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**Theologia Ficiniiana : Intellectual exchange and spiritual renewal  
in late Quattrocento Florence**

**Stephens, Lana Marie**

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***Theologia Ficiniiana: Intellectual Exchange and  
Spiritual Renewal in Late Quattrocento Florence***

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A thesis submitted in total fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of  
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Institute for Religion and Critical Inquiry  
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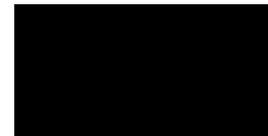
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2022



## **Declaration**

*This thesis contains no material that has been extracted in whole or in part from a thesis that I have submitted towards the award of any other degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution.*

*No other person's work has been used without due acknowledgment in the main text of the thesis.*



Lana Stephens

13/10/2022



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Fig. 3. Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze, Ms. Nazionale II. III. 402, f. 1r.

Fig. 4. Biblioteca Riccardiana, Ms. Riccardiano 2544, f. 202v.

## Abbreviations

ASF = Archivio di Stato di Firenze

BAV = Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana

Bibl. Ambr. = Veneranda Biblioteca Ambrosiana

Bibl. Cas. = Biblioteca Casanatense

Bibl. Laur. = Biblioteca Medicea-Laurenziana

Bibl. Ricc. = Biblioteca Riccardiana

BNB = Biblioteca Nazionale Braidense

BNCF = Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze

BNF = Bibliothèque Nationale de France

Piacenza Bibl. Com. = Biblioteca Comunale Passerini-Landi

Siena Bibl. Com. = Biblioteca Comunale degli Intronati

A note on translations: unless stated otherwise, all translations are my own.

## A Note to the Reader

In an age where knowledge is more accessible than ever, we as historians, on account of the global pandemic, found ourselves more isolated than we could possibly have anticipated, not only from one another, but from the very sources which fuel our curiosity and generate new ideas. Closed off from the processes to which we had grown accustomed, we were forced to innovate, and to research from afar with all the many challenges which that presented. When I first embarked on my doctorate, I had grand plans to pursue my research in Italy, nestled away in the archives of Florence, but Fate had chosen otherwise. The pandemic led to unforeseen and unprecedented disruptions in all our lives, and for so many of us, fundamentally changed the course of our research. Indeed, this is not, in fact, the thesis which I had set out to write, living as I have been and am in the ‘most locked down city in the world,’ studying a culture so distant and remote, from the confines of my *studiolo*, and so I hope my readers will look upon this dissertation for what it is, rather than for what it is not. Under more propitious circumstances (to gloss Ficino), I would certainly have tilled new earth and produced a more bountiful crop, but a farmer must be an optimist, and so I remain confident that future cultivation of the seeds which have been sown throughout this study will generate a rich harvest of the sweetest fruit

## Abstract

The philosophical contributions of Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499) to the intellectual legacy of the Italian Renaissance cannot be overstated; Ficino's name has become synonymous with Florentine Neoplatonism, and his philosophy of love and systematic defence of the immortality of individual souls has made Ficino one of the most recognised and influential thinkers of the fifteenth century. As the translator of the Platonic corpus, and many Neoplatonic authors besides, the Florentine philosopher-priest was well acquainted with, and indeed, had arguably become attracted to antique notions of the origins of the soul. Situating the doctrine of the soul's pre-mortal existence within Ficino's thought, particularly in relation to his understanding of spiritual renewal, this thesis aims to provide a re-evaluation of Ficino as a religious thinker and how he understood the relationship between religion and philosophy. The thesis will thereby offer a more nuanced understanding of his contributions to the religious and spiritual life of Quattrocento Florence.

Drawing on Ficino's *Platonic Theology*, his commentaries of Plato and Plotinus, and his epistolary correspondence, this thesis adopts a framework which combines social, cultural and intellectual historical methods, setting out to not only establish Ficino's doctrinal interventions, but to place them within the broader context of Renaissance theological reform. In so doing, the thesis aims to contribute to a scholarly reappraisal of how humanistic, vernacular and rhetorical theologies functioned in Florence, and how we as historians understand these theologies. Focussing in particular on the use of rhetoric, language, literary convention, and socio-intellectual networks in the dissemination of Ficinian theology, this thesis intends to provide new perspectives on intellectual exchange in the later decades of the fifteenth century, particularly in relation to the movement of ideas which advocate for religious and theological reform. With a view to examining the broader implications of the dissemination of these ideas, the thesis also reconsiders Ficino's relationship to the Tuscan vernacular, and its role in his programme of spiritual renewal.

This thesis moreover seeks to re-contextualise thinkers in Ficino's circle, by highlighting their critical role in the religious transformations taking place in the second half of the

fifteenth century, and significantly, in the formation of a new religious subculture. Analysing a number of Latin and Tuscan works, this thesis reveals the reproduction of Ficinian ideas on the origins of the soul in connection to contemplation, conversion and mystical union, as well as nuanced modes of communication, and thereby links intellectual exchange to Florentine spiritual renewal. The thesis therefore aims to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of the intellectual world on the religious, by demonstrating how the re-emergence and incorporation of new streams of thought, as well as the methods used in that effort, came to bear upon the religious and spiritual life.

Contending that Ficinian theology fundamentally informed an intellectually driven programme of spiritual renewal and theological reform in Florence during the second half of the fifteenth century and early sixteenth century, this thesis therefore re-contextualises Ficino's place in our understanding of the intellectual and religious history of Renaissance Florence, and brings an entirely new set of methods, ideas, and characters into this understanding.

## Chapter One: Introduction

If Philosophy is defined by everyone as love of, and devotion to, truth and wisdom, while truth and wisdom themselves are God alone, it follows that lawful Philosophy is no different from true religion, and lawful religion exactly the same as true Philosophy.<sup>1</sup>

Marsilio Ficino to Bernardo Bembo, c.1475.

By now, the name Marsilio Ficino will be familiar to many. Born on the 19<sup>th</sup> of October 1433 in Figline Valdarno, Ficino would come to be one of the most celebrated intellectuals of the Italian Renaissance. In his letter to Bernardo Bembo, the Florentine philosopher-priest emphasised the unity of philosophy and religion, a message which became his life's mission to proclaim. Reason, he had argued, would lead those with a philosophical turn of mind to the very same place as faith had led those of a religious nature. Tracing the footsteps of Ficino's readers, throughout this thesis we shall enter the contemplative realm of Saturn, and discover precisely where this path was leading, but more importantly, where Ficino believed it had come from. This thesis argues that from his close study of Platonic and Neoplatonic sources, Ficino saw in the doctrines on the origins of the soul a path to spiritual, religious, and theological renewal, seeking not only to revive these doctrines, but to incorporate them into an existing framework of Christian belief and practice. The principal aim of this thesis is therefore to investigate the formation of a new religious culture in late Quattrocento Florence, in relation to the internal dynamics of the intellectual community of which Ficino was at the heart.

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<sup>1</sup> Letter 123, *Oratorical, moral, dialectical and theological praise of Philosophy*. Marsilio Ficino, *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino*, 2nd ed., trans. the Language Department of the School of Economic Science, London, 11 vols. (London: Shephard-Walwyn, 1975–2021), 1:155–160, at 151. “Veritas autem et sapientia ipsa solus est Deus, sequitur ut necque legitima Philosophia quicquam aliud, quam vera religio, necque aliud legitima religio, quam vera Philosophia.” Marsilio Ficino, *Opera Omnia*, 2 vols. (Basel: Henricus Petrus, 1576), 1:668–670, at 668. Cfr. the preface to Ficino's *De Christiana religione*; Letter 18, *Philosophy and Religion are true sisters*; and Letter 21, *The Platonic teaching accords with religion*. See *Ibid.*, 1:1–2, 853–855; Ficino, *Letters*, 6:32–36.

## 1.1 Renaissance Humanism and Religion towards the Twenty-First Century

One of the central problems still faced in contemporary Renaissance studies is the way in which past scholars have treated the religious aspects of the period, particularly in relation to Humanist culture. Few studies have adequately assessed the impact of ordinary humanists on the contemporary religious climate, or the way in which the developments in the intellectual world, namely its ideas and practices, affected those of the religious. This is fundamentally due to the way in which historians have interpreted and approached Renaissance ‘humanism’; following Jacob Burckhardt, scholars from the mid-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century tended to view humanism as a strictly secular, anti-religious movement.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, it has since been characterised as a cultural phenomenon confined exclusively to the linguistic branches of culture, as a movement which arose in opposition to Scholasticism, and as a discipline which had little to do with philosophy, politics, religion, or theology at all. The competing approaches in modern scholarly literature have led to a plurality of ‘humanisms,’ and it is therefore necessary to understand the influences that have shaped the contrasting interpretations of Italian Renaissance intellectual history.

Toward the second half of the twentieth century, three very distinct historiographical schools emerged, represented by the scholarship of Hans Baron, Paul Oskar Kristeller and Eugenio Garin respectively. I shall briefly summarise Baron, before turning to Kristeller and Garin, whose research epitomises the most influential theoretical approaches to the intellectual history of the Italian Renaissance, which are still felt

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<sup>2</sup> As succinctly summarised by Robert Black, for Burckhardt the Italian Renaissance “signaled the rebirth of the individual; society was secularized; religious faith and morality declined; the shackles of legitimacy were broken. For Burckhardt, ‘the essence of the phenomena’ was political, social, and moral; learning — the revival of Latin and Greek letters — was secondary (although he conceded that the rebirth of antiquity colored innumerable facets of culture). Accordingly, humanism assumed an anthropological dimension. The humanists were liberated individuals, paying scant regard to social, moral, or religious norms. They were characterized by ‘malicious self-conceit,’ ‘abominable profligacy,’ ‘irreligion,’ ‘licentious excess’ — ‘the most striking examples and victims of an unbridled subjectivity.’” Robert Black, “Kristeller and his Critics: Celenza, Rubini, Maxson, and Baker on Renaissance Humanism,” review of *The Intellectual World of the Italian Renaissance: Language, Philosophy, and the Search for Meaning*, by Christopher Celenza; *Italian Renaissance Humanism in the Mirror*, by Patrick Baker; *The Humanist World of Renaissance Florence*, by Brian Jeffrey Maxson; *The Other Renaissance: Italian Humanism between Hegel and Heidegger*, by Rocco Rubini, *History of Humanities* 4, no. 1 (2019): 155–156.

strongly in the historiography today.<sup>3</sup> In particular, they form the scholarly context of this tension, and indeed, the study of Ficino in relation to it.

German-Jewish historian of political thought and literature, Hans Baron (1900–1988), is best known for his influential monograph, *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance: Civic Humanism and Republican Liberty in an Age of Classicism and Tyranny*, published in 1966.<sup>4</sup> In his youth, Baron was a staunch supporter of the Weimar republic, who was forced to flee Germany shortly after Adolf Hitler’s rise to power and the rise of the tyrannical Nazi regime. The centrality of republicanism in Baron’s thesis, and emphasis on tyranny versus freedom, is therefore unsurprising.<sup>5</sup> In Baron’s view, the war between Florence and Milan in 1402 was a pivotal moment in the formation of modern political consciousness, signalling the transition from medieval to modernity. Creating an incisive division between medieval tyranny, represented by Milanese despotism, and the freedom represented by a new political ethos — which he called ‘civic humanism’ — engendered by Florentine republicanism (which was itself inspired by the humanist interest in the literary, historical, and philosophical elements of classical culture), Baron began to show that the political and intellectual spheres were deeply enmeshed. His study of Leonardo Bruni’s *Laudatio florentinae urbis*, which connected the humanist’s efficacious political rhetoric to civic engagement and political action, provided the humanist movement with a tangible political dimension, thus freeing it from the constraints of a merely intellectual or literary phenomenon. Baron’s thesis effectively confirmed that the power of humanist rhetoric cannot be underestimated in its effect on the various and intersecting domains of Renaissance culture, and that the intellectual world cannot be treated in isolation from the

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<sup>3</sup> This historiography has been reviewed in detail, see Black, “Kristeller and his Critics,” 155–177; Christopher S. Celenza, *The Lost Italian Renaissance — Humanists, Historians, and Latin’s Legacy* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 16–57; James Hankins, “Garin and Paul Oskar Kristeller: Existentialism, Neo-Kantianism, and the Post-War Interpretation of Renaissance Humanism,” in *Eugenio Garin: Dal Rinascimento all’Illuminismo*, ed. Michele Ciliberto (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2011), 481–505; Patrick Baker, *Italian Renaissance Humanism in the Mirror* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015). The impact that the Nazi and Italian fascist regimes had on the philosophical attitudes after World War II is central to any understanding of how the political climate in Europe affected the life and thought of these scholars. It is equally significant to understanding how the post-war academic communities, particularly in Italy and the United States, affected the reception of their ideas. These notions have been unpacked more fully by Celenza and Hankins especially.

<sup>4</sup> See Hans Baron, *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance: Civic Humanism and Republican Liberty in an Age of Classicism and Tyranny* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1966). Baron’s other key works include *From Petrarch to Leonardo Bruni: Studies in Humanistic and Political Literature* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1968) and *In Search of Civic Humanism: Essays on the Transition from Medieval to Modern Thought*, 2 vols. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989).

<sup>5</sup> On this, see Riccardo Fubini, “Renaissance Historian: The Career of Hans Baron,” *Journal of Modern History* 64 (1992): 541–574.

other spheres of influence. After moving to the United States in 1938, Baron gained notoriety precisely because of the affinities between post-war America and Renaissance Florence that were highlighted in his works from the mid-1920s onward. Though he remains one of the most influential scholars on subsequent historiography, particularly in the United Kingdom and North America, it became apparent quite early on that his theory was deeply flawed. Amongst the major criticisms of his work is the contention that his view of humanism is a completely secular notion, which makes no provision for other aspects, especially religion, and which neglects important sources for ‘civic humanism’ — the Scriptures and other theological literature.<sup>6</sup> Thus, despite its initial popular reception, and the widespread influence of Baron’s thesis, it was ultimately unable to stand the test of time, for what Baron’s thesis itself showed us was that religion cannot be excluded from any serious study of humanism or the Renaissance, and certainly not the intellectual world.

Though Baron had anticipated writing on this very issue, believing that Florentine humanism not only encompassed a political element, but also a widespread interest in the religious sphere (even if he did not find this element in Bruni), it appears that the religious aspects of Baron’s humanism were still narrowly constrained.<sup>7</sup> In his early work, Baron had believed Florentine Neoplatonism to be “a form of survival of civic humanism,” but by the time of his later works his stance had changed;<sup>8</sup> Baron came to see the writings of the Florentine Neoplatonists as “abstruse and removed from the daily life of the city.”<sup>9</sup> Indeed, for Baron, the “civic strain in Florentine thought began to weaken under the impact of rising Neoplatonism.”<sup>10</sup> In his view, the “kind of Platonic superstructure accepted by these late Quattrocento Florentines [including Ficino] exhibits little of the political consciousness of city-state citizens; it is a Platonism rooted primarily in art and religion.”<sup>11</sup> It would thus seem that despite its religious elements, Ficino’s Platonism was

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<sup>6</sup> This was pointed out especially by Amos Edelheit in *Ficino, Pico and Savonarola: The Evolution of Humanist Theology 1461/2–1498* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 3–6. For other critical reviews of Baron’s thesis, see James Hankins, *Renaissance Civic Humanism: Reappraisals and Reflections* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000); James Hankins, “The ‘Baron Thesis’ after Forty Years and Some Recent Studies of Leonardo Bruni,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 56, no. 2 (1995): 309–338; Celenza, *Lost Italian Renaissance*, 36–39.

<sup>7</sup> See Hans Baron, *Leonardo Bruni Aretino: Humanistisch-Philosophische Schriften, mit einer Chronologie seiner Werke und Briefe* (Leipzig: Verlag und Druck von B. G. Teubner, 1928), xv.

<sup>8</sup> Fubini, “The Career of Hans Baron,” 557.

<sup>9</sup> Baron, *In Search of Civic Humanism*, 2:184.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:131.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:281.

antithetical to Baron's general view of humanism.<sup>12</sup> Certainly, having repeatedly highlighted the medieval and Scholastic elements in Ficino's philosophy and theology, which Baron juxtaposed against the modern and humanist elements as he saw them, the mystical religious and theological dimension of Ficino's thought were clearly not to be conflated with Baron's version of humanism.

On the question of how to interpret Renaissance humanism, the differing positions of Kristeller and Garin are intimately bound to the contrasting ways in which they understood the "nature of philosophy and the criteria by which the value of philosophical reflection is to be judged."<sup>13</sup> Kristeller's formalist approach to humanism and philosophy was characterised by his emphasis on professional roles and strict disciplinary boundaries; Garin's approach, which was certainly more fluid, embraced a far broader sense of philosophy, allowing him to focus on the philosophical aspects of the humanist movement and the contributions of the Italian humanists to the evolution of modernity. Though Ficino was for both of these scholars a philosopher, they differed significantly on the question of the influence of humanism on his philosophical thought.

Undoubtedly one of the most celebrated scholars of the Italian Renaissance, Paul Oskar Kristeller (1905–1999) was a historian of philosophy, and like Baron, Kristeller too was "part of the German-Jewish diaspora of intellectuals caused by the rise of National Socialism in Germany."<sup>14</sup> Before moving to Italy in 1934, Kristeller had spent his formative years in the scholarly tradition of German *Wissenschaft* — that systematic approach to knowledge, learning, and scholarship which at that time often had the ancient world as its focus. It is telling of this highly regimented instruction that Kristeller came to draw a firm distinction between philosophy and humanism, refusing to admit the latter into the purview of the former. For him, humanism was a strictly literary discipline, which

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<sup>12</sup> Baron stated that "From the beginning of his career as a philosopher, Ficino had rejected some of the basic tenets of the early humanists: their insistence on the inseparable unity of soul and body, their high esteem for material goods, and their preference for the active life and disregard for the values of contemplation." *Ibid.*, 2:38.

<sup>13</sup> Hankins, "Garin and Kristeller," 487–488. "Kristeller wanted his philosophers to be professional philosophers addressing well-defined problems with valid methods. He wanted his humanists to be classical scholars and professional rhetoricians. [Garin] wanted his humanist-philosophers to be organic intellectuals, breaking down the hegemony of traditional paradigms, particularly religious ones, through concrete, critical activity." *Ibid.*, 493.

<sup>14</sup> Celenza, *Lost Italian Renaissance*, 40.

had “nothing to do with philosophy even in the vaguest possible sense of the term.”<sup>15</sup> In his own words:

By humanism we mean merely the general tendency of the age to attach the greatest importance to classical studies, and to consider classical antiquity as the common standard and model by which to guide all cultural activities.<sup>16</sup>

For Kristeller, the interpretation of humanism as “the rise of classical scholarship accomplished during the period of the Renaissance,” and the humanists as classical scholars was insufficient, for the classical learning of the humanists was merely ‘incidental’ to their chief interest: the pursuit of eloquence;<sup>17</sup> in Kristeller’s view, the humanists were professional rhetoricians, “who developed the belief ... that the best way to achieve eloquence was to imitate classical models, and who thus were driven to study the classics and to found classical philology.”<sup>18</sup> Thus, far from being ‘the new philosophy of the Renaissance,’ humanism was to be understood as “a characteristic phase in what may be called the rhetorical tradition in Western culture,” and not a philosophy “which arose in opposition to scholasticism, the old philosophy of the Middle Ages.”<sup>19</sup>

Though humanism had some impact on the other sciences, Kristeller stubbornly refused to admit that humanism had directly contributed to the branches of philosophy or science. Indeed, as a historian of philosophy, Kristeller could not help but view the ‘superficial’ and ‘inconclusive’ works of the humanists as anything other than amateurish attempts to impose their standards on other fields of learning and science (including philosophy). For him,

... the Italian humanists were neither good nor bad philosophers, but no philosophers at all. The humanistic movement did not originate in the field

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<sup>15</sup> Paul Oskar Kristeller, “Humanism and Scholasticism in the Italian Renaissance,” *Byzantion* 17 (1944–1945): 346–374, at 354.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 350.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* As Kristeller notes, the humanist writings which set forth an ideal of eloquence “are far more numerous than the contributions of the humanists to classical scholarship, and they cannot be explained as a necessary consequence of their classical studies. *Ibid.*, 353.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought: The Classic, Scholastic and Humanist Strains* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1961), 11; Kristeller, “Humanism and Scholasticism,” 353.

of philosophical or of scientific studies, but it arose in that of grammatical and rhetorical studies. ... This development in the field of grammatical and rhetorical studies finally affected the other branches of learning, but it did not displace them. After the middle of the fifteenth century, we find an increasing number of professional jurists, physicians, mathematicians, philosophers, and theologians who cultivated humanistic studies along with their own particular fields of study. Consequently, a humanistic influence began to appear in all these other sciences. ... This influence of humanism on the other sciences certainly was important, but it did not affect the content or substance of the medieval traditions in those sciences. For the humanists, being amateurs in those other fields, had nothing to offer that could replace their traditional content and subject matter.<sup>20</sup>

In his view, the humanists, who had not contributed any new philosophical ideas and had not contributed substantially to the other sciences, could therefore only be considered responsible for the cultivation of a new classicist ideal of culture. Though they had made some contributions to the field of moral philosophy (ethics) the Italian humanists remained men of letters and were not to be classed among professional philosophers; “their domain were the fields of grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history, and the study of the Greek and Latin authors,” that is, the *studia humanitatis*.<sup>21</sup> The works of the Renaissance philosophers, on the other hand were altogether different from those of the humanists, both in subject matter and method. “Like the humanists, however, their questions and doctrinal positions were fundamentally continuous with those of medieval philosophy.”<sup>22</sup>

However, Kristeller’s insistence on the continuity between medieval and Renaissance philosophical positions can only be maintained if one upholds his narrow interpretation of humanism and strict separation of religion and theology from philosophy. As Amos Edelheit has aptly observed:

A good example of Kristeller’s “philosophical” approach can be found in the beginning of the chapter on the inner experience in his *Il pensiero*

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<sup>20</sup> Kristeller, “Humanism and Scholasticism,” 354–355.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 355.

<sup>22</sup> Hankins, “Garin and Kristeller,” 488.

*filosofico di Marsilio Ficino*, where he criticizes the use of the term “mysticism” in this context, since it may represent a confusion between religion and philosophy, whereas he is interested in the inner experience as a philosophical phenomenon and a foundation for philosophical interpretation. The assumption underlying this approach is that the historian of philosophy can, and indeed should, separate theological and religious aspects from philosophical ones, which are obviously regarded as more important. But such an assumption becomes problematic if we consider that Ficino himself used the term “theology” in the title of his *magnum opus*, the *Platonic Theology*, that he dedicated a book to a discussion of the Christian religion, that many of his letters deal with spiritual issues, and that he was ordained a priest in 1473. In other words, we can say that there is enough evidence to show that Ficino was profoundly interested in religion and theology, and that his philosophy cannot be separated from these elements, nor can they be treated as marginal.<sup>23</sup>

Though Marsilio Ficino was for Kristeller a philosopher and not a humanist, the separation of philosophy from religion and theology according to modern disciplinary boundaries is detrimental to the study of Renaissance intellectuals. One can then see that in adopting a more inclusive view of humanism and of philosophy, the doctrinal positions held by individuals like Ficino come to represent a transition from medieval thinkers. Given the mutually reinforcing relationship that appears to have existed between the philosophical aspects of Renaissance thought, and the religious and theological thinking

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<sup>23</sup> Edelheit, *The Evolution of Humanist Theology*, 11–12. Jörg Lauster similarly noted that “Nearly everywhere in his work are allusions, passages and even treatises reflecting his engagement with Christian theology. Some writings, moreover, are so dominated by these themes that we can simply call them theological works. The foremost piece is, of course, *De Christiana religione*, Ficino’s great apology for the Christian religion.” However, Lauster stated that in his own works he would make use of “the modern conception of theology as reflection on the concerns of the Christian religion, and not the conception of Ficino himself, who could call his main philosophical work *Theologia Platonica*.” Ficino understood the word *theologia* perfectly well, and we should not make assumptions based on modern distinctions between theology and philosophy; this is both anachronistic and is untrue of Ficino’s general attitude and the reality of the fifteenth century. As Christopher Celenza notes: “It would be artificial if we separated ‘philosophical’ conceptions from Ficino’s religious views. Ficino’s *prisca theologia* was his philosophy.” The *Platonic Theology* was indeed part of Ficino’s programme of religious reform and spiritual renewal. See Jörg Lauster, “Marsilio Ficino as a Christian Thinker: Theological Aspects of his Platonism,” in *Marsilio Ficino: His Theology, His Philosophy, His Legacy*, eds. Michael J. B. Allen, Valery Rees and Martin Davies (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 46 and n.4; Christopher S. Celenza, “Late Antiquity and Florentine Platonism: The ‘Post-Plotinian’ Ficino,” in *Theology, Philosophy, Legacy*, 84–85.

of the age, it is imperative that these branches of knowledge be reunited by today's historians:

It is true that in terms of Kristeller's historiographical school the Platonic and Neoplatonic writings, which represent pagan classical and rationalist thinking, also contain religious aspects ... but we do not find in Kristeller's school detailed accounts and discussions of these religious and theological aspects in terms of contemporary mediaeval and Renaissance religiosity, the immediate religious context of Ficino and Pico, which, in addition to ancient pagan philosophical texts, deeply affected and shaped their philosophical thinking.<sup>24</sup>

Kristeller's interpretation has played a pivotal role in the direction taken in the study of Renaissance intellectual history, and it is precisely because of his approach to humanism and his strict separation of theology and religion from philosophy, that scholars have not yet made the connection between Ficino's philosophical works (especially those that treat his notion of inner experience) and his religious and spiritual thinking.<sup>25</sup> It is perhaps also the principal cause of the prevailing view of Ficino as a Christianising interpreter of Plato, who was committed to and in conformity with the orthodoxies of his time. Moreover, it is arguably because of Kristeller's strong views on the distinction between 'professionals' and 'amateurs' that 'secondary' figures in the Florentine intellectual field, and especially those in Ficino's circle, have been neglected, especially in terms of contributions to contemporary religion and theology.

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<sup>24</sup> Edelheit, *The Evolution of Humanist Theology*, 14.

<sup>25</sup> The influence of Kristeller's approach can be found in the works of a number of important of North American scholars, Michael J. B. Allen and James Hankins being chief among them. "Michael J. B. Allen accepts the fact that Ficino was a religious man who wrote also religious works such as *On the Christian Religion*, sermons, and many spiritual letters, but he tends to see in all this activity merely a popular aspect of Ficino, which does not represent his real contributions. Ficino's real contributions are to be found in his Platonic commentaries and the *Platonic Theology*, to which Allen has dedicated all his studies on Ficino. His account of *On the Christian Religion* is symptomatic of his attitude. According to Allen this work is '... an explicitly apologetic work written after Ficino's admission to the priesthood and studiously avoids many of his characteristically Platonic ideas.'" *Ibid.*, 13. Though James Hankins' approach to the interrelationship between religion and philosophy in Ficino's thinking is more amenable to Garin's school of thought than Amos Edelheit suggests, one nevertheless finds traces of that Kristellan tendency to separate religion and philosophy throughout Hankins' work; on the very doctrines with which this thesis deals, there is no attempt by Hankins to frame these as part of Ficino's programme of religious and theological reform, nor as part of his broader notion of religion itself. For Hankins, these doctrines interest Ficino as a *philosopher* and an *interpreter*, perhaps even as a *magus*, but they are not presented as being important or even relevant to Ficino as a reformer of contemporary Christianity. See n.68 below.

For all their many merits, Baron and Kristeller have offered a somewhat circumscribed view of and approach to humanism in the Renaissance, which continues to present a challenge to the study of Italian Renaissance intellectual history today. The way in which these scholars have treated humanist culture, particularly in relation to the religious aspects of the period, has not only created a fundamental problem for the way in which subsequent scholarship has understood the effects that humanism had on the religious, theological and spiritual life, but it has further obfuscated the impact that ordinary humanists had on the contemporary religious climate, and the way in which the developments in the intellectual world affected those of the religious. With such a vast and lasting influence on the scholarship, particularly in the English-speaking world, it is no wonder that many ‘philosophical’ texts of undoubted religious and theological importance have continually been overlooked as such by religious and intellectual historians alike.

The need for scholars to define their terms can be both a help and a hindrance: too encompassing and we stand to lose all meaning, too narrow and the conceptual ‘taxonomic’ box which we have created becomes untenable. The close scrutiny of historians like Robert Black, for whom terms such as ‘humanist,’ ‘philosopher,’ and ‘intellectual’ are simply too problematic if not used in their strictest sense (that is, according to the Oxford English dictionary), or their contemporary usage (for fear of ‘anachronism’ or worse, ‘absurdities’), pressures scholars to be excessively meticulous about these things.<sup>26</sup> But at what cost? In the period we are looking at especially, the bigger question of whether we can ever neatly place anyone or anything into such clearly defined categories arises. The answer is, of course, negative, for the borders between historiographical and disciplinary concepts as we now conceive them were far more porous in reality; thinking in these terms can only lead to a limited understanding of the past. This is not to deny the value of contemporary terms like *humanista* or *umanista* for the modern historian, but the terms ‘humanist,’ ‘philosopher,’ ‘intellectual’ and even ‘theologian’ can surely be used in a less rigid way (which is not detrimental to a broader

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<sup>26</sup> “To smooth over the differences between humanism and philosophy, speaking in terms of ‘intellectuals,’ is to deprive Italian Renaissance thought of much of its context and its agonistic vitality.” Black, “Kristeller and his Critics,” 163.

analysis).<sup>27</sup> After all, there were surely writers who would consider themselves philosophers, even where Kristeller would hesitate to ascribe the same appellation, and even where this was not their profession.<sup>28</sup> These terms can and must have different shades of meaning (within reason, of course).

The third influential scholar who continues to shape the study of the Renaissance, particularly in Italy, is the Italian philosopher and intellectual historian, Eugenio Garin (1909–2004).<sup>29</sup> Unlike Baron and Kristeller, Garin came to maturity under the fascist educational reforms of Giovanni Gentile (*riforma Gentile*), which prized religious knowledge, the study of philosophy and Latin antiquity, and emphasised the role of the Italian nation in history. It is therefore not surprising that Garin’s work sought to highlight the ways in which Italy and the various Italian intellectual traditions contributed to the evolution of European intellectual life. This would also seem to explain his determined efforts to emphasise the philosophical importance of Italian Renaissance humanism. In stark opposition to Kristeller, for Garin humanism was to be understood as a “movement of both literary *and* philosophical import, or rather, as a new way of thinking that was important precisely because it shattered then-existing disciplinary boundaries.”<sup>30</sup> Garin thought it necessary for the historian to abandon modern assumptions about the nature of philosophy, since, historically, academic ‘disciplines’ “have not always existed with the same sorts of boundaries and presuppositions.”<sup>31</sup> On this point, Kristeller and Garin found themselves at an impasse.

Garin characterised his own view of humanism as:

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<sup>27</sup> On the contemporary usage of *humanista*, see Kristeller, “Humanism and Scholasticism,” 346–374; Augusto Campana, “The Origin of the Word ‘Humanist,’” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 9 (1946): 60–73.

<sup>28</sup> In a similar vein, for the Florentine statesman, Giannozzo Manetti (1396–1455), humanism signified all liberal branches of knowledge, embracing “things divine as well as human,” and at times became almost synonymous with universal knowledge. As Patrick Baker points out, “Manetti [was] intent on reducing humanism to a name for general culture and learning.” Similarly, for the Venetian scholar, Marcantonio Sabellico (1436–1506), “humanism comes to embrace natural philosophy and theology.” If we are to consider contemporary terms like *humanista*, surely we must consider them in their relative historical contexts, for example, an early or late fifteenth century usage, rather than a blanket term which spans the several centuries and cities which the Italian Renaissance encompassed. See Baker, *Humanism in the Mirror*, 99, 131–132, 215.

<sup>29</sup> Garin’s school fostered many influential scholars, including Cesare Vasoli and Salvatore Camporeale.

<sup>30</sup> Celenza, *Lost Italian Renaissance*, 31.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

Very far from — indeed, profoundly against — the thesis dear to Kristeller of a Renaissance humanism as a substantially grammatical fact, of a Renaissance which on the speculative plane was only a continuator of the Middle Ages, and as such, in truth, inconsistent, I have tried on the contrary to individuate its particularity precisely in the deep nexus of its multiple aspects, and above all in the conception of life, of man, and of man’s activity . . . Here, exactly, are the complex roots of modern civilization, without denying the deep connections of the preceding era, but also without attenuating the no less deep differences.<sup>32</sup>

While Kristeller viewed humanism as a phase in the history of rhetoric, Garin saw humanism as “a period in the history of Western and especially Italian philosophy,” and the humanists were “philosophers in the broadest sense of the term.”<sup>33</sup> Embedded within Garin’s interpretation of humanism was thus the recognition that “the nature of what counts as philosophy is itself contingent, defined by the practice of actual thinkers in history rather than by its institutional profile in modern universities.”<sup>34</sup> Garin’s analytical approach then came to take on a new form:

I learned — or began to learn — not to look for philosophy only in books that proclaimed themselves philosophy books. I began to understand that philosophy . . . did not feed on itself alone, and that one of the ways of approach toward philosophizing is precisely reflection on the exemplary aspects of the various forms of human experience.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> “Lontanissimo, anzi profondamente avverso alla tesi cara al Kristeller di un umanesimo del Rinascimento come fatto sostanzialmente grammaticale, di un Rinascimento speculativamente continuatore del Medioevo, e come tale, in verità inconsistente, ho cercato al contrario di individuarne la peculiarità proprio nel nesso profondo dei suoi molteplici aspetti, e soprattutto nella concezione della vita, dell’uomo e della sua attività: nell’arte come nella politica, nello sviluppo delle tecniche come nel contributo al risveglio scientifico. Qui, appunto, le complesse radici della civiltà moderna, senza negare i profondi legami con l’età precedente, ma senza neppure attenuare le non meno profonde differenziazioni.” Eugenio Garin, *La Filosofia come Sapere Storico* (Bari: G. Laterza e Figli, 1990), 146–147. English translation in Celenza, *Lost Italian Renaissance*, 40.

<sup>33</sup> Hankins, “Garin and Kristeller,” 488.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 493.

<sup>35</sup> “Imparai — cominciai a imparare — a non cercare la filosofia solo nei libri che si proclamavano libri di filosofia. Cominciai a capire che la filosofia . . . non si nutre di se stessa, e che una delle vie d’accesso al filosofare è proprio la riflessione sugli aspetti esemplari delle varie forme dell’esperienza umana.” Garin, *La Filosofia come Sapere Storico*, 120–121. English translation in Celenza, *Lost Italian Renaissance*, 31.

While humanism cannot be confused or identified with “all or most of Renaissance philosophy,” its influence on other aspects of Renaissance culture certainly extended beyond the contemporary ideals of the dignity of man and his place in the universe, ‘individualism,’ and the attempt to revive ancient philosophical doctrines.<sup>36</sup> Seeking, and indeed, finding philosophy outside of texts and contexts which had been declared as such — an approach which all but dissolved traditional disciplinary boundaries — was to have a profound impact on later scholarship: philosophy was everywhere, but what place did religion and theology have in Garin’s understanding of this new Renaissance culture? Unlike Kristeller, Garin not only rejected the separation of humanism and philosophy, but he also rejected a separation between philosophy and theology.<sup>37</sup> Similar to Baron, Garin saw humanism as contributing a “distinctive, activist ethos toward living in the world, and it did so by means of philology and rhetoric.” “By historicizing antiquity,” humanist philology “came to a more modern view of what the doctrines of antiquity were,” and using this new understanding they were able to make tangible interventions in the world in which they lived.<sup>38</sup> Though Garin emphasised the originality of the humanists, and their break with the traditions of medieval philosophy, he nevertheless recognised the difficulties in pointing to particular “doctrines held by humanists that were not anticipated by medieval thinkers of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.”<sup>39</sup> However, that Garin “regarded the mystical, magical, and Hermetic elements as a central theme in Renaissance philosophy in general, and in Ficino and Pico in particular,” showed that he

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<sup>36</sup> Kristeller, *Classic, Scholastic and Humanist Strains*, 20–23.

<sup>37</sup> “Nello stesso ambito, d’altra parte, tendono a rimanere, anche se con accento tutt’affatto diverso e a volte opposto, quanti, da un punto di vista filosofico-scientifico vedono umanesimo e filosofia come cose separate, riconoscendo al primo il merito di avere introdotto nuove conoscenze di testi, ma non di avere inciso sul rinnovamento dei metodi d’indagine, della classificazione delle varie discipline, e, infine, della concezione della vita. Ancora: a queste tendenze, diciamo così, separatistiche, che vanno della tesi estrema *umanesimo contro scienza e filosofia* a una tesi moderata *umanesimo e filosofia*, si legano in qualche modo le varie tematiche del controrinascimento, le quali attraverso il procedimento, se non dell’antitesi, almeno dell’esclusione, rischiano spesso di trasformare una tensione dialettica interna a un momento di crisi della cultura in una contrapposizione estrinseca che finisce col privare di senso le varie posizioni, in tal modo sistematizzate e cristallizzate nel contrasto.” See Eugenio Garin, “Le Interpretazioni del Pensiero di Giovanni Pico,” in *L’Opera e il Pensiero di Giovanni Pico della Mirandola nella Storia dell’Umanesimo, Convegno Internazionale (Mirandola: 15–18 Settembre 1963)*, ed. the Istituto Nazionale di Studi sul Rinascimento, 2 vols. (Florence: Istituto Nazionale di Studi sul Rinascimento, 1965), 1:11. Also see Garin’s *L’Umanesimo Italiano: Filosofia e Vita Civile nel Rinascimento* (Bari: G. Laterza e Figli, 1952) and *La Cultura Filosofica del Rinascimento Italiano: Ricerche e Documenti* (Milan: Bompiani, 1994).

<sup>38</sup> Celenza, *Lost Italian Renaissance*, 35–36.

<sup>39</sup> “For him, the originality of the humanists lay not in *contenuto* but in their approach: their *animo*, *sguardo*, *coscienza*, in the *forma* of their philosophical reflections. They did not constitute a philosophical school of the ancient sort that handed down the doctrines of a master, but like the *philosophes* of the Enlightenment they had shared themes and a shared point of view. They sometimes presented these themes and attitudes in a literary dress not usually associated with formal philosophical debate, but this did not make them less philosophical.” Hankins “Garin and Kristeller,” 489.

embraced the intimate connection that existed between philosophy, religion and theology.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, highlighting the synergy between religion and philosophy in both Ficino's and his own thought, Garin was able to identify the religious nature of Ficino's 'philosophical' accounts of inner experience and contemplation.<sup>41</sup> In stark contrast to Kristeller, it was Garin who recognised that Ficino stood before Platonic philosophy as a 'believer in front of a revelation' which not only coincided with religion, or was essentially religious, but which was religion itself.<sup>42</sup> With a more inclusive approach than Kristeller's, Garin paved the way to a new understanding of how humanism and humanists themselves interacted with and contributed to contemporary religion, theology, and spirituality.

In the later twentieth century, it is largely the followers of Garin who have brought the religious dimension of the humanist movement to the fore. Showing that Italian Renaissance humanism was more diverse and influential than had previously been recognised, Charles Trinkaus, John O'Malley, John D'Amico, Salvatore Camporeale, and Amos Edelheit have used humanism as a lens through which to study the emergence of a *new* kind of theology.

In his study of the poetical and theological aspects of Italian humanist thought, Charles Trinkaus established that the humanist movement directly affected theology and Biblical scholarship.<sup>43</sup> Exploring the intimate link between humanist attitudes toward the Bible, and their subsequent treatment of the Scriptures, Trinkaus illustrated the centrality of

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<sup>40</sup> Edelheit, *The Evolution of Humanist Theology*, 17.

<sup>41</sup> Garin stressed that Plato was for Ficino a theologian and emphasised that his ideas were to be considered within a religious and theological framework: "Ché questi due concetti, di una tradizione *teologica* ininterrotta da Ermete a Platone, e di una filosofia come luce interiore, dono di Dio («la filosofia è dono di Dio, e una sua somiglianza e una felicissima imitazione del medesimo»), stanno al centro dell'animo ficiniano nella sua venerazione per i platonici." "Platone, e la tradizione platonica, anche quando espongono logicamente il vero, parlano sempre di Dio, non di concetti; la forma della trattazione è logica, il senso è teologico." Eugenio Garin, *Storia della Filosofia Italiana*, 2 vols. (Turin: Giulio Einaudi Editore, 1966), 1:373–436, at 381 and 384.

<sup>42</sup> "Filosofare è amor di Dio e ritorno a Dio: è religione: è quel momento della vita spirituale in cui si raggiunge la comunione con Dio nella contemplazione suprema." Eugenio Garin, "Ritratto di Marsilio Ficino," *Belfagor* 6, no. 3 (1951): 289–301, at 298. "Alla filosofia platonica si avvicinerà sempre come a una rivelazione compiuta e perfetta, come alla teologia in cui velatamente sono già adombrate tutte le verità cristiane. D'altra parte la vera filosofia, quella che tratta delle cose divine, nata da una rivelazione, da una illuminazione gratuita, coincide con la religione, è essenzialmente religiosa." "Come si vede, si tratta di un *corpus platonicum* imponente, nei confronti del quale Ficino si poneva, non tanto come filologo accurato o storico obbiettivo, ma come credente di fronte a una rivelazione." Garin, *Storia della Filosofia*, 1:379–381.

<sup>43</sup> See Charles Trinkaus, *In Our Image and Likeness: Humanity and Divinity in Italian Humanist Thought*, 2 vols. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1970).

humanist exegetical and hermeneutical practice to the historical emergence of modern Biblical studies. Building upon the medieval and late classical treatment of the Bible as ‘poetry,’ which must necessarily be interpreted allegorically, the Italian humanists of the fourteenth century applied the scholarly, literary and historical norms used in their approach to secular, classical and patristic texts to their study of the Scriptures. Trinkaus showed that this analytical approach, which investigated the literary and poetic merits of the Biblical text, was deeply connected to their regard for human and divine authorship, and thus inherently linked to their concept of ‘authority’ on matters of religion. Demonstrating the humanist awareness of the power of philology and its doctrinal implications, and of the opportunities created by the blurred distinction between the human and the divine, Trinkaus established that the humanists had made effective incursion into the realm of professional theologians, that is, those who worked in the universities, the religious orders and within the *magisterium* of the Church.<sup>44</sup>

From Trinkaus’ ‘rhetorical theology’ came John O’Malley’s ‘Renaissance theology,’ John D’Amico’s ‘humanist theology,’ and Salvatore Camporeale’s *teologia umanistica*.<sup>45</sup> Representing the key stages in the development of this branch of historiography, O’Malley, D’Amico, and Camporeale’s studies assessed the impact of humanist ‘rhetorical’ theology across the fifteenth century, demonstrating that the “emotive voluntarist aspects of rhetoric moved the believer more directly than the intellectualist philosophy of the Scholastics.”<sup>45</sup> Linked to later scholarship on the ‘Neo-Latin revolution,’ which focusses on the humanist concern for and awareness of the ability of a language — its grammar, syntax, vocabulary and rhetorical structures — to communicate ideas effectively, these studies further explored the nexus between the

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<sup>44</sup> In examining the Hieronymic translation of the Scriptures, which had successfully met the criticisms of others, Giannozzo Manetti presented a new translation, which he believed had corrected or improved upon the early Church Father’s translation of the Septuagint. Moreover, Lorenzo Valla indicated his understanding of how support could be offered or removed from particular doctrines by ‘correct’ or ‘incorrect’ philology. See *ibid.*, 2:563–614.

<sup>45</sup> See John W. O’Malley, *Praise and Blame in Renaissance Rome: Rhetoric, Doctrine, and Reform in the Sacred Orators of the Papal Court, c. 1450–1521* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1979); Salvatore Camporeale, *Lorenzo Valla: Umanesimo, Riforma e Controriforma, Studi e Testi* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2002); Salvatore Camporeale, *Lorenzo Valla: Umanesimo e Teologia* (Florence: Istituto Nazionale di Studi sul Rinascimento, 1972); Salvatore Camporeale, “Humanism and the Religious Crisis in the Late Quattrocento: Giovanni Caroli, O.P., and the *Liber dierum dicensium*,” in *Christianity and the Renaissance: Image and Religious Imagination in the Quattrocento*, eds. Timothy Verdon and John Henderson (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1990), 445–466. Also see John F. D’Amico, *Renaissance Humanism in Papal Rome: Humanists and Churchman on the Eve of the Reformation* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), especially 144–168.

humanist exposition of veritable Christian doctrines and the power to authoritatively communicate them.<sup>46</sup> Highlighting the religious and linguistic needs of the Quattrocento, these studies revealed a heightened consciousness from the late fourteenth century of the fallibility of human knowledge — which could and should be subject to scrutiny — and of the abstruseness of scholastic language, in expressing the theological truths of the Christian faith. Typified by the use of classical motifs, *exempla* and a Latin style inspired by the metaphors and rhetoric of Cicero, humanist theology made Christian teachings more appealing to the individual and satisfied the needs of lay intellectuals that were not met by the Church and contemporary theological discourse. The humanist writings thus presented a series of “nuances and reformulations” of existing doctrine that rejected the forms of traditional Scholasticism, though they remained essentially Scholastic in interpretation.<sup>47</sup> That is to say, while the humanists reinvigorated religious practice and belief, they did not change, fundamentally, the basis of that belief.

For decades Coluccio Salutati, Leonardo Bruni, Giannozzo Manetti and Lorenzo Valla have been at the centre of these inquiries, and it was not until Amos Edelheit’s study of the evolution of humanist theology that a broader examination of lesser-known humanists emerged.<sup>48</sup> Edelheit’s analysis revealed a collective feeling of “increasing dissatisfaction with the institutional ceremonies and a deep need for a new approach to religion, for a new theology which could re-establish the relations between the human and the divine differently from the technical scholastic theology.”<sup>49</sup> Emphasising how the humanists’ sources affected their theology, his analysis of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola argued that the disjuncture between opinion and faith had further compounded the growing discontentment with scholastic theology. Noting the inconsistencies between authors throughout the history and tradition of the Church, Pico questioned the changing interpretations of Scripture and the doctrines elaborated by later theologians. Edelheit’s study thus returned to the distinctions between human and divine authorship, and to

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<sup>46</sup> See James Hankins, “The New Language,” in *The Humanism of Leonardo Bruni: Selected Texts*, trans. and eds. Gordon Griffiths, James Hankins and David Thompson (Binghamton, NY: The Renaissance Society of America, 1987), 195–212; Angelo Mazzocco, *Linguistic Theories in Dante and the Humanists: Studies of Language and Intellectual History in Late Medieval and Early Renaissance Italy* (Leiden: Brill, 1993).

<sup>47</sup> D’Amico, “Renaissance Humanism,” 144.

<sup>48</sup> In addition to well-known figures such as Marsilio Ficino, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, Cristoforo Landino and Angelo Poliziano, Edelheit examined Alamanno Rinuccini, Giovanni Nesi, Francesco Berlinghieri, Giovanni di Messer Donato Cocchi and Donato Acciaiuoli.

<sup>49</sup> Edelheit, *The Evolution of Humanist Theology*, 26.

humanist attitudes toward religious ‘authority.’ He showed that the humanist sermons, orations, and theological compositions attempted to draw a clearer distinction between the ‘human’ and the ‘divine,’ by redefining the foundations of religion against human opinion and interpretation; the humanist writings delineated more strictly between the divine authority of the Scriptures, the Creeds, and some of the early Church Fathers on the one hand, and the opinions of later theologians and Doctors of the Church on the other. Certainly, with the exception of Saints Augustine and Jerome, the medieval scholastic tradition had disappeared almost entirely.<sup>50</sup>

In short, what these scholars have shown is that the humanists had had a collective reimagining, both of themselves, and of what it meant to be a ‘theologian’ — of what it meant to ‘do’ theology. Considering themselves more qualified than laymen to speak on such matters, and more skilled than the Scholastics in disseminating theology, their writings confirmed a functional re-definition of a theologian as “anyone who actually writes on theology.”<sup>51</sup> Their methods of historical and philological inquiry, their new language, and their diverse sources made the humanists more capable of conveying theology and of fostering a new religious culture. Yet despite their criticisms of the limitations of scholastic theology and theologians alike, the new methodology developed by the humanists offered no real solutions to the deeply felt religious and spiritual needs of late-Quattrocento Florentines. At least, none that can be ascertained from the sermons, orations, translations, and theological commentaries surveyed thus far. It seems to me remarkable that for all the avenues considered in the historiography, none appear to explore the correlation between these ‘humanist’ theologies, and tangible expressions of doctrinal and theological reform, that is, the formulation of new or revised doctrines. Moreover, despite the inclusive nature of their approach, Garin’s followers still confined themselves to the study of those texts which were explicitly religious or theological, as if the very boundaries they sought to break down had reappeared once more. Though they proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that humanism had impacted the realms of religion and theology, these studies did not go far enough. Why did they not look for religion and theology in those texts which have for centuries been considered *philosophical*, especially those with an unmistakably spiritual tone? A re-appraisal of Ficino — which is the aim of this thesis — will shed light on these questions.

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<sup>50</sup> See my critique of *Edelheit* in the section below and again in chapter four.

<sup>51</sup> D’Amico, “Renaissance Humanism,” 147.

## **1.2 Theology, Philosophy, Religion: A New Methodological Approach**

The first edition of Florentine philosopher-priest, Marsilio Ficino's translation of Plotinus' *Enneads* was printed in 1492. In its lengthy dedication to Lorenzo de' Medici, the text revealed a grave state of religious decline in the city of Florence. Ficino lamented that few people of his day interpreted the spirit of Aristotle with the same reverence as the ancients had done; the Alexandrians and Averroists, who denied the immortality of individual souls, had betrayed religion and consigned the ancient poets to impiety. Merely preaching faith was not enough to rectify their treachery, and thus "some sort of philosophical religion" was needed: this *pia philosophia*, he argued, would "convince the philosophers open to its teaching."<sup>52</sup> Showing the intimate connection between religion and philosophy in his thinking, Ficino here demonstrated his belief that the key to Christian spiritual renovation lay in the restoration of ancient philosophical teachings — which Ficino called *prisca theologia*. He proclaimed that it was the will of divine Providence that the shared wisdom of the ancient theologians, perfected in Plato and purified by Plotinus, be translated and commented upon; Ficino declared that Providence herself had chosen him to perform this task, that is, to reveal the *true* theology. Though the text was written in the final years of his life, it was emblematic of the project Ficino had spent over forty years trying to realise: the drastic reformation of Christianity along Platonic and Neoplatonic lines. Against the backdrop of a European 'Christian religious identity crisis,' Ficino believed that if Christianity were to be reformed "under the guidance of his Platonic theology ... that it [could] be remade into the universal true religion of peace and love that it originally was."<sup>53</sup> But what did this *pia philosophia* actually entail?

As James Hankins posits, even if the Italian humanists were "primarily literary men and did not constitute a philosophical school," it is "perfectly possible that important aspects of modernity" were present in their thought, that is to say, that their new approach to religion and theology was rooted in humanism.<sup>54</sup> It can be argued, he continues, that:

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<sup>52</sup> Ficino as translated in Henri Saffrey, "Florence 1492: The Reappearance of Plotinus," *Renaissance Quarterly* 49, no. 3 (1996): 488–508, at 499.

<sup>53</sup> James Hankins, "Marsilio Ficino and the Religion of the Philosophers," *Rinascimento* 48 (2008): 101–121, at 120.

<sup>54</sup> James Hankins, "Religion and the Modernity of Renaissance Humanism," in *Interpretations of Renaissance Humanism*, ed. Angelo Mazzocco (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 139.

... philosophers like Nicolaus Cusanus, Marsilio Ficino, Pico della Mirandola, and Francesco Patrizi of Cherso explored a new way of thinking about religion that has numerous analogies with the way religion is understood in the contemporary world. It might be objected that, by Kristeller's definition of humanism, Cusanus, Ficino, Pico and Patrizi are philosophers, not humanists. But ... it cannot be denied that these thinkers were deeply marked by humanist study of antiquity. The matter could be put even more strongly, for it is surely true that the humanist element in their thought that is primarily responsible for their attitude is religion. It was the effort to comprehend and incorporate ancient religious wisdom into Christianity that sparked Renaissance philosophy's most profound meditations on the nature of religion itself.<sup>55</sup>

Their notion of *religion* — what it was, where it came from, and what purpose it served — was drawn from the humanist aspects of their learning, that is, from their recovery of ancient theological wisdom; so too was their notion of reforming Christianity. Hankins argues that a distinguishing feature of this project was to rethink the relationship between Christianity and other world religions, and to break down the dogmatic barriers that separated Christianity from other forms of religious wisdom. This necessarily involved reforming Christian beliefs and praxis.

On the spectrum of theological positions, 'philosophical religion' can be said to occupy one pole, and 'traditional religion' the other. Philosophical, or metaphysical religions make use of philosophical and scientific reasoning to understand the action of the divine in the world. God is a metaphysical principle and a being of pure activity, He is both the final and first efficient cause, and is known through his effects. A rational and esoteric understanding of God is reached through contemplation, philosophical arguments, and speculation. Traditional, that is, devotional or psychological approaches to religion, by contrast, tend to hold more anthropomorphic understandings of the divine; there is an affective and emotional relationship to God. God is known through reading Sacred scripture and His will is discovered through prayer. Though they contain some deeper truths, traditional religions disguise these truths symbolically in cults and myths. The

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<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

believer may serve God by obeying religious laws, and by observing various liturgical and ritual practices. As Hankins points out, while most pre-Socratic pagan philosophers fall under the banner of ‘philosophical religion,’ most post-classical theologians, Aquinas among them, tend to occupy a central place on the continuum. In light of the contrasts between ‘philosophical’ and ‘traditional’ religion, it is Hankins’ view that Ficino ought to be placed toward the more ‘traditional’ end of the continuum, based on his understanding of the sources of religious belief, which, for Ficino, stem from two principal fonts: the first comes from within, through the soul, and the second through the Word and revelation.<sup>56</sup> Thus, we see in Ficino that “belief in or awareness of the divine is implicit in our natures as ensouled beings,” and therefore, “all people, Christian or non-Christian, are naturally religious.”<sup>57</sup>

Though he conforms to a more ‘traditional’ form of religion, Ficino is something of a revolutionary in the history of Christianity in at least two ways: first, “his universalizing and naturalizing of the sources of religious belief,” and second, “his attitude to non-Christian revelation and the veridical status of other faith traditions.”<sup>58</sup> For Ficino, “the sources of religious traditions are multilinear,” descending from a number of sources “mostly independent of Judaism,” that is, principally through Zoroaster, Hermes Trismegistus, and Orpheus.<sup>59</sup> The best pagan philosophies, such as that which was revealed to Plato, shared the exact same vision as their Christian counterparts; “the grace of illumination was given them all. Their wisdom differed in degree but not in kind from Christian wisdom.”<sup>60</sup> To this I believe we can add a third reason, which is arguably deeply entrenched in Ficino’s notion of religion and is, in fact, related to both of these factors: his belief in the pre-existence of the soul. As Ficino understands it, the doctrines of Providence, personal immortality, and rewards and punishment are to be taken as the central beliefs of true religion. Given the prominence of Platonism (especially its late

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<sup>56</sup> See Ficino’s *Platonic Theology* (hereafter *PT*) 14.9.2: “When I say religion, I mean that instinct which is common and natural to all peoples and which we everywhere and always use to think about providence and to worship it as the queen of the world. Assuredly we are led to this piety by three main causes. Firstly by a certain as it were natural sagacity infused in us by providence itself; then by philosophical reasons establishing the providence of the architect from the very order of his edifice; and lastly by words of prophecy and by miracles.” Marsilio Ficino, *Platonic Theology*, trans. Michael J. B. Allen and John Warden and eds. James Hankins and William Brown, 6 vols. (Cambridge, MA and London: The I Tatti Renaissance Library, Harvard University Press, 2001–2006), 4:294–295.

<sup>57</sup> Hankins, “Ficino and the Religion of the Philosophers,” 106.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

antique forms) in his theory of inner religion, which Ficino refers to as a “natural sagacity infused in us by providence itself,” it is worth asking *when* precisely this wisdom was infused, and whether the answer to this question may itself constitute another core doctrine worthy of Ficino’s concept of true religion. In the twelfth book of his *Platonic Theology*, Ficino argues for a pre-conscious knowledge of the divine and vision of the truth:

Just as an everlasting and essential desire for good is innate in the soul, so too is a natural and everlasting vision of the truth, or rather a kind of touching, to use Iamblichus’ words, a touching which is prior to and more outstanding than all knowledge and argumentation. The divine Iamblichus supported this view with the additional argument that, just as we reach things temporal and contingent through knowledge which is temporal and contingent, so we have to attain things necessary and everlasting through a knowing which is necessary and everlasting, and this precedes our inquiring just as rest precedes motion.<sup>61</sup>

If religious belief is infused in the soul prior to its unification with the body, as is implied here, then not only would this suggest the soul’s pre-existence, but it would moreover seem to indicate that this belief itself should be a central doctrine in true religion, and that it should translate into the practical forms of religious observance. Thus, though we do not *need* philosophy to know God, philosophy and contemplation can help to improve our vision (or better, *recover* that vision). In my view, this is what Ficino meant when he impressed the need for “some sort of philosophical religion.”<sup>62</sup>

Amos Edelheit shows that in Ficino’s work we see a “growing dependence on biblical and classical sources, including newly discovered classical texts,” limited references to the Fathers (essentially only Augustine and Origen), and a complete absence of the

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<sup>61</sup> See *PT* 12.4.5: “Et sicut animae ingenitus est appetitus boni perpetuus atque essentialis, ita et ipsius veri naturalis essentialisque intuitus sive tactus aliquis potius, ut Iamblici verbis utar. Tactus, inquam, omni cognitione discursuque prior atque praestantior. Eiusmodi sententiam hac insuper ratione divinus Iamblicus confirmavit, quod quemadmodum temporalia contingentiaque per temporalem contingentemque cognitionem attingimus, ita oportet necessaria et aeterna per essentialem et perpetuam attingere notionem, quae non aliter inquisitionem nostram antecedit quam status motum.” Ficino, *Platonic Theology*, 4:50–51.

<sup>62</sup> Saffrey, “The Reappearance of Plotinus,” 499.

Doctors of the Church;<sup>63</sup> the “sources used by Ficino as well as the sources which he avoids are the building blocks of the new theology which he creates out of them.”<sup>64</sup> Though he has all the pieces with which to understand Ficino’s vision of a reformed theology, and indeed, a restored Christian religion, Edelheit declares simply that:

... the emphasis in this theology is not on a reformed set of rituals, but on a new and purified relation between the Christian and his God, based on a new notion of religion, on a new historical perspective of religiosity, on moments of direct revelation such as prophecies and miracles, and on an image of a priest who should be at once a philosopher, a religious and a political leader, Melchizedek, who should lead Christianity from its present Iron Age to a future Golden Age.<sup>65</sup>

However, focusing solely on those Ficinian works which explicitly declared themselves to be ‘religious’ texts — the *De Christiana religione* and his *Praedicationes* — Edelheit’s study does not look beyond the “patina of the obvious.”<sup>66</sup> Moreover, his analysis does not actually deal with doctrines. These issues pervade Ficinian scholarship. Though both Hankins and Edelheit agree that Ficino’s *Platonic Theology* and *De Christiana religione* “were clearly part of the same project of theological renewal,” no serious attempt has been made to incorporate the doctrines outlined in the *Platonic Theology* into Ficino’s programme of religious and theological reform.<sup>67</sup> Thus it seems as though the scholars who seek to dissolve disciplinary boundaries have failed to practice what they preach. If Ficino’s ‘religious’ texts build upon and explain ideas considered in a text which is still, by and large, considered a work of philosophy, then surely it is possible that many and more of his ‘philosophical’ writings similarly form part of Ficino’s broader project of reform?

From his reading of Platonic and Neoplatonic sources, James Hankins and Michael J. B.

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<sup>63</sup> Edelheit, *The Evolution of Humanist Theology*, 213.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>66</sup> I borrow the phrase from Peter Brown’s classic study, *Religion and Society in the Age of Saint Augustine* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972), 19: “The patina of the obvious that encrusts human actions: this is the first and last enemy of the historian.”

<sup>67</sup> See Hankins, “Ficino and the Religion of the Philosophers,” 101 and Edelheit, *The Evolution of Humanist Theology*. Also see the essays collected in *Theology, Philosophy, Legacy*, eds. Allen, Rees and Davies.

Allen have demonstrated that Ficino came to adopt a number of views which deviated from the generally accepted theological positions of his time. Drawing evidence from Ficino's *Platonic Theology*, his *Commentaries on Plato*, and many of his letters, the pair have identified several instances where Ficino appears to favour Platonic interpretations, confronting several key Christian doctrines, from the nature of man and creation to miracles, heavenly motions, and cosmic cycles.<sup>68</sup> These discussions, however, are largely considered within the context of Ficino's philosophy, even where Hankins describes Ficino as a speculative theologian.<sup>69</sup> Though the position Ficino held on each of these doctrinal issues was inspired by the humanist influences in his thought, it is Ficino's treatment of the doctrines on the origins of the soul — its pre-existence, its descent into bodies, its vehicles, and its powers of recollection and memory — that are of unique significance. For indeed, if, as Hankins says, the aspect responsible for Ficino's philosophical attitude is religion, then these doctrines must surely come to be considered as central to Ficino's notion of religion and to his entire theological system.

Seeking to address these historiographical gaps, my own methodology adopts two simple but necessary approaches: First, given that Ficino's doctrinal discussions extend beyond what would traditionally be considered works of Christian 'religion' or 'theology,' it is necessary to broaden our textual horizons. Not all that dissimilar from Garin's approach to the locations of philosophical thought, I too meditated on the question of where

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<sup>68</sup> Challenging traditional Aristotelianhylomorphism (the soul's relationship to the body, where human beings are a complex of body and soul), Ficino instead espoused the Plotinian model of *sarx, psyche, pneuma* (spirit, soul, flesh). Given that Aristotelianhylomorphism would seem to eliminate the possibility of a fine-material vehicle of the soul, Hankins hypothesises that Ficino's position may have been motivated by a desire to revive these Neoplatonic vehicles in order to recover the magical powers of the soul which are exercised through them. On the doctrine of God's freedom to create alternate worlds, Ficino instead emphasised "the unique, perfect and ontologically exhaustive character of creation." Confronting the Thomistic distinction between Christian and non-Christian miracles, Ficino proposed a naturalistic account of miracles drawn from Avicenna. Broadening this concept was, in his view, central to the re-manifestation of miracles, which would serve to both inspire and reinvigorate belief. See James Hankins, "Marsilio Ficino on *Reminiscentia* and the Transmigration of Souls," *Rinascimento* 45 (2005), 6–17; James Hankins, "Ficino, Avicenna and the Occult Powers of the Rational Soul," in *La Magia nell'Europa Moderna: Tra Antica Sapienza e Filosofia Naturale: Atti del Convegno (Firenze, 2–4 Ottobre 2003, Istituto Nazionale di Studi sul Rinascimento)*, eds. Fabrizio Meroi and Elisabetta Scapparone (Florence: Leo S. Olschki Editore, 2007), 35–52. Boldly opposing the Aristotelian-Ptolemaic hypothesis about heavenly motions, Ficino insisted on the animation of the heavens. Exploring this idea in great depth, Michael J. B. Allen has further shown that Ficino's discussions of cosmic cycles and alternating times drastically departed from the Augustinian understanding of physical space and historical time. See the extended discussion in Michael J. B. Allen, "Life as a Dead Platonist," in *Theology, Philosophy, Legacy*, 159–178. To this list, Gioacchino Curiello adds the doctrine of original sin, see Gioacchino Curiello, "Original Sin in Marsilio Ficino's Platonic Works," *Renaissance Studies* 34, no. 2 (2020): 191–207.

<sup>69</sup> See n.25 above.

theology and religion are located. Could they too be found in other disciplinary contexts? Was the influence of the Kristeller school so strong that these aspects had been neglected despite being present in the sources? I decided to look for theology, and for a new model of religious belief and practice precisely in those locations Kristeller ignored — the places where he enforced a strict separation of religion and theology from philosophy. Contrary to the Kristellan view, we can find ample evidence of Ficino’s religious and theological thought even in works which are deemed to be ‘philosophical.’ Throughout this thesis I will therefore examine excerpts from Ficino’s entire corpus, including with his epistolary correspondence, his commentaries and summaries (*argumenta*) of the various Platonic dialogues and other Neoplatonic works, and especially his *Platonic Theology*. I will thus show that religion and philosophy were inseparable for Ficino, not just in an abstract sense, but in the very texts which he produced throughout his career.

Second, though many scholars are quick to overlook the rhetorical merits of Ficino’s work, Ficino was very much interested, and indeed, invested in harnessing the power of classical rhetoric. This aspect is neglected especially when analysing the philosophical and theological elements of Ficino’s thought. Yet, just as Plato had believed that rhetoric was the ideal vehicle through which to convey higher truths, so too did Ficino. As this study will show, it was his rhetorical mastery that allowed him to discuss, and indeed, propose doctrinal reform in a serious manner, without attracting the censure of ecclesiastical authorities. Throughout this thesis, I will therefore focus on the careful manipulation of language, rhetoric, and literary genre to convey new theological ideas, both by Ficino and those around him.<sup>70</sup> In the first half of the thesis (and particularly in chapter four), I will outline a new methodological approach to reading Ficino’s texts which not only allows scholars to ‘read between the lines,’ but also to bolster the connection between Ficino’s religious and philosophical thinking and the humanist movement. Throughout this thesis I will examine specific texts which help the historian to think about Ficino’s view of the pre-existence of the soul, particularly in his early

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<sup>70</sup> My approach draws inspiration from Christopher Celenza’s research on Ficino’s role as a translator and his ability to communicate effectively, including his use of the Tuscan vernacular and the notion of hybrid-genres; Sears Jayne’s analysis of Ficino’s esoteric-exoteric writing; and Leo Strauss’ research on textual embedding, which explores how medieval philosophical authors could manipulate language to convey multiple readings. See Christopher S. Celenza, *The Intellectual World of the Italian Renaissance: Language, Philosophy and the Search for Meaning* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Sears R. Jayne, “Introduction,” in *Commentary on Plato’s Symposium on Love*, trans. and ed. Sears R. Jayne (Dallas, TX: Spring Publications, 1985), 1–32; Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1952).

formation of this idea, and its relation to his religious and theological thought. Though it was undoubtedly an idea which pervaded his later works, including his commentaries of the later Neoplatonists, owing to the limitations occasioned by the circumstances — that is, the scope of a doctoral thesis — I have here restricted my study largely to Ficino's Platonic works.

For Edelheit, Trinkaus' 'rhetorical theology' was too specific, only applicable where rhetoric is the center of the discussion, rather than theology or philosophy. Similarly, he saw O'Malley's 'Renaissance theology' as too inclusive, as it incorporated the study of non-humanist approaches, such as the theology practiced by scholastic theologians, and noted that it is misleading if one only means to refer to the humanists. He chose, like D'Amico and Camporeale to adopt the term 'humanist theology,' underpinned by the assumption that an individual could be a humanist (in terms of their education and also in terms of their main activity), while also being a philosopher (whose philosophical thinking is influenced by his humanist background) and also a theologian. The term, which is not permissible in Kristeller's definition and which is only possible by adopting Garin's approach, nevertheless implies an inherent binary opposition with Scholastic theology. That humanism and scholasticism coexisted peacefully as different branches of learning and culture is as true a statement today as it was when first asserted by Kristeller, and yet the relationship between humanism and scholasticism as presented in modern historiography is continually fraught with similar such distinctions. Many of the 'humanist' philosophers and theologians studied in the works cited above, particularly those in Edelheit's monograph, were trained in scholastic methods, and their approaches to theological questions are often ostensibly coloured by that tradition. To use 'humanist theology' as analytical lens is, moreover, especially troublesome when it comes to Ficino, who himself was scholastically trained and consistently employed scholastic terminology; despite borrowing from both traditions, Ficino was not a 'humanist' in a strict sense, nor was he strictly 'scholastic.'<sup>71</sup> These sorts of labels create distinctions (that in reality do not exist), which scholars from the early sixteenth century and beyond have used in order to analyse the preceding period for different polemical purposes, but in the end, it is the *texts* which drive the thoughts of the period. As historians, we must therefore look closely at the texts themselves, to understand the way in which ideas were being

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<sup>71</sup> The scholastic origins of Ficino's thought are discussed in Paul Oskar Kristeller, "The Scholastic Background of Marsilio Ficino: With an Edition of Unpublished Texts," *Traditio* 2 (1944): 257–318.

drawn out of newly discovered texts and traditions and how they operated within specific contexts. It is for this reason that I have tried to approach the individuals and texts studied here in terms of ‘local theology.’<sup>72</sup> As will become evident throughout the thesis, this term allows for a range of influences within a particular context, without losing the specificity of time, place and period (which ‘humanist,’ ‘rhetorical’ and ‘Renaissance’ theology have all attempted to encapsulate, but which are, in my view, on the one hand, temporally vague and certainly too broad, spanning the several centuries of the ‘Renaissance,’ and on the other, exclusive of the porous relationship that existed between humanism and scholasticism). Throughout the thesis I have endeavoured to analyse individuals not as humanists, or scholastics *per se*, nor according to their professional roles, but instead analysing them as Florentines existing in a very particular religious, intellectual and socio-political context, and especially in the latter part of the thesis, looking at a broader set of characters as disciples of Ficino. In a bid to obtain what Michael Baxandall calls the ‘period eye,’ I have tried always to look at each of the figures studied here as individual readers and thinkers, looking at the resources on which they drew to develop their thinking.<sup>73</sup>

### **1.3 Thesis Structure**

Seeking to highlight possible doctrinal interventions geared toward theological reform, chapter two anchors itself in the Platonic notion of the soul’s pre-existence. Examining the reception of this idea throughout the history of the early Church and its lasting impact on contemporary theology, chapter two situates the doctrine within the religious context of the late-fifteenth century. Through the lens of *renovatio*, which characterised the religious and spiritual life of the period, this chapter explores the changing spiritual concerns of the Florentine people and the ways in which they sought to renew their faith. Asking what function the doctrine of pre-existence might have served in Ficino’s theological and religious thinking, this chapter connects these concepts to Ficino’s understanding of inner conversion. Here chapter two argues for a direct correlation between the contemplation of the soul’s origins and personal union with God,

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<sup>72</sup> I borrow the term ‘local theology’ from Peter Howard, who adapted the phrase ‘local religion’ from William A. Christian’s *Local Religion in Sixteenth-Century Spain* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981).

<sup>73</sup> See Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), especially 29–108.

highlighting the clear influence of the Platonic theory of divine frenzy and the Neoplatonic notion of conversion on Ficino's thought. This chapter not only aims to enrich our understanding of Ficino as a religious thinker, but also to offer a nuanced reading of the way that he understood the relationship between philosophy and religion.

Chapter three is designed to position the idea of pre-existence within the intellectual context of the late-Quattrocento. Exploring the question of where theology is located, this chapter looks at the transmission and circulation of the idea within Florence from the mid-century onwards, and the local responses to it as they manifested in texts, in the classroom, and at the universities. Demonstrating the dynamic interplay between the religious and intellectual spheres, this chapter shows how the history of the Church not only drove the conversations happening in the intellectual field, but determined the bounds of those conversations, even where boundaries were being pushed, particularly in the philosophy department of the Florentine *Studio*. Revealing a number of contemporary examples where the doctrine was suppressed and rejected — social and textual interactions which can be linked to Ficino directly — this chapter argues that Ficino was well aware of the theological consensus of his time, and knew the risks involved with promoting the doctrine of pre-existence. Chapter three outlines the stark contrasts between theology 'on the ground' and Ficinian theology, and thereby demonstrates its significance, not just from a Christian perspective, but showing that Ficino's formulation of these ideas was completely novel and would therefore require a vastly different approach. In an important way, chapter three thus establishes the framework for the second half of the thesis, where I explore the interrelationship between the religious and intellectual worlds of the late fifteenth century.

