484- 1485	Tommaso Baldinotti	1-7	=
L1	Firenze	BML	Plut. 90sup.43	1488	Luca Fabiani	1-8	≈
G1	Wolfenbüttel	HAB	73 Aug. 2°	1490	Luca Fabiani	1-8	≈
L5	Firenze	BML	Plut.83.11	1491	Luca Fabiani	2	≠
N2	Firenze	BNCF	8.1436	1475- 1499		1	≈
M	München	BSB	Cod. lat. 10781	1492	Luca Fabiani	9-11	≈
P	Napoli	BDSPN	XXV D 19	1475- 1499	Tommaso Baldinotti	1	= N1
W	Venezia	Marciana	Lat XI 49	1487- 1499	Gherardus Presbyter	1	≠

APPENDIX II NUMBERED LETTER TITLES WITH ADDRESSEES

NO	TITLE	ADDRESSEE
BOOK 1		
1.1	De felicitatis desiderio	Ficino, Marsilio
1.2	Que sit ad felicitatem via	de' Medici, Cosimo
1.3	Imitatio utilior est quam lectio	Benci, Amerigo
1.4	Dialogus inter Deum et animam theologicus	Mercati, Michele
1.5	Lex et iustitia	de' Pazzi, Piero; Niccolini, Ottone; Giugni, Bernardo; Accolti, Benedetto
1.6	De divino furore	Agli, Pellegrino
1.7	Excusatio prolixitatis	de' Medici, Cosimo
1.8	De divinitatione et divinitate anime	Corsini, Matteo
1.9	Modus laudis absque adulazione	Castellani, Francesco
1.10	Solitarie vite utilitas	Befani, Gregorio
1.11	De modestia componendi	Bessarion
1.12	De laude Platonicorum interpretum	Bessarion
1.13	Exhortatio ad scientiam	de' Pazzi, Antonio
1.14	Consolatio in alicuius obitu	della Stufa, Sigismondo
1.15	Laus brevitatis	Poliziano, Angelo
1.16	Quantum utile sit alere doctos	de' Medici, Lorenzo
1.17	Laus opificis non a verbis sed ab opere	de' Medici, Lorenzo; de' Medici, Giuliano
1.18	De virtutibus civilibus, purgatoriis, purgati animi, exemplaribus	Lapaccini, Francesco; Cresci, Migliore
1.19	De sapiente et felice viro	Serafico, Antonio
1.20	Bona scribere prestat quam multa	Poliziano, Angelo
1.21	Exhortatio ad scientiam	degli Albizzi, Niccolò
1.22	Invitatio ad scribendum	de' Medici, Lorenzo to Marsilio Ficino
1.23	Gratiarum actio	de' Medici, Lorenzo
1.24	Amatoria	de' Medici, Lorenzo to Marsilio Ficino
1.25	Mirabilium auctor deus est non homo	de' Medici, Lorenzo
1.26	Laudes Laurentii Medici mire	Michelozzi, Niccolò
1.27	Amatoria	de' Medici, Lorenzo to Marsilio Ficino
1.28	Amatoria: quomodo amandus quisque sit et quomodo laudandus	de' Medici, Lorenzo
1.29	Iocosa ad Iohannem: invitatio ad redditum per dissimulationem	Cavalcanti, Giovanni
1.30	Epistola genialis de heroibus	Cavalcanti, Giovanni
1.31	Quod gratis fit, gratius est quam quod ex debito	Cavalcanti, Giovanni
1.32	Provocatio ad scribendum	Cavalcanti, Giovanni
1.33	Quod necessarie epistole inter amicos	Cavalcanti, Giovanni
1.34	Gravis est iactura temporis	Cavalcanti, Giovanni

1.35	Quam iocunde amicorum littere	Cavalcanti, Giovanni
1.36	Nemini detrahendum quia Deus ulciscitur	Cavalcanti, Giovanni
1.37	Homo est animus. Amantis animus est in amato	Cavalcanti, Giovanni
1.38	Seria ad Iohannem: anima post mortem corporis intelligit et multo clarius quam in corpore	Cavalcanti, Giovanni
1.39	Contra Averoem, scilicet quod non sit unicus hominum intellectus	Cavalcanti, Giovanni
1.40	Theologi vigilant, ceteri somniant	Cavalcanti, Giovanni
1.41	Veritas Dei splendor, pulchritudo, amor	Cavalcanti, Giovanni
1.42	Idee secundum Platonem in divina mente sunt	Cavalcanti, Giovanni
1.43	Causa peccandi, spes, remedium	Cavalcanti, Giovanni
1.44	Quos Deus coniunxit moribus coniunget felicitate	Cavalcanti, Giovanni
1.45	Prestantior est legum conditor quam sophista	Cavalcanti, Giovanni
1.46	Legitimus amoris terminus est consuetudo	Cavalcanti, Giovanni
1.47	Medicina corpus, musica spiritum, theologia animum curat	Musano, Francesco
1.48	Neque amor sine religione neque religio sine amore laudatur	Controni da Lucca, Filippo
1.49	De toleranda iniuria	Cavalcanti, Giovanni
1.50	De constantia adversus fortunam comparanda	Cavalcanti, Giovanni
1.51	Amicitias illa stabilis que a Deo conflatur	Cavalcanti, Giovanni
1.52	Poeticus furor a Deo est	Pelotti, Antonio; Ugolini, Baccio
1.53	Cura patrie, familie, amicorum	Tedaldi, Francesco
1.54	Quis sit verus vir appellandus	Fonzio, Bartolommeo; Braccesi, Alessandro
1.55	De humanitate	Minerbetti, Tommaso
1.56	Gratia, amor, fides, amicitia	Naldi, Naldo
1.57	Stultitia et miseria hominum	Angellieri, Riccardo; Serafico, Antonio; Arduini, Oliviero
1.58	Stultitia et miseria hominum	Quarquagli, Cherubino; Galletti, Domenico; Vanni, Pietro
1.59	Stultitia miseriaque hominum	Landino, Cristoforo
1.60	Exhortatio ad modestiam et studia litterarum	de' Medici, Giuliano
1.61	Quod amicus est in amico	de' Medici, Giuliano
1.62	Salus amici ab amico	Ficino, Marsilio
1.63	Divinatio de amico	Marsuppi, Carlo
1.64	Quantum possit desiderium amicorum	de' Medici, Lorenzo
1.65	Laudare prestat benivolentiam quam ingenium	Poliziano, Angelo
1.66	Quos amor fallat, quos non fallat	Michelozzi, Niccolò
1.67	Commendatio ab egestate et dignitate	Palmieri, Matteo
1.68	Cum bene omnia regantur a Deo, omnia in melius accipienda	Campani, Giovanni
1.69	De stultitia hominum et que sit vera scientia	Pandozzi, Panezio
1.70	Liberalitatis laus, elemosine laus	de' Medici, Lorenzo
1.71	Nulla virtus benignitate amabilior	Michelozzi, Niccolò