Revealing how changes in the intellectual sphere came to bear on the religious life, both in terms of the incorporation of new streams of thought and the methods used in that effort, the fourth chapter is an investigation of Ficino's incursion into the theological arena of the late fifteenth century, and his role as a 'theologian.' Guided by questions of how theology is transformed when its language, contents, and contexts change, and what happens when it is discussed by non-theologians, this chapter considers a number of unique strategies of spiritual renewal. Chapter four is instrumental in laying out a new methodological approach; combining methods of redaction, rhetorical, literary and form criticism, this chapter focusses primarily on the rhetorical, linguistic, and conventional

formulae of Ficinian theology, to show that Ficino was advocating new theological ideas. Broadening the conventional scope of what might be considered a theological or religious text, this chapter considers Ficino's treatises, commentaries, and extensive epistolary correspondence as nuanced vehicles of theological and religious discourse. Here I show that Ficino employed a range of rhetorical, linguistic, and conventional techniques in order to communicate the doctrines of pre-existence and the descent of the soul, and, moreover, to persuade and instruct an audience. Chapter four contributes to a nuanced scholarly understanding of the way in which language, rhetoric, and genre were used and understood in the period, particularly when it comes to creating religious and theological change, but also how the movement of ideas was understood.

Exploring the relationship between language, thought and culture, chapter five reconsiders Ficino's relationship to the *volgare*, and its role in his greater programme of spiritual renewal. Investigating the ways that ideas were communicated and culturally translated through the vernacular, this chapter highlights the unique role played by the Tuscan vernacular in the movement of ideas within Florence and illuminates the various social locations of reformist ideas. This chapter argues that the vernacularisation of works which promoted doctrines pertaining to the soul's pre-existence was a strategic move by Ficino and people within or close to his network to disseminate new theological ideas, and to promote a new contemplative ideal. In particular, this chapter analyses the Ficinian epistolary treatise, the *De divino furore*, in its various Tuscan translations. Moving from Ficino to his translators, chapter five begins to show that the methods used in advocating these ideas were not only effective, but that these methods and ideas began to be mirrored in the works of other Florentine thinkers. This chapter thus also contributes to a scholarly reappraisal of 'what' forms local theologies might take, 'where' they might be found, and brings nuanced perspectives to the questions of 'who' can be considered, 'how' they could 'do theology,' and 'why' they might be doing it in a way that fused particular theological and philosophical ideas. In a way that has not been before, this chapter demonstrates the impact that Ficino had on his peers and on local, popular culture.

Expanding on the interventions made in chapters four and five, chapter six shows the transmission of Ficinian theology on a broader scale and provides a more comprehensive understanding of the role played by lesser-known individuals in that transmission. Focussing primarily on two thinkers in Ficino's circle, Giovanni Nesi and Francesco

Cattani da Diacceto, this chapter re-examines a selection of texts that have been overlooked by historians, revealing both a shared theological goal, and significantly, the use of similar rhetorical, linguistic, and conventional strategies. Demonstrating the transmission of ideas from Ficino to his circle, and from his circle to the public, this chapter not only confirms new methods of intellectual exchange, but links them to the formation of a new contemplative culture. Bringing this cohort of ‘second-tier’ thinkers to the fore and demonstrating their role in Ficino’s programme of spiritual renewal, chapter six makes important contributions to the study of Florentine intellectual and religious history by showing that these men had an influence over Florentine intellectual and religious culture, and, therefore, that the influence exerted by Ficino in both of these respects was far greater than has previously been recognised.

In short, this thesis shows how Ficinian theology — its ideas and practices — affected both the intellectual and religious history of the period. It moreover contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of the intellectual world on the religious by revealing how the internal dynamics of an intellectual community effected the formation of a new religious culture in late-Quattrocento Florence.

## Chapter Two: Marsilio Ficino as Doctor of Souls and his Remedy for Renewal

Throughout various historical contexts, from antiquity to modernity, the doctrine of the soul's pre-existence has served manifold functions. Ranging from whimsical to more philosophical purposes, this structure of belief has prevailed by virtue of its explanatory power. It is a belief that has allowed man to make sense of the instantaneous connections made with people they have just met yet feel as though they have known their entire lives. It has offered an explanation for our "yearning for transcendence and the sublime," and for "the frequent sensation of alienation and the indelible sadness of human existence."<sup>1</sup> It has allowed man to rationalise how we know things that we ought not to, like how we are able to grasp concepts that we have not yet been taught, how a common sense of morality guides humanity, or how humans are able to recognise universals. Offering a nuanced framework within which to understand the doctrines of original sin, grace and salvation, a pre-mortal existence would seem to account for the pain and suffering of mankind; functioning as theodicy, pre-existence could vindicate God's justice and defend His goodness. Philosophers throughout the ages have argued that pre-existence is the "necessary precondition for a will that is genuinely free and independent."<sup>2</sup> The belief in pre-existence could also be used to reinforce arguments in favour of the soul's immortality — a most pertinent issue in the fifteenth century, as we shall see. Certainly, in the Platonic system, establishing the soul's origins in the eternal realm gave a solid basis for a soul which was both immortal and the image of divinity. Moreover, this belief has provided a logical symmetry that orthodox, "asymmetrical notions of eternity and the unidirectionality of the soul's immortality" cannot.<sup>3</sup> For our own study, we must ask how the pre-existence of the soul was conceived of by Ficino, and what function it might have served in this late-fifteenth century context.

Grounding Ficinian theology within its proper socio-cultural, intellectual, and religious settings, the present chapter moves away from recent historiographical framing of 'rhetorical,' or 'humanist' theology as a symptomatic response to an 'overall' crisis in the fifteenth century (particularly the notion of simultaneous *crises* in the religious, spiritual,

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<sup>1</sup> Terryl L. Givens, *When the Soul Had Wings: Pre-Mortal Existence in Western Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 5.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

and theological realms) — a collective response of which Ficino is considered part. Rather, I intend to re-evaluate Ficinian theology through the lens of *renovatio*, and particularly *conversio*, that so coloured the spiritual life of the Quattrocento. In this chapter I will explore the changing religious feeling in Florence, particularly amongst lay intellectual circles, and the growing concern for the individual soul. I will show how Ficino attempted to restore the fundamental role of the *prisca theologia* in conventional religiosity and spirituality, by transforming its precepts from the stuff of controversy to the basis of inner conversion. In so doing, this chapter will situate the pre-existence of the soul within the religious context of late-Quattrocento Florence and establish what role the doctrine played in Ficino's larger programme of religious, theological, and spiritual renewal.

Exploring Ficino's approach to and understanding of the origins of the soul, I will argue in favour of a direct correlation between the belief in a pre-mortal existence and inner spiritual renewal, demonstrating how Ficino believed his theology could strengthen the faithful and breathe new life into the religious culture of his city. It is my contention that Ficino, compelled by his belief that man's ultimate goal was to achieve mystical union with God, a belief underpinned by the Platonic theory of divine madness, was led to promote a new contemplative culture. I hold that, for Ficino, the pre-existence of the soul, being the source of religion or religiousness, was essential to any understanding of the nature and immortality of the soul (the end to which this religiousness aimed). I will argue that Ficino believed that contemplation of the soul's divine origins could allow man to retrieve the memory of his former unity with and knowledge of God, and through this recollection, be reunited with Him, and hence renewed in his own faith. Highlighting the contrasts between Ficino's approach to contemplation and the contemporary culture, this chapter aims to show the innovation of Ficinian theology, and the significance of its intended function in ordinary religious practice. Building upon the growing body of literature on lay piety, and the changing nature of religion and theology in the fifteenth century, this chapter offers a nuanced perspective of Ficino as a religious thinker.

## **2.1 The Pre-existence of the Soul: From Controversy to *Conversio***

This first section deals with two central themes, tradition and reform, weaving them together to show how the ancient was made new in an unanticipated way. Tracing the two predominant formulations of ‘creation’ in the Christian tradition — creationism and traducianism — and a third, the pre-existence of the soul — I will highlight why the latter in particular was so problematic for Christian theologians, and yet formed the basis for a growing religio-intellectual culture of renewal. Against a complex background of the widespread *renovatio* of ecclesiastical institutions in the medieval period more broadly, and a drive toward complete renewal and reform of the mendicant orders, and a new religious *modus vivendi* in the fifteenth century, I will show how Ficino’s theology of the soul was both shaped by and contributed to this changing religious culture.

For centuries the doctrine of pre-existence has aroused a great deal of suspicion and has consistently been met with opposition from Christian theologians. However, the arguments levelled against it have not offered a logical superiority, as one might hope to demonstrate, but rather reflect anxieties related to certain other political and theological concerns. In this section I will explore the hostility toward the doctrine of pre-existence in relation to the religious controversies prevalent in the early Church and beyond, in order to more fully appreciate how and why its revival was problematic for Christian authorities, and was seen to pose a threat to the foundations of Christian belief. I intend to show that despite the clear delineation of the Church, the changing understandings of man and the soul, inspired by the revival of antique theologies and cosmologies, and the re-evaluation of the practices and purposes of religion and religious institutions, led Ficino to reimagine the origins of the soul such that it became, for him and those around him, a crucial component in the process of inner conversion and path to spiritual renewal.

In the early centuries of Christianity, in which doctrinal formation was still taking place, disputes over the precise nature of creation abounded. The controversial discussions of whether man was created *ex materia* or *ex nihilo* were perpetuated by the ambiguity of the Scriptures themselves, which left much room for speculation. Scholarly consensus holds that no explicit theory of creation *ex nihilo* had been formulated in either the Jewish or Greek traditions, and rather, seems to have emerged sometime in the early first century,

possibly, though unlikely, through Philo of Alexandria.<sup>4</sup> Yet it is this formulation which has prevailed in the Catholic tradition, being almost universally accepted from the second century.<sup>5</sup> Creation *ex nihilo*, or creationism, describes the creation of a fresh soul for each human individual, out of nothing, at or after its conception. This account was defended by St Jerome as the only doctrine of creation compatible with Catholic theology, though he acknowledged that much of the Western tradition, including Tertullian, favoured traducianism.<sup>6</sup> In opposition to creationism, traducianism describes the theory in which souls are generated with the body, transmitted by the parents to their children through the physical act of generation.<sup>7</sup> Though it offered a simple explanation for original sin, it was wholly incompatible with ideas about the spiritual (non-material) nature of the soul. The matter was not definitively resolved until the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, in which the very first Canon declared that:

God ... Creator of all visible and invisible things, of the spiritual and of the corporal; who by His own omnipotent power at once from the beginning of time created each creature from nothing, spiritual and corporal, namely, angelic and mundane, and finally the human, constituted as it were, alike of the spirit and the body.<sup>8</sup>

*Creatio ex nihilo* thus reigned supreme. How then does pre-existence factor into the equation, and what difficulties might it have posed for Christian belief? To the first question, we must answer that pre-existence has been recorded amongst some of the oldest civilisations and religious traditions known to man, from the myths of the soul of the ancient Mesopotamians, to the divine assemblies recounted in the Ugaritic texts, to the populous heavens described in the Hebrew Scriptures.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the Platonic myth of Er speaks of the intermingling of souls in the Meadow, where some descended from heaven to earth, and some ascended from earth to heaven; passing through the Plain of

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>5</sup> See 'Creation,' in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, eds. F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

<sup>6</sup> See Tertullian, *De anima*, chapters 23–41.

<sup>7</sup> See 'Traducianism,' *Dictionary of the Christian Church*.

<sup>8</sup> Declaration 428, "Deus...creator omnium visibilium et invisibilium, spiritualium et corporalium: qui sua omnipotenti virtute simul ab initio temporis utramque de nihilo condidit creaturam, spiritualem et corporalem, angelicam videlicet et mundanam: ac deinde humanam, quasi communem ex spiritu et corpore constitutam." Heinrich Denzinger, *The Sources of Catholic Dogma*, trans. Roy J. Deferrari (Fitzwilliam, NH: Loreto Publications, 1955), 168–169.

<sup>9</sup> See especially Givens, *When the Soul had Wings*, chapters 1 and 2.

Oblivion, they were made to drink from the Lethean waters, where, falling asleep, they forgot their previous lives and were whisked away into new bodies.<sup>10</sup> It was not until the advent of Christianity that the doctrine met any real opposition. As for the second question, Terryl Givens offers a succinct answer:

In theory, God could create a world, a soul, and a body out of nothing, and as long as the soul is created prior to the body, we have both pre-existence and creation *ex nihilo*. However, any cosmology that muddled the question of God's supremely majestic creative power by intimating that he used materials ready to hand — eternally existent or otherwise — fell into disfavour as the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* gained ascendancy ... any anthropology that situates the human soul anterior to those opening scenes of cosmic creation could be seen as imputing grandeur to the human at the expense of the absolute supremacy of the divine.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, these concepts of creation could theoretically exist in harmony within a Christian belief system, which is perhaps why so many foundational figures in the early Church had endorsed the doctrine, or else remained ambiguous on the matter. But we are here given the sense that the fear of pre-existence had little to do with the doctrine itself. Certainly, history has shown that “the ideas with which pre-existence was associated and interconnected, rather than the inherent deficiencies of the doctrine” were at the heart of its official exclusion from the teaching of the Church.<sup>12</sup> As Christian theologians refined the doctrines of God's sovereignty, the creation of the universe, man's relationship to the divine, the doctrines of grace and original sin, and the nature of incarnation, pre-existence began to lose favour. But the most decisive blow to the notion of pre-mortal existence was its affiliation with the three major moments of historical crisis in the early Church: the Pelagian, Gnostic and Origenist controversies.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> On the Platonic myth, see Allen, “Life as a Dead Platonist,” 161–163.

<sup>11</sup> Givens, *When the Soul Had Wings*, 104.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>13</sup> The Pelagians argued that if God created each individual soul afresh, well after the Fall, then the doctrine of inherited spiritual depravity was inconsistent with a pure and perfect God. Further, they denounced the plausibility of the hereditary transmission of non-physical attributes like guilt, sin, and depravity. Believing we are born into a state of moral neutrality, they held that humans could choose between good and evil, with obvious implications for the doctrines of grace and God's sovereignty as they pertained to redemption. The Pelagians effectively celebrated “human freedom and autonomy at the expense of inevitable and original sin [and] more disturbingly, at the expense of Christ himself and his whole redemptive mission.” The first eight canons of the Council of Carthage (418) formally condemned Pelagius' doctrine, though the

Unlike the former heresies, the Origenist controversy marked a shift in the formal rulings of the Church against pre-existence. Following his allegorical reading of Scripture, especially Genesis 1, Origen held that man was created as a result of the Fall; bodily life was a punishment for the sins of pre-existent souls, and not the result of a choice made by human beings. He envisioned “whole nations of souls ... stored away somewhere in a realm of their own, with an existence comparable to our bodily life.”<sup>14</sup> It was his contention that:

Some sinned deeply and became daemons, others less and became angels; others still less and became archangels; and thus each in turn received the reward for his individual sin. But there remained some souls who had not sinned so greatly as to become daemons, nor on the other hand so very lightly as to become angels. God therefore made the present world and bound the soul to the body as a punishment.<sup>15</sup> ... so long as a soul continues to abide in the good it has no experience of union with a body. But by some inclination toward evil these souls lose their wings and come into bodies ...<sup>16</sup>

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idea of pre-existence which his anthropology implied was never mentioned in the written anathema. The subsequent Councils of Ephesus (431) and Orange (529) likewise made no mention of the origins of souls. Conversely, Gnosticism posed a threat to the very concept of monotheism; not fearing to violate the sacred distance between man and God, so fundamental to Jewish and Christian belief, the Gnostics held that “self-knowledge is knowledge of God; the self and the divine are identical.” While Christ’s pre-existence is the “necessary consequence of an incarnate deity conceived of as eternal, transhistorical, and which is to be identified with God himself,” to suggest that human souls exist outside historical time reflects a desire to attribute unique value to mankind, who was made in the image and likeness of God. Though never proscribed in the Scriptures, an implicit agreement seems to exist between Christians and Jews that “more than one transcendent being of any significance complicates or constitutes a weakening of or threat to monotheism.” Moreover, Gnostic teaching advocated dangerous and heretical myths about transmigration. *Ibid.*, 71, 115–116. See the first eight canons of the 418 Synod of Carthage (Canons CVIII–CXVI) in Council of Carthage, “The Code of Canons of the African Church,” in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church: Series II*, trans. and eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wallace, 14 vols. (New York: The Christian Literature Company, 1890–1900), 14:496–499; Larry W. Hurtado, *How on Earth did Jesus become a God? Historical Questions about Earliest Devotion to Jesus* (Michigan and Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmanns Publishing Company, 2005), 114.

<sup>14</sup> *De principiis*, I.8.4. Origen, *On First Principles: Being Koetschau’s Text of the De Principiis Translated into English Together with an Introduction and Notes*, trans. Paul Koetschau and ed. G. W. Butterworth (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1936), 72.

<sup>15</sup> *De principiis*, I.8.1. *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>16</sup> *De principiis*, I.8.4. *Ibid.*, 73.

In his view, our bodily purpose is to suffer the punishment of our pre-mortal sins, and to improve upon them in this life, where we are free to choose between happiness or wickedness.<sup>17</sup>

The unwavering commitment of Emperor Justinian I to defend orthodoxy and combat the perceived enemies of the Christian religion sounded the passing bell for the doctrine of pre-existence. Effectively condemning Origenism, the first of nine anathemas appended to Justinian's *Liber Adversus Origenem* (543) declared that:

Whoever says or thinks that human souls pre-existed, i.e., that they had previously been spirits and holy powers, but that, satiated with the vision of God, they had turned to evil, and in this way the divine love in them had died out (ἀπψυγείσας) and they had therefore become souls (ψυχάς) and had been condemned to punishment in bodies, shall be anathema.<sup>18</sup>

Justinian's edict of 551 again targeted the doctrine of pre-existence stating that: "man is not soul apart from body, nor body apart from soul, but he was created from 'non-being' and brought into existence as body and soul."<sup>19</sup> Then, in 553, Justinian convened the Fifth Ecumenical Council, where he confirmed the anathemas against Origen; of the fourteen anathemas issued, the eleventh specifically named Origen:

If anyone does not anathematize Arius, Eunomius, Macedonius, Apollinaris, Nestorius, Eutyches and Origen, together with their impious, godless writings, and all the other heretics already condemned and anathematized by the holy catholic and apostolic Church, and by the aforementioned four Holy Synods and all those who have held and hold or who in their godlessness persist in holding to the end the same opinion as those heretics just mentioned; let him be anathema.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> See also Gerald Bostock, "The Sources of Origen's Doctrine of Pre-Existence," in *Origeniana Quarta: Die Referate des 4 Internationalen Origeneskongresses (Innsbruck 2-6 September 1985)*, ed. Lothar Lies (Innsbruck, Wien: Tyrolia-Verlag, 1987), 259-264.

<sup>18</sup> Justinian I, "The Anathematism of the Emperor Justinian Against Origen," in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 14:320.

<sup>19</sup> Justinian I, "Edicts of Justinian," in *Creeds & Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition*, eds. Jaroslav Pelikan and Valerie Hotchkiss, 3 vols. (Newhaven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003) 1:129.

<sup>20</sup> Fifth Lateran Council, "The Capitula of the Council," in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 14:314.

Furthermore, the first of an additional fifteen anathemas attached to the record of the Council declared that: “If anyone asserts the fabulous pre-existence of souls, and shall assert the monstrous restoration which follows from it: let him be anathema.”<sup>21</sup> The rulings of the early Church made its position abundantly clear: the notion of a pre-mortal existence was a virulent heresy against the teaching of the Church and must be condemned. These decrees were not unknown to fifteenth-century thinkers, whose *ad fontes* approach saw the revival of not just classical authors, but also the religious authorities of the nascent Catholic church, including Origen; significantly, as chapter three will explore, the official records of the judgments against him, and against pre-existence, also resurfaced at this time. How then could it become the pathway to inner conversion and spiritual renewal?

In the later fifteenth century, it was Ficino and his former student, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola that took up the mantle as the caretakers of Origen. Alongside Pico, Ficino was hailed as a champion of religious and philosophical *concordia*, and it is thus significant to understand how he used and understood Origen. While we know that as a student Ficino had been attracted to the Platonists, we also know that he was reading early Christian sources like Origen and Tertullian, and thus would have been aware of the issues addressed by these foundational thinkers.<sup>22</sup> Ficino appears to have known Origen already at the time that he wrote the *De Voluptate* (1457); making clear reference to Origen as ‘*Platonicus nobilissimus*,’ Ficino praised the Alexandrian Father for the aspects of his thought associated with the philosophy of the Platonists.<sup>23</sup> Ficino’s manuscript

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<sup>21</sup> Fifth Lateran Council, “The Anathemas Against Origen,” in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 14:318; Givens, *When the Soul had Wings*, 125–126.

<sup>22</sup> Ficino had certainly read these authors by 1474, though being available in the public library of San Marco, it is likely he read them much earlier. Three manuscripts now held in the San Marco collection at the Biblioteca Medicea-Laurenziana contain the works of Origen: ms. 609 (*De principiis*) and ms. 617 (Eusebius’ *Ecclesiastical History* and Jerome’s *De viris illustribus* with the continuation by Gennadius of Massilia) show annotations by Ficino’s hand, while ms. 612 (*De principiis*) shows that of Pico’s. Through ms. 617 Ficino was able to read excerpts from Tertullian, Flavius Josephus, Origen and others. See Sebastiano Gentile, “Traversari e Niccoli, Pico e Ficino: Note in Margine di Alcuni Manoscritti dei Padri,” in *Tradizioni Patristiche nell’Umanesimo: Atti del Convegno Istituto Nazionale di Studi sul Rinascimento, Biblioteca Medicea-Laurenziana, Firenze, 6–8 Febbraio 1997*, eds. Mariarosa Cortesi and Claudio Leonardi (Florence: Sismel Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2000), 102–105, 108–110, 113–119; Sebastiano Gentile, “La Formazione e la Biblioteca di Marsilio Ficino,” in *Il Pensiero di Marsilio Ficino: Atti del Convegno di Figline Valdarno, 19 Maggio 2006*, ed. Stéphane Toussaint (Paris: Société Marsile Ficin, 2007), 19–31; Sebastiano Gentile, *Umanesimo e Padri della Chiesa: Manoscritti e Incunaboli di Testi Patristici da Francesco Petrarca al Primo Cinquecento, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, 5 Febbraio – 9 Agosto* (Rome: Rose, 1997), 356–358.

<sup>23</sup> Ficino, *Opera Omnia*, 1:994. Writing on the characterisation of Origen as a *Platonicus*, Pasquale Terracciano notes that the “most frequent errors attributed to Origen bear the hallmark of Platonism: they are, as expected, the pre-existence of souls, the possibility of metempsychosis, a Trinitarian doctrine close

annotations found in a copy of the *De principiis* (Bibl. Laur. San Marco 609) suggest that he believed in a connection between Origen and Plotinus — that they were co-disciples of the school of Ammonius Saccas in Alexandria (the fact of which he probably read in Porphyry’s *Vita Plotini*).<sup>24</sup> It is now believed that the Origen in question was not the Christian author of *De principiis*, but instead an accomplished pagan philosopher and a fellow student of Plotinus; until the seventeenth century, however, the Christian heresiarch and the disciple of Ammonius Saccas were thought to be one and the same person.<sup>25</sup> Certainly, Ficino believed this and this connection no doubt confirmed for Ficino the harmony between the Christian and Platonic traditions. Indeed, for Ficino, the congruence of these authors on the question of pre-existence likely indicated the verification of a shared truth. Though Ficino was well aware of the implications of Origen’s ideas on the soul, he used him as a source of theological, philosophical, and religious authority; certainly, ms. 609 contains notes that correlate to both Ficino’s *Christiana Religione* and his *Platonic Theology*.<sup>26</sup> Further, though Ficino claimed to ‘pass over’ the descent of the soul in Origen’s account, he clearly understood that there was some merit in the doctrine of pre-existence that he espoused.<sup>27</sup>

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to Arianism and a spiritualisation of the locations of the afterlife.” Pasquale Terracciano, “The Platonic Stain: Origen, Philosophy and Censorship between the Renaissance and the Counter Reformation,” in *Platonism: Ficino to Foucault*, eds. Valery Rees, Anna Corrias, Francesca M. Crasta, Laura Follesa and Guido Giglioni (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 165.

<sup>24</sup> Note, moreover, that the sixth book of Eusebius’s *Ecclesiastical History* (read and annotated by Ficino, see n.22 above), dedicated to Origen, also detailed his intensive study of Plato, the Pythagoreans and the Stoics. *Ibid.*, 151. Also see Ficino’s *Commentary on Plotinus*: “Plotini mentem non fuisse a Christiana lege penitus alienam ex eo conijcere possumus, quod cum Ammonii semper Christiani discipulus fuerit, et Christianissimi Origenis semper amicus convenisse dicitur una cum Origene atque Heremnio.” Ficino, *Opera Omnia*, 2:1663. On Plotinus and Origen, see Porphyry, *On the Life of Plotinus*, III.25–33, XIV.21–25, and XX.36–47 in Plotinus, *Enneads*, trans. A. H. Armstrong, 7 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969), 1:10–11, 40–43, 56–57.

<sup>25</sup> See Michael J. B. Allen, “At Variance: Marsilio Ficino, Platonism and Heresy,” in *Platonism at the Origins of Modernity: Studies on Platonism and Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. Douglas Headley and Sarah Hutton (Dordrecht: Springer, 2008), 31–44, at 38; Denis J. -J. Robichaud, “Tearing Plato to Pieces: Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola and Marsilio Ficino on the History of Platonism,” *Renaissance and Reformation* 42 (2019): 103–133, at 113. On the scholarly dispute over the identity of the Origen mentioned by Porphyry in *On the Life of Plotinus* see Mark Edwards, “Ammonius, Teacher of Origen,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 44, no. 2 (1993): 169–81; Richard Goulet, “Porphyre, Ammonius, les deux Origène et les autres,” *Revue d’Histoire et de Philosophie Religieuses* 57, no. 4 (1977): 471–496.

<sup>26</sup> Generally speaking, these are instances where Ficino paraphrases Origen’s thought. Ficino’s *Commentaria in Platonem* bears the most evident influence of Origenist thought, however, a clear link between the work and ms. 609 cannot be drawn. Nevertheless, there is an ‘insistent’ presence of Origen in the work, which explicitly cites Origen’s *Genesi*, and makes multiple allusions to the *Contra Celsum* (particularly for the doctrine on demons). See Gentile, “Traversari e Niccoli, Pico e Ficino,” 103, 108–110.

<sup>27</sup> See for example *PT* 5.14.8. Ficino, *Platonic Theology*, 2:100–101.

James Hankins has postulated that Ficino may have been attracted to the notion of pre-existence since it would allow him to revive “the Neoplatonic doctrines of fine-material vehicles for the soul, acquired during its descent into the body.”<sup>28</sup> In an age marked by a fascination with natural magic, and against the rising tide of apocalypticism, where the concern not just for all souls, but each soul became paramount, it is hard to ignore this suggestion as a possible motivation.<sup>29</sup> It would certainly have far broader ramifications for the intellectual and religious culture of the time, especially for contemporary thinking about the resurrection of the body and the implications for the individual. Given the fundamental connection between these vehicles and the pre-existence of the soul, it would be remiss of me not to discuss these vehicles, and so I shall here briefly digress from my main argument. For Ficino there are three vehicles which clothe the soul: first, the ‘fiery’ celestial vehicle made of aether, which is irrational and immortal; second, the ‘airy’ or ‘vaporous’ vehicle made of air and the vapours of the bodily humors which is irrational and long-lasting, and third, the ‘earthly’ or ‘elemental’ body, composed of flesh and blood — the body of man — which is irrational and mortal.<sup>30</sup> Demonstrating the centrality of these vehicles in Ficino’s thought, Anna Corrias has shown how the philosopher used the heterodox doctrine of soul-vehicles to reject the equally heterodox doctrine of the

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<sup>28</sup> Hankins, “*Reminiscentia*,” 9.

<sup>29</sup> There is a wealth of scholarship on the apocalyptic preaching of Savonarola. For general reading on apocalypticism in Renaissance Italy see Ottavia Niccoli, *Prophecy and People in Renaissance Italy*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990); Bernard McGinn, “Apocalypticism and Church Reform, 1100–1500,” in *The Continuum History of Apocalypticism*, eds. Bernard McGinn, John J. Collins and Stephen Stein (New York: Continuum, 2003), 273–298.

<sup>30</sup> See especially *PT* 18.5.7: “I leave aside the fact that many Platonists think the soul uses three vehicles: first the immaterial and simple, that is the celestial vehicle; second the material and simple, that is the airy vehicle; and third the material and composite, that is the vehicle compounded from the four elements. To the first the soul gives an irrational but immortal life, to the second an irrational but long-lasting life (one that survives for a certain time in the simple body after the composite body has at some point dissolved); and to the third finally it gives an irrational life that must dissolve along with the body’s dissolution. The Platonists suppose, furthermore, that in the first life communicated to the vehicle the sense is common and impassible; that in the second life it is passible and common (that is, the sense is equally whole through the whole vehicle); and that in the third life the sense is alike divided and passible.” Ficino, *Platonic Theology*, 6:110–111. One should note Ficino’s use of preterition here, dedicating an entire paragraph to a subject he claims to pass over, and which was also covered, amongst many other places using different terms, in *PT* 7.6.1, 9.5.2, 10.2.13 and 15.1.2. See chapter four, *Rhetoric and Redaction: The Language of Spiritual Renewal*, on Ficino’s use of rhetoric to convey unorthodox beliefs. Plato and Aristotle played a crucial role in shaping Ficino’s theory of the vehicles of the soul: Plato’s *Timaeus*, *Phaedo* and *Phaedrus* all speak of a ‘semi-corporeal’ vehicle which guides the soul in its descent from the heavens into bodies, and accompanies it throughout its bodily life and after its bodily death; Aristotle’s theory of the *pneuma* as the seat of the lower soul influences the argument that the *ochêma* (vehicle) is the locus of the faculty of the imagination. Later philosophers combined these theories to bridge the gap between the noetic and earthly worlds, and though the number and fate of these vehicles varied from author to author, the general agreement about their metaphysical role was that they enabled the soul to become embodied — to descend from the Intellect to the world of generation. See Anna Corrias, “Imagination and Memory in Marsilio Ficino’s Theory of the Vehicles of the Soul,” *The International Journal of the Platonic Tradition* 6, no. 1 (2012): 81–114, especially 83–84.

transmigration of souls into beasts, and conversely, to support the immortality of individual souls.<sup>31</sup> Drawing on Ficino's reading of Synesius' *On Dreams* and Georgius Gemistus Plethon's *Commentary on the Chaldean Oracles*, as well as evidence from Ficino's commentary on Plotinus' *Enneads* and his *Platonic Theology*, Corrias' lengthy analysis lays the foundations for identifying the *spiritus* (a corporeal substance which plays an intermediary role between the rational soul and the body) as the second of the soul's three vehicles.<sup>32</sup> Corrias compellingly demonstrates that in Ficino's writings, the airy vehicle and the *spiritus* were made of the same material (air and vapour); that the two were defined as the element which links the immaterial soul to the material body, and which share the same attributes; that they were both characterised by an adaptability to the forms of the imagination; and that they were both connected to the substance of which demonic bodies are composed. Stopping short of this conclusion, however, perhaps because this would necessarily require evidence for Ficino's support of the doctrine of pre-existence, or perhaps inspired by a reading of Ficino's account of demonic bodies in his commentary of Plotinus' *Enneads* III.4.5, Corrias instead identifies the three vehicles as various states of the *spiritus*, allowing her to bypass the problematic issue of pre-existence.<sup>33</sup>

We have ample evidence that the *spiritus* was indeed for Ficino the second of the soul's three vehicles, and that these vehicles were obtained on the soul's initial descent into the body, from its original, pre-existent state. In his discussion of Plato's cyclicity argument in his *epitome* of the *Phaedo*, Ficino demonstrates not only that the soul is the source of motion, but that this motion is mediated by a vehicle:

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<sup>31</sup> Preserving the whole person, these vehicles enable the 'complete' immortality of the soul, that is, of both its higher and lower faculties; the survival of the individual intellect alone is, in effect, 'incomplete.' On Ficino's arguments against transmigration and in favour of individual immortality through the doctrine of soul-vehicles, see *ibid.*, especially 99–110.

<sup>32</sup> See *ibid.*, 90–99.

<sup>33</sup> Note that Plotinus' *Enneads* IV.8 treats of the descent of the soul, concluding that the soul's highest part does not descend in a literal sense, that is, through space into the sensible world, rather it remains united to the universal Intellect; for Plotinus, "the soul's descent takes place within the soul and has nothing to do with travel through space." See Damian Caluori, "The Human Soul: Its Descent and Its Confusion in the Sensible World," in *Plotinus on the Soul* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 134–151, at 134. Also Barrie Fleet, *Ennead IV.8 On the Descent of the Soul into Bodies* (Las Vegas: Parmenides Publishing, 2012). As such, the Neoplatonic *ochêma* is almost absent from his thought. Yet Ficino used these vehicles, which were developed in post-Plotinian thought, in order to interpret passages of Plotinus' *Enneads* (including those pertaining to metempsychosis and post-mortem memory). This lends further credence to the idea that not only were these vehicles central to Ficino's thought, but so too was their acquisition during the spatial descent of the soul into bodies.

He then says that he will prove that the immortality of the soul is based on its forward and backward movement from one opposite to another. Just as the dead proceed from the living, so one day do the living rise again from the dead. ... In long rambling excursions he further indicates that just as the substance of heaven, the material of the elements, unceasingly alternates between one disposition and another, so, too, does the rational soul — which is the origin of movement, life and generation — have the power to endlessly alternate between uniting with the body and detaching itself from it, since many substances naturally change their qualities through perpetual alternation, and by the power of the soul an everlasting circuit is produced. ... He then deals with the principle of remembering, having proved a little earlier that the soul lives prior to the body as well as after the body. ... He says therefore: If learning is remembering, then souls have lived prior to the body. ... Indeed, when the attraction towards the physical remains in the soul, the result is not that the soul is actually seen — for attraction is not visible — but that the soul carries with it something that is visible: a kind of veil that is made of air or of the spirits and vapours of its own body, as Proclus says, or a veil new-woven from the circumambient air. Plato is undoubtedly indicating here the same as Proclus: that between the ethereal body (which is immaterial, simple, and everlasting) and the earthly body (which is material, composite, and of short duration) there is the airy body, which is material, but in some way simple and of quite long duration, and in which souls continue to live even after death, until, when this has dissolved, they once more put on a composite body if they are not purified, but if they are purified, they go to heaven with their ethereal body alone.<sup>34</sup>

In his *argumentum* come commentary on the tenth book of Plato's *Republic*, Ficino explains that in their coming and going, souls pass through an 'intermediate zone,' which is that airy sphere where the second vehicle was obtained:

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<sup>34</sup> Ficino as translated in Arthur Farndell, *Gardens of Philosophy: Ficino on Plato*, trans. Arthur Farndell (London: Shephard-Walwyn, 2006), 130–139 at 132–134. See Plato, *Phaedrus*, 245c1–246e2, where Plato explains that things which have motion within themselves can neither be destroyed nor generated. Also cfr. chapter six, p. 204–205.

But what do they think is signified by the two openings in the earth and the two openings in heaven? It is that you may understand that souls descend to the earthly realm by one way, that is by being clothed in an earthly body, and that they ascend from the earth by another way, that is, by being purified of that earthly garment. In the same way souls fall from heaven into the elements through love of the elemental body, and conversely they rise again to the heavenly realm when this love is extinguished and celestial love is kindled. Hence Orpheus says that love holds the keys for those above and for those below. Plato says that the judges of souls are in the air, and he places the angels, ministers of divine providence, in the ether. After the sentence, the just go towards heaven bearing their deeds and the judgments before them ... The unjust, on the other hand, go downwards, bearing their deeds and their judgements in their backs; for they do not know themselves ... The meadow in which the souls rest for a while, both those which are ascending and those which are descending, is a middle region between the infernal and the heavenly ...<sup>35</sup>

The followers of Plato see the intermediate zone as a place reserved for choice, and so it is called a meadow. Although some of his followers call the meadows the highest realms of heaven, here the meadows signify the airy region, for how could Plato here indicate the highest heaven by the word ‘meadows,’ since he says, when referring to them, that some souls come down from the celestial realms, while other souls suddenly come forth from the bowels of the earth?<sup>36</sup>

The first, celestial vehicle is thus obtained in the heavens, from where the soul originates. This is further clarified in the *Platonic Theology*, where Ficino explicitly states that the eternal life which the vehicle possesses is endowed to it by virtue of the soul, which necessarily exists before donning its celestial garment:

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<sup>35</sup> Ficino as translated in Arthur Farndell, *When Philosophers Rule: Ficino on Plato's Republic, Laws, & Epinomis*, trans. Arthur Farndell (London: Shephard-Walwyn, 2009), 45–69, at 54–55. On Ficino and the Myth of Er, see Anna Corrias, “Spinning the Whorl of the Spindle: Marsilio Ficino on Plato's Myth of Er in the *Argumentum in Platonis Respublicam*,” *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 37, no. 1 (2020): 39–60. Also see Allen, “Life as a Dead Platonist,” 159–178.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

So the rational soul is able to live apart from both the elemental and the celestial nature infused in the elements. But if some one of the Platonists were to say that it always rides in a celestial vehicle, we would retort that the soul does not depend on the vehicle but the vehicle on the soul, and that according to the Platonists the everlasting soul always gives life to the everlasting vehicle.<sup>37</sup>

As is demonstrated here, these vehicles are dependent on an eternal soul which exists prior and which gives life to them. The first of these vehicles is obtained in the heavenly sphere, where the soul dwelled before its descent; as the soul gradually descends through the spheres toward the sensible world, it obtains its final two vehicles. Despite their intimate connection, and the undoubted allure of the magical powers of these vehicles, the doctrines of pre-existence and soul-vehicles played vastly different roles in Ficino's philosophical and religious thinking.

Ficino's interest in the doctrine of pre-existence stemmed primarily from his understanding of the sources of religion or religiousness, and of the possibility of spiritual renewal through internal experience, that is, through contemplation which facilitates the recollection of the ante-natal vision, and which leads to personal union with God. Though his views on pre-existence, much like his views on the vehicles of the soul, are often implicit, the centrality of this doctrine for his entire programme of religious, theological, and spiritual renewal cannot be overstated. Indeed, uncovering Ficino's often unarticulated assumptions about pre-existence sheds new light on everything he has to say about contemplation, conversion, and renewal. For Ficino the pre-existence of the soul was not a matter of abstract belief or speculation; rather it had real implications for the possibility and nature of participation in the religious, and indeed spiritual, life of the city — an interpretation which I propose will become evident as my discussion proceeds.

“Throughout the later Middle Ages the call for reform and renewal was near-universal in Europe,” certainly, “from the cosmos to the human body renewal was deemed necessary

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<sup>37</sup> See *PT* 9.3.7. Ficino, *Platonic Theology*, 3:26–29.

and was desired, demanded, and expected.”<sup>38</sup> This centuries-long history is characterised by the overarching belief that the ills of society and its institutions stemmed from corruption within the Church. The objective of reform was thus always “the Christian faith and the institutions that enshrined and transmitted it.”<sup>39</sup> Overcoming corruption required a total, top-down reform — a complete restoration of the principles and practices of the early Church, in order to regenerate its ancient glory and apostolic purity. Following years of instability in the Church throughout the Western Schism (and the subsequent uncertainty over the ultimate authority of Pope or general Council), and especially after the conquest of Constantinople by the Ottoman Turks in 1453 (believed by many Florentines to be divine punishment for the sins of Christendom), the Church was in dire need of renewal and reform. In the Quattrocento, this call was embodied especially by the Dominican Order, spearheaded by Giovanni Dominici and Antonino Pierozzi in the first half of the century, and Giovanni Caroli and Girolamo Savonarola in the second, who sought a return to Scriptural studies and moral reform.<sup>40</sup> It followed that from institutional reform came societal reform. Certainly, religious reform preached in Florence “was intricately bound with urban renewal and therefore reform of a lay citizenry, both as individuals and within the structures which sustained and governed their collective lives.”<sup>41</sup> This reform, “at least from the 1420s to the 1480s, was ... about *modus vivendi* ... that is, actively adapting doctrine to deal with the new realities of life so that the populace, religious and lay alike, could work together for the *bonum commune* — the common good.”<sup>42</sup> As we shall see below, there was a growing sense in the fifteenth century that one might serve the common good by bettering oneself, and leading others toward spiritual perfection.

Individual renewal in the late-medieval period was considered in terms of ‘conversion.’ From the Latin *conversio*, conversion essentially describes the act of turning around or

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<sup>38</sup> Gerald Strauss, “Ideas of *Reformatio* and *Renovatio* from the Middle Ages to the Reformation,” in *Handbook of European History, 1400–1600: Late Middle Ages, Renaissance, and Reformation*, eds. Thomas Brady Jr., Heiko Oberman and James Tracy, 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 2:1, 3.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>40</sup> See Edelheit, *The Evolution of Humanist Theology*; Amos Edelheit, *Humanism, Theology, and Spiritual Crisis in Renaissance Florence: Giovanni Caroli’s “Liber Dierum Lucensium”*; *A Critical Edition, English Translation, Commentary, and Introduction* (Leiden: Brill, 2018); Bert Roest, “Observant Reform in Religious Orders,” in *The Cambridge History of Christianity*, eds. Miri Rubin and Walter Simons, 9 vols. (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 4:446–457.

<sup>41</sup> Peter Howard, “‘A Paradise Inhabited by Devils’: Lay Reform as *Imago Dei*,” *Renaissance Studies* (forthcoming). I am grateful to Peter Howard for sharing his text with me prior to publication.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

revolving, signalling an inner alteration or change that redirects emotional energy toward a particular, interior focus.<sup>43</sup> At its most basic, religious conversion refers to “a reorientation with regard to the world as well as to the divine.”<sup>44</sup> The semantic field of ‘conversion’ in this context is, however, exceptionally broad: it can mean a change in religious identity, converting from one religion to another; it can denote a cross-confessional conversion, moving from one confessional community to another; but it can also refer to an “inward change of heart or powerful transformation in a nominal Christian, whose faith subsequently becomes qualitatively different.”<sup>45</sup> It is this latter characterisation that I shall focus on.

As Richard Kieckhefer notes, “Conversion in the late medieval sources is often not a turning from sin or error but a discovery of inwardness or interiority and a corresponding transcendence of conventional pieties.”<sup>46</sup> However, working to avoid distinctions of mysticism as a separate sociological category, Kieckhefer argues that mystical contemplation ought not be considered as different to or outside of standard religious practice. His study speaks to the medieval notion of *conversio in se*, a turning toward inward reflection, which does not demand the plunging of oneself into radical individualism (how many define mysticism); it can just as easily turn one toward a context of conventional piety within the church, and toward a more balanced, inwardly focused private devotionalism. Nuancing this formulation, Jonathan Strom writes that these types of interior conversions “shared elements of the medieval understanding of *conversio in se*, which signalled profound growth in interiority and spirituality,” but they “could also manifest themselves in marked changes in morality and comportment in the life of a

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<sup>43</sup> On the semantic capacity of the Latin *conversio*, also see Matteo Soranzo, “Words of Conversion: Poetry and Religious Identity in Early Modern Italy,” *Journal of Religion in Europe* 6 (2012): 234–235.

<sup>44</sup> Jonathan Strom, *German Pietism and the Problem of Conversion* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2018), 2. One might also think of William James’ definition: “To be converted, to be regenerated, to receive grace, to experience religion, to gain an assurance, are so many phrases which denote the process, gradual or sudden, by which a self, hitherto divided and consciously wrong, inferior and unhappy, becomes unified and consciously right and happy, in consequence of its firmer hold upon religious realities.” William James, “Lecture IX: Conversion,” in *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2002), 150.

<sup>45</sup> Strom, *Pietism and the Problem of Conversion*, 2.

<sup>46</sup> Richard Kieckhefer, “Convention and Conversion: Patterns in Late Medieval Piety,” *Church History* 67, no. 1 (1998): 32–51, at 36. Note, however, in the Florentine context (and elsewhere), Lenten sermons very often preached the theme of ‘*convertimini*’ that is, turning away from the vices that undermined the common good, and instead, turning toward the *bonum commune*. Through preaching we can see that conversion was not only part of the everyday Florentine lexicon, but the Florentine cultural ethos — and that it had polyvalent meaning. Peter Howard, “Making a City and Citizens: The ‘Fruits’ of Preaching in Renaissance Florence,” in *Medieval Urban Culture*, eds. Andrew Brown and Jan Dumolyn (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2017), 62.

Christian that echoed a *conversio vitae*.”<sup>47</sup> Deeper levels of spirituality, that is deeper understandings of God and of self, are thus unlocked through inner alterations.

These profound alterations were not limited to those in the cloister; the desire for the interior life developed alongside the secularisation of the monastic ideal. As the fourteenth century came to an end, the medieval value system began its slow transition into that of the Renaissance, revealing growing tensions between religious and secular values. First-generation humanists began to challenge the ‘medieval commonplace’ that elevated the sanctity of the professional religious. As Charles Trinkaus has argued, Petrarch’s *De otio religioso* indicates a growing sense that one need not be a religious in order to be religious, emphasising the merit and genuine piety of lay Christians, without diminishing the status of the clerical vocation.<sup>48</sup> Coluccio Salutati’s *De Saeculo et Religione* likewise indicates that one could be religious without making a religious denunciation of the world, for one could serve God in one’s heart whilst still embracing it, and that there was virtue to be found in both the monastic and domestic life.<sup>49</sup> Despite the growing emphasis on and praise of action in the civic sphere, the contemplative life was never rejected, and indeed, much of the historiography since Hans Baron’s ‘civic humanism’ thesis has worked to show that the value attributed to the active life in Quattrocento Florence did not diminish the value of the contemplative life.<sup>50</sup> Knowledge was considered by many to be essential for enlightened action, for without the guidance of theory and knowledge the active life could have no merit. The laity were thus eager for contemplative practices accessible to them.

Speaking to the reciprocal nature of Florentine religious life, Peter Howard’s research on fifteenth-century preaching reveals a culture in which the audience, just as much as the context, shaped the preachers’ discourse, and in which the preacher equally reflected and shaped the audience’s values. Attesting to the high theological literacy of the Florentine

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<sup>47</sup> Strom, *Pietism and the Problem of Conversion*, 2.

<sup>48</sup> Trinkaus, *In Our Image and Likeness*, 2:661–662.

<sup>49</sup> See also Paul Lombardo, “Vita Activa versus Vita Contemplativa in Petrarch and Salutati,” *Italica* 59, no. 2 (1982): 83–92; Maria Maślanka-Soro, “La Vita Attiva e la Vita Contemplativa nella Letteratura dell’Umanesimo Italiano,” in *Fontes Christianæ Aux XV<sup>e</sup> et XVI<sup>e</sup> Siècles: Lectures, Inspirations, Contestation*, ed. Marcela Świątkowska (Krakow: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2010), 22–34.

<sup>50</sup> For a concise summary, see David Lines, “Action and Contemplation in Renaissance Philosophy,” in *Encyclopedia of Renaissance Philosophy*, ed. Marco Sgarbi (Springer, 2019), [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-02848-4\\_181-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-02848-4_181-1); See also Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Studies in Renaissance Thought and Letters*, 4 vols. (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1956–1996), 4:197–213.

merchant, and even artisan classes, lay anthologies demonstrate a deep concern about matters of the soul: its immortality, its powers (intellect, memory, will), its perfection and its salvation.<sup>51</sup> The theological themes with which everyday Florentines were dealing demonstrates that they were able to hear and comprehend complex theological discourses — particularly the eschatological implications of ‘dwelling in the world’ — and that these issues were deeply connected to the changing understanding of the nature of man, his role in the world, and the ultimate goal of human existence.<sup>52</sup> Unlike the other animals, man can reach for perfection and become the true image of the divine through his participation in God’s nature; created in the image and likeness of God, it was through man’s intellect — reflected both in the changing material structure of Florence and the rekindled love of one’s neighbour — that he could become like God. That is, through his virtuous deeds man could achieve his true potential. But as we have seen, without knowledge, one’s action cannot be truly virtuous.

It is thus significant that even amongst the lower classes, it was understood that the perfection of the human soul for the merit of eternal life relied just as much upon meditation, prayer, and contemplation, as it did upon love of God and fellow man. Indeed, as one artisan text records, these acts bring consolation to body and soul.<sup>53</sup> Similarly, one

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<sup>51</sup> Merchant records show a concern for themes such as the justice of God, Christian faith, divine providence, free will and predestination, the final judgement, confession, humility, mortal sin, penitence and contrition, secular vanity, and charity, all of which are consistent with the penitential preaching of the friars. However, the detailed development on themes such as the Holy Trinity, communion, the body of Christ, the grace of God, the resurrection of the body, the glories of paradise, the precious sensibilities of the glorified body, and the mercy of God and indulgences is somewhat unexpected. Howard, “Lay Reform.” On the religious concerns and habits of the artisan class, see Sabrina Corbellini and Margaret Hoogvliet, “Artisans and Religious Reading in Late Medieval Italy and Northern France (ca. 1400–ca. 1520),” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 43, no. 3 (2013): 521–544. On confraternal spirituality, see Giacomo Mariani and Nelson Minnich, “The Autobiography of Antonio Degli Agli (Ca. 1400–1477): An Introduction and Transcription of the *Dialogus De Vita Eiusdem Auctoris*,” *Archivio Italiano per la Storia della Pietà* 29 (2016): 415–487; Rab Hatfield, “The Compagnia de’ Magi,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 33 (1970): 107–161, particularly 128–135. As will be shown below, the nature and immortality of the soul were also of chief concern at the Italian universities.

<sup>52</sup> Peter Howard, “Aptum ad praedicandum: The Reception and Transformation of Scholastic Thinking in Renaissance Florence,” in *The Brill Companion to Renaissance Scholasticism*, ed. Amos Edelheit (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming). I am grateful to Peter Howard for sharing his text with me prior to publication. Also see Howard, “Lay Reform.”

<sup>53</sup> Filippo di Lorenzo Benchi da Firenze Bibl. Ricc. 2957, fol. 39r: “Io lo prestassi me lo renda o a mio rede e pigline utile e consolazione all’anima e al corpo e prie che iddio per me e bello che piaoło e soprattutto lo sbuardi dalla lucerna o marchie avio non si grati.” See Howard, “Lay Reform.” Consider in light of the Thomistic stance that, “In itself and essentially, the perfection of the Christian life consists in charity — primarily in the love of God and secondarily in the love of neighbour, concerning which the principal precepts of the divine law are given...” 2a2ae, 184.3. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae: Latin Text and English Translation, Introductions, Notes, Appendices, and Glossaries*, trans. and ed. Thomas Gilby, 61 vols. (New York and London: Blackfriars, McGraw-Hill Books Company, and Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1964–1981), 47:29.

merchant text conveys the sense that in order to raise the mind above carnal desires and other distractions associated with participation in the Florentine cultural life (including speculation on the mysteries of nature and religion), one should devote oneself to sacred learning and divine contemplation, leading one to a better understanding both of oneself, and of God's saving actions in his life.<sup>54</sup> The Florentines understood that they needed to strive for individual dignity; they must all direct their efforts toward spiritual perfection, and encourage those around them to follow suit, thus we see that even men of the merchant class were calling others to contemplation and conversion.<sup>55</sup>

Ficino's own concept of *conversio* was of course coloured by this religious context, but it was also deeply imbued by the Neoplatonic notion of *epistrophê* found in the sources he was reading and engaging with in his youth, including Plato, but especially Proclus and Plotinus. As scholars of Plotinus and Neoplatonism have noted, the term *epistrophê* carries various meanings:

... related to the activity of the self or soul: turning one's attention toward something, turning towards oneself, and turning back to a prior source. More specifically the philosophical employment of these three broad meanings point to intellectual activities: turning one's thoughts to something in particular, reverting one's thinking onto self (an interiorized self-reflexivity, reflection, or self-knowledge), and a conversion, reversion, or return to one's original abode, namely to the One as *archê* [first principle].<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Antonio degli Agli, *Dialogus De Vita Eiusdem Auctoris*, 1475. Mariani and Minnich, "The Autobiography of Antonio Degli Agli," 429–434.

<sup>55</sup> An anonymous Florentine merchant anthology documents that "'uomini secolari' of whatever status, grade or condition, have to give over some time to the contemplative and spiritual life, according to their circumstances." Bibl. Ricc. 1186C, fol. 22v. Howard, "Lay Reform."

<sup>56</sup> Denis J. -J. Robichaud and Matteo Soranzo, "Philosophical or Religious Conversion? Marsilio Ficino, Plotinus's *Enneads* and Neoplatonic *epistrophê*," in *Simple Twists of Faith: Cambiare Culto, Cambiare Fede: Persone e Luoghi. Changing Beliefs, Changing Faiths: People and Places*, eds. Simona Marchesini and James Nelson Novoa (Verona: Alteritas, 2017), 132. Also see Denis J. -J. Robichaud, "Fragments of Marsilio Ficino's Translations and Use of Proclus' *Elements of Theology* and *Elements of Physics*: Evidence and Study," *Vivarium* 54 (2016): 46–107. On Ficino and the concept of procession–rapture/conversion–return, see Edgar Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1968), 36–52.

As the leading interpreter of Platonic and Neoplatonic authors, Ficino had encountered the Plotinian notion of *epistrophê* well before the publication of his translation of the *Enneads* in 1492.<sup>57</sup> Certainly, Ficino’s association of *conversio* and *epistrophê* is evident even in his earliest works; the first appearance can be traced back to an unpublished work, written during his time at the Florentine *Studio*, entitled *De sono* (c.1454–1455).<sup>58</sup> Dealing with the intellect’s capacity for self-reversion, Ficino employed *conversio* to refer to Proclus’ causal explanation of psychology and the senses.<sup>59</sup> Ficino had also come across the idea in Plato’s *Phaedrus*, in Proclus’ *Liber de causis* (through Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite), *On Providence and Fate*, the *Elements of Theology*, the *Elements of Physics*, and the *Parmenides* commentary — all of which were accessible to him through the late-thirteenth-century Latin translations of William of Moerbeke, and in the medieval authors who had engaged with Proclus, such as Thomas Aquinas, Henry of Ghent and Nicolaus of Methone.<sup>60</sup> For Plotinus, however, the cycle of descent and ascent takes place within the soul, and therefore Ficino’s understanding of conversion needs to be unpacked further.

Blending the notions of the Greek *metanoia* and *epistrophê* which were encompassed by the Latin *conversio*, Ficino’s religio-philosophical understanding of conversion is to be understood as a gradual process.<sup>61</sup> Intimately connected to Ficino’s understanding of internal experience, this process begins by turning toward an interior focus (that is, contemplation of the soul itself), which rouses and unites its higher and lower parts, allowing the soul to abstract itself from the body and to be led or drawn back to God and

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<sup>57</sup> By the time he had completed the first draft of his translation of Plotinus’s *Enneads* in 1486, Ficino had already translated the complete Platonic corpus, and had either translated or was in the process of translating “numerous works by other Platonists like Alcinous, Porphyry, Iamblichus, Hermias, Proclus, Synesius, Theon of Smyrna, and Priscianus Lydus, as well as having read many more.” Robichaud and Soranzo, “Philosophical or Religious Conversion,” 147.

<sup>58</sup> The text is transcribed in full in Kristeller, “The Scholastic Background of Marsilio Ficino,” 299–315.

<sup>59</sup> “Nam ut inquit Proculus in sua theologica declaratione, nulla virtus materialis et extensa supra se ipsam converti potest.” *Ibid.*, 313; Robichaud and Soranzo, “Philosophical or Religious Conversion,” 147.

<sup>60</sup> In Socrates’ palinode from the *Phaedrus* (247a5), Plato adopts the verb *epistrophô* to describe the circular movement of the celestial charioteers in the trains of the gods. Robichaud and Soranzo, “Philosophical or Religious Conversion,” 142. On Ficino’s engagement with these texts, see Michael J. B. Allen, “Marsilio Ficino as a Reader of Proclus and Most Notably of Proclus’ *In Parmenidem*,” in *Essays in Renaissance Thought and Letters: In Honor of John Monfasani*, eds. Alison Frazier and Patrick Nold (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 179–183.

<sup>61</sup> See Robichaud and Soranzo, “Philosophical or Religious Conversion,” 140–142. Matteo Soranzo, however, argues that “after finalizing his translations and exegetical commentaries of Plato’s dialogues and, most importantly, after translating Plotinus’ *Enneads* (first printed in 1492), Ficino’s use of ‘*conversio*’ became increasingly specialized to translate the Greek term ‘*epistrophe*,’ which — as Plotinus — Ficino used to describe the turning of the soul toward its object of knowledge, but not the intimate spiritual transformation indexed by ‘*metanoia*.’” See Soranzo, “Words of Conversion,” 234–236, at 236.

to its original, pre-existent state. This process concludes when the soul returns to the body, the result of which is the dramatic spiritual transformation of the believer, who has become inflamed with the burning desire for God once more. This understanding is expressed in Ficino's *argumentum* to Plato's *Ion*:

But the divine frenzy is the illuminating of the rational soul via which God takes the soul which has fallen from the heights to the depths and *leads it back* from the depths to the heights. ... Accordingly, just as it descends through four degrees, it must ascend through four. But the divine frenzy is the frenzy that *turns the soul back* to the heights, this being what constitutes its definition. ... Finally, when the soul rises above its mind into its one — into the one, I say, which is present in the soul's very essence — it remains for it to be *converted* thence into the One which is above essence. ... Thus the first frenzy tempers discords and discordances; the second makes the tempered parts one whole from the parts; the third makes one whole above the parts; the fourth leads [the soul] to the One which is above essence and is wholly one. The first distinguishes the good horse, that is, reason and opinion from the bad horse, that is, from the confused phantasy and nature. The second subjects the bad horse to the good and the good to the charioteer, that is, to the mind. The third directs the charioteer to his head, that is, to the unity which is the apex of his mind. The last frenzy turns the charioteer's head towards the head of all things. And there the charioteer is blessed: halting his horses at the stable, that is, at divine beauty, he throws them ambrosia and then nectar too to drink, that is, the vision of beauty and the gladness that comes from that vision.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> "Est autem furor divinus illustratio rationalis animae, per quam deus animam, a superis delapsam ad infera, ab inferis ad superas *retrahit*. ... Quare sicut per quatuor descendit gradus, per quatuor ascendat necesse est. Furor autem divinus est qui ad superna *convertit*, ut in eius definitione consistit. ... Demum cum anima unum facta est — unum, inquam, quod in ipsa essentia animae inest — restat ut illico in unum quod est super essentiam *convertatur*. ... Primus itaque furor inconcinna et dissonantia temperat; secundus temperata unum totum ex partibus efficit; tertius unum totum supra partes; quartus in unum, quod super essentiam et totum est, ducit. Primus bonum equum, id est rationem opinionemque, a malo equo, id est a phantasia confusa et natura, distinguit; secundus malum equum bono, bonum aurigae, id est menti, subiicit; tertius aurigam in caput suum, id est in unitatem mentis apicem, dirigit; postremus caput aurigae in caput rerum omnium vertit, ubi auriga beatus est et ad praesepe, id est divinam pulchritudinem, sistens equos obiicit illis ambrosiam et super ipsam nectar potandum, id est visionem pulchritudinis et ex visione laetitiam." Emphasis mine. See Marsilio Ficino, *Commentaries on Plato*, trans. and ed. Michael J. B. Allen, 2 vols. (The I Tatti Renaissance Library, Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA and London, 2008), 1:194–201. Cfr. Ficino's commentary to Plato's *Symposium*, Speech VII, Chapter XIII, which repeats "Est

Here we see the broader concept of conversion at play, expressed both in terms of *convertere* (to turn back), but also *retrahere* (to call or draw back), indicating that this turning is, for Ficino, a re-turn — it is effectively the second part of the soul’s journey, not the first. Elsewhere the soul’s ascent is expressed in terms of flying back (*revolare*) or aspiring to its celestial homeland, or completing its circuit and returning to its point of origin, all of which speak to the fact that, for Ficino, the soul first exists in the celestial realm, where it experiences the love of God and is instilled with the desire for Him (this desire is what Ficino refers to as religion or religiousness).<sup>63</sup> Turning one’s focus inwards to the soul and upwards to God allows the soul to return to its initial state — not merely to its source, but its first dwelling — reigniting that initial spark and innate desire within the soul, which is what we refer to here as spiritual renewal; this is after all the process by which the devout and pious men of antiquity were said to be in a way reborn from God.<sup>64</sup> Thus, for Ficino, conversion is at once a turning toward an inner focus, a turning toward God, and a powerful spiritual transformation which dramatically alters and strengthens one’s faith. This kind of conversion thus ultimately produces a new way of loving God, and thereby a new way of loving others and of dwelling in the world.

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autem furor divinus illustratio rationalis animae, per quam Deus animam a superis delapsam ad infera, ab inferis ad supera *retrahit*.” Chapter XIV moreover restates “Quae propter sicut per quatuor descendit gradus, per quatuor ascendat necesse est. Furor autem divinus est, qui ad supera *tollit*, ut in eius definitione constitit.” The verb *tollere* here again implies God is now active in the process, raising the soul back to Him. It continues: “Demum cum anima facta est unum, unum inquam, quod in ipsa natura et essentia animae est, restat ut ilico in unum quod est super essentiam, id est Deum se *revocet*.” *Revocere* similarly implies the soul is called back or drawn back to God in this process. Again, it continues: “Primus itaque furor inconcinna et dissonantia temperat. Secundus temperata unum totum ex partibus efficitur. Tertius unum totum supra partes. Quartus in unum quod super essentiam, et super totum est ducit. ... Primus itaque furor bonum equum, id est rationem opinionemque a malo equo, id est a fantasia confusa et sensuum appetitu distinguit. Secundus malum equum bono, bonum aurigae, id est menti subiicit. Tertius aurigam in caput suum, id est in unitatem mentis apicem dirigit. Postremus caput aurigae in caput rerum omnium vertit. Ubi auriga beatus est, et ad praesepe, id est divinam pulchritudinem sistens equos, id est accommodans omnes sibi subiectae animae partes, obiicit illis ambrosiam, et super ipsam nectar potandum, id est visionem pulchritudinis, et ex visione laetitiam.” The passage thus similarly concludes with the same process of conversion to self and to God which leads to a spiritual transformation. Ficino, *Opera Omnia*, 2:1361–1362.

<sup>63</sup> See Ficino’s *epitome* of the *Phaedo*: “... his quasi duabus alis *in coelestem patriam revolet*.” “Porphyrius certe atque Iamblichus tradunt animos Deo perfectissime *restitutos* nunquam cadere.” “Praeterea oracula praeceptorum tradunt, animas *remeantes* in coelum, paeana, id est, triumphalem cantilenam canere Phoebo. Reddit ergo Deo votum, ut alacer paeana canens, coelestem patriam *repetat*.” Here we also see *restituere*, *remeare* and *repetere* invoked to convey a return to the soul’s original state. In *PT* 14.7.3: “... *ad patriam adspirat caelestem*,” and in the *argumentum* to the tenth book of the *Republic*: “... *hominis anima suum explet circuitum, per quem in idem redeat*.” Also see the preface to the *De Christiana religione*: “Nam cum animus (ut Platoni nostro placet) duabus tantum alis, id est, intellectu, et voluntate possit *ad coelestem patrem, et patriam revolare*.” Ficino, *Opera Omnia*, 1:1; 2:1393–1395, 1431; Ficino, *Platonic Theology*, 4:272–273.

<sup>64</sup> See *PT* 13.4.12 and n.73 below.

In Ficino's later works, the idea of conversion as an 'unlocking' of a different level of consciousness and as a return to the pre-natal communion with the divine becomes central. Indeed, it permeates his commentary on Plotinus' *Enneads* VI.9. Here, Ficino explains that only by turning towards itself and uniting its various parts may the soul gain access to higher levels of consciousness:

The principle of things is utterly incorporeal, immobile, and one. Therefore, we cannot access it through opposites, nor can we properly access it by using the imagination, which plots around corporeal things. Nor through reason, which is itinerant, somehow changeable, and always busy contriving; nor through the intelligence which, because of its own manifold nature, is always contemplating something different. But, through a sort of unity of the soul, we eventually access a higher [unity] in intellect, when we take refuge in it, completely separate from the multiplicity [of things], both external and internal.<sup>65</sup>

This inward turn, he explains, prepares the mind for the vision of God; shining brightest in the Intellect, God's divine light can be perceived by our mind through this unity, which is already present within us, and through it we may be called back to God (*revocare*) once more:

It remains moreover that certain affections/passions in our reason will at some time or other *be called back* to God by their own impulses. When we are completely united to Him, since we are united to Him through essential unity, we enjoy far more inwardly and more fully than anyone can do by knowing anything.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Ficino's commentary of *Enneads* VI.9.4: "Principium rerum est penitus incorporeum, immobile, unum. Cum igitur nequeamus illud attingere per opposita, merito nec imaginatione attingimus corporalia machinante, nec mobili ratione mutabile nonnihil semper excogitante, nec intelligentia suapte natura multiplici varium semper aliquid meditante. Sed attingimus tandem unitate quadam animae [unitatem] intellectu superiorem, quando ad eam a multitudine tam intima, quam externa penitus segregati confugimus." Ficino, *Opera Omnia*, 2:1799. I am very grateful to Anna Corrias for sharing her translation of Ficino's commentary of Plotinus' *Enneads* VI.9.

<sup>66</sup> Emphasis mine. Ficino's commentary of *Enneads* VI.9.8: "Restat quinetiam affectus quidam in ratione stimulis quandoque suis *revocaturus* ad Deum: cui quando penitus copulamur, quoniam per unitatem essentialem illi jungimur, interius longe pleniusque fruimur, quam qui re quavis cognoscendo potitur." *Ibid.*, 2:1800.

The enjoyment of God is more penetrating in the innermost fruit than in the intelligence, inasmuch as the intelligence is accustomed to penetrate an object more deeply than the senses. To enjoy God, therefore, is not so much to see as to touch; nor does it flow from the outside, but rather from the inside; and it is also to be divinely struck and to be made into God, just as someone who wants to enjoy food is eventually made into the food or perhaps vice versa.<sup>67</sup>

Touched deep within, the soul which is brought back into union with the divine experiences such joy and consequently such powerful alterations that when it returns to its embodied state, it is forever changed.<sup>68</sup>

As the following section will further explore, Ficino's notion of contemplation and mystical union was always expressed in terms of the *re*-ascent of the soul, a turning *back* or *return* to God. This is certainly evident in the language that colours the *De divino furore* which deals with the themes of spiritual transformation that characterise both the Plotinian *epistrophê* and the Greek *metanoia*. Though the idea became clearer in his later written works, Ficino was thinking about conversion in these terms right from the beginning. As I will argue below, this understanding was underpinned by his belief in the pre-existence of the soul. Indeed, as we shall see, the turning of the soul towards itself is to be understood as the attempt to recollect the ante-natal vision. This self-reflexivity unites the higher and lower parts of the soul, allowing it to 'regain its wings' and fly back to its original home and to return to God.

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<sup>67</sup> Ficino's commentary of *Enneads* VI.9.9: "Fruitio tanto sit penetrantior in medullas quam intelligentia, quanto intelligentia solet obiectum profundius penetrare quam sensus. Igitur frui Deo non tam est videre quam tangere, nec id quidem extrinsecus, sed penitus illabi, ac divinitus affci, effci que Deum sicut qui et alimento vescitur, tandem effcitur alimentum, vel forte vicissim." *Ibid.*, 2:1800. Cfr. Augustine, *Confessions*, 7.10.16: "I am the food of those who have come of age: grow up and you shall taste of me. You will not transform me into you as you do your fleshly food, but you will be transformed into me." Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, trans. Carolyn J. -B. Hammond, 2 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014–2016), 1:329.

<sup>68</sup> See Anna Corrias, "Plotinus's Language of Seeing: Marsilio Ficino on *Enneads* V.3, V.8 and III.8," *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 26, no. 3 (2019): 251–269. Also cfr. chapter one, n.61.

## **2.2 The Flight to the Citadel of the Soul: Conversion to One's Own Divinity**

The centrality of contemplation to the whole of Ficino's thought is by now well known; for him, the contemplative life was "not merely the life of prayer, of study or scholarship, [or] of theory or knowledge."<sup>69</sup> Examining Ficino's concept of internal experience (that is, the contemplative act itself), Paul Oskar Kristeller has shown a system that shares many elements with mystical and Neoplatonic thought.<sup>70</sup> As Ficino understands it, the embodied human soul is in a constant state of restlessness, but should it turn away from external reality and concentrate on its own inner substance, it is capable of separating itself from the body, and is able to attain higher levels of knowledge — knowledge of the incorporeal world — that is imperceptible in our ordinary state. The contemplative life is described as a gradual ascent through higher degrees of truth and being (Matter, Quality, Rational Soul, Angelic Mind) and culminates in the direct knowledge and vision of God. For Ficino this is the ultimate goal of human life and is the only means by which our restless minds may be satisfied; even in contemplating the lower levels of being, we are preparing our soul for this end. It is through this inner ascent, Kristeller notes, "both intellectual and moral, [that] we come to grasp the true reality of the intelligible world, that is, of God and, the divine Ideas, and to see the outer world, and our part in it, in their true perspective."<sup>71</sup> Ficino, like Plotinus, believed that we could experience immediate union with God during the present life, albeit briefly, however, he acknowledged that very few people could reach the highest degree.<sup>72</sup> Nevertheless, these experiences, though

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<sup>69</sup> Kristeller, *Studies in Renaissance Thought and Letters*, 4:209, for Ficino see 208–210. See also Paul Oskar Kristeller, *The Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino*, trans. Virginia Conant (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1964), 218–230.

<sup>70</sup> Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Eight Philosophers of the Italian Renaissance* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1964), 43–45; Kristeller, *The Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino*, 206–255; Kristeller, *Studies in Renaissance Thought and Letters*, 4:197–213; Ernst Cassirer, "Ficino's Place in Intellectual History," review of *The Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino*, by Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 6, no. 4 (1945): 483–501; Corrias, "Plotinus's Language of Seeing," 251–269.

<sup>71</sup> Kristeller, *Studies in Renaissance Thought and Letters*, 4:209.

<sup>72</sup> This idea can be linked to Ficino's understanding of the melancholic temperament of intellectual men, and men of 'divinely inspired genius.' See Ficino's *De Vita Libri Tres*, Book 1, Chapter 5: "In this [Aristotle] has confirmed that Platonic notion expressed in the book *De scientia*, that most intelligent people are prone to excitability and madness. Democritus too says no one can ever be intellectually outstanding except those who are deeply excited by some sort of madness. My author Plato in the *Phaedrus* seems to approve this, saying that without madness one knocks at the doors of poetry in vain. Even if he perhaps intends divine madness to be understood here, nevertheless, according to the physicians, madness of this kind is never incited in anyone else but melancholics." Marsilio Ficino, *Three Books on Life*, trans. and eds. Carol V. Kaske and John R. Clark (Binghamton, NY: The Renaissance Society of America, 1989), 117. See also n.74 below. On the language and types of mystical union in Christian understanding, see Bernard McGinn, "Mystical Union," in *The Oxford Handbook of Mystical Theology*, eds. Edward Howells and Mark McIntosh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 404–421. On the language of inner experience and

fleeting, forever change us, having awakened a new state of inner consciousness.<sup>73</sup> Once returned to our original state, we become more aware of the misery of our present condition — we plunge into sadness, desolation, and grief — which not only humbles us before God but incites in us a more ardent desire for Him — to know Him, to love Him, to be reunited with Him.<sup>74</sup> Intensifying our individual relationship to God, these moments work to renew and strengthen our faith.

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spiritual sensation of the Latin patristic mystical authors, and the language of embodied sensation of the late medieval mystics see Bernard McGinn “The Language of Inner Experience in Christian Mysticism,” *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 1, no. 2 (2001): 156–171.

<sup>73</sup> For Ficino, these brief moments of union are mediated through an abstraction of the rational soul from the body. In *PT* 13.2.2, he says that “people who have discovered something important in any of the more noble arts have principally done so when they have abandoned the body and taken refuge in the citadel of the soul.” Linking these moments of abstraction to contemplation of the soul’s pre-existence, in *PT* 13.2.6, he explains that during these moments there is “no motion, sensation or breathing,” signifying that “the soul was doing nothing in the body; yet in itself it was doing something, *since it was pondering the harmony it had heard beforehand* and listening to the voices.” Emphasis mine. Ficino then gives a lengthy exposition of the seven kinds of ‘emptying or release’ which allow the rational soul to become separated from the senses, and hence recognise the influences of the higher minds (Angelic Mind), which in turn reveal to it the universal knowledge of things eternal. These are principally “in sleep, in syncope or swoon, in the melancholic humor, in the tempered complexion, in solitude, in wonder, and in chastity.” The first six are described as an ‘emptying’ of the rational soul (*vacatio*) and the final kind, chastity, which is the most outstanding of all, as an ‘alienation’ (*alienatio*). This abstraction, Ficino explains, is most common among priests and philosophers, on account of their devotion to things divine. Following these ‘miracles,’ as Ficino calls them, Plato refers to these devout and pious men as ‘divine’ and ‘sons of God,’ “because in a way they are reborn from God.” Here we can see that abstraction is moreover linked to spiritual renewal. See *PT* 13.2, especially 13.2.31–13.2.37. Ficino, *Platonic Theology*, 4:120–169, quotes at 123, 129, 151 and 123 respectively. On altered states of consciousness in Ficino see Valery Rees, “The Care of the Soul: States of Consciousness in the Writings of Marsilio Ficino,” *Aries* 8, no. 1 (2008): 1–19. Also see Michael J. B. Allen, “Marsilio Ficino, Levitation, and the Ascent to Capricorn,” in *Studies of the Platonism of Marsilio Ficino and Giovanni Pico* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), 117–134.

<sup>74</sup> Grief is not a transitory state of mind — it is a basic sentiment which accompanies man in his actual living. Nor is it a simple expression of human unworthiness and humiliation, rather, those who feel it consciously raise themselves from a ‘vulgar’ existence to a higher, truer degree of life. Thus, grief is a way to a higher life and higher joy. However, “according to Ficino, even after the mind has been freed from external impressions it is never free from internal unrest and is constantly being driven forth by it. For the mind does not stop at any degree of consciousness until it has reached the highest end destined for itself, and once it has really arrived there, it must tear itself away again and so fall anew into its usual unrest.” Kristeller, *The Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino*, 208–209. This sense is also given by Antonio degli Agli, as Mariani and Minnich recount: “Spiritual consolations that produced confidence in God were followed by desolation, sadness, and a frigidity of the soul. From this he learned humility, diffidence in his abilities, but confidence in God so that prayer again flowed forth.” Mariani and Minnich, “The Autobiography of Antonio degli Agli,” 432. For a discussion of Ficino’s genial theory, and his association of spiritual restlessness with both the Platonic concept of divine frenzy and the Aristotelian concept of melancholy alienation, see Noel Brann, “The Platonic Revival and the Philosophical Flowering of a Theory of Melancholy Genius,” in *The Debate Over the Origin of Genius During the Italian Renaissance: The Theories of Supernatural Frenzy and Natural Melancholy in Accord and in Conflict on the Threshold of the Scientific Revolution* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 82–152. Note, however, that Kristeller doubts the coherency of such an argument, stating that, “It is difficult to recognize a conceptual relation between the two theories. . . . In spite of a common foundation and of a recognizable affinity, they lack entirely a conceptual bond.” Kristeller, *The Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino*, 213–214. In line with Ficino’s view that [descending] souls are drawn to suitable bodies, and that embodied melancholic souls (those under saturnian or mercurial influence) are, as men, often drawn to the contemplative life, it reasonably follows that, being the physiological counterpart best suited to divine frenzy, those possessing a tempered excess of the melancholic humor (men of intellect who philosophise, and are drawn to contemplation) can more easily abstract themselves from the body and

The role of pre-existence in Ficino’s theory of contemplation, however, has not yet been explored. This is surprising, given that the Platonic concept of *theia mania* (θεία μανία), or divine frenzy, underpins Ficino’s whole theory of union elaborated in the *Platonic Theology*, and indeed, that, divine frenzy in the Platonic system is premised on souls which existed in the heavens before falling into bodies.<sup>75</sup> Though Ficino never directly claims to have experienced this ecstatic or mystical union — the culmination of the contemplative act that enables the *visio Dei* — his account as told in the *De divino furore* likewise begins with a soul that originates in heaven.<sup>76</sup> In his letter to Pellegrino degli Agli, Ficino begins by ascribing the gifts Pellegrino possesses to study, technique, and especially to divine frenzy — for without it, he claims, no man can be great. Ficino says that Pellegrino’s writing expresses powerful emotion and a burning desire, which proves that he is inspired and inwardly possessed by that frenzy. It is a power which manifests itself in external movements and is the most potent proof that the divine force dwells within us. Ficino then moves on to his explanation of what divine frenzy is, so that Pellegrino may understand fully. This, he says, will not only delight him, but will be of the very greatest use to him. What did he mean by this? What was his purpose? And how would his description of an eternal soul be useful to others?

For Ficino (in Kristeller’s classic account),

... the doctrine of immortality was a necessary complement and consequence of his interpretation of human existence and of the goal of human life. If it is our basic task to ascend, through a series of degrees, to the immediate vision and enjoyment of God, we must postulate that this

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ascend to personal union with the divine. Once they return, they are more inflamed with divine love than before, but are equally overwhelmed by an excess of the melancholic humor. Cfr. Brann’s overall contention, which seems to suggest a two-way causality of genius. Though Ficino formulated a nuanced theory of divinely inspired, but naturally mediated genius, Aristotelian genial melancholy was always subordinate to the supernatural Platonic theory of divine frenzy, playing a facilitative or assistive, rather than causal role in the origin of genius. On Ficino and melancholy, also see James Hankins, “Monstrous Melancholy: Ficino and the Physiological Causes of Atheism,” in *Laus Platonici Philosophi: Marsilio Ficino and His Influence*, eds. Stephen Clucas, Peter J. Forshaw and Valery Rees (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 25–43.

<sup>75</sup> See *PT* 13.2. Ficino, *Platonic Theology*, 4:120–169. Cfr. n.73 above. Note that Kristeller draws on this same chapter of the *Platonic Theology* to demonstrate the centrality of contemplation to Ficino’s thought. On Ficino and the Platonic frenzies, see Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “The Platonic Frenzies in Marsilio Ficino,” in *Myths, Martyrs, and Modernity: Studies in the History of Religions in Honour of Jan N. Bremmer*, eds. Jitse Dijkstra, Justin Kroesen and Yme Kuiper (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 553–567.

<sup>76</sup> Letter 7, *On divine frenzy*. Ficino, *Letters*, 1:42–48.

ultimate goal will be attained, not merely by a few persons and for a short while but by a great number of human beings and forever. Otherwise, man's effort to attain this ultimate end would be in vain, and the very end for which he had been destined would remain without fulfillment. Thus, man would be unhappier than the animals, which do attain their natural ends, and this would be inconsistent with the dignity of the place man occupies in the universe.<sup>77</sup>

The most fundamental exercise of the human soul is to strive toward union with God. This union becomes permanent only after bodily death, when the soul is separated once and for all from the body, but man can attain this union during his bodily existence through the abstraction of the soul, mediated by contemplation of the soul's very own nature, that is, the conversion to one's own divinity.

Ficino's commentary of the *Phaedrus* offers critical insight into his understanding of the soul's condition as an immortal being, which entails not merely its life after bodily death, but its antenatal existence, and its descent from the intelligible to the sensible world. One notes that Ficino's is therefore a Platonic rather than Christian interpretation of immortality, for the Greeks believed that the soul was naturally immortal (implying pre-existence), while Christianity teaches that the soul, created *ex nihilo*, becomes immortal through God's grace.<sup>78</sup> Indeed, Ficino's gloss of the allegory of the Phaedran charioteer describes a soul, which, through a gradual weakening of its commitment to contemplation, that is, the remission of understanding coupled with the intensifying of the soul's lower, earthly nature (the soul, he says, is unable to exercise both its contemplative and providential powers simultaneously) leads to the intermission, and ultimate abandonment of contemplation.<sup>79</sup> This signals the descent of the soul from the heavens into an earthly body.

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<sup>77</sup> Kristeller, *Eight Philosophers of the Italian Renaissance*, 46.

<sup>78</sup> This point has been discussed by the German Theologian, Oscar Cullmann, who noted that even well-read Catholics and Protestants understand immortality in the Greek sense, and that "I Cor. 15 has been sacrificed for the *Phaedo*." See Oscar Cullmann, "Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Body: The Witness of the New Testament; The Ingersoll Lecture of 1955," in *Immortality and Resurrection: Four Essays by Oscar Cullmann, Harry A. Wolfson, Werner Jaeger and Henry J. Cadbury*, ed. Krister Stendahl (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1965), 9–53, at 50.

<sup>79</sup> See Michael J. B. Allen, *The Platonism of Marsilio Ficino: A Study of his Phaedrus Commentary: Its Sources and Genesis* (London: University of California Press, 1984), especially chapters 2 and 7; Michael J. B. Allen, *Marsilio Ficino and the Phaedran Charioteer* (London: University of California Press, 1981), especially 217–237.

But because the rational soul retains a certain hidden memory of that beauty, when it remembers it in some way, it chooses to recover it completely. Eventually, when it is about to receive that beauty from the meadow of truth, that is, from the fullness of Ideas in the intelligible world, it is drawn always, and with justice, to the knowledge itself of all things. Whenever it is liberated, it will strive for knowledge zealously.<sup>80</sup>

For Ficino, before entering the body, the soul lived in and fell from contemplation, and it is through contemplation that it may reascend. Recollecting that hidden memory of the soul's experience in its native homeland, where it was nourished and rejoiced in the contemplation of truth, the soul can return to the blessed divinity and absolute beauty it once enjoyed. This process of recollection, which Plato calls *anamnesis* (ἀνάμνησις — *reminiscentia* in Latin), allows the individual to 'unlock' the pathway to the divine; by recollecting the 'antenatal vision' the individual can more easily reach their contemplative ideal to ascend to those higher levels of consciousness, and to obtain more frequent or longer lasting moments of union with God in this life.<sup>81</sup> This positive contemplative ideal offered a vivid imagery which the believer could embrace in their imagination, and through it, rekindle their soul to take flight to "the heights of mystical contemplation they enjoyed before the fall."<sup>82</sup>

Like Plato and Plotinus before him, Ficino elaborated his theory of recollection in more than one way, both of which imply the soul's pre-existence.<sup>83</sup> In the *De divino furore*,

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<sup>80</sup> See *Commentum cum summis capitulorum* 23.2 in Ficino's *Phaedrus* commentary. Ficino, *Commentaries on Plato*, 1:134–135.

<sup>81</sup> "To 'regain one's wings' is thus to recollect at last the antenatal vision. Once it has been recollected, the philosopher returns not only to his God but to the point where he can gaze beyond celestials and intellectuals at the intelligibles themselves. Since this gazing precisely distinguishes a divinity from inferiors, the philosopher can reacquire his own divinity." Allen, *The Platonism of Marsilio Ficino*, 181.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

<sup>83</sup> In the *Meno*, Plato describes ἀνάμνησις in terms of past knowledge or knowledge of past experiences, and emphasises finding knowledge within oneself, for the knowledge of true opinions is always present in the soul: the soul has knowledge of all things because it has seen them during both its embodied and disembodied state. Once the soul recalls one thing, it has the ability to remember all things. See Plato, *Meno*, 81a–86c. In the *Phaedo*, recollection is the regaining of actual knowledge acquired by the soul before it was born. This knowledge, Socrates explains, is knowledge of the equal and the other ideas, which belongs to us; though it is lost at birth it can be regained when the soul recognises the equal in equal things. Plato, *Phaedo*, 72e–77a. In the *Phaedrus*, *anamnesis* is described as the recollection of beauty itself. Once more, Plato explains that the soul has knowledge of ideas before its incarnation (indeed, this is an essential precondition for its incarnation); the soul can therefore recall what it had previously seen when stimulated by sense perception (physical beauty) which recognises the idea (divine beauty) which it had previously encountered. Plato, *Phaedrus*, 249b–250c. These ideas are not always present to the soul, however, and, as Lenka Karfíková explains, "It follows that in addition to the ideas which the soul recalls, a general concept

Ficino explains that the soul may be stirred by the senses, which recognise the ‘images’ or likenesses of the divine, for example, physical beauty is the image of divine beauty, musical instruments and voices the image of divine harmony, and that through this recognition “we remember what we knew before when we existed outside the prison of the body.”<sup>84</sup> In his extended discussion, Ficino describes the activities we partake in in the sensible world which mimic the activities of the soul in the intelligible world — the activities our souls took part in before they fell from the contemplation of truth — and how through these likenesses we might prompt our recollection of our former union with the divine. Ficino thus subtly reminded Pellegrino that our souls had tasted this ecstasy once before and urged him to recall this experience from memory. Though the soul could be stirred by the senses, it must still turn toward itself in order to access the hidden knowledge gained from experience which it had retained.

However, Ficino also explains that souls “do not fly back to heaven, whence they fell ... until they begin to contemplate once more those divine natures which they have forgotten.”<sup>85</sup> The virtues of justice (which relates to moral conduct) and wisdom (which relates to contemplation) are the wings upon which the soul may reascend, but since men “never remember the divine unless they are stirred by its shadows or images,” and since “wisdom is present in no man, or at any rate in very few, and cannot be perceived by bodily senses, it follows that the likenesses of divine wisdom are very rare amongst us,

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must be introduced, which is formed by abstraction and, at the same time, stands for the anamnesis of ideas. A recollection thus does not entail the presence of ideas, but a general concept created by the anamnetic-abstractive process.” See Lenka Karfiková, “Augustine on Recollection between Plato and Plotinus,” in *Studia Patristica LXXV: Papers presented at the Seventeenth International Conference on Patristic Studies held in Oxford 2015*, ed. Markus Vinzent, 24 vols. (Leuven: Peeters, 2017), 1:81–102, at 87. Plotinus gives two accounts of ἀνάμνησις, the first describes *anamnesis* based on an acquaintance with beauty, and the second based on the impressions of ideas in the soul which come from the Intellect. In *Enneads* I.6.2, 10–11 Plotinus says that the soul is by its nature related to the intelligible realm and that the idea of beauty may therefore be recollected when beauty is seen in this world, for upon seeing a trace of its kindred reality the soul is “delighted and thrilled and remembers itself and its own possessions.” In *Enneads* I.2.4, 18–27, Plotinus says that immaterial impressions of the ideas are present in the soul, but they must be activated or awakened by turning the soul’s attention to that which they are impressions of. Moreover, Plotinus claims that the soul contains not just the images, but also the realities themselves, which are present “but not active, lying apart and unilluminated,” until they are illuminated by the Intellect; the Intellect is always present to the soul but remains alien to it unless the soul looks toward it. In *Enneads* IV.4.5 and IV.6.3 *anamnesis* is described not in terms of an act of memory, but rather as the actualisation or awakening of the intellectual vision, which we might consider in terms of an ‘unlocking’ of higher levels of consciousness. See Plotinus, *Enneads*, 1:137–139, 237. Also see Dmitri Nikulin, “Memory and Recollection,” in *Neoplatonism in Late Antiquity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 72–89.

<sup>84</sup> Ficino, *Letters*, 1:15.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

hidden from our senses and totally unknown.”<sup>86</sup> Though not perceptible to the eye, they are perceptible to the eye of the soul when it is turned away from the senses toward an interior focus through contemplation. In his *argumentum* to the *Ion*, as we have already seen above, this inward turn rouses the various parts of the soul, and ‘awakens’ something within ourselves which has always been there — something divine and eternal — but which has been obscured through the confusion of the senses. Similar to Plotinus, this awakening, or unlocking of another level of consciousness was considered by Ficino as the illumination of the soul by God.<sup>87</sup>

Turned toward itself and alienated from the senses, the soul is free to recognise the correspondence (or unity) between itself and the higher minds; the mind of the soul (the intellect) may recognise the influence of the Angelic Mind (Intellect), which reveals or illuminates the universal knowledge of things eternal — knowledge which is *already* within the soul because of its earlier experience.<sup>88</sup> In his *epitome* of the *Phaedo*, Ficino states that:

... the soul which fixes its sight upon the physical is blind to the vision of the non-physical. The truth of things cannot be known unless we have recourse to Ideas. Besides, the patterns of the Ideas are within our minds, and it is in their conformity with these patterns that things are judged to be true or not. Socrates never broke his unwavering contemplation of Ideas, and his practice was to affirm Ideas alone. The undoubted cause of things is in Ideas, and the immortality of the soul receives its strongest proof from Ideas.<sup>89</sup>

Again, in his commentary to Plotinus’ *Enneads* IV.6.3, Ficino says that “to remember and recall is not to preserve and revisit forms of things at some point impressed on the soul,” but rather:

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<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>87</sup> Here we also see the affinities between Ficino and Augustine. On this see Hankins, “*Reminiscentia*,” 13–16. Also cfr. *PT* 11.8, 12.7.5–7 and 13.9–10.

<sup>88</sup> See n.73 above.

<sup>89</sup> Ficino in Farndell, *Gardens of Philosophy*, 136.

... just as there are in the soul natural powers of substance: intellect, reason, imagination, sense, and the vegetative potencies, so the soul also has reason-principles of things to be known which are as though essential powers in the same way that it also has the seminal reason-principles of its bodily parts. Therefore, when the soul thinks about something, it brings itself out from its natural power into a natural act with respect to that thing. But if it thinks about this same thing with greater attentiveness and for a longer time, it conforms itself more forcefully to that thing, and this amounts to remembering it. And from this, recollection is easily accomplished.<sup>90</sup>

The ‘patterns’ of the intelligible world are within the soul itself. These are not to be understood as material impressions of sensible things, which mark the soul like a seal pressed onto a wax tablet; rather, they are immaterial impressions of intelligible things which are known to the soul through experience. The soul therefore retains its ‘memory’ or knowledge of the Ideas, which is always present within us, but which is obscured by the senses. In contemplating itself – its divine essence and eternal origins – and the eternal ideas, including the ideas of justice and wisdom, the soul may bring forth its inborn knowledge of these things. Having thus regained its metaphorical wings, the soul may then reascend to the vision of God.<sup>91</sup>

Ficino believed that contemplative practices could and should be accessible to all mankind, and, sharing a common origin in the heavens, each person could draw on their own memory of their previous existence in order to attain (or rather, reattain) union with God in this life, and to unlock deeper levels of spirituality, and thus renew their faith.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> “Meminisse et reminisci non est conservare atque repetere rerum formas aliquando impressas animo. ... sicut sunt in anima naturales substantiae vires: intellectus ratio imaginatio sensus et potentiae vegetales, ita rerum quoque cognoscendarum rationes habet quasi vires essentielles, quemadmodum et membrorum seminales possidet rationes. Quando igitur anima aliquid meditatur, seipsam ex naturali virtute in actum naturalem circa id ipsum educit. Quod si attentius diutiusque meditatur idem, in hoc ipsum valentius se conformat; idque est meminisse — hinc et facilius reminiscitur.” Marsilio Ficino, *Commentary on Plotinus*, trans. and ed. Stephen Gersh (Cambridge, MA: The I Tatti Renaissance Library: Harvard University Press, 2017–), 5:516–519. Also cfr. Ficino’s commentary to *Enneads* IV.8.4, which describes that the divine Intellect imprints the form of the universe in our intellect, which casts its glimmer into the reason, which is free to receive it and, once turned completely toward this form, it may enjoy the contemplation of divine things. *Ibid.*, 5:544–547.

<sup>91</sup> The same description is given in *PT* 13.2.23.

<sup>92</sup> See the discussion around Ficino’s universalising of religion in chapter one. Also see Hankins, “Ficino and the Religion of the Philosophers,” 101–121.

In both these accounts, Ficino had, in effect, provided his readers with a step-by-step guide on how to recover the antenatal vision and thus achieve mystical union with the divine. Indeed, this is precisely the function which Ficino's narrative around divine frenzy serves: the realisation of each of the frenzies represents the achievement of an essential aspect in the journey to awakened consciousness — each of the frenzies is intended in some way to trigger the recollection of our prior memory. Explaining that if the soul focusses its attention not only on itself, but that which Ficino had described in the letter to Pellegrino, namely, the soul's pre-existence, the soul can not only bring forth its knowledge of its original state, but it can also return to its homeland and to God. This is, after all, our purpose. Though some people are better suited to the contemplative life, the ascent can be initiated by anyone and everyone, and any movement along this upward trajectory has positive spiritual benefit in some measure. The recognition that the divine realm is our place of origin allows the believer to more readily initiate and achieve this union with God because it has already been attained, by all men, at some earlier stage. Through contemplation of our true, divine nature, man is brought closer to God, if not into immediate, personal unity with Him, that is to say, he *returns to* the blessed life.

Though Ficino first began to develop and systematise Plato's theory of *mania* in the *De divino furore*, describing how the soul can be separated from body (*absractio*) and can begin ascent toward heavenly realm through a process of purification, the *Platonic Theology* further explained and systematised divine frenzy as both a form of spiritual awakening and as salvation — awakening the soul from error and ignorance (separating it from the 'realm of opinion') through purifications and religious ceremonies. This theory was further elaborated in his commentaries of Plato's *Ion*, *Phaedo*, *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium*, his commentary of Plotinus' *Enneads*, and many of his letters. While the concept of divine frenzy certainly had currency in the intellectual circles of late-fifteenth century Florence, the way in which Ficino was thinking about this idea — its precise formulation and function — was far more systematic than that of his contemporaries.<sup>93</sup> Directing the reader to the specific 'memory' to be recalled and the innate reality that it

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<sup>93</sup> Divine frenzy features in the thought and writings of Cristoforo Landino (*Commentary of Dante*), Francesco Cattani da Diacceto (in his discussions of melancholy genius and frenzy in the *De Pulchro* and the *De Amore*), Lorenzo de' Medici (who indirectly refers to it in his discussion of love in his *Commento*), Angelo Poliziano (*Liber Miscellaneorum*), and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (*Oration on the Dignity of Man*). On Diacceto, see chapter six. On Landino, see Simone Fellina, "Cristoforo Landino e Marsilio Ficino sull'Origine dell'Anima," *Rinascimento* 50 (2010): 279–294.

unveils, Ficino's vivid description was the catalyst from which to begin the contemplative journey.

Reflective of his initial reading of the *Phaedrus*, Ficino's letter to Pellegrino represents the earliest formation of these ideas, being the first written evidence of both pre-existence and of ecstatic union in his extant writings.<sup>94</sup> While the later books of his published letters follow a more or less chronological sequence, the first two books are more deliberate in their construction.<sup>95</sup> The precise curation of his correspondence is by no means insignificant: his letter on divine frenzy is the seventh of the first book, and its primacy amongst the collection corresponds to its prominence in his thought. That "many of his letters, and the declamations included among them, are in fact invitations to the contemplative life" has long been noted.<sup>96</sup> This letter, and indeed, the many works like it that emerged much later in his career, offered a prompt toward a new contemplative ideal for personal union with God and spiritual renewal, based on the pre-existence of the soul.

Ficino's texts, much like the preacher's discourse, are reflections of the anxieties and interests not just of the author, but of his socio-cultural context. Just as the sermons preached responded to the growing concern for the fate of each and all souls, so too did Ficino. His invitations to contemplation reflect more than just his belief in the superiority

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<sup>94</sup> Though the letter is dated 1<sup>st</sup> December 1457 by Ficino himself, doubt about its precise dating has persisted. Wouter Hanegraaff dates the letter to 1462, arguing that Ficino's discussion around Hermes Trismegistus is "more than just name-dropping," and instead suggests a reading of the *Corpus Hermeticum* I, 6–8, which was not yet available to Ficino in 1457. Hanegraaff also draws on Raymond Marcel's observation that the date 1457 does not appear on all of the manuscripts; Marcel proposed that the copyist miswrote MCCCCLVII as MCCCCLXII. See Hanegraaff, "The Platonic Frenzies in Marsilio Ficino," 557–558, n.20. Note, however, the editors of the letter collection have addressed this very issue: "At the time of this letter Ficino was familiar only with the *Asclepius* of Hermes Trismegistus, and other fragments. . . . The writings known as *Corpus Hermeticum*, including the *Pimander*, were found later and were given to Ficino to translate in 1462. *Asclepius*, 34–35 describes the dependence of the world on forms invigorated by God. *Pimander*, I, 6–8 expresses that dependence in terms of light." The editors do not question the date given, see Valery Rees, Adrian Bertoluzzi and Arthur Farndell, "Introduction," in *Letters*, 1:176, n.6. The dating is also confirmed in Sebastiano Gentile's critical edition of the letters, see Sebastiano Gentile, *Lettere: Epistolarum Familiarum*, 2 vols. (Florence: Leo S. Olschki Editore, 1990–2010), 1:28. Further, Giuliano Tantarli, who has worked closely with Ficino's vernacular works, and who has identified parallels between this letter and his vernacular *De Dio et anima* (1<sup>st</sup> December 1457), also maintains the date given by Ficino. See Giuliano Tantarli, "Marsilio Ficino e il Volgare," in *Marsilio Ficino: Fonti, Testi, Fortuna: Atti del Convegno Internazionale (Firenze, 1–3 Ottobre, 1999)* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2006), 183–213, at 187–188. Regarding Ficino's reading of the *Phaedrus*, note that the first chapter of Ficino's *De Voluptate* (29<sup>th</sup> or 30<sup>th</sup> December 1457) also speaks of the heavenly origins of the soul and the Phaedran charioteer. Though Ficino may not have read the text in Greek, it is likely that he relied on Leonardo Bruni's translation of 1424.

<sup>95</sup> As noted by Valerie Rees, editor of the translated collection. Valerie Rees, "The Divinity of Man — Marsilio Ficino's Vision for a Happier Life" (lecture, Temenos Academy, London, 25 February 2019).

<sup>96</sup> Kristeller, *Studies in Renaissance Thought and Letters*, 4:209.

of the contemplative life — they mirror the desires of the reader, and arguably, a much wider audience, to partake in contemplative practice. By this same logic, we can argue that the concerns about the immortality, powers, perfection, and salvation of the soul show that the audience was already contemplating the soul to some degree, and were eager to continue their spiritual ascent toward unity with God.

That the teachings of the *prisci*, the two Testaments, and the clear doctrine of the ‘first faithful custodians of the evangelical revelation,’ that is, those Fathers of the Church who had often resorted to common Platonic sources, namely Origen and Augustine, had all, in some measure, accorded on this precise point was for Ficino a ‘revelation.’<sup>97</sup> Indeed, the temporal proximity of the *prisci* and of the early Fathers (who had either shown support, or no obvious opposition to the doctrine) to one another, and to the Apostles and Christ himself, was further confirmation that these were congruent and continuous moments of revelation. For Ficino, ‘revelatory’ knowledge such as this held such an essential place in his view of religion, and therefore in his idealised Christianity — this symbolised, in a way, the kind of prophetic knowledge that he hoped would again occupy a central position in the way that religion was understood and practiced in his own day. As Amos Edelheit demonstrated, Ficino’s theology emphasised the need for prophecies and miracles to return to Christianity.<sup>98</sup> For Ficino, not only was the ancient theology itself a form of prophetic knowledge, the notion of divine frenzy which the *prisci* had elaborated was a means through which prophetic knowledge could be attained, and the moments of abstraction and union which this frenzy brought about were considered by Ficino to be miracles.<sup>99</sup> These divine truths had been revealed to the ancients by God, and had, until the sixth century, been part of that purer form of Christianity. It was precisely this type of Christianity that Ficino believed we should revere, and certainly, aim to return to. Indeed, for “it is obvious how perfectly the soul accords with things celestial, how close is its

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<sup>97</sup> “... la religione personale del Ficino identificava proprio nella profezia e nel miracolo il segno della verità cristiana, confermata da eventi soprannaturali, e la certezza di un diretto intervento divino sempre operante nell’armonia universale e nella mente degli uomini. Era dunque, una ‘rivelazione’ che poteva comprendere in sé sia gli insegnamenti dei *prisci*, sia la testimonianza dei due Testamenti, sia la limpida dottrina dei primi fedeli custodi della rivelazione evangelica, quei Padri della Chiesa, da Origene ad Agostino, che, del resto, erano spesso ricorsi alle comuni fonti platoniche.” Cesare Vasoli, “Marsilio Ficino e la sua *Renovatio*,” in *Marsilio Ficino: Fonti, Testi, Fortuna. Atti del Convegno Internazionale (Firenze, 1–3 Ottobre 1999)*, eds. Sebastiano Gentile and Stéphane Toussaint (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2006), 19.

<sup>98</sup> Edelheit, *The Evolution of Humanist Theology*, 39.

<sup>99</sup> See *PT* 13.5 and n.73 above.

kinship with God,” and therefore, “as often as it returns to itself, it becomes a participant in the celestial mysteries and in providence divine.”<sup>100</sup>

As Ficino understood it, the aim of religion was the immortality of the soul, thus the philosophical arguments that supported the immortality of individual souls provided a philosophical basis for religious inspiration. Pre-existence, by creating a footing grounded in reason and logic, provided a more secure philosophical base for the immortality and divinity of human souls. But pre-existence had a greater significance in Ficino’s thought; for him, religious belief was infused in the soul during its antenatal existence — when it first experienced the love of God — thus its desire to return to God had stemmed from its pre-natal communion with the divine. Indeed, for Ficino, the inclination of the soul was not unidirectional; the soul did not merely strive to ascend toward the divine, it also had a natural inclination toward earthly things — a yearning for and tendency toward bodies.<sup>101</sup> Being at the heart of his notion of immortality and of religion, pre-existence was for Ficino the key to religious, theological and spiritual renewal.

For Ficino, whether one is able to attain those brief, ecstatic moments of unity, or else some alteration to the inner consciousness, the believer, when returned to their ordinary state is permanently changed for the better: we are drawn closer to God and are united to his will, we live more piously and turn away from sin, we become better Christians and better citizens. Understanding the heavenly origin of the soul in this light, we see that it is a far more complex matter than simply being the basis of metaphysical speculation, rather, through inner conversion and contemplation comes spiritual renewal. While immortality served as religious inspiration, pre-existence too had a practical function, with real implications for the present life, and for the soul’s ascent both momentarily here on earth, and permanently after the death of the body.

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<sup>100</sup> *PT* 13.2.38. Ficino, *Platonic Theology*, 4:168–169.

<sup>101</sup> Here one can see the influence of Plotinus, Iamblichus, and Priscianus, for whom the idea of ‘inclination’ was central. See for example, Plotinus, *Enneads*, III.6.5, IV.8 and VI.4; Iamblichus, *De anima*, 377.13–382.13 and *De Mysteriis*, I.7.21, 5–7; Priscianus, *On Theophrastus on Sense-Perception*, 1.17, 26.16, 29.9.

### 2.3 Conclusion

Through the lens of *renovatio* and *conversio* this chapter set out to explore the changing religious feeling in Ficino's Florence, and to analyse the context in which his theology was situated. The concerns expressed by preachers and public alike revealed collective anxieties about the individual soul; filtering down to even the lowest levels of society, spiritual perfection became the objective of the common man. In line with the ethos of the period, Ficino too expressed the need for religious reform, indeed, this was the premise of his *De Christiana religione*. But for Ficino, the self-professed 'doctor of souls,' the time had come for renewal and conversion of a different sort — a new kind of spiritual healing. Intricately linked to the cultural interplay between the active and contemplative ideals, and the *modus vivendi* of adapting doctrine to deal with contemporary societal concerns, a new idea of what it meant to 'make new' that which had previously been revered began to emerge. Though the advent of Christianity had heralded the demise of pre-existence, for Ficino, the links between the Christian and Platonic traditions were clear, and the doctrine, as he understood it, had unique value for the Christian believer. Through his reading of Platonic and Neoplatonic sources, Ficino developed a new understanding of the nature and origins of the soul, and of the possibilities created by turning one's attention toward a deeply interior focus: recollecting the memory of one's divine origins and antenatal existence in the heavens. This prompted him to restore the teachings of the *prisci theologi*, incorporating them into conventional religious practice, and transforming that which had long been deemed ruinous to the Christian faith into that which could renew and fortify it.

Throughout this chapter I have shown how Ficino's theology of the soul was both shaped by and contributed to this changing religious culture; understanding the reciprocal dynamic that characterised the religious life of the Quattrocento does, however, seem to support the possibility of wider societal concerns about or engagement with ideas of pre-existence as a contemplative ideal, and offers new perspective about the contemplative needs, ambitions, and practices of lay believers. By linking the process of inner conversion — the conscious turning of the intellect toward the contemplation of one's own nature — and its goal of mystical union, to the belief in a pre-mortal soul, I have demonstrated a clear functional role of the doctrine within Ficino's theological and religious thinking, and thus within his broader programme of spiritual renewal. This not only nuances our

understanding of Ficino's approach to conversion, but in a larger sense, helps to expand scholarly understandings of early modern conceptions of conversion and renewal, and likewise, Ficino's influence upon them. Furthermore, this study enriches our understanding of how newly recovered strands of Neoplatonic thought were being incorporated into an existing Christian framework, both by Ficino, and by those around him.

Building upon earlier scholarship which points to Ficino's attraction to heterodox teachings, the arguments presented in this chapter argue in favour of a reappraisal of Ficino's understanding of the origins of the soul, the nature of its immortality, and of religion itself. With regard to the first of these especially, we are able to paint a more detailed picture about other aspects of Ficinian theology and philosophy, including Ficino's understanding of the vehicles of the soul. Aligning his theology with the individual contemplative practice promoted throughout his writings in this way, I have shown that Ficino had in mind to substantially impact the religious and spiritual life of his city. I have also demonstrated that Ficino's systemisation of these ideas — about pre-existence, divine frenzy and mystical or ecstatic union, and about conversion and renewal — truly sets him apart from his contemporaries. From this viewpoint, we are led to a new appreciation of how Ficino envisioned himself, and how he understood his personal responsibility as a 'doctor of souls.' This sense of duty will begin to take on heightened significance in the following chapter, which situates the idea of pre-existence within the intellectual sphere of the late fifteenth century.

Ficino believed that souls, before entering earthly bodies, lived in the heavens in the contemplation of truth. It was through a weakening of their commitment to this fundamental activity that souls fell from their pristine condition and descended into bodies, and it was therefore through contemplation of its previous life that the soul could return to its heavenly home. That these ideas were present from his earliest writings, and continued to manifest throughout his career, and certainly, well into his ministry, speaks to their centrality in his thought, and indeed, speaks to his perceived mission in the city of Florence. Though the assumption about pre-existence was often implicit in his writings, this chapter has argued that the idea nevertheless held primacy of place in his understanding of the soul and its relationship to the divine. Effectively re-situating the place that pre-existence occupied within the religious context of Quattrocento Florence,

and more importantly, within Ficino's theological and philosophical thinking, this chapter changes the way that we understand Ficino as a religious thinker.

In the following chapter, I will pursue Ficino's novel approach to the pre-existence of the soul further, by situating the doctrine within the intellectual environment of the late fifteenth century. Examining the various contexts in which pre-existence resurfaced and the reception of the doctrine by lay intellectuals, including those with whom Ficino was acquainted, I will demonstrate the significance of Ficino's contributions to the philosophical, theological, and religious life of Renaissance Florence.

### Chapter Three: Pushing the Boundaries of Belief: Contemporary Responses to the Reimagined Soul

Though there is arguably evidence which would seem to support the heavenly origin of souls in both the Old and New Testaments, the belief has primarily survived in the West through later Platonic and Patristic exposition. Certainly, the primary means through which the positive doctrine of pre-existence was transmitted into medieval Western culture was through the Neoplatonic tradition, the writings of the Alexandrian Church Father Origen, and those of the Roman philosopher Boethius.<sup>1</sup> Despite widespread efforts to reconcile and incorporate new streams of thought, an examination of the fate of these authors in Florence in the second half of the fifteenth century, reveals an unfavourable, and even hostile, reception of ancient teachings on the origins of the soul. Reflecting on the question of where theology is located, this chapter will reconstruct the various contexts in which the doctrine of pre-existence appeared and will analyse the various local responses to it. I begin with an investigation of the uses and interpretation of Boethius' *Consolatio philosophiae* and its subsequent commentaries within the Florentine grammar schools. I will then explore the polemical warfare initiated at the Council of Florence in 1439 that continued to rage for some decades, and the impact this and the Council itself had on the intellectual culture of the second half of the fifteenth century. Finally, I will unpack the interpretation and use of Origen's vast body of texts, by examining the responses to his teachings on pre-existence by lay and clerical audiences. Here I call chiefly upon the voices of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola in his *De Salvate Origenis Disputatio*, and Matteo Palmieri in his *Città di Vita*. I will then assess contemporary responses to the latter text, including the commentary written by Leonardo Dati.

Situating the doctrine of pre-existence within the intellectual landscape of late Quattrocento Florence, the purpose of this chapter is to highlight the stark contrasts between Ficino's own and other local theologies, and thereby eliminate any ambiguity about the novelty and boldness of Ficino's proposition. I will argue that Ficino was

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<sup>1</sup> See Lodi Nauta, "The Preexistence of the Soul in Medieval Thought," *Recherches de Théologie Ancienne et Médiévale* 63 (1996): 93–135; Daniel J. Nodds, "Origen of Alexandria Among the Renaissance Humanists and their Twentieth Century Historians," in *Nova Doctrina Vetusque: Essays on Early Christianity in Honor of Fredric W. Schlatter, S. J.*, eds. Douglas Kries and Catherin Brown Tkacz (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc., 1990), 51–64.

abundantly aware that the pre-existence of souls had been condemned by successive Church councils, by demonstrating that the ruling had been reinforced by several of his contemporaries, especially since the 1440s, and significantly, by members of his own circle. Surveying synchronous ideas about the soul — its origins, immortality, and relationship to the body — I will show that Ficino’s unique reformulation of Platonic ideas did not reflect the tenor of contemporary debate, and on this basis, I will argue that his contributions to the religious and philosophical cultures of the late fifteenth century are therefore exceptional. Having shown the extent to which Ficino’s theology pushed the boundaries of acceptable belief, I will demonstrate that Ficino’s theology was far more radical in its aims than other local theologies which emerged in the early-fifteenth century.

### **3.1 Boethius’ *Consolatio Philosophiae* in Florence after 1450**

Written around 523, Boethius’ *Consolatio philosophiae* (hereafter *Consolation*) is situated historically some decades before the Origenist controversy. Dealing with the problem of theodicy (how evil can exist in a world governed by God), and how happiness may still be achieved, while also reflecting on the nature of happiness and God, the text is a conversation between Boethius and Lady Philosophy, where Platonic philosophy, and not Christianity, offers consolation for these deeply spiritual concerns. With pre-existence operating as the spiritual trope that achieves said consolation, the Boethian text offered a powerful appeal to the emotions, providing a perspective “in which suffering can recede to its proper dimensions,” and from which the human spirit may be spurred to positive action “kindled by actual memory rather than a more nebulous hope.”<sup>2</sup> Given its advocacy of a soon-to-be heterodox ideal, determining how the *Consolation* and its commentaries were read and received in late-fifteenth century Florence is fundamental in demonstrating that these texts were not used as a basis for speculation, and that the idea of pre-existence within them was never a topic of classroom debate.

Recent studies of the Latin *Consolation* in Italy show that it was read primarily as a grammatical schoolbook in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries; Robert Black notes that “although, or perhaps because, it was a true school favourite, Boethius seems to have

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<sup>2</sup> Givens, *When the Soul Had Wings*, 126.

been relatively little read at any other point in the formal hierarchy of academic learning.”<sup>3</sup> Understanding the precise nature of its use in the grammar schools is thus paramount. Black’s study of the extant Florentine manuscript glosses from the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries shows that while the text enjoyed great popularity in the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, there was a distinct shift away from the text in the second half of the fifteenth century. He argues that by the late medieval period, the text was no longer seen as the “embodiment of profound philosophical, scientific, metaphysical and theological ideas,” and served rather as a “useful anthology for verse and prose.”<sup>4</sup> Virtually none of the annotations of these manuscripts demonstrate a comprehensive engagement with the text’s philosophical, theological, or metaphysical content. Indeed, aside from a singular annotation that reads “*Nota quod ista est opinio Platonis qui dicit quod deus creat animas in celis et postea mittit deorsum per umbras et non est verum,*” no material evidence remains to suggest that students had engaged with the notion of pre-existence.<sup>5</sup> Though its precise provenance is unknown (an early fifteenth century manuscript, likely from northern Italy), the codex is reflective of contemporary attitudes toward this metaphysical and theological aspect presented in the Boethian text: pre-existence is the opinion of Plato and it is not true.

Moreover, though the trecento commentaries and translations of the *Consolation* had a lasting impact in the Quattrocento, material evidence shows that readers did not engage with the philosophical clarifications of Boethius’ Platonism.<sup>6</sup> Like Boethian scholars

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<sup>3</sup> 37 manuscripts have been identified in Florentine libraries, 12 of which are signed as schoolbooks. Robert Black, “Boethius at School in Medieval and Renaissance Italy: Manuscript Glosses to the *Consolation of Philosophy*,” in *Talking to the Text: Marginalia from Papyri to Print: Proceedings of a Conference held at Erice, 26 September – 3 October 1998, as the 12th Course of International School for the Study of Written Records* (Messina: Centro Interdipartimentale di Studi Umanistici, 2002), 267. See also Robert Black and Gabriella Pomaro, *Boethius’s Consolation of Philosophy in Italian Medieval and Renaissance Education* (Florence: Sismel Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> Black, “Boethius at School,” 268.

<sup>5</sup> Bodleian Library MS Canon Class Lat. 138, 21r, see *ibid.*, 246, n.2.

<sup>6</sup> The three most influential commentators of the *Consolation* were Remigius of Auxerre, William of Conches, and Nicholas Trevet. In Florence there is no full manuscript of Remigius and only one version of William of Conches, however, the manuscript does not actually contain the text of the *Consolation*, and appears to be a French production of the late thirteenth century, with no sign of Italian use. Though the influence of these commentaries has been noted in Italian schools even up to the early fifteenth century (a small number of manuscripts reveal extractions from their glosses), it was not felt as strongly as that of Trevet’s commentary, and for this reason, I have excluded them from my analysis. See *ibid.*, 231–235. For a detailed study of the treatment of Boethian Platonism in the commentary tradition, particularly on the issues of World Soul, the pre-existence of human soul, and knowledge as recollection, see Lodi Nauta, “‘Magis sit Platonius quam Aristotelicus’: Interpretations of Boethius’s Platonism in the *Consolatio Philosophiae* from the Twelfth to the Seventeenth Century,” in *The Platonic Tradition in the Middle Ages*.

before him, especially William of Conches, the Aristotelian scholastic, Nicholas Trevet, was tasked with justifying the Platonic content of the *Consolation* that borrowed from the *Timaeus*, while being careful not to reject Plato (so highly esteemed by Origen and Augustine), nor the ideas of popular authors like Macrobius, Calcidius and Martianus Capella.<sup>7</sup> His *Expositio super Boecio* (c.1300), the most widely read commentary in the Middle Ages, thus aimed “to anchor Platonic ideas to Christian tenets ... and assume that the truths contained in Plato had to be acceptable to Christians,” albeit concealed by a philosophical veil.<sup>8</sup> When confronted with pre-existence, Trevet explained that Boethius’s interpretation of what Plato *seems* to have said was within the limits of orthodoxy, and that readers should understand that, thinking as a Catholic, he had meant that souls descended into rationality, rather than bodies.<sup>9</sup> Dealing with the fine-material vehicles that accompany souls on their descent (and later reascent), Trevet explained that the ‘light chariots’ described by Boethius signified the soul’s immortal power, “by means of which, when the body has been dissolved, the soul flies out from it.”<sup>10</sup> Alberto della Piagentina’s vernacular translation of 1322 (*Della filosofica consolazione* or *Il Boezio*) was the most popular Italian translation of the *Consolation*, renowned amongst the non-Latinate lay readership. His clarifications of philosophical detail were based upon Trevet’s commentary: he too claimed that souls, created by God and made subservient to reason, are enclosed in human bodies and then released, and his approach to the ‘light chariots’ was closely aligned with Trevet’s.<sup>11</sup> The exegetical efforts of these authors thus worked to reinforce the classification of Plato as a pseudo-Christian thinker, by offering a ‘reasonable understanding’ of his Platonic terminology using the philosophical vocabulary of the late Middle Ages, which in turn rendered the controversial aspects of Plato’s ‘fabulous narratives’ acceptable to the Christian reader. Categorising Plato’s thought as mere fable appears to be the only way that medieval commentators could

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*A Doxographic Approach*, eds. Stephen Gersh and Maarten J. F. M. Hoenen (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2002), 165–204.

<sup>7</sup> The theory of reminiscence (3m11.9–16); the status of prime matter (3m9.5); the World Soul (3m9.13–17); and the pre-existence of souls, their sowing in the heavens and their descent through the heavenly spheres into an earthly body (3m9.19–20; 3m6.5). Dario Brancato, “Readers and Interpreters of the *Consolatio* in Italy, 1300–1550,” in *A Companion to Boethius in the Middle Ages*, eds. Noel Harold Kaylor Jr. and Philip Edward Phillips (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012), 365.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 368; Nauta, “Interpretations of Boethius’s Platonism,” 185–186.

<sup>10</sup> Brancato, “The *Consolatio* in Italy,” 368; Nauta, “Interpretations of Boethius’s Platonism,” 186–187, on knowledge as recollection, see 187–188.

<sup>11</sup> Brancato, “The *Consolatio* in Italy,” 368–369, on late-fourteenth and early fifteenth century responses, see 372–377; Nauta, “Interpretations of Boethius’s Platonism,” 168.

rescue the doctrine from condemnation and uphold both his and Boethius' reputations, for its literal sense was widely acknowledged as contrary to the Christian faith.<sup>12</sup> But for all their efforts, the evidence shows that Italian students, who made the most use of Trevet's commentary in the earlier fifteenth century, still did not engage with the text in this way. Rather, their use of his commentary was entirely consistent with the manner in which the original text was used in the classroom, as outlined above.<sup>13</sup>

What we can gather from all this is that while Florentines encountered this idea on occasion, they believed that it was not to be taken as true, acknowledging that it was against the teaching of the Church to propose a whole system of man predicated on an erroneous, pagan belief. Boethius was neither taught as nor considered a metaphysical, theological, or philosophical authority in Florence in the later fifteenth century, and certainly not at the grammar school level. By and large, the evidence suggests that this aspect of his work was ignored by the primary audience of the original text; we would simply have more evidence if the opposite were true. Perhaps some students did question this aspect on occasion, before being guided away from it in the classroom (as the Bodleian manuscript seems to suggest), or perhaps, and this seems more likely, they did not need to be, as the Church had clearly delineated for some centuries the orthodox account of the creation of souls, the fact of which was well understood. Moreover, though paling in comparison to the circulation of the *Consolation* itself, the commentaries of the work certainly enjoyed some circulation in Florence. The key difference between the use of the original text in the grammar schools, and the use of its commentaries at some later stage, is that the commentators confronted these issues within a Christian framework; they found ways to mitigate the doctrine of pre-existence and *reminiscentia*, or else outright rejected it, discouraging readers from these teachings. From these responses to the Boethian ideas of the soul, it seems that not only were these texts never used in an educational setting as tools for philosophical inquiry, but their primary use in this regard was as a deterrent from the idea.

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<sup>12</sup> By the late Middle Ages, several commentators had already flatly condemned or else were highly critical of Boethius' Platonism, and/or rejected any attempt at a reconciliation between Christianity and Platonism. See Nauta, "Interpretations of Boethius," 165–204.

<sup>13</sup> See Black, "Boethius at School," 235–245.

It was not until the late fifteenth century that a different reading practice emerged, and unsurprisingly, it corresponds to members of Ficino's circle, namely, Lorenzo de' Medici and Francesco Cattani da Diacceto.<sup>14</sup> As Ficino's copy of the *Consolation* contained little to no annotations, scholars have concluded that his primary concern with the text was to extract Platonic content, with a particular interest in epistemological and metaphysical issues, and, structurally speaking, the intertwining of poetry and prose.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, believing that Ficino's flirtations with pre-existence in the *Platonic Theology* were merely playful poetics, scholars have distanced him and his disciples from this aspect of the *Consolation*, viewing their expositions of Book III, metre 9, 21 simply as an interest in metaphysical speculation.<sup>16</sup> I would argue that their engagement with pre-existence is not merely the fruit of 'Florentine Platonism,' because there were certainly some amongst the Florentine Platonists who did *not* believe this doctrine to be true, and certainly, argued against it publicly, as we shall see. Moreover, the weight of the evidence to be presented in the following section will show that this was not simply the stuff of playful inquiry.

### **3.2 Origen, Plato and the Council of Florence: Pre-Existence in the late Quattrocento**

Despite the earlier condemnation of Origen, the Alexandrian Father made a resurgence in the fifteenth century. The efforts of Niccolò Niccoli and Ambrogio Traversari in recovering not just classical, but patristic texts, inaugurated a lengthy process of transcription and translation of those earliest sources of the Christian religion. Adding to his catalogue no less than fifty Greek patristic texts, and some eighteen Latin manuscripts containing various works of Origen, Niccoli's collection was a fount of a most ancient belief.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, the acquisition of these texts was to have significant bearing on the

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<sup>14</sup> See Brancato, "The *Consolatio* in Italy," 381–386.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 377–381. See Bibl. Ricc. 641 for Ficino's annotated copy of the *Consolation*.

<sup>16</sup> Though it does not appear in the printed edition, Diacceto's *Expositio* of these lines is found in a letter addressed to Bernardo Rucellai, which can be found in manuscript versions of his *Opera Omnia*, see for example Bibl. Laur. San Marco 328, fols. 117r–118v. See the discussion in chapter six. Also see Lorenzo's *Orazioni* in Lorenzo de' Medici, *Tutte le Opere*, ed. Gigi Cavalli, 3 vols. (Milan: Rizzoli Editore, 1958), 3:51–53.

<sup>17</sup> "These included four or five of Basil, five of Gregory Nazianzen, one each of Athanasius and Gregory of Nyssa, and, astoundingly, seventeen or eighteen Chrysostom. Niccoli owned also at least four Greek texts of Scripture, and numerous manuscripts of old Latin translations of Origen, Gregory Nazianzen, and other Greek Fathers." Charles Stinger, *Humanism and the Church Fathers: Ambrogio Traversari (1386–1439) and Christian Antiquity in the Italian Renaissance* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1977), 140–141. The list of Origen's works in the San Marco collection includes: *De convenientia decem praeceptorum cum decem plagis Aegypti* (1); *Homiliae in vetus testamentum* (10); *Homiliae super "In principio verbum"* (1); *Homiliae in Lucam* (2), *In Pauli Epistulam ad Romanos* (2); *Peri Archon* (2). In

intellectual and religious climate in Florence over the next several decades. Corresponding with the re-emergence of Platonic and Neoplatonic texts in the city, the tensions between philosophical and theological approaches to questions about the soul became more pronounced, but as we shall see, though many of the classical and patristic ideals made a significant and lasting impact on the contemporary religious and intellectual culture, pre-existence was not embraced by the intellectual field more broadly. Contrasting the history of formal decrees with local theology, or theology ‘on the ground’ (which can be linked directly to Ficino’s social, intellectual, and religious milieu), my purpose in this section is to show that at each of the *known* junctures where pre-existence briefly resurfaced, it was just as quickly subdued, owing to its undisputed unorthodoxy.

In 1423, when Niccoli left for Rome, he sent his library to the Camaldolese monastery of Santa Maria degli Angeli under Traversari’s care. Amongst the collection was a manuscript volume which contained the decrees of the first seven Ecumenical Councils and early synods, and which was to play a fundamental role in the Council of Florence some years later.<sup>18</sup> It is worth noting that in addition to the Fifth, both the Sixth and Seventh Ecumenical Councils confirmed the condemnation of Origen. With the manuscript being accessible both to the Camaldolese brothers and to those humanists who enjoyed Traversari’s company (a wide circle, to be sure), the content of the decrees would likely have become a talking point amongst Florentine intellectual circles. Indeed, if not in the 1420s, the case was certainly so by the time of the Council of Florence, where the ancient decrees had become well known to all the delegates, thanks especially to the contributions of Traversari, whose role there was indispensable. Moreover, Nicholas of Cusa owned a copy of this same volume (or one very similar), and thus by the mid-century the formal rulings against Origen, and against pre-existence, arguably became common knowledge once more.

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addition, the collection boasted a vast number of Platonic and Neoplatonic manuscripts, including at least 19 containing the various works of Plato, 5 of Plotinus, 6 of Proclus, 3 of Iamblichus, and 6 of Porphyry. See Berthold Ullman and Philip Stadter, *The Public Library of Renaissance Florence: Niccolò Niccoli, Cosimo de’ Medici and the Library of San Marco* (Padua: Editrice Antenore, 1972).

<sup>18</sup> Though not the original tome given to Traversari by Niccoli, Bibl. Laur. Conv. Soppr. 603 (almost certainly compiled by Traversari based on his reading of it) contains the Apostolic Canons, the decrees of the first seven Ecumenical Councils and other early synods, and numerous letters of the Fathers which dealt with the Councils or with ecclesiastical discipline. Greatly moved and excited by the collection, Traversari studied the activities of the councils closely; he was then motivated to study Eusebius’ *Ecclesiastical History* with even more intensity, substantially expanding his knowledge of Christian antiquity.

Though, even before the Council had reached Florence, Traversari, who was then General of the Camaldolese Order, had already begun to recirculate the earlier rejections of pre-existence, provoking the sentiment against the doctrine once more. Between 1434 and 1435, Traversari had obtained a copy of Aeneas of Gaza's *Theophrastus* and soon set about making a translation, completing the task by 1437. In the dedicatory letter addressed to Andreolo Giustiniani, Traversari revealed that he had decided to make the translation on account of the "beauty of its doctrine and dignity of the subject matter treated."<sup>19</sup> He stated:

The whole discourse is devoted to the Soul. His disputation treats this matter with great subtlety so that the learned, imbued with pagan philosophy, may gradually through reason attain the rudiments of Catholic faith and the sanctuary of piety. By true and rational arguments he refutes the empty, diverse and mutually conflicting opinions of the Philosophers and diligently and beautifully introduces the truth of Christian faith.<sup>20</sup>

Here Traversari praised the author for his rejection of Platonic and Neoplatonic beliefs about the soul. Also known as the *De animorum immortalitate*, the *Theophrastus* was a "philosophical dialogue about the pre-existence of the soul and the eternity of the world," in which Aeneas "attacked philosophy as a threat to Christian teaching."<sup>21</sup> As Charles L. Stinger points out, "Aeneas Gazeus, then, is not to be studied as a source for the philosophies of the soul of the esoteric *prisci theologi* ... but rather as a work of Christian apologetics, and as a spur to turn from philosophy to Christian truth and piety."<sup>22</sup> This is not an insignificant detail, as Traversari's opinion on this matter (and others) held serious weight, both at the Council of Florence, within Florentine intellectual circles, and for Ficino himself: Ficino had in fact copied Traversari's translation of the *Theophrastus* in 1456 (a crucial date in the development of Ficino's thought on the topic of pre-existence, as explored in chapter two).<sup>23</sup> Moreover, Ficino certainly had both direct and indirect

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<sup>19</sup> Stinger, *Humanism and the Church Fathers*, 78.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 78; For a concise summary of Aeneas' views on the soul, see Michael Champion, "Aeneas of Gaza on the Soul," *Australasian Society for Classical Studies: Selected Proceedings* 32 (2011): 1–11, especially 5–7.

<sup>21</sup> Champion, "Gaza on the Soul," 1.

<sup>22</sup> Stinger, *Humanism and the Church Fathers*, 78.

<sup>23</sup> Bibl. Ricc. 709, fol. 190r, "Hic liber est Marsilii Fecini Florentini et ab eo scriptus mense maii 1456." Ficino's transcription of the translation is written on fols. 134r–183r. See Stinger, n.182. "Traversari's translation was widely disseminated in the fifteenth century. ... It was first printed in 1513 (Venice), thus

dealings with Traversari, and the latter undeniably played a role in helping to shape Ficino's religious and intellectual identity, as well as his socio-intellectual connections in Florence.

Playing a central role in the course of contemporary religious and intellectual history, the ideas which emerged out of the Council of Florence went on to shape the very debates being held at the Florentine *Studio* for more than half a century. After brief intervals in Rome, and then Ferrara, an outbreak of plague forced the Seventeenth Ecumenical Council to move to Florence in 1439, bringing to the city a host of Greek theologians, philosophers, and intellectuals. Whilst waiting for the Council to reconvene, the delegates swiftly resumed a debate already begun in Greece on the question of the primacy of Plato or Aristotle. Initiated by the Byzantine Platonist, Georgius Gemistus, later known as Plethon (and hereafter Pletho), the debate had a significant impact on the Italian humanists, both in Rome and especially in Florence. It was Pletho's intention to create a new "philosophical-theological system that expanded in many fields of knowledge like Plato's *Republic* and *Laws*," and it was his reintroduction of the theological foundations of ancient Greece, which incorporated elements of Neoplatonism and Zoroastrianism, that had triggered the initial debate.<sup>24</sup> I would like to recall certain aspects of this episode to demonstrate that Plato's views on the origins of the soul became part of the dispute, though not even the champions of Plato could concede the doctrine's acceptability within an orthodox Christian framework.

Though the debates were held primarily amongst the Greek delegates, the publication of Pletho's *De differentiis Platonis et Aristotelis* in 1439 (based on a series of anti-Aristotelian lectures given in Greek at the *Studio*) inaugurated what was to become an all-out tract war that continued well after his death in 1454. In it, Pletho compared Aristotle and Plato on twenty specific issues — points 10 and 11 are especially pertinent here, being the history and immortality of the soul, respectively.<sup>25</sup> The treatise caused such a commotion amongst the Greeks that numerous tracts were written back and forth,

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coinciding with the Fifth Lateran Council. One of the few enactments of the Council was a condemnation of the position of the Paduan Averroists who believed that the immortality of the soul could not be proved by reason." *Ibid.*, 255.

<sup>24</sup> Nasia Lyckoura, "Scholarios, George," in *Encyclopedia of Renaissance Philosophy*, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-02848-4\\_831-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-02848-4_831-1).

<sup>25</sup> See Sears Jayne, "The Pletho Revival of Plato in Italy," in *Plato in Renaissance England* (Dordrecht: Springer Science + Business Media, 2013), 64.

becoming ever more personal.<sup>26</sup> The dynamic of the debate shifted with the publication of Giorgius Trapezuntius' (hereafter Trebizond) *Comparatio philosophorum Platonis et Aristotelis et de praestantia Aristotelis* in 1458. Perhaps the most notable and severe opponent of Pletho, Trebizond's was the first work written on the subject in Latin, thus introducing it to the Italian humanists. Comprised of three books, it was in the second that Trebizond attacked Plato's theology as inferior to that of Aristotle, and specifically with regard to pre-existence.<sup>27</sup> Citing Aristotle's *De anima*, Trebizond argued that the intellectual soul does not pre-exist, but, rather, having been 'born' it is "infused [into the body] *ex nihilo* by virtue of an act of Godly creation," and attacked Plato's idea that souls transmigrated into the bodies of irrational animals.<sup>28</sup> Trebizond's main opponent was Cardinal Basilio Bessarion, who entered the debate the following year with the publication of his *In Calumniatorem Platonis* (hereafter *ICP*), which highlighted the merits of Plato without rejecting Aristotle.<sup>29</sup> In his polemic, Bessarion asserted that Plato had a 'sublime' opinion about the soul, though he was forced to admit that some of his

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<sup>26</sup> Other key protagonists include Giorgios Scholarios (Gennadius II), Theodore Gaza, Michael Apostolius, Andronikos Kallistos, Demetrius Chalcondylas, John Argyropoulos, Matthew Kamariotes and Manuel of Corinth. For a succinct account see *Ibid.*, 63–70. Also see relevant entries in *Encyclopedia of Renaissance Philosophy*.

<sup>27</sup> *Comparatio* II. 12. George Karamanolis, "George Gemistos Plethon," in *Encyclopedia of Medieval Philosophy: Philosophy Between 500 and 1500*, ed. Henrik Lagerlund (Springer, 2011), [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4020-9729-4\\_183](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4020-9729-4_183); Sergei Mariev, "Bessarion, Cardinal," in *Encyclopedia of Renaissance Philosophy*, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-02848-4\\_25-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-02848-4_25-1); Jayne, "The Pletho Revival," 65.

<sup>28</sup> *Comparatio* II. 16.11–13. "Hence, he is obviously calling the intellectual soul here an intellect, which, he says, "is born." "Is born" certainly cannot be understood other than as infused or produced in the body. For if it is born in the body, it cannot have existed before the body. Next, since to be born, as it were, "something more excellent and superior" is said only about that which is impassible, incorruptible and more divine than other things, one cannot doubt that the intellectual soul issues not from the potency of matter, as does a vegetative or sensitive soul, but is born and infused in a certain more divine way that befits a more divine soul. For it is not created outside of the body, but is produced in a body that has already been prepared by the vegetative and sensitive soul. Hence, to the degree that form is more divine than matter, act more divine than potency, and the sensitive soul more divine than the vegetative soul, to the same degree the intellectual soul is more divine than the sensitive soul." See Sergei Mariev, "Bessarion against George of Trebizond on the Soul," in *Bessarion's Treasure: Editing, Translating and Interpreting Bessarion's Literary Heritage* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), 253–263, at 254.

<sup>29</sup> Though intended for a Latin audience, the work was drafted in Greek in 1459. Bessarion knew that in order to have any real impact against Trebizond, particularly for an Italian audience, it would have to be translated into Latin. The translation, however, did not appear until 1469. John Monfasani, "Bessarion Latinus," *Rinascimento* 21 (1981): 165. See also Eva Del Soldato, "*Illa Litteris Graecis Abdita*: Bessarion, Plato, and the Western World," in *Translatio Studiorum: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern Bearers of Intellectual History*, ed. Marco Sgarbi (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 109–22; Eva del Soldato, *Early Modern Aristotle: On the Making and Unmaking of Authority* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020), 29–31; John Monfasani, "A Tale of Two Books: Bessarion's *In Calumniatorem Platonis* and George of Trebizond's *Comparatio Philosophorum Platonis et Aristotelis*," *Renaissance Studies* 22, no. 1 (2008): 1–15.

ideas were unacceptable for a Christian.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, Bessarion acknowledged that certain aspects of Plato's philosophy were wholly incompatible with Christian doctrine, and though he argued that Platonic, rather than Aristotelian, philosophy demonstrated a closer affinity with Christian doctrine, he stressed that these beliefs could not be approved or shared by Christians;<sup>31</sup> Bessarion declared that pre-existence fell into this category.<sup>32</sup>

It is, moreover, significant that the eleventh session of the Council, held on the 4<sup>th</sup> of February 1442 declared that:

It also embraces, approves and accepts the fifth holy synod, the second of Constantinople, which was held in the time of our predecessor most blessed Vigilius and the emperor Justinian. In it the definition of the sacred council of Chalcedon about the two natures and the one person of Christ was renewed and many errors of Origen and his followers, especially about the penitence and liberation of demons and other condemned beings, were refuted and condemned.<sup>33</sup>

This latest reaffirmation of the condemnations against Origen served to bolster what had been declared by the Fourth Lateran Council, and recontextualised how pre-existence would be received in later-fifteenth century Florence. Having ruled firmly against the doctrine, it is unsurprising that we find little discussion around it. Indeed, with the exception of Pletho, both the Aristotelians and the Platonists acknowledged that this aspect of Plato could not be accepted, and the idea seems to have faded from the sources thereafter.

The debates at the Council did, however, have a significant impact on later debates in the universities, both in Florence and beyond, about the nature and immortality of the soul.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Against Trebizond, Bessarion pointed out that Plato had spoken of the bodies of wild beasts only in order to instil fear into the common people and to keep them away from vice — even if Plato had admitted this kind of transmigration, Bessarion asserted that it was not to be understood the way that Trebizond understood it (*ICP* II. VIII.23). Mariev, “Bessarion.”

<sup>31</sup> *ICP* II. III.3. *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *ICP* II. VIII.16. *Ibid.* On Bessarion, Plato, and the soul's pre-existence see James Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance*, 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 1990), 1:258.

<sup>33</sup> Pope Eugenius IV, “*Cantate Domino*,” in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, trans. and ed. Norman P. Tanner, 2 vols. (London: Sheed and Ward; Washington: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 1:580.

<sup>34</sup> For an account of these debates, see Paul Grendler, *The Universities of the Italian Renaissance* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 267–313; John Monfasani, “Aristotelians,

Certainly, the immense scrutiny that had been applied to the errors, differences, and concordances of the opinions of Plato and Aristotle in these critical years brought the religious and intellectual worlds to a head. Becoming something of a preoccupation in the fifteenth century, the immortality of the individual soul was a topic of perpetual debate amongst the natural philosophy departments in the Italian universities, which aimed to prove (or disprove) the doctrine's validity, and its precise parameters, through reasoned logic (in contrast to its status as a matter of faith). Italian students of philosophy argued about the precise nature of the intellective soul: did it exist independently and immaterially from the body, or was it dependent on the body and material in nature? Was it dependent on, or independent of sense experience? Or was it both? Did it die with the body or was it indeed immortal? How were they to reconcile the ideas of Aristotle, who was ambiguous on the matter, with those of his translators, Averroes and Alexander of Aphrodisias, who denied the immortality of human intellective souls?<sup>35</sup> Or with the Christian-Aristotelianism of Thomas Aquinas and John Duns Scotus, who argued for personal immortality, and who had such great influence in the northern universities? Given the prominence of medical studies in the Italian universities, the "natural philosophers had paid close attention to the body and sensation (sense experience) in the process of cognition," bringing nuanced perspective to their approach.<sup>36</sup> The natural philosophers thus saw their discipline as wholly separate from theology and its concerns, and ignored theological issues.<sup>37</sup>

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Platonists, and the Missing Ockhamists: Philosophical Liberty in Pre-Reformation Italy," *Renaissance Quarterly* 46, no. 2 (1993): 247–276. Also see the essays collected in *History of Theology III: The Renaissance*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell and ed. Giulio D'Onofrio (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1998).

<sup>35</sup> Averroes' notion of the 'unity of the agent intellect' "implied that there was only one rational soul for all mankind, thus ruling out individual immortality. According to Averroes, separate forms or substances continued to exist, after death, in the common active intellect of the human species; so immortality was possible, but only in a purely impersonal sense." Corrias, "Marsilio Ficino's Theory of the Vehicles of the Soul," 85. Conversely, Alexander of Aphrodisias held that "individual human intellects existed but died with the body." Grendler, *The Universities of the Italian Renaissance*, 283.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 282.

<sup>37</sup> Based on material evidence of university appointments from c.1370 until 1473, the University of Florence (which ordinarily employed around twenty to thirty professors), appears to have employed only a single friar at any one time. Despite the apparent decline of theology professors in the university's employ (as compared with other Italian cities), the presence of theologians, such as Antonino Pierozzi (1389–1459) and Bartolommeo Lapacci Rimbertyni (1402–1466), was still felt in the Florentine *Studio* in the fifteenth century. The theology faculty in Florence was constituted by nine *studia generalia* of the various religious orders: the Dominican *studium* at the convent of Santa Maria Novella, the *studium* of the Friars Minor of St Francis at Santa Croce, the Augustinian Hermit *studium* at Santo Spirito, the Carmelite *studium* at Santa Maria del Carmine, the Servite *studium* at Santissima Annunziata, and those smaller *studia* at San Marco, San Lorenzo, the episcopal palace, and the Humilitati convent at Ognissanti. In the late fifteenth century, Florence had 19 male convents within the city walls, and another 11 within a 5-mile radius of the city center. *Ibid.*, 359, 375.

However, the ‘freedom’ of discussion at the Italian institutions did not mean that the theological issues raised therein were ignored by religious authorities. On the 4<sup>th</sup> of May 1489, in response to the debates amongst the university circles, the bishop of Padua, Pietro Barozzi, together with the Franciscan Inquisitor, Martinus de Lendinara, issued a decree entitled ‘*Edictum contra disputantes de unitate intellectus*’ (Edict against disputants on the unity of the intellect), which was addressed to all the Paduan professors of philosophy and their students.<sup>38</sup> The decree formally prohibited the discussion of this topic outside of the university and threatened to excommunicate anyone who publicly professed an Averroist interpretation of Aristotle’s *De anima*. This edict makes clear that where heterodox arguments took place within the university, the religious authorities could and did intervene. Certainly, as John Monfasani notes, “from the fourteenth century on we have striking, albeit sporadic, evidence of the surveillance of philosophical activity in Italy by local bishops and inquisitions.”<sup>39</sup> We find no such parallel in Florence (or elsewhere in Italy) regarding discussion around pre-existence.<sup>40</sup> Nor have I been able to find evidence of written polemics which argue in favour of pre-existence.<sup>41</sup> Certainly, save for a single account by the Florentine apothecary, Matteo Palmieri (1406–1475), a contemporary of Ficino and Traversari, and who was present at the Council of Florence, pre-existence was only ever acknowledged as a fallacious and unacceptable teaching contrary to the Christian faith, that is to say, it was not ‘up for debate.’

Composed between 1455–1466, Matteo Palmieri’s vernacular poem, *Città di Vita*, began circulating in manuscript form in Florence soon after its completion. In Dantesque fashion, the text, divided into three books, and a total of one hundred chapters, recounts

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 283–284; Monfasani, “Aristotelians, Platonists, and the Missing Ockhamists,” 250.

<sup>39</sup> Monfasani, “Aristotelians, Platonists, and the Missing Ockhamists,” 251.

<sup>40</sup> Nor is there any record of censures issued by the Florentine faculty of theology. Indeed, in contrast to the operations of the northern universities, no such censures were issued by any of the Italian theological faculties before the Reformation. *Ibid.*, 252.

<sup>41</sup> This is unsurprising, given that pre-existence was opposed or rejected in both Averroist and Alexandrist Aristotelianism, and in Epicureanism, Avicennism and Thomism (*Summa Contra Gentiles* II.83–84). Nor did it find a home in the schools: forming the basis of theological study in the *scuole*, Lombard’s *Sentences* presented a systematic exposition of traditional and strictly orthodox doctrine of the Fathers and medieval Doctors of the Church, the dominant view presented therein of course being creationism: “But the Catholic Church teaches neither that souls were made simultaneously, nor from one another, but that they are infused into bodies which have been inseminated and formed through coition, and they are created at the moment of their infusion.” Book II, Distinction 18, Chapter 7.2. Peter Lombard, *The Sentences, Book II: On Creation*, trans. Giulio Silano (Toronto: The Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2008), 81. See also Marian Michèle Mulchahey, “*First the Bow is Bent in Study--*”: *Dominican Education Before 1350* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1998); Bert Roest, *A History of Franciscan Education (c. 1210–1517)* (Leiden: Brill, 2000).

a dream in which Palmieri's soul journeys to and from the heavens. The poem's content, however, undeniably takes inspiration from Origenist (and Platonic) ideas about the soul.<sup>42</sup> During its decade-long drafting process the manuscript underwent many changes, and it was clear from the comments made by the text's first reader, Leonardo Dati (1407–1472), that he anticipated controversy. Indeed, Dati, soon-to-be Bishop of Massa Marittima, advised Palmieri that he ought to amend some of the passages — these were almost certainly those which referred to the pre-mortal soul.<sup>43</sup> Though none of the extant manuscripts preserve the original, we know that Palmieri reviewed and re-wrote sections of the poem before it was completed, as Dati responded with praise for the version sent to him in early 1466 (however, copies of the original manuscript could very well have circulated at this time). That these revisions pertained to pre-existence is evidenced by prophylactic statements made in the ninth and tenth chapters, which clearly correspond to the theory of the soul outlined by the Cumaean Sybil in chapter five of the first book. The Sybil recounts that once all the angels had been united around God, but were divided into three groups after Lucifer rebelled against his Father: one third remained faithful to God, one third chose to follow Satan, and one third remained neutral, unable to decide. God granted human life to the latter, who were sent to Earth from the Elysian fields. Making ten stops along the way (seven in the planets, three in the elements), souls were finally made to cross the River Lethe, and lost all memory of their previous life. These souls were given three incarnations in which to make their ultimate choice between heaven and hell; the third and final death would lead to eternal damnation.