1.72	Verus amicus non eget absentia ut magis desideretur	de' Medici, Giuliano
1.73	Quis dives iniustus sit, quis iustus	Poliziano, Angelo
1.74	Iurisconsulti bonitas et dignitas	Niccolini, Angelo
1.75	Dignitas sacerdotis	Neri, Pace
1.76	Non cuilibet dandi sunt sacri ordines	Salvini, Mariano
1.77	Nulla consonantia magis delectat quam cordis et lingue	de' Medici, Lorenzo
1.78	De officio civis	del Nero, Piero
1.79	Quid est bene vivere	Pasqualini, Girolamo
1.80	Vota non sunt spernenda	Marescalchi, Francesco
1.81	Nobilitas, utilitas et usus medicine	Valori, Tommaso
1.82	Tempus parce expendendum	de' Medici, Lorenzo
1.83	Homo sine religione bestiis est infelicior	Colucci, Benedetto
1.84	Responsio ad epistolam de tempore parce expendendo	Ficino, Marsilio
1.85	Nemini recte volenti omnino ad bonum interclusus est aditus	Michelozzi, Niccolò
1.86	Imitatio potior est quam lectio	de' Medici, Lorenzo
1.87	Durate et vosmet rebus servate secundis	Salviati, Francesco
1.88	Divinitas animi ab inventione	de' Medici, Lorenzo
1.89	Novum opus nimium placet opifici	Poliziano, Angelo
1.90	De perseverantia	Altoviti, Giovanni
1.91	Prudentis est nihil preter salutem animi bonamque corporis valitudinem exoptare	Cambini, Andrea
1.92	De musica	Canigiani, Antonio
1.93	Verissima laus est que laude digna est	Aurelio, Giovanni
1.94	Feliciter amatur qui a viro amatur amore dignissimo	Bembo, Bernardo
1.95	De lege et iustitia	de' Medici, Lorenzo
1.96	De anima	Tedaldi, Francesco
1.97	Consolatio in amici obitu	Bembo, Bernardo
1.98	Legitimi iurisconsulti partes	della Cornia, Pier Filippo
1.99	Velociter comparatur quod ardenter desideratur	Altoviti, Giovanni
1.100	Fontes potius quam rivulos sectari debemus	Cortusi, Giovanni Piero
1.101	Peripateticus non philosophus est pecuniam appetit, sed ut homo	de' Medici, Lorenzo
1.102	Commendatio a fortuna quandam felici, innocentia, scientia	Acciaiuoli, Donato
1.103	Qua ratione sit quisque laudandus	de' Medici, Lorenzo
1.104	Nemo sine amore de amore bene loquitur	Michelozzi, Niccolò
1.105	Precepta ad memoriam	Banco
1.106	Virtutum definitio, officium, finis	Calderini, Antonio
1.107	Anime natura et officium. Laus historie	Bracciolini, Iacopo
1.108	Tres vite duces et una vite optima ratio	Franceschi, Lorenzo
1.109	Ratio docendi, laudandi, vituperandi	Lippi, Lorenzo
1.110	Cognitio et reverentia sui ipsius omnium optima	Generic
1.111	De divinitate animi a religione	Bandini, Francesco

1.112	Consolatio in alicuius obitu	degli Agli, Antonio
1.113	Contra mendaces et impios detractores	Generic
1.114	Contra mendaces et impios detractores	Rucellai, Bernardo
1.115	Quid est felicitas, quod habet gradus, quod est eterna	de' Medici, Lorenzo
1.116	Oratio ad Deum theologica	Rucellai, Bernardo
1.117	Quod soli virtuti Deoque confidendum et serviendum	Salviati, Francesco
1.118	Qualis esse debeat imitatio	Martelli, Braccio
1.119	Sepe magna est laus que brevis est	Scala, Bartolomeo
1.120	Qui favet bonis sibi favet	de' Medici, Lorenzo
1.121	Que sit petitio et commendatio iusta	de' Medici, Lorenzo
1.122	Institutio brevis episcopi	Niccollini, Giovanni
1.123	Laus philosophie oratoria, moralis, dialectica, theologica	Bembo, Bernardo
1.124	Gratia iobelei	Ficino, Marsilio
1.125	Gratiarum actio	Piccolomini, Francesco
1.126	Otiose vite utilitas	Cambini, Andrea
1.127	De perseverantia	Soderini, Francesco
1.128	Solus divinus medicus curare morbos animi potest	Piccolomini, Francesco
1.129	Vicissitudo amoris unde nascatur	Corsini, Amerigo
1.130	Vera poesis a Deo et ad Deum	Braccesi, Alessandro
1.131	Sua mittenda sunt ad suos	Soderini, Piero

BOOK 2

2.0	Prologus	da Montefeltro, Federico
2.2	Questiones quinque de mente.	His fellow philosophers
2.3	Super sensum est intellectus. Super sensible est intelligibile. Super mentes nostras sunt alie mentes. Super formas corporales sunt forme incorporales	His fellow philosophers
2.4	Elementa moventur mobiliter, celestes spere moventur stabiliter, anime stant mobiliter, angeli stant stabiliter, Deus est ipse status	Ippoliti, Giovanni Francesco
2.5	Forma corporea dividitur et movetur ab alio. Anima rationalis non dividitur, sed ex se ipsa movetur. Angelus neque dividitur neque movetur, sed aliunde impletur. Deus est plenitudo una, simplex, immensa	Bandini, Francesco
2.6	Compendium Platonice theologie	His fellow philosophers
2.7	De raptu Pauli ad tertium celum et animi immortalitatem	Cavalcanti, Giovanni
2.8	Argumentum in Platonicam theologiam	de' Medici, Lorenzo
2.9	Qualis est amor, talis amicitia	Donato, Alemanno
2.10	Quid sit lumen in corpore mundi, in anima, in angelo, in Deo.	Capella, Febo

BOOK 3

3.1	Exhortatio ad bellum contra barbaros	Matthias
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3.2	Quod fallax sit humana prosperitas	Bembo, Bernardo
3.3	Oratio soluta poeticis modis et numeris exornanda est	Fonzio, Bartolommeo
3.4	Solus nullum carum amittit, cui omnes in illo cari sunt qui non amittitur	Cavalcanti, Giovanni
3.5	Maledici contemnendi	de' Medici, Lorenzo
3.6	Maledici contemnendi	de' Medici, Giuliano
3.7	Congratulatio de magistratu	del Nero, Piero
3.8	Non est suavis absque amico suavissimo melodia	Foresi, Sebastiano
3.9	Veritas sua potentia potius quam aliena defenditur	Placentino, Pietro
3.10	Venus Martem, Iuppiter Saturnum domat	Orsini, Rinaldo
3.11	Foelix qui sua contentus est sorte	Romano, Valerio
3.12	Virtus legitimi civis	Cavalcanti, Giovanni
3.13	Quae sit vera laudis laus	Serafico, Antonio
3.14	Nihil possidetur in terris praeciosius homine	Salvini, Sebastiano
3.15	Qualis sit terreni convivii ornatus, caelestis convivii splendor, supercaelestis beatitudo	de' Medici, Lorenzo
3.16	Prudens neminem spernit tanquam inutilem	Michelozzi, Niccolò
3.17	Perversis animis adversa sunt omnia	degli Agli, Antonio
3.18	Gratiae et Musae a Deo sunt atque ad Deum referendae	Bembo, Bernardo
3.19	Neque potest vere sibi ipse placere, qui displicet veritati, neque vere gaudere bonis, qui in iis diligendis negligit ipsum bonum, unde sunt bona	Cavalcanti, Giovanni
3.20	Nemo foelix, nisi qui vere gaudet; nemo vere gaudet, nisi qui veritate gaudet	Cavalcanti, Giovanni
3.21	Qui ethernam amat formam tam facile saltem tanquam secure fruitur quam difficile et solicite qui temporalem	Vespucci, Giorgio Antonio
3.22	Deus omnia bonis convertit in bonum	Cavalcanti, Giovanni
3.23	Mala non sunt ab astris proprie sed ex defectu vel materiae vel consilii	Cavalcanti, Giovanni
3.24	Omnes omnium laudes referantur in Deum, principium omnium atque finem	Cavalcanti, Giovanni
3.25	Nemo ascendit ad Deum nisi in quem quodammodo Deus ipse descenderit	Cavalcanti, Giovanni
3.26	Nugis vulgus pascitur	Cavalcanti, Giovanni
3.27	Amicitia vera est quam religio vera conciliavit	Forli, Antonio
3.28	Non cortex nutrit sed medulla	Sacramoro, Filippo
3.29	Miser qui ex futuris externisque pendet	Neroni, Lotterio
3.30	Qui sequitur omnia nihil assequitur	Valguli, Carlo
3.31	Quomodo invidia puniatur vel mitigetur vel extirpetur	A man who is afraid of envy
3.32	Dilige omnes, elige et ama unicum, soli confide Deo	A man
3.33	Benefacta male locata malefacta arbitor	Ficino, Marsilio
3.34	Marsilii ironia adversus philosophorum adversarios	de' Medici, Lorenzo
3.35	Sua mittenda sunt ad suos	Soderini, Piero
3.36	Benefaciendum est amico vel nolenti	Cavalcanti, Giovanni
3.37	Tres sunt contemplationis Platonice gradus	de' Medici, Lorenzo

3.38	Ubi ipsum vacillat fundamentum, quicquid superstruxeris corruet	Paolo of Florence
3.39	Ubi fervet charitas, ibi Deus lucet, ibi gratia emicat	Parisi, Alberto
3.40	Omnia mundi bona illi mala sunt, qui immundus vivit in mundo	The human race
3.41	Quod gratis accepistis, gratis date	Marescalchi, Francesco
3.42	De sufficientia, fine, forma, materia, modo, condimento, auctoritate convivii	Bembo, Bernardo
3.43	Quam gratus aspectus amici, quam necessarius, quam voluntarius amor	Cavalcanti, Giovanni
3.44	Lupus est homo homini, non homo	Bracciolini, Iacopo
3.45	Nulli unquam Deus omnia dedit	A man ful of disgust and aversion
3.46	Discendi et loquendi ratio	Fabiano, Luca
3.47	Ultionis studium nihil est aliud quam iniuriam rursus accipere	A man who cannot bear an injury
3.48	Multum errat qui aggreditur multa	A man burdened with business and full of cares
3.49	Nunquam satisfacit arti is cui semper artificium satisfacit	A vain craftsman
3.50	Unicus est vitae custos amor. Sed ut ameris ama	A man seeking power
3.51	Gravis quidem videtur iactura pecuniarum, hominum vero gravissima	Cambini, Andrea
3.52	Parum illi credendum est qui nimis credit	Salviati, Francesco
3.53	De officiis	Quarquagli, Cherubino
3.54	Nunquam ad infima cadit qui constitutus in summo et acute et clementer prospicit infima	Jacopo
3.55	Facilitatem vitii vitae sequitur difficultas, difficultatem virtutis vitae facilitas	del Nero, Piero
3.56	Sicut pulchritudo natura gignit amorem, sic amor opinione regenerat pulchritudem	Jacopo
3.57	Pios pia decent	Naldi, Naldo
3.58	Pios pia decent	Corsini, Amerigo
3.59	Si perspicue cerneremus quam turpis et quam aeger sit pravus animus, non peccaremus	de' Medici, Giuliano
3.60	Nihil turpius illo apud quem praeter animum pulchra sunt omnia	Mankind
3.61	Malis quidem bona fortuna mala est, bonis autem mala fortuna bona	Bembo, Bernardo
3.62	Animus mortalibus non impletur quoniam aeterna requirit	de' Medici, Lorenzo
3.63	Non cortex nutrit sed medulla	Guasconi, Francesco
3.64	Quae revera sunt bona quo maiora sunt eo etiam meliora	Buonincontri Lorenzo
3.65	Non possunt plures in ea re invicem firmiter copulari quae ipsa in se mutabilis est atque diversa	Neroni, Lotterio
3.66	Cupido magis persuadet vel tacendo quam et orando Mercurius et Phoebus ipse canendo	Galletti, Domenico

BOOK 4

4.1	Nemo est, cui possit invidere qui videre possit quot omnes intus et extra furiis agitamur	Franceschi, Lorenzo
4.2	Cum rationi et consilio satisficeris cunctis satisfecisse putato	His fellow philosopher
4.3	Frustra sapit qui non sibi ipse sapit	Moral philosopher without morals
4.4	Mundanorum medicina malorum est supermundani Dei cultus	Bembo, Bernardo
4.5	Nunquid quisque sed quo animo det considerare debemus	Vespucci, Giorgio Antonio
4.6	Quod turpe est amare pecunias, tam honestum amare hominem, tam etiam necessarium et beatum amare Deum	Guicciardini, Piero di Iacopo
4.7	Qualis in se est talia cuique sunt quae accipit	Cortusi, Giovanni Pietro; Aurelio, Giovanni
4.8	Mundana omnia discordia componuntur, anima discordia et ipsa sibi et aliis opponuntur	Neri, Pace
4.9	Ut sortem in melius mutet, animae figuram in melius muta	Mankind
4.10	Pura neque impure queras neque postquam inveneris impuris communia facias	de' Medici, Lorenzo
4.11	Honestum agendum est quia placeat, placere debet ut Deo placeat	Neroni, Lotterio
4.12	Nihil vel mirabilius vel amabilius est quam doctrina probitati coniuncta	Aurelio, Marco
4.13	Oratio de laudibus philosophiae	[no addressee]
4.14	Oratio de laudibus medicinae	[no addressee]
4.15	In singulis expertum consule	Buonincontri, Lorenzo
4.16	Praestat malam valitudinem bene ferre quam male bonam	His friends
4.17	Omnia dedit semel qui seipse dedit	Bembo, Bernardo
4.18	De Platonica philosophi natura, institutione, actione	Ippoliti, Giovani Francesco
4.19	De vita Platonis	Bandini, Francesco
4.20	Quantum astronomi metiuntur tantum astrologi mentiuntur	Bembo, Bernardo
4.21	Tunc maxime commendas aliquem cum ostendis illius esse cui commendas	Aurelio, Marco
4.22	Quando divino afflante spiritu amor accenditur, semper amante altero redamat alter, saepe altero cogitante idem cogitat alter	Bembo, Bernardo
4.23	Quando divino afflante spiritu amor accenditur, semper amante altero redamat alter, saepe altero cogitante idem cogitat alter	Aurelio, Marco
4.24	Nihil infirmius quam humanus amor, nihil firmius quam divinus	Bembo, Bernardo
4.25	Frustra nimium in rebus his quae sibimet nequaquam sufficiunt nostram sufficientiam affectamus	Mankind