Sensing that readers may misinterpret these verses, Palmieri asks his guide for clarification:

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<sup>42</sup> For a lengthy exposition of the work, see Alessandra Mita Ferraro, "Palmieri Poeta Teologo," in *Matteo Palmieri: Una Biografia Intellettuale* (Genoa: Name Edizioni, 2005), 353–478. See also Fabrizio Crasta, "Gli Angeli Neutrali da Dante a Matteo Palmieri," *Lettere Italiane* 67, no. 1 (2015): 5–25; Richard J. Palermino, "Palmieri's Città di Vita: More Evidence of Renaissance Platonism," *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance* 44, no. 3 (1982): 601–604.

<sup>43</sup> A letter to Palmieri dated 21 August 1464 indicates that Dati had already read the manuscript, and had provided his commentary, which clarified the places where 'malicious' readers would have intentionally distorted and adulterated the meaning of certain passages. Four months later, a letter of 3 January 1465 was even more explicit: imploring his friend to carefully re-read his book, Dati asks that Palmieri amend his commentary, and to review the text in those most dubious, obscure, and difficult places. Once corrected, and illuminated by the commentary, Dati assured him that the book would no longer be able to be misinterpreted by the envious or the unlearned. Mita Ferraro, "Palmieri Poeta Teologo," 419–420.

The opinion that this figure puts forward invigorates new thought in my mind, and it seems to me too obscure among Christians. And if this seems to other people removed from the Christian faith, I would value their opinion almost nothing.<sup>44</sup> ... Please clarify to me whether this obscure doctrine is in line with what the Holy Church approves or whether the Church itself reckons that it should be blamed and rejected.<sup>45</sup>

Palmieri openly acknowledges that Christian readers would not approve of this view and shows that he was fully aware of the theological consensus. The opening tercets of chapter ten answer the anticipated charge, and clearly reiterate that “the opinion already said is not contrary to the Christian Church.”<sup>46</sup> As Alessandra Mita Ferraro has argued, these passages make it clear that Palmieri knew the risks he was taking in adopting an Origenist angelology which espoused a pre-mortal existence. Recalling biblical authority in support of his theories, (a move which likely dates back to Dati’s plea to review the text), Palmieri cites ‘the evangelist’ and the ‘sacred cards’ (by which he means St John in the *Apocalypse*), who spoke of a great dragon whose tail dragged a third of the stars from the sky, and hurled them toward the earth, and to Augustine, who had said that as many men will be sent to heaven as there were angels.<sup>47</sup> However, it is only with Dati’s elucidation that these brief references become clear.

In response to these same chapters, Dati’s commentary, which similarly predicts accusations of heresy, calls upon *auctoritates* of unquestionable orthodoxy to show that fundamental Christian thinkers had once expressed these same ideas, and certainly, that there was a basis for them in Scripture. In chapter five, Dati asserts that St Augustine and Peter Lombard had expressed the same idea proposed by Palmieri, and recalls arguments on the nature of free will to support a soul which, through its own fault, falls from its

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<sup>44</sup> “L’opinion questa anima figura / nuovo pensier rinnuova ad la mia mente / et parmi troppo tra christiani scura. // Et se questo paressi ad altra gente / rimossi fusson da christiana fede / stimerei lor parer quasi niente.” I.IX.41–42. Matteo Palmieri, *Libro del Poema Chiamato Città di Vita Composto da Matteo Palmieri Fiorentino, transcribed from the Laurentian MS XL 53 and Compared with the Magliabechiano II ii 41*, ed. Margaret Rooke, 2 vols. (Northampton, MA: Smith College, 1927–1928), 1:44.

<sup>45</sup> “Ma fammi chiaro questo oscuro decto / s’accordi ad quel che sancta chiesa canta / o non lo stimi reprobato et neglect.” I.IX.46. *Ibid.*; English translation in Alessandra Mita Ferraro, “Matteo Palmieri’s City of Life: The Original Idea of Three Opportunities for Salvation,” *International Journal of Literature and Arts* 2, no. 6 (2014): 239, n.44.

<sup>46</sup> “Capitolo decimo del primo libro nel quale capitolo sybilla mostra che l’opiniono già decta non è contraria ad la chiesa christiana.” I.X, Palmieri, *Città di Vita*, 1:46.

<sup>47</sup> See I.X.17–30. Palmieri, *Città di Vita*, 1:47–48; Mita Ferraro, “Palmieri Poeta Teologo,” 410–411.

pristine condition, calling on the testimony of St Paul's *Epistle to the Corinthians*, St Jerome, and Lombard's *Sentences*.<sup>48</sup> In his commentary of chapter ten, Dati then highlights the positive support of two Biblical passages: Revelation 12:4 and Deuteronomy 32:8.<sup>49</sup> Dati felt strongly that Palmieri was right in his claim that the authority of the Bible and of the two Church Fathers (Augustine and Gregory) agreed with Origen's view about the descent of souls from one third of the angelic choir.<sup>50</sup>

The poem continued to circulate throughout the late 1460s and early 1470s, however, Dati's commentary only appeared alongside it in 1473. It has been suggested that Palmieri's choice of Dati as reader and commentator was strategic, intended to lend an authoritative voice of the institutional Church, and thus give credence to the poem's doctrine.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, at the author's request, the *Città di Vita* was not published until after his death in 1475 — another strong indication that Palmieri knew his poem risked accusations of heresy.

Though no formal charge of heresy was ever issued, the contemporary responses to the text (rather than Matteo's person) are of great significance for demonstrating the collective awareness that pre-existence was against the teaching of the Church.<sup>52</sup> Recalling the judgments of Boccaccio in his commentary of the *Inferno*, and those of

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<sup>48</sup> Dati tried to corroborate the account given in Pseudo-Dionysius' *De Coelesti Hierarchia*, Lombard's *Sentences* (Book II. Distinction VI), Augustine's *City of God* (VII.XIV and XI.XXIII), St Paul's *Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (2.4), Gregory the Great's *Homily on the Third Sunday after Pentecost* (Homily 34 on the Hierarchy of the Angels), Plato, and Dante's *Commedia* I.III. He then tried to link this to the account of free will in other, unquestionably orthodox, sources: Augustine's *City of God* (XI.23 and XXII.1) and the *Enchiridion on Faith, Hope and Love* (9.29), Lombard's *Sentences* (Book II. Distinction 1. Chapter 5), Justin Martyr's *First Apology* (XLIII.2–7) and *Second Apology* (VII.5–6), and later, Virgil's *Aeneid* (VI.707). See Mita Ferraro, "Matteo Palmieri's City of Life," 234; Mita Ferraro, "Palmieri Poeta Teologo," 394–400, and see details on Dati's commentary in n.96, n.99–101, n.103.

<sup>49</sup> Revelation 12:4: "And his tail drew the third part of the stars of heaven, and did cast them to the earth: and the dragon stood before the woman which was ready to be delivered, for to devour her child as soon as it was born." Deuteronomy 32:8: "When the Most High gave the nations their inheritance, when he divided all mankind, he set up boundaries for the peoples according to the number of the sons of Israel." Note that the reference to Deuteronomy comes from Dati's reading of Gregory the Great's *Homily on the Third Sunday after Pentecost*, entitled 'The Angelic Choirs,' and not the *Homily on the Fourth Sunday after Pentecost*, as Mita Ferraro has mistakenly transcribed. Also note that she renders Dati's commentary (chapter 10, point 28) as "et sunt verba scripta in deuteronomio V," where the manuscript clearly refers to Deuteronomy II. Cfr. Bibl. Laur. Plut. 40.53, 53r. Also cfr. n.50 below.

<sup>50</sup> Mita Ferraro, "Palmieri Poeta Teologo," 411–412, n.123.

<sup>51</sup> The poem later met the approval of Fra Domenico da Corella, prior of Santa Maria Novella and Vicar General of the Dominican Order. *Ibid.*, 359, 440–441.

<sup>52</sup> Some agitation appears to have occurred around eight years after Palmieri's funeral, and accounts of his condemnation abounded thereafter. On the perpetuation of this error, see Mita Ferraro, "Palmieri Poeta Teologo.," Giuseppe Boffito, "L'Eresia di Matteo Palmieri 'Cittadin Fiorentino,'" *Giornale Storico della Letteratura Italiana* 37, no. 1 (1901):1–69.

Jerome against Origen in his *Letter to Avitus*, Cristoforo Landino's 1481 commentary on Dante's *Divina Commedia* reiterated the initial condemnation of Origen at the Fifth Ecumenical Council, demonstrating that the Catholic decrees and the theological implications of Origen's teaching were clearly known and understood.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, in the Proem, Landino dedicates a small paragraph to the celebration of the Florentines he considered 'excellent in eloquence'; citing the "invention in [Palmieri's] poem written in Tuscan verse in imitation of Dante," he declares that had "he/it not fallen into any heresy, he/it could live easily."<sup>54</sup> As Mita Ferraro rightly points out, the use of the third person singular here makes it unclear as to whether Landino refers to Palmieri's death as a result of divine punishment, or to the *Città di Vita* itself, which could have had an obstacle-free circulation, had it not been for certain aspects. Landino evidently believed Palmieri to be guilty of heresy, and the implication seems to me clear: while Palmieri himself, and his other works were looked upon favourably, his verses on the pre-existence of souls as neutral angels and metempsychosis were undoubtedly heretical in nature.<sup>55</sup> We should note the close relationship between Ficino and Landino, who had been Ficino's teacher and mentor, and whom Ficino had counted amongst his closest friends.

Florentine bookseller and biographer, Vespasiano da Bisticci, wrote in his *Vite di uomini illustri del secolo XV* that Palmieri's error was not intentional, for he was unlearned in sacred things, and reiterated that his desire to remain faithful to the Church was clear to everyone. Dedicating more than half of Palmieri's entry to the events related to the poem, Vespasiano acknowledged that it contained many fine passages, but that Palmieri had gone astray when writing on religion in ways that directly opposed the Christian faith. Vespasiano declared that once Palmieri had written his poem, he did not discuss it further,

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<sup>53</sup> See *Commentando Inferno*, 3. 71–111, Giovanni Boccaccio, *Tutte le opere di Giovanni Boccaccio*, eds. Giorgio Padoan and Vittore Branca, 10 vols. (Milan: Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 1964–1998), 6:167–168; Jerome, "Letter CXXIV to Avitus," *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 6:238–244. Cfr. Landino's commentary on *Inferno* III.1–12 (118–20) and (235–241); III.70–81 (1–106); III.82–99 (1–93); III.100–111 (1–46); IX.106–133 (147–151); X.10–21 (54–64); XXXIV.106–39 (10–15). Cristoforo Landino, *Comento Sopra la Comedia*, ed. Paolo Procaccioli, 4 vols. (Rome, Salerno Editrice: 2001), 1:376, 379, 391–400, 2:571, 580, 3:1028.

<sup>54</sup> "È di tale inventione nel suo poema scripto in versi toscani ad imitatione di Dante, che se non fussi caduto in alchuna heresia potea facilmente vivere." Landino, *Comento Sopra la Comedia*, 1:238.

<sup>55</sup> Mita Ferraro, "Palmieri Poeta Teologo," 427–428.

for if he had, he would not have made this mistake.<sup>56</sup> After Palmieri's death, Vespasiano recounts:

... they at once brought out the book, and showed it to certain learned theologians, with the intention that it should not be published if anything contrary to the Faith be found in it, and after having carefully examined it, they found but one error in the whole of the book, which showed that Matteo had no ill purpose, for, had he known of it, he would have rectified it. This book is now in the keeping of the proconsul of the Guild of Notaries and has never been published.<sup>57</sup>

The implication that the book had never been published on account of its heterodox content was clearly understood. Vespasiano's attempt to rescue Palmieri is therefore quite interesting. Firstly, we know that there was certainly dialogue around the work, and that Palmieri was aware of the errors and risk involved — Dati's correspondence and warning to Palmieri, and Palmieri's own pre-emptive statements are evidence enough of this. But there is other textual evidence, as will be shown below, to suggest that the content of the poem had, at the very least, become a talking point. Secondly, we cannot uphold the opinion that Palmieri was ill-informed on the matter; not only had he collated parts of Platonic, Pythagorean and Origenist theology, he had explored these ideas in relation to the theology of later Christian theologians and against Scripture, and he had carefully constructed his own unique account of the creation of souls. His error was not the shortcoming of an unlearned layman.

In Palmieri's funeral oration, Alamanno Rinuccini referred to negative perceptions of the text, though he implied that the poem had educational value and could be justified:

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<sup>56</sup> "Ora, avendo finita questa opera, nolla conferì con persona, che avendola conferita non faceva quello errore." Vespasiano da Bisticci, *Le Vite: Edizione Critica con Introduzione e Commento di Aulo Greco*, ed. Aulo Greco, 2 vols. (Florence: Istituto Nazionale di Studi sul Rinascimento, 1970–1976), 1:566.

<sup>57</sup> Vespasiano da Bisticci, *The Vespasiano Memoirs: Lives of Illustrious Men of the XVth Century*, trans. William George and Emily Waters (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 418. Cfr. "... subito apersono questo libro, et veduti questi errori ebbono, più uomini dotti in teologia, et mostrorono questo libro fine che se vi fussino cose contro alla fede il libro non si pubblicassi; veduto che non gl'ebbono questo libro diligente mente, vidono uno errore ch'era in tutto il libro, che certo si vede che la malitia non fu in lui, che se l'avessi saputo l'emendava, et conoscesi che non vi fu malitia, per l'essersi nell'ultimo rimesso alla Chiesa. Il libro per questo s'è stato al proconsolo, ch'è l'arte de' notai, e non s'è pubblicato." Vespasiano, *Le Vite*, 1:566–567.

Finally, daring to knock on the door of poetry as well, he composed this great book in the Florentine language and in tercets, which you see placed on his chest, entitled *Città di Vita*. In it he leads the soul at last, freed from the weight of the earthly and wandering body, through various and multiple places to its true homeland and to its city, in which it can enjoy eternal life. And if some reproach the work for having supported certain assumptions that are discordant with the Christian faith, conceding too much to poetry, they must remember that “Rightly, painters and poets were always allowed any audacity,” and that this does not mean that it is legitimate to conclude that they really think as they write, since much is said by them only to delight and teach.<sup>58</sup>

The public nature of the oration undoubtedly gave voice to the overarching belief that, in parts, the poem was contrary to the Christian faith, and is likewise reflective of the broader cultural attitude.

In 1484, Ficino’s long-time rival, Luigi Pulci, reintroduced the errors of Palmieri in his epic poem, *Il Morgante*, recalling Palmieri’s neutral angels and metempsychosis.<sup>59</sup> However, Pulci’s positive appraisal of Palmieri elsewhere would seem to indicate that the “ongoing, if discrete, conversation among learned circles about Palmieri’s sensational creation,” was focussed primarily “on the angels, the pre-existence of the soul, and human

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<sup>58</sup> “Da ultimo, osando bussare anche alle porte della poesia, compose in lingua fiorentina e in terzine questo grande libro, che voi vedete posto sul suo petto, intitolato *Città di vita*. In esso egli conduce infine l’anima, sciolta dal peso del corpo terreno e peregrinante attraverso vari e molteplici luoghi, alla sua vera patria ed alla sua città, nella quale possa fruire della vita sempiterna. E se taluni rimproverano all’opera di aver sostenuto, troppo concedendo alla poesia, certi assunti discordanti dalla verità della fede cristiana, essi debbono ricordarsi che «Giustamente a pittori ed a poeti / Qualunque audacia fu sempre permessa», e che non per questo è lecito concludere che essi pensino davvero così come scrivono, poiché molto e da loro detto solo per dilettere ed insegnare.” Rinuccini here cited Horace’s *Ars Poetica*, 10–11. Alamanno Rinuccini, *Letteratura Fiorentina del Quattrocento: Il Filtro degli Anni Sessanta*, trans. and ed. Mario Martelli (Florence: Le Lettere, 1996), 262–263. Note the correspondence between Rinuccini’s reference to ‘knocking at the door of poetry’ and Ficino’s allusion to the *Phaedrus* in his *De Vita Libri Tres*, where he states that “without madness one knocks at the doors of poetry in vain.” See chapter two, n.72.

<sup>59</sup> “Vanno per l’aire come uccel vagando / altre spezie di spiriti folletti, / che non furon fedel né rei già quando / fu stabilito il numer degli eletti. / Non so se ‘l mio Palmier qui venne errando, / che par di corpo in corpo ancor gli metti, / onde e’ punge la mente con mille agora / esser prima Eüforbio e poi Pittagora.” Canto XXIV.109. Luigi Pulci, *Morgante e Lettere*, ed. Domenico De Robertis (Florence: Sansoni Editore, 1962), 681. On the rivalry between Ficino and Pulci, see Christopher S. Celenza, “The Voices of Culture in Late Fifteenth-Century Florence,” in *The Intellectual World of the Italian Renaissance*, 288–295; Federica Signoriello “Pulci and Ficino: Rethinking the *Morgante* (Cantos XXIV–XXV),” *Rivista di Studi Italiani* 35 (2017): 80–138.

will,” rather than Palmieri himself.<sup>60</sup> The evidence is clear: there was certainly conversation, even if private, surrounding the content of Palmieri’s poem. But as I shall argue, not all of these conversations rejected the idea of pre-existence.

Lastly, some confusion has been caused by the discovery of an anonymous retraction that some scholars believe was made by Palmieri’s own hand, though this is not confirmed by the text itself, nor has the manuscript been definitively dated (it could be a product of the late-fifteenth or early-sixteenth century).<sup>61</sup> The poem, comprised of fifty-eight verses in rhyming tercets, is titled *Matheo Palmieri fiorentinosi si retracta da suoi errori*, and makes clear reference to those very same passages outlined above. Having imitated Plato’s doctrine, ‘Palmieri’ admits that error had arisen in his ‘blind’ mind.<sup>62</sup> Nearing death, Palmieri realised his mistake when God invited his heart to repent; he admitted that he gave scandal to the Christian people through what he had portrayed of Plato, and asked that forgiveness be given to the penitent.<sup>63</sup> “Let that of my book which is against the pure and holy church be erased and destroyed, and once clean, let this vessel remain in the temple.”<sup>64</sup> It was not right, he maintained, that the true and Catholic part of his poem had been ‘extinguished and divided’; the author thus made an appeal to amend the unorthodox parts, and to keep that which was in conformity with the Church.<sup>65</sup> Whether by Palmieri’s hand, or another’s, it is clear that someone felt it necessary to recant these ideas in order to save Palmieri’s reputation, which in itself represents how pre-existence was received by contemporary lay Christians.

There are, however, two notable exceptions, which arguably suggest a positive exchange around the notion of pre-existence. In 1475, Leonardo Benci composed the *Versi fatti a lalde di Matteo Palmieri per Lionardo Benci, dove mostra che Matteo si dolga*, a one-hundred verse poem which tried to defend the *Città di Vita*. In an imagined exchange,

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<sup>60</sup> Meredith Gill, *Angels and the Order of Heaven in Medieval and Renaissance Italy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 88.

<sup>61</sup> See Bibl. Laur. Conv. Soppr. 440.

<sup>62</sup> “Il nome di Platon tanto eccellente / mi fece imitator di sua doctrina, / onde error nacque in mia cecata mente.” Bibl. Laur. Conv. Soppr. 440, fol. 264r–v.

<sup>63</sup> “Conobbi l’error mio alla partita / dal terreno habitacol presso a morte, / quando al pentire Dio mio core invita. // Scandalo ho dato alla christiana gente, / per quel che da Platone io ho ritracto. / hor sia dato perdono al penitente.” *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> “Sia del mio libro cancellato et raso / quel ch’è contra la chiesa pura et sancta, / Et mondo resti al tempio questo vaso.” *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> “Ma non è iusto sia spenta et divisa / quella parte catholica et verace, / qual non merita d’esser già derisa.” “Et come la doctrina di Origene / dove ben dixè a leggier si concede, / ancor quel decto ho rectamente et bene // Sendo conforme alla sacrata fede, / absconder non si debbe da viventi, / però che al vero ogni intellecto cede.” *Ibid.*

Palmieri tells Benci that he had believed what his guide had told him about the soul, which, much to the shame of crude people, had opened him to fame and distinction. Palmieri then asked whether he had scrutinised the Scriptures, and trusted the Sybil in vain; the judgments of Benci are clear: for him, Palmieri was worthy of a ‘posthumous Apollonian coronation.’<sup>66</sup> Further, in an undated letter, commonly agreed by scholars to be amongst those written in 1473 (and which was collated in the first volume of his letters), Ficino referred to Palmieri as *poetae theologice*.<sup>67</sup> Though short, the letter reveals that Ficino held Palmieri in high esteem, naming him ‘a palm among the Muses.’ His use of the epithet ‘theological poet’ here demonstrates that Ficino had not only read the *Città di Vita*, but it had met his approval;<sup>68</sup> appearing to praise Palmieri for his theological opinions, we might then infer that Ficino approved of Palmieri’s account of pre-existence, even if not in all its particulars. Interestingly, and perhaps not insignificantly, 1473 was the same year that Ficino was ordained priest. Moreover, during the years in which the poem was composed, Ficino was simultaneously composing his *De divino furore* and *De*

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<sup>66</sup> “Ond’io incominciai: “Deh, s’i’ son degno // udirti, il fiato la tua voce spinga. / Qual causa il color nel viso spense, / ove letizia par mai non s’infinga? // E dov’è l’alme nelle fiamme offense? / Mostrami nella faccia tuo letizia, / non mi celar le tuo parole immense!” // “S’al fiume Lete, che to’ la notizia, / chinato non ti fussi a bere all’onda, / conosceresti in te la mia tristizia. // Ogn’anima fu qui lieta e gioconda / picciolo spazio, poi divisa in tre: / l’una nel Sommo Bene veder s’infonda; // l’altra, ribella a quel felice Re, / possiede loco giù nel basse centro; / la parte terza ben né mal non fè. // Quest’è ne’ corpi nostri inchiuso dentro, / come dispensa la divina sorte; / or più m’ascolta, perch’io vo più entro. // In noi le pruova Iddio fino alla morte, / e quelle che ‘n ben vivere s’affanna / le fa beate nell’eterna corte. // Quelle che ‘l mondo le diletta e ‘nganna / nella gola infernal le scaccia e chiude; / con morte eterna al fuoco le condanna. // Io le credetti, e ‘l creder mi dischiude / nel mondo su di fama e di ghirlanda, // in gran vergogna delle gente rude. // Non è d’Iddio precetto, e non comanda / scuola teologica né cherici, / che chi pur crede ben la fama spanda. // Vi sono ancora e gran Peripatetici, / quantunque riprovati in ogni parte, / Pittagora, Platone e gli altri eretici. // Dunque ho io indarno rigato le carte, / prestando vana fede a mia nutrice, / infesta guida all’opere e mia arte? // Beato tu, che sali con Beatrice / su fra le stelle nel più alto polo; / quanto fortuna t’ha fatto felice! // e tu che fusti innamorato e solo / per Laura cogliesti quelle foglie / sacrate a quello Iddio ch’i’ son figliuolo. // O dolce Apollo, se mai se ne coglie / in questa vita, cingimi le tempie, / po’ che la ‘nvidia al mondo me le toglie!” // Chinò el capo e ‘l petto si riempie / di caldo pianto; ma el benigno Iddio / spiro col fiato foglie e ‘l capo gli empie. // L’acque renderon dolce mormorio, / faccendo segno alla dimanda iusta; / né più ritrassi di tanto disio, // perché, partita, quell’ombra vetusta / si trasse nella selva, onde lo sguardo, / seguendo retro, la veduta frusta. // Volsimi indietro assai pensoso e tardo.” Verses 43–100. Leonardo Benci, *Lirici Toscani del Quattrocento*, ed. Antonio Lanza, 2 vols. (Rome: Bulzoni Editore, 1973–1975), 1:250–251; Mita Feraro, “Palmieri Poeta Theologo,” 426.

<sup>67</sup> Letter 67, *A commendation from need and merit*. Ficino, *Letters*, 1:113.

<sup>68</sup> Though Ficino did not conceive of man’s soul as a fallen angel, and though his notion of immortality anticipates but a single incarnation, he does not (as far as I am aware) reject the Origenian, and later Palmerian, notion of multiple incarnations. Though Origen’s view of pre-existence is contrasted directly with Plotinus’ in *PT* 9.5.23–24, it is not rejected. For a brief summary of Ficino’s understanding of the human relationship to the angels, its connection to the soul’s vehicles and the notion of pre-existence, see Michael J. B. Allen, “«Quisque in sphaera sua»: Plato’s *Statesman* Marsilio Ficino’s *Platonic Theology*, and the Resurrection of the Body,” *Rinascimento* 47 (2007): 25–48, at 41–42.

*Voluptate*. I do not believe these events are coincidental and will argue as much in chapter four.

The known heterodoxy of pre-existence in the period is further evidenced by one of the most eminent and controversial figures in later fifteenth century Florence, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463–1494). Following the condemnation of thirteen of his *900 Theses* by Pope Innocent VIII in 1486, Pico composed his *Apologia*, a written defence of his theses. Constructing a long and elaborate defence of the Alexandrian Father, Origenist issues occupy a central place, with the *De salvate Origenis disputatio* accounting for almost one fifth of the entire work. Of the seven items disputed by Pico therein, the first deals with charges of Arianism, the *apokatastasis* of the devil, and the issue of pre-existence.<sup>69</sup> Though Pico was not prepared to defend the “more fantastic parts of Origen’s angelology,” he could, however, excuse them.<sup>70</sup> On the question of pre-existence, Pico announced that, unlike the charges of Arianism and universal salvation, which he argued could not be attributed to Origen directly, that which remained to be seen was “a particular heresy attributed to Origen, that is to say, with regard to his opinions about the soul, insofar as they will have been created from eternity and descended from heaven into bodies.”<sup>71</sup> Under the weight of overwhelming literary testimony, from Rufinus of Aquileia to Pamphilus of Caesarea, Pico conceded that Origen’s doctrine of pre-existence was indeed heretical. The ancient sources all agreed, and Pico himself could not deny, that Origen had certainly held this view and that it went against the current teaching of the Church. Unlike Dati, Pico believed that there was no Biblical evidence to support pre-existence. Yet, in a final attempt to salvage Origen’s good name, the young Pico countered that pre-existence had not been considered unorthodox in Origen’s own era,

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<sup>69</sup> “In primo videbitur, an Origenes unquam haeticam aliquam de rebus fidei opinionem, scripserit et crediderit? In secundo, dato quod scripserit, an dogmatice, vel adhaesive, vel inquisitive tantum scripserit? In tertio, dato quod adhaesive, an taliter adhaesive, quod illa scribendo mortaliter peccaverit, et haeticus dici possit? In quarto, dato quod scripserit, et taliter scripserit, quod scribendo erraverit, an pro talibus unquam poenituerit? In quinto, dato quod de eius nec poenitentia, nec impenitentia constet, an sit rationabilius ipsum credere esse damnatum an salvum? In sexto, quid ex dictis decretorum, iudicandum sit, Ecclesiam determinasse de Origene? In septimo, quantum obliget in ista materia, crudelitatem nostram determinatio Ecclesiae?” Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Opera Omnia Ioannis Pici Mirandulae* (Basel: Henricus Petrus, 1557), 199; For a concise account of these arguments, see Max Schär, *Das Nachleben des Origenes im Zeitalter des Humanismus* (Basel and Stuttgart: Verlag Helbing & Lichtenhahn, 1979), 132–134.

<sup>70</sup> Edgar Wind, “The Revival of Origen,” in *Studies in Art and Literature for Belle da Costa Greene*, ed. Dorothy Miner (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1954), 414.

<sup>71</sup> “... una haeresis Origeni attributa, scilicet in opinionibus de anima. Quod fuerint ab aeterno creatae, et de coelo delabantur in corpora.” For full excerpt, read until “... an ex illa una quae facta est in Adam a Deo.” Pico della Mirandola, *Opera Omnia*, 209–210.

remaining unclear even up to the time of Augustine, some two-hundred years later, and was thus not cause enough for his damnation by the Church. As a contemporary and former student of Ficino, we must concede that the latter was fully aware of the nature of the arguments made by Pico — that the pre-existence of the soul was in direct contrast to the tradition of the Catholic church, and which had been maintained by the theologians of his time.

### **3.3 Conclusion**

The growing spiritual concerns that pervaded the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries coincided with the re-emergence and flourishing of classical authors in the Florentine intellectual sphere. Boundaries were pushed and new questions were raised, both by the religious and philosophical thinkers of the age, as they tried to accommodate new ideas within their existing cultural context. This found unique expression in the debates over the nature and immortality of the soul, as thinkers tried to integrate antique concepts into a Christian framework, and though these questions were intensely deliberated upon for several decades, a fundamental orthodoxy seems to have been maintained. Indeed, from what can be gleaned about public disputation from written defences, there is little evidence to indicate that the origins of the soul were discussed beyond those arguments between the Greek delegates at the Council of Florence, and as we have seen, even Plato's defenders could not stand behind his views on pre-existence. Where evidence is found, it was always framed as being unacceptable to the Christian faith; at almost every turn the idea was stifled, or else rejected as heretical. Though these ideas were widely accessible in the city through the works of Boethius and Origen, as is attested by the record of the public library of San Marco, there is no indication that these ideas were being explored by readers either at the universities or the schools.<sup>72</sup> Though this study does not attempt

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<sup>72</sup> See Ullman and Stadter, *The Public Library of Renaissance Florence*. A scan of the records of the *quaestiones, disputationes* and copies written by the brothers of Santa Maria del Carmine does not reveal any engagement with these ideas. Save for a single copy of Nicholas of Trevet's commentary of the *Consolation*, there is no evidence of a text which would transmit this idea, nor any original works of Boethius or Origen, in the library. Two texts relate to creation in the Bible. An additional text relates to Aquinas' *Quaestio disputata de spiritualibus creaturis*. See Leandro Perini, *L'Inventario dei Codici di S. Maria del Carmine di Firenze del 1461* (Spoleto: Centro Italiano di Studio sull'Alto Medioevo, 1970). The library of Santa Maria Novella contained one copy of Origen's *Homilies*, one vernacularisation of the *Consolation*, two copies of the commentary on the *Consolation*, a text which contains all of the philosophy of Boethius, the different books of Augustine, and canon law, and another which contains Plato's *Apology, Critias*, and his account of the immortality of the soul. A single text compiled by Simone da Cascia della Marca, an Augustinian brother, deals with creation. See Gabriella Pomaro, "Censimento dei Manoscritti della Biblioteca di S. Maria Novella Parte II: Sec. XV–XVI," *Memorie Domenicane* 13 (1982): 203–353.

to reconstruct scholastic debate over the composition of the soul and the distinction between *anima*, *spiritus/psyche* and *pneuma*, by exploring the discussion around and responses to figures like Boethius, Origen and Plato by the likes of Pico, Palmieri, and the delegates of the Council, I have demonstrated the place that pre-existence held within the intellectual context of late-fifteenth century Florence. My aim in doing so has been to underscore the significance of Ficino's philosophical and religious interventions, and to reveal a more private conversation about pre-existence that was simmering underneath the surface.

While Ficino's texts certainly contributed to the broader debate on immortality, his position on the question of 'individual immortality' was hardly controversial, given its status as a central tenet of the Christian faith. The significance of his contribution, which represents far more than mere classroom disputation, was the revival of the doctrine of pre-existence, and its subsequent role in his programme of spiritual renewal. As I have shown, throughout the century, the notion of pre-existence was continuously met with suspicion and was suppressed. Earlier rulings which confirmed the condemnation of pre-existence were re-confirmed in multiple and various ways, and were far from being overturned. That is to say, Ficino was not part of a broader cultural trend that embraced a pre-mortal existence; it seemed plain to his contemporaries, particularly after Lateran IV: God created all souls out of nothing at the moment of unification with the body.

Throughout this chapter, I have presented an intellectual context where the thinkers of the time were, by and large, not receptive to the doctrine of pre-existence, despite their concerted efforts to reconcile and incorporate the newly discovered textual traditions of antiquity. Highlighting a number of contemporaneous expressions of local theology with which Ficino can be tangibly linked — being either members of his circle, or with those whom he had some indirect socio-intellectual connection — I have shown the uncongenial grounds for reception of pre-existence in the second half of the fifteenth century in Florence. In stark contrast to Ficino's view of pre-existence as playing a

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The collection also contained a few of Ficino's writings, *Ibid.*, 298–299. The Carmelite library housed one exposition of Origen's *Canticle of Canticles*, and one text relating to geometry and astrology in Boethius. Though the catalogue refers to the fourteenth-century collection, no significant additions were made in the Quattrocento. See Kenneth William Humphreys, *The Library of the Carmelites at Florence at the End of the Fourteenth Century* (Amsterdam: Erasmus Booksellers, 1964). I have been unable to identify anything substantial in the collection from the Camaldolese Library. These copies prove nothing as regards the propagation of the doctrine of pre-existence, whether affirmative or negative.

functional role in the process of conversion and spiritual renewal, I have shown that many contemporary Florentine intellectuals did not see the religious or spiritual value of the belief in a pre-mortal existence; rather they perceived only the threat that it posed. Moreover, in emphasising the authorities, texts, and conversations to which Ficino can almost certainly be connected, I have made clear that Ficino knew he was treading on dangerous ground, and have thus shown the boldness of his proposition. As I have argued, there seemed to be a consensus amongst the city's intellectuals that pre-existence was an error of the pagans, and yet despite this unsympathetic response, and the very real threat of accusations of heresy, Ficino persisted, encouraging his readers to incorporate this understanding into their contemplative practice. Unlike the anonymous retraction of the *Città di Vita*, or the mediating defences by the likes of Dati and Vespasiano, Ficino stood behind this teaching, albeit playfully (as chapter four will explore). Though Palmieri was never formally condemned as a heretic, he was by no means as influential as Ficino, and his profession did not carry the same authority and implications; as an ordained priest, the risks that Ficino took in espousing a pre-mortal existence and in assigning it a place within ordinary religious practice makes Ficino's remedy for renewal all the more significant.

As the ultimate goal of human existence, Ficino believed that it was his duty to ensure that all men possessed the knowledge of how to attain union with God, or else be brought closer to Him, irrespective of the consequences. Just as the *Consolation* "invited generations of readers from whatever rank to 're-enact' Boethius' search for his spiritual homeland by way of introspection and discursive reasoning," offering "moral guidance and intellectual instruction," making "life bearable and understandable in a world apparently governed by arbitrariness, injustice and personal adversity," so too did Ficino's theology.<sup>73</sup> Ficino's contributions to the religious and intellectual culture of the late Quattrocento are thus, in this regard, not only innovative, but are of great significance. Indeed, his theology has been shown to be far more radical in its aims than other 'humanist' theologies. This perspective not only changes our understanding of the religious, theological, and intellectual culture of the period, but repositions Ficino's place in the intellectual and religious history of the fifteenth century.

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<sup>73</sup> Nauta, *Interpretations of Boethius*, 2.

In light of the conclusions drawn throughout the previous and present chapters, however, we begin to see that any discussion around this idea would necessarily have had to take place in a more private and hidden fashion, but this does not mean that it was a limited conversation. In fact, these ideas could, and did have much further reach than has previously been recognised. In the subsequent chapters I will argue that Ficino's ideas about the soul and its previous life in the heavens endured, and will explore the methods by which these ideas were communicated to a broader audience. I will begin to show that the idea of pre-existence, particularly in relation to contemplation and conversion, had a very real basis in the Florentine intellectual field, and always in connection to Ficino's circle.

## Chapter Four: Campaigning for Change: Ficino's Restoration of *Prisca Theologia*

In the preface to his translation of Plotinus' *Enneads*, Ficino sorrowfully declared that the basis of all religion had been destroyed.<sup>1</sup> This, he explained, was the regrettable consequence of those poets and Peripatetics who had confounded the events and mysteries of religion with mere fable. Appealing to the philosophers of his own day and age, Ficino warned that they "should not mistake this religiousness for an old wives' tale."<sup>2</sup> Ficino was here referring to the betrayal of the religious philosophy (*pia philosophia*) which had been passed down from Zoroaster to Hermes Trismegistus, to Orpheus and Aglaophemus, to Pythagoras and then to Plato, and which was finally purified by Plotinus. Breathing the very same spirit, each of these ancient theologians had shared the same ideas. In order to rectify the impiety of those who, among other things, had denied the immortality of individual souls, and consequently lead them toward perfect religion, this very same *pia philosophia* must be restored. But Ficino conceded that only when reason had been "infused into them by a religious philosopher," that they would "readily and promptly admit that there is such a thing as religiousness."<sup>3</sup> Ficino proclaimed that it was now the will of divine Providence that the shared wisdom of the ancient theologians not only be translated, but also commented upon. His role as 'philosopher-priest' was symbolic of the reunification of wisdom and religion, and thus Ficino declared that Providence herself had chosen him to perform this task — to unite the two and reveal the true theology unveiled by Plotinus. "And once they have had a taste of it, they pass on more easily to a better form of religion, which is common to all men."<sup>4</sup>

Though his charges were laid chiefly against the Alexandrists and Averroists, Ficino's counsel was addressed to all of Christianity. But surely it was not necessary to convince Christians of God's promise of eternal life? Of what, then, was he trying to convince them? Ficino's preface demonstrated his belief that the ancient religious philosophy not

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<sup>1</sup> "Indeed, nearly all the world is inhabited by the Peripatetics and divided into two schools the Alexandrists and the Averroists. The first ones believe that our intellect is mortal, whereas the others think it is unique: both groups alike destroy the basis of all religion, especially because they seem to deny that there is such a thing as divine providence towards men, and in both cases they are traitors to Aristotle." Ficino as translated in Saffrey, "The Reappearance of Plotinus," 499.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 497.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

only facilitated the ascent to the supreme religion, but that the doctrines of the *prisca theologia* were essential to Christianity. At the heart of the ancient theology, however, was the belief in an *eternal* soul, which was infused with religious belief before it descended into the body. As we have seen, this belief was far from the orthodox position of a soul created *ex nihilo*, in time, and whose immortality stretched in but a single direction, to be experienced only in the future. So how then would Ficino lead those with a “keen and somewhat philosophical turn of mind ... towards perfect religion”?<sup>5</sup>

What is perhaps most striking about Ficino’s proposal is the context in which it is found: the preface to a philosophical translation. Indeed, in this self-consciously chosen form, which was anything but standard for a proposal of this calibre, Ficino appeared to guide his audience through a reading of the text as if it were the preamble to Christian revelation, and thereby redefine the foundations of religion entirely. There was, moreover, something in Ficino’s manner of writing which seemed to carry an air of authority and persuasiveness. Could these conventional, rhetorical, and linguistic choices have been purposeful? Throughout this chapter I will argue that Ficino was here, and elsewhere, proposing a new model of Christian religious belief and practice. Tracing the development of the doctrines on the origins of the soul throughout Ficino’s corpus, this chapter will demonstrate that these doctrines formed the basis of a distinctly Ficinian theology, and that these doctrines were promoted by the philosopher in both his major and minor works. To this end, I will show that Ficino employed a range of rhetorical and linguistic techniques in order to disseminate these views to a wider audience and utilised different textual media as a means to do so.

Exploring the relationship between medium and message, this chapter will establish a distinct correlation between the conventions of some of the more ‘traditional’ forms of theological literature (in particular, those of the ‘humanistic’ sermons and theological orations) and Ficino’s ‘philosophical’ writings. My approach here is twofold: First, I will explore the relationship between form and content, and examine Ficino’s self-conscious choices about genre, especially as they related to the prescribed rhetoric or rhetorical structures of a particular genre, and the corresponding expectations of the audience. Then, I will examine Ficino’s own rhetorical and linguistic formulae against these

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

considerations. Investigating the purpose and intention of various preaching aids, my analysis focusses on the model rhetorical structures used in ‘humanist’ theology, drawing particular attention to Ficino’s use of epideictic rhetoric, together with the mechanisms of deliberative rhetoric. I propose that the appropriation of the new ‘humanist’ language into various literary forms allowed Ficino to manipulate the message being sent to his readers and consequently their interpretation of this message. Demonstrating Ficino’s awareness of the weight of words, this chapter will show how he used language to shape the particular ideas he wished his readers to absorb. It will thereby offer a new perspective on how language, rhetoric and genre functioned in the later decades of the fifteenth century. In determining how these practices contributed to Ficino’s greater programme of spiritual renewal, and thus the formation of a new religious culture, this chapter will contribute to the growing scholarship that investigates the dynamic interplay between the intellectual and religious worlds. By examining how theology is transformed when its language and content change, and what happens when it is discussed outside of its traditional contexts by non-theologians, this chapter aims to resituate our thinking about how theology was performed and put into practice. By the end of this chapter the reader will have gained a more nuanced understanding of the changing nature of theology in the fifteenth century, particularly within Florence. This investigation of theology practiced outside the walls of the university moreover helps the reader to appreciate how theology developed a uniquely public character, facilitated by a new linguistic and rhetorical approach.

#### **4.1 Changing Contexts, Changing Cultures**

Where precisely is theology located? What sorts of texts and contexts come to mind when we think of ‘theological literature’? Hagiographies, homilies, and sermons, to be sure, but the number and variety of genres that theology encompassed in the fifteenth century were far greater than this. Indeed, theological literature could encompass just about any literary genre. The standard genres were all derived from the curriculum of theology faculties, predominantly in line with the University of Paris, including commentaries on the Bible and Peter Lombard’s *Four Books of Sentences*, theological *quaestiones disputatae* and *quodlibeta*, and topical discourses in the form of the thematic sermon. There were, moreover, polemical treatises, handbooks on penitential and canon law, dialogues, and

pamphlets. Some were produced by people teaching in the universities, a great deal more were produced by those in the clerical orders, but some writers, it is true, had no clerical rank at all. Each of these genres reflects a certain kind of prescribed rhetoric or rhetorical structure and contains “deeply embedded cultural patterns that not only appeal to the expectations of readers, but compose those same expectations.”<sup>6</sup> On the question of where to look for theology, we might start with any of the above-listed genres, but this would not necessarily give us a complete picture of what theology ‘on the ground’ looked like in the late fifteenth century. As discussed in chapter one, the disciplinary boundaries between religion, theology and philosophy have been divisive in the historiography, and despite attempts to dissolve these boundaries, we still find in the scholarship a tendency to delineate between what is to be considered a religious or theological text, against those which are to be considered philosophical. These delineations are, understandably, based on the perceived contexts, intentions and aims of the text at hand. But what happens when these contexts change, and the rhetoric expected of one context or genre is transplanted into another? What does this mean for the historian when a text which markets itself as belonging to one discipline very much belongs to another?

Occupying a central place in his corpus, the immortality of individual souls is classified as the defining characteristic of Ficino’s philosophy. Surely, we cannot deny that this idea was also central to his theology. As is evidenced by his ‘philosophical’ *magnum opus*, the *Platonic Theology* (and as I will highlight below), individual immortality was in fact central to Ficino’s notion of religion, too. Why then do studies of Ficino’s religion and theology focus so narrowly on those works which explicitly declare themselves to be religious or theological works? I refer here of course to the *De Christiana religione* and his *Praedicationes*. Why have scholars not analysed Ficino’s ‘philosophical’ epistles, commentaries, and *argumenta* as part of this broader religious and theological project? In this section, I will demonstrate the necessity to analyse Ficino’s body of works as a unified whole in this endeavour, by highlighting out a simple, yet critical hermeneutic.

There are distinct correlations between Ficino’s philosophical and theological works in detailing his unique concept of religion. For Amos Edelheit, the *De Christiana religione*

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<sup>6</sup> Michael Jensen, “Why Literary Genres are Inescapably Theological: The Lesson of Roald Dahl,” *ABC Religion and Ethics*, 11 October 2019. <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/roald-dahl-and-the-theology-of-literary-genres/11594900>.

is the manifesto of Ficino's 'humanist' theology and epitomises his novel notion of religion. Drawing parallels with Augustine's *De doctrina Christiana*, Edelheit first emphasises the philological significance of '*religio*' in Ficino's text, versus the Augustinian '*doctrina*' arguing that Ficino's treatise did not deal with doctrines, but rather "a wider concept of religion as the center of the life of individuals and societies."<sup>7</sup> Then, highlighting the correspondences between the proem of its vernacular translation, the *Della religione Christiana*, and the first chapter of Ficino's *Platonic Theology*, Edelheit rightly points out that the former is indeed a more popular version of the latter, "in which 'religion' replaces the notion of the eternity of the soul."<sup>8</sup> The proem is titled *Che la generatione humana senza Religione sarebbe più misera che le bestie*, while the first chapter of the *Platonic Theology* is titled *Si animus non esset immortalis, nullum animal esset infelicius homine*.<sup>9</sup> This synonymy both demonstrates the centrality of an immortal soul in Ficino's concept of religion and highlights how, for Ficino, the fact that individual immortality had not yet been declared Christian doctrine had contributed to the transformations in the religious culture of his day, for it is these two qualities that give mankind pre-eminence in nature.<sup>10</sup> Ficino's substitution here provides a hermeneutical key. In the proem of *De Christiana religione* he states:

Man, the most perfect animal, by this quality [religion] especially is both capable of perfection and differs from inferior things; by it he is connected to the most perfect things, i.e., divine ones. And conversely, if man, as man, is the most perfect among mortal animals, it is chiefly because of this quality that he is the most perfect [animal] of all; he himself regards it as his special [quality] which is not common to the rest of them. This [quality] is religion; therefore, it is on account of religion [that man] is most perfect.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Edelheit, *The Evolution of Humanist Theology*, 211.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 218.

<sup>9</sup> Marsilio Ficino, *Della religione Christiana* (Florence: Giunti, 1568), 1–5; *PT* 1.1.1. Ficino, *Platonic Theology*, 1:14.

<sup>10</sup> The doctrine of individual immortality was only affirmed in 1513, at the eighth session of the Fifth Lateran Council (1512–1517). See Pope Leo X, "*Apostolici Regiminis*," in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, 1:605–606.

<sup>11</sup> *De Christiana religione*: "... homo perfectissimum animal, ea proprietate maxime tum perfectione pollet, tum ab inferioribus discrepat, qua perfectissimis, id est, divinis coniungitur. Rursus, si homo animalium mortalium perfectissimus est, in quantum homo, ob eam praecipue dotem est omnium perfectissimus, quam inter haec habet ipse propriam, caeteris animalibus non communem, ea religio est, per religionem igitur est perfectissimus." Ficino, *Opera Omnia*, 1:2.

Religion is the singular quality that distinguishes man from beast. Like man, the animals are capable of communication, and they too display some measure of reason, but man alone is capable of contemplating the divine.<sup>12</sup> It is through religion that man can achieve his own distinct perfection and may be brought closer to God; it is precisely because of this closeness to the divine and potential for perfection that man is the happiest of all mortal beings, and therefore the most perfect. He continues:

If religion were to be empty, man would, in turn, on account of it, be the most imperfect of all [animals], since, on account of it, man would be the most foolish and miserable [animal] ... If, therefore, religion (as we said) is empty, there is no animal more foolish and miserable than man; and so, because of religion, man would be the most imperfect [animal] of all, and yet by virtue of it, he has just a little earlier seemed to be more perfect than all [animals].<sup>13</sup>

Mirroring the proem closely, *Platonic Theology* 14.10 similarly concludes that man “cannot be so subject to contraries that he is both fully perfect and fully imperfect through the same part of himself. Therefore religion is true.”<sup>14</sup> If religion is true, then it cannot be empty, and must therefore offer something unique; man must be afforded a happier fate after death than the ‘miserable’ and ‘inferior’ beasts, who are incapable of divine contemplation. This notion is clarified further in *Platonic Theology* 1.1, which similarly contends:

Since mankind, because of the restlessness of our soul and the weakness

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<sup>12</sup> *PT* 14.9.1: “But it behooves the human species, inasmuch as it is distinct from the beasts, to have its own distinct perfection which none of them in any way shares. Will the perfection be speech? But the beasts imitate speech by way of gesture, sound, and song. Will it be reason? Reason certainly, but not every activity of the reason; for in the beasts too we find certain traces of the active reason, the adumbrations of art and governance. Even the speculative reason, the contemplator of natural things, seems to have a shadowy counterpart among the beasts ... So what is there left which is entirely and solely man’s? The contemplation of the divine. For the beasts show no sign of religion.” Ficino, *Platonic Theology*, 4:292–293.

<sup>13</sup> Ficino as translated in Edelheit, *The Evolution of Humanist Theology*, 222. See *De Christiana religione*: “Si religio esset inanis, per eam rursus homo omnium esset imperfectissimus, quoniam per eam dementissimus esset, atque miserrimus ... Si ergo religio, (ut diximus) vana est, nullum est animal dementius et infelicius homine, esset igitur ob religionem homo imperfectissimus omnium, per eam tamen paulo ante omnibus perfectior apparebat.” Ficino, *Opera Omnia*, 1:2.

<sup>14</sup> *PT* 14.10.1: “Non potest autem per eandem sui partem ita contraria perpeti, ut per eam tum summe perfectus sit, tum summopere imperfectus. Est igitur religio vera.” Ficino, *Platonic Theology*, 1:294–295.

of our body and our need for all things, lives on earth a harder life than beasts; if exactly the same end of life were attributed to man as to the rest of the animals, there would be no animal more miserable than him.<sup>15</sup> But man, by worship of God comes closer to God than all other mortal things, and God is the author of happiness. So it is utterly impossible that man should be the most unhappy of all. However, only after the death of the body can man become any happier. It seems therefore to follow of necessity that once our souls leave this prison, some other light awaits them.<sup>16</sup>

If the same fate were to await man and beast alike — if man were to possess a *mortal* soul — then man would be the most miserable of beings, but as Ficino had explained in the poem, on account of religion this cannot be true; man’s soul must therefore be immortal. The ‘restlessness’ of the soul described here refers to its natural tendency to strive upwards towards God; separated from the body after death, the soul seeks to return to Him. As Edelheit argues, this ‘emptiness of religion’ refers to the lack of an eternal life, thus demonstrating that for Ficino the aim of religion is the immortality of the soul.

Though he highlights the clear affinities between these texts in dealing with Ficino’s concept of religion, Edelheit’s focus remains fixed on Ficino’s explicitly religious and theological texts — the *De Christiana religione* and his *Praedicationes*. Moreover, while Edelheit’s review here accounts for the aim of religion (it is, after all, the corresponding theme), he says nothing of where this religiousness comes from. However, as we saw in chapter one, the *Platonic Theology* certainly addresses this question.<sup>17</sup> Though this Ficinian title similarly omits the term ‘*doctrina*’ the text undoubtedly dealt with doctrines.

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<sup>15</sup> Edelheit’s formulation differs slightly from Hankins and Allen’s translation, which begins: “Since man’s mind is never at rest, his body is frail and he is totally without resources, the life he leads on earth is harsher than that of the beasts. Had nature set exactly the same term of his life as she has to the other creatures, no animal would be more miserable than man.” Edelheit, *The Evolution of Humanist Theology*, 222.

<sup>16</sup> *PT* 1.1.1: “Cum genus humanum propter inquietudinem animi imbecillitatemque corporis et rerum omnium indigentiam duriorem quam bestiae vitam agat in terris, si terminum vivendi natura illi eundem penitus atque ceteris animantibus tribuisset, nullum animal esset infelicius homine. Quoniam vero fieri nequit ut homo, qui dei cultu proprius cunctis mortalibus accedit ad deum, beatitudinis auctorem, omnino sit omnium infelicissimus, solum autem post mortem corporis beatior effici potest, necessarium esse videtur animis nostris ab hoc carcere discedentibus lucem aliquam superesse.” Ficino, *Platonic Theology*, 1:14–15.

<sup>17</sup> See chapter one, n.56.

So, if Ficino's texts build upon and explain ideas also considered in other texts — a precedent already established here — can we suggest that many and more of his writings similarly treat of his proposed solution to bring man toward perfect religion? The above-cited intertextual connections verify that Ficino's texts cannot be read in isolation from one another and demonstrate that his collective written works must be considered as part of an ongoing dialogue, labouring toward a common goal.

Indeed, evidence of the *Theologia Ficiniana* can arguably be found throughout Ficino's entire corpus. If we return briefly to the text cited at the beginning of this chapter — to Ficino's preface to his translation of the *Enneads* — we read:

Nowadays, few people, except the great Pico, our companion in Platonism, interpret the spirit of Aristotle with the same reverence as was shown by Theophrastus, Themistius, Porphyry, Simplicius, Avicenna, and more recently Plethon. If there be some who believe that an impiety so common and upheld by such sharp minds can be erased from the hearts of men merely by preaching faith to them, there is no doubt that the facts themselves will prove that they are very far from the truth: a much greater power is needed, namely some divine miracles, acknowledged as such everywhere, or at least some sort of philosophical religion that will convince the philosophers open to its teachings. Today, the will of divine Providence is that this genus of religion should be confirmed by the authority and the reasoning of philosophy, whereas at an appointed time the truest species of religion will be confirmed by miracles acknowledged by all nations, as was once the case in the past.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ficino as translated in Saffrey, "The Reappearance of Plotinus," 499. See Ficino's Latin text in the critical edition by O'Meara: "Cuius mentem hodie pauci praeter sublimem Picum complatonicum nostrum ea pietate qua Theophrastus olim et Themistius, Porphyrius, Simplicius, Avicenna, et nuper Plethon interpretantur. Si quis autem putet tam divulgatam impietatem tamque acerbis munitam ingeniis sola quadam simplici praedicatione fidei apud homines posse deleri, is a vero longius aberrare palam re ipsa procul dubio vincetur: maiore admodum hic opus est potestate. Id autem est vel divinis miraculis ubique patentibus, vel saltem philosophica quadam religione philosophis eam libentius audituris quandoque persuasura. Placet autem divinae providentiae his saeculis ipsum religionis suae genus auctoritate rationeque philosophica confirmare, quoad statuto quodam tempore verissimam religionis speciem, ut olim quandoque fecit, manifestis per omnes gentes confirmet miraculis." Dominic J. O'Meara, "Plotinus," in *Catalogus Translationum et Commentariorum: Mediaeval and Renaissance Latin Translations and Commentaries. Annotated Lists and Guides*, eds. Virginia Brown, Paul Oskar Kristeller and F. Edward Cranz, 13 vols. (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1960–2020), 7:55–73, at 70.

The grievances cited here by Ficino had in fact been penned once before, the fact of which is of no small importance; written nearly ten years earlier, a letter to John of Hungary detailed almost verbatim Ficino's call for a new approach to religion. However, there are some subtle nuances in its construction that help us begin to answer the question we raised earlier: how would Ficino lead men toward perfect religion? With no consensus on who this 'John of Hungary' actually was, it has been suggested that the exchange, which is tentatively dated to 1485, was "based only partly on actual correspondence, and might be read rather in the tradition of literary embellishments ... [opening] the way for Ficino to give a full and detailed justification of his position on controversial subjects."<sup>19</sup> In the letter he writes:

First of all, we should not, as a general rule, look for Christian precepts in those who preceded the coming of Christ; nor ought we to believe that men with keen and philosophically inclined minds can ever be attracted and led, step by step, to perfect religion by any other bait than that of philosophy. For keen intellects entrust themselves to reason alone, and when they hear reason from a religious philosopher they at once gladly admit religion in general ... [and] are more easily led to a finer and more specific form of religion. ... But if anyone were to think that this betrayal of religion, which is so widespread and is defended by such keen intellects, could be ended merely by a simple preaching of faith among men, it would at once be evident that he was in fact clearly straying even further from the truth. Here a much greater power is needed: either divine miracles manifesting everywhere, or at least a philosophical religion which one day will persuade the philosophers who are prepared to listen to it with an open mind. However, it pleases divine Providence in these times [of irreligion] to strengthen the very substance of her own religion with philosophical authority and reason until, at an appointed time, she confirms the truest

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<sup>19</sup> Several names have been suggested: there was the poet and Bishop of Pécs, Janus Pannonius, and János Vitéz (both of whom were nephews to János Vitéz (the elder), Archbishop of Esztergom), as well as János Váradi, an Augustinian monk. See the biographical notes on John of Hungary in Ficino, *Letters*, 7:200–201.

form of religion with miracles manifesting among all peoples, as she did in times past.<sup>20</sup>

While the letter attests to the longevity of Ficino's perceived need for a philosophical religion, his plea here further highlights a number of significant issues. First, Ficino clearly acknowledges that the ideas expressed by the ancients did not wholly cohere with Christian teachings but nevertheless play an integral role in the path to perfect religion. Second, just as Plato had enticed his readers with the pleasures of literature and led them to the temple of Platonic wisdom, Ficino demonstrated that he would similarly appeal to the intellect of the audience using 'philosophical bait' — he too would lure them with language.<sup>21</sup> Finally, whether the exchange was real, remembered or imagined, Ficino's rhetorical construction here allowed him to discuss views which he knew to be unorthodox. Usually when Ficino discussed contentious ideas, he would offer a precautionary disclaimer, in which he would assert that "In everything we pen, however, we want to affirm, and others to affirm, only what may appear acceptable to a council of Christian theologians."<sup>22</sup> Echoed in many variations throughout his corpus, these disclaimers, which emphasise his orthodoxy, appeal to what is approved by the Church or to what may be appropriate in the future. Differing only slightly from the phrasing in

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<sup>20</sup> Letter 19, *Divine Providence has decreed the restoration of the ancient teaching*: "Principio neque debemus ab illis ad summum Christiana requirere, qui Christi adventum antecesserunt, neque confidere acuta et quodammodo Philosophica hominum ingenia unquam alia quadam esca praeter quam Philosophica ad perfectam religionem allici posse paulatim ac perducere. Acuta enim ingenia soli se rationi committunt, cumque a religioso quodam Philosopho accipiunt religionem, subito communem libenter admittunt. Quae quidem imbuti ad meliorum religionis speciem sub genere comprehensam facilius traducuntur. ... Si quis autem putet tam divulgatam impietatem tamque acerbis munitam ingeniiis, sola quadam simplici praedicatione fidei apud homines posse deleri, is a vero longius aberrare palam reipsa protinus convincetur. Maiori admodum hic opus est potestate. Id autem est vel divinis miraculis ubique patentibus, vel saltem philosophica quadam religione Philosophis eam libentius auditoris quandoque persuasura. Placet autem divinae providentiae his seculis ipsum religionis suae genus autoritate rationeque philosophica confirmare, quoad statuto quodam tempore veris infimam religionis speciem, (ut olim quandoque fecit) manifestis per omnes Gentes confirmet miraculis." *Ibid.*, 7:21–24; Ficino, *Opera Omnia*, 1:871–872.

<sup>21</sup> "Elsewhere Plato mixed into his discourse jokes and play, gems of wit and beauty, fables and poetic flowers. Although these often had a deeper meaning hidden within them, their basic purpose was to use the joys of literature as a 'bait' to lure the pleasure-loving youths within the temple of Platonic wisdom." Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance*, 1:337.

<sup>22</sup> *PT* 18.5.4: "Nos autem in omnibus quae scribimus, eatenus affirmari a nobis aliisque volumus, quatenus Christianorum theologorum concilio videatur." Also see the proem to the *Platonic Theology*: "I can only hope that the truth that I have arrived at reflects the veneration for the divine truth with which I approached it. For I would not want anything proved in these pages which is not approved by divine law." See *PT* 13.5.8: "But individual points concerning miracles, points we have discussed from a Platonic viewpoint, we affirm only insofar as they are approved by Christian theologians." Ficino, *Platonic Theology*, 1:12–13, 4:216–217, 6:114–115. See also the proem to Ficino's third book *On Life, De Vita Coelitus Comparanda*: "In all things which I discuss here or elsewhere, I intend to assert only so much as is approved by the Church," Ficino, *Three Books on Life*, 103.

his preface to Plotinus, Ficino's repeated references to an 'appointed time' in which the truest form of religion will return similarly imply that he is referring to point in the not-too-distant future. The semantics of subjunctive clauses indicate that future hypothetical statements such as these express propositions.

So far, we have established three things. First, we can see that multiple statements made by Ficino about a future golden age of Christianity, and of a new notion of what constitutes perfect religion, are found outside of what would traditionally be classified as works of religion or theology. Second, we have identified a unique intertextual hermeneutic, revealing a rich 'textual tapestry,' if you will. And finally, we are beginning to see the pointed way in which the linguistic and rhetorical choices Ficino makes are being used to convey what he sees as the solution to the betrayal of religion: the restoration of the doctrines of *prisca theologia*. We shall probe each of these matters further in the following section. For now, it is enough to highlight the following. The key to religious or theological change is first and foremost dissemination; language, rhetoric and genre are central to this endeavour. Indeed, the power of a textual genre in creating a prescribed rhetoric and its influence on the way in which ideas are put together cannot be underestimated. How an author comes to use or manipulate a given literary form for his own ends is, as Eileen Sweeney writes, critical in our understanding of that text.<sup>23</sup> We must therefore interrogate what the shift from the epistolary genre to philosophical translation, for example, might have meant for Ficino, and ask what this means for our interpretation of him. We must also look specifically to the kinds of linguistic and rhetorical mechanisms which are at play in any given context to determine what precisely Ficino was trying to achieve.

#### **4.2 Rhetoric and Redaction: The Language of Spiritual Renewal**

Christopher Celenza argues that "the Savonarolan era created orthodoxy in late Quattrocento Florence by defining a field of action as heterodox."<sup>24</sup> As chapters two and

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<sup>23</sup> See Eileen Sweeney, "Literary Forms of Medieval Philosophy," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Stanford University, 2019), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2019/entries/medieval-literary/>.

<sup>24</sup> Christopher S. Celenza, "From Center to Periphery in the Florentine Intellectual Field: Orthodoxy Reconsidered," in *Artistic Exchange and Cultural Translation in the Italian Renaissance City*, eds. Stephen J. Campbell and Stephen J. Milner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 284. Also see Celenza, "Late Antiquity and Florentine Platonism," 72–73.

three have well established, Ficino's comprehension of what was heterodox surely cannot be denied. And yet, as we have already begun to see, Ficino openly speaks of his plans for a new mode of Christian belief and practice based on doctrines which he knew were unacceptable within a contemporary Christian framework. Hidden in plain sight, Ficino's radical doctrinal discussions took place outside of traditional Christian 'religious' and 'theological' texts. These discussions, moreover, seem to employ the linguistic and rhetorical techniques found in contemporary religious and theological literature. In the discussion below, I will demonstrate that Ficino had an astute awareness of the power of theological discourse in transmitting ideas, and of the potential influence of the rhetorical and linguistic structures embedded within certain genres. Indeed, representing far more than a simple revival or restatement of Neoplatonic doctrines, I will argue that Ficino manipulated language, rhetoric, and literary convention in order to advocate for the restoration of ancient doctrines on the origins of the soul, in place of established Christian teachings. This was, after all, central to his broader programme of spiritual renewal. However, determining Ficino's support for these doctrines is a complex matter, and I must therefore begin by elaborating a new methodological approach to reading Ficino.

A necessary consideration when trying to determine Ficino's theological goals, is, as we have just established, that Ficino's texts often build upon and elaborate themes which have been discussed in his other works. Ficino often alluded to the fact that his discussions on a given topic would be or had been treated elsewhere, and we must therefore always keep this in mind when attempting to reconstruct his position on particular doctrines. This will, however, only take us so far. In order to demonstrate Ficino's advocacy of Neoplatonic doctrines on the origins of the soul, we must first study the conventions of the various genres used in this project of renewal in order to highlight the way in which different literary forms were consciously selected and used by Ficino to gain more intellectual freedom. Next, we must closely examine Ficino's written style, focusing on the linguistic and rhetorical techniques employed to persuade the reader. Here we will draw particular attention to Ficino's unique fusion of elements of both deliberative and epideictic rhetoric. Finally, we must consider simply what was said, and where. Taking a redaction critical approach to what was added, omitted, and conserved by Ficino, we will illuminate the doctrines which were essential to Ficino in constructing his theology.

Used to determine the theological motivations of a writer based on the manner in which they modify or redact pre-existing material, redaction criticism studies the “collection, arrangement, editing and modification of traditional material.”<sup>25</sup> Sometimes referred to as composition criticism this methodology tracks the changes introduced into the material, and assesses how the reorganisation or relocation of material transforms the narrative. Studying the “interaction between an inherited tradition and a later interpretive point of view,” redaction critical analyses allow scholars to understand “why the items from the tradition were modified and connected as they were,” and “to identify the theological motifs that were at work” in a given text.<sup>26</sup> While my analysis primarily follows a redaction critical approach, I have been guided by the questions central to literary and form criticism. Focussing on authorship, the composite nature of a text, and the identity and extent of sources which inform it, literary criticism raises central questions about the relationship between form and content, the significance of form for meaning, and the capacity of language to direct thought. Form criticism, on the other hand, is concerned with the sources that inform a text, and the modifications which the life and thought of the Church have introduced into the tradition.<sup>27</sup> This latter discipline informs my understanding of the way in which the Neoplatonic tradition had creative influence on the content of Ficino’s texts, and how it impacted his understanding and modification of Christian theology.

#### **4.2.1 Literary Forms and their Conventions**

Any study which seeks to examine the dissemination of ideas must necessarily focus its attention to the specific medium employed. In a written context, it must consider to what extent a literary genre might dictate the kinds of material treated within a given text, and how that genre might impact the way those ideas are expressed. For the present study, we must also consider how Ficino understood these conventions and the ways in which he used or exploited them for his own purposes. To address these concerns, let us first briefly consider the compositional conventions of the epistolary and commentary genres, as well as those of the medieval *summa*.

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<sup>25</sup> Norman Perrin, *What is Redaction Criticism?* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1970), 1.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, viii.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, vii–viii.

During the fifteenth-century letters were usually composed in line with the medieval *ars dictaminis* — a five-part systematic format consisting of a *salutatio* (formal greeting), *exordium* (introduction to the content of the letter and a “laudatory exhortation” to the reader to capture his attention and goodwill), *narratio* (narrative), *petitio* (presentation of requests), and *conclusio* (conclusion).<sup>28</sup> Aside from these basic mechanisms, a letter could discuss whatever material the author desired, and could certainly be discursive. As Judith Henderson demonstrates, letter-writing was taught principally as an exercise in rhetoric, where “each letter was a miniature oration intended to persuade. ... The *ars dictaminis* ... adapted the art of the oration to the letter.”<sup>29</sup> Thus, in a rhetorical sense, there were many styles from which the author could choose, including the demonstrative genre, depending on the purpose of the letter and the outcome they wished to achieve. Quattrocento humanists were united in the belief that letter-writing was an art, and for them, Cicero was the paragon of epistolary style and eloquence.<sup>30</sup>

Commentaries from antiquity and beyond aimed principally to elucidate the text of another author, as is well known, and were more often than not organised in relation to the textual logic of the source text, usually “by an alteration between lemmata consisting of brief citations of the commented text and explanations or comments of [their] own.”<sup>31</sup> However, it has always been the commentator’s prerogative to determine the nature of his *expositio*, and how closely he follows this lemmatic format. Though the balance of the work should, as a general rule, look to the views of the original author, rather than those of the commentator, as can be seen through the exegetical traditions of Plotinus, Porphyry, Iamblichus, and Proclus, original philosophical systems were often elaborated

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<sup>28</sup> Paul McLean, “The Rhetoric and Design of Florentine Letter Writing,” in *The Art of the Network: Strategic Interaction and Patronage in Renaissance Florence* (Durham, N.C: Duke University Press, 2008), 45–46. Also see Giles Constable, *Letters and Letter-Collections* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1976); David Randall, *The Concept of Conversation: From Cicero’s Sermo to the Grand Siècle’s Conversation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 166–182.

<sup>29</sup> See Judith Rice Henderson, “On reading the Rhetoric of the Renaissance Letter,” in *Renaissance-Rhetorik / Renaissance Rhetoric*, ed. Heinrich F. Plett (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1993), 143–162, at 149.

<sup>30</sup> “By the end of the quattrocento Ciceronian imitation had become almost a defining initiatory rite for humanists. Most collected and circulated their letters, as Petrarch had done, on the model of Cicero’s *Epistulae ad familiares*. The humanists were consumed by attaining new heights in rhetoric and eloquence, and none seemed higher than Cicero.” Denis J. -J. Robichaud, *Plato’s Persona: Marsilio Ficino Renaissance Humanism, and Platonic Traditions* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), 40. Note, though the Italian humanists’ rediscovery of the *Epistulae ad Familiares* led them to a different appreciation of Cicero’s stylistic merits within the epistolary genre, “when the humanists devise their own catalogues and classifications of epistolary types, they rarely mention the ‘familiar’ letter as such.” Henderson, “Rhetoric of the Renaissance Letter,” 149.

<sup>31</sup> Glenn W. Most, “Preface,” in *Commentaries–Kommentare* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999), vii–xv.

as reflections on a given text, bringing philosophy itself into close connection with exegesis.<sup>32</sup> Though they approached texts through the lens of their antique counterparts, medieval commentators learned to transcend the “increasingly sophisticated and codified” technical structure and “rigid scheme of the commentary in order to make it a flexible instrument to express in an orderly manner, so to say, his own basic philosophical assumptions.”<sup>33</sup> From the second half of thirteenth century, and especially throughout the fourteenth century, commentaries *per modum quaestionis* became the predominant form, as the *quaestio* was understood to be “the most direct way of getting to the philosophical problems conveyed by the text.”<sup>34</sup> Granting the author a “pretext for independent theological argumentation,” through which to refute and persuade rather than explain, the commentary form was the ideal genre for speculative originality.<sup>35</sup>

As the genre of didactics, the medieval *summa* was a compendium of knowledge in a particular field — theology, philosophy and law being chief among them. Though they may be variously constructed, some *summae*, such as Aquinas’ *Summa Contra Gentiles* and *Summa Theologiae*, “divide their subjects into a great number of questions, usually following a more or less generally accepted order, and use the dialectical method of evolving a theme by affirmation and contradiction.”<sup>36</sup> In their systematic compilation of expositions and recognised opinions, *summae* seek to fully “emancipate the subject matter, whether logical, theological, or philosophical, from the structure dictated either by scripture or authoritative sources,” and to “cover completely an entire discipline, often but not always, in summary form.”<sup>37</sup> As such, *summae* could be polemical, encyclopaedic, or protreptic works.

Aside from these basic compositional conventions, the genres just discussed carried relatively few pre-conceived expectations for Renaissance readers. By contrast, within the more traditional, public theological forms (sermons and orations) we find a far more

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<sup>32</sup> See Francesco del Punta, “The Genre of Commentaries in the Middle Ages and its Relation to the Nature and Originality of Medieval Thought,” in *Was ist Philosophie im Mittelalter? / Qu’est-ce que la philosophie au Moyen Âge? / What is Philosophy in the Middle Ages?*, eds. Jan A. Aertsen and Andreas Speer (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1998), 138–151.

<sup>33</sup> Del Punta, “Commentaries in the Middle Ages,” 141.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>36</sup> See ‘Summa,’ in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*. On the contrasts between these *summae*, see especially Peter Howard, *Aquinas and Antoninus: A Tale of Two Summae in Renaissance Florence* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2013).