4.26	Transitus repentinus a minimo lumine ad maximum atque a maximo ad minimum aciem impedit	Angellieri, Riccardo
4.27	Quod animus immortalis sit atque cur cum sit divinus saepe tamen vitam agit bestiae similem	Nesi, Giovanni
4.28	Solus omnia possidet qui a nullo praeter Deum penitus possidetur	Nesi, Giovanni
4.29	Cum primum fatum impugnare nitimur expugnamus	Marescalchi, Francesco
4.30	Multos habet servos qui multis servit	Bembo, Bernardo
4.31	Amicitia inter homines nisi afflante Deo conflari non potest	Barbaro, Ermolao
4.32	[no title]	Barbaro, Ermolao
4.33	Fortuna neque benefacere potest malis neque malefacere bonis	Ivani, Antonio
4.34	Matrymonii laus	Pelotti, Antonio
4.35	Philosophia sapientiam gignit, sapientia parit foelicitatem	Salvini, Sebastiano
4.36	Non est sanus cui salubria displicant	Bracciolini, Iacopo
4.37	Marsilii Ficini Florentini disputatio contra iudicium astrologorum	Ippoliti, Giovani Francesco
4.38	Prohemium Marsilii F. in opusculum eius de vita Platonis ad Franciscum Bandinum	Bandini, Francesco
4.39	Montes non separant animos montibus altiores	Bathory, Miklos

BOOK 5

5.1	Prohemium	Bembo, Bernardo
5.2	Legis divinae fides scientia confirmatur	His friends
5.3	Nihil potest esse proprium ubi communis est animus	Naldi, Naldo
5.4	Breviter loquendum sed non breviter vel cogitandum vel amandum	Ivani, Antonio
5.5	Sacerdotes et philosophi pie loquantur et sentiant	Cavalcanti, Giovanni
5.6	Nullum in malis refugium est nisi ad summum bonum	His friends
5.7	Non creavit ad parva quaedam Deus homines sed ad magna	Cavalcanti, Giovanni
5.8	Nullus incontinentis potest sapiens esse	Philosophers and sophists
5.9	Philosophi saepe dum discunt curiosius disputare interim consultare dediscunt	Cavalcanti, Giovanni
5.10	Solitudo philosophis non remissio mentis sed intentio esse solet et debet	Bembo, Bernardo
5.11	Prophanis sapientia non conceditur	Buonincontri, Lorenzo
5.12	Omne tulit punctum qui miscuit utile dulci	Foresi, Sebastiano
5.13	Nullum commodius in malis remedium quam patientia	Salvini, Sebastiano
5.14	Solum Minerve templum contra fortune procellas homines protegit	Cavalcanti, Giovanni
5.15	Amicitia vera\û extrinsecis non eget officiis	Cavalcanti, Giovanni
5.16	Qui Musis abutuntur non mel sed fel ab earum fonte reportant	Manetti, Angelo

5.17	Nunquam aduersa revera patimur nisi cum patimur et perversa	Cavalcanti, Giovanni
5.18	Amicitia perfecta verbis litterisque non indiget	Piccolomini, Francesco
5.19	Merito invitus omni caret bono qui sponte caret Deo qui est omne bonum	Leoni, Michele
5.20	Cum Deus sit ipse amor quicunque absque Deo aliquid studet amare hic absque amore tentat amare	Neroni, Lotterio
5.21	Solus foeliciter dominatur qui volentibus dominatur	Piccolomini, Francesco
5.22	Egregios grex improbat, Deus probat apud quem gratitudo est et libertas	Cavalcanti, Giovanni
5.23	Quod philosophia non docet immo vetat cum principibus vivere et conversari	Cavalcanti, Giovanni
5.24	Solus in amando laudandoque nunquam fallitur cui amandi laudandique lex Deus est	Ciprio, Giorgio
5.25	Fides gignit spem, spes charitatem, charitatis ardor affert intelligentiae claritatem	Bembo, Bernardo
5.26	Amore humano nihil infirmius, divino nihil firmius	Amazzi, Girolamo
5.27	Nemo vere servit nisi qui servit volens. Nemo dominatur vere nisi qui volentibus dominatur	Riario, Raffaele
5.28	Tunc solum viro dignitatem nacto congratulari debemus cum dignitate dignus appetet	Riario, Raffaele
5.29	Veritas virum reddit dignitate dignum	Soderini, Francesco
5.30	Omne tulit punctum qui miscuit utile dulci	Bembo, Bernardo
5.31	Malo meis litteris mente responderi quam manu	Apollinari, Gianpietro
5.32	Maiorem charitatem nemo habet quam ut animam suam ponat quis pro amicis suis	de' Medici, Lorenzo
5.33	Foelix est qui habet omnia quae vult, habet autem omnia quae vult quia omnia vult quae habet	Sassetti, Francesco
5.34	Prosperis perversius utimur quam adversis	Riario, Raffaele; Salviati, Francesco
5.35	Nunquam deest amantibus scribendi materia	Bembo, Bernardo
5.36	Praestat dare superflua quam debita denegare	Spoletino, Pierleone
5.37	Gratia naturalis plus persuadet quam acquisita eloquentia, humanitas plures vincit quam violentia	Aurelio, Marco
5.38	Excusatio de libro astronomiae serius reddito	Benivieni, Antonio
5.39	Excusatio diuturni silentii	Riario, Raffaele
5.40	Patientia sine religione haberi non potest	Cocchi, Antonio
5.41	Sola malorum medicina est patientia	Bembo, Bernardo
5.42	Nihil magis vel necessarium vel voluntarium est quam amor	Vinciguerra, Antonio
5.43	Excusatio ubi serius respondemus	Neroni, Lotterio
5.44	Non ex humanis divina sed ex divinis humana sunt iudicanda	Rossi, Girolamo
5.45	Non cortex nutrit sed medulla	Niccollini, Giovanni
5.46	Prospera in fato fortuna, vera in virtute foelicitas	Lorenzo de' Medici Jr.
5.47	Coelum pollicetur bona, virtus praestat	Vespucci, Giorgio Antonio; Naldi, Naldo
5.48	De salute philosophorum ante Christi adventum	Ivani, Antonio
5.49	Exhortatio ad respondendum	Capella, Febo

5.50 Foelix est qui vere gaudet, solus gaudet vere qui sola
veritate gaudet

5.51 Pictura pulchri corporis et pulchrae mentis

Capponi, Nicola
de' Medici, Lorenzo; Bembo, Bernardo

BOOK 6

6.1 Oratio Christiani gregis ad pastorem Sistum suadens ut
ovibus suis dicat: Pax vobis

6.2 Adhortatio ad rusticandum

6.3 Quis ardenter amat nihil capit praeter amatum

6.4 Neque tutum est incusare principes neque fas incusare
fortunam

6.5 Inter mala minus laeditur quem tuetur Deus

6.6 Tunc solum nos probare debemus quando a
probatissimis approbamus

6.7 Nemo infortunatior illo qui neque ipse videt neque
videntem videt

6.8 Spiritus ubi vult spirat

6.9 Cognosce alia ut te cognoscas cognosce te ipsum ut
cognoscas Deum

6.10 Feliciter vincit qui animos beneficio sibi devincit

6.11 Surgunt e coeno quotidie qui rapiant nobis caenam

6.12 Nihil est occultius quam humana voluntas

6.13 [no title]