<sup>37</sup> Sweeney, “Literary Forms of Medieval Philosophy.”

distinct relation between form and content. Indeed, within these literary forms, the audience would expect to read or hear certain ideas presented in a certain way, but the same cannot necessarily be said of letters, commentaries, and *summae*. This is precisely what attracted Ficino to these literary forms; with no strictly mandated content, structure or method, these genres offered Ficino substantial liberty, flexibility, and poetic license. As such, the things that were consciously included by Ficino in each of these forms and the manner in which they were expressed become extremely important considerations for the historian. Certainly, the repetition of common themes and the specific vocabulary and style he employed are indicative of Ficino's manipulation of the narrative being expressed, and of the conventions of each of these literary forms. Through the vehicle of commentary especially, Ficino was able to carefully select which ideas and which parts of an original text he would relay, expound upon, and emphasise, in so doing expressing his theological goals.

Though its full title, *Theologia Platonica: De Immortalitate Animorum* nowhere reflects the term 'summa' Ficino's *Platonic Theology* was simultaneously a *summa theologica*, a *summa philosophica*, and a *summa platonica*.<sup>38</sup> Unlike the medieval *summae* which are typically ordered on Neoplatonic principles, the *Platonic Theology* follows a "psychological or heuristic rather than ontological or generative order."<sup>39</sup> Moreover, Ficino's systematic approach does not follow a unitary method; the text presents a combination of arguments on a particular point (alternating between affirmative defence, confirmation, and proofs), objections to the opinions of past authorities accompanied by a response, refutation, or rebuttal, and finally, Ficino takes up the form of the *quaestio*, particularly as he moves towards the discussions of his more controversial positions. In books 17 and 18 especially, Ficino's *Platonic Theology*, like Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*, appears to use 'artificial' questions, which are "carefully composed imitations of disputations, not tied to any actual oral debate as true disputed questions

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<sup>38</sup> Michael J. B. Allen and James Hankins, "Introduction," in *Platonic Theology*, 1:ix. As per Sweeney's definition, "the work fits the *summa* form in its systematic arrangement of topics and its attempt to include all possible arguments for a given position and against its contrary." Sweeney, "Literary Forms of Medieval Philosophy."

<sup>39</sup> "The medieval *summa* ordinarily begins from the apex of the metaphysical hierarchy, beginning with God and his attributes, then moves down through angelic to human nature; it then follows the flow of the divine creative act back to its source by treating the redemption of human nature, understood as that nature's return, via reason, love and grace, to the source of its being. Ficino begins instead with what is known *quoad nos*, i.e. with our material bodies, and ascends through five grades of reality to God. He then descends again to the level of soul and discusses its nature and species before passing on to his immortality proofs." See Hankins, "Ficino and the Religion of the Philosophers," 109.

are,” which gives Ficino the opportunity to “arrange the objections and authorities so as to achieve a rhetorical as well as a logical effect.”<sup>40</sup> Though it certainly boasts an impressive design, it does not reflect the “tightly woven, internally consistent and self-referential architecture of Thomas’s two great *summae*.”<sup>41</sup> Instead, the work “opens up a number of lines of inquiry and persuasion, as if in some degree it were trying to introduce into a medieval formatting something of the open-endedness of Plato’s dialogic inquiry.”<sup>42</sup> On Ficino’s written style, James Hankins and Michael J. B. Allen assert that while it is “unadorned and apparently artless,” it is nevertheless “syntactically and rhetorically challenging, with its frequent asyndeton ... its unbalanced periods ... its occasional direct address, and its intermittent flights of poetic imagery contributing to a sense of allocutionary trance.”<sup>43</sup> The rhetorical complexities of Ficino’s *magnum opus* should not be overlooked however, because for all the confusion they might present to the modern reader, they arguably served a much greater purpose in his programme of religious, theological and spiritual renewal — a purpose which was, moreover, perceptible to his peers.

Of all the literary forms employed by Ficino, it is his use of commentary which has captured scholarly attention. In his investigation of Ficino’s written style and use of ‘hybrid-genres’ Christopher Celenza notes that Ficino’s *Commentary of Plato’s Symposium on Love* (hereafter *De amore*) sat somewhere “between the genres of commentary and original work.”<sup>44</sup> This was similarly noted by Michael J. B. Allen, who, according to Letizia Panizza, revalued “Ficino’s commentaries on Plato’s dialogues, and through them the commentary itself as a distinctive genre, comparable to the modern ‘essays on...’ or ‘a critique of...’”<sup>45</sup> Ficino’s commentaries were, in Panizza’s view, “hardly reductionist summaries or trite repetitions,” and instead proved to be “polemical and innovative reshapings of Plato in light of late fifteenth-century Italian concerns.”<sup>46</sup> In his English translation of the *De amore*, Sears Jayne noted that:

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<sup>40</sup> Sweeney, “Literary Forms of Medieval Philosophy.” As chapter three has argued, questions regarding the creation of souls in the heavens, the pre-existence of souls, and their subsequent descent into bodies do not appear in the records we have of disputed questions in the Florentine *Studio* or *studia generalia*.

<sup>41</sup> Allen and Hankins, “Introduction,” in *Platonic Theology*, 1:xiii.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, ix.

<sup>44</sup> Celenza, *The Intellectual World of the Italian Renaissance*, 260.

<sup>45</sup> See Letizia Panizza, “M. J. B. Allen, Marsilio Ficino and the Phaedran Charioteer; The Platonism of Marsilio Ficino,” review of *Marsilio Ficino and the Phaedran Charioteer* and *The Platonism of Marsilio Ficino*, by Michael J. B. Allen, *Italian Studies* 41, no. 1 (1986): 116–119, at 117.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

Although the *Symposium* does not contribute very much to the doctrinal content of the *De amore*, employing the form of a commentary on the *Symposium* was important to Ficino. The point was that it was conventional before Ficino's time to write one's own treatise in the form of a commentary on some other work.<sup>47</sup> ... Ficino decided to use the *Symposium* of Plato as his vehicle. It was an appropriate vehicle because it was on his subject and because it was new; his was the first complete translation of the dialogue ever written. It was because of the convention of commentary as a substitute for the discursive treatise that Ficino wrote his treatise on love in the form of a commentary, and it was because of the relevance of this *Symposium* to his own subject, Socratic love, that he chose to attach his commentary to the *Symposium*.<sup>48</sup>

Following this, Jayne stated that:

... Plato wrote non-discursively, casting his ideas in the form of imaginary dialogues and myths, whereas Aristotle wrote discursively, casting his ideas in the form of systematic treatises on physics, metaphysics, ethics, politics etc. ... Because the *De amore* was written as a Platonic work and because it was written for the Medici, any renaissance reader would have expected it to follow the Platonic mode of non-discursive form but also to conceal some more esoteric meaning than was apparent on the surface. ... This is the way Ficino intended it to be read.<sup>49</sup>

Though Renaissance readers would arguably have been aware that the Platonic dialogic form *was* a discursive form (and that Ficino's commentaries therefore contained a discursive lesson), we can then see here a keen awareness on Ficino's part of the power of genre in directing the expectations of the reader.<sup>50</sup> As the intended audience for Ficino's Platonic commentaries were the Florentine *ingegnosi*, who were also instructed

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<sup>47</sup> On this convention, see chapters 1 and 2 in John Charles Nelson, *Renaissance Theory of Love: The Context of Giordano Bruno's Eroici furori* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958).

<sup>48</sup> Jayne, "Introduction," 9–11.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 17–18.

<sup>50</sup> On the discursive nature of the Platonic dialogic form, see Robichaud, *Plato's Persona*, especially chapter 1. On the centrality of epideictic rhetoric to this discursive mission, see Bernard K. Duffy, "The Platonic Functions of Epideictic Rhetoric," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 16, no. 2 (1983): 79–93.

in classical rhetoric, surely it follows that these readers (particularly those in Ficino's circle) could discern that Ficino was instructing them toward a particular belief or action. From these analyses, we can clearly see that a precedent for Ficino's use, or perhaps misuse, of literary genre has already been established.

Though Ficino has been described as a master in the art of letter writing, the rhetorical aspects of his epistolary correspondence are often overlooked by scholars.<sup>51</sup> In his study of Ficino's use of the epistolary genre, however, Denis Robichaud highlights the close correspondence between this genre and the Platonic dialogic form. Robichaud argues that Ficino, like his contemporaries, employed the epistolary form to "fabricate his own discursive rhetorical *persona*, yet in his case, he worked at being known as *the* public spokesperson for Plato."<sup>52</sup> This *persona* — a carefully crafted rhetorical mask used for rhetorical purposes — he argues, anchors itself more firmly in the readers' mind. Observable in the unique dynamic created between Ficino and his reader — a dynamic which mimics the Platonic *personae* — Ficino's *personae* constitute an epistolary game that "encourages one to reflect Socratically on self-knowledge as an engagement with another" — an exercise through which they can begin to know God.<sup>53</sup> Robichaud asserts that the "prosopopoeic interpretations of Plato's corpus" by later Neoplatonic commentators "clearly influenced Ficino's epistolary voice," and that "Ficino turned to these ancient commentary traditions to help him conceive of his epistolary persona."<sup>54</sup> This prosopopoeic influence on Ficino's writing, however, arguably extends beyond his epistolary-self; as we shall see below, Ficino used the masks of the ancients to both construct and promote his own theology. But Ficino's epistolary correspondence is also marked by another rhetorical characteristic, one which I believe needs to be unpacked

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<sup>51</sup> See Clement Salaman, "Introduction," in *Letters*, 8:xix. Robichaud remarks that "In writing these epistles Ficino does not immediately follow the two traditional models for philosophical letters, Seneca and Cicero, yet philosophical style was nonetheless important to him." He continues by noting that "researchers of humanist rhetoric and dialogue are often too quick to cast aside Ficino the philosopher," while "scholars of Ficino all too often neglect the rhetorical facets of Ficino's work. Yet Ficino is very much invested in rhetoric, primarily in studying Plato's own artistry and in forming his own oratorical and epistolary persona. In both cases, Ficino works with various rhetorical stratagems, but notably *prosopopoeia* and *enargeia* — in other words, the fabrication and vivid presentation of *personae*. If one looks exclusively for narrowly defined *elegantia* in humanist rhetoric, one runs the risk of being blind to the sophisticated and philosophical aspects of Ficino's style." Robichaud, *Plato's Persona*, 51 and 69–70.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>53</sup> "At first glance one can understand Ficino's Platonic letters as a correspondence network strengthening the social bonds of fifteenth-century philosophers, theologians, poets, statesmen, and scholars. That is, they simply perform a literary game in which members of an inner circle of elites are cast in roles played for their own amusement. They do indeed form a network of connections." *Ibid.*, 66–67.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

further. Examining ‘praise’ in Ficino’s letters, Valery Rees has shown how this topos was used to praise men for personal and political purposes. As Rees has shown, “comments on praise also abound in Ficino’s other works ... Among the letters, there are some twenty-five to which Ficino annexed the title ‘Praise’ of one sort or another.”<sup>55</sup> Though she acknowledges that Ficino was “clearly an adept in the difficult art of teaching by encouragement and example,” and though she treats of praise as a spiritual discipline, Ficino’s use of praise in the context of spiritual direction requires further investigation.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, this particular kind of rhetorically purposeful language is a recurring motif in his epistolary correspondence.

#### **4.2.2 The ‘New’ Rhetoric**

The seminal studies of Charles Trinkaus, John O’Malley, John D’Amico, and Salvatore Camporeale all attested to the emergence of a new theological style in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.<sup>57</sup> This new way of theologising — classified as ‘humanist’ or ‘rhetorical’ theology — was characterised primarily by the use of classical motifs and *exempla*, and especially a Latin style that renewed the rhetoric and metaphors of Cicero, the master of eloquence. Rejecting traditional Scholastic forms, this new humanistic style nuanced and reformulated existing doctrine so as to make Christian teachings more appealing to individual believers, and to satisfy the needs of lay intellectuals in a way which contemporary theological discourse did not. This resurgence of classical language in a theological context was especially coloured by the use of both the *ars laudandi et vituperandi* and the *ars suadendi et dissuadendi*. Indeed, by the late-fifteenth century, praise, blame, persuasion, and dissuasion had become indispensable tools for the

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<sup>55</sup> Valery Rees, “Quo vertam oculos ut te laudem? Aspects of Praise in Ficino’s Writing,” in *Laus Platonici Philosophi*, 46. Ficino’s letter to Lorenzo Lippi (c.1473–1474) is especially important for understanding how he himself used praise and blame: “... [the] audience must be swayed not by what is pleasing, but by what is right. For he who urges what is just will win his case most easily ... the speaker who is most deeply moved himself will move others most deeply, whereas the man who sings one tune and plucks another from his lyre totally offends the ear. ... When about to praise or blame anyone ... remember that the nature of matter, time and space is vast ... Praise, therefore, should be sparingly given, and blame more sparingly still; further, by praising [one] should encourage and instruct. No one is more deadly a murderer than the flatterer, who does everything in his power to kill the soul. Therefore, rather than praise persons ... praise virtues, and God, the fount of all virtues. Such is the part of the true philosopher. The other is the way of the flatterer. [One should] censure the fault, which is the act of a friend, not blame the man, which is the act of an enemy. It is evil [one] should loathe, not men. ... Therefore, following the example of Socrates ... use human learning to dispel the clouds of the senses, and to bring serenity to the soul. Then will the ray of truth from the divine sun illumine the mind, and never in any other way.” See Letter 109, *The principle of teaching, praising and blaming*. Ficino, *Letters*, 1:132–133.

<sup>56</sup> Rees, “Aspects of Praise in Ficino’s Writing,” 50.

<sup>57</sup> See chapter one, n.43 and n.45.

humanist-theologian. Commonly known as the language of ‘praise and blame,’ epideictic or demonstrative rhetoric is the art of being able to impress ideas upon an audience without action as a goal. Deliberative rhetoric, on the other hand, aims to move the audience to a decision or specific course of action using historical proof as a means of argumentation and persuasion. Various adapted to suit the preachers’ needs, these rhetorical genres became the trademark of the late fifteenth-century humanist sermons and theological orations.<sup>58</sup>

Indeed, contemporary preaching manuals indicate that the preacher needed to adapt his speech in order to satisfy the needs of his audience, both in terms of the messages and moral teachings he chose to convey, and in the rhetorical style he adopted to persuade and move his audience.<sup>59</sup> Published in 1477, St Antoninus’ *Summa Theologica* (III, XVIII, V–VI) was the newest *artes praedicandi* to appear in Florence. The text summarised the seven methodologies available to the fifteenth-century preacher, making explicit reference to the classical rhetorical tradition, and the rhetoric of praise and blame in particular. Antoninus’ *Tractatus de modo praedicandi*, however, which contains passages that correspond to this section of the *Summa*, and indeed, several complete versions of Pars III, were in circulation in manuscript form some decades earlier.<sup>60</sup> Given Antoninus’ connection to Ficino (however tenuous) during his youth, as the Chancellor of the University of Florence, the ideas expressed in this text especially help us to gauge how Ficino understood the subtle and persuasive art of transmitting theological discourse — the purpose of which was to teach and to instruct on doctrine.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Though O’Malley states that deliberative rhetoric was not used *inter missorum solemnities*, he notes that epideictic sermons would often, in practice, conclude with a deliberative peroration. While these could indeed be of a political nature, the general notion of what is to be considered a deliberative ‘call to a specific course of action’ must be reconsidered, for just as epideictic itself was adapted for the preacher’s use, so too was deliberative rhetoric; a decision or action need not be political, it could be religious, moral, or spiritual, and the deliberative body which this genre addresses, likewise, need not be a senate or a conclave of cardinals — it could be the preacher’s very own audience, to whom this persuasive appeal was being made. Moreover, the classical and biblical *exempla* employed by humanist preachers corresponded to the historical examples used for persuasion which are central to the deliberative genre. See O’Malley, *Praise and Blame*, 37, n.4, 60–61.

<sup>59</sup> See Peter Howard, *Beyond the Written Word: Preaching and Theology in the Florence of Archbishop Antoninus 1427–1459* (Florence: Leo S. Olschki Editore, 1999); David D’Avray, *Medieval Religious Rationalities: A Weberian Analysis* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>60</sup> Howard, *Beyond the Written Word*, 20–29, 107–126.

<sup>61</sup> On the debate as to whether Antoninus was Ficino’s religious mentor, see Kristeller, *Studies in Renaissance Thought*, 1:201; Arthur Field, *The Origins of the Platonic Academy of Florence* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 136. Both Kristeller and Field argue against the notion. Sebastiano Gentile, Sandra Niccoli and Paolo Viti argue in favour of informal contact between the two, see *Marsilio Ficino e il Ritorno di Platone: Manoscritti, Stampe e Documenti: Catalogo*, eds. Sebastiano Gentile, Sandra Niccoli and Paolo Viti (Florence: Le Lettere, 1984), 172–173. “Ficino was still relatively young in terms

In contrast to the ‘scholastic’ or thematic sermon, which raised questions and proved the answers through disputation and lecturing, the ‘dogmatic’ character of the epideictic sermon so favoured by the humanists was designed to stimulate admiration and contemplation of the divine, with the intention of leading the audience to imitate. In his survey of humanist orators in the Papal court from the mid-fifteenth century, O’Malley argued that the changes in preaching practices from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance were far more radical than the addition of classicising vocabulary or the abandonment of the scholastic thematic sermon structure; he demonstrated that the shift to epideictic in this context represented a transformation in the genre from an exercise of instruction to an exercise in praise.<sup>62</sup> In impressing ideas upon the audience, however, epideictic is a form of teaching, making “generous provision for exhortation, the giving of counsel and admonition.”<sup>63</sup> Moreover, the deliberative perorations appended to many of these sermons provided the audience with a clear spiritual path on which to proceed. It is thus significant that we find this linguistic precedent within the pages of Ficino’s treatises, commentaries, and correspondence, as it combined the call for imitation found in epideictic with the call to specific action found in deliberative rhetoric; this language instructed the audience to put particular ideas into practice.

Of course, we cannot remove epideictic from its Platonic roots, which were just as influential on Ficino’s understanding of communicating higher truths. In the *Republic*, Plato identified epideictic as the form of oration necessary to the ideal state. Similarly, in the *Menexenus* and *Phaedrus*, Plato revealed epideictic rhetoric as the handmaiden of Platonic philosophy, using epideictic itself to convey this belief. For Plato, epideictic rhetoric was an educative tool which could be used to illuminate timeless values and abstract, philosophical truths, and which could be implemented such as to “shape an appearance of truth that [would] be persuasive.”<sup>64</sup> As Bernard Duffy shows, “Plato embraces epideictic rhetoric as the means for the philosophical instruction of the single

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of his philosophical explorations when Antoninus died in 1459, and there appear to have been no thoughts in his mind by that time of training for the priesthood.” Whatever the case, it is clear that Francesco da Castiglione, who was Ficino’s teacher of Greek and possibly his mentor, “served as secretary to Antoninus and later as biographer,” and thus, Ficino “experienced possibly first-hand but certainly second-hand the effective presence of this determined but gentle saint.” Rees, “Aspects of Praise in Ficino’s Writing,” 59–60.

<sup>62</sup> O’Malley, *Praise and Blame*, 49.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>64</sup> Duffy, “The Platonic Functions of Epideictic Rhetoric,” 89.

auditor, although the significance of the speech is universal.”<sup>65</sup> Having shown the utility of epideictic in both oral and written contexts throughout many of his dialogues, Plato was yet another source which revealed that epideictic was the optimal form of persuasion and education.

Thus, drawing on all facets of his immediate cultural context — especially his theological environment — as a barometer for what was effective in shaping and transmitting theological discourse, Ficino forged his own distinct combination of demonstrative and deliberative rhetoric as a means to promote Platonic doctrines. Indeed, what better tools than these to effect theological change.

Turning now to our analysis, we will here focus on excerpts from a range of Ficino’s works, including his *Platonic Theology*, his commentaries of Plato’s *Phaedrus* and *Symposium*, and two select letters from the beginning and height of his career respectively. These passages, which deal predominantly with the pre-existence and descent of the soul, aptly illustrate exactly what Ficino was trying to persuade the audience of, and how it was achieved. This analysis is by no means exhaustive and aims only to provide a sampling of the kinds of rhetorical, linguistic, and conventional manipulations that occur in relation to Ficino’s advocacy of Platonic doctrines, and moreover, it only deals with a handful of such instances. A much broader analysis which addresses the full spectrum of Ficino’s Platonic and later Neoplatonic commentaries in this light remains a desideratum. For now, I will demonstrate some of the ways in which praise, blame, and deliberative rhetoric operated within the various genres employed by Ficino in advocating a new mode of religious belief and practice.

The particular verbs employed by Ficino in conveying Platonic doctrines on the origins of the soul more clearly reveal his purpose. Written in 1457, Ficino’s epistolary treatise, the *De divino furore*, gives a lengthy exposition of the soul’s pre-existence, descent, and powers of memory and recollection. Integral to the doctrine of divine frenzy, as we have seen, is the notion that the soul was created and existed in the heavens prior to its corporeal inhabitation; however, driven by its inclination toward earthly things the soul descended into bodies, where it became imprisoned until, stirred again by its inclination

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<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

towards God, it contemplates the divine natures it had previously experienced but had forgotten. Through contemplation the soul regains its wings and is able to return to God. Hinged upon the pre-existence of the soul, the Platonic narrative differs significantly from the Christian account of religious madness or ecstasy, which instead describes an altered state of consciousness, both interior and exterior.<sup>66</sup> Addressed to the humanist poet and fellow Platonist, Pellegrino degli Agli, Ficino's letter advises that:

I am sure that this description will not only please you, but also be of the very greatest use to you. Plato considers, as Pythagoras, Empedocles and Heraclitus maintained earlier, that our soul, before it descended into bodies, dwelt in the abodes of heaven where ... it was nourished and rejoiced in the contemplation of truth. Those philosophers I have just mentioned had learnt from Mercurius Trismegistus, the wisest of all the Egyptians, that God is the supreme source and light within whom shine the models of all things, which they call ideas. Thus, they believed, it followed that the soul, in steadfastly contemplating the eternal mind of God, also beholds with greater clarity the natures of all things. ... And sometimes [Plato] calls these natures 'ideas,' sometimes 'divine essences,' and sometimes 'first natures which exist in the eternal mind of God.' The minds of men, while they are there, are well nourished with perfect knowledge. But souls are depressed into bodies through thinking about and desiring earthly things. Then those who were previously fed on ambrosia and nectar, that is the knowledge and perfect joy of God, in their descent are said to drink continuously of the river Lethe, that is forgetfulness of the divine. They do not fly back to heaven, whence they fell by weight of their earthly thoughts, until they begin to contemplate once more those divine natures which they have forgotten. The divine philosopher considers we achieve this through two virtues, one relating to moral conduct and the other to contemplation; one he names with a

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<sup>66</sup> Ecstasy is defined as the state of being beside oneself as the result of an overpowering religious experience. Consisting of two elements, one interior and one exterior, the former is invisible and exists solely within the mind, which becomes fixated on some divine matter. The latter pertains to the senses, which are suspended during the experience; they are unable to influence the soul and are difficult to awaken. See John A. Hardon, *Catholic Dictionary: An Abridged and Updated Edition of Modern Catholic Dictionary* (New York: Image, 2013), 146.

common term ‘justice,’ and the other ‘wisdom.’ ... [Plato] thinks that men never remember the divine unless they are stirred by its shadows or images, as they may be described, which are perceived by the bodily senses. Paul and Dionysius, the wisest of the Christian theologians, affirm that the invisible things of God are understood from what has been made and is to be seen here, but Plato says the wisdom of men is the image of divine wisdom.<sup>67</sup>

Before launching into a detailed description of the doctrine of divine frenzy, Ficino first frames the readers approach to the text.<sup>68</sup> Taking a laudatory tone throughout the letter, Ficino’s rhetorically purposeful language here makes use of words such as ‘*voluptati*’ (to please or to be a source of pleasure), and ‘*utilitati maxime*’ (to benefit most), which impress upon the reader that the teachings which follow will be of practical use and must therefore be respected. Then, reciting a list of philosophers who espoused the doctrine, and who are used as historical proof, Ficino employs reverential appellations like ‘*omnium sapientissimo*’ (the wisest of all), through which he is able to emphasise their wisdom and authority. One should note that Ficino’s amalgamation of the views of these authors, which of course differed in reality, but which are presented in a way which creates unity and uniformity across the ancient tradition, ultimately served to bolster the validity of the views being expressed. Moreover, Ficino authoritatively asserts and

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<sup>67</sup> Letter 7, *On divine frenzy*: “Quod quidem tum voluptati, tum etiam utilitati maxime tibi fore confido, censet igitur ille animum nostrum, prius quam in corpora laberetur, ut etiam Pythagoras, Empedocles, atque Heraclitus antea disputaverant, in coelestibus sedibus extitisse, ubi veritatis contemplatione ... nutriebatur, atque gaudebat. Quumque ii, quos paulo ante memoravi Philosophi, Deum summum fontem quendam, ac lumen, in quo rerum omnium exemplaria, quas ideas nominant, elucescant esse, a Mercurio Trismegisto Aegyptiorum omnium sapientissimo didicissent, necessarium fore putabant animum aeternam Dei mentem assidue contemplantem, rerum quoque omnium naturas clarius intueri. ... atque has omnes tum ideas, tum divinas essentias, tum primas naturas, quae in aeterna Dei mente sint, nominat, quarum perfecta quadam cognitione hominum mentes quandiu illic degunt, foeliciter nutriantur. Quum vero ob terrenarum rerum cogitationem appetitionemque animi ad corpora deprimuntur, tunc qui prius ambrosia, ac nectare, id est, Dei cognitione perfectoque gaudio nutriebantur, continuo in ipsa descensione flumen Lethaeum, id est, oblivionem divinorum haurire dicuntur, nec prius ad superos, unde terrenae cogitationes pondere deciderant, revolare, quam divinas illas, quarum oblivionem susceperant, naturas recogitare coeperint. Id autem duabus virtutibus, ea videlicet, quae ad mores, ea insuper, quae ad contemplationem pertinent, assequi nos Philosophus ille divinus existimat, quarum alteram communi vocabulo iustitiam, alteram vero sapientiam nominat. ... Neque enim divinorum putat unquam homines reminisci, nisi quibusdam eorum, quasi umbris, atque imaginibus, que corporis percipiuntur, sensibus excitentur. Itaque Paulus ac Dionysius, Christianorum theologorum sapientissimi, invisibilia Dei, asserunt, per ea quae facta sunt, quaeque hic cernuntur intelligi. Divinae vero sapientiae imaginem esse Plato vult hominum sapientiam ...” Ficino, *Letters*, 1:14–15; Ficino, *Opera Omnia*, 1:612–613.

<sup>68</sup> Though Ficino claims to cover the notion in just a few words, “with that brevity which a letter demands,” the text spans several pages. Ficino, *Letters*, 1:14.

emphasises that these ancient philosophers are the most celebrated, especially on account of their doctrine. Working to integrate *prisca theologia* into the historical traditions of the Christian faith, Ficino's laudatory and legitimising language — which here largely pertains to the celebration and praise of Plato or the other ancient theologians — is designed to create trust and to promote belief, by persuading the reader in the veracity of their teachings. Though he acknowledges the harmony between St Paul and the Pseudo-Dionysius, Ficino chooses to follow Plato's logic and describes how man may restore his memory of the pre-natal communion with God. Recounting the various kinds of frenzy which are kindled by the bodily senses, Ficino explains that while these 'shadows' or 'reflections' of the divine may arouse the divine force which dwells within, the memory of true and divine beauty can only be perceived by the eye of the soul. From the introduction alone we can see that Ficino's purpose here is to guide the reader not only toward praise, but also toward a particular course of action: the belief in the pre-existence of the soul, and the practice of contemplating its divine origins.

Using the language of the *ars vituperandi*, Ficino was able to criticise views that would deny the teachings he sought to promote. Though Ficino avoided overtly blameful language, he used ancient authorities as a mouthpiece to express personally held views.<sup>69</sup> Again from his letter to Pellegrino degli Agli:

For Nature has so ordained that he who seeks anything should also delight in its image; but Plato holds it the mark of a dull mind and corrupt nature if a man desires no more than the shadows of that beauty nor looks for anything beyond the form his eyes can see. For he believes that such a man is afflicted with the kind of love that is the companion of wantonness and lust. And he defines as irrational and excessive the love of that pleasure in physical form which is perceived by the senses.<sup>70</sup>

Having earlier established that man is the most perfect, intelligent, and rational creature,

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<sup>69</sup> On the use of *personae* in Plato and Ficino, see Robichaud, *Plato's Persona*.

<sup>70</sup> "Sic enim natura institutum est, ut qui aliquid appetit, eius quoque similitudine delectetur, at istud crassioris ingenii corruptionisque naturae proprium esse putat, si quis umbras duntaxat verae illius pulchritudinis concupiscat, nec aliud quicquam, praeter illam, quae oculis offeretur speciem admiretur. Hunc enim eo amore, cuius petulantia atque lascivia comes est, affici vult, eum diffiniens irrationalem atque insolentem eius, que sensu percipitur, circa corporis formam voluptatis cupidinem." Ficino, *Letters*, 1:16; Ficino, *Opera Omnia*, 1:613.

Ficino appealed to the intellect of the audience, if not their ego. He guided the reader to the understanding that if man does not strive to ascend to God — if he does not desire to remember the true, divine beauty he once knew and loved — then he possesses a dull mind and corrupt state. Creating a clear dichotomy between good and bad, true and false, the negative connotations suggested here are not only a deterrent for the reader against superficial and impure love, but they also encourage the reader to look beyond the shadow of divine beauty (that which is perceived by the senses), and to recall the knowledge of the divine that the soul had once enjoyed. Ficino continues:

Plato says that this kind of love is born of human sickness and full of trouble and anxiety, and that it arises in those men whose mind is so covered over with darkness that it dwells on nothing exalted, nothing outstanding, nothing beyond the weak and transient image of this little body. It does not look up to the heavens, being locked in the darkness of a windowless dungeon.<sup>71</sup>

Using Plato's voice to further deter the reader, Ficino evokes a sense of trepidation, with an emotional appeal that paints a bleak alternative filled with misfortune. He does, however, offer a solution for those prepared to listen:

But those people should at once recall to memory that divine beauty, which they should honour and desire above all, as it is by a burning desire for this beauty that they are drawn to the heavens. This first attempt at flight Plato calls divine ecstasy and frenzy.<sup>72</sup>

Reminding the reader that the soul's memory of the divine is to be honoured (*admirentur*) and desired (*desiderent*) above all, Ficino's purposeful language again sets an epideictic mood. His deliberative construction moreover instructs the audience to "at once recall to memory" the knowledge their soul possessed when it dwelt in the abodes of heaven. The

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<sup>71</sup> "Huiusmodi Plato noster amorem ab humanis morbis nasci dicit, et cura solitudineque plenum esse, eumque iis hominibus convenire, quorum mens adeo tenebris offusa sit, ut nihil altum, nihil omnino egregium, nihil preter fragilem ac fluxam corpusculi huius imaginem cogitet, nec auras respiciat, clausa tenebris, et carcere caeco." Ficino, *Letters*, 1:16; Ficino, *Opera Omnia*, 1:613.

<sup>72</sup> "Verum ex hac imagine statim in memoriam divinam illam reducant, quam in primis admirentur, ac vere desiderent, cuiusve ardentissimo desiderio ad supera rapiantur. Atque hunc primum evolandi conatum divinam Plato alienationem furoremque nuncupat." Ficino, *Letters*, 1:16; Ficino, *Opera Omnia*, 1:613–614.

letter takes as its basic presumption that the soul did certainly exist prior to unification with the body and has therefore retained its memory of its former life, irrespective of Christian teachings. Certainly, it is conspicuous that the accepted belief is not acknowledged at all.

Ficino's preference for Platonic positions may easily be determined from his written style. In an epistle from 1480 addressed to Lotterio Neroni, a member of Ficino's circle, Ficino describes the nature of the lower world and the affairs of men. Masked as a letter, this treatise first sets out to validate the unity of Christian and Platonic belief:

Therefore, if there is anything pure in the universe, it has been granted only to heavenly beings ... Hence the Christian text: "Woe to land and sea, for Satan, seething with rage, has fallen upon you." Again, "Woe to the world because of offences, for it must needs be that offences come." Hence that saying of Plato: "It is necessary that there be evils opposed to good, but since evils cannot exist in the company of higher beings, of necessity they crowd round this lower region. And there is no other remedy for us but to flee as quickly as possible from the lower region to the higher by a perfect imitation of the divine life." ... But the Platonists hold that the heavenly bodies are not wholly pure if compared to those above the heavens.<sup>73</sup>

Drawing on passages of Scripture and Plato's *Theaetetus*, Ficino shows that the two traditions are in total agreement that the lower world is impure, in contrast to the purity of the heavens.<sup>74</sup> Advancing the auxiliary teaching that the heavens are purer than that which is beneath them, though God Himself is purer still, however, it is the Platonic view that lingers in the reader's mind before Ficino begins his exposition. Certainly, though the epistle is littered with scriptural references, revealing an intimate knowledge of both

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<sup>73</sup> Letter 48, *How impure this world is, how illusory and how deceptive*: "Siqua igitur in universo sunt munda, coelestibus tantum donata sunt. ... Hinc Christianum illud. Vae terrae ac mari quoniam ad suos cecidit diabolus ira furens. Rursus, vae mundo a scandalis, necesse enim est ut scandala veniant. Hinc illud Platicum, contraria bono mala esse necessarium est, cum vero apud superos esse mala non possent, regionem hanc inferiorem necessario circumeunt. Nullumque nobis aliud datur remedium, quam hinc illuc, qua celerrime purissima quadam vitae divinae similitudine fugere." Ficino, *Letters*, 5:72–73; Ficino, *Opera Omnia*, 1:836–837.

<sup>74</sup> Revelation 12:12; Matthew 18:7; Plato, *Theaetetus*, 176.

Old and New Testament teachings, the Platonists are given pre-eminence. This seamless glossing of the two traditions allowed Ficino to extend the authority of Christian teaching unto the doctrines contained in the epistle; contrasted against the dualism of the Manichaeans, the seemingly acceptable opinions of the Platonists go on to dominate the remainder of the letter. He continues:

So, although it is not lawful to agree fully with the Manichaeans about the world, we may at least cry out with them against it.<sup>75</sup> ... But in case we seem too bold, or unskilled, as orators, let us now have done with this rhetoric and make known with the brevity a letter requires what we understand about the impure structure of the lower world, showing firstly what reasons and then on whose authority we chiefly rely.<sup>76</sup>

Building upon this newly leased power, Ficino's rhetorical construction appeals to the reader's sense of logic and teaches which authorities should be relied on. Assuming an instructive tone and mood, Ficino's language indicates both his attitude toward the subject, and how the reader is meant to feel. Shifting the self-consciousness of the audience, Ficino's language and appeal to logic here also invoke the complicity of the reader, who becomes part of the effort to further a shared ideal.<sup>77</sup> Having demonstrated his knowledge of orthodox teachings, Ficino overlooks the authority of the Church and instead constructs an argument inspired by the Platonists, which advocates once more for the soul's pre-existence and descent into the body.<sup>78</sup> Having compared the soul's embodiment to a sleep-like state which brings delusion and sickness, Ficino delivers an overtly demonstrative declaration, as if he were recounting the words of God Himself:

Our Lord ... seems to sound these words in our ears: ... 'The only remedy

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<sup>75</sup> The Manichaeans believed that man was formed from a mixture of two natures which had always existed, one good and one bad; Christianity taught that man was created by God and was corrupted by sin. The construction '*si non licet*' might be nuanced here to read 'but *if* it is not lawful' — in this rendering, similar to Ficino's subjunctive appeals, the phrase seems to carry the sense that some aspect of their doctrine which has been rejected may in fact hold some truth.

<sup>76</sup> "Quamobrem et si non licet idem omnino cum Manichaei sentire de mundo, liceat saltem cum iisdem adversus eum ita clamare. ... Verum ne forte declamatores quidam audaciores sive inepti potius videantur, missa haec oratoria in praesentia faciamus, et quibus potissimum rationibus primum, deinde quorum praecipue autoritate freti, haec de immunda mundi huius inferioris machina sentiamus, in medium ea bevitate, (quam exigit Epistola) producamus." Ficino, *Letters*, 5:73; Ficino, *Opera Omnia*, 1:837.

<sup>77</sup> See 'Preaching and in Identity' in Howard, "Making a City and Citizens," 62–65.

<sup>78</sup> See Ficino, *Letters*, 5:77–78.

for so many and such serious diseases’ — trust the divine physician — ‘is to wake up at once and remain ever vigilant; or at least to recognise as sleeping those who are asleep. So rise now from your deep sleep, wretched men. Rise, I say, from your unhappy sleep and be happy. Breathe again, my sons. Keep watch with me, my sons. Return to your reason now, and be wise with me. Thus may you come to enjoy as fully as you can that same blessed light and truth which I enjoy.’<sup>79</sup>

Invoking the complicity of the reader once more, Ficino here calls his readers to contemplate their souls’ divine origins so that it may return to “that purity in which it is created” and unite with God Himself.<sup>80</sup> The divine physician (*divino medico*) referred to could be Plato or perhaps Ficino himself (Ficino appears happy to let the ambiguity work to his advantage), but in any event, he again asks the reader to trust what has been presented to them. The letter then goes on to present its second sub-argument, which deals with the descent of the soul, the Platonic myth of the cave, and the view of Hegesias and Plotinus that once souls enter the body, the best thing for them is to leave it at once. “But more on these matters elsewhere,” Ficino concludes.<sup>81</sup>

Through a comparative approach, which juxtaposed and contrasted Christian and Classical ideas, Ficino was able to subtly praise Platonic doctrines over established teachings. Fundamental to the deliberative genre, this technique, which draws on various historical models, allows the author to show his support or opposition by illustrating that a particular teaching should or will be beneficial. Thus, manipulating the rhetorical structures both of the *summa* and of the deliberative genre, in the eighteenth and final book of his *Platonic Theology*, Ficino inquires:

From where does the soul descend into the body? Truly since God is present in every place but is outside place, and the soul is not enclosed by

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<sup>79</sup> “Christus noster ... nostris auribus insonare videtur. ... Unica vero tot tantisque morbis medicina est, divino medico credere vel expergisci prorsus, et vigilare semper, vel saltem eos qui dormiunt, dormientes existimare. Quamobrem surgite iam e somno miseri tam profundo, surgite, inquam, ex infelici somno feliciter, respirate filii tandem, vigilate, filii, mecum, respiscite iam et sapite mecum. Ut eadem qua et ipse quandoque ipsi quoque pro viribus felicissima luce et veritatem fruamini.” Ficino, *Letters*, 5:75; Ficino, *Opera Omnia*, 1:838.

<sup>80</sup> Ficino, *Letters*, 5:73.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 78. On the reference to Plotinus, see *Enneads* IV.8.5. Cfr. chapter two, n.33.

place and is created and appears in a moment, properly we should say neither that it descends nor inquire whence it descends ... Now and then, however, it is pleasant to converse with the ancients. Thus, if we are to believe Zoroaster and Mercurius [Trismegistus], the lowest mind is sent down from the vast circumference of the world and — if I may relate their view in the right order — clings first to the highest body; and not only does it cling to it, it is poured into it; and with the highest body as a mean it is then joined to the grosser bodies.<sup>82</sup>

Unlike his letter to Pellegrino, Ficino here acknowledges the Christian understanding that the soul was created at the very moment it was joined with the body. He also acknowledges that he should neither say otherwise nor inquire into the matter, and yet, having raised the very question himself (for it was not a genuinely disputed question), he persisted in detailing the judgements of the ancients. Ascribing the views to Zoroaster and Hermes Trismegistus, Ficino is careful to note that he is merely relaying their opinions, however, having earlier worked to show that these same figures were comparable in status and authority to the Church Fathers, we know that Ficino held their judgements in the highest esteem. Certainly, he expounds these views in great detail across six subsequent chapters.<sup>83</sup> In the following chapter on the creation and descent of the soul, Ficino again asks an invented *quaestio* which serves his purposes:

In what part of heaven are souls created? Although it is foolish to enquire after a place in the case of these souls which are not confined to any place — and just as wherever the sun shines, a ray is emitted, so wherever God is present, the rational soul is sent forth — yet it is delightful to play poetically for a while with the ancients.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> *PT* 18.4.1: “Undenam descendit in corpus anima? Revera cum deus extra locum adsit omni loco, et anima non claudatur loco momentoque et creetur et adsit, neque dicendum proprie est eam descendere, neque unde descendat est quaerendum. Sic enim ab ipso deo manans adest corpori, ut ita dixerim, sicut a solis lumine radius oculo. Sed delectat interdum una cum priscis confabulari. Igitur si Zoroastri et Mercurio credimus, ex amplo demittitur ambitu mundi atque, ut illorum sententiam ordine referam, infima mens supremo corpori primum adhaeret, neque haeret solummodo, sed infunditur, quo tamquam medio crassioribus corporibus copulatur.” Ficino, *Platonic Theology*, 6:102–103.

<sup>83</sup> See *PT* 18.2–18.7. *Ibid.*, 6:82–119.

<sup>84</sup> *PT* 18.5.1: “Qua parte caeli animae procreantur? Quamquam stultum est quaerere situm in his, quae situ aliquo non clauduntur, et sicut ubicumque sol fulget, ibi mittitur radius, sic ubicumque deus adest, mittitur animus, delectat tamen cum antiquis interdum poetice ludere.” *Ibid.*, 6:110–113.

Ficino again revealed his implicit knowledge of the accepted Christian view and indicated his awareness that the view which he was about to discuss was heterodox. Preferring the Platonic view, however, what we see in both of these chapters is Ficino's deployment of a common topos of the Renaissance Neoplatonists.

Known as *serio ludere* (or *iocari serio*), this topos was here used to invite the reader to contemplate the pre-existence and descent of the soul further. Characterised as 'jesting in seriousness' this convention is a kind of philosophical wit designed to induce the disposition of the spirit proper to serious philosophising, attracting those worthy of the discipline. Utilising adjectives such as '*delectat*' (pleasant, delightful), and '*iuvat*' (enjoyable, helpful), Ficino's 'playful poetics' and 'conversations with the ancients' concealed more serious philosophical considerations, drawing in those capable of grasping them. Certainly, as Michael J. B. Allen and Francesca Lazzarin, have explored, Ficino's use of the topos was not merely humanist ornamentation.<sup>85</sup> To paraphrase Lazzarin: for Ficino, *serio ludere* is the dialectic that identifies itself with theology as the culmination of philosophical activity; it is the investigation of the divine mysteries handed down by Plato and his successors, in contrast to the childish rudiments of those who are unable to reach these heights. In order to attract kindred souls to the 'foods' that will bring spiritual health, Ficino uses simple and pleasant arguments as baits; while they may seem playful on the surface, these are carefully planned and constructed with serious intent.<sup>86</sup> This is exactly the kind of philosophical bait that Ficino had earlier mentioned in his letter to John of Hungary. We are suddenly reminded of those earlier passages in which Ficino appealed to the philosophers with an open mind.<sup>87</sup> That Ficino used language to bait his readers, with the intent of stimulating subsequent oral dialectics, will be discussed further in the next chapter.

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<sup>85</sup> See Michael J. B. Allen, "The Second Ficino-Pico Controversy: Parmenidean Poetry, Eristic, and the One," in *Plato's Third Eye: Studies in Marsilio Ficino's Metaphysics and its Sources* (Aldershot, Hampshire: Varorium, Ashgate Publishing Limited, 1995), 437–439; Francesca Lazzarin, "L'ideale del *severe ludere* nel Pensiero di Marsilio Ficino," *Accademia* 7 (2005): 61–78; Robichaud, *Plato's Persona*, 54–57, 63–64.

<sup>86</sup> Lazzarin, "L'ideale del *severe ludere*," 62–64.

<sup>87</sup> See the excerpts from Ficino's preface to the Plotinus translation: "... some sort of philosophical religion that will convince the philosophers open to its teachings," and from his letter to John of Hungary cited above: "... a philosophical religion which will persuade the philosophers who are prepared to listen to it with an open mind."

To better understand Ficino's use of *serio ludere*, and its significance, we must distinguish between Ficino's approach to logic and dialectic. In Chapter 23 of his *Philebus* commentary, Ficino explains that logic is preoccupied with language; it is not properly knowledge itself, but the instrument of all knowledge. It is concerned with the properties of nouns and verbs and what is compounded from them — the sentence — with various species of statements combining to create various classes of proofs. It is therefore necessary, but insufficient to access higher levels of contemplation. Dialectics, on the other hand, is a divine craft which is concerned with things, rather than words. By probing the intellect above the senses, dialectics inquires into the substance of each thing, and from all things it ascends to their one principle, without the need for any other principle. Dialectics unites, divides, and considers the one and the many, in order to know the fundamentals of reality.<sup>88</sup> In his *Phaedrus* commentary, Ficino notes that those who possess knowledge will not entrust it to writing except for fun; the philosopher entrusts the deepest truths to dialectical orality. Comparing the philosopher to a farmer who wants to obtain an abundant harvest, the philosopher must choose the appropriate terrain; he should not cultivate the 'gardens of Adonis,' that is, those cultivated for the sake of flowers, but rather those cultivated for the fruits they produce. To entrust doctrines to letters is to cultivate flowers — to play a beautiful game — but the farmer who introduces disciplines to intellects worthy of them practices a far better agriculture — one that is serious and worthy of the highest study. Writers metaphorically cultivate the gardens of Adonis, but those who want their doctrines to produce a lot of fruit, and therefore want to practice the art of intellectual sowing in a serious way will carefully select the souls most suited. They will be careful to try not to pass on the ineffable mysteries using writing, because, if he is a philosopher, he will know that the contemplation of divine realities cannot be contained within the limits of human expression. Therefore, writing is used for entertainment, but 'serious agriculture' is achieved only through dialectics.<sup>89</sup>

Baiting his readers with more than just words, Ficino's exposition here also drew on the Magi to discuss the aethereal vehicles of the soul. Providing a familiar metaphor for his Florentine readers especially, for whom the biblical Magi bore special cultural

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<sup>88</sup> Marsilio Ficino, *The Philebus Commentary*, trans. and ed. Michael J. B. Allen (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2000), 218–220.

<sup>89</sup> See Ficino's *Commentum cum summis capitulorum*, chapters 51 and 52 on *The Use of Writing*. Ficino, *Commentaries on Plato*, 1:190–193.

significance, these ancient priests and first adorers of Christ were used as a religious and historical symbol to legitimise his proposal that souls had descended into bodies:

The Magi call this body the vehicle of the soul, that is, the little aethereal body received from the aether, the soul's immortal garment; it is round in its natural shape because of the [rotundity of] the aether's region, but it transforms itself into our [angular] human shape when it enters the human body, and restores itself to its former shape when it departs from it. The Magi think it necessary for the following reason. Because the angels are such that they are separable in power from bodies and have been separated in act, whereas irrational souls are separable neither in power nor in act, it follows that rational souls as intermediaries must be such that they are always separable in power (since if bodies are withdrawn from them they are not going to perish), but are always joined in act (because they acquire their [truly] familiar body from the aether and keep it immortal through their own immortality). In the *Phaedrus* Plato calls this aethereal body the chariot at one time of the gods, at another of souls. In the *Timaeus* he calls it the vehicle that the souls of the spheres and heavenly souls can ride in its utmost purity, the souls of demons can ride when it is less pure, and our souls can barely ride because of the mixture of earthy body.<sup>90</sup>

Glossing the ancient and Christian traditions once more, Ficino speaks of these vehicles as a necessity in the soul's journey to the body — its pre-existence is here a given.<sup>91</sup> He then directs the 'conversation' toward the conversion, purification, and alienation of the

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<sup>90</sup> See *PT* 18.4.3: "Hoc vocant Magi vehiculum animae, aethereum scilicet corpusculum acceptum ab aethere, immortale animae indumentum, naturali quidem figura rotundum propter aetheris regionem, sed in humanam effigiem sese transferens quando corpus humanum ingreditur atque in priorem se restituens cum egreditur. Quod ob eam causam Magi necessarium arbitrantur, quoniam angeli tales sunt ut et virtute separabiles et actu separati sint a corporibus, irrationales animae neque virtute separabiles neque actu; ex quo sequitur rationales animas tamquam medias tales esse debere, ut virtute quidem semper separabiles sint, quia si illis subtrahantur corpora, non peribunt, actu autem sint semper coniunctae, quia familiare corpus nanciscuntur ex aethere, quod servant per immortalitatem propriam immortale. Quod Plato currum deorum tum animarum vocat in *Phaedro*, vehiculum in *Timaeo*, quo utantur animae sphaerarum caelestesque purissimo, daemonum animae minus puro, nostrae quoque minus propter terreni corporis mixtionem." Ficino, *Platonic Theology*, 6:102–103. On the significance of the Magi, see Hatfield, "The Compagnia de' Magi," 107–161 and Richard C. Trexler, *Journey of the Magi: Meanings in History of a Christian Story* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).

<sup>91</sup> Ficino aims to show the accord between the Magi, Plato, Zoroaster, Plotinus, Tatius, Hermes Trismegistus, Apollonius of Tyana, and other unnamed philosophers. He also attempts to harmonise these views with Aristotle.

soul.<sup>92</sup> Thus, even in his ‘playful jests’ Ficino was inviting the reader to contemplate these matters in seriousness, but moreover, to contemplate them within a Christian framework.

That the pre-existence of souls was consistent with Ficino’s own view may be further evidenced by his rebuke of the Platonic doctrine of the transmigration of souls into beasts. Though presenting but a brief admonition, this excerpt from the third part of Ficino’s commentary of Plato’s *Phaedrus* attests to the fact that when Ficino does not endorse a doctrine, he will say so. Broken down into fifty-three artificial chapter summaries, in his account of chapter 24, on “The soul’s state in its native land. Its descent and return, and its nine lives,” Ficino declares that:

The final descent occurs when it [the soul] has already tightly folded its wings, the powers that raise it to the divine. Consequently it forgets divine matters, especially if it has by some chance fallen among those daemons who turn aside towards sensibles. Nevertheless, the soul that has just descended from heaven cannot be precipitated into a beast. For souls are dispatched as to purgatory to have some dealings with beasts, when, being further still separated now from their celestial power, they have laid aside even their human characteristics and donned those of wild animals.<sup>93</sup>

Here Ficino maintains the Platonic understanding that the soul descends into bodies, whereupon its decent, it forgets the memory of its previous existence in the heavens. Despite its natural inclination toward earthly things, the soul can only be drawn into human bodies, and not those of beasts. If by chance the reader were to be confused by this, and believed instead that Plato endorsed such a notion, Ficino clarifies the matter, by explaining that being so far from the divine, it is humans themselves that may take on a beast-like character.

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<sup>92</sup> See *PT* 18.4.6. Ficino, *Platonic Theology*, 6:108–111.

<sup>93</sup> See Ficino’s *Commentum cum summis capitulorum* 24.2: “Id postremo contingit quando alas id est vires ad divina tollentes iam coegerit in angustum, unde obliviscitur divinorum, praesertim si casu quodam in daemones inciderit ad sensibilia divertentes. Neque tamen potest anima nuper caelitus descendens in brutum praecipitari, siquidem in aliqua brutorum commertia tanquam ad purgatorium animae transmittuntur postquam a caelesti proprietate longius iam digressae humanos etiam mores exuerunt, et induere ferinos.” Ficino, *Commentaries on Plato*, 1:138–139.

Two striking features emerge from this reading. First, within the designated *Comment and Chapter Summaries*, one observes that the commentary and *summa* forms are merged together without distinction — an early indication of the manipulations to come. With the exception of chapters 13 and 14, chapters 1–18 are all relatively short (ranging from one to a few sentences) and may be clearly classified as chapter summaries. Following these generalised synopses, however, from chapter 19 Ficino enters into real commentary. Growing significantly in length, and taking care to expound these particular points, our redaction critical approach reveals to us that these chapters, and the doctrines contained therein were significant to the author.<sup>94</sup> As Michael J. B. Allen notes, chapters 13–33 constitute almost two-thirds of the total bulk of the summaries, and while some “summae are good accounts of their respective sections,” others, namely chapters 24, 25, 30 and 35, “introduce allegorization and interpretation, sometimes so extensively as to render them eligible for inclusion in the commentary proper.”<sup>95</sup> Allen maintains that the length of an individual *summa* “often bears little relationship to the number of lines being glossed, since the *lemmata* Ficino finds interesting are often clustered together.”<sup>96</sup> “Though not a systematic exposition of his views,” Allen continues, “they give us a vivid sense of his day-to-day reactions as a commentator, his habitual Platonic responses and his general cast of mind.”<sup>97</sup> Allen reveals that these “two-thirds of *summae* and all of the commentary proper embrace just a third of the dialogue,” and therefore the particular themes repeated and elaborated here are telling for the historian.<sup>98</sup> These chapters all correspond to the doctrines on the origins of the soul, and treat quite clearly of conversion, contemplation, divine frenzy, mystical union, and spiritual renewal. This is no mere coincidence; Ficino has here used the conventions of the commentary form to further his own ideals. Moreover, one cannot mistake that Ficino’s didactic tone throughout these ‘summaries’ conveys a sense of instruction of fact. Indeed, in chapter 24 especially and those chapters which surround it, Ficino only sparingly refers to this or that view being held by Plato, Socrates, or some other Platonist; instead, his style here seems to imply his own voice. Further, the clear unity of opinion between Ficino and the ancients is conveyed through his recurrent use of the personal pronoun ‘we’; featuring prominently throughout

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<sup>94</sup> See chapters 13–14, 20–29, 31, and 33 especially. Though short, chapters 9, 11, 15, 16 and 18 do, however, begin to reveal the repetition of common themes and should not be overlooked based on their length.

<sup>95</sup> See Michael J. B. Allen, “Introduction,” in *Commentaries on Plato*, 1:xxxiii.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, xxxii.

these chapters, whether it be ‘we say,’ ‘we think,’ or ‘we mean,’ this collective term refers to both Ficino and the Platonists.

Second, placed into dialogue with Ficino’s broader corpus, transmigration was the only heterodox doctrine Ficino felt the need to defend. Going to great exegetical lengths, Ficino dedicated most of Book 17 of the *Platonic Theology* to explaining how this doctrine should be interpreted. He suggested poetic, prophetic, allegorical, and typological readings, and advised what Plato had probably believed instead.<sup>99</sup> Here we again see Ficino’s manipulation of the narrative being expressed. As we have already seen in chapters two and three, Ficino’s treatment of the doctrines on the origins of the soul was vastly different from his contemporaries; he made every effort to expound these ideas, and to present them in a way which made them both appealing and acceptable to the reader. The absence of what might traditionally be deemed as an explicit endorsement does not negate Ficino’s advocacy of these ideas; rather, in this context it merely illustrates caution. The pattern that emerges seems to indicate that ‘praise’ and ‘blame’ do not necessarily have to occur simultaneously, nor in the same space, further emphasising that these passages cannot be read in isolation and must be considered as part of a broader attempt to initiate change.

Further evidence that Ficino was promoting the doctrine of pre-existence as a pathway to religious, theological, and spiritual renewal can be found in his celebrated commentary of Plato’s *Symposium*. Describing the four kinds of divine love in Speech VII, Chapter XIII of the *De amore*, Ficino declared that:

The divine madness, however, is an illumination of the rational soul through which, after the soul has fallen from higher things to lower, God draws It back from lower to higher. The fall of the soul from the One itself, the beginning of all things, to bodies, is brought about through four grades; through Intellect, Reason, Opinion, and Nature. ... All of these our soul looks back upon. Through these it descends; through these it also ascends.

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<sup>99</sup> “Over and over in his writings he repeats that Plato’s references to the doctrine were ‘poetic’; that he was merely repeating a Pythagorean story which he himself did not believe; that it can be understood prophetically as a proto-Christian version of Purgatory; that it should be understood allegorically as a return of the soul to God; that it should be understood typologically as a prophecy of the resurrection of the body.” Hankins, “*Reminiscentia*,” 10–11.

... You see therefore that from the One, which is above eternity, it falls into multiplicity, from eternity into time, from time into place and matter. It falls, *I say*, when it departs from that purity in which it is born, embracing the body too long.<sup>100</sup>

Here we see Ficino making an important linguistic distinction; unlike his usual attribution of such comments to Plato, it is Ficino himself who declares (*inquam*) that the soul falls from its pre-existent state.<sup>101</sup> Remembering his penchant for intertextual connections, we must note that this same material also appears in the *argumentum* to Ficino's translation of the *Ion*, which he dedicated to Lorenzo de' Medici.<sup>102</sup> In light of the intertextual hermeneutic already demonstrated, we hardly need doubt that the position expressed in the *Ion* was also Ficino's own. Moreover, recalling that Ficino's commentarial style often adhered more to his own views than the original text, Ficino's 'commentary' of Speech VII, in fact, made no reference to the *Symposium* at all.<sup>103</sup> Where Plato had Alcibiades speak in praise of Socrates, Ficino instead had his character, Cristoforo Marsuppini, discuss the physiology of love, the four kinds of madness, Plato's other dialogues — the *Phaedrus*, *Apology*, and *First Alcibiades*, he moreover praised love, God, and Socrates, and treated of a poem by Giovanni Cavalcanti. Furthermore, we can see the mechanisms of demonstrative and deliberative rhetoric at play here, in the structuring of the chapters themselves. Building up to his spiritual directive like a crescendo, from chapters 12 to 16, Ficino treats how harmful vulgar love is; how useful divine love is, and its four kinds; by what grades the divine madresses raise the soul; of all these madresses how love is the

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<sup>100</sup> Emphasis mine. Marsilio Ficino, *Commentary on Plato's Symposium on Love*, 168–169. “Est autem furor divinus illustratio rationalis animae, per quam Deus animam ab superis delapsam ad infera, ab inferis ad supera retrahit. Lapsus animae ab ipso uno rerum omnium principio ad corpora per quatuor gradus efficitur, per mentem, rationem, opinionem atque naturam. ... Haec omnia respicit anima nostra, per haec descendit, per haec et ascendit. ... Cernitis igitur ab uno, quod superaeternitatem in aeternam multitudinem labitur: ab aeternitate in tempus, ab tempore in locum atque materiam, labitur *inquam*, quando ab ea puritate, qua nata est, longius corpus amplectendo discedit.” Ficino, *Opera Omnia*, 2:1361.

<sup>101</sup> Note, though I do not analyse here the vernacular translation, *El Libro dell'Amore*, this language appears in the exact same format: “El furore divino è una certa illustratione dell'anima rationale, per la quale Iddio l'anima, dalle cose superiori alle inferiori caduta, senza dubio dalle inferiori alla superiori ritira. La caduta dell'anima da uno principio dello universo infino a' corpi passa per quattro gradi: per la mente, ragione, oppenione e natura ... L'anima nostra riguarda tutte queste cose, per queste descende, per queste sale. ... Voi vedete adunque che l'anima cade, da quella unità divina la quale è sopra l'eternità, alla eterna moltitudine, e dalla eternità al tempo, e dal tempo al luogo e alla materia. *Dico* ch'ella cade allora, quando ella si parte da quella purità con la quale ella è nata, abbracciando troppo el corpo.” Emphasis mine. See Marsilio Ficino, *El Libro dell'Amore*, ed. Sandra Niccoli (Florence: Leo S. Olschki Editore, 1987), 211–212.

<sup>102</sup> See Ficino, *Opera Omnia*, 2:1281–1284.

<sup>103</sup> The same is true for Speech II. Speech VI was the only formal commentary of the *Symposium* contained in Ficino's *De amore*. See Jayne, “Introduction,” 9–10.

most excellent; and how useful the true lover is. With only a single chapter before the entire commentary comes to a close, we can see the final lesson Ficino has left the reader to contemplate.

Though Ficino worked within the established conventions of each genre, he pushed them to their limits, carefully selecting what to say where. Where he was able to use the voices of others to proclaim his own views, he did so methodically, repeatedly emphasising those aspects most central to his mission. Though the demonstrative letter was common in the period, unlike his contemporaries, Ficino used this convention to teach and instruct on doctrine. His opportunistic use of the *quaestio* form allowed him to raise issues which had been overlooked in contemporary disputations and which he believed needed to be revisited, and to treat them at length, defending ancient positions (even where he claimed not to be, or acknowledged he should not). The inherent logical and rhetorical structures of the *summa* and commentary forms themselves moreover allowed Ficino to manipulate the reading, and dare I say, leave a lasting impression on the reader's mind, body, and soul. Through his manipulation of language, rhetoric, and literary conventions Ficino was effectively able to promote theological change.

### **4.3 Conclusion**

As the historiographical tradition has shown, the humanist attempt to combat the limitations of Scholastic theological language had far more profound effects than merely the introduction of a classicising vocabulary and rhetorical style. Fostered by an intellectual culture that confronted the existing models, ideals and authorities, this linguistic shift had a direct correlation to increased secular engagement with theology, and thus a transformation in contemporary religiosity. As we have seen, language has the power to teach, to persuade, and to stimulate further contemplation, but its powers could be harnessed to much greater effect. Borrowing from a rhetorical and linguistic model designed specifically to lead the audience to imitate, the language of this new rhetorical theology allowed Ficino to access the same power as the more traditional theological media designed to teach and instruct on doctrine. Introducing new and ostensibly compatible alternatives in this way gave Ficino the power to shape doctrinal

belief and interpretation, such that the audience was moved not only to reimagine their current understanding, but to embrace a different one.

The significance of this language in varied genres is thus twofold: First, it helps us to establish that this was a recurring feature throughout Ficino's corpus, and thus helps to validate my contention that he was in fact promoting doctrines. Second, the application of theological discourse outside of their habitual contexts and literary forms facilitated a speculative discussion that could not elsewhere have taken place. It provided a number of accessible platforms through which to test new ideas, which could enjoy a far broader reception than conversation alone; letters were almost always read aloud, and often in front of an audience, whether great or small; commentaries and treatises alike were indispensable for even the most basic of intellectual pursuits, and often became the subject of some other treatise or commentary which responded to it, triggering a chain of further discussion. We know that Ficino's letters, treatises, and commentaries were certainly widely circulated, and thus were the optimal means through which he could disseminate his theology. As chapter five will further explore, the intellectual climate in Florence was such that philosophy had become a serious interest amongst several diverse social groups, and therefore this rhetorical, linguistic, and conventional shift was crucial.

This shift further encourages us to think about Ficino's advance into the realm of theology and its impact on contemporary religious culture. Once the humanists had established that even the Latin Fathers could be inaccurate, a new cultural attitude began to emerge, whereby anyone who wrote about theology came to be regarded as a theologian. In theory, this new definition gave lay humanists the power to engage in theological matters with some measure of influence, but also to say something *new*. Though it facilitated the active participation of the many in 'doing' theology and offered a re-definition of how it could be done, this cultural shift did not alter the content of traditional Christian beliefs. In an intellectual landscape enriched by the flourishing of new texts and ideas, the question then becomes why not? Was it a matter of authority? Though Ficino was ordained in 1473, he was neither a *magister* of theology, nor part of the *magisterium* of the Church; it was his manipulation of language, rhetoric and genre which allowed him to advocate new theological ideas without censure, and to disseminate them on a grander scale. Adopting this new language in connection to particular ideas allowed Ficino to manipulate the message and his audience's interpretation of that message. Perhaps the

issue then lays within the scholarship itself? By confining the study of local theologies to sources that fall under the more traditional categories of ‘theological’ or ‘religious’ literature, we limit our understandings of the true and intricate nature of the spiritual world of the fifteenth century. As historians, we must continue to look to ‘philosophical’ texts as sources of local theology, and must consider the ways which language, rhetoric, and genre were used by fifteenth-century thinkers to discuss and promote new theological ideas. This study encourages a far broader survey of the ways in which humanist culture could facilitate one’s progression into the theological arena, and indeed, a reimagining of the ways in which classical influences manifested in Florence.

In thinking about the transformative nature of theology, we must recognise that it both transforms and can be transformed. By changing its language, content, locations, and practitioners, the nature of theology itself had begun to change. Not only had theology become localised, responding to the various needs and pressures affecting the societies and contexts from which these new theologies emerged, as seen in chapter two, but it had now become public. Like popular preaching that transported theology into the *piazze*, humanistically inspired local theologies too had effectively moved outside of the closed confines of the university and the Church, and into the public domain.

But what does all this mean for Ficino and his greater programme of spiritual renewal? This question can only be answered in part, for it is a complex matter that will be investigated in the following chapters. For now, we have established a method and a means of transmission and have begun to hint at the implications of reception. We know that Ficino believed that only those open to the teachings of the ancient theologians could grasp the serious concepts at hand. We might then provisionally suggest that his project of renewal began from within, seeking to shape the mindset of his fellow philosophers, and build solidarity amongst his circle, with a view to disseminate these ideas more broadly, until such a time that Christianity would find these teachings acceptable. This very hope, as we have seen, was expressed by Ficino many times. Though this chapter has re-examined the subtle pushing and pulling at the borders of acceptable belief, it has considered only some of the techniques used by Ficino in the transmission of Platonic doctrines and has restricted itself to his Latin, Platonic compositions. It does, however, raise important questions about contemporary practices of intellectual exchange, which I shall address throughout the remainder of the thesis. Nevertheless, by suggesting a

nuanced approach to the study of Ficinian theology and its transmission, we can see the need to reassess Ficino's influence on the Florentine religious and intellectual landscapes, and indeed, on the religious and intellectual history of Renaissance Italy.

## Chapter Five: Ficino and the *Lingua Toscana*

In the late nineties, a new approach to the study of theology in the Renaissance emerged, distinct from the study of the scholastic and monastic theologies that characterised the period, and different again from the ‘rhetorical,’ ‘Renaissance’ and ‘humanist’ theologies that became a central focus of historical study from the seventies and beyond.<sup>1</sup> The production and administration of these theologies was always restricted to those within the universities and the religious Orders, that is, they were the domain of an educated elite, and always composed in Latin; the scholarly shift toward the study of vernacular theology has instead brought into focus the various and intricate theologies particular to a time and place, articulated in the local language, and has highlighted the host of implications for our understanding of each of these theological varieties. Though the scholarly approaches to vernacular theology are as diverse as the theologies themselves, they are all characterised by a unique collaboration between the clergy and the laity, which was expressed in a diverse range of genres, and which allowed non-Latinate audiences to become readers of and participants in theological discourse.<sup>2</sup> Considering the dynamic interchange that took place between learned and laity in Florence especially, a more nuanced approach to these locally produced belief systems is warranted — an

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<sup>1</sup> Viz. Trinkaus, O’Malley, Camporeale, and Edelheit cited earlier.

<sup>2</sup> For Bernard McGinn, vernacular theology represents a “serious attempt to foster greater love of God and neighbor through a deeper understanding of the faith,” expressed in forms that were “somewhat different from those used by the monks and the schoolmen.” Directed at a different audience, “both wider and narrower than that of the technical scholastic Latin,” vernacular theology made this previously closed discipline available to “any person, male or female, high or low, who was literate in the particular vernacular employed.” Utilising different genres from the scholastic and monastic theologies, vernacular theology “put forth according to new modes of claiming authority *ex beneficio*.” For Nicholas Watson, vernacular theology can include a wide variety of texts, and can be found in any kind of writing that “communicates theological information to an audience.” His focus centers on the “specifically intellectual content of vernacular religious texts,” encouraging reflection on “cultural-linguistic environment in which religious writing happens,” and “the kinds of religious information available to vernacular readers without obliging us to insist on the simplicity or crudity of that information.” For Eliana Corbari, vernacular theology embraces a far more inclusive definition, which considers not just textual, but material artefacts in exploring the collaboration between men and women, the clergy and the laity, “who desired a shared language for learning and teaching about God and God’s creation.” See Bernard McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism, 1200–1350* (New York: Crossroad, 1998), 19–22; Bernard McGinn, “Meister Eckhart and the Beguines in the Context of Vernacular Theology,” in *Meister Eckhart and the Beguine Mystics: Hadewijch of Brabant, Mechthild of Magdeburg, and Marguerite Porete* (New York: Continuum, 2001), 1–14; Nicholas Watson, “Censorship and Cultural Change in Late Medieval England: Vernacular Theology, the Oxford Translation Debate, and Arundel’s Constitutions of 1409,” *Speculum* 70, no. 4 (1995): 822–64; Eliana Corbari, “Lost and Found in Translation: The Heart of Vernacular Theology in Late Medieval Italy,” *Franciscan Studies* 71 (2013): 263–279. See also Peter Howard, “Approaching Renaissance Religions,” in *Renaissance Religions: Modes and Meaning in History*, eds. Peter Howard, Nicholas Terpstra and Riccardo Saccenti (Turnhout: Brepols, 2021), 13–44.

approach which accounts for the unique combination of sources, style and interlocutors that informed these theologies, and the ways in which monastic, scholastic, and humanistic theologies, and especially antique philosophies, came to bear upon them. So too must this approach investigate the purpose of vernacularisation at the hands of various authors. Indeed, we need to ask what value the vernacular might have had for those who, though sharing the “singleness of spirit that fuelled ... attempts to appropriate the Christian story set forth in the Bible” for the good of the common man, embraced ideas distinct from the doctrines set forth by the Church.<sup>3</sup>

Exploring the nexus between language, thought and culture, this chapter considers how the use of a particular idiom over another might have impacted the intellectual and religious cultures of the late Quattrocento, especially with regard to the diffusion of new ideas within a dynamic theological context. Having highlighted Ficino’s manipulation of rhetoric and literary convention to promote and shape new theological ideas in his Latin works, the purpose of this chapter is to examine the methods and modes of transmission of Ficinian theology in the Tuscan vernacular, and to determine the role that the *lingua Toscana* played in Ficino’s greater programme of spiritual renewal.

Reappraising scholarly assumptions about author and audience, this chapter offers a new perspective about what it meant to vernacularise in Florence in the late Quattrocento. As I will show, the rise of the vernacular languages in Italy in the fifteenth century had profound impact on all spheres of influence, and perhaps nowhere more so than in Florence. Located at the heart of this phenomenon, my discussion will explore literacy as a broader concept, looking beyond Tuscan and Latin literacy, to themes such as theological, philosophical, and classical literacy in order to address questions around intention and reception, and the accessibility of language and ideas. The discussion in this chapter aims to contribute to the scholarly reorientation of how we think about humanism and the movement of ideas, and their respective social locations, taking into account the shift in approach towards humanists exemplified by Brian Maxson.<sup>4</sup> I will argue that as the written, read, spoken, and heard language of Florence, the Tuscan vernacular offered

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<sup>3</sup> McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, 19.

<sup>4</sup> See Brian Maxson, *The Humanist World of Renaissance Florence* (Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Brian Maxson, “‘This Sort of Men’: The Vernacular and the Humanist Movement in Fifteenth-Century Florence,” *I Tatti Studies in the Italian Renaissance* 16, no. 1 (2013): 257–271.

inimitable access to the thought of Florentine patricians, merchants, and artisans, and was thus used by Ficino and his disciples as a tool in the dissemination of a nuanced understanding of the soul, and the promotion of a new contemplative ideal. My analysis here focuses primarily on Ficino's philosophical epistle, the *De divino furore*, and its independent, anonymous vernacular translations, to reveal evidence of the transmission of Ficinian theology, and similarly, the use of the rhetorical and conventional techniques outlined in the previous chapter.

### **5.1 Vernacularisation and the Movement of Ideas in Florence**

In the early fifteenth century, nuanced attitudes toward the vernacular languages began to emerge, particularly in Florence, where the *lingua Toscana* was not only a literary, but truly common language.<sup>5</sup> Its unique currency amongst the learned and the *volgo* facilitated a cultural translation not yet seen in other parts of Italy, that allowed for the dissemination, diversification, and democratization of knowledge on a broader scale. Vernacular authors and translators in Florence were driven by nuanced motivations, and their works generated more fruitful outcomes than elsewhere, as the reception of their ideas permeated throughout the socio-cultural order. Indeed, as Carlo Dionisotti has demonstrated, vernacular languages anywhere outside of Florence and Tuscany were still considered 'aristocratic,' and thus to publish in the vernacular meant that the author was simply addressing one kind of elite (non-Latinate aristocratic audiences) over another (Latinate audiences).<sup>6</sup> However, already in the period we have evidence that the Tuscan vernacular would allow authors to reach "uomini di ogni genere [cuiuscumque generis]," that is, men of all kinds.<sup>7</sup> As the title suggests, this section deals with the inherent connection between vernacularisation and the movement of ideas, to show that works penned in Tuscan were able to be read, and moreover, understood by the common people. However, before we can discuss the significance of Ficinian teachings in the vernacular, we first need to foreground the long history of vulgarisation in Florence and Tuscany. The following will therefore act as an excursus upon which the remainder of the chapter

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<sup>5</sup> See Glauco Sanga, *Koinè in Italia dalle Origini al Cinquecento* (Bergamo: Pierluigi Lubrina Editore, 1990); Mirko Tavoni, *Storia della Lingua Italiana: Il Quattrocento* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1992).

<sup>6</sup> Carlo Dionisotti, "Tradizione Classica e Volgarizzamenti," in *Geografia e Storia della Letteratura Italiana* (Turin: G. Einaudi, 1967), 123.

<sup>7</sup> Luca Bianchi, "Volgarizzare Aristotele: Per Chi?" *Freiburger Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Theologie* 59, no. 2 (2012): 488.

will build. The reader may wish to skim this segment, or else move on to section two (p. 156), where I will return to the main Ficinian narrative, which focuses on the epistolary treatise, the *De divino furore*.

Recent scholarship is pervaded by the distinction made almost five decades ago by Natalie Zemon-Davis between audience and public — between actual readers and the intended readership imagined by the author.<sup>8</sup> Studies of ‘audience’ caution that we cannot take the ‘programmatically statements’ contained in the prefaces and dedicatory epistles of vulgarisations at face value.<sup>9</sup> Instead, we must analyse these statements against the theoretical, structural and linguistic choices made in the drafting of these texts, the background knowledge of the readers, and the technicalities which are deemed transmissible, to determine the true intentions of the author.<sup>10</sup> Luca Bianchi holds that while philosophical vulgarisations certainly reflect a willingness to share complex doctrines with a socially and culturally elevated elite, we should not make assumptions that the production of these works was dictated by ‘popularising’ intentions, nor by the demands of a public which lacked the pre-requisite knowledge.<sup>11</sup> Marco Sgarbi, however, argues that the study of audience only allows us to gauge the “effectiveness of the attempted vulgarization,” which is “a matter beyond the purview of the author.”<sup>12</sup> For Sgarbi, who warns modern readers against decontextualised judgments of linguistic register, it is only through the study of the intended reader that the true aims and intentions

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<sup>8</sup> On this distinction, see Natalie Zemon-Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France: Eight Essays* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1975), 192–193.

<sup>9</sup> Bianchi, “Volgarizzare Aristotele,” 494.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 494.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 486.

<sup>12</sup> See Marco Sgarbi, “Aristotle and the People: Vernacular Philosophy in Renaissance Italy,” *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Reforme* 39, no. 3 (2016): 59–109, at 64.

of vulgarisers can be revealed.<sup>13</sup> While I cannot make judgments about other Italian cities, I am not convinced that these approaches allow the historian to wholly understand the motivations which underpinned the Florentine vernacularisations of the late fifteenth-century. Nor do I believe that they adequately represent the desires and understanding of the audience in this transaction. Indeed, the study of philosophical and theological vernacularisations in this context necessarily requires consideration of the impact of the religious and intellectual spheres upon the development of the Tuscan vernacular — its vocabulary and lexical semantics — and their connection to Florentine thought and collective cultural knowledge. As we shall see, philosophy and theology cannot be understood as realms of interest only to monastic and university circles, nor again to the educated Tuscan elite, and it is only through a study of these intersecting worlds that we can truly gauge the intentions behind the vernacularisation of certain works.

In order to understand the relationship between the Tuscan vernacular, the movement of ideas, and the aims of Florentine *volgarizzatori* in the fifteenth century we must first trace the development of vernacular religiosity between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries. A survey of recent scholarship reveals a tendency to separate vernacular ‘religion’ from vernacular ‘philosophy,’ seeming to overlook the close relationship between the religious and philosophical disciplines. Indeed, studies of sixteenth-century vernacular Aristotelianism seem to ignore the linguistic and cultural precedents of centuries past, especially the fifteenth century, and significantly, the Florentine intellectual and religious contexts, where the philosophically ‘literate’ audience had a far broader social-base than these studies would otherwise lead us to believe. As we shall see, though Latin was certainly encountered in the classroom, the language specific to philosophy and theology

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<sup>13</sup> Vulgarisers were tasked with communicating in a register that made complex content accessible to the common person. However, as typically ‘highly cultured intellectuals’ this was rarely achieved; vulgarisers still wrote in the “elevated manner to which they had been accustomed through education.” This does not however negate their desire to popularise or vulgarise knowledge, and hence the study of linguistic register is “useful only in determining whether a text was easy or difficult to understand.” As Sgarbi points out, we should be mindful not to conflate the culture *of* the people and the culture *for* the people, and should resist the urge to associate elevated linguistic registers with elevated audiences. Audiences could vary from ‘idiots’ and ‘illiterates’ to those capable of reading complex Latin works; we should bare in mind that the ultimate aim of intellectuals in vulgarising was to instruct, and the vernacular allowed vulgarisers to broaden the social base of acquired knowledge. He concludes that “even complicated and highly elaborate linguistic works of vulgarization ... were not symptomatic of a closure of knowledge or a restriction of the audience, but were in fact an attempt to improve the knowledge of those who had no classical education, or were more comfortable reading in their own native tongue. This was a clear indication that the vernacular was ripe for tackling involved speculative and theoretical questions, as well as taking on the role of a language of culture and an instrument of emancipation.” *Ibid.*, 92–94.

was made intelligible to the masses through an altogether different kind of instruction. Thus, the most appropriate way to determine whether texts could actually reach the audience and be understood by them is to trace the progression of the Tuscan vocabulary over the years through the study of preaching and its role in the translation of Latin words (and the concepts attached to them), and through the spiritual direction given to the public. Through this approach we can determine what the Tuscan vocabulary was actually capable of, and which ideas were in transit at this time. As we have already begun to explore in chapter two, the artefacts of preaching — written sermons and lay religious works — attest to the reciprocal dynamic between the ideas which circulated in the cultural arena, and which were undoubtedly impacted by the top-down movement of broader intellectual ideas through social networks.

The studies of vernacularisation and of preaching culture are inherently linked: preaching helped to disseminate vernacular languages and was the vehicle through which Latin terminology was translated not only into the common tongue but into the collective lexicon, which facilitated a broader cultural transmission of knowledge. Indeed, as noted by Carlo Delcorno, preaching was a powerful stimulus for the development of vernacular languages throughout Europe, including its written forms.<sup>14</sup> Though we can safely assume a much earlier vernacular preaching culture, it was not until the beginning of the fourteenth century that written evidence of vernacular sermons appeared in Italy.<sup>15</sup> This is perhaps no surprise given the formal decree issued by the general chapter of the

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<sup>14</sup> See Carlo Delcorno, *Giordano da Pisa e l'Antica Predicazione Volgare* (Florence: Leo S. Olschki Editore, 1975), 37–43. See also Carlo Delcorno, “The Language of the Preachers: Between Latin and Vernacular,” *The Italianist* 15, no. 1 (1995): 48–66; Carlo Delcorno, *La Predicazione nell'Età Comunale* (Florence: Sansoni, 1974).

<sup>15</sup> “Latin always was and always would be the preferred medium for recording Dominican preaching in the Middle Ages. But the early years of the fourteenth century saw the preservation of the first great series of Dominican sermons in the vernacular. Vernacular preaching was not new in the fourteenth century; the language of popular preaching had long been the vernacular, even if sermons were written down in Latin. But now the friars began to capture their preaching as spoken language.” “... to find the earliest full collections of Dominican sermons edited in the local vernacular, we must return to Italy. The first great Dominican vernacular cycle dates to the opening years of the Trecento, when a group of lay listeners was inspired to copy down the sermons preached by the magnificent Giordano da Pisa. Fra Giordano's *prediche volgari* provide us with our earliest and best example from the next phase in the evolution of Dominican preaching texts.” Mulchahey, *Dominican Education before 1350*, 440–441. “In Italia occorre attendere l'alba del XIV secolo per trovare la prima ampia documentazione in volgare nel corpus delle prediche di fra Giordano da Pisa.” Carlo Delcorno, *La Predicazione nell'Età Comunale*, 4. See also Jean Longère, *La Predication Médiévale* (Paris, Études Augustiniennes, 1983), 161–164. For a comparison with French records, see Michel Zink, *La Prédication en Langue Romane: Avant 1300* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1982), 126–127: “... durant tout le XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle, presque aucun sermon conservé en langue romane ne porte l’empreinte des ordres mendiants,” “... les ordres mendiants, jusqu’aux dernières années du XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle, n’ont produit ni recueils de sermons types ni recueils de lectures édifiantes en français.”

Dominican Order in 1242 which banned the *fratres* from translating sermons, collations, or other holy writings from Latin into the vernacular languages.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, the value of the vernacular languages was recognised. Preachers were required to obtain licenses in order to prove their competency before they were able to preach in the city; even before they left the confines of the chapter houses, preachers had to show that they could be understood in the vernacular of a given audience.<sup>17</sup> This meant more than simply being able to speak the local idiom, and necessarily required preachers to adapt their communicative techniques to the capabilities of the *volgare* itself. Certainly, these early Trecento records attest to the translation of complex Latin terminology into the Tuscan language by providing audiences with multiple synonyms in their own tongue in order to impart a greater sense of meaning. In this way they were able to convey the semantic capacity of Latin terms and the ideas that were attached to them. Documenting in detail his method of explanation and explication, the records of Fra Giordano da Pisa (1260–1311) were a model for fellow preachers, highlighting lexical equivalents and deficiencies, and where audiences might struggle.<sup>18</sup> Dominican preacher, Domenico

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<sup>16</sup> “Nec aliquis fratrum de cetero sermones vel collaciones vel alias sacras scripturas de latino transferat in vulgare.” Dominicans, *Acta capitulorum generalium Ordinis Praedicatorum*, eds. Benedikt Maria Reichert and Cardinal Franz Andreas Frühwirth, 9 vols. (Rome: In Domo Generalitia, 1898–1904), 1:47.

<sup>17</sup> “Preaching in Latin and the vernacular was part of the practical training, as future preachers regularly had to give ‘mock’ sermons in both languages in their convent before getting a licence to preach in public.” Lidia Negoi, “Bilingual Strategies in Fourteenth-Century Latin Sermons from Catalonia,” *Medieval Worlds: Comparative and Interdisciplinary Studies* 12 (2020): 210–233, at 213. [https://doi.org/10.1553/medievalworlds\\_no12\\_2020s210](https://doi.org/10.1553/medievalworlds_no12_2020s210). Also see Mulchahey, *Dominican Education Before 1350*, 184–193; Paul Gehl, “Preachers, Teachers and Translators: The Social Meaning of Language Study in Trecento Tuscany,” *Viator* 25 (1994): 294–297. In 1346, the General Chapter of the Dominican Order instructed priors to licence only those who had frequently preached in Latin and the vernacular in the chapter houses. “Item. Cum ex insufficiencia predicancium et confessiones audiencium ordo noster veniat in contemptum et vergat in periculum animarum, volumus et ordinamus, quod priores provinciales et conventuales ac vices eorumdem gerentes diligentissime caveant, ne committant predicacionis officium seu confessionis audienciam nisi fratribus ad hoc ydoneis, moribus et vita et sciencia sufficienter approbatis, adiiicientes nichilominus, ne frater exponatur ad predicandum populo, nisi qui in capitulo coram fratribus pluries predicaverit in vulgari; nec aliquis admittatur ad confessionum audienciam, nisi iudicio discretorum sufficienter instructus fuerit in casibus et aliis ad huiusmodi officium requisitis.” Dominicans, *Acta capitulorum generalium*, 2:310. It is moreover worth noting the phonological and orthographical similarities between Italian (especially Tuscan) and Latin: “The opinion that Latin could not be understood by the people is hardly convincing for a period in which any person who could read and write acquired some elements of Latin, and in a country where Latin is to some extent understood even nowadays, let alone medieval Latin which was pronounced in the Italian manner and which became so non-classical and ‘barbarous’ just because it was adapted to the spoken vernacular language.” “The language spoken in Italy was much closer to medieval Latin than anywhere else, and a Latin text recited in local pronunciation could also be understood by the ordinary people.” See Kristeller, *Studies in Renaissance Thought and Letters*, 1:478, 4:344.

<sup>18</sup> “[Giordano] demonstrates an attentive, one would almost say refined, linguistic sensitivity. He knows how to exploit the expressive possibilities of the lexicon and above all the vulgar syntax. He can linger to underline the semantic nuances of a term to specify its meaning, sure that the Florentine listeners are ready to grasp and finally judge the problems proposed.” Delcorno, *Giordano da Pisa*, 38.

Cavalca (c.1270–1342), similarly used colloquial language and employed a Tuscan prose style; often expanding “upon telescopic Latin descriptions,” Cavalca regularly eliminated “such oral-delivery devices as the rhetorical questions so beloved of Latin stylists.”<sup>19</sup> His approach invited vernacular readers to reread each phrase carefully, and effectively aided a more meditative reading. As the evidence shows, preachers were deeply invested in effectively translating both words and ideas into the cultural consciousness. Moreover, as chapter two has already shown, the complexity of the theological issues that were addressed in fifteenth-century sermons indicate a vocabulary well equipped to deal with the spiritual concerns of the audience, which in many instances reflect the overlapping of religious and philosophical discourse.

There were some vocal representatives of the Church, such as Jacopo Passavanti, however, who declared as late as 1354 that *scienza divina* (by which he meant speculative scholastic theology), distinct from *scienza della Divina Scrittura*, was closed to the *volgare* because the things of divine science were “too profound and subtle for the laity, and they could not be well understood with *our vernacular*.”<sup>20</sup> His reference is of course to the Tuscan language, implying that it was in some way inadequate to treat such topics. He maintained that divine science ought not to be studied by everyone in the same manner and depth, and instead the use of *exempla* was a more pleasant alternative, which would avoid certain difficulties and would reach the souls of less educated listeners more directly.<sup>21</sup> Despite Passavanti’s pessimistic appraisal of the Tuscan vernacular, and indeed, his audience, his view does not seem to have been widely shared by his peers, perhaps reflective of a more traditionalist view rather than insurmountable deficiencies of language and listener alike. Indeed, the preachers of Florence sanctioned vernacular theology, enjoining their listeners to make written record of, and even re-enact what they

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<sup>19</sup> Gehl, “Preachers, Teachers and Translators,” 308–312, at 308–309.

<sup>20</sup> Emphasis mine. “. . . perché sono cose troppo profonde e sottili per gli laici, e non si potrebbero ben dare ad intendere col nostro volgare.” Jacopo Passavanti, *Lo Specchio della Vera Penitenza di Iacopo Passavanti*, ed. Filippo Luigi Polidori (Florence: Felice Le Monnier, 1856), 277. See also Bodo Guthmüller, “Die Volgarizzamenti,” in *Die Italienische Literatur im Zeitalter Dantes und am Übergang vom Mittelalter zur Renaissance*, ed. August Buck (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Carl Winter, 1989), 235.

<sup>21</sup> Vittorio Coletti, “Predicazioni e Lingua,” in *Enciclopedia dell’Italiano*, ed. Raffaele Simone (Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 2011). [https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/predicazione-e-lingua\\_%28Enciclopedia-dell%27Italiano%29/](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/predicazione-e-lingua_%28Enciclopedia-dell%27Italiano%29/).

had heard, and to provide religious instruction within the household.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, though audiences predominantly received religious instruction orally through sermons, and even visually through art, vernacular readers were actively encouraged to deepen their knowledge of the Bible and religious texts through the various means accessible to them. Material evidence attests to the vast circulation of vernacular manuscripts containing biblical and other religious texts.<sup>23</sup> Certainly, from the early fourteenth century, numerous texts became available to Florentine vernacular readers, “not only ancient Latin literary works, but a number of pious, literary, and learned writings from medieval Latin and French authors,” including Cavalca’s translation of the *Acts of the Apostles*.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, the return to Scripture and the patristic authors by members of the religious orders, as well as the humanists, similarly found vernacular expression, with Cavalca’s translation of the *Lives of the Fathers*, the *Dialogues* of Gregory the Great, and St Jerome’s *Epistle to Eustochium*.<sup>25</sup>

Though there were certainly efforts to protect the discipline from untrained minds, it was the language itself that concerned religious and intellectuals alike. Despite an awareness of the prevalence of lay and religious vernacular translations, there is scant evidence of formal admonitions against such endeavours. However, translators were cautioned to maintain and strive for accuracy. Religious authorities sought to satisfy the needs of the

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<sup>22</sup> “Medieval preachers for example stressed the importance of taking notes from sermons and sharing their main lines with other members of the household in order to further propagate religious instruction.” “A case in point are the sermons of the Franciscan Cherubino da Spoleto describing in his sermons a complete theory of religious communication in which the laity is playing an essential role.” Sabrina Corbellini, “The Religious Field during the Long Fifteenth Century,” *Church History and Religious Culture* 99 (2019): 303–329, at 326. See also Sabrina Corbellini, “Creating Domestic Sacred Space: Religious Reading in Late Medieval and Early Modern Italy,” in *Domestic Devotions in Early Modern Italy*, ed. Maya Corry, Marco Faini and Alessia Meneghin (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 295–309. My discussion does not explore the role of confraternities in the transmission of religious knowledge and vernacular religious writings, though it is undoubtedly of great significance. For further reading on this, see Sabrina Corbellini, “The Plea for Lay Bibles in Fourteenth- and Fifteenth-Century Tuscany: The Role of Confraternities,” in *Faith’s Boundaries: Laity and Clergy in Early Modern Confraternities*, eds. Nicholas Terpstra, Adriano Prospero and Stefania Pastore (Turnhout: Brepols, 2012), 87–112.

<sup>23</sup> See Corbellini, “The Plea for Lay Bibles,” 93–98; Edoardo Barbieri, “Panorama delle Traduzioni Bibliche in Volgare prima del Concilio di Trento,” *Folia Theologica* 8 (1997): 169–197. For a detailed bibliography of available vernacular texts, see Guthmüller, “Die Volgarizzamenti,” 333–348.

<sup>24</sup> Ronald G. Witt, “What did Giovannino Read and Write? Literacy in Early Renaissance Florence,” *I Tatti Studies in the Italian Renaissance* 6 (1995): 84; Guthmüller, “Die Volgarizzamenti,” 333–348.

<sup>25</sup> Guthmüller, “Die Volgarizzamenti,” 333–348. Other mendicant translators include the Dominicans Zanobi Guasconi and Bartolomeo di San Concordio, the Franciscans Giovanni Campulu and Gentile da Foligno, and the Carmelite Guido da Pisa. Gehl notes that “Cavalca speaks of audiences who are not Latin-literate and are composed largely of women. Both [the *Dialogues* and the *Epistle to Eustochium*] were already widely known in Latin and had a rather popularizing tone. Only their language really stood in the way of their appropriation by even broader audiences.” See Gehl, “Preachers, Teachers and Translators,” 310–311, at 311.

laity in a controlled way, providing interpretive parameters and guidelines for elaboration. Smaller amounts of information deemed ‘manageable’ for lay audiences were circulated in both written and oral contexts, and were usually accompanied by some form of exposition. Though the Bible as we now understand it was not distributed in its entirety, relevant biblical excerpts and other assemblages of Holy Writ were certainly in manuscript circulation prior to the printing of the vernacular Bible in 1471. While measures were put in place to mitigate fears of misinterpretation in the centuries prior, and immediately following (formal censures were put in place in the mid-sixteenth century), this was not the case in the Quattrocento, and moreover, not in Italy.<sup>26</sup> There is little to suggest a broad concern about the laity’s ability to comprehend theological concepts. Rather, the institutional church feared that with the power to wield a language came the threat of corruption, and worse, heresy. Certainly, the evidence repeatedly testifies to a concern about the linguistic capabilities of translators and audiences, rather than a concern over doctrinal cognition.<sup>27</sup> Intellectuals on the other hand, worried that the Tuscan language did not possess the qualities necessary to convey the profundity of the higher disciplines.

In pursuit of an eloquence akin to that of the ancients, humanists throughout the fourteenth and into the fifteenth century had begun to adopt increasingly sharp positions on the distinctions between Latin and the vernacular languages, and expressed concerns about whether the grammatical, syntactical, lexical and rhetorical structures of the Tuscan

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<sup>26</sup> See Gigliola Fragnito, *La Bibbia al Rogo: La Censura Ecclesiastica e i Volgarizzamenti della Scrittura (1471–1605)* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1997); Corbellini, “The Plea for Lay Bibles,” 88.

<sup>27</sup> This is not to deny the very real fear that the clergy and the friars had over possible corruption and heterodoxy through audiences’ misunderstanding, and further, misinterpretation and elaboration when transcribing and translating religious works. As Justin Walden notes, the prefaces of thirteenth-century biblical vernacularisations routinely “evinced a concern with the laity misunderstanding biblical material and allude to other threats on the horizon — threats such as the reading of vernacular secular literature, and worse, heretical or willful misinterpretation of scripture.” In order to prevent misuses of the Bible “vernacularizers often asserted that every Christian should know Christian doctrine, but only according to their station and that higher religious speculation was better left to professional theologians. The original purpose of these works, then, appears to have been Christianization: the attempt to evangelize in a controlled manner.” See Justine Walden, “Vernacular Scripture, Reform, and the Lesser Laity in Quattrocento Florence,” (paper presented at the Vernacular Bibles and Religious Reform Conference, Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium, November 29, 2012), 4.

vernacular could effectively communicate ideas.<sup>28</sup> However, the evidence suggests that a number of Latinisms and complex themes had already been introduced by the early fourteenth century; a philosophical lexicon that mimicked the Latin original had already been forged. Certainly, proto-humanistic writers from the end of the thirteenth and beginning of the fourteenth century had begun to deal with philosophical, spiritual, and theological ideas. Already from the time of Dante (*Convivio* c.1304–1307, *Divina Commedia* 1320) a precedent in vernacular writing, which made use of complex and technical Tuscan vocabulary, can be observed. By the time Alberto della Piagentina's translation of Boethius' *Consolation* emerged in 1332, Italian literary prose and the art of translation already had long histories and much experience behind them. In addition to his understanding of both Latin and Tuscan, Piagentina had a comprehensive understanding of the source text and showed concern for the appropriate reproduction of the text's special vocabulary.<sup>29</sup> Just as Dante's *Convivio* (which similarly built upon the Boethian classic) had done some decades before, Piagentina's translation worked to communicate a specialised lexicon through and into the Tuscan vernacular. His translation, which elaborated profound spiritual and philosophical themes, was not only made available to the *volgo*, but was consumed by them. Indeed, the evidence shows that the translation enjoyed a vast circulation, reflective of a strong cultural desire for access to complex philosophical and religious texts in the vernacular and to take part in both the intellectual and spiritual life of the city. The parallels between religious and theological translations into the cultural arena (and the reciprocal nature of this dynamic) here become apparent.

The proto-humanist style of translation by the likes of Brunetto Latini (1220–1294) and Guidotto da Bologna (mid-late thirteenth century, precise dates unknown) represented a turning point in *volgarizzamenti*. Translators no longer sought to merely convey the content of an original text in near equivalent terms, but rather laboured to cultivate a more eloquent, refined, and stylistic rendering in the *volgare* which was both true to and

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<sup>28</sup> See Hankins, "The New Language," 195–212; Mazzocco, *Linguistic Theories in Dante and the Humanists*. For more on the Latin vernacular debate, see Kristeller, *Studies in Renaissance Thought and Letters*, 4:341–365; Lodi Nauta, "Latin as a Common Language: The Coherence of Lorenzo Valla's Humanist Program," *Renaissance Quarterly* 71 (2018): 1–32; Luca Boschetto, "Latin and Vernacular in Florence During the mid-1430s," in *City, Court, Academy: Language Choice in Early Modern Italy*, eds. Eva Del Soldato and Andrea Rizzi (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 47–64; Sarah Stever Gravelle, "The Latin-Vernacular Question and Humanist Theory of Language and Culture," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 49, no. 3 (1988): 383.

<sup>29</sup> See Guthmüller, "Die Volgarizzamenti," 201–254, on Piagentina's Boethius translation see 239–240.

showed its admiration for the Classics and the Roman world. This desire to foster a vernacular that possessed an ‘elegant dexterity’ and ‘solemn weight’ worthy of the original propelled early fourteenth century *volgarizzatori* to advance their language in a manner that went beyond mere imitation of the ancients; while their endeavours paid homage to Roman antiquity, these intellectuals elevated the Tuscan vernacular such that it undeniably achieved its own nobility and refinement.<sup>30</sup> That the early fifteenth-century Latin-Vernacular debate fostered an opposition between learned-Latin and vernacular cultures, however, is an outdated view, to say the least. Many humanists did indeed hold strong opinions about the superiority of Latin grammar and vocabulary — with its supreme ability to structure thought and shape culture — and some expressed doubts about the strength of the vernacular languages, which were, in their opinion, ‘neither abundant nor adorned,’ enough to adequately express the ‘high and worthy things contained in the humble arts,’ nor the sentiments of ‘acute and almost divine geniuses.’<sup>31</sup> However, recent studies on translation and vernacular culture have shown that these idioms did not compete with or oppose one another, but rather shared a mutually reinforcing relationship.<sup>32</sup> Demonstrating the contemporary shift away from this earlier cynical attitude, historians have shown that humanists recognised that the vernacular had “its own perfection, its own sound, and its own polished and learned diction.”<sup>33</sup> Indeed, for distinguished first generation Florentine humanist, Leonardo Bruni, the Tuscan vernacular was just as dignified as Greek and Latin.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 240–247.

<sup>31</sup> “Tirati, credo, in tale opinione perché dubitano la lingua toscana non essere né sì abundante né sì ornata, colla quale l’alte e degne cose che nelle buone arti si contengono e le sentenzie di molti acutissimi e quasi divini ingegni esprimer si possono.” Cristoforo Landino, “Orazione fatta per Cristofano da Pratovecchio quando cominciò a leggere i Sonetti di messere Francesco Petrarca in istudio,” in *Scritti Critici e Teorici*, 2 vols., ed. Roberto Cardini (Rome: Bulzoni, 1974), 1:33.

<sup>32</sup> “...in the long fifteenth century, Latin and Italian ... can be best understood not in the context of separate disciplines foreign to the Renaissance era itself, but as differently shimmering facets of the same unique jewel.” Celenza, *The Lost Italian Renaissance*, 144. See also Eva del Soldato and Andrea Rizzi, “Latin and Vernacular in Quattrocento Florence and Beyond: An Introduction,” *I Tatti Studies in the Italian Renaissance* 16, no.1 (2013): 231–242; Andrea Rizzi, *Vernacular Translators in Quattrocento Italy: Scribal Culture, Authority, and Agency* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2017). These studies nuance the earlier view of Kristeller, who describes the relationship as a “peaceful competition between two alternative modes of literary expression.” See Kristeller, *Studies in Renaissance Thought and Letters*, 1:477–478.

<sup>33</sup> “[Ciascuna lingua ha] sua perfezione e suo suono e suo parlare limato e scientifico ...” Leonardo Bruni, *Le Vite di Dante, Petrarca e Boccaccio: Scritte Fino al Secolo Decimosesto*, ed. Angelo Solerti (Milan: Casa Editrice Dottor Francesco Vallardi, 1904), 106. English translation in Stever Gravelle, “The Latin-Vernacular Question,” 383.

<sup>34</sup> “... lo scrivere in istile litterato o vulgare non ha a fare al fatto, né altra differenza è se non come scrivere in greco od in latino.” Bruni, *Vite di Dante, Petrarca e Boccaccio*, 106.

The continual efforts of the Florentine humanists to reinforce and cultivate their language such that it could treat the themes emblematic of Latin learning were not in vain; many everyday Florentines could read and often write in the Tuscan vernacular. Certainly, beyond the influence of preaching, the ascent of the Tuscan vernacular from an oral to a written language, was spurred on in large part by an increased lay literacy. Current scholarship is characterised by the desire to unearth the extent to which Florentines of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries underwent formal education and to discern whether the vernacular was taught in schools.<sup>35</sup> According to the estimates given by Florentine chronicler, Giovanni Villani, in his *Nuova Cronica* of 1338, some 8,000 – 10,000 boys and girls were learning to read, 1,000 – 1,200 were attending the city’s six abbas schools, and a further 550 – 600 were enrolled in the city’s four grammar and logic schools.<sup>36</sup> These figures would seem to suggest a far higher rate of literacy than was precedented anywhere else in the period. Indeed, according to these figures, “37 percent to 45 percent of the school age population (ages 6 to 15) of both sexes attended school,” indicating that “Florence had a male schooling rate of 67 percent to 83 percent.”<sup>37</sup> If correct, these statistics suggest that Florence probably had a higher male schooling rate than any other European town or city for centuries. In the period between 1440 and 1475, we might then reasonably assert a mean-average male literacy rate of approximately 75 percent.<sup>38</sup> Villani’s estimate has of course come under scrutiny, Paul Grendler, for

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<sup>35</sup> On this longstanding debate, see Paul Grendler, *Schooling in Renaissance Italy: Literacy and Learning, 1300–1600* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 71–86; Robert Black, “Education and the Emergence of a Literate Society,” in *Italy in the Age of the Renaissance 1300–1550*, ed. John M. Najemy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 18–36; Robert Black, *Humanism and Education in Medieval and Renaissance Italy: Tradition and Innovation in Latin Schools from the Twelfth to the Fifteenth Century* (Cambridge, UK and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Robert Black, “The Curriculum of Italian Elementary and Grammar Schools, 1350–1500,” in *The Shapes of Knowledge from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment*, eds. Donald R. Kelley and Richard H. Popkin (Dordrecht: Springer, 1991), 137–163, at 139–143; Gehl, “Preachers, Teachers and Translators,” 289–324; Paul Gehl, *A Moral Art: Grammar Society and Culture in Trecento Florence* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1993); Witt, “Literacy in Early Renaissance Florence,” 83–114.

<sup>36</sup> See Book XI, Chapter 94: “Troviamo, ch’è fanciulli e fanciulle che stanno a leggere, da otto a dieci mila. I fanciulli che stanno ad imparare l’abbaco e algorismo in sei scuole, da mille in milledugento. E quegli che stanno ad apprendere la grammatica e loica in quattro grandi scuole, da cinquecentocinquanta in seicento.” Giovanni Villani, *Cronica di Giovanni Villani: A Miglior Lezione Ridotta coll’Aiuto de’ Testi a Penna*, ed. Francesco Gerardi Dragomanni, 4 vols. (Florence: Sansone Coen Tipografo-Editore, 1844–1845) 3:324.

<sup>37</sup> Grendler, *Schooling in Renaissance Italy*, 72.

<sup>38</sup> Certainly, given the general scholarly support for higher than average literacy rates in Trecento and Quattrocento Florence, the noted decline of Latin grammar schools between 1350 and 1450, and more specifically the first four decades of the fifteenth century, would seem to support a higher vernacular literacy rate. This would, moreover, coincide with the ‘neo-Latin revolution’ (which gained momentum around 1475), and the marked increase of vernacular print culture, which grew exponentially in the last three decades of the fifteenth century. See Black, “Education and the Emergence of a Literate Society,” 27–35; Kristeller, *Studies in Renaissance Thought and Letters*, 1:482–485.

example, argues that “Villani’s enrollment figures contradict the Renaissance pattern of one school, one teacher,” and that even if “Florentines valued education more highly than other Italians (a dubious assumption), Villani’s figures cannot be correct.”<sup>39</sup> As Ronald Witt observes, “Villani’s Florence must have been a warren of elementary schools directed by parish clergy, monks, friars, nuns, notaries, professional teachers, local women and old men ... At the elementary level we are dealing with a grab-bag of teachers.”<sup>40</sup> He asserts that the “unregulated character of elementary school teaching in Florence, and the data on teachers and classroom size, together with the recognized accuracy of Villani’s statistics in other areas, support the validity of his estimates of school enrollment.”<sup>41</sup> While he concedes that, “the diverse nature of the teaching at [the elementary school] level made accuracy impossible, as Villani himself indicates,” Witt maintains that the “flood of vernacular writings, both original and in translations, produced in Italy in Villani’s day, was solidly concentrated in eastern Tuscany,” and thus concludes that the “assumed direct relationship between production and demand indicates that Florence and the surrounding areas had a vernacular reading public unparalleled in the rest of the peninsula in the first half of the century.”<sup>42</sup> Based on the primary and secondary school curricula throughout the Quattrocento, we can assume that the majority of males at this time, though gaining an early and brief introduction to Latin, were

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<sup>39</sup> In his estimation, “Florence would have needed 500 to 600 teachers to instruct 9,550 to 11,800 people, given the Italian pattern of single schools with relatively low teacher and student ratios.” Grendler reiterates the difficulty in locating archival evidence for even a handful of these teachers. Citing the 1480 *catasto* records, which coincided with the introduction of a new tax law that demanded to know the occupation and annual salary of each masculine member of the household, Grendler states that this law would have “encouraged heads of households to mention boys in school,” because “households supporting students probably paid lower taxes.” While these records provide information about boys from middle- and lower-class household who attended formal schools outside of the home, the case is less so for wealthy households, as expenditure on education was unlikely to reduce their taxes. Grendler does, however, acknowledge that “wealthy boys universally attended school,” and that the *catasto* declarations “listed some, but probably not all, of the household tutors, and they omitted children learning informally from parents, siblings, or relative at home, because this information had no financial implication. The *catasto* declarations omitted some younger students and made no mention of the education of girls.” Grendler states that in 1480 approximately 28 percent of Florentine boys aged 10 to 13 went beyond elementary school level. Taking into account a broader age range, that is, boys aged 6 to 14 (because a boy could not study *abbaco* or Latin at 12 unless he had first learned to read and write), Grendler adjusts his calculation to factor in schoolboys who were not counted in the *catasto*, or who learned through informal tutoring, and offers a conservative estimate of Florentine school-aged male-literacy (reading and writing) of somewhere between 30 percent to 33 percent. Grendler, *Schooling in Renaissance Italy*, 71–74, 78, quotes at 72 and 74.

<sup>40</sup> Witt, “Literacy in Early Renaissance Florence,” 95. Note that like Witt, Robert Black similarly favours a higher enrolment rate in Florentine schools, though his estimate is still lower than that of Witt, who puts more stock in Villani’s estimate.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 97–98.

principally schooled in the vernacular.<sup>43</sup> As we shall see, there appears to be a clear pattern, or correlation between the waxing and waning of Latin and vernacular literacy in Florence and Ficino's own Latin and vernacular compositions.

With the growth of Tuscan literacy came the rapid incline of literacy more broadly; even within the merchant class we have evidence of a bilingual culture. Not only were merchants beginning to dabble with Latin texts in the classroom, they had learned to independently decipher legal, moral, devotional, technical, and entertaining texts, certainly, "some of the most accomplished of the Florentine merchant diarists make clear that reading had become their principal avocation and gave them a private intellectual world they valued as a source of solace and reflection."<sup>44</sup> Beyond the spiritual literacy that had been bestowed upon the Florentine populace through preaching, these endeavours further amplified the classical, moral, philosophical, and theological literacy of an entire class. But artisans too showed elements of bilingualism, both written and oral, demonstrating that the laity not only read, but also wrote about religious themes, and

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<sup>43</sup> Robert Black holds that Florentine schools instructed students in Latin reading only; at the elementary school level students learned Latin by memorising the words without necessarily understanding them (*a suono*), while students in the grammar school were expected to understand the texts (*a senno*). In his view, the elementary curriculum (the *carta/tavola* — the alphabet; the *salterio* — religious verses and moralisms; and the *Donadello* — Donatus' Latin grammar) was memorised without understanding, and thus, although these students were referred to as non-Latinates, they could nonetheless 'read' Latin. Black's hypothesis for the widespread vernacular literacy rests on the notion that "the experience of separating out and pronouncing syllables and words in their Latin reading permitted graduates of the schools later to learn on their own to read and write their language." This theory of 'haphazard self-instruction' is surely inadequate. Paul Grendler, Paul Gehl and Ronald Witt instead hold that the vernacular was taught in Florentine classrooms in this period: Grendler argues in favour of vernacular teaching in the elementary school at least from the second half of the fourteenth century and would likely have been based on vernacular materials brought into the classroom by the students themselves or the teachers. For Grendler, Villani's '*leggere e scrivere*' denotes a vernacular instruction at the elementary level. Gehl argues that given the number of children who had no possibility or need to learn Latin, learning to read with Latin materials would have been a pointless endeavour; Gehl argues that the *tavola* and *salterio* were written in the vernacular and that Latin was only encountered when students began to read the *Donadello a suono*. For Gehl, Latin was learned through the medium of the *volgare*. Surveying the few extant elementary school manuscript texts, Witt cites Florentine vernacular verses which can be directly linked to instruction in the *tavola*, and repeats Black's concession that poorly educated *maestri* may have used vernacular translations of the *Donadello* in the fifteenth century to understand the Latin text before teaching. Witt also draws on merchant records to demonstrate the intention of fathers to prepare their sons for vernacular instruction needed for a mercantile career (both reading and writing), even where their school materials may well have been in Latin.

<sup>44</sup> Gehl, "Teachers, Preachers and Translators," 290.

annotated personal copies of theological texts.<sup>45</sup> All of this attests to the lively, and participatory nature of vernacular culture in the religious and intellectual life of the city. The role played by vernacular readers was thus essential to the progression of thought and culture. Tuscan was the language of conversation and communication — it was the medium through which ideas were discussed, contemplated, elaborated, and most importantly, it was the language through which these ideas could be written down and copied time and again. Unlike other Italian cities with multiple spoken dialects in any one region, the *lingua Toscana* was the language spoken by all Florentines and was the only language that translated to vernacular written forms, moreover, anyone who *could* read could read Tuscan; it was truly a *common* language. An idiom or idea is only as effective as it is capable of communicating with the lowest possible denomination of society. Tuscan was thus the ultimate tool for dissemination, through which Ficino, and indeed, any author, could communicate particular ideas to the broadest possible audience, and shape collective thought.

Giving a sense of the broader implications of the vernacular oral and written discourses not only for the intellectual culture, but also the religious, this understanding epitomises what Brian Maxson terms ‘social humanism,’ showing that humanism — or the ideas which this movement brought to the fore — was not restricted to the elite or patrician classes.<sup>46</sup> In Maxson’s account, the humanist movement encompassed a wide range of learned interests and abilities, ranging from the strongest literary humanists at one end, to the weakest social humanists at the other. For him, social humanists predominantly operated in the vernacular; few wrote original literary treatises and only some of them could speak or even read Latin. Their interest in the humanist movement can be traced primarily through their social networks, looking to the number, quality, and strength of their links to other social, and literary humanists. Like literary humanists, social humanists also formed learned connections, though this was usually on a much smaller scale, and the individuals to whom they were connected varied in the strength of their humanist interests and in their social and political prominence. Though we should avoid

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<sup>45</sup> See Peter Howard, “Languages of the Pulpit in Quattrocento Florence,” in *City, Court, Academy*, 31–46; Corbellini, “Creating Domestic Sacred Space,” 304–308; Corbellini and Hoogvliet, “Artisans and Religious Reading,” 521–538; Sabrina Corbellini and Margriet Hoogvliet, “Holy Writ and Lay Readers in Late Medieval Europe: Translation and Participation,” in *Texts, Transmissions, Receptions: Modern Approaches to Narratives*, eds. André Lardinois, Sophie Levie, Hans Hoeken and Christoph Lüthy (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 259–280.

<sup>46</sup> See n.4 above.

the inadvertent binary opposition created between terms such as ‘literary’ and ‘social’ humanists, we should, like Maxson, consider the social locations of ideas, both philosophical and theological, religious and spiritual, to understand the role that the vernacular played in the exchange between the author and the reader, but also between readers and listeners.

By the late fifteenth century, the requisite growth in cultural knowledge of theological discourse had already occurred, the fact of which is confirmed by more than a century’s worth of written evidence. Moreover, the religious and philosophical lexicons were by then well-furnished and well-established. Audiences in Quattrocento Florence were able to understand complex doctrines; we need only look back at the survey of lay religious writings discussed in chapter two to see that the Tuscan vernacular was an ample and effective vehicle for communicating complex theological and inherently philosophical ideas. Whether from the preachers directly, or indirectly through social and familial networks, the Florentines could obtain a degree of religious and linguistic knowledge without ever having set foot in a classroom.<sup>47</sup> Theoretically we can make the same judgment about philosophical discourse, even if to a lesser degree.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, the disciplines that were previously the possession of the learned had effectively been translated to a broader socio-cultural audience in a way that was both understood and could be put to practical use. The language and ideas of the pulpit and *piazza* alike had long dealt with many of the same issues that Ficino was determined to address, especially the immortality and salvation of the soul. Thus, the expansion of the Tuscan lexicon, and consequently the themes which it could communicate, had already taken place long before the vernacular rendering of Ficino’s *De divino furore*.

The interest shown by vernacular audiences in particular topics indicates that they were capable not only of grasping the language and ideas being shared, but also demonstrates that they were invested in harnessing these concepts and wanted to participate in the intellectual and spiritual life — to play a part in their self-edification, and, moreover, their

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<sup>47</sup> On the primacy of orality and performance in Florence, see Blake Wilson, “Dominion of the Ear: Singing the Vernacular in Piazza San Martino,” *I Tatti Studies in the Italian Renaissance* 16, no. 1 (2013): 273–287; Nerida Newbigin, *Making a Play for God: The Sacre Rappresentazioni of Renaissance Florence*, 2 vols. (Toronto: Centre for Renaissance and Reformation Studies, 2021).

<sup>48</sup> Indeed, as discussed in chapter one, many of the localised theologies that emerged in the fifteenth century employed classical motifs and *exempla* which were translated to the broader culture orally through preaching, visually through art, and textually in various religious and secular works.

own salvation. The vernacular readership in Florence was far richer and more diverse than is often assumed by modern historians. People not only understood complex philosophical ideas, but they also took a serious interest in them, and there was a demand for vernacularisation — after all, for these works to be produced a patron had to commission them. It is only through an appreciation of this linguistic and conceptual framework that we can truly situate the vernacularisation of Ficinian teachings within the broader cultural landscape, and, moreover, within Ficino's programme of spiritual renewal.

Delving into the dynamics of Ficino's relationship to the *volgare*, Giuliano Tanturli's critical study has explored the linguistic phases of Ficino's career and the significance of his original Tuscan compositions and vernacular self-translations.<sup>49</sup> Tanturli showed that Ficino's commitment to giving Tuscan dress to concepts usually expressed in Latin revealed something about the linguistic expression over and above the arguments being made — that is, *how* the arguments were made, rather than *what* was actually said. Comparing Ficino's Latin and vernacular compositions, Tanturli implied that Ficino did not see vernacularisation as harmful or disadvantageous to the thought and understanding of the reader, noting that, Ficino never refers to a difficulty in expressing ideas in Tuscan.<sup>50</sup> Why then did he opt to translate certain works already written in Latin, or to compose them initially in the vernacular? Drawing on the earlier textual tradition that had prepared non-Latinate readers for the reception of complex ideas in the vernacular, Tanturli's close lexical analysis showed that the Latinised Tuscan vernacular had near equivalents to the technical Latin and was thus sufficiently equipped to treat philosophical matters. Tanturli argued that the Tuscan vernacular not only offered a lexicon which could renew the Latin metaphors, but which offered Florentine cultural autonomy, and this, he argued, explained Ficino's commitment to *volgarizzamenti*. Certainly, through its lexicon Florentine culture was able to gain access to the ancient mysteries. As Tanturli has aptly noted, “what better sign and proof that vulgar culture was ripe for Marsilio Ficino's philosophical message?”<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Tanturli, “Ficino e il Volgare,” 183–213; Giuliano Tanturli, “Osservazioni Lessicali su Opere Volgare e Bilingui di Marsilio Ficino,” in *Il Volgare Come Lingua di Cultura dal Trecento al Cinquecento: Atti del Convegno Internazionale (Mantova, 18–20 Ottobre, 2001)* (Florence: Leo S. Olschki Editore, 2003), 155–185.

<sup>50</sup> Tanturli, “Ficino e il Volgare,” 199.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.

There are three distinct linguistic phases of Ficino's career. During phase one (1455–1462), Ficino produced a number of original works in Tuscan and Latin.<sup>52</sup> During phase two (1463–1478), arguably the most dynamic phase of his career, Ficino composed some of his major philosophical works.<sup>53</sup> Though nothing was written *immediately and only* in the vernacular, it was during this phase that Ficino began the process of self-translation, and in which Tuscan redactions were made of other key texts. In the third and final phase of his career (1479–1499), however, Ficino made a rapid move away from the *volgare*, and after 1485 it had disappeared from his textual horizon entirely.<sup>54</sup> Placed within the broader intellectual context of the Quattrocento, these phases seem to harmonise with the ebb and flow of Latin and the vernacular driven by the changes in formal education, and the impact of the humanist social ideology for education. In this respect, however, the Florentine context is wholly unique, as there existed a more distinctive relationship between these idioms in Florence than other Italian cities, based on the demands of a highly literate society.

There is more to be said about this sought-after cultural autonomy. Certainly, there is something in Ficino's implied attitude toward the *volgare* that suggests he himself saw a much higher value in translating his works into the vernacular. Moreover, this value was arguably seen by *others*, who, either by Ficino's initiative, or their own, set about translating particular Ficinian works, and the doctrines contained therein, into the vernacular. Beyond establishing or cultivating a conventional culture that was both interested and engaged in the study of philosophy, I contend that Ficino saw in the vernacular a pathway to a new religious and intellectual culture; for Ficino, the *lingua Toscana* was a means capable of breaking down the barriers that divided the social order, through which his understanding of the soul could move beyond his inner circle, beyond the more learned members of society, and could communicate directly to the common people.

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<sup>52</sup> *De Dio et anima* (1454), *Epistola ai fratelli* (1455), *De furore divino* (1457), *Dell'appetito* (1460), *Che cosa è fortuna* (1460–62), the *Epistola a Leonardo di Tone Pagni* (1462), and the *Visione d'Anselmo* (1462).

<sup>53</sup> *Pimander* (1463), *Monarchia* (1468), *Libro dell'amor* (c.1474), *Della Cristiana Religione* (1475), *Epistole philosophice* (c.1476–1478), *De raptu Pauli* (1477), *Salterio abbreviate di Santo Girolamo* (c.1477–1482), and the *Sermoni Morali* (1478).

<sup>54</sup> In the final stage, Ficino wrote the vernacular *Consiglio contra la pestilentia* (1479), along with several prefaces written for the works of some of his friends (1481–1485).

## 4.2 The Fruits of Ficinian Theology

Armed with a vocabulary capable of communicating complex doctrines, and a public which could comprehend their profundity, Florentine *volgarizzatori* were uniquely equipped to create broad cultural, religious, and spiritual change. From this advantaged position, the motivations that spurred translators to make particular works accessible become critical to our understanding not only of the movement of ideas which were valued by, or believed to be of value to that society, but of how the vernacular languages played a central role in the spiritual reform of a city. Throughout the previous chapters I have repeatedly drawn the reader's attention to the doctrinal significance of Ficino's *De divino furore* — of the hidden assumptions about pre-existence and its relationship to Ficino's ideas about contemplation, conversion and renewal. I have moreover demonstrated Ficino's manipulation of rhetoric and genre within this very epistle to shape theological ideas. In the years that followed Ficino's original letter to Pellegrino degli Agli in 1457, a number of Latin and vernacular copies emerged. While the Latin copies made by those close to Ficino may seem routine amidst a culture of learning, the translation of these ideas into the common tongue arguably represents a shift in the transmission of ideas from author to audience, and the intentions that necessarily drive this enterprise. Recalling the distinct phases of Ficino's relationship to the *volgare*, it is worth noting here that the vernacularisation of this letter falls into that second, and most fundamental phase of Ficino's career, and that this phase correlates to the dynamic changes occurring within the Florentine socio-cultural and intellectual fields. With these contextual considerations in mind, my discussion below will begin to examine the transmission of Ficinian teachings by a broader set of characters, facilitated by the *lingua Toscana*.

At first glance, the number of extant versions of Ficino's *De divino furore* might not seem that impressive. Certainly, compared to the likes of Leonardo Bruni — the “best-selling author of the Quattrocento and model for humanists throughout Italy,” whose vernacular literary production far eclipsed that of Ficino — the number of surviving codices may seem insignificant.<sup>55</sup> However, considering Ficino's comparative celebrity, as well as the

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<sup>55</sup> James Hankins, “Humanism in the Vernacular: The Case of Leonardo Bruni,” in *Humanism and Creativity in the Renaissance: Essays in Honor of Ronald G. Witt*, eds. Christopher Celenza and Kenneth Gouwens (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 11–12, 21–22.

nature and relative ‘importance’ of this singular text amongst Ficino’s collected works, this number seems to hold more weight. In addition to the *Letters* published by Ficino (of which there are numerous copies), a total of 17 independent manuscript copies of Ficino’s letter to Pellegrino degli Agli survive: 12 of these are found in Latin miscellanies, another 4 appear in Tuscan miscellanies, 3 of which are said to be linked (though not yet directly attributed) to members of Ficino’s circle.<sup>56</sup> The letter also survives in a vernacular edition of the first book of Ficino’s *Letters*, the translation of which is not conclusively attributed to Ficino.<sup>57</sup> Focussing on the linguistic and codicological details of these vernacular miscellanies, my analysis here seeks to establish the initial links in the chain of transmission of new theological ideas from Ficino to the Florentine public. Reflecting on the questions of when, by whom, and under what circumstances these vernacular translations were made, I will argue that these codices reflect a larger undertaking by Florentine thinkers to foster a new religious culture premised upon Ficinian theological precepts. In reconstructing the relationships between Ficino’s original letter, its Latin copies, and its Tuscan translations, I will attribute special significance to one Florentine codex in particular, which was accompanied by a unique prefatory epistle to the reader. In light of the analysis in the previous section, I will argue that the vernacularisation of this Ficinian epistle (and the subsequent vernacular proem), represents an attempt by Ficino and those around him to disseminate nuanced understandings of the soul and the innate connection that each person has to the divine to the broadest possible audience. Reconsidering Ficino’s relationship to the *volgare* in this way, my discussion will demonstrate that Ficino had a broader programme of spiritual healing in mind, one that could be embraced by the common man, and not just a privileged minority.

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<sup>56</sup> Latin manuscripts: Bibl. Ambr. D 3 inf., fols. 156v–159r; Glasgow, Hunterian Museum 206 (U 1.10), fols. 96v–99r; Bibl. Laur. Plut. 21.8, fols. 133r–138r; Bibl. Laur. Plut. 21.21, fols. 131r–135r; Bibl. Laur. Conv. Soppr. 544, fols. 8r–13v; Piacenza Bibl. Com. Landi 50, fols. 104v–109v; Bibl. Ricc. 146, fols. 49r–54v; Bibl. Ricc. 351, fols. 27v–31v; Bibl. Ricc. 574, fols. 51r–53v; Bibl. Ricc. 966, fols. 63r–70r; Firenze Marchese Filippo Serlupi, fols. 183r–190r; British Library, Harl. 5335, fols. 54r–65v. Tuscan manuscripts: BNCF Naz. II. III. 402, fols. 19v–25r; Bibl. Ricc. 1074, fols. 143r–147r; Bibl. Ricc. 2544, fols. 198r–202v; Siena Bibl. Com. I. VI. 25, fols. 128r–132r. See Appendix A. Referring to BNCF Naz. II. III. 402, Kristeller contends that “we are entitled to assume that the vernacular translation of the *De furore divino* was made by a friend of Ficino shortly after the composition of the original Latin text.” Though he provides no further qualification, Kristeller asserts that “All these manuscripts, except for the Siena manuscript, are closely linked with Ficino’s circle.” Paul Oskar Kristeller, “Marsilio Ficino as a Man of Letters and the Glosses Attributed to Him in the Caetanoi Codex of Dante,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (1983), 22, also see Kristeller’s n.74.

<sup>57</sup> See Bibl. Cas. 1297, fols. 8r–14v.

In the Roman Biblioteca Casanatense an ornate manuscript preserves the letter written to Pellegrino. The collection, titled *Epistole philosophice di Marsilio Ficino Platonico Fiorentino tradotte di latina lingua in fiorentino sermone ad Antonio et Lorenzo di Bernardo de' Medici*, concludes with a scribal note that reads: “Here ends the first book of the letters of Marsilio Ficino up to the year 1476. Bernardus Businus wrote it.”<sup>58</sup> We know that the first book of Ficino’s letters was completed in 1476, and as Giuliano Tanturli has argued, this vernacular translation followed shortly thereafter; given the translator’s apparent awareness that this was not the *only* book of letters, Tanturli shows that it could not have been written in tandem. That the *Sermoni Morali*, another vernacular collection of Ficinian epistles, which presupposes and improves upon this translation, was concluded by 28 June 1478 suggests a narrow time frame for composition — that is, within two years.<sup>59</sup> Tanturli contends that the title of the vernacular collection indicates a closeness to Ficino: the title *Epistole philosophice* was not reflected in the Latin codices of the first (and in principle the only) book of Ficino’s correspondence; rather, it reflects an affinity to the name which was given to the collection in the first catalogue composed by Ficino of his own works, where he listed the collection under the title of *Philosophicum epistolarum volumen*.<sup>60</sup> Though this does not necessarily signify that the vernacularisation was made at Ficino’s behest, the title is certainly indicative that the translation was made close to and in synchronicity with Ficino. Indeed, it has been suggested that the translation is in fact the work of Ficino’s friend, Andrea Cambini.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> “Finisce el primo libro delle epistole di Marsilio Ficino Fiorentino per insino all’anno del MCCCCLXXVI. Bernardus Businus. (D’Ancona: Rufinus) scribebat.” Bibl. Cas. 1297, fol. 132v. Note, scholars appear to agree that Bernardus is the scribe, not the translator, see n.62 below.

<sup>59</sup> This ‘fairly definitive redaction’ contains the first book of Ficino’s letters, followed by the *Epistola ai Fratelli*. The seven letters which are preserved in both the first book of *Epistole* and the *Sermoni Morali* are verbatim copies of one another. It should be noted that the inscription on the walls of Ficino’s villa at Careggi is also preserved in *terza rima* in the codex. See Kristeller, “Ficino as a Man of Letters,” 27.

<sup>60</sup> The first catalogue Ficino made of his work is preserved in an undated letter to Angelo Poliziano (see Letter 21 in Ficino, *Letters*, 1:29–30), the second is found in a letter to Martin Prenninger of 1489 (see Letter 10 in Ficino, *Letters*, 8:19–20), and the third is preserved in a codex held at the C. W. Dyson Perrins Library (Malvern 89). These are printed in Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Supplementum Ficinianum: Marsilii Ficini Florentini Philosophi Platonici Opuscula Inedita et Dispersa*, 2 vols. (Florence: Leo S. Olschki Editore, 1973), 1:1–4.

<sup>61</sup> Though he maintained his belief that the translation was Ficino’s own, Kristeller proposed that Cambini could also have been the translator, given the dedication to Antonio and Lorenzo di Bernardo de’ Medici, to whom Cambini had also dedicated the vernacularisations of *De amicitia* and *De Senectute* by Cicero, the *Cicero novus* by Leonardo Bruni, and the *Life of Atticus* by Cornelius Nepos. Following Kristeller, Sebastiano Gentile, reaffirmed and clarified the close relationship between the *Epistole philosophice* and *Sermoni Morali*, noting that in some cases the latter improves the translation of the former, and that he considers these translations to be worse than the vernacularisation by Ficino himself, namely: the *Commentarium in Convivium Platonis*, the *De christiana religione*, and Dante’s *Monarchia*. Tanturli agrees that it is highly plausible that someone like Cambini translated the first book of Ficino’s *Epistole* and revised the letters included in the *Sermoni Morali*. See Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Ficino and His Work after*

While this collection represents an important and independent reworking of the Ficinian original, the Casanatense translation appears to be unrelated to the miscellaneous manuscripts now housed in Tuscany, signifying yet another branch in the Ficinian network.<sup>62</sup> It moreover reflects the prevailing desire to not only preserve Ficinian ideas, but to make them widely available in the Tuscan vernacular. However, as we shall see, this desire was felt nearly two decades prior.

By the fifteenth century the custom of documentation and collecting texts for the benefit of future generations had become central to the Florentine ethos. The vernacular genre of *zibaldone*, akin to a journal or scrapbook — a medium in which all manner of disparate material, collected from a range of sources, was organised together — was at the heart of Florentine domestic literary production.<sup>63</sup> *Zibaldoni* reflected both the “personal interest and character of their author,” as well as the “more general circulation of learned and popular texts throughout Florentine society.”<sup>64</sup> These miscellanies served as single-book libraries, and their compilation often involved the sharing and exchange of manuscripts within private and semi-private social networks.<sup>65</sup> Reflecting the active choices of the author, who either committed themselves to copy texts by hand or commissioned a scribe, and who took part in the precise curation of a collected work, the physical act of copying original excerpts and ideas was a heavily mediated mental process of learning,

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*Five Hundred Years* (Florence: Leo S. Olschki Editore, 1987), 126; Gentile, *Lettere*, 1:CCLXX–CCLXXXII; Tanturli, “Ficino e il Volgare,” 192–193, n.33.

<sup>62</sup> The 1476 translation was not only written much later than the Tuscan codices, but there are a number of discrepancies between the Casanatense and Tuscan codices. For example, the Casanatense letter collection omits the final sentence of the letter which states that “nothing is dearer to me than you.” Other lines have likewise been omitted (lines 67 and 108), or are substantially different in this rendering, for example, lines 36–37: “vedeva l’armonia e la ineffabile et invisible natura della bellezza divina” become “l’armonia et una mirabile bellezza della divina natura.” Emphasis mine.

<sup>63</sup> *Zibaldone*, which roughly translates to ‘heap of things,’ is the Italian term used to denote a ‘miscellany’ or ‘commonplace’ book. Miscellanies made up the majority of codices produced at this time, and indeed, there is no other historical period in which the miscellaneous manuscript had more centrality or importance. For an overview of this genre, see Armando Petrucci, *Writers and Readers in Medieval Italy*, trans. and ed. Charles M. Radding (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), 169–235, especially 187–189; Sebastiano Gentile and Silvia Rizzo, “Per una Tipologia delle Miscellanee Umanistiche,” *Segno e Testo* 2 (2004): 379–407; Dale Kent, “Compilations and the Corpus of Popular Texts,” in *Cosimo de’ Medici and the Florentine Renaissance: The Patron’s Oeuvre* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 69–93; Lisa Kaborycha, “Copying Culture: Fifteenth-century Florentines and Their Zibaldoni,” (PhD thesis, University of California, 2006); Niall Atkinson, *The Noisy Renaissance: Sound, Architecture, and Florentine Urban Life* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2016), 24–25, 161, 164.

<sup>64</sup> Atkinson, *The Noisy Renaissance*, 24.

<sup>65</sup> On the broad readership of books and the mobility of knowledge among social networks and the spaces of medieval cityscapes, see Sabrina Corbellini and Margriet Hoogvliet, “Late Medieval Urban Libraries as a Social Practice: Miscellanies, Common Profit Books and Libraries (France, Italy, the Low Countries),” in *Die Bibliothek – The Library – La Bibliothèque*, eds. Andreas Speer and Lars Reuke (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2020), 379–398; Kaborycha, “Copying Culture,” 87–90.

admiration, and contemplation.<sup>66</sup> Ficino's letter to Pellegrino clearly possessed something worthy not only of admiration and contemplation, but of preservation. Indeed, the emotional, intellectual, and spiritual investment of Florentine thinkers in this letter will become apparent as my discussion proceeds.

The desire to possess a personal manuscript which one could not only refer back to for the purpose of study and self-reflection, but which one could physically exchange, or else orally communicate the ideas contained therein with social and familial networks, speaks to the perceived value of that text. That these miscellanies were compiled in such similar fashion clearly reflects the attribution of such value, but also demonstrates the proximity of the authors to Ficino and the close nature of the socio-intellectual network exchanging these manuscripts. The circulation of numerous Ficinian works well prior to their publication moreover indicates an ongoing conversation from at least the late-1450s and throughout the 1460s about the very ideas to which this thesis has been signalling. Throughout the Latin and vernacular anthologies, many of the same sets of texts appear, and indeed, some commonalities are found across both languages. While their programmatic format reads somewhat like a Ficinian syllabus, each miscellany is different enough in composition to retain its fundamental individuality. Though some texts appear in only two or three of the codices, it is curious that only a singular text appears in all 16 miscellanies: the *De divino furore*.<sup>67</sup> So just how did *this* work find its way into the vernacular? And why does this matter?

The Latin rendering of the *De divino furore* contained in ms. Ricc. 574 bears strong resemblance to the four 'anonymous' vernacular translations, and in particular, that which

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<sup>66</sup> "The practice of selecting texts from several manuscripts in order to create personal miscellanies could also imply that the copyist was borrowing books from various confraternal libraries. ... Selecting texts and deciding what to write and what to leave out implies an active role played by scribes, transforming them into authors of their own miscellanies, often containing the texts they considered essential to their spiritual life." Corbellini, "The Plea for Lay Bibles," 101. Also refer to the 'A. S. W. Rosenbach Lectures in Bibliography' lecture series by Ann Blair, *Hidden Hands: Amanuenses and Authorship in Early Modern Europe*, sponsored by The University of Pennsylvania Libraries: "Hidden Helpers," (17 March 2014); "Hands and Minds at Work," (18 March 2014); "Authors and Amanuenses," (20 March 2014).

<sup>67</sup> See Appendix A. Of the Latin works translated into Tuscan, only the *Epistola a Cosimo de' Medici* and the *De divino furore* appear in the vernacular miscellanies, though the former is only present in the Riccardian manuscripts. The other texts contained in some but not all of these miscellanies were composed originally and only in Tuscan: *Visione d'Anselmo*, *Epistola ai Fratelli*, *Di Dio et anima*, *Dell'appetito*, *Che cosa è fortuna*, and the *Epistola a Leonardo di Tone Pagni*. While these various texts did appear in other codices, where the *De divino furore* did not (for example we know of 25 miscellanies containing the *Epistola ai Fratelli*), in these heavily Ficinian *zibaldoni* there is only one text deemed essential to record. See Kristeller, *Supplementum Ficinianum*, 1:CLIX.

appears in ms. BNCF Naz. II. III. 402 (hereafter Nazionale).<sup>68</sup> Did Ficino request the translation? Were each of the miscellanies independently translated based on a reading of the Riccardian manuscript or are they copies of one another? While we do not have a clear indication that the work was vernacularised at Ficino's request, we can surmise in any event that it was probably done so prior to the translation of the first book of letters undertaken by Ficino, possibly with the help of Cambini, once the letter collection was complete.<sup>69</sup> It was certainly put into Tuscan well before the mid-sixteenth century translation by Felice Figliucci. Though we can make no definitive claims in answering these questions, I will show that there is cause to believe that the Nazionale manuscript, which was almost certainly the first of these translations, had some bearing on the Riccardian and Siena manuscripts. Based on a reading of the proem, I will argue that this translation was an autonomous endeavour (that is, not at Ficino's *request*), though the author was certainly linked to Ficino. Further, I would like to propose that the author's clarification and reiteration of Ficino's intended spiritual direction to the reader played a role in the production of its subsequent copies. In this way, I will show that with this letter, Ficino *and* his followers set the wheels of Florentine spiritual renewal in motion.

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<sup>68</sup> Minor discrepancies can be observed between the canonical version of the epistle and Bibl. Ricc. 574. However, it is the latter and not the canonical that shares a closer affinity to the vernacular codices. Comparing the Latin Bibl. Ricc. 574 with the vernacular BNCF Naz. II. III. 402, Bibl. Ricc. 1074, and Bibl. Ricc. 2544 Tanturli has observed the following: Line 22: "ea brevitate quam epistola exigit," becomes "con quella brevità che lla epistola richiede." Line 67: "que ex partium membrorumque corporis aaptissima compositione conficitur," becomes "che nell'aptissima compositione delle parti e membra corporali si dimostra." Line 196: "primum quidem furorem diffinit vehementiorem concitationem," becomes "Il primo furore difinisce così: vemente concitazione d'animo." Lines 36–37: "videbat harmonium atque ineffabilem divine nature et invisibilem pulchritudinem," are repeated in full in BNCF Naz. II. III. 402, except for the exchange between object and specification, "vedeva l'armonia e la ineffabile et invisible natura della bellezza divina." Bibl. Ricc. 1074 and Bibl. Ricc. 2544, on the other hand, omit "et invisible," reading, "vedeva l'armonia e lla ineffabile bellezza della natura divina." Common to Piacenza Com. Landi 50, Bibl. Ricc. 351 and Bibl. Ricc. 574, line 108 reads: "nihil altum, nihil omnino egregium," ("nihil altum atque egregium" in the canonical version) and becomes "mai cosa alcuna alta e egregia," in BNCF Naz. II. III. 402. Another commonality is found on line 137: "aliorumque" in the canonical version becomes "variorumque" in the three codices just mentioned but is omitted from the vulgarisations. Line 60, rather than "hominem reminisce," in the canonical version, becomes "homines" in these codices, and is reflected in BNCF Naz. II. III. 402: "né stima però mai gli uomini delle divine cose ricordarsi." And again, common to Piacenza Com. Landi 50, Bibl. Ricc. 351, Bibl. Ricc. 574 and Bibl. Ricc. 966, line 192 reads "quocumque moveris," ("quodcumque movetur," in the canonical version), becoming "ciò che ssi muove," in BNCF Naz. II. III. 402. See Tanturli, "Ficino e il Volgare," 188, n.17. For the canonical version, see Gentile, *Lettere*, 1:19–28. Though Tanturli did not consult the Siena manuscript, my analysis shows that it follows BNCF Naz. II. III. 402 in all of the lines cited above, except for lines 36–37, which like its Riccardian counterparts, similarly omits 'et invisibile.'

<sup>69</sup> As noted by the editors in the preface to the second edition of the *Letters*, "Ficino probably started to collect his philosophic letters for publication towards the end of 1473 ... which he collected ... and circulated among his friends (a common practice among scholars at that time). ... The first book of letters was translated into Italian during Ficino's lifetime, probably by Ficino himself and Andrea Cambini, in manuscript only." Rees, Bertoluzzi and Farndell, "Introduction," in *Letters*, 1:xvii. Also see n.61 above.

The Nazionale miscellany is the only one of the Tuscan codices which contains a prefatory letter, giving crucial insight to the provenance of this translation. In the proem, the translator praises Ficino as the new interpreter of Plato, based only, it seems, on his reading of Ficino's commentary on the *Timaeus*, the earliest version of which was written before 1457, and the 'most acute disputations compiled over many enigmas,' by which he presumably refers to Ficino's now lost *Istitutiones ad Platoniam disciplinam* of 1456.<sup>70</sup> The author shows no knowledge of Ficino's translation of Plato's dialogues (begun in 1463, and written largely before the death of Cosimo de' Medici in August 1464), the *Commentarium In Convivium Platonis (De amore, 1469)*, or his other commentaries on Plato.<sup>71</sup> As Tanturli has shown, a significant number of important Ficinian works composed between 1463 and 1478 — that is, the second phase of Ficino's relationship to the *volgare* — were vernacularised in close temporal proximity to the original Latin, and indeed, there is no other evidence which would lead us to believe that the vernacularisation of this letter happened at a great chronological distance.<sup>72</sup> While we cannot assert a precise dating of this letter, we can reasonably suggest that it was composed some time between early 1458 and early 1463 at the very latest, though the former date is far more likely.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> The author cites "commentari del Timeo" and "l'acutissime disputazioni sopra molti enimmati compilate." See Appendix B. The 1457 version of the *Timaeus* commentary has not survived; the Basel edition is based on the second version finished in 1483.

<sup>71</sup> Nine of the dialogues were already written by 11 January 1464. The tenth was written before Cosimo's passing on 1 August 1464. The complete collection of twenty-three dialogues was finished on 1 April 1466. Paul Oskar Kristeller, "Ficino as a Beginning Student of Plato," *Scriptorium* 20, no. 1 (1966): 43.

<sup>72</sup> On average, the translation of Ficino's Latin works into Tuscan were composed within a few years of the original, and in some cases, within six months. In the case of the *Pimander*, the Latin version was completed in April 1463, while the Tuscan version dates to the 10<sup>th</sup> of September 1463. The *De christiana religione* was drafted in Latin in 1474 (though not printed until 1476); the Tuscan version, dedicated to Bernardo del Nero, was printed on 25 March 1475. The autograph copy of the *Commentarium in Convivium Platonis de amore* is dated July 1469, and its Tuscan counterpart was certainly composed before March 1475, having already been mentioned in the dedication to Bernardo in the *De amore*. The Latin *De raptu Pauli* dates to the 1<sup>st</sup> of November 1476 and was vernacularised no later than the 11<sup>th</sup> of December 1477 (and perhaps even by the 24<sup>th</sup> of March 1477). At a maximum, then, the trend for vernacularisation is no longer than five years, and it is highly likely that this interval can be significantly reduced. See Tanturli, "Ficino e il Volgare," 188–192.

<sup>73</sup> The Nazionale translation of the *De divino furore* is believed to be the first translation and diffusion of a Latin Ficinian work put into Tuscan, followed closely by the *Epistola a Cosimo de Medici*, itself originally composed on the 11<sup>th</sup> of January 1464. The Riccardian manuscripts, which contain the letter to Cosimo, could not have been composed prior to the Nazionale manuscript. Based on what we know about the proximity of Ficinian translations alone, a brief survey of the other excerpts contained in the Riccardian manuscripts, almost all of which predate the Ficinian works, would seem to suggest composition probably no later than 1475. This is, however, a conservative estimate, owing in large part to the unknown dating of the letters of Brigida Baldinotti, nor the sonnets of Feo Belcari. The Siena manuscript bears strong resemblance to the excerpts collected in the Riccardian manuscripts, however, given that it does not contain the *Epistola a Cosimo de Medici*, it is entirely possible that it was composed prior to the Riccardian texts. Considering Kristeller's assertion that the Siena manuscript is not directly linked to Ficino's circle, I do not believe that it could have been composed prior to the Nazionale manuscript, the fact of which points to a

That the temporal proximity of this version to Ficino's original signifies a closeness to the author is undeniable. Yet the relationship between Ficino and the task of vernacularisation is a different question altogether. Tanturli asserts that the vernacularisation of Ficinian works more broadly was, by and large, undertaken by Ficino himself or at the very least, by his initiative. Yet we have no clear evidence to suggest that Ficino initiated the translation of *this* epistle. Indeed, the Nazionale author seems to take pride and ownership in having translated this work; as we shall see, it was *he* who decided to translate it, and it was *his* gift to the *volgari*. While it is my contention that this translation was encouraged by Ficino's insistence on the spiritual benefit of the letter — an assertion manifested especially through his rhetorical command, and which was undoubtedly reinforced by intellectual discussions in the vernacular — I will argue here that these four codices demonstrate an individual initiative, the fact of which is highly significant for a number of reasons.