6.14 Tam ineptus est qui amico iam perfecto gratias agit,
quam ingratus qui non habet gratias

6.15 Quod libenter accipis redde libenter

6.16 Magis commendat virtus quam amicitia, facilius
persuadet probitas quam eloquentia

6.17 Votum, oraculum, miraculum

6.18 Verus amicus, quid amicus optaturus sit, praesagit
atque praevenit petiturum

6.19 Qui pro rebus verba dat folia dat pro fructibus

6.20 Qui beati sint, qui beatis proximi, qui remotiores, qui
remotissimi

6.21 Non est harmonice compositus qui harmonia non
delectatur

6.22 Maledicus non aliter te ledere potest quam si faciat
vicissim te maledicium

6.23 Cum veritas ipsa sit immobilis et aeterna foelicitas soli
vere immobiliter beate vivunt qui in veritatis studio
vitam agunt

6.24 Ubi bonorum viget bonum, ibi solum reperitur
omnium medicina malorum

6.25 Decrescente corporis pulchritudine crescit animi
pulchritudo

6.26 Seditiosas urbes procul fugito

Sixtus

Vinciguerra, Antonio; Bembo, Bernardo

Riario, Raffaele

Niccollini, Giovanni

Riario, Raffaele

Bollano, Domenico

Cocchi, Antonio

Giovanni of Aragon

Sixtus

Sixtus

Niccollini, Giovanni

Niccollini, Giovanni

Giovanni of Aragon

Gavardi, Rinaldo

Lippi, Lorenzo

Bandini, Francesco

Bembo, Bernardo

Ciprio, Giorgio

Cocchi, Giovanni

Neroni, Lotterio

Foresi, Sebastiano

Cocchi, Giovanni

Salvini, Sebastiano

Leonardo of Colle

Poliziano, Angelo

Rossi, Girolamo

6.27	Orphica comparatio solis ad Deum atque declaratio idearum	Neroni, Lotterio
6.28	Praestat exulem esse quam inspicere patriam pereuntem	Bembo, Bernardo
6.29	Foelix est qui vere gaudet, vere gaudet qui sola veritate gaudet	Ippoliti, Giovani Francesco
6.30	Publica nequeunt recte foeliciterque absque divino auxilio gubernari	Berlinghieri, Francesco
6.31	Non est communis pater qui communem filiorum non habet curam	Bembo, Bernardo
6.32	Sola illa gratia non senescit quae a rebus non senescentibus oritur	Galletti, Domenico
6.33	Commendatio amici	Riario, Raffaele
6.34	Auxilium meum a Domino qui coelum fecit et terram	Bembo, Bernardo
6.35	Quattuor divini furoris species sunt, amor omnium praestantissimus	Naldi, Naldo
6.36	Qui colit numen numinis oraculis interest	Soderini, Francesco
6.37	Pius dominabitur astris	de' Medici, Lorenzo
6.38	Unum sunt qui ab uno amantur in uno	Neroni, Lotterio
6.39	Diligentia circa matrimonium et nuptias summa sit	Berlinghieri, Francesco
6.40	Magnos magna decet	Soderini, Francesco
6.41	Nihil magis adhortatur nos ad virtutis amorem quam species ipsa virtutis	Bembo, Bernardo
6.42	Commendatio non vulgaris, civis institutio non vulgaris	Bishop Gentile
6.43	Commendatio non vulgaris. Nemo ardentius amandus, quam qui Musas ardenter amat	Poliziano, Angelo
6.44	Pictura malae mentis et non bonae, item ignorantis et doctae	de' Medici, Lorenzo
6.45	Commendatio litteratorum non vulgaris	Lanfredini, Iacopo
6.46	Non verbis amoris sed fide respondendum	Lanfredini, Antonio
6.47	Frustra scribit qui ita scribit ut a nullo intelligatur	Rucellai, Bernardo
6.48	Quod immundus sit hic mundus, quam falsus, quam fallax	Neroni, Lotterio
6.49	Marsilius Ficinus Florentinus fingit Florentiam congratulari Danti	[no addresse]

BOOK 7

7.1	Prohoemium	Berlinghieri, Francesco
7.2	[no title]	The reader
7.3	Sapientia a solo Deo	Cavalcanti, Giovanni
7.4	Ubi sapientia maior ibi sermo brevior	Bembo, Bernardo
7.5	Et si litteris quandoque, nunquam tamen animo ab amicis abesse licet	Bunonisegni, Antonio
7.6	Qui umbram amat transfertur in umbram	Bembo, Bernardo
7.7	De optimo vivendi genere	Ivani, Antonio

7.8	Excusatio quando non salutatur amicus	Cavalcanti, Giovanni
7.9	Agriculturae litterarumque studia invicem foeliciter coniunguntur	de' Medici, Lorenzo
7.10	Invitatio ad rusticandum	Cavalcanti, Giovanni
7.11	Amicitia inter pares et libera est	Lisci, Alberto
7.12	De tribus Gratii et Genio	de' Medici, Lorenzo
7.13	Apologus. Divinum genus divina sola alimonia coalescit	generic
7.14	Philosophus tria potissimum devitare debet: Venerea, avaritiam, ambitionem. Apologus	generic
7.15	Apologus. Impuri nunquam Musas vel Gratias assequuntur sed picas et furias	generic
7.16	Apologus. Potentia sine sapientia non regnat	generic
7.17	Apologus. In traductionem libri de amore missam ab Alamanno Donato ad Laurentium Medicem	generic
7.18	Apologus. Quod male se habeat Lucilia, id est anima, quando a Phoebo, id est a Deo, discedit	generic
7.19	Divina lex fieri a coelo non potest sed forte significari	Federico da Montefeltro
7.20	Philosophia et religio germanae sunt	Zilioli, Antonio
7.21	[no title]	Capella, Febo
7.22	[no title]	Capella, Febo
7.23	Quod pia sit Platonica disciplina	Niccollini, Giovanni
7.24	Apologus. Marsili Ficini in librum Platonis de regno ad Federicum Urbini Ducem	Federico da Montefeltro
7.25	Apologus ad Federicum Urbini Ducem in librum Cosmographiae Francisci Berlingherii	Federico da Montefeltro
7.26	Sacra sacrilegi non attingant	Ristoro, Carlo
7.27	In solo Deo salus	Bandini, Francesco
7.28	Tantum ipsi nos probare possumus quantum a probatis ipsi probamur	Molin, Pietro
7.29	Honesta silentii diuturni purgatio	Cavalcanti, Giovanni
7.30	Responsum de genesi, quod iudicium sit fallacissimum	Romano, Zenobio
7.31	Divina dum mittuntur non amittuntur	Neroni, Lotterio
7.32	Petitio commendatioque artificiosa	Bandini, Francesco
7.33	Qua in re praecipue disciplina Platonica peripateticam superat	Pico, Giovanni
7.34	Salutatio pia et librorum petitio	Ippoliti, Giovani Francesco
7.35	Honesta simul ac vehemens librorum commendatorum exactio	Dulci
7.36	Negociosum virum non esse temere interpellandum	Rucellai, Bernardo
7.37	Non sunt amici nisi alter ex altero pendeat	Bandini, Francesco
7.38	Solitudo litteratis necessaria	del Nero, Piero
7.39	Non vere se invicem amant qui non assidue de se invicem cogitant	Valori, Filippo
7.40	Laus Platonici philosophi	Leone, Pier
7.41	Dolores omnes ex amore animi erga corpus nascuntur	Corsini, Amerigo

7.42	Expositio allegorica saeculi aurei atque aliorum	Antiquario, Iacopo
7.43	Omnium rerum vicissitudo est	Forli, Matteo
7.44	Qui humanum amorem in divinum transfert ex homine transfertur in Deum	Forli, Matteo
7.45	Obsecratio ut Platonis libri in Latinum a nobis translati ex eius manibus qui occuluerat redimantur	Cantanio, Girolamo
7.46	Charitas potius quam scientia transfert in Deum	Carducci, Filippo