First, translation is always an act of interpretation. Presenting only slight variations to the original Latin, none of which are detrimental to the overall rhetorical command, nor the philosophical and theological sentiments contained therein, the authors chose to recount the letter in full, rather than bowdlerise or Christianise its content, as had often been the case with sensitive Platonic material in the past.<sup>74</sup> Integral to the Platonic doctrine of Divine Frenzy, as we have seen, is the notion that the soul existed prior to its corporeal inhabitation; driven by its inclination toward earthly things the soul descends into bodies, where, stirred again by its inclination towards God, it contemplates the divine natures it had previously experienced but had forgotten — through contemplation the soul regains its wings, and is able to return to God.<sup>75</sup> Hinged upon the pre-existence of the soul, the Platonic narrative differs significantly from the Christian account of religious madness or ecstasy, and it is therefore significant that the translators relay this doctrine in the same detail. Moreover, these translations reflect the reuse of language and thus the renewal of its power. Second, though the works are not original in a strict sense, these copies represent the deliberate choice to record these ideas for posterity, reflecting a broader

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secondary private manuscript exchange network, which perhaps stems from the Nazionale translator's own social contacts. See Appendix A.

<sup>74</sup> Aside from the poem in BNCF Naz. II. III. 402, the only notable difference between the Florentine vernacular manuscripts are the omissions noted on lines 36–37. See n.68 above for reference. See also Tanturli, "Ficino e il Volgare," 188, n.17. On the history of the modification and bowdlerisation of Platonic dialogues, see Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance*, 1:29–159.

<sup>75</sup> See chapter two.

culture of memorialisation and learning, as well as the dynamic interchange between ‘literary’ and ‘social’ humanists. With respect to genre, we must remember that there is no such thing as a ‘mere compilation’ — these copies are contained within carefully composed miscellanies, the very fact of which shows that these ideas were important to them.<sup>76</sup> Third, that these translations appear in quick succession, and before the translation of the first book of *Letters* in full speaks to the desire and urgency which was felt by the translators to make this work available for themselves and for others in the common tongue. During the second phase of his career, Ficino busied himself translating a number of his most important works, such as the *De amore*, which also espoused pre-existence, but this was a work of far greater proportion. Having understood the benefit of the letter’s teachings on the one hand, and perceiving the spiritual concerns of those around them on the other, the translators made it their mission to make this work available to the *volgo*. We might even suggest that both Ficino and his followers had an awareness of the growing literary capabilities of the Florentines more broadly and made the conscious and calculated choice to ‘speak their language.’

Finally, through these translations we can see that Ficino was indeed espousing the pre-existence of souls (and that it had use for the believer) and that his rhetoric had a tangible impact on those around him. This is confirmed by the prefatory epistle to the translation in the Nazionale manuscript, which reads:

Proem of the vulgariser of the Epistle of Marsilio Ficino to Pellegrino degli Agli.

Read fruitfully.

Having recently read the most solemn and ornate epistle of our divine philosopher, Marsilio Ficino, I made it my intention that the vernacular readers would receive this short gift from me; for that epistle, more than

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<sup>76</sup> “... each Florentine amanuensis was creating an artifact, a unique manuscript, and he or she was participating in the craft of book production characteristic of Quattrocento Florence. Copying was not a passive act; every copyist made selective choices of what to compile, and the copying was in itself a creative act. Indeed, in a sense the compiling of literature in the Middle Ages was arguably a more creative act than composing it ...” Kaborycha, “Copying Culture,” v. “... compilers freely participated in the production of social meanings through ‘arrangement,’ or what I call active readership practices in manuscript production. The term compilation ... designates a cultural activity that is something less than literary creation from scratch, and something more than the passive lumping together of found, or even pillaged, materials ...” Sarah Westphal, “The Van Hulthem MS and the Compilation of Medieval German Books,” in *Codices Miscellaneorum*, eds. Ria Jansen-Sieben and Hans van Dijk (Brussels: Archives et Bibliothèques de Belgique, 1999), 75–76. For the texts compiled in these miscellanies, see Appendix A.

the previous one, delighted me greatly. But that obligation to report his studies, not only to himself, but to his friends and household, belongs to any scholar.<sup>77</sup> Invite me to undertake this task with respect to this material that is so delightful and certainly not of little value. For what intellect is so inept and uncouth that, seeing with what ingenuity the Divine Plato wrote on the origins of our principal affections, does not delight in it and recount its usefulness to others? Since, according to the most solemn writers, philosophy is the way to our perfection, and this, treating one of the most excellent parts of philosophy, it followed that his lesson may not be of little use. This one knows all the more through experience, so it is not necessary to dispute it. ... It remains that having already proposed to translate the present epistle into Tuscan, I was reminded of your most worthy friendship, to which this little work is dedicated. This I did, so that you understand me not only in common things, but also to always have you present in my studies, and in order that, of my undertakings, whatever those may be, you may participate.<sup>78</sup>

From the Latin *felix*, meaning ‘fruitful’ or ‘happy,’ the adverb *feliciter* has, more often than not, been translated as ‘happily’ in the sense of ‘happily with success’ or ‘happily with abundance.’ One might also find it translated as ‘favourably,’ ‘fortunately’ or ‘abundantly.’ Yet its translation as ‘fruitfully’ is often overlooked. But, as stated earlier, translation is always an act of interpretation, which necessarily relies on context; the rendering of *feliciter* as ‘fruitfully’ in a didactic context such as this is certainly fitting.

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<sup>77</sup> I have translated ‘*domestici*’ as ‘household’ rather than ‘servants’ or ‘family members.’ On this, see n.82 below.

<sup>78</sup> BNCF Naz. II. III. 402, fols. 19v–20v. “Proemio del volgarizzatore della pistola di Marsilio Fecino a Pellegrino degli Agli. Lege feliciter. Avendo a questi di lecta la gravissima et ornatissima epistola del nostro divino filosafio Marsilio Fecino, et quella più che l’usato sommamente diletatami, feci proposito che i volgari lectori da me ricevessino questo brieve dono, però che debito è di qualunque studioso non solo a se, ma ancora agli amici et domestici i suoi studii referire. Invitami a ciò fare la materia in se delectabile et non poco utile. Et quale ingegno è tanto inetto et rozzo, che veggendo con quanto ingengo el divino Platone le origini delle principali nostre affezioni scrisse, in quello non si dilecti [e] l’utilità [ad] altri racconti. Conciosia cosa che secondo e gravissimi scriptori la filosofia è via alla perfezione nostra. Et questo d’una delle più eccellenti parti di filosofia trattando, seguita che non con poco utile sia la lezione sua. Questo più per sperienza si conosce, onde non è necessario el disputarlo. ... Resta che già avendo proposto la presente epistola in toscano tradurre, m’occorse alla memoria l’amicizia vostra degnissima a cui questa operetta s’adirizzi. Il che ho facto, perchè intendiate me non solo nelle comuni cose, ma eziandio ne’ miei studii sempre avervi quasi presente, e acciò che delle mie operazioni, qualunque quelle sieno, voi faccia partefice. Et già Marsilio udiamo per così parlante.” Some minor emendations have been made by Kristeller, see Kristeller, *Supplementum Ficinianum*, 1:68–69. For the full transcription, see Appendix B.

Setting the tone for the prospective reader, the vulgariser's hope that the reading of this translation should bear fruit is not only reminiscent of the Ficinian sentiment already expressed in the previous chapter, but moreover, strongly resembles the familiar theological language associated with the fruits of preaching, and the biblical language more broadly which is often expressed in such terms.<sup>79</sup> Invoking the complicity of the reader, much in the same way that a preacher's sermon would, the translator here begins his spiritual instruction.<sup>80</sup> Like a shepherd guiding his flock, the *volgarizzatore* intends to lead his audience to an understanding he believes is fundamental to their spiritual health.

The proem implies a much broader readership than one might initially gather from the English translation given here. Andrea Rizzi notes that the proem "warmly addresses a specific and unnamed friend," however, the translator's continuous address is to the second-person plural (*vostra, vi, voi*).<sup>81</sup> While these personal and possessive pronouns have indeed been used in the past to formally address a singular person, in the context of close friendship, as is indicated here by the author, it seems far more likely that the informal 'tu' would have been used were it addressed to one person (as Ficino himself did when addressing Pellegrino). Likewise, in the context of the period, a return to the Roman 'tu' seems far more fitting if it were directed to a singular recipient. Instead, the author immediately addresses a group of his own friends. Moreover, the author refers

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<sup>79</sup> See chapter four. Ficino's use of agricultural language reiterates that the philosopher should not cultivate the 'gardens of Adonis' (that is, for the sake of flowers), but rather those cultivated for the fruits they produce. Galatians 5:22–23 lists the twelve fruits of the Holy Spirit: charity (*caritas*), joy (*gaudium*), peace (*pax*), patience (*patientia*), benignity (*benignitas*), goodness (*bonitas*), longanimity (*longanimitas*), mildness (*mansuetudo*), faith (*fides*), modesty (*modestia*), continency (*continentia*), and chastity (*castitas*). On the fruits of preaching, see Howard, "Making a City and Citizens," 71.

<sup>80</sup> See *Ibid.*, 62–65.

<sup>81</sup> Rizzi notes that "translators often directed their work to a friend or ruler, but addressed also a wider readership. ... Such is the case of the unnamed translator of Ficino's *De furore divino* (written soon after 1457): the translator addresses his work to 'volgari lectori' and to some friends and family members ('domestici') whose names are, like his own, omitted. ... The paratext then warmly addresses a specific and unnamed friend: 'avendo proposto la presente epistola in toscano tradurre, m'occorre alla memoria l'amicizia vostra degnissima a cui questa operetta s'addrizzi' (having decided to turn this work into Tuscan, I thought of addressing it to you, whose friendship I treasure)." While the omission of the names of the recipients and the vulgariser himself may indeed "reflect the proximity and immediacy of the social circle for which the work was made," contrary to Rizzi's assessment, the letter is not *addressed* to an unspecified vulgar readership, nor to the vulgariser's own family (though we may infer from his direction that he had at some stage reported to them). It is, however, certainly the vulgariser's *intention* that his translation will reach these kinds of readers through intellectual exchange of the letter's contents. The language used does not indicate multiple recipients at the beginning of the proem and then a singular recipient in the second half; the language is consistent throughout: from the outset the letter is addressed to multiple readers (the vulgariser's own friends), who are encouraged to share this 'gift' with as many people as possible, as is their duty and obligation upon learning of the letter's significance. See Rizzi, *Vernacular Translators*, 176–177.

directly to ‘*i volgari*’ — an unquantified (and perhaps limitless) vernacular readership, or better, audience — and a diversity amongst that audience, declaring his intention that this work was not only addressed to fellow philosophers, but was one that should be shared with one’s friends and the members of one’s household (*domestici*).<sup>82</sup> We are again reminded of the cultural practices of chronicling and performance in the religious edification of the family unit.<sup>83</sup> Indeed, the nature of this *zibaldone* would certainly seem to suggest familial reading in the first instance, if not reaching wider audiences: the author makes clear inference to oral transmission, and perhaps further written transmission, beyond that which is implicitly understood to occur in line with standard letter reading and private reading practices.<sup>84</sup> Moreover, when we think about the ways that *zibaldoni* functioned within the household, or other social settings, we must also consider the language used by the author, and how he imagined its reception in real terms.<sup>85</sup>

The author shares that his translation, which was both his duty and delight to undertake, was a gift to the audience, an act of charity, if you will. Re-creating the laudatory language and verbs of purpose found in the original Latin, the author here equates Ficino’s genius with Plato’s, asserting his authority. It stresses the importance and merit of the letter’s philosophical lessons, which should be respected and observed. Like the original Latin letter, the proem’s language sets an epideictic mood, evoking epideictic emotions such as admiration and praise, which arouse the audience’s desire to imitate what is loved and

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<sup>82</sup> Regarding the author’s use of the Tuscan ‘*domestici*,’ we must consider that as a noun it refers to the ‘household.’ Though the noun ‘*domestico*’ is defined as a ‘servitore che lavora in casa’ (which, roughly translated, denotes a servant, hired help, butler or maid), given the contemporary use of nouns such as ‘*servi*,’ which would better describe servants alone, and ‘*famiglie*’ or ‘*familiari*’ for family, we might imply that the author here intends a more nuanced meaning. While Renaissance households varied in size, particularly in relation to the status and wealth of the family, we can assume a broader reception than the average ‘conjugal’ household of five or six members. We must also note that no distinction between age, class, or gender is implied in the term ‘*domestici*.’ For a demographic and economic account of domestic life during the Quattrocento in the urban center of Florence, see Francis William Kent, “Household Structure and the Developmental Cycle,” in *Household and Lineage in Renaissance Florence: The Family Life of the Capponi, Ginori and Rucellai* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977), 21–62.

<sup>83</sup> “With their *zibaldoni*, Florentines were building memory houses, filling them with the most edifying material they could find in the hopes that their world would endure.” Kaborycha, “Copying Culture,” 104.

<sup>84</sup> “Social humanists mostly copied or rewrote materials in vernacular for themselves and their friends and family. In most instances, the voices of the social humanists are silent, since the *zibaldoni* and miscellanies containing these copies are seldom prefaced by dedications or explanatory notes.” Rizzi, *Vernacular Translators*, 88.

<sup>85</sup> Speaking of another *zibaldone* that remarked at the delight its readers would encounter, Lisa Kaborycha notes that: “This phrase: ‘delightful to listen to’ suggests that this work was intended to be read aloud, perhaps by the *pater familias* for the entertainment and edification of the household. It is even possible to imagine a social gathering where readings of a few of these subtle and controversial arguments could spark lively conversation, functioning as a kind of party game, suggesting yet again how the public and private spheres could overlap in Florentine society.” Kaborycha, “Copying Culture,” 150.

seen as beneficial. Moreover, the proem speaks to the changing conceptions of pre-Christian philosophers as divine, and goes further, ascribing Ficino himself divine status, making no distinction between ‘divine’ and ‘divinely inspired.’<sup>86</sup> The language throughout the proem, and the epistle itself are clear expressions of the transformative abilities of this unique rhetorical fusion. Contrary to the earlier suggestions that the Tuscan vocabulary, grammar, and syntax were detrimental to Florentine thought and culture, we can see that, for Ficino and his translator, this was not the case. Certainly, rhetoric transcends the idiom being used, but the idiom is equally crucial to the transmission of ideas.

The intention or purpose of vulgarisation was not to create the artifice of a sophisticated or cultivated society; when a Tuscan writer stated that his intended audience was comprised of those from lower social levels, his inherent assumption was that his work could and would be read and understood by them — his work was not addressed to a fictional audience as a ‘literary exercise’ to justify his use of the vernacular, nor was the audience a fabrication for commercial purposes, that is, to sell more books.<sup>87</sup> Identifying four key motivations for the vernacularisation of Aristotelian precepts in the mid-sixteenth century, Luca Bianchi shows that *volgarizzatori* were driven by the moral obligation to share knowledge which they considered beneficial or even indispensable to the reader; the commitment to make Aristotelian thought accessible to those lacking the linguistic skills (and/or the time necessary) to study the original texts; the desire to facilitate the understanding of Aristotelian thought not only on a linguistic level, but also and above all its content; and according to the classical ideal where *docere* (to teach) must be coupled with *movere* (to move) and *delectare* (to delight), vulgarisers set out to render the content of various Aristotelian works in a “delightful” way, so as to spur readers to deepen and discuss their understanding.<sup>88</sup>

Our *volgarizzatore*, however, paints a more nuanced picture about his own motivations. The translator tells his readers that “... the obscure language used by Plato [...] has now

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<sup>86</sup> On this changing conception, see Hankins, “Ficino and the Religion of the Philosophers,” 110, 114–117; Garin, *Storia della Filosofia*, 1:238.

<sup>87</sup> See Sgarbi, “Aristotle and the People,” 85–86 and n.71.

<sup>88</sup> Bianchi, “Volgarizzare Aristotele,” 482–485.

been explicated and smoothened.”<sup>89</sup> This brief note about the nature of this vulgarisation and its contents reveals to us what the vulgariser’s true purpose and intention was: he does not need to simplify anything for his audience (the fact of which was true for all the vernacular versions, even if not specifically declared). His purpose is simply to report to his audience both the usefulness and benefit of the letter’s teachings, and to implore his audience to do the same. His intention was to disseminate this teaching on a broader scale, deeming it essential to the spiritual life of both his immediate and subsequent, indirect audience. Indeed, invoking the participation of the audience, the vulgariser’s desire to have his reader participate in his studies, and his assertions about the use and delight of the doctrines contained therein, emphasises not only that these ideas must be contemplated in earnest and put into practice, but they must also be shared on a grander scale. ‘You are welcome here, dear reader,’ he gestures, as he makes clear the invitation to partake in that culture and knowledge which had once been closed to the *volgo*; reminiscent of St Mark’s gospel, the vulgariser makes his appeal: ‘now go forth and tell of what you have learned.’<sup>90</sup> In this invocation lays the inherent assumption of the author that his audience would be able to understand with ease, even if his register is, at times, more elevated or intellectual.<sup>91</sup> The author explicitly states that the letter treats the most excellent part of philosophy (where theology is the pinnacle of philosophy), which leads to the perfection of the soul, and enjoins his readers, no matter who they are, to implement these understandings in their day-to-day spiritual life, as is their duty and obligation not only to themselves, but to those around them.

We might even be able to infer that the *volgarizzatore*’s intention to benefit and delight the reader speaks to the notion that delight may be found in attaining a long-sought solution to a deeply felt spiritual concern or need. That this relates to the contemplative desires of the common people and is in turn part of the Ficinian programme of spiritual renewal, can be deduced from the vulgariser’s declaration that Plato’s lesson here deals with the origins of our principal affections — which, in the spiritual life, are identified with the movements of the soul that reach out to God, and with the invisible world of the

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<sup>89</sup> “... gli oscurissimi parlari di Platone [...] sono stati dichiarati et quasi posti in piano.” English translation in Rizzi, *Vernacular Translators*, 177.

<sup>90</sup> Mark 16:15. “Go into all the world and preach the Good News to everyone.”

<sup>91</sup> This in no way implies the audience could not understand him, nor does it say more about intention than outcome. See n.13 above.

angels and saints.<sup>92</sup> When he speaks of the origins of our principal affections, the vulgariser refers to our soul's first encounter with God in the heavens before it enters the body — that initial experience which drives all later desire to return to and be united with God. Learning of this, the vulgariser's rhetorical question — who would *not* delight in such knowledge and who would *not* recount its usefulness to others — stresses the fundamental teaching being outlined in the epistle. This language is not coincidental: when defining ecstasy in the *Platonic Theology*, Ficino refers to 'affective states of reason';<sup>93</sup> the connection made by Ficino between pre-existence, contemplation, conversion, and renewal was understood by the vulgariser, and his proem seeks to pass that understanding on. This charitable act was intended to be taken up by others.

The few scholars who have studied this manuscript in relation to Ficino repeatedly assert the anonymity of the author. This strikes me as odd, given that the codex is closed with the following statement: "Liber iste est mei Jhoannis Jacobi Latini Primerani Lotti domini Folcheti Chiariti coddam domini Ghuidocti de Piglis et propria manu scripsi."<sup>94</sup> Though the translator did not give his name anywhere in his prefatory epistle, the hand is undoubtedly that of Florentine copyist-poet, Giovanni di Jacopo di Latini de' Pigli (1396–1473).<sup>95</sup> Moreover, the very first folio of the codex bares the Pigli family stemma.<sup>96</sup> Though Pigli was not trained in Latin, he certainly understood it "well enough to be able to annotate in Latin a copy of Leon Battista Alberti's *Libri della Famiglia*."<sup>97</sup> Evidently, he also understood it well enough to make this translation. Pigli was, moreover, linked to Pellegrino degli Agli: in November 1465 Pigli asked Pellegrino to translate a Latin oration by Eneo Silvio Piccolomini.<sup>98</sup> We might assume then that it was Pellegrino who

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<sup>92</sup> See Hardon, *Catholic Dictionary*, 12.

<sup>93</sup> See *PT* 13.2. Ficino, *Platonic Theology*, 4:120–169. On the mistranslations of this word in Hankins and Allen and the lost sense of meaning, see Hanegraaff, "The Platonic Frenzies in Marsilio Ficino," 563, n.37.

<sup>94</sup> Moreover, showing the transmission of the codex within the family, a little further down it reads "Questo libro è di Jac. Di Lione di Jacopo di Pigli." There is also a more modern note on fol. ii from 1670, indicating that the codex made its way into the hands of Carlo di Tommaso Strozzi.

<sup>95</sup> See figs. 1 and 2. See also Teresa De Robertis, "Scritture Umanistiche Elementari (e altro)," *Scrineum Rivista* 14 (2017): 385–386. The hand can be compared against BNCF Naz. II.IV. 128, fol. 119r (shown in De Robertis' fig. 13).

<sup>96</sup> See fig. 3.

<sup>97</sup> Rizzi, *Vernacular Translators*, 45.

<sup>98</sup> Pier Giorgio Ricci, "Aneddoti di Letteratura Fiorentina," *Rinascimento* 2 (1962): 37–39. Pigli's brother, Gerozzo, was head of the London branch of the Medici bank. This affiliation with the Medici further bolsters the connection to Ficino. See Hatfield, "The Compagnia de' Magi," 120, n.51.



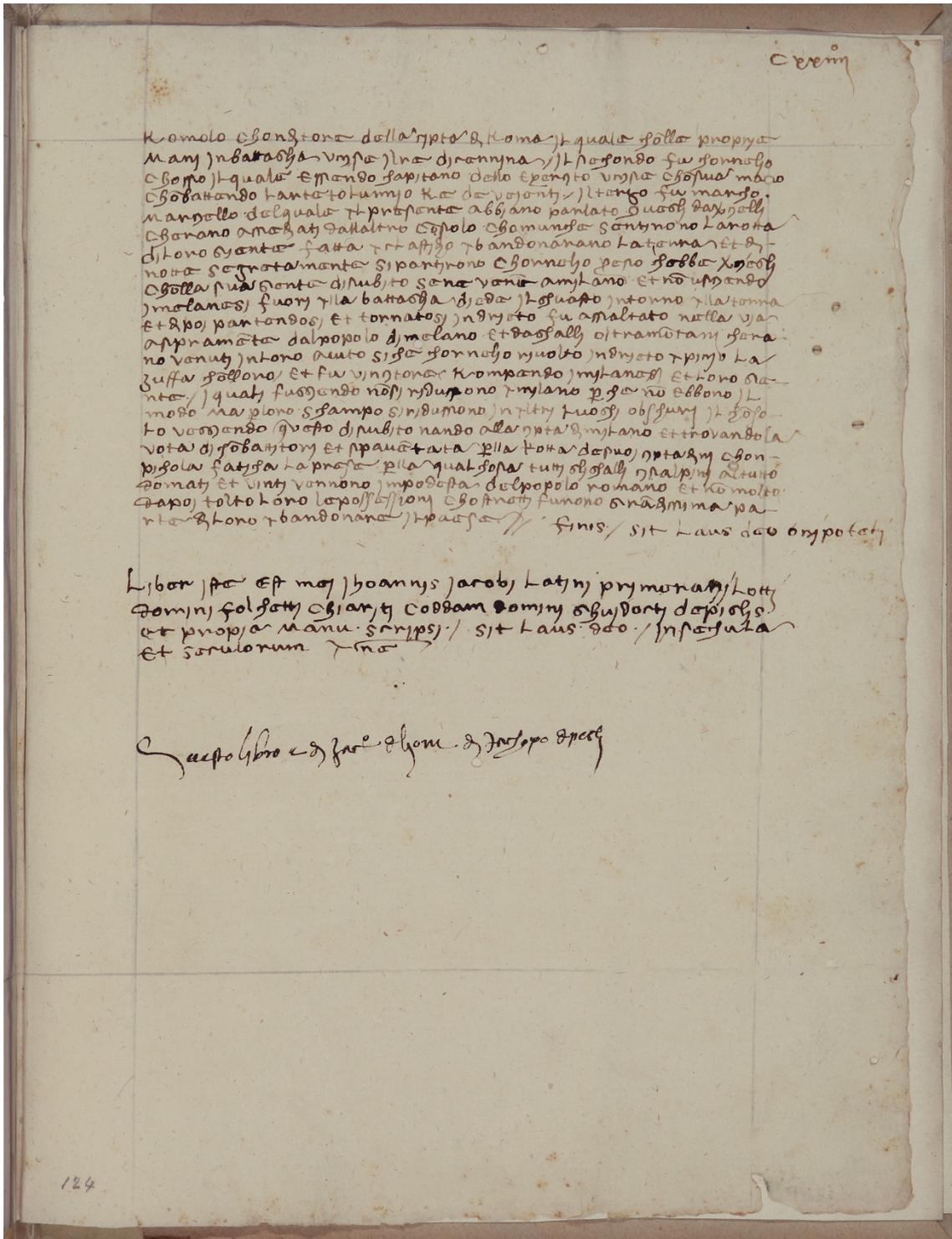


Fig. 2. Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze, Ms. Nazionale II. III. 402, f. 124r.

The note reads: "Liber iste est mei Jhoannis Jacobi Latini Primerani Lotti domini Folcheti Chiariti coddam domini Ghuidocti de Piglis et propria manu scripsi."

Manfijofognoyffranzjfo fapory omiffo optimo  
d. Salute. Loda fofytor.

In mitta noftra fingulana Kirchada fano  
 manfijofognoyffranzjfo fapory omiffo optimo  
 d. Salute. Loda fofytor. Et maximo Epondo Et fofyda  
 no tuo d'itro a fofa ro falamonta fofy ma  
 Etango d'uno. Loda p'ffiarava fofy d'ho  
 ty. K'epetero d'aprinno. Epondo latata p'ctory  
 tar a fampol' a la yllar d'obanni fanydany guo  
 mo amatoro d'p'ffio fofy. mytrobaty vnd' ap'p'ro  
 an fiamyolo. Et alombra fofy v' h'oro d'platon  
 nofyo. Et quala trartaua della d'vina et huma  
 na natura. Plona jo d'ato domadato. ty p'p'p'p'  
 quala tra lamatoro d'fo trartaua. In q'atto h'oro  
 platon / et d'andom tu. fofy fofy. Et q'atta d'vina  
 et humana natura. Credo ty fofy fofy d'ni  
 tu l'opay fofy rofa d' b'p'no fofy d' f'any. k'ogual  
 panola d'ertoro ananda am'p'p'ona. K' f'pon  
 d'afim fofy p'p'p'la fapana fofy fofy fofy non  
 fono imparata. Jo allora p'p'p'ant' fofy fofy  
 ano humano p'p'p'odo la op'p'ona d' platon fofy  
 Infa p'luna d'natura. fofy fofy fofy. Innata  
 d' tanta fofy natural'. fofy fofy fofy d' h'ko  
 n'ny r'and' ord'na adomandant' fofy  
 como folca fano fofy nato. In uany mod' et d'  
 d' fofy natura. C'ad'oy fofy fofy d' d' d' d' d'  
 anima. Et d' d' fofy fofy fofy fofy fofy fofy  
 finalmente potera. In tanto fofy d' d' d' d' d'  
 no natura. fofy fofy fofy fofy fofy fofy fofy  
 fofy platon. fofy fofy fofy fofy fofy fofy fofy  
 In d'no p'p'p'p'amente my p'p'p'p' et d' d' d' d'  
 tu alla my d'  
 In tanto p'p'p'p' d' p'p'p'p' fofy fofy fofy fofy  
 d' d' d' anima d' p'w fofy fofy fofy fofy fofy  
 lo fofy d'  
 vo mente panlano. Credo fofy fofy fofy fofy



Fig. 3. Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze, Ms. Nazionale II. III. 402, f. 1r.  
The Pigli family stemma.

shared his original letter with Pigli, demonstrating the way in which ‘second’ and even ‘third-tier’ humanists played a central role in the transmission of Ficinian ideas.<sup>99</sup>

We know less about the other manuscripts. Catalogue information tells us only that the manuscripts were composed sometime in the third quarter of the fifteenth century.<sup>100</sup> On the first page of Ricc. 1074, however, we find a note of possession: “Di Carlo Altoviti, canonico fiorentino.”<sup>101</sup> Above it was another note, which librarian, Salomone Morpurgo, speculated could perhaps have been the name of a previous owner, however, it was completely erased.<sup>102</sup> Florentine humanist priest, Carlo di Simone Altoviti, was a doctor of ecclesiastical law and prior of the church of Ciggiano in the Valdichiana.<sup>103</sup> He was certainly active in the period in question, and so it is not unlikely that he could be the original owner. Indeed, being a friend of Cristoforo Landino (being his business partner and collaborator), the social links which could lead him back to the Ficinian network do not seem so distant. His position as a priest and doctor of ecclesiastical law would be highly significant given the letter’s content — the endorsement of which is implied by its very inclusion in a *zibaldone*. Like Ficino, Altoviti was charged with the care of souls. Like Ficino, we might safely assume Altoviti’s role as a priest meant he had a thorough understanding of Latin. His choice to record this excerpt in Tuscan, rather than Latin, thus speaks volumes — he could easily have obtained a Latin copy on which to base his own.

As noted by James Hankins, Ricc. 1074 is a *codex descriptus*, (that is, a copy) of Ricc. 2544, though it nevertheless reveals the author’s impulse to personalise the text and exercise individual agency in its composition (for one thing, the Ricc. 1074 translation of the *De divino furore* has no title, though it does bare a coloured initial, and displays a

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<sup>99</sup> Pigli may also have had direct links to Ficino, but we have no written evidence of this. However, given the nature of Florentine social life, a lack of epistolary correspondence does not indicate that two people were not acquainted or even friends.

<sup>100</sup> fol. 1r of the Siena manuscript is quite ornate, with space at the bottom for the family stemma. This has, however, been erased. There is a note of possession from the eighteenth century: a priest names Giuseppe Ciaccheri (1724–1804). This does little to tell us how the manuscript passed into his possession. Bibl. Ricc. 2544 bears no such note.

<sup>101</sup> See Bibl. Ricc. 1074, fol. i.

<sup>102</sup> See Salomone Morpurgo, *I Manoscritti della R. Biblioteca Riccardiana di Firenze* (Rome: Ministero dell’Educazione Nazionale, 1900), 61.

<sup>103</sup> On the relationship between Landino and Altoviti see Lorenz Böninger, “Cristoforo Landino’s Commented Edition of Dante’s Divine Comedy (1481),” in *Niccolò di Lorenzo della Magna and the Social World of Florentine Printing, ca. 1470–1493* (Harvard University Press, 2021), 75–82, at 82; Lorenz Böninger, “Minima Landiniana,” in *Il Laboratorio del Rinascimento: Studi di Storia e Cultura per Riccardo Fubini*, ed. Lorenzo Tanzini (Florence: Le Lettere, 2015), 103–119, at 113–114.

tendency toward Latinised, rather than Italianised spelling).<sup>104</sup> Two mistakes are introduced into Ricc. 1074, while two errors from Ricc. 2544 have been redacted. Another four singular words, and an unrelated clause, have also been omitted, though this appears to be accidental. Judging by the translation itself, its spelling, its word order and its own unique set of errors, the Siena manuscript appears to have been translated independently of the Riccardian manuscripts and was likely composed prior; like the Nazionale manuscript, it does not contain the *Epistola a Cosimo de' Medici* of 1464.<sup>105</sup> But are the Siena and Riccardian manuscripts related to the Nazionale manuscript?

Aside from the omission on lines 36–37 of ‘*et invisibile*,’ the replacement of ‘*astrazione*’ with ‘*abitazione*’ on line 58, the wording on line 196 which replaces ‘*concitazione*’ with ‘*chogitatione*’ and the omission of the word ‘*così*,’ the Siena and Nazionale translations are otherwise closely aligned.<sup>106</sup> In relation to lines 193–195, the Siena manuscript reads “... *l'altra circha a futuri advenimenti et questa ultima chiama vaticinio*.” However, in both the Riccardian and Nazionale manuscripts it reads “... *l'altra circha il vaticinio*.”<sup>107</sup> In this singular instance, the Siena manuscript is closer to the Latin original.<sup>108</sup> There is enough evidence here to indicate that the Siena manuscript was translated independently, though whether the impulse to do so was related to the Nazionale preface remains a possibility.

Despite minor differences, the Riccardian manuscripts do not reveal any strong evidence to suggest translation independent to that of the Nazionale manuscript. On the contrary, there may be evidence to suggest a link between them. An intriguing, albeit small detail can be found at the close of Ricc. 2544. Unlike other excerpts found in the manuscript,

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<sup>104</sup> This likely speaks to the use of an *amanuensis*, to whom the text would be recited, and who would then copy it phonetically, effectively bringing yet another person into the Ficinian fold. James Hankins, *Humanism and Platonism in the Italian Renaissance*, 2 vols. (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2003–2004), 2:36.

<sup>105</sup> Towards the end of the epistle, along lines 194–198, the Siena manuscript appears to follow the Latin Bibl. Ricc. 574 closely: “... *l'altra circha a futuri advenimenti et questa ultima chiama vaticinio Et il primo furore difinisce vemente chogitatione d'animo et operare perfectamente quelle chose che allaicho et religione purghatione ...*” In Bibl. Ricc. 2544, however, it becomes “... *altra circha il vaticinio el primo furore difinisce così Vehemente quelle chose che al cultore legione purghatione ...*” The additional mistake, which should read ‘*al culto religione*’ is repeated in Bibl. Ricc. 1074: “*al chultore legione*.” As shown above, the phrase is also mistaken in the Siena manuscript.

<sup>106</sup> The word order on line 60 is slightly different but remains fundamentally the same.

<sup>107</sup> See n.104 above.

<sup>108</sup> “*Secuntur post hec relique furoris divini species, quas ille bifariam dividit, earumque alteram circa mysteria, alteram circa futurorum eventus, quod vaticinium vocat, versari putat.*”

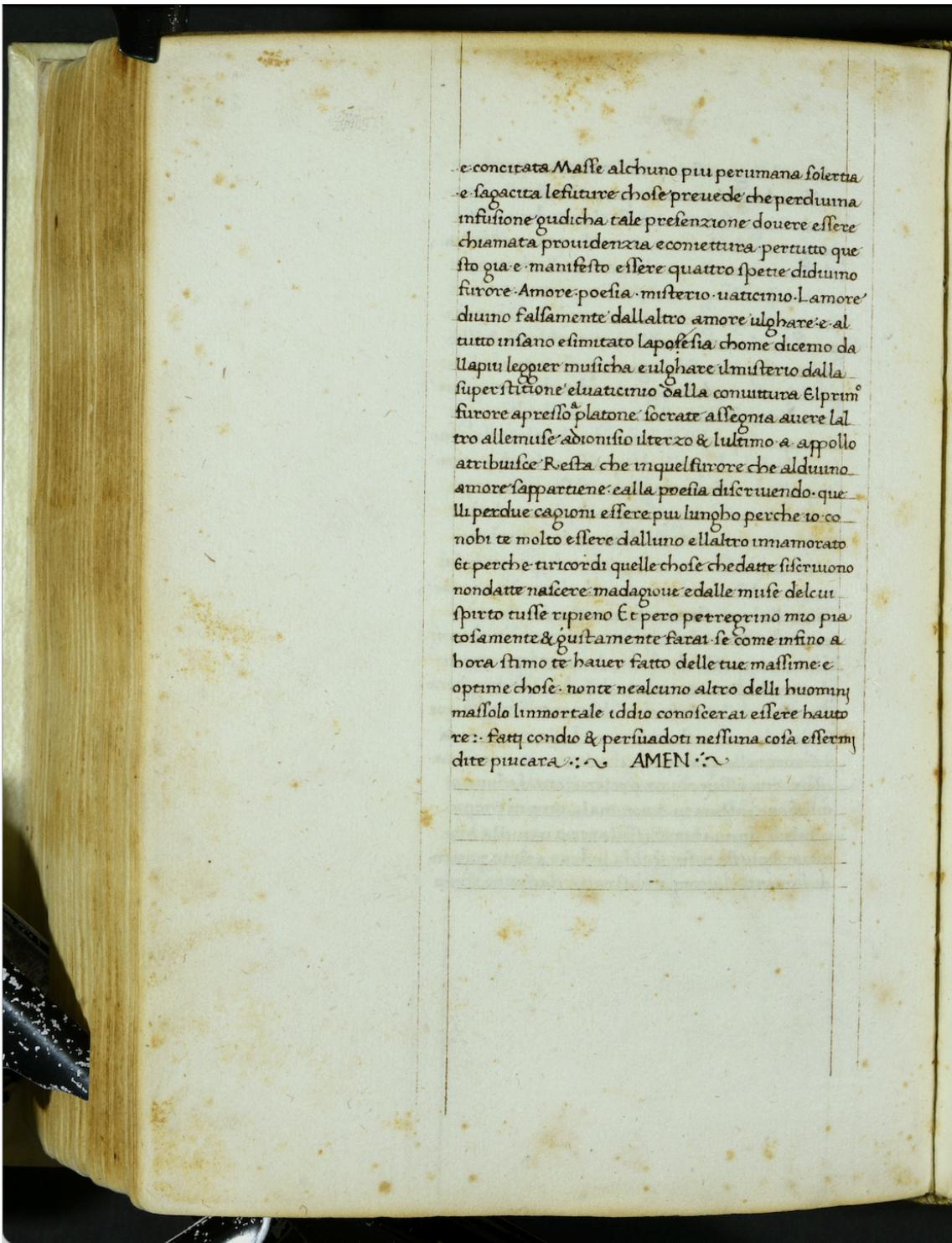
the author concludes his copy of the *De divino furore* with the word ‘amen,’ which he capitalised and accentuated with flourishes.<sup>109</sup> On occasion, the authors of *zibaldoni* would conclude their works with phrases which followed a basic formulation of ‘*Laus Deo*’ (‘Praise be to God’), ‘*Dei Gratia*’ (‘By the grace of God’), or ‘*Deo grazias. Amen*’ (‘Thanks be to God’). We might also see something along the lines of ‘*Finito è il libro, amen*’ (‘the book is finished, amen’), ‘*Finito libro ... gratias cristo domino nostro amen*’ (‘the book is finished, thanks to Christ our Lord, amen’) or ‘*in secula seculorum amen*’ (unto the ages of ages, amen). In a similar vein, we sometimes see it as a simple conclusion, written alongside the date on which the work was completed. However, in the Florentine *zibaldoni* these statements are usually found at the conclusion of formal and personal prayers or at the end of a religious work, as is seen in a handful of copies of Cavalca’s *Lives of the Holy Fathers* and the epistles of various saints.<sup>110</sup> This does not preclude their use to conclude excerpts of secular works, which praise and give thanks to God, but the use of ‘amen’ on its own appears to be a rare occurrence, especially with relation to philosophical works. Perhaps the author was here acknowledging that he understood the religious and spiritual connotations of the letter. Perhaps this small acknowledgment can be linked to the preface of the Nazionale manuscript, which also closes with ‘*Sit Laus Deo.*’

We know that Ficino shared his letters with his friends, as was common practice in the period. However, if we are to assume that the first Tuscan translation appeared within five years of the original letter (and the others by the following decade), we must remember some basic contextual details. At the tender age of thirty, Ficino was hardly the renowned or influential figure we now know him to be. Having only just received his first commission, Ficino was not yet the famed translator of Plato, nor the celebrated philosopher whose theories on love earned him a central place in the history of Western philosophy and the Italian Renaissance. The excerpts which were copied by his contemporaries, therefore, must have been compelling enough not only to copy, but to translate. While Ficino was away in the hills of Careggi, far from the distractions of the

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<sup>109</sup> See fig. 4.

<sup>110</sup> This statement is based on an assessment of Kaborycha’s survey of over five hundred Florentine *zibaldoni*. Though she does not transcribe all the manuscripts she consulted, there are fourteen manuscripts cited which conclude in such a way (including a copy of a letter of Ps. St Bernard in Bibl. Ricc. 1074). See Kaborycha, “Copying Culture.” A copy of Palmieri’s *Città di Vita* likewise concludes with ‘*Deo grazias amen*’ (BNCF Magl. II. II. 41). The Siena manuscript concludes a letter by Ps. St Bernard with ‘amen’; ‘*Laus Deo*’ concludes the copy of the *Di Dio et anima*; and the *Epistola ai Fratelli* also ends with ‘Amen.’



e concitata Mafse alchuno piu perumana foletta  
e sagacita le future chofe preuede che per diuina  
infufione giudicha tale preferenzione douere effere  
chiamata prouidenzia e comettura per tutto que  
fto gia e manifesto effere quattro fpette di diuino  
furore Amore poefia mifterio uaticinio. L amore  
diuino fallamente dall altro amore ulghare e al  
tutto infano e imitato la poefia chome dicemo da  
llapiu legger musicha e ulghare il mifterio dalla  
fuperftitione e uaticinio dalla conuittura El prim  
furore apreflo platone socrate affegna auere l al  
tro alle mufe adionfio il terzo & lultimo a appollo  
attribuife. Resta che in quel furore che al diuino  
amore fappartiene e alla poefia difcr uendo que  
lli per due capioni effere piu lungho perche io co  
nobi te molto effere dall uno ell altro in amurato  
Et perche tu ricordi quelle chofe che dante fifer uono  
non dante nafcere madagoue ed alle mufe del cui  
fpirto tu fte ripieno Et pero peregrino mio pia  
tofamente & guftamente farai fe come infino a  
hora ftimo te hauer fatto delle tue mafime e  
optime chofe non te ne alcuno altro delli huominy  
mafolo l immortale iddio conofcerai effere hauo  
re: fatti condio & perfuadoti neffuna cofa effere m  
dite piu cara: ~ AMEN ~

Fig. 4. Biblioteca Riccardiana, Ms. Riccardiano 2544, f. 202v.

city and Florentine social life, his impact was already being felt within the contemporary intellectual field, like a budding flower beginning to open.

The nature of the *zibaldone* tells us that these miscellaneous excerpts were something the authors wished to preserve and share, and this is moreover confirmed from a palaeographical and codicological perspective; despite the scrawled *mercantesca* hand that we see in the Nazionale manuscript, the other Tuscan translations appear in ordered compilations, written in neat *littera antiqua* and humanist cursive hands. Irrespective of the difficulty modern readers might have with certain scripts, we must remember that all of these styles were designed not only for legibility and beauty, but their chief purpose was that of preservation. The decoration of both the Riccardian and Siena manuscripts especially, which become increasingly more ornate, reveal this to us further. These choices allow us to gauge not only the circulation of ideas, as they moved orally and materially through the city, but of the value attributed to them by contemporary thinkers.

Might we conclude that the Nazionale translation was the catalyst for the Riccardian and Siena manuscripts? Even if not the direct source text, given the strong didactic tone throughout the proem which insisted these ideas be shared with vernacular audiences — a directive which we know was also intended to be brought up in conversation and discussed, this may very well have been the case. At the very least, we cannot rule this possibility out. As historians, we rarely see prefaces to or within *zibaldoni*, and therefore the voices of the authors are often silenced.<sup>111</sup> The Nazionale preface gives us unique insight into the inner psyche of Florentine thinkers and should be used as a lens through which to understand why Florentines included certain excerpts — and this work in particular — in their *zibaldoni*, and why they recorded them in Tuscan. If the Nazionale manuscript was indeed the impetus, we can see a clear transmission of ideas to a broader audience with material results. Whether or not the individual copyists were primary or even secondary contacts of Ficino may never be known, but we can be certain that his ideas were circulating within and had impact upon the Florentine intellectual field. Should the Siena manuscript indeed not be ‘closely linked,’ as Kristeller has claimed, this would only be reflective of the fact that Ficinian ideas were spreading beyond Ficino’s immediate circle, and perhaps even beyond the city, making their way into Tuscany more

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<sup>111</sup> Rizzi, *Vernacular Translators*, 88.

broadly. This expansion, as we have seen, was facilitated, and driven by the *lingua Toscana*.

### **5.3 Conclusion**

We know that Ficino had an influence on his peers, but his impact on local popular culture is incredibly important. The study of Ficino's vernacular works, especially those translated through an autonomous initiative are therefore crucial to our understanding of this impact, and of the interaction between the learned and laity in the late fifteenth century. Ficino's vernacularisations always had clear purpose: for the benefit of the souls in his charge. It was not his intention to merely stimulate discussion amongst a closed group of intellectuals; rather he was compelled to bring these ideas to a broader audience. Humanism was not solely the domain of the elite — it was a culture in which people of all social strata participated, and the vernacular facilitated that participation.

Not all of Ficino's works were vernacularised, but the *De divino furore* was chosen amongst the many to be shared — both by Ficino himself to those closest to him, and by those same men to the Florentine people. The ability of the audience to draw the intended interpretation and conclusion from these texts allows us to gauge the efficacy of Ficino's rhetorical techniques, and simultaneously establish a tradition of dissemination of these self-same ideas, and methods of communication and intellectual exchange. In addition to these techniques, Ficino's spiritual direction was fortified by the Tuscan language. Whether or not we can prove that the rhetorical command of the Nazionale preface had bearing upon the Siena and Riccardian manuscripts, it nevertheless highlighted for the reader the need to make vernacular (rather than Latin) copies of this text; it showed that this letter was worthy of translation, and that its translation was essential. The recurrence of these 'unorthodox' ideas across various texts and genres is, as I have shown, incredibly important; demonstrating this transmission across multiple idioms further validates that Ficino was promoting a theological system that incorporated Platonic teachings through which he hoped to foster a nuanced mode of Christian religious practice, for the salvation and perfection of souls.

Plato believed that oral communication was more powerful than written language; the *Phaedrus* was itself a dialogue intended to valorise orality over textuality, and to show the congeniality of oral forms in the transmission of ideas to the people — the fact of which did not escape the intellectuals of the fifteenth century. Indeed, Ficino himself had explained that the philosopher should entrust the deepest truths to oral dialectics.<sup>112</sup> By imparting these doctrines in the Tuscan vernacular, that is, the language of conversation, the vulgarisers of Ficino’s epistle on divine frenzy were here able to sow the seeds of spiritual fruit, and thus invite many other interlocutors to join the dialogue.<sup>113</sup> This initiative is, moreover, reflective of the conversation already taking place on the ground amongst Ficino’s circle. Through the discussion of ‘serious’ matters, such as those deliberated throughout the letter to Pellegrino degli Agli, the Tuscan cultivation of the intellectual seeds planted by Ficino — that ‘serious agriculture’ — would produce the most abundant harvest.

In his mission to share these Neoplatonic ‘truths,’ Ficino was not ‘profaning the sacred,’ he was the next in line from Plotinus to unveil ancient theology and the divine mysteries, and to make them available to all; his was a mission in service of everyone’s lives. As James Hankins aptly described, “Platonic theology was for Ficino a divine medicine sent by God to renew the spiritual health of Christendom.”<sup>114</sup> With this idiomatic shift, and especially the vulgariser’s proem, the purposeful intention to spread these doctrines becomes ever clearer. Indeed, the idiomatic shift represents a transformation in the development of individual agency of one’s religious self, and, moreover, one’s own spiritual fate. The vernacularisation of this spiritual missive gave that remarkable power to all those versed in the Tuscan language. Just as Ficino’s ‘playful poetics’ and ‘conversations with the ancients’ concealed more serious philosophical considerations, drawing in those capable of grasping them and stimulating oral dialectics, the adoption

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<sup>112</sup> See chapter four, especially n.89.

<sup>113</sup> On the affinity between Neoplatonism and vernacular languages, see August Buck, *Der Einfluss des Platonismus auf die Volkssprachliche Literatur im Florentiner Quattrocento* (Scherpe: Krefeld, 1965).

<sup>114</sup> Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance*, 1:287. In his study of an epistolary interaction between Giovanni Pico della Mirandola and Angelo Poliziano that referred directly to an actual conversation, Christopher Celenza remarks that the “first thing we learn, then, is that, yet again, a Renaissance thinker is developing his ideas in the context of a conversation.” He goes on to say that “Both Pico and Ficino fit perfectly into that tradition. Pico, for example ... cared more about the conversation on the ground, whether epistolary or oral, with his friends and friendly rivals. We have seen, for example, that his dedication of *De ente et uno* to Poliziano took as its point of departure a conversation. And, importantly, it feels conversational, as if he is simply continuing in writing a discussion that had earlier been interrupted.” Celenza, *The Intellectual World*, 331 and 333.

of the Tuscan vernacular in the transmission of these ideas allowed Florentines to take Ficinian precepts off the page, and to discuss them without fear of censure. We can now see how the *lingua Toscana* played an integral role in Ficino's broader programme of spiritual renewal.

So how might we explain Ficino's move away from the vernacular in his later years? For Kristeller, the decline is obvious: this 'third phase' spanned the years in which Ficino composed his major Latin works.<sup>115</sup> As Tanturli has argued, however, this reasoning is insufficient, given that during the 'second phase' of his career, Ficino still found the time and means to vernacularise important ideas, and when he found himself unable to personally write them, he entrusted the task to others.<sup>116</sup> Though I have pointed to the waxing and waning of Latin and Tuscan as being in some way related to this shift, I would argue that the issue raised by Tanturli can be explained in another way: there were still those around Ficino to whom this greater task was entrusted, though this did not necessarily mean producing vernacular translations of Ficino's works – rather, it was a task which manifested in the production of texts that independently worked through his ideas. The issue is therefore not a lack of evidence, but rather, a lack of attention given to this question within the historiography. Perhaps this is because Ficino's vernacular works were not as 'substantial' as his Latin works, and there were certainly fewer of them. Or perhaps, and this seems to me more likely, because the task of vernacularisation was instead undertaken by 'second-tier' humanists who have not been credited with much importance, at least not in the religious and theological space — an issue which chapter six aims to address.

The arguments presented here serve to enrich our understanding of the changing nature of theology and philosophy, and the ways in which Florentine thinkers were adapting to the growing needs and concerns of society. My analysis has endeavoured to show the value that vernacular language could have for those expressing new ideas, and the ways in which its use began to impact the intellectual and religious cultures of the late fifteenth century — a theme which will be examined more thoroughly in chapter six.

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<sup>115</sup> See Kristeller, "Ficino as a Man of Letters," 28–29.

<sup>116</sup> Tanturli, "Ficino e il Volgare," 198–199.

Referring back to our discussion in chapter three, where we saw Matteo Palmieri's flirtation with pre-existence, we are reminded of a bold statement made by August Buck, who claimed that Ficino could not have been the source of the *Città di Vita* because at the time it was being composed, Ficino's translation of the dialogues had hardly begun, and he had perhaps only just commenced work on the *Platonic Theology*.<sup>117</sup> It is clear that the themes of Palmieri's poem correlate far more closely to Ficino's *De divino furore*, which was available in Latin from 1457 and in Tuscan within just a few years — certainly before the *Città di Vita* was complete. Buck's contention made no concession for the oral exchange of ideas, or the physical exchange of manuscripts, but as this chapter has shown, this was certainly happening from at least the late 1450s; Ficino's ideas on pre-existence undoubtedly had a place within the Florentine intellectual field, and certainly well before the systematic formulation of his ideas on divine frenzy in the *Platonic Theology*, which was not published until 1482. In the following chapter I will explore more fully the ramifications of these exchanges and will begin to examine the works of other Florentine thinkers impacted by this central element of the *Theologia Ficiniiana*.

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<sup>117</sup> Buck suggested that the *Istitutiones Platonicae* (1456) could potentially have been a source of inspiration for Palmieri but made no mention of the *De divino furore* written the following year. *Ibid.*, 15–17.

## Chapter Six: Communication and Exchange: Ideas in Practice

In a letter to Lorenzo de' Medici of 1481, Ficino spoke of the "little Academy of Phoebus on the hill of Saturn."<sup>1</sup> He was no doubt referring to the smallholding at Careggi given to him by Cosimo de' Medici, where he was to begin his Platonic translations in the solitude and seclusion of the Florentine *contado*. Indeed, for in what better place than this hillside estate could one devote oneself more fully to a life of contemplation (*otium*)? However, this was not the only reference Ficino had made to an *academia* throughout his corpus, and it is the ambiguity of this term which has fuelled ongoing debate as to what precisely was meant by the term, and what function this so-called 'academy' might have served.<sup>2</sup> To be sure, Ficino and those close to him used this term to mean many things; at times *academia* did indeed refer to Ficino's humble *podere* in the fields of Careggi, and at others, it was, as James Hankins suggests, a metaphor for the Platonic corpus.<sup>3</sup> However, the most compelling, and certainly, most consistent usage of the term appears consonant with that suggested by John Monfasani, that is, to signify a school of thought, and its 'members' (*academici*) the adherents of that *schola*.<sup>4</sup> As such, we may, then, with Hankins, disregard traditional understandings of what a 'Platonic Academy of Florence' might entail, that is, the concept of a formal academy in the sixteenth-century sense of an organised institution or 'school' with an official membership. But where does that leave us? Perhaps the most critical issue raised by this debate and its conclusions surrounds the

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<sup>1</sup> Letter 7, *The pursuits of agriculture and learning are united, to the benefit of both*. Ficino, *Letters*, 6:10–11. On Ficino's house, see Christophe Poncet, "Ficino's Little Academy of Careggi," *Bruniana & Campanelliana* 19, no. 1 (2013): 67–76.

<sup>2</sup> Here I conservatively list but a few of the key players in this debate, for there many scholars who have written on the subject in one way or another. See Arnaldo Della Torre, *Storia dell'Accademia Platonica di Firenze* (Florence: G. Carnesecchi e Figli, 1902), 4; Arthur Field, "The Platonic Academy of Florence," in *Theology, Philosophy, Legacy*, 359–376; Field, *The Origins of the Platonic Academy*; Paul Oskar Kristeller, "The Platonic Academy of Florence," *Renaissance News* 14, no. 3 (1961): 147–159.

<sup>3</sup> Hankins has published extensively on the topic. See James Hankins, "Cosimo de' Medici and the 'Platonic Academy,'" *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 53 (1990): 144–162; James Hankins, "The Myth of the Platonic Academy of Florence," *Renaissance Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (1991): 429–475; James Hankins, "The Invention of the Platonic Academy of Florence," *Rinascimento* 42 (2002): 3–38; James Hankins, "The Platonic Academy of Florence and Renaissance Historiography," in *Forme del Neoplatonismo: Dall'Eredità Ficiniiana al Platonismo di Cambridge, Atti del Convegno Firenze, 25–27 Ottobre 2001*, ed. Luisa Simonetti (Florence: Leo S. Olschki Editore, 2007), 75–96; James Hankins, "Humanist Academies and the Platonic Academy of Florence," in *On Renaissance Academies: Proceedings of the International Conference "From the Roman Academy to the Danish Academy in Rome / Dall'Accademia Romana all'Accademia di Danimarca a Rome," The Danish Academy in Rome, 11–13 October 2006*, ed. Marianne Pade (Rome: Edizioni Quasar, 2011), 31–46.

<sup>4</sup> See John Monfasani, "Two Fifteenth-Century 'Platonic Academies': Bessarion's and Ficino's," in *Renaissance Humanism, from the Middle Ages to Modern Times* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2016), 61–76, especially 68–71.

characterisation of the *academia* as exclusively ‘Platonic,’ and it is the lingering questions around Ficino’s Platonism in the private sphere, that is, the activities of those that gathered in his private *gymnasium* that occupy this chapter, for they undoubtedly warrant further investigation.

For Hankins, the apostolate was comprised of a closed group of *auditores*, who attended private lectures and held academic conversations; only loosely connected with the *Studio Fiorentino*, the group excluded most of the key contemporary Florentine Neoplatonists and *litterati*.<sup>5</sup> While the group certainly occupied themselves with reading Platonic and other ancient philosophical texts, so too were they engaged in the study of vernacular literature, the Bible, astrology, and ‘spiritual medicine.’<sup>6</sup> Monfasani moreover emphasises their pursuits in moral philosophy.<sup>7</sup> Hankins argues that Ficino’s reference to his pupils as a *gymnasium* or *academia*, and not a *sodalitas*, suggests that “the primary function of Ficino’s gymnasium was educating young men and not providing a venue for adult discussions of philosophy and literature.”<sup>8</sup> It is clear how philology informs Hankins’ understanding, however, his characterisation requires further consideration, as ‘education’ and ‘discussions of philosophy and literature’ were inextricable concepts in Ficino’s mind. Developing Christophe Poncet’s characterisation of the academy as a “politically sponsored gathering of men of various ages and horizons who, influenced by Plato’s thought, were dedicated to the defense of religion,” I will propose a more nuanced account of the activities of this cohort.<sup>9</sup>

Building upon the findings established in chapters four and five, the present chapter will demonstrate the transmission of Ficinian theology on a broader scale and will provide a more comprehensive understanding of the role played by lesser-known individuals in that transmission. In this pursuit, I will re-evaluate two key figures in the Ficinian circle:

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<sup>5</sup> While Ficino listed thirty-five *academici* in a letter to Martin Prenninger, on the basis of Platonic studies alone, Hankins estimates a mere seven or eight affiliates, naming Francesco Diacceto, Filippo Valori, Giovanni Nesi, Francesco Berlinghieri, ‘probably’ Giovanni Canacci, Bindaccio Ricasoli, Alamanno Donati, and ‘possibly’ Filippo Carducci. Hankins, “The Invention of the Platonic Academy,” 12. Also see Hankins, “The Myth of the Platonic Academy,” 443–459; Letter 28, *A list of my friends and students*. Ficino, *Letters*, 10:33–34.

<sup>6</sup> Hankins, “The Myth of the Platonic Academy,” 459.

<sup>7</sup> Monfasani, “Platonic Academies,” 70–71.

<sup>8</sup> Hankins, “Humanist Academies,” 42–43.

<sup>9</sup> Poncet, “Ficino’s Little Academy,” 68. Monfasani agrees on the diversity of the group, see Monfasani, “Platonic Academies,” 69–70.

Giovanni Nesi and Francesco Cattani da Diacceto. Re-examining key texts that have been overlooked by historians, I will demonstrate evidence of a shared theological goal, and the use of similar rhetorical, linguistic and conventional strategies. Using the Ficinian ‘network’ as a methodology to establish patterns of convergence, this chapter will show the reproduction of core Ficinian ideas and nuanced modes of communication, thus linking intellectual exchange to Florentine spiritual renewal. By demonstrating the transmission of ideas from Ficino to his circle, and from his circle to the public, I will argue that these individuals are significant in their own right as the standard-bearers of a new religious culture. The purpose of this chapter is thus to demonstrate that both Ficino *and* the individuals in his circle had greater influence over Florentine intellectual and religious culture than has previously been recognised.

### **6.1 Between *Piagnone* and Platonist: Giovanni Nesi as Visionary Poet**

With only a few, but by no means insubstantial, literary works to his name, Giovanni Nesi (1456–1506) has seldom been the subject of detailed, independent study. Nesi is known for his *De Moribus* (1477), a dialogue on Aristotelian ethics which argued that the contemplation of God was the highest pursuit of man;<sup>10</sup> the *Oraculum de novo saeculo* (1497), a complex attempt at synthesis between the Neoplatonic and Hermetic ideas circulating within the Ficinian circle, on the one hand, and the message of renewal and conversion of the ‘prophetic saviour,’ Girolamo Savonarola, on the other;<sup>11</sup> the *Symbolum Nesianium* (1500), an interpretative work on Pythagorean sayings that oscillated between Ficinian Neoplatonism and Savonarolan apocalypticism; and for a series of sermons preached before Florentine lay religious confraternities in the 1470s and 80s.<sup>12</sup> Playing an active role in civic life, Nesi served as a *priore* in Florence in 1485, 1499 and 1503; as an *officiale* of the Florentine *Studio* in 1497 and 1499; and was appointed *podestà* of Prato for the year 1505–1506.<sup>13</sup> Though he is recognised as an ‘influential layman’ his mark on the spiritual life of the city has never been taken quite as

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<sup>10</sup> Salaman, “Introduction,” in *Letters*, 8:129.

<sup>11</sup> The description is borrowed from Giulia Ponsiglione, “La Voce dal Pulpito: Suggestioni Savonaroliane nella Lirica di Giovanni Nesi,” *Bollettino di Italianistica* 8, no. 1 (2011): 89–101, at 90.

<sup>12</sup> See Christopher S. Celenza, *Piety and Pythagoras in Renaissance Florence: The Symbolum Nesianum* (Leiden: Brill, 2001); Cesare Vasoli, “Giovanni Nesi tra Donato Acciaiuoli e Girolamo Savonarola: Testi Editi e Inediti,” in *Umanesimo e Teologia tra ‘400 e ‘500*, special issue, *Memorie Domenicane* 4 (1973): 103–179; Olga Zorzi Pugliese, “Two Sermons by Giovanni Nesi and the Language of Spirituality in Late Fifteenth-Century Florence,” *Bibliothèque d’Humanisme et Renaissance* 42, no. 3 (1980): 641–656.

<sup>13</sup> Salaman, “Introduction,” in *Letters*, 8:129.

seriously as Nesi himself perhaps would have hoped;<sup>14</sup> while his membership to several religious confraternities “revealed Nesi’s propensity for religious discussion,” he is often marginalised as a mere follower of greater men.<sup>15</sup>

In particular, Nesi has come to be closely associated with both Ficino and Savonarola. For all their many ideological differences, the two agreed that in recent history, the Church had fallen into a state of decline. “Whereas Ficino envisioned a gradual reform, to be achieved by an intellectual elite, Savonarola had seen it as sudden, violent, and universal.”<sup>16</sup> It was this common cause — the desire for and drive toward religious renewal — that bound Nesi to both men. However, although he was undoubtedly one of Savonarola’s staunchest supporters — the friar features prominently in Nesi’s written works, especially after his death which deeply affected Nesi — the evidence would seem to suggest that his own religious programme was not totally aligned with that of Savonarola;<sup>17</sup> for Nesi, the regeneration needed in Florence was “no less a philosophical than a religious one.”<sup>18</sup> In each of his major works — the *De Moribus*, the *Oraculum* and the *Symbolum Nesianum* — Nesi relied heavily on Ficinian concepts and translations, which arguably shaped his thought in more fundamental ways than Savonarola had. Nesi had used Ficino not just as a spiritual and philosophical guide, but as a religious mentor too, citing both Ficino’s *De Christiana religione* and his commentary on St Paul’s *Epistle to the Romans* as authoritative sources. Indeed, Ficino’s understanding of the Pauline

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<sup>14</sup> Nesi presented himself, and indeed, was perceived as “a layman who at the same time was versed in such a fruitful way in the world but was also abundantly versed in sacred scripture, so that he did not harm scripture; far from sprinkling it about, rather, he ornamented everything he said with it.” Celenza, *Piety and Pythagoras*, 35.

<sup>15</sup> Lorenzo Polizzotto, *The Elect Nation: The Savonarolan Movement in Florence 1494–1545* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 103.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 96. In the later decades of the century, a group of supporters, known as *piagnoni* (literally ‘wailers’ or ‘weepers’), gathered around Savonarola. Coined by their opponents, this derogatory term signified those who wept for their own sins and for the sins of the world. The Savonarolans believed in the ecclesiastic reform preached by the charismatic friar, and aided in his mission to eradicate tyranny, immorality, and social injustice. In their view, the clergy should focus on sacramental and pastoral functions, while laymen and women, like Nesi himself, should focus on charity.

<sup>17</sup> “From the Savonarolan doctrine of reform he drew only those elements which confirmed his own position. The impact of Savonarola’s ideas upon his thought was thus inevitably circumscribed. The notions of reform and renewal expressed by Savonarola were incorporated into the *Oraculum*, but [Nesi’s] essentially mystical vision of the soul’s ascent to God was not only reiterated, but expanded.” However, “even Savonarola and his followers could not bring themselves to discuss, let alone endorse, the religious programme there set out.” They “couldn’t really fathom it, or feel fully at ease with its arguments.” They steered “well clear of any assertion of its religious message.” Polizzotto further argued that “Nesi’s views were often at variance with Savonarola’s.” *Ibid.*, 105–106.

<sup>18</sup> *Oraculum*, sigs. b3v, c2v–c3r, c5r, c6v, c8v and d3r–v. *Ibid.*, 86–87 and n.117. Also see Gian Carlo Garfagnini, “Neoplatonismo e Spiritualismo nella Firenze di fine Quattrocento: Giovanni Nesi,” *Annali del Dipartimento di Filosofia* 13 (2007): 59–73.

concept of charity was to colour the sermons that Nesi had preached before the Confraternity of the Magi.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, the practical religious aspects of Ficino's theology had similarly influenced Nesi's use of the term 'spiritual happiness' (*vera felicità* or *vera beatitudine*), the latter agreeing that through contemplation it was fully possible for the soul to ascend to God in the present life.<sup>20</sup> As his career progressed, Nesi became increasingly preoccupied with the concepts of charity in this life and salvation in the next, and it is the inherent connection between these ideas and his relationship to Ficino especially that make Nesi worthy of closer analysis.

In this section, I wish to turn the reader's attention to one of Nesi's lesser-known works, which has for some time been considered nothing more than an 'insignificant' product of post-Savonarolan Florence: an unfinished vernacular poem comprised of 28 cantos, written in *terza rima*. Almost a century ago, Nesca Robb stated that the poem was to be found in "an obscurity in which it might be more charitable to leave it."<sup>21</sup> More recently, Lorenzo Polizzotto claimed that the "recondite imagery and profuse classical allusions of this long allegorical poem render it difficult of interpretation."<sup>22</sup> While the poem is certainly difficult to navigate, Nesi's overarching interest in renewal, contemplation, and the mystical ascent of the soul are perhaps most evident in this work, over and above all those which preceded it. Indeed, Nesi's final extant work, the *Poema* (also known as *La viva luce*), arguably formulates the precise practice and function of contemplation as Nesi understood it, situating it within his broader religious programme and self-conceived notion of reform.<sup>23</sup> Weaving together evidence from four extant *abbozzi* (drafts or sketches) of the poem, I will demonstrate that Nesi was independently working through ideas which, true to the Ficinian and Savonarolan quest for *renovatio*, dealt not only with contemplation and renewal, but also the pre-existence of the soul.<sup>24</sup> Based on the similarity of these ideas to Ficino's, I will argue that Nesi is to be considered not only a

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<sup>19</sup> See n.12 above and Hatfield, "The Compagnia de' Magi," 134–135.

<sup>20</sup> Nesi's use of the term *sommo bene* (the 'highest good') was similarly influenced by Ficino. Polizzotto, *The Elect Nation*, 104. Also see Nesi's sermons transcribed in Vasoli, "Giovanni Nesi," 123–179; Zorzi Pugliese, "Two Sermons by Giovanni Nesi," 643–649.

<sup>21</sup> Nesca A. Robb, *Neoplatonism of the Italian Renaissance* (London and New York: Routledge, 2021), 153.

<sup>22</sup> Polizzotto, *The Elect Nation*, 107.

<sup>23</sup> Note, as the work was never given a proper title by Nesi himself, the rhematic title was attributed by cataloguers. The latter title appears to have been attributed by Lorenzo Polizzotto, based on the poem's opening line.

<sup>24</sup> Bibl. Ricc. 2118; Bibl. Ricc. 2123; Bibl. Ricc. 2722; Bibl. Ricc. 2750; BNCf Magl. VI. 176.

key advocate of the *Theologia Ficiniana*, but as an important figure in driving spiritual and religious transformation in late fifteenth-century Florence.

Despite the criticisms of the clergy, Nesi evidently believed that he too had a role to play in the religious reform and spiritual renewal of his city.<sup>25</sup> Listed by Ficino as being amongst his third genus of friends, comprised of *auditores* (listeners and pupils) and *quasi discipuli* (those who were like disciples), it is perhaps no surprise that Nesi, like his master, asserted that the “constant practice of contemplation enables man to achieve knowledge of God and union with God in this life,” and that this central tenet of his belief featured in virtually all of his works.<sup>26</sup> Nesi, like Ficino, proposed a practical religious model with contemplation at its core, and like Ficino, he too was captured by the notion of an *eternal* soul, as is evident from their earliest correspondence. In a letter dated 1 July 1477, Ficino wrote to Nesi on the immortality of the soul according to Platonic argumentation. In it, he counselled that “were there not within us divine power, and were our minds not of heavenly origin, we could in no way acknowledge the insufficiency of mortal things and we should certainly never reason beyond, or pursue anything above, the physical level.”<sup>27</sup> Since man’s condition is vastly different in reality, he went on, “I believe — and with no empty faith — that we are of divine origin.”<sup>28</sup> This idea pervaded the excerpts found within Nesi’s sketchbooks, including the *quaderno di lavoro* that Nesi used as a reference in the composition of his *Poema*. The manuscript in question is BNCF Magliabechiano VI. 176, which principally features excerpts from Ficino, including the *De amore*, the *Platonic Theology*, and the early vernacular letters circulating in Florence throughout the 1450s and 60s discussed in the previous chapter.<sup>29</sup> Containing those key ideas about the soul which I have highlighted throughout this thesis, Nesi’s transcription

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<sup>25</sup> In his *Contra Iohannis Nesii Oraculum de novo saeculo*, Giovanni Caroli argued that the judgments of a layman on theological matters were an unwelcome intrusion, and that Nesi lacked the proper learning to be able to comment on Savonarola’s apostolate. As Polizzotto has put it, Caroli argued that ‘the cobbler should stick to his last.’ See BNCF Conv. Soppr. C. 8. 277, fol. 163r; Polizzotto, *The Elect Nation*, 87. Cfr. n.14 above.

<sup>26</sup> Salaman, “Introduction,” in *Letters*, 8:129. Also see Letter 28, *A list of my friends and students*. Ficino, *Letters*, 10:33–34.

<sup>27</sup> Letter 27, *That the soul is immortal. And why, though it be divine, it often leads a life similar to that of a beast*. Ficino, *Letters*, 3:59.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> The manuscript, which is badly damaged and illegible in many places has, understandably, not received much scholarly attention. It is worth noting that while the *De divino furore* has not yet been identified within the text, it seems highly likely to have been transcribed by Nesi in this workbook, at least in part, given the collection of Ficinian epistles contained therein, which often appeared together in the *zibaldoni* of the Ficinian circle. See Appendix C for a list of the contents of the 148 folios. Note, the list is by no means complete. Cfr. Appendix A.

of these texts becomes critical when considering his *modus operandi* when drafting the poem. In his survey of the extant manuscripts containing the *Poema*, Filippo Zanini notes that “one gets a sense of the very close relationship, almost in real time, between the reading of the source and its versification, as if the author read a text, found it in accordance with his intentions and then immediately transformed it into hendecasyllables.”<sup>30</sup> It is therefore significant that in addition to the Ficinian excerpts found in Magl. VI. 176, we find within the codex containing the very first draft of the *Poema*, Riccardiana 2123, large excerpts of Matteo Palmieri’s *Città di Vita* (and the accompanying commentary by Leonardo Dati).<sup>31</sup> A testament to the sources read and owned by Nesi, this manuscript helps to determine both the influences on his spiritual and philosophical identity, but also the intentions of his *Poema*.<sup>32</sup> Certainly, as I will show, it would appear as though the link between pre-existence and contemplation argued by Ficino was at the fore of Nesi’s thinking, especially in the formulation of his of vision of man’s mystical union with the divine.

Describing the celestial ascent through the spheres, Nesi’s *Poema* is a poetic discourse on the quest for salvation through mysticism. The poem opens with a *descriptio veris* (description of spring) — a topos that Nesi had also employed in his *Canzoniere*.<sup>33</sup> Charged with an inherently religious symbolism, spring is connected both to the Christian tradition, marking the Paschal mystery and the historical anniversary of creation, as well as the ancient Greek tradition, with the celebration of the Eleusinian mysteries at the time of the vernal equinox. Intrinsicly linked to the revelation of divine truths, *descriptio veris* became a powerful literary device familiar to fifteenth-century authors through the

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<sup>30</sup> Filippo Zanini, “L’Incompiuto *Poema* di Giovanni Nesi: Edizione Critica,” (PhD thesis, Università degli Studi di Firenze, 2013), 46.

<sup>31</sup> See Bibl. Ricc. 2123, fols. 31r–91v. The excerpts correspond to the significant passages outlined in chapter three.

<sup>32</sup> Zanini has described the manuscript as “a grandiose mosaic of texts across the ages which confirmed Plato’s theories, especially in their late fifteenth century re-proposition.” Zanini, “L’Incompiuto *Poema* di Giovanni Nesi,” 46.