BOOK 8

8.1	Prohoemium	Valori, Filippo
8.2	Gratiarum actio pro libris Platonicis per Hieronymum ab occupatore redemptis	Urbinato, Girolamo
8.3	Amor absentiam non patitur	Compagno, Pietro
8.4	Prohoemium in apolos	Ciprio, Giorgio
8.5	Amatoria silentii purgatio quando amicorum litteris non respondemus	Valori, Filippo
8.6	Quomodo singuli angelos custodes habent	Callimaco, Filippo
8.7	[no title]	Baduer, Sebastian; Bembo, Bernardo
8.8	Concordia Mosis et Platonis	Martelli, Braccio
8.9	Confirmatio Christianorum per Socratica	Ferobanti, Paolo
8.10	In quo principis consistat laus	Galeotto of Faventia
8.11	Excusatio obsequii non collati	Pico, Giovanni
8.12	Qui commendat omnes est commendandus ab omnibus	Bandini, Francesco
8.13	Charitatis laus	Barbaro, Ermolao
8.14	Non exigendum ab amico plus quam habeat	Aurelio, Giovanni
8.15	Commendatio librorum Platonicorum	Bandini, Francesco
8.16	Excusatio quando brevius respondetur amicis	Calderini, Antonio
8.17	Excusatio quando brevius respondetur amicis	Callimaco, Filippo
8.18	Quod qua via dicit Deus pergendum sit	Bandini, Francesco
8.19	Dubitatio utrum opera philosophica regantur fato an providentia	Ficino, Marsilio
8.20	Quod divina providentia statuit antiqua renovari	Johannes Pannonius
8.21	Pro prima Platonis impressione parum fortunata	Bandini, Francesco
8.22	Purgatio de silentio	Corsini, Amerigo
8.23	Prophetae et interpraetes prophetarum	Benivieni, Antonio
8.24	[no title]	Barbo, Marco
8.25	Inimici hominis domestici eius	Leone, Pier
8.26	[no title]	Barbo, Marco
8.27	[no title]	Calderini, Antonio
8.28	[no title]	Martelli, Braccio
8.29	Purgatio de silentio ad amicum	Bandini, Francesco
8.30	Honesta exactio ab amico	Pico, Giovanni
8.31	Purgatio de brevitate scribendi ad amicum	Bandini, Francesco

8.32	Commendatio amici	Bandini, Francesco
8.33	Quid sit foelicitas	Serafico, Antonio
8.34	Laus ingenii	Pico, Giovanni
8.35	Nihil intempestive tentandum	Bembo, Bernardo
8.36	Commendatio amici nomine philosophi	Bandini, Francesco
8.37	Oratio Marsilii Ficini de charitate	The Florentine people
8.38	Fortuna virtuti plurimum adversatur	Gavardi, Rinaldo
8.39	Responsio ad omnia	Michelozzi, Bernardo
8.40	Purgatio postquam diu non scripseris	Barbo, Marco
8.41	De eodem	Calderini, Antonio
8.42	Lardiendum est etiam ingratias	Miniati [Mithridates]
8.43	Purgatio quando non salutas coram sed litteris	Barbo, Marco
8.44	Multa quae stelle significant, demones persuadent, nos agimus	Bathory, Miklos
8.45	Consolatio in obitu filii	Verino, Ugolino
8.46	Studium divitiarum atque dignitatum maxime omnium nocet studio litterarum	Soderini, Piero
8.47	Commendatus ante omnes, qui sapientiam toto orbe perquirit	Pico, Giovanni
8.48	Gratiarum actio, congratulatio, commendatio	Matthias
8.49	Cognitio de divinitate animae ante omnia necessaria	[no addressee]
8.50	Philosophia Platonica tanquam sacra legenda est in sacris	[no addressee]
8.51	Congratulatio	Bandini, Francesco
8.52	Iuppiter et Venus Martem domant	Pico, Giovanni
8.53	Exhortatio ad amicos ut percepturi Deum corporeum omne deponant	Ad amicos
8.54	Quod ab amore Dei exordiri debemus ut Deum intelligamus	No addressee
8.55	Insinuatio quaedam in amicitiam	Scala, Francesco
8.56	Exhortatio ad iustum causam defendendam	Vittori, Giovanni
8.57	Commendatio amici apud regem	Matthias
8.58	Cur viris magnis discrimina magna immineant	Pico, Giovanni
8.59	Quo vadit amicus et tu vadis	Pico, Giovanni
8.60	Erunt novissimi primi	Probo
8.61	Iocosa ex eo quod salutaturus non salutavit	Ficino, Marsilio
8.62	Planete reverentur solis aspectum	Pico, Giovanni
8.63	Labor improbus omnia vincit	Pico, Giovanni
8.64	De tribus Gratii et concordia	Salviati, Roberto; Benivieni, Girolamo
8.65	Quomodo tacentes etiam colloquantur amici	Leone, Pier
8.66	In ignem omnia resolvenda secundum Orpheum	Callimaco, Filippo
8.67	Videndum quo stilo ad quem scribas	Barbaro, Ermolao
8.68	De fame volatu et quod suaque carissima sunt	Paolo of Florence
8.69	Nihil magis impedit litteras quam civilis ambitio, probatur per astrologiam	Barbaro, Ermolao

8.70	Pauci negocia publica coniungunt cum studio litterarum	Gaddi, Francesco
8.71	Ibi solum vivitur, ubi vivitur intellectu	Barbo, Marco

BOOK 9

9.1	Prohoemium	Brenninger, Martin
9.2	Descriptio villae salubris	Valori, Filippo
9.3	Querimonia et consolatio in amicorum obitu	Corsini, Amerigo
9.4	Positio aspectusque planetarum ingenio conferentium	Barbaro, Ermolao
9.5	De efficacia loquendi et ratione iocandi	Leone, Pier
9.6	Satis ad unum scribit amicum, qui cunctis simul scribit amicis	Bandini, Francesco
9.7	Amicus in amico. Item excusatio de itinere non suscepto	Matthias
9.8	Prohoemium in Theophrastum de anima	Valori, Filippo
9.9	Prohoemium in Iamblicum	Giovanni de' Medici
9.10	Prohoemium in Proculum et Porphyrium	Giovanni de' Medici
9.11	Prohoemium in Sinesium atque Psellum	Piero de' Medici
9.12	Commendatio stili	Cambini, Andrea
9.13	Responsio petenti Platonicam instructionem et librorum numerum	Brenninger, Martin
9.14	[no title]	Leone, Pier
9.15	Commendatio levis	Nesi, Giovanni
9.16	Studium de vita longa	Pico, Giovanni
9.17	De stilo poetico in aphorismis Hippocratis	Cittadini, Antonio
9.18	Astronomicum auspicium pro libro de vita longa	Pico, Giovanni
9.19	Responsio desideranti natalem suum et reliqua	Brenninger, Martin
9.20	Artificiosa commendatio docti viri	Matthias
9.21	Iocosa gratiarum actio	Salviati, Roberto
9.22	Prohemium in librum de vita longa	Valori, Filippo
9.23	Ironia in librum suum contra grammaticum detractorem	Ugoletto, Taddeo
9.24	Iocosa adversus silentium diuturnum	Leone, Pier
9.25	In librum de vita	Attavanti, Paolo
9.26	In librum de vita, post libros de somniis et demonibus	Piero de' Medici

BOOK 10

10.1	Prohoemium Marsili Ficini Florentini in librum decimum undecimumque epistolarum	Valori, Filippo
10.2	Pro libro de vita ad amicum misso	Martini, Iacopo
10.3	Pro eodem	Lorenzo de' Medici Jr.
10.4	Iocosa	Michelozzi, Bernardo

10.5	Prohoemium in libros primo quidem missos ad Laurentii filios et Valorem, deinde ad Laurentium Medicem	de' Medici, Lorenzo
10.6	Coetus civium quorundam elegantium et optantium tranquillitatem, nomine Mammola	Rucellai, Bernardo
10.7	De charitate nonnihil cum commendatione rerum suarum	Filicaro, Alessandro
10.8	Laus nobilis et optimi civis	Antiquario, Iacopo
10.9	Commendatio causae iurisconsulto	Giustino, Leonardo [?]
10.10	De amore et amicitia et commendatio amici	Donati, Girolamo
10.11	De amicitia et immortalitate animae	Bembo, Bernardo
10.12	Demones sola res medici. Item commendatio libri de vita	Leone, Pier
10.13	Filii solis dicuntur quibus nascentibus sol aspirat. Sol in Leone in nona coeli plaga	Lorenzo de' Medici Jr.
10.14	Commendatio litterati litterato	Torriani, Gioacchino
10.15	In librum de vita, de accepto dono	Brenninger, Martin
10.16	Approbatio libri ex comprobatione doctorum	Matteo of Arezzo
10.17	Commendatio Academie peripatetico	Cittadini, Antonio
10.18	De adorando Deo in Confessionibus Augustini	de' Medici, Lorenzo
10.19	Oratio quotidiana	Barbaro, Ermolao
10.20	Pro libro de vita	Calderini, Antonio
10.21	[no title]	Soderini, Francesco
10.22	Gratiarum actio pro patrocinio exhibito nobis a principe	Barbo, Marco
10.23	Gratiarum actio pro patrocinio exhibito nobis a principe	Orsini, Rinaldo
10.24	Commendatio diligentiae, officia Mercurii	Calderini, Antonio
10.25	Declaratio amoris unici	Brenninger, Martin
10.26	Purgatio tarditatis in respondendo	Barbaro, Ermolao to Marsilio Ficino
10.27	Petitio auxilii in publicis oneribus	Dovizi, Bernardo
10.28	Purgatio circa salutationem non frequentatam	Pandolfo of Pesaro
10.29	Alludendo nomini declaratur divitias esse bona animi	Dovizi, Bernardo
10.30	De fato et fortuna et suo cuiusque demone	Scuto, Gregorio
10.31	In successu operum Deo gratias age amicis congratulare	Leone, Pier
10.32	Finis operis. Principium operis tibi esto de commentario in Philebūm	Soderini, Francesco
10.33	Pro acceptis gratias age antequam nova petas	Bishop Gentile
10.34	De adoratione	Ricasoli, Bindaccio
10.35	Prohoemium in libros in adolescentia compositos sed collectos tandem atque ad Laurentium missos	de' Medici, Lorenzo
10.36	Prohoemium Marsili Ficini in librum qui inscribitur „homo“ ad magnanimum Laurentium Medicem	de' Medici, Lorenzo
10.37	Per quas coeli plagas animae descendunt atque ascendunt	de' Medici, Lorenzo
10.38	Amatoris cura secura	Soderini, Paolantonio

10.39	Fata viam invenient aderitque vocatus Apollo	Pandolfini, Filippo
10.40	Laurentius Platonis libros formis exprimere iussit	Martelli, Braccio
10.41	Concordia Iovis et solis, concordia collegarum	Niccolini, Angelo; Valori, Filippo
10.42	Gratiarum actio pro immenso beneficio	de' Medici, Lorenzo
10.43	Allegoria, quomodo Mercurius, celestium minimus, significat sapientiam, virtutum maximam	Ricasoli, Bindaccio
10.44	Pallas, Iuno, Venus: vita contemplativa, activa, voluptuosa	de' Medici, Lorenzo
10.45	Congratulatio in nova dignitate, cum auspiciis astronomicis	Barbaro, Ermolao
10.46	Heroicorum virorum laboriosa quidem vita est sed gloriosa	Leone, Pier
10.47	Prohoemium in apolos de voluptate	Brenninger, Martin

BOOK 11

11.1	Epistola de dono argentei calicis	Herivart, Georg to Marsilio Ficino
11.2	Responsio pro dono argentei calicis	Herivart, Georg
11.3	Quomodo aliquis sub aliena persona cogitanti sibi met occurrat	Leone, Pier
11.4	Ad magnos pertinet beneficia conferre etiam non merentibus	Riario, Raffaele
11.5	Caritas et pietas potissimum est sapientis officium	Brenninger, Martin
11.6	Purgatio de litteris non redditis	Riario, Raffaele
11.7	Pro adolescentibus e Suevia missis ad Academiam Florentiam	Nauclerus, Ludwig; Reuchlin, Johann
11.8	De quattuor speciebus divini furoris. Item laudes Medicis Laurentii vere	Dovizi, Piero
11.9	Vera laus Marci cardinalis sancti viri	Calderini, Antonio
11.10	Rationes negotiorum suorum amico reddende	Brenninger, Martin
11.11	De simplicitate et integritate morum	Leone, Pier
11.12	Prohoemium in Platonicas institutiones	Valori, Filippo
11.13	Gratiarum actio	Brenninger, Martin
11.14	In librum de vita dono datum	Mazzinghi, Mazzingo di Paradiso
11.15	Philosophica ingenia ad Christum pervenient per Platonem ut Augustino Aurelio contigit	Pico, Giovanni
11.16	Commendatio	Soderini, Francesco
11.17	Commendatio	Valori, Filippo
11.18	Actio gratiarum. Item de ostentis in obitu principis	Giovanni de' Medici
11.19	Actio gratiarum	Soderini, Francesco
11.20	Cause prodigiorum in obitu principis contingentium	Valori, Filippo
11.21	De vita solitaria et quanti facienda sit fama	Pico, Giovanni
11.22	Laudes amici scilicet Bindacii Recasolani	Valori, Filippo
11.23	Laudes legitimi principis	Eberhard of Württemberg
11.24	Qui futuris predicendis incumbunt infortunati sunt	Ricasoli, Bindaccio

11.25	Opiniones non temere divulgande. Item Orphei carmina	Brenninger, Martin
11.26	Exhortatur amicos ut Plotino foras prodeunti faveant	Carducci, Filippo
11.27	In librum de vita missum ad amicum	Canacci, Giovanni; Ricasoli, Bindaccio
11.28	Cathalogus familiarium atque auditorum	Brenninger, Martin
11.29	Prohoemium in compendium Proculi	Brenninger, Martin
11.30	De demonibus	Carducci, Filippo
11.31	Philosophia cum fortuna et divitiis coniungitur	Valori, Filippo
11.32	Ubi plus fortunae ibi sapientiae minus atque vicissim	Ricasoli, Bindaccio
11.33	Prohoemuim in comparationem solis ad Deum	Eberhard of Württemberg
11.34	Laudes saeculi nostri tanquam aurei ab ingeniosis Averois	Von Middelburg, Paulus

BOOK 12

12.1	Prohoemium	Rossi, Girolamo
12.2	Nullus mala poenitus et curas extirpare potest	Soderini, Giovanni Vittorio; Cattani da Diaceto, Francesco
12.3	Solem non esse adorandum tanquam rerum omnium auctorem	Eberhard of Württemberg
12.4	Copula philosophiae cum legibus, quod foelix et nobilis sit philosophus	Brenninger, Martin
12.5	Cur semper eadem et antiqua tractem	Valori, Filippo
12.6	Similitudo Mercurii cum Saturno	Carducci, Filippo
12.7	Apologia in librum suum de sole et lumine	Valori, Filippo
12.8	Sepe in coelestibus gemini sunt. Item soles duo	Brenninger, Martin
12.9	In librum de sole dono missum	Guiducci, Lorenzo
12.10	Amor ipse Deus amantem redamari iubet	Giuliano of Istria
12.11	In librum de sole	Mazzinghi, Mazzingo di Paradiso
12.12	In librum de sole	Ciprio, Giorgio
12.13	In librum de sole missum	Ugolini, Baccio
12.14	Foelicia ad philosophiam auspicia a Mercurio et Saturno et sole	Valori, Niccolò
12.15	Signa legitimi Platonici atque de ideis	Cattani da Diaceto, Francesco
12.16	Purgatio silentii diurni	Valori, Filippo
12.17	In librum de sole	Calderini, Antonio
12.18	Lumen est admirabile, quoniam est imago sapientie; item quam mirabilis sit copula sapientiae cum potentia	Malatesta, Ramberto
12.19	Quomodo Venus per cupidinem commiscet amantes. Iuppiter amicabilis per Mercurium conflat amicos	Malatesta, Ramberto
12.20	Sol imago vicariusque Dei	Soderini, Francesco
12.21	Prohoemium in aepistolas	His letters
12.22	Pro libro de sole, item de stella magorum in solennitate Epiphaniae	Niccolini, Angelo
12.23	Pro Bacchi dono. Item evangelicum illud, ex aqua vinum factum	Mazzinghi, Mazzingo di Paradiso

12.24	Pro libro de vita iterum imprimendo. Item auspicium de amicitia immortale	Menchen, Johannes
12.25	Commendatio brevis in causa iusta	Soderini, Francesco
12.26	Plato multa Christianis consentanea dixit, Platonici multi Christiana sunt imitati	Rondoni, Jacopo
12.27	Semper aliquid agendum et quoad fieri potest in eodem perseverandum	Callimaco, Filippo
12.28	Sapientes filii sunt Minervae, haec philosophiam parit, philosophia philosophos	de Ganay, Germaine
12.29	Pro libro de sole	Bembo, Bernardo
12.30	Pro libro de sole	Cronico, Antonio
12.31	Quid sentiat de astrologia	Poliziano, Angelo
12.32	Pro libro de sole	Rucellai, Bernardo di Mariotto
12.33	Commendatio clientis apud magistratum	del Benino, Niccolò
12.34	Gratiarum actio pro indulgentia in clientem impetrata	del Benino, Niccolò
12.35	De Iove amicabili et Apolline pro libro de sole	Matheron, Jean
12.36	Multifaciendum est laudari a laudato viro	de Ganay, Germaine
12.37	Pro libro de religione, purgatio de tarda salutatione	de Stefano, Giovanni
12.38	Oratio Marsilii Ficini Florentini ad Carolum magnum Gallorum regem	Charles VIII
12.39	Cur providentia permittat adversa. Item de vaticiniis remediisque malorum	Cavalcanti, Giovanni
12.40	Gratulatio pro litteris diu expectatis	de Ganay, Germaine
12.41	Pia Platonis sententia de amicis et inimicis dei	Cavalcanti, Giovanni
12.42	Pro libro de sole	de Ganay, Jean
12.43	Pro libro de sole	Paolo da Verona

APPENDIX III TABLE OF ADDRESSEES WITH LETTER COUNT

Piero de'Medici	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	2
Quarquagli, Cherubino	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
Salviati, Roberto	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	2
Tedaldi, Francesco	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
Ugolini, Baccio	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
Vinciguerra, Antonio	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	2
Acciaiuoli, Donato	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Accolti, Benedetto	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Agli, Pellegrino	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Amazzi, Girolamo	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Apollinari, Gianpietro	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Arduini, Oliviero	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Attavanti, Paolo	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Baduer, Sebastian	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
Banco	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Befani, Gregorio	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Benci, Amerigo	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Benivieni, Girolamo	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
Bollano, Domenico	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
Bunonisegni, Antonio	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
Campani, Giovanni	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Canacci, Giovanni	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
Canigiani, Antonio	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Cantanio, Girolamo	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1

Capponi, Nicola	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Castellani, Francesco	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Charles VIII	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Colucci, Benedetto	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Compagno, Pietro	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
Controni da Lucca, Filippo	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Corsini, Matteo	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Cresci, Migliore	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Cronico, Antonio	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
de Ganay, Jean	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
de Stefano, Giovanni	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
de' Pazzi Piero	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
de'Pazzi, Antonio	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
degli Albizzi, Niccolò	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
della Cornia, Pier Filippo	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
della Stuffa, Sigismondo	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Donati, Girolamo	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
Dovizi, Piero	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
Dulci	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
Fabiano, Luca	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Ferobanti, Paolo	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
Filicaro, Alessandro	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
Forli, Antonio	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Gaddi, Francesco	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1

Galeotto of Faventia	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
Girolamo of Urbino	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
Giugni, Bernardo	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Giuliano of Istria	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
Giustino, Leonardo [?]	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Guasconi, Francesco	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Guicciardini, Piero di Iacopo	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Guiducci, Lorenzo	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Landino, Cristoforo	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Lanfredini, Antonio	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
Lanfredini, Iacopo	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
Lapaccini, Francesco	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Leonardo of Colle	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
Leoni, Michele	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Lisci, Alberto	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
Manetti, Angelo	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Martini, Iacopo	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
Matheron, Jean	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Matteo of Arezzo	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
Menchen, Johannes	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Mercati, Michele	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Minerbetti, Tommaso	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Miniati [Mithridates]	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
Molin, Pietro	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1

Musano, Francesco	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Nauclerus, Ludwig	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
Niccolini, Ottone	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Palmieri, Matteo	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Pandolfini, Filippo	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Pandolfo of Pesaro	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Pandozzi, Panezio	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Paolo da Verona	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
Parisi, Alberto	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Pasqualini, Girolamo	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Placentino, Pietro	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Probo	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
Reuchlin, Johann	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Ristoro, Carlo	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
Romano, Valerio	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Romano, Zenobio	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
Rondoni, Jacopo	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Rucellai, Bernardo di Mariotto	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Sacramoro, Filippo	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Salvini, Mariano	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Sassetti, Francesco	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Scala, Bartolomeo	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Scala, Francesco	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
Scuto, Gregorio	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1

Soderini, Giovanni Vittorio	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
Soderini, Paolantonio	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Spoletino, Pierleone	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Torriani, Gioacchino	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Ugoletto, Taddeo	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
Valguli, Carlo	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Valori, Niccolò	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
Valori, Tommaso	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Vanni, Pietro	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Verino, Ugolino	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
Von Middelburg, Paulus	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
Zilioli, Antonio	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1