<sup>33</sup> On this see Elisabetta Tortelli, “Il «Canzoniere» di Giovanni Nesi: Edizione Critica e Commento,” (PhD thesis, Università degli Studi di Firenze, 2008), 86–89.

works of Dante, Horace, Ovid and Lucretius.<sup>34</sup> Nesi's vivid depiction of 'spiritual springtime' was thus a clear rhetorical allusion to the veracity of his vision, and signalled that his poem provided the ideal channel through which these truths could be disclosed to mankind.<sup>35</sup> With their overt symbolism of renewal and regeneration, these images begin to reveal Nesi's purpose in writing the *Poema*.

Nesi's description of the abstraction of the soul during sleep and its subsequent rapture bares all the hallmarks of a Ficinian patronage: he recounts the experience of divine frenzy and mystical union as they were formulated by Ficino. The first canto begins with the protagonist, who finds himself at the border of the mortal realm on the banks of the river Lethe; as if awoken from a slumber that had blinded him, he sees a burning cloud above him, from which a thunderous roar erupts. Through the bright and clear light, he sees a face appear before him. Following it, he crosses the river, and is stripped of his corporeal body. It is here that he begins the celestial ascent toward the throne of the '*Vigore Agente*.'<sup>36</sup> Looking back at the smallness of the earth, he reflects on the vanity of earthly passions and human ambition.<sup>37</sup> From this vantage point, the protagonist makes a curious observation: amidst the 'chaos' before him he sees every seed piled up (*ogni seme congesto*);<sup>38</sup> having crossed the river of forgetfulness, he can now see that all "the forms that were first created or would later be created by the Maker were enclosed there, and were drawn out by the sun's rays."<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> "Just as the Lesser Mysteries discussed the prenatal epoch of man when the consciousness in its nine days (embryologically, months) was descending into the realm of illusion and assuming the veil of unreality, so the Greater Mysteries discussed the principles of spiritual regeneration and revealed to initiates not only the simplest but also the most direct and complete method of liberating their higher natures from the bondage of material ignorance. Like Prometheus chained to the top of Mount Caucasus, man's higher nature is chained to his inadequate personality. The nine days of initiation were also symbolic of the nine spheres through which the human soul descends during the process of assuming a terrestrial form." See Manly Palmer Hall, *The Secret Teachings of All Ages: An Encyclopedic Outline of Masonic, Hermetic, Qabbalistic and Rosicrucian Symbolical Philosophy* (San Francisco: H. S. Crocker Company, 1928), 72. On Dante see Alison Cornish, "The Date of the Journey," in *Readings Dante's Stars* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), 26–42.

<sup>35</sup> See Canto I, verses 1–66. This description moreover appears to be based on some of the *excerpta* Nesi had made in his *quaderno*. Cfr. Magl. VI. 176, fols. 60–61. The poem is transcribed in full by Filippo Zanini, based on a reading of Bibl. Ricc. 2722 and Bibl. Ricc. 2750, see Zanini, "L'Incompiuto *Poema* di Giovanni Nesi," 1–230.

<sup>36</sup> Canto I, verses 1–66, especially verses 29–42.

<sup>37</sup> Canto I, verses 67–120.

<sup>38</sup> "Un cerviero ochio, uno intellecto desto / vede in la selva et natura che voi / 'chaos' nomate ogni seme congesto." Canto I, verses 124–126.

<sup>39</sup> "Le forme che il Factore et prima et poi / creò o de' creare, lì sono incluse, / et tra'le fuori el sol co' raggi suoi." Canto I, verses 127–129.

After praising Plato as superior to Aristotle in canto seven, cantos eight and nine are respectively dedicated to the creation of man by Prometheus and the creation of the soul by Jupiter. In canto nine, we see a familiar theme emerge: the pre-existent soul dwelling in the heavenly homeland prior to its descent, in the presence of the supreme deity. From the outset, the protagonist recounts the vision of “una figlia creò nel ciel sovrano,” a daughter (the human soul) created in heaven, who is endowed with many virtues by Jupiter and the gods.<sup>40</sup> The protagonist watches as the soul descends toward the mortal door, where she then climbs into a chariot accompanied by the burning light of God himself, which burns brighter than the sun.<sup>41</sup> Making her way to a temple, she disperses the treasures given to her within the citadel (*arce*), that is, the innermost part of herself.<sup>42</sup> Spanning some 131 verses, the poem then narrates the speech given by Jupiter to the soul, which was a moral warning to prepare her for her earthly pilgrimage, and to alert her to the dangers she will face in the terrestrial realm.<sup>43</sup> “Vivi pur ben, peregrinetta,” he counsels, ‘avoid vanities and strive to raise yourself to the heavens once more.’<sup>44</sup> He tells her that, having wet her feet in the river Lethe, she will find that her thirst will not be satisfied, and she will wash her head in its waters, forgetting everything she once knew of her heavenly origins.<sup>45</sup> Until such a time that he calls her to return to him, Jupiter reminds the soul that:

Io sono in te, et tu mia imago quando  
me ben rimiri, e l’intellecto abstracto  
creato dio nel picciol mondo oprando.  
D’un luminoso thron di poi in un tracto  
nuvilecta vedrai intorno accesa,  
che luce et arde et dentro è sempre in acto;  
questa t’infiamma et muove ad l’alta impresa  
della giusta riforma et di quel lume  
che fè contra gli Ebrei giusta difesa.  
La spada mia vi produrrà un fiume

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<sup>40</sup> Canto IX, verses 34–51, at verse 15.

<sup>41</sup> Canto IX, verses 46–57.

<sup>42</sup> Canto IX, verses 58–63.

<sup>43</sup> Canto IX, verses 64–195.

<sup>44</sup> Canto IX, verses 88–96, at verse 94.

<sup>45</sup> Canto IX, verses 76–81.

di nectare et di gratie, se la vibri  
colla misura sol del mio volume;  
il cielo aperti tiene e nostri libri:  
ivi iustitia quella legge insegna  
che scripse già col sangue Piero in Tybri.

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Palma non si riporta in ciel dal mondo  
se in perigliosa pugna o in palestra  
pria non sommergi e miei nimici in fondo.  
Con sinistra la targa, et con la dextra  
prendi la spada et mia gregge difendi:  
unisci quelli a me, et quei sequestra,  
acciò che quando alfin ragion mi rendi  
della opra tua, in el mio sen riceva  
l'alma, et che altri il tuo exemplo prendi.<sup>46</sup>

Throughout these verses, we are given a sense of the seriousness of the soul's duty on earth — of what she must overcome, and how. "I am in you, and you are in my image, and the intellect created by God working in the little world is abstracted when you gaze well upon me." From his luminous throne, the Creator will reveal that light which always burns within, which inflames the soul and moves it to the high enterprise of reform. "My sword will produce a river of nectar and gratitude within you," he declares, following with what appears to be an allusion to the Cumaean Sybil's foreboding prophecy recounted in the sixth book of Virgil's *Aeneid*.<sup>47</sup> "The palm," Jupiter says, "will not return to heaven from the world if you do not first overwhelm my enemies in perilous battle or in the gymnasium." In the Christian tradition, the palm symbolises the victory of the faithful over the enemies of the soul;<sup>48</sup> in Greco-Roman mythology, it was the sacred plant of Apollo and likewise associated with victory. The palm can moreover be

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<sup>46</sup> Canto IX, verses 109–123, 130–138.

<sup>47</sup> In the Virgilian passage, Aeneas tells the Trojans that the 'elusive' coast of Italy is within their grasp, and that here the ills of the past could be left behind; with justice, they could spare the Trojan race. However, the Sybil prophesies great perils and grievous woes, she warns Aeneas of fierce wars to come in establishing the new city, and signals that the Tiber will foam with blood. Virgil, *Aeneid*, VI.56–97.

<sup>48</sup> See Maurice M. Hassett, "Palm in Christian Symbolism," in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, eds. Charles H. Herbermann, Edward A. Pace, Condé B. Pallen, Thomas J. Shahan and John J. Wynne, 15 vols. (New York: The Encyclopedia Press, Inc., 1913), 11:432.

understood as an earthbound entity which raises itself toward the heavens and unites with the divine. While each of these interpretations may be fitting within this section of the poem, ‘*palma*’ could also be an allegorical reference to Matteo Palmieri, whose work never successfully launched; the inference here is that it was now Nesi’s task to overwhelm detractors through the argumentation of the so-called ‘Academy,’ and to champion the mission that Palmieri had embarked on some decades before.<sup>49</sup> In her left hand, the soul carries a shield, and with her right, she is to take the divine sword and defend the Lord’s flock. “Seize them [the enemies of the soul] and unite them to me, so that when at last the reason of your work returns them to me, my heart will receive the soul, and others may follow your example.” Through this critical interaction between Jupiter and the pre-existent soul, Nesi is able to instruct the reader about man’s fundamental mission — to recover the pre-natal vision through contemplation and thus ascend to the divine — and invites them to do the same.

Reminiscent of both Dantesque and Savonarolan sentiment, the canto then closes with an announcement of the *renovatio temporis* — that is, the reform of the Church that would see a return to the purity and poverty of the apostolic age.<sup>50</sup> In his detailed study of the poem, Zanini characterises this announcement as an ‘unexpected digression,’ but given the themes discussed immediately prior and subsequent to it, there is arguably a logical connection that has until now not been made.<sup>51</sup> Addressed to Jupiter as an invocation for his compassionate assistance, the tenth canto laments the moral corruption of men. Found only in the final redaction of the *Poema*, that is, Riccardiana 2750, this canto appears to speak to the themes addressed in the previous one, and it is here that Nesi’s desire for renewal as the underlying motivation in drafting the poem becomes most apparent;<sup>52</sup> this renewal being principally spiritual and religious in nature, rather than moral.

By the eleventh canto, the protagonist reaches a turning point in the celestial ascent. From verse 154, Nesi finds himself in the ‘Garden of the Wise,’ emblematically placed at the border between the sublunary and celestial spheres. But his arrival here is first dependent

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<sup>49</sup> So as not to disrupt the meter, Nesi has used the word ‘*palestra*’ as a synonym for ‘*gymnasium*.’ Moreover, the wordplay between ‘*palma*’ and ‘Palmieri’ was also adopted by Ficino, cfr. chapter two.

<sup>50</sup> Almost with a sense of hope, the poem speaks of a new style to be born — a new age, a chosen city, and a perfect people. Canto IX, verses 196–205.

<sup>51</sup> See Zanini, “L’Incompiuto *Poema* di Giovanni Nesi,” 102.

<sup>52</sup> The correlation between the declaration in Canto X and the themes discussed in Canto IX was first observed by Zanini. *Ibid.*

upon an act of contemplation; the poet describes Jupiter gazing upon the created order and those minds which he ‘created without means’ (that is, without corporeal bodies), and it is in meditating upon this scene that the splendid garden appears to him.<sup>53</sup> Evocative of the images already depicted by Ficino, Nesi rejoices in the sweet food and manna he finds there that seem to taste of ambrosia and nectar. In this liminal space he encounters the Seven Sages and a host of ancient philosophers, including Plato. While stood in the garden, great wings emerged from his shoulders and winged sandals like those worn by Hermes appeared on his feet, which carried him to a portal guarded by Atlas and Apollo.<sup>54</sup> The scenes described are an allusion to the contemplative act itself, and moreover, to the contemplation of ancient philosophical and theological wisdom, as the means through which the soul regains its wings and is transported to the heavenly sphere. As the twelfth canto commences, we, along with the protagonist move symbolically through the threshold between the two worlds, entering into the enclosure of heaven, which leads directly to mystical union with the Creator.

Canto fourteen closes with the poet’s lament for the disappointment he feels in life and his desire for it to end.<sup>55</sup> As Zanini has speculated, this reflects Nesi’s frustrations in the failings of the Florentine people in answering the call for political and religious renewal. While the poem undoubtedly has moral-philosophical undertones, its spiritual and religious character cannot be overstated, for it repeatedly draws the reader’s attention to the connection between contemplation and renewal, with the pre-existent soul at its center.

Though the few scholars to have reviewed the *Poema* have, rather unjustly, discounted Nesi as a mere ‘imitator of Dante’ or ‘versifier of Ficino,’ exhibiting no originality in

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<sup>53</sup> Canto XI, verses 127–138, and 151–156. “Come il saggio nocchiere usa hor le vele / et hora i remi, hor con la ciurma hor solo, / come Polluce o Castor li rivele, // non altrimenti su da l’alto polo / Giove rimira l’ordine et il suo fato, / provvede al cielo, al mondo, al vostro sòlo. // Queste hora crea et quell’altre ha creato / mente senza alcun mezo; ogn’altro effecto / in fronte ad l’altre cause ha segnato; // et s’alle volte advien qualche difecto, / la seconda cagion sol lo produce / che mal ritrahe lassù dal primo getto.” “*Ab eterno* ha ciò che segue veduto: / a chi fia pena vide, a chi fia merto, / a chi dà in vita, a chi in morte il tributo. // Hor così contemplando vidi aperto / un sì vago vezoso et bel giardino / c’ogn’altro appresso a llui parria un deserto.”

<sup>54</sup> Canto XII, verses 1–24.

<sup>55</sup> Canto XIV, verses 199–229.

style or substance, it appears that quite the opposite is true.<sup>56</sup> Having approached the work from a literary rather than philosophical perspective, Zanini shows that the Dantesque character of the *Poema* is more ideal than actual, since the textual influence of the *Commedia* is nowhere compelling enough to justify this pejorative branding of Nesi.<sup>57</sup> Rather, it appears that it was the visionary-poetic model that was attractive to Nesi, who had recognised in the genre a powerful tool to disseminate his own philosophical and theological speculation, just as Palmieri had done some decades before, and moreover, to broadcast his own expression of spiritual renewal in Florence, in line with that already proposed by Ficino.<sup>58</sup>

Visionary texts may be defined as those “which describe an event or series of events where a protagonist perceives, by visual means, a supernatural experience during which he or she is granted some prophetic or revelatory knowledge.”<sup>59</sup> More often than not, these visionary events tend to “take place during sleep or whilst in some abnormal physical state, such as coma, trance, or temporary ‘death.’”<sup>60</sup> These events can, however, be real or imagined, and indeed, medieval authors from the early Middle Ages to the end of the thirteenth century repeatedly turned to the topos of the ‘otherworldly-journey’ as an imaginative means for speculation. The genre reached its peak in the form of Dante’s *Divina Commedia* (1320), and the renewed interest in Dante in the late-fifteenth century led to a flourishing of the genre amongst Florentine intellectual circles once more.<sup>61</sup> Conferring authority on the author “because his or her knowledge was revealed through

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<sup>56</sup> “Nel quale [Poema] è inutile, tanto la cosa è evidente di per sè, di far rilevare l’imitazione della *Commedia*: a noi invece importa di osservare che nella parte teorica e trattativa esso non fa che mettere in versi le teorie Platoniche, come le aveva esposte il Ficino.” See Della Torre, *Storia dell’Accademia Platonica*, 702. A similar remark was made by Cesare Vasoli, who characterised it as a “Poema filosofico d’imitazione dantesca.” See Vasoli, “Giovanni Nesi,” 106.

<sup>57</sup> On this, see Zanini, “L’Incompiuto *Poema* di Giovanni Nesi.”; Filippo Zanini, “Il «*Poema*» di Giovanni Nesi tra Dante e Petrarca,” in *I Cantieri dell’Italianistica. Ricerca, Didattica e Organizzazione agli Inizi del XXI Secolo. Atti del XVII Congresso dell’ADI – Associazione degli Italianisti (Roma Sapienza, 18–21 Settembre 2013)*, eds. B. Alfonzetti, G. Baldassarri and F. Tomasi (Rome: Associazione degli Italianisti, 2014), 1–8; Filippo Zanini, “Ricerche il Senso dell’Opera negli ‘Scartafacci’: Gli Abbozzi del Poema di Giovanni Nesi,” *Camenule* 11 (2014): 1–10. <https://lettres.sorbonne-universite.fr/sites/default/files/media/2020-06/14zanini.pdf>; Filippo Zanini, “Osservazioni sulla Fortuna di Dante nel Rinascimento Italiano: Il Caso di Giovanni Nesi,” in *AlmaDante Seminario dantesco 2013*, eds. Giuseppe Ledda and Filippo Zanini (Bologna: Edizioni Aspasia, 2015), 249–260.

<sup>58</sup> Moreover, “The choice of the vernacular ... is functional to a cultural project which sees in poetry (and in *terza rima* in particular), an expressive opportunity of great prestige.” Zanini, “Il «*Poema*» di Giovanni Nesi,” 7.

<sup>59</sup> Elizabeth Boyle, “Visionary Texts,” in *Handbook of Medieval Studies*, ed. Albrecht Classen, 3 vols. (Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 2010), 1:2131.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> See Robb, *Neoplatonism of the Italian Renaissance*, 135–174.

divine means,” it is the genre, rather than the experience recounted, that grants power to the author, but what the poet chooses to convey is central, as it always serves a didactic function.<sup>62</sup> In the Quattrocento, the visionary-poem was thus for the author a means of instruction, which allowed him to “combine the manner of Dante with an exposition of Neoplatonic doctrines.”<sup>63</sup> The complex relationship between poetry and philosophy is embodied in the visionary model, which, though crossing both disciplines, properly belongs to neither. Indeed, Nesca Robb characterised Palmieri’s *poema visione*, the *Città di Vita*, as a “theologico-philosophical disquisition in verse that can be called a poem only for convenience.”<sup>64</sup> It is clear, then, that both Nesi and Palmieri chose to undertake their speculative explorations of Neoplatonic ideas under the guise, or perhaps protection, of the visionary-poem, and that this unique literary genre afforded them the ideal vehicle to do so. Once again, we see here an acute awareness of the relationship between form and content.

This understanding is nuanced further when considered in relation to the claim that poetry could present truth allegorically — a claim defended by both Petrarch and Boccaccio. In his famous *Defence of Poetry*, Boccaccio asserted that, “fiction [*fabula*] is a form of discourse, which, under the guise of invention, illustrates or proves an idea; and, as its superficial aspect is removed, the meaning of the author becomes clear.”<sup>65</sup> As Charles Dempsey has argued, “Boccaccio’s use of the word *inventio*, which he makes all but synonymous with *fabula*,” is bound to the conception of fiction as an “outer cortex with which the poet allegorically converts or ornaments the truth.”<sup>66</sup> “Who but an ignoramus,” Boccaccio went on to ask, “would dare to say that poets purposely make their inventions void and empty, trusting in the superficial appearance of their tales to show their eloquence, as though the power of eloquence were unable to display itself with the truth.”<sup>67</sup> The poetic form was thus the perfect means through which to present controversial ideas in a cautious way, especially given the revival of the classical mentality that safeguarded the poets, who were ‘always allowed any audacity.’<sup>68</sup> Petrarch

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<sup>62</sup> Boyle, “Visionary Texts,” 1:2133.

<sup>63</sup> Robb, *Neoplatonism of the Italian Renaissance*, 136.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>65</sup> Boccaccio, *Genealogie deorum gentilium* XIV, as cited in Charles Dempsey, *The Portrayal of Love: Botticelli’s Primavera and Humanist Culture at the Time of Lorenzo the Magnificent* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 25.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>67</sup> Boccaccio, *Genealogie deorum gentilium* XIV.10, as cited in *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> This notion stems from Horace’s *Ars Poetica*, 10–11.

and Boccaccio were undoubtedly important influences in Nesi's understanding of the powers of literary convention, and as Giulia Ponsiglione has further demonstrated, the genre of poetry was, for Nesi, crucial in remedying the moral and spiritual ills of his time.<sup>69</sup>

Although it was never completed, Nesi's penultimate work was the culmination of more than twenty years spent under Ficino's influence, and many years of independent study, as his workbooks attest. Though it is believed to have been written in the first few years of the sixteenth century, and certainly before his death in 1506, the *Poema* is nevertheless an express artefact of the intellectual and spiritual cultures of the late fifteenth century. With four known editorial phases of the *Poema*, demonstrated respectively by each of the four Riccardian manuscripts, we can clearly see Nesi's commitment to refining the poem's message, and to prepare it for circulation. Though no other versions of the poem exist, save those already mentioned, it is worth noting here that the final manuscript, Riccardiana 2750, was not written in Nesi's hand. While we cannot assert a particularly broad circulation (the poem is not mentioned in any of Nesi's correspondence), it evidently had a life, however limited, beyond Nesi's *studio*. Zanini has suggested that the poem remained unfinished as the project was interrupted by Nesi's death — the fact of which he believes Nesi had anticipated, perhaps due to illness. If this is indeed true, and Nesi knew that his days were numbered, his commitment to propagate the connection between contemplation, renewal, and the pre-existence of the soul, and his understanding of how this effort related to both charity and salvation (his and the Florentine people's), signifies just how dear the project was to him and the intellectual milieu to which he belonged, whose belief in the very real implications of these ideas on the religious and spiritual life of the city became more pronounced as the century drew to a close.

The poem's obscure and obtruse nature has undoubtedly impacted scholarly interest in the work, and consequently, hindered a true understanding of the investment in, efforts toward and impact on spiritual renewal in the late-Quattrocento by a 'secondary' humanist like Giovanni Nesi. By leaving it in obscurity, an appreciation for Nesi's intentional use and manipulation of literary genre in transmitting these controversial ideas, as demonstrated throughout this discussion (which, as we have seen, were geared

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<sup>69</sup> See Giulia Ponsiglione, *La Poesia ai Tempi della 'Tribulazione': Giovanni Nesi e i Savonaroliani* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2012).

toward reform), has arguably been lost on historians. Moreover, by neglecting this work and thinkers like Nesi, we fail to appreciate the very real impact that Ficino had in his own day and age.

## **6.2 Love, *Consolatio* and the *Vehiculum Animae* in Francesco Cattani da Diacceto**

Praised by Ficino as the most beloved of his Platonic colleagues, Francesco di Zanobi Cattani da Diacceto (1466–1522) is perhaps one of the most well-known of his pupils.<sup>70</sup> Though he only came under Ficino’s influence in 1492, this was not too short a time for Diacceto to be greatly impacted by Ficino’s philosophical and religious enterprise.<sup>71</sup> Indeed, like his master, Diacceto too produced a commentary on Plato’s *Symposium*, and consistently dealt with the metaphysical themes of love, beauty and the mystical ascent of the soul.<sup>72</sup> Diacceto’s literary production, in contrast to Nesi’s, includes several titles, amongst them: the *De Pulchro* (drafted between 1496–1499, and completed *post* 1514), the *Panegyricus in Amorem* (*ante* 1508) and the *De Amore Libri Tres* (1508), both of which were vernacularised c.1511, and a series of notable philosophical letters to the likes of Bernardo Rucellai, Cristoforo Marcello and Germain de Ganay.<sup>73</sup> It is perhaps no surprise then, that scholars tend to view Diacceto’s influence over his peers in a strictly philosophical capacity, especially given that he did not exhibit the same commitment to syncretism as Ficino had done, and rarely, if ever, mentioned the Christian religion. My discussion below, however, endeavours to paint a more nuanced picture of Diacceto as

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<sup>70</sup> See Chapter 84 of Ficino’s *Commentary to the Parmenides*, where Ficino refers to Diacceto as “*dilectissimum complatonicum nostrum.*” Ficino, *Commentaries on Plato*, 2.II:196–197.

<sup>71</sup> We can assume the two met only a short time before their first correspondence, which dates to the 27<sup>th</sup> of September 1492, as Diacceto’s name did not appear in the original list of students that Ficino compiled between the 22<sup>nd</sup> of July and the 3<sup>rd</sup> of August that same year. On this see Letter 1, *No one is able to eradicate evil and cares completely*. Ficino, *Letters*, 11:3–5; Letter 28, *A list of my friends and students*. Ficino, *Letters*, 10:33–34; Kristeller, *Studies in Renaissance Thought*, 3:297.

<sup>72</sup> The commentary is entitled *Francisci Catanei Diacetii Patricii Florentini in Divini Platonis Symposium Enarratio ad Clementem VII Pont. Max.* See Francesco Diacceto, *Opera Omnia Francisci Catanei Diacetii Patritii Fiorentini Philosophi summi, nunc primum in lucem edita* (Basel: Henrichum Petri et Petrum Pernam, 1563), 145–179.

<sup>73</sup> The letter to Bernardo Rucellai can be found on pages 324–329; the letter to Germain de Ganay on pages 345–349; and the two letters to Cristoforo Marcello on pages 349–355 and 355–359. See Diacceto, *Opera Omnia*, 324–329, 345–359. The titles which comprise Diacceto’s oeuvre are as follows: *De pulchro libri III, accedunt opuscula inedita et dispersa necnon testimonia quaedam ad eundem pertinentia*; *Epistolarum Liber*; *Epistolae* (in *De pulchro*); *In Platonis Symposium enarratio*; *Oratio de anima* (in *De pulchro*); *Oratio de philosophia* (1) (in *De pulchro*); *Oratio de philosophia* (2) (in *De pulchro*); *I Tre Libri d’Amore*; *Panegyrico all’Amore* (in *I tre libri d’amore*); *Paraphrasis in libros IIII Aristotelis De caelo*; *In Amatores Platonis sive de philosophia paraphrasis*; *Paraphraseos in Meteora Aristotelis liber primus*; *Paraphrasis in Politicum Platonis*; *In Theagen Platonis sive de sapientia paraphrasis*; *Praefatio in libros Aristotelis De moribus*.

one who was deeply committed to the cause of spiritual renewal. Tracking the development of his thought, which, as the title suggests, expounded Platonically inspired theories of love, the pursuit of happiness, and the vehicles of the soul, I will argue that spiritual renewal through the linked concepts of pre-existence, contemplation, and divine frenzy were at the heart of Diacceto's mission as a defender of Plato, and as an advocate of the *Theologia Ficiniiana*.

Unlike Nesi, Diacceto's discussion of the pre-existence and descent of the soul is not at all difficult to discern. In fact, these themes are evident even in his earliest writings, and were developed and refined throughout his successive works, transporting these provocative ideas from the late Quattrocento into the early Cinquecento. Our task then, is not so much to point out these recurring instances, but to frame them as being part of a broader programme of spiritual renewal. In this section, I will demonstrate first that Diacceto was indeed a religious thinker, and that his exposition and dissemination of Platonic and Neoplatonic philosophy (or better, theology) was undertaken with Christian religious perspectives and objectives in mind. Focusing primarily on Diacceto's *Expositio* of Boethius and a panegyric on love, I will argue that Ficinian doctrines on the soul are not only evident in Diacceto, but were conveyed using the very same rhetorical, linguistic, and conventional techniques discussed in chapters four and five, including the use of the vernacular, epideictic rhetoric, and the strategic employment of diverse literary genres.

A remark made by Paul Oskar Kristeller in 1986, which asserted that questions of Christian theology were of little importance to Diacceto, has continued to colour the way in which scholars of history and philosophy have viewed Diacceto's role as the 'authentic successor of Ficino' and an advocate of Platonic philosophy in the late-fifteenth and early-sixteenth centuries.<sup>74</sup> As such, we will briefly 'jump forward in time,' in order to foreground Diacceto's attitude on the relationship between Christianity and Platonism, which is a necessary consideration before any analysis of his earlier works can begin.

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<sup>74</sup> Kristeller, *Studies in Renaissance Thought*, 3:319. This belief endures to this day: "Diacceto's philosophical system is, of course, derivative from that of his teacher, but it renounces a grandiose search for an organic harmonization of Platonism and Christianity in favor of a thorough analysis of Plato and his followers, especially Plotinus." Brancato, "The *Consolatio* in Italy," 386.

For Diacceto, the Platonic wisdom transmitted by Ficino had a rightful place in the understanding and fortification of the Christian religion. In his *Apologia contra Parisienses philosophos pro Platone* (ante 1509), a written defence of Plato addressed to Germain de Ganay (bishop of Cahors and Orléans), against the theologians of the Sorbonne, who had raised concerns over the religious implications of his collective works, Diacceto answered two principal charges: that Platonism and Christianity are not the same thing, and that the former “tends to attribute the wisdom of Christianity to the ancient pagans.”<sup>75</sup> Replying to the first charge, Diacceto conceded some basic differences between Platonic and Christian doctrine, namely, that Platonism teaches that the One is the first principle, that heaven, the angels, and souls have no beginning, and that Plato believed that the soul remains outside the body, giving life to it through a second soul or nature;<sup>76</sup> Christianity, meanwhile, teaches that God is both One and Three, and that heaven, the angels, and souls were created in time. He then stated that the animation of the world and the stars is not contrary to Christian doctrine, since it was accepted by Dionysius the Areopagite. After making these and other less important distinctions, Diacceto emphasised that if a Christian is blamed for studying Plato, he must equally be criticised for studying Aristotle, “who is no less in disagreement with Christianity. Yet Aristotle is taught in all schools and even accepted as an authority.”<sup>77</sup> Diacceto argued that despite the many errors which are contrary to the Christian truth, no one objects to the study of Aristotle, and therefore, rather than blame Plato for the errors of Arius, his opponents must, like Dionysius, read his work and recognise his piety: though Plato was not a Christian, his doctrine may be useful to Christianity.<sup>78</sup> Although Kristeller asserted that Diacceto did not attempt to synthesise Christianity and Platonism, as Ficino had done, and alleged a “certain lack of interest in theological problems,” it is clear that Diacceto

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<sup>75</sup> “... Platonicos nullo pacto eosdem esse et Christianos, quasi iure Christiano homini re omni Platonica interdicatur.” See the full tract in Diacceto, *Opera Omnia*, 332–337, at 332. See also Kristeller, *Studies in Renaissance Thought*, 3:314. Note that this title of the letter appears only in BNF lat. 6687, fols. 51r–56v.

<sup>76</sup> Here Ficino’s influence on Diacceto is noticeable, for Plato did not believe that the soul remained outside the body, but Plato as interpreted by Ficino, that is, through Plotinus, did. On the second soul in Plotinus, see John Dillon, “Plotinus and the Vehicle of the Soul,” in *Gnosticism, Platonism and the Late Ancient World*, eds. Kevin Corrigan and Tuomas Rasimus (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 489–490. On the second soul in Diacceto, see Dario Brancato and Maude Vanhaelen, “Francesco Cattani da Diacceto and Boethius: A Neoplatonic Reading of the *Consolatio* in 16th-Century Florence,” *Accademia* 17 (2015): 64–65, 68.

<sup>77</sup> “Si ducitur fraudi Christiano homini quod legat Platonem huiusmodi sententem, quamobrem et Aristoteles non dico suspectus sed et reus et damnatur eiusdem criminis non erit? Et tamen ipsum quotidie audimus in scholis, adiramur, callentesque eius placita quasi πανεπιστήμονας nosmetipsos venditamus.” Diacceto, *Opera Omnia*, 335. Kristeller, *Studies in Renaissance Thought*, 3:315.

<sup>78</sup> “Nam ne ipse quidem Plato dixerit se Christianum esse. Negabit tamen se commisisse ut ex se potius quam ex nostra imbecillitate male sentiremus, utpote qui rei Christianae non detrimento sed potius adiumento esset amet.” Diacceto, *Opera Omnia*, 336.

had a vested interest in defending Plato's theology, and here attempted to safeguard him from detractors for the sake of the Christian religion.<sup>79</sup>

From this perspective, his reply to the second charge becomes even more critical in our understanding of Diacceto's Platonic enterprise, and to a changing perception of Diacceto as a religious thinker. Reminding his critics that Plato had no knowledge of the Christian God, Diacceto concluded with a statement reminiscent of the subjunctive appeal made by Ficino some years before: "And *if* the Christian truth admits these things, they must be considered and maintained by me as well. But if not, as indeed I disapprove of it altogether, so I desire to know from you where to take precautions ..."<sup>80</sup> Here, the Florentine tentatively proposes arguments in defence of Plato, "in case they may appear in agreement with Christian doctrine," and if not, he demonstrates a preparedness to be corrected by his critics.<sup>81</sup> Interestingly, Diacceto, who was willing to admit the differences between Platonism and Christianity, and to grant superiority to "the truth as taught by the Christian religion," had elsewhere advocated for the theory of double truth.<sup>82</sup> One gets the sense then that Diacceto was always more ready to persuade than be persuaded, confident in his defence of the Platonic truths and their harmony with Christian teaching. Indeed, in his defence of Plato, one should note Diacceto's use of early Christian sources sympathetic to his cause, and distinct lack of reference to later scholastic authorities. Given the surveillance of Diacceto's philosophical activity by the likes of Cristoforo Marcello (bishop of Rome and later Archbishop of Corfu), Germain de Ganay, and the Parisian theologians, as well as the charges presented against him, it is clear that Diacceto's contemporaries viewed his works as inherently religious and theological — for them, these were not simply the musings of a speculative philosopher

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<sup>79</sup> Kristeller, *Studies in Renaissance Thought*, 3:319. On Plato and Aristotle, also see Diacceto's letter to Vincenzo Querini in Diacceto, *Opera Omnia*, 329–330.

<sup>80</sup> Emphasis mine. "Quae si Christiana veritas admiserit, mihi quoque pro ratis et habenda sunt et asserenda. Sin minus, ut quidem omnino improbo, sic cupio nosse ex vobis qua sit parte praecavendum ..." Diacceto, *Opera Omnia*, 337. Cfr. chapter four. One should note the use of 'si' in conjunction with the subjunctive term 'admiserit,' which together convey the hope that these Platonic teachings will be accepted as part of the Christian truth, if not now, then in the near future.

<sup>81</sup> Kristeller, *Studies in Renaissance Thought*, 3:315.

<sup>82</sup> "It is not by chance that he refers to the similar disagreement between Aristotelianism and Christianity. A similar dualism which often, with an oversimplification, is called the theory of double truth, was defended by many Aristotelian philosophers of the same age." *Ibid.*, 319. On the theory of double truth, also see Karl Heim, "Zur Geschichte des Satzes von der Doppelten Wahrheit," in *Glaube und Leben. Gesammelte Aufsätze und Vorträge* (Berlin: Furche-Verlag, 1926), 73–97.

in the classroom; they had real-world implications.<sup>83</sup> Diacceto, too, responded to these concerns on religious grounds. Moreover, that Diacceto was a pious and most religious Catholic all his life was emphasised by Benedetto Varchi, one of two biographers of the Florentine philosopher, in his *Vita di Francesco Cattani da Diacceto*.<sup>84</sup> In light of this evidence, we may now turn to an analysis of Diacceto's philosophical works.

From the beginning of his literary career, Diacceto was captivated by questions about the human soul and its quest to be reunited with God. In the third book of the *De Pulchro*, a “comprehensive work on metaphysics in which the problem of beauty merely represents one of the leading topics,” Diacceto deals with the theme of ‘man as microcosm.’<sup>85</sup> Here, man is praised for his ability to live all kinds of life, and for his powers of sense, reason, and mind, which he may follow at any given time.<sup>86</sup> “Sensation is an activity of the soul excited by external impressions,” whereas pure thought “is not dependent on the body, and hence the soul enters the body from the outside.”<sup>87</sup> As he moves through the successive chapters, the text slowly turns towards the Platonic allegory of the cave and the reascent of the soul, describing its path to perfection and the moment of ecstatic union through the various kinds of divine frenzy.<sup>88</sup> “Our soul,” he teaches, “so nourished on the love of the divine, contemplates the marvels of the heavenly region; our soul governs the whole world.”<sup>89</sup> As Christopher Celenza observes, Diacceto here demonstrates that “our soul grows wings, senses their power, slips the bonds of this place of evils and rejoicing and awake flies to its homeland.”<sup>90</sup> Recovering the memory of its former glory, the soul rekindles its innate desire to return to God.

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<sup>83</sup> After all, the pre-existence, descent, and vehicles of the soul are undoubtedly theological issues, having anthropological, and, in their relation to the immortality of the soul, eschatological and soteriological implications.

<sup>84</sup> See Benedetto Varchi, *Vita di Francesco Cattani da Diacceto* (Ancona: Gustavo Sartorj Cherubini, 1843), 1–22, especially 16, 19–20.

<sup>85</sup> See Book III, Chapter 1, in Francesco Cattani da Diacceto, *De pulchro libri III, accedunt opuscula inedita et dispersa nec non testimonia quaedam ad eundem pertinentia*, ed. Sylvain Matton (Florence: Leo S. Olschki Editore, 1986), 158–162. For more on Diacceto and *De Pulchro*, see Christopher S. Celenza, “Francesco Cattani da Diacceto’s *De Pulchro*, II.4, and the Practice of Renaissance Platonism,” *Accademia* 9 (2007): 87–98.

<sup>86</sup> Kristeller, *Studies in Renaissance Thought*, 3:305.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 3:307; see Book III, Chapter 2, in Diacceto, *De Pulchro*, 163–178.

<sup>88</sup> See Book III, chapter 3, in *Ibid.*, 179–189. On the Allegory of the Cave, see Plato, *Republic*, VII.514a–521d.

<sup>89</sup> “Anima nostra donec amore divinorum nutrita supercaelestis contemplatur miracula regionis, totum gubernat mundum.” See Book III, Chapter 4, in Diacceto, *De Pulchro*, 190–209, at 208. English translation in Celenza, “Francesco Diacceto’s *De Pulchro*,” 92.

<sup>90</sup> Celenza, “Francesco Diacceto’s *De Pulchro*,” 92.

Building upon these ideas, Diacceto's next endeavour dealt more directly with the pre-existence, descent, and vehicles of the soul. Sometime before 1506, Diacceto wrote to Bernardo Rucellai, a member of the Florentine political and social elite, clarifying a key passage of Boethius's *Consolation*;<sup>91</sup> the controversial excerpt is notably that which is found in Book III, metre 9, lines 13–21. It is here that Diacceto elaborated his theory of the vehicles of the soul, and his understanding of its descent and reascent. Written in response to a request made by Rucellai (a request which Diacceto remarked had been prompted by Zanobi Acciaiuoli), the letter opens with a variety of powerful rhetorical *topoi*: humility, friendship, and inexpressibility, as well as a feigned concern over the use of the epistolary genre, “which cannot reveal and explain a matter of this amplitude.”<sup>92</sup> As demonstrated in chapter three, the task of interpreting Boethius had been attempted by many, all of whom were faced with the challenge of how to overcome the issues that the text had raised for the Christian faith; the ‘problem’ was not philosophical, but rather religious. This very issue is acknowledged by Diacceto, who states that “this rather difficult and major task [which has] often troubled those who were otherwise great men, and will cause trouble in the future,” is “by no means a common and trivial matter, but one that lies hidden in the recesses of the secrets of Pythagorean and Platonic wisdom,” and which is “filled with the most important questions, and filled with answers to these questions.”<sup>93</sup> Stressing the magnitude of the task assigned to him, Diacceto asserts that he “will not regret accomplishing the of duty of [a] ... highly diligent and precise” interpreter, and that “others will rightly approve” of Rucellai's judgment of Diacceto as the most suitable candidate to solve difficult questions.<sup>94</sup> Although it was not explicitly stated, we can see that Diacceto was here writing as a Christian, for the Christian, and that his Neoplatonic reading of the *Consolation* was a way of integrating ancient philosophical doctrines into a Christian theological and religious framework — a feat which had, until now, not successfully been accomplished.

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<sup>91</sup> Between 1500 and 1506 especially, Diacceto was a regular participant in the meetings of the *Orti Oricellari*, a Florentine sodality which gathered at the Rucellai Gardens. His participation in this group coincides with the composition of the *Expositio*. On this, see Felix Gilbert, “Bernardo Rucellai and the Orti Oricellari: A Study on the Origin of Modern Political Thought,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 12 (1949): 101–131.

<sup>92</sup> Diacceto as translated in Brancato and Vanhaelen, “Francesco Cattani da Diacceto and Boethius,” 85.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

Divided into two sections, the first half of the letter deals primarily with interpreting Plato on the issues raised in the Boethian verses, while the second seeks to clarify them according to this exegesis. Diacceto lists four issues which he deems worthy of explication: how the soul is the ‘middle of things’ and is ‘triple’; how it moves itself and the heavens; of what kind its ‘vehicles’ are; and what the ‘sowing of souls’ is.<sup>95</sup> While certainly worth discussing, Diacceto notes that he deliberately put these matters into writing (as opposed to mere conversation) under the advice of Bindaccio Ricasoli, indicating that it would be negligent of him not to. For indeed, one “cannot let anything unexplained about the composition,” but must instead “ponder and discuss every single word, given that Boethius has merely arranged in verse what he has unearthed about the *Timaeus*’ secrets.”<sup>96</sup> The carefully considered choice to reveal these mysteries in a lasting, written form, which by virtue of the epistolary genre itself is both public and performative, is significant. That the letter was included for publication in his printed *Opera omnia* (1563), and which had circulated in manuscript form prior, is thus also significant.<sup>97</sup>

In answering the first question, Diacceto makes an important distinction, stating that the soul is:

... eternal according to its essence (for it is not of an inferior genre and is not subject to generation), but temporal according to its action (for it accomplishes all things temporally). It is the middle between the nature that is completely temporal and the nature that is completely eternal. ... it is eternal according to its substance, but subject to time in its functions. It is indivisible according to what is most divine within itself; it is divisible (as Plotinus says) in as much as, in its lowest parts, it is far away from that most divine part, and tends toward the body. Since it moves itself, as shown in the *Phaedrus* and Book X of the *Laws*, it is superior to the things

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<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> The letter appears under the title of *Expositio* in the following manuscripts: Bibl. Laur. San Marco 328, fols. 117r–118v; BNCF Naz. II. IV. 34, fols. 287v–294r; BNF lat. 8696, fols. 139r–147v; BAV Ross. 423, fols. 24r–32r.

that are moved by another [principle], but is of an inferior substance compared with those that are completely motionless.<sup>98</sup>

Diacceto here refers to a passage in the *Phaedrus*, where Plato explains that things which have motion within themselves can neither be destroyed nor generated, indeed, they are ‘ungenerated and immortal.’<sup>99</sup> Being eternal in substance, the soul exists first in the heavens, where it is committed to contemplation, and it is only when it gives in to its desire to govern bodies that it gradually falls from contemplation, finds rest in a solid form, and becomes subject to time.

A little further, he explains that on account of this inclination toward earthly bodies, individual souls produce and take up their own ‘body,’ “which has the same nature as the heaven,” (what Plato and Plotinus called ‘purest fire’), which is the ‘vehicle’ (*vehiculum*) of the soul.<sup>100</sup> He explains to Rucellai that:

... each rational soul is eternal according to its essence and thus makes use of a body that is in itself eternal too. For if the soul that gives life to something is eternal, the life it gives to it must also be eternal, in which case that to which life is given lives eternally, and for that reason it will also be eternal. But this body is completely eternal only because it partakes of the condition of the heaven. This is what Proclus says, although Plotinus and Iamblichus argue that the rational souls sometimes reach such a degree of elevation through contemplation that, once they go beyond the intelligible world, they leave even their entire body.<sup>101</sup>

Here we learn that for Diacceto, these vehicles, like the soul itself, are eternal. Though they indeed facilitate the soul’s ascent to the divine, they are first acquired upon its descent into a corporeal body. Diacceto is intrigued by the idea that these vehicles accompany the soul during its journey to and from the material world, and are shed only when the soul passes beyond the intelligible sphere, that is, when the soul is brought into

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<sup>98</sup> Diacceto as translated in Brancato and Vanhaelen, “Francesco Diacceto and Boethius,” 86.

<sup>99</sup> See Plato, *Phaedrus*, 245c1–246e2.

<sup>100</sup> See Plato, *Timaeus*, 39e10–40b8; Plotinus, *Enneads*, II.1.4.

<sup>101</sup> Diacceto as translated in Brancato and Vanhaelen, “Francesco Diacceto and Boethius,” 88.

ecstatic union with God.<sup>102</sup> We are to understand, then, that the soul ‘falls’ from an initial, or pre-existent, state of contemplation in the heavens, and assumes its function of generation once in the body. Contemplation and generation are not, as Simone Fellina asserts, merely acts undertaken by the soul during its earthly existence.<sup>103</sup> Relating these vehicles directly to both the descent and ascent (as opposed to just the latter), Diaceto counsels that “one can read many explanations in many authors, and particularly in Plotinus.”<sup>104</sup> He does not, however, move on from the issue:

... I would nevertheless say a few particularly relevant things, lest I seem to have neglected this matter. The creator of the world, as Plato says in the *Timaeus*, has attributed to each soul its own series of stars ... which allows celestial things to go down to the earth and earthly things to be taken up to the heavens. ... when they fall because of their love for generation, they turn away [from their initial state of contemplation] so that, after having taken up an earthly body, oblivious of themselves, they try hard to ignore the rule of fate, while in fact they are most of the time subservient to fate. ... But they are relieved from this burden when, illuminated by a desire

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<sup>102</sup> Diaceto develops this idea further in his letter to Cristoforo Marcello, where he considers the fate of the vehicle of human souls: “Plotinus and Iamblichus consider that the soul can discard even its astral body through contemplation, whereas Proclus and Syrianus consider that the vehicle of the soul always accompanies the soul and that, during the ascent into the intelligible world, it is reunited with the vehicle of the supreme Soul, just as the soul is united with the supreme Soul. The nature and location of the soul’s vehicle depends, he says, on the life the soul chooses — a life of contemplation will purify the soul and its vehicle and lead them closer to the intelligible world. ... according to [Diaceto], the vehicle of the human soul cannot go beyond the spheres of the elements that constitute it, so it stays in the cosmos. In other words, the soul, when in contemplation, very soon discards the vehicle (probably at the cosmic level) and proceeds alone into the intelligible world.” Brancato and Vanhaelen, “Francesco Diaceto and Boethius,” 68. Also see the letter to Marcello in Diaceto, *Opera omnia*, 353–354.

<sup>103</sup> See Simone Fellina, *Alla Scuola di Marsilio Ficino: Il Pensiero Filosofico di Francesco Cattani da Diaceto* (Pisa: Edizioni della Normale, 2017), 260. Also see n.109 below.

<sup>104</sup> Diaceto as translated in Brancato and Vanhaelen, “Francesco Diaceto and Boethius,” 88. Though Brancato and Vanhaelen cite *Enneads* IV.8, one cannot help but wonder whether *Enneads* IV.3.15 might have also been of interest to Diaceto, where Plotinus discusses the secondary way in which the soul can be said to enter the body: “The souls proceed, then, peering out (*ekkypsasai*) from the intelligible realm, in the first instance to the heavens, and, taking on a body there, they then pass by means of it to more earthly bodies, to the degree to which they are extended in length. Some go from the heavens to the lower level of bodies, while others are inserted from some bodies into others, those, that is, whose power was not adequate to raise them from here because of the heaviness laid upon them, and the consequent forgetfulness, since they drag about with them a lot that was loaded onto them to weigh them down.” Translation in Dillon, “Plotinus and the Vehicle of the Soul,” 495. Though Plotinus did not believe in the pneumatic vehicle of the soul, as did Plato and the Neoplatonists, he “is prepared to envisage, not only astral bodies proper, but more polluted versions of them (borrowed from a notable passage of the *Phaed.* 81C–D) ... These bodies are material vehicles serving as bodies for souls; they are not intermediate entities between soul and body as such. Plotinus, then, has no objection to postulating astral or pneumatic bodies of various sorts, to service the soul while it is between earthly bodies, but still within the physical cosmos; he just does not find them useful as a solution to the soul-body problem.” *Ibid.*, 495–496. Also see n.111 and n.112 below.

for contemplation, they grow completely tired of life on earth. Thanks to philosophy and love they prepare for themselves an easy road and learn to obey to fate, as Plato says in the *Phaedrus*.<sup>105</sup> ... They ascend towards the superior realities through Capricorn, just as they had descended to the inferior realities through Cancer. For one is the house of the Moon, which presides over generation; the other is the house of Saturn, which governs contemplation. This is what Er Pamphilus meant in Book X of Plato's *Republic*, where he says that he saw two openings in the heaven and in the earth: through the first two the souls would return to heaven and through the other two they would be cast down.<sup>106</sup>

Following our redaction critical approach, we must note Diacceto's determination not to neglect this important issue and give particular attention to the points made in his explication. Though he advises Rucellai that he can read more on the question in Plotinus, Diacceto proceeds to describe the Platonic account, which is, in his estimation, the most relevant on the matter. This rhetorical device is a kind of apophasis, which allowed Diacceto to openly discuss a topic that would ordinarily be considered unorthodox for a Christian, and to introduce his own opinion. In this passage we see the descent of the soul discussed in spatial terms, where the soul exists first in a state of contemplation, then descends along an astral path toward an earthly body, where it finally rests and becomes oblivious to its true nature and origin. But the soul, he says, can regain its 'wings' through 'love and philosophy,' that is, contemplation and the retrieval of its pre-natal memory, which will elevate it such that it will be reunited with God. Though he does not directly refer to divine frenzy here, we are told that the soul becomes illuminated by this contemplative desire; as we have already seen in the previous chapters, each moment of ecstatic union, or progression along that path, engenders spiritual renewal, igniting within the soul a more fervent desire to be united with God. All of this he dutifully explained before even beginning to deal with the Boethian verses themselves.

Though he remained faithful to Ficino's teachings, Diacceto nonetheless demonstrated great innovation, seen above all in the sources he employed, and his commitment to showing the harmony between Plato and Aristotle (even if only to defend the former using

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<sup>105</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, 248d.

<sup>106</sup> Diacceto as translated in Brancato and Vanhaelen, "Francesco Diacceto and Boethius," 88–89.

the latter as a shield).<sup>107</sup> His interest in ancient pagan theology, and supposed ‘indifference’ to its similarities with Christian mysticism, has spurred the notion that Diacceto had “[renounced] a grandiose search for an organic harmonization of Platonism and Christianity in favor of a thorough analysis of Plato and his followers, especially Plotinus.”<sup>108</sup> However, the correspondence of both Ficino’s and Diacceto’s understanding of the origins of the soul and its inherent relationship to mystical union and spiritual renewal is closer than scholars tend to acknowledge. As Simone Fellina would have it, the ‘fall’ of the soul, for Diacceto, is metaphorical; the descent and ascent are to be understood symbolically as the functions of the soul, that is, as generation and the care of bodies, and contemplation respectively, which occur during the soul’s earthly existence.<sup>109</sup> Dario Brancato and Maude Vanhaelen, on the other hand, have interpreted the ascent and descent of the soul in Diacceto as ‘inner detachments from physical realities’; citing a single (and somewhat ambiguous) sentence in a letter Diacceto had written to Cristoforo Marcello, which reads: “*Contemplatio quidem ascensus vocatur, declinatio vero in caduca corpora, descensus,*” they assert that Diacceto, in line with Plotinus, did not view the descent of the soul as a spatial separation.<sup>110</sup> As we shall see, the larger body of evidence on this topic, and indeed, in line with Diacceto’s exegesis of Plotinus elsewhere (in particular, the method of reading post-Plotinian understandings of the ‘body’ which the soul puts on in heaven as that ethereal vehicle made of ‘pure fire,’ which protects the soul on its descent into the material world), would seem to suggest an

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<sup>107</sup> These innovations are discussed at length in Fellina, *Il Pensiero Filosofico di Francesco Diacceto*, see especially chapter 4, “L’Antropologia,” 177–305. On this also see Kristeller, *Studies in Renaissance Thought*, 3:297–327, especially 318–319.

<sup>108</sup> Brancato, “The *Consolatio* in Italy,” 386. Also see Brancato and Vanhaelen, “Francesco Diacceto and Boethius,” 64.

<sup>109</sup> Building upon his reading of Ficino’s *PT* 18.4, Fellina quotes Book II, Chapter 6 of Diacceto’s *I tre Libri d’Amore*: “Imperocché, non potendo adempiere insieme l’uno et l’altro ufficio, è necessario la espeditione dell’uno sia accompagnata dalla dimissione dell’altro, quando è intenta alla generatione si dice discendere, quando è intenta alla conternplatione si dice ascendere.” Fellina then concludes: “Non bisogna pertanto farsi ingannare dal richiamo costante e compiaciuto al formulario platonico sulla caduta dell’anima: contemplazione e cura dei corpi, vale a dire ‘ascesa’ e ‘discesa,’ sono operazioni vicendevoli dell’anima umana nella sua esistenza terrena.” See Fellina, *Il Pensiero Filosofico di Francesco Diacceto*, 245–263, quotes at 260.

<sup>110</sup> Brancato and Vanhaelen, “Francesco Diacceto and Boethius,” 67; Diacceto, *Opera Omnia*, 353. Also see Brancato, “The *Consolatio* in Italy,” 386: “In the specific case of the *Expositio*, the hermeneutical apparatus used by Diacceto includes a number of sources from Plato other than the *Timaeus*, such as, for example, the Phaedran metaphor (246A) of the winged chariot as the soul. As for his preferred exegetes of Plato, Plotinus, and other neo-Platonists (Iamblichus, Proclus) are his preferred sources: for example, Diacceto relies entirely on Plotinus’s exegesis in the description of the souls’ descent into human bodies.”

alternative reading.<sup>111</sup> Indeed, I would argue that Diacceto's position on the pre-existence, descent, and vehicles of the soul, is much closer to the reading of Ficino on these same issues that has been presented throughout this thesis.<sup>112</sup>

In the first of his writings dedicated to love, the *Panegirico all'Amore*, Diacceto builds upon the central themes of beauty, which is God, and love, which is the desire for beauty. Diacceto explains that man possesses an overpowering inborn desire for beauty, and that through it, man can partake in its perfection. Though he does not possess it, he is not entirely devoid of beauty, for if he were, he could not derive any knowledge of it from previous experience, and would therefore not be able to desire it, given that desire is driven by the belief that the object we desire will be beneficial to us:

Thus, if we do not know what a thing is like, we have no idea whether or not it corresponds to the object of our desire, and therefore we cannot desire it as something that would be advantageous to us ... But whoever desires [a thing] does not possess [it], for if he possessed [it], his desire would be in vain, since he would already be enjoying his possession. This explains why the desire for beauty lies midway between knowledge and possession: its beginning lies in knowledge, and its end in possession.<sup>113</sup>

Here Diacceto explains that our desire to return to God, which is innate in all men, is driven by our soul's initial experience of His beauty, goodness, and perfection in the intelligible sphere. Diacceto continues to expand on this theme, revealing that there are two kinds of love: celestial and vulgar. Central to Platonic thought, celestial or divine love is the desire for the spiritual beauty contained in the intelligible world and in the

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<sup>111</sup> "Diacceto follows a tradition developed by Plotinus' successors, which consisted of reading back into Plotinus the doctrine of the astral body, even though this doctrine had only been fully developed by Porphyry, Iamblichus and Proclus. ... Both Ficino and Diacceto followed this tradition and sought to underline the fundamental agreement between Plato, Plotinus and his successors, because they believed that each of these philosophers had expressed the same truth, albeit in different ways." See Brancato and Vanhaelen, "Francesco Diacceto and Boethius," 64.

<sup>112</sup> As in n.111 above, in their interpretation of the *Enneads*, both Ficino and Diacceto arguably read the Platonic and post-Plotinian notion of the soul's 'vehicle' back into Plotinus, whose concept of soul-body relations is not mediated by a pneumatic vehicle. Cfr. chapter two, n.33.

<sup>113</sup> The *Panegyricus* has been translated in full. See Diacceto as translated in Luc Deitz, "Francesco Cattani da Diacceto," in *Cambridge Translations of Renaissance Philosophical Texts*, ed. Jill Kraye, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 1:156–165, at 158–159.

soul, while vulgar love is the desire for corporeal beauty.<sup>114</sup> Here we might relate celestial love to the contemplative function of the soul, and vulgar love to the desire for generation and care of bodies. Since divine love is superior to that common, vulgar form, Diacceto announces that:

I will not at this time dwell on all the calamities that befall us when we obey Vulgar Love, since my purpose is to show that the greatest of divine gifts is that type of love under whose leadership we are able to contemplate divine beauty and that, consequently, a true lover is a most sublime thing, a wonder to behold in the midst of other lovers. Our soul, although full of the divine and the true daughter of God, is so much a prisoner of the body, whose administration it was put in charge of by nature ... Oblivious of its own beauty and of its divine origin, the soul is assailed by huge and varied swarms of dreams, continually deceiving it during that period of time which the blind and ignorant masses call life. Not everyone can easily remember the divine beauty while still ensnared in a mortal body. There is, however, a very small number of people in whom there remains a spark of the divine splendour, enabling them to conjure up such a happy memory.<sup>115</sup>

All men are imprinted with the memory of the soul's pre-natal existence, he explains, but few are readily able to retrieve it. His purpose, as is clearly stated, is to invite his readers to divine contemplation — to seek that celestial love perceived only by the mind's eye, recall this memory, and thus free the soul from the tomb of the body. Drawing on that same rhetorical tradition of praise and blame, Diacceto makes a clear distinction between what is pure and what is corrupt, explaining that vulgar love may be justified only when it is used as an instrument for ascending toward divine beauty; celestial love, on the other hand, frees the soul from its bodily prison and reminds it of its divine origin, leading the soul to true happiness.<sup>116</sup> With each attempt souls are “raised in a wondrous way,” but,

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<sup>114</sup> Francesco Diacceto, *I tre libri d'amore di M. Francesco Cattani da Diacceto, Filosofo et Gentil'homo Fiorentino, con un Panegirico all'Amore; et con la vita del detto autore, fatta da M. Benedetto Varchi* (Venice: Gabriel Giolito de' Ferrari, 1561), 153. Cfr. the discussions of the 'two Aphrodites' (also referred to as the 'two Venuses') in Plato's *Symposium*, Plotinus' *Enneads* III.5, and Proclus' commentary on Plato's *First Alcibiades*, as well as Ficino's commentaries on the *Symposium* and the *Enneads*.

<sup>115</sup> Diacceto as translated in Deitz, “Francesco da Diacceto,” 161–162.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

“weighed down by the stain of corporeality,” fall back down once more. The desire for beauty, which “seems to get absorbed, and sorrow is turned into joy,” thereafter burns more ardently within them, such that when “they are deprived of their usual diet, they become sad and sick, continuously thinking of the beauty of this most resplendent face.”<sup>117</sup> Describing the theory of divine frenzy, Diaceto counsels that it is only when man goes in search of the divine vision that his hunger will be appeased, and he will continue like this, gradually ascending, “until they finally reach the bottomless sea of divine beauty,” bringing the lover into mystical union with divine.<sup>118</sup> “This is the way that the *true* lover must go: once he has begun to contemplate divine beauty, he has nearly reached the end of his journey, where all things are at rest and enjoy perfect happiness,” he advises, “... whoever contemplates true beauty with the eye of his mind — which alone can see it — does not produce images and counterfeits of virtue, but *true* virtues.”<sup>119</sup> However brief these moments are, they bring the lover ever closer to spiritual renewal in this life. The reader is left with the distinct impression that no other enterprise could be “more advantageous ... and more agreeable to the gods.”<sup>120</sup>

The significance of the rhetorical genre of the panegyric itself cannot be overlooked. Historically used by humanists and professional rhetoricians, the panegyric is a genre characterised by effusive praise, and is a means through which an author could influence his readers’ perception of a person or thing; using epideictic rhetoric, the author is given “the opportunity for vituperation that recommends certain subjects.”<sup>121</sup> Traditionally employed in civic and diplomatic contexts by such notable Florentines as Leonardo Bruni and Poggio Bracciolini, the use of panegyric here reveals an implicit awareness of the persuasive (and indeed, political) power afforded by this genre.<sup>122</sup> In Diaceto’s *Panegirico*, the account given of the soul’s journey back to God through the recovery of the memory of its pre-natal existence, where it first encountered true love and beauty, is that which should be honoured and taken as true. Moreover, celestial love is praised,

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<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 162–163.

<sup>119</sup> Emphasis mine. *Ibid.*, 163.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

<sup>121</sup> On the use of panegyric in the Quattrocento, see Carl Goldstein, “Rhetoric and Art History in the Italian Renaissance and Baroque,” *The Art Bulletin* 73, no. 4 (1991): 641–652, at 650; Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Studies in Renaissance Thought*, 1:552–583; Baron, *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance*.

<sup>122</sup> See Michael Komorowski, “The Diplomatic Genre before the Italian League: Civic Panegyric of Bruni, Poggio, and Decembrio,” in *New Worlds and the Italian Renaissance: Contributions to the History of European Intellectual Culture*, eds. Andrea Moudarres and Christiana Purdy Moudarres (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 47–73.

while vulgar love is blamed; the dichotomy suggested here encourages and indeed, urges the reader toward contemplation. The recollection of this vision, as we have seen, is facilitated through ‘love and philosophy,’ which arguably translates to the study of ancient philosophical and theological doctrines, and the contemplation of one’s true, divine origins and the divine nature that resides within our soul. With this genre and its rhetoric, Diacceto was therefore able to guide his audience toward spiritual renewal.

A similar pattern, which connects the external and pre-existent soul to contemplation, and then to mystical union is followed once more in his *Tre Libri d’Amore*. The soul is described as having two properties: a natural inclination to govern the body, and the ability to know itself, as well as the things below and above itself — a faculty known as intelligence, which is derived from the intelligible world, and is also known as Angel.<sup>123</sup> Angel, however, has plurality, and therefore proceeds from a higher principle, that is, the perfect unity that is God.<sup>124</sup> God may not be reached by any knowledge, but only through divine frenzy and ecstatic union.<sup>125</sup> Dabbling in his own theory of emanation, Diacceto explains that all things proceed from God and return to him.<sup>126</sup> He demonstrates that the soul which proceeds from Angel is “diversified into many different souls which are all led by the world soul and by the souls of the twelve spheres,” but delineates that, in contrast to the world soul, human souls cannot perform their contemplative and generative functions simultaneously, and thus they are “forced successively to descend toward generation and to ascend toward contemplation.”<sup>127</sup>

In Book II, Chapter VII, Diacceto’s references to the ‘descent’ and ‘ascent’ are clarified in detail, and it is here that we may see that these were not merely symbolic terms, and are directly related to contemplation and renewal.<sup>128</sup> According to his reading of the *Timaeus*, human souls were created in the same place as the world soul, and as such,

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<sup>123</sup> *I Tre Libri d’Amore*, Book I, Chapter 3. Note the Christianisation of the metaphysical hierarchy already taking place. All references to the *De Amore* hereafter are based on a reading of Bibl. Ricc. 2070, fols. 1r–84r. See fols. 7v–9v.

<sup>124</sup> Book I, Chapter 4. See *Ibid.*, fols. 10r–12v.

<sup>125</sup> Book I, Chapter 5. Read from “Et pero el divino Platone disse nel Parmenide ...” until “Et pero ogni cosa creata, o vuoi terrena, o vuoi mortale, o vuoi rationale, o vuoi angelica, po exclamare insieme col propheta signore lo splendore della faccia tua è segnato sopra noi.” Note in particular the blending of ancient and Christian theology: “Questa è quella divina caligine, la quale tanto celebra Dionisio Areopageta splendore della christiana Theologia ...” See *Ibid.*, fols. 15v–17r.

<sup>126</sup> Book I, Chapter 5. See *Ibid.*, fols. 12v–17r.

<sup>127</sup> Book II, Chapters 1 and 6. See *Ibid.*, fols. 27r–30r, 40r–42r.

<sup>128</sup> See Appendix E, where the relevant chapter is transcribed in full.

possess the same properties and powers as not only the world soul, but other divine souls. They are, however, more imperfect, and because they are intent on generating and caring for transient bodies, they dismiss the contemplation of true beauty. When it is intent on generation the soul is said to descend; when it is intent on contemplation it is said to ascend. Our souls do not ascend according to the custom of the body, because they do not themselves participate in the corporeal condition, and instead enter from outside the body. Our souls, he teaches, remain partly in the intelligible sphere, partly in the sensible, operating at times in one, and at times another — there are two halves, so to speak, which operate according to the dominant inclination.<sup>129</sup> Affection (*affetto*) is the principle which operates this inclination or desire, but this would not be possible if there were not some preceding experience or knowledge of the thing which it desires. He gives an analogy of a sculptor, who must first conceive of a thing in order to create it, signifying that the soul cannot seek divine beauty if it had not known or experienced it at an earlier point in time. As Plato says in the tenth book of the *Republic*, the souls that descend into the realm of generation are said to drink from the Ameles (which signifies negligence), the river which runs through the plain of Lethe (which signifies oblivion), where they become oblivious to divine things.<sup>130</sup> These souls are not denied the ability to return to the intelligible sphere, however, and when the soul contemplates its true nature, it experiences an intense love, allowing it to re-ascend and become whole once more. Diacceto describes this as a circular motion, where the divided soul, having departed from its unity, seeks its divine half and ‘intensely’ wishes to return to its first state. The soul may experience this frenzy, even if only in a brief moment, and from it an ancient form of love is born, which is the doctor and healer of humankind. Contemplating the lives our souls lived ‘at the beginning’ in the intelligible sphere allows the soul to remember the divine beauty it experienced and to reawaken from its slumber, gradually restoring it to the divine life. This account, Diacceto says, will be enough to have hinted the reader toward the right path.

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<sup>129</sup> Book II, Chapter 7: “Quando è intempta alla generatione si dice descendere; quando è intenta alla contemplatione si dice ascendere, non perché l’anima ascenda, o discenda secondo el costume dei corpi. Imperochè sendo essentia separabile, et non partecipando di conditione alchuna corporale. Secondo che piace a Platone et Aristotile, ma stando di fuori, è al tutto assoluta dalla natura del luoco: al quale solo è obligato el corpo di cui è proprio l’ascenso et el descenso. Ma diciamo, ascendere, o descendere in questo modo le cose divine sonno presente secondo che epse operano. Imperochè diciamo la divinita essere in cielo, o in terra, secondo che epsa opera in cielo, o in terra, altrimenti non po essere determinatamente in luoco alchuno.” See *Ibid.*, fols. 42v–43r.

<sup>130</sup> Note, Ameles and Lethe are synonymous.

While Diacceto's commitment to propagating a new model of Christian religious practice may not appear so obvious to the modern reader, certain stylistic choices were made by the author in both the *Tre Libri d'Amore* and the *Panegirico all'Amore* to facilitate a broader, vernacular readership — these lexical and exegetical choices are significant. Eva Del Soldato has approached Diacceto's vernacular works from a perspective in which Diacceto is viewed as an elitist — as one who seeks to show his prowess with his native tongue, rather than as one attempting to serve the common good. For Diacceto, she argues, philosophy is selective by nature, regardless of the language used, for all languages are equally limited in their ability to convey the secrets of philosophy. In highlighting some of Diacceto's lexical choices, which replace Neoplatonic terms with Christian equivalents, Del Soldato argues that Diacceto was drawing on a common Neoplatonic exegetical tradition which “established a correspondence between Neoplatonic hypostasis and the different levels of the Christian hierarchy.”<sup>131</sup> As an example, the Latin philosophical terms *unum* and *mundus intelligibilis* are Christianised in the vernacular as *Dio* and *Angelo* respectively; we also see this effort toward Christianisation in the Latin *De Amore*, for example, the substitution of *Triades* with *Trinitas*. Del Soldato also points to an exegetical method which removed those veils and enigmas so common to philosophical writing, making it easier for the reader, while still protecting it from untrained minds.<sup>132</sup> Though Diacceto never stated his purpose for vernacularisation, these do not appear to be the workings of an elitist, but of one who seeks to democratise knowledge and enlighten his fellow man.<sup>133</sup> Building upon the arguments made in chapter five, we can see that Kristeller's insistence that the *De Amore*, like the *De Pulchro* was a “metaphysical treatise and hence not written for the parlor as some scholars have maintained,” is an outlook which cannot, in earnest, be maintained.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> See Eva Del Soldato, “The Elitist Vernacular of Francesco Cattani da Diacceto and its Afterlife,” *I Tatti Studies in the Italian Renaissance* 16, no. 1 (2013): 343–362, at 353, see also n.39.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 351. On why this protection was necessary, see Michael J. B. Allen, “Catastrophe, Plotinus and the Six Academies of the Moon,” in *Synoptic Art: Marsilio Ficino on the History of Platonic Interpretation* (Florence: Leo S. Olschki Editore, 1998), 61–62.

<sup>133</sup> Here Del Soldato draws contrasts between Ficino's statements to vernacularise for the sake of the common good and notes the distinct lack of stated motive by Diacceto. In his *De Amore*, Ficino claimed that he had translated the work so that the “salvific manna heaven sent to the priestess Diotima could be commonly and easily available to more people.” In the *De Christiana religione*, Ficino announced that “since religion is a common dowry and virtue that belongs to all, it seemed to me worthwhile to write this book not only in Latin, but also in Tuscan, so that the book of the universal virtue might become common to many.” Again, he shows his interest in the common good with the vernacular *Consiglio contro la pestilenza* and his translation of Dante's *Monarchia*. *Ibid.*, 351–352.

<sup>134</sup> Kristeller, *Studies in Renaissance Thought*, 3:308, and n.97, where he cites Giuseppe Toffanin's *Storia Letteraria d'Italia: Il Cinquecento*.

Indeed, the broad readership of the vernacular *De Amore* and the *Panegirico* is attested by the many extant manuscript copies;<sup>135</sup> that the audience could indeed understand such material has already been established in the previous chapter.<sup>136</sup>

Brancato and Vanhaelen rightly point out that Diacceto never “equates the doctrine of the vehicle of the soul with Christian mysticism, as Ficino had done,” and that rather, he “draws solely on pagan philosophical sources.”<sup>137</sup> They do, however, refer to evidence which suggests that Diacceto “believed in the efficacy of the theurgic rituals described by Iamblichus, whereby the soul’s vehicle could be purified and lead to the soul’s ascent into heaven,” but reiterate that Diacceto “never alludes to the comparison Ficino had established between the pagan experience of theurgic vision and Christian contemplation such as, for instance, St. Paul’s rapture into heaven.”<sup>138</sup> Perhaps the metrics used in these sorts of comparisons — setting what Ficino said and was able to achieve, against what Diacceto did *not* say or was *not* able to achieve — are not, in fact, helpful; perhaps they inhibit our progress in developing nuanced understandings of Diacceto’s own religious and spiritual thinking. Diacceto was indeed Ficino’s successor as a defender of Plato, but unlike his master, he was not a cleric tasked with the care of souls, and yet it seems that he did take on this role in some capacity. Indeed, if the evidence drawn upon in this section has shown anything, then it is surely that contemplation and divine frenzy are in fact at the heart of Diacceto’s conception of love, and that they are moreover intricately bound up in his theory of the origins of the soul, even if they were not expressed in the same explicit manner as Ficino. Certainly, throughout this section I have demonstrated a reading of Diacceto’s philosophical treatises that illuminates his objectives of spiritual and religious renewal, and which shows that his exposition and dissemination of Platonic philosophy and theology was undertaken from a Christian perspective for a Christian audience.

With this in mind, we can better appreciate what Diacceto *was* able to achieve. Affiliated with the city’s most prominent intellectuals and cultural elite, and a member of two of the

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<sup>135</sup> There are 5 extant copies of the vernacular *Tre Libri d’Amore*, one of which also contains the *Panegirico*. This is in addition to 7 extant copies of the Latin *De Amore*, two of which contain the *Panegyricus*, and a further 3 copies of the *Panegyricus* on its own. See Appendix D.

<sup>136</sup> See chapter five, especially *Vernacularisation and the Movement of Ideas in Florence*.

<sup>137</sup> Brancato and Vanhaelen, “Francesco Diacceto and Boethius,” 62.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*

leading literary brotherhoods of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, Diacceto's sphere of influence cannot be understated; not only was he part of Ficino's *academia*, but also the *Orti Oricellari* and the *Sacra Accademia Medicea*.<sup>139</sup> As Kristeller noted in his seminal study, while the "influence which Diacceto exercised in transmitting the teachings of his own and Ficino's Platonism is difficult to ascertain in detail," it may be estimated from "the number and quality of his literary relations and of his pupils."<sup>140</sup> The list itself is extensive, and each name brings into orbit its own constellation of socio-intellectual contacts. Though an examination of the Florentine *zibaldoni* which may contain excerpts of the texts analysed here is far beyond the scope of this study, it is highly probable that the original works circulated in manuscript form prior to their collation in the earliest editions of Diacceto's *Opera omnia*. Further, we can reasonably assume that the issues addressed in these texts were discussed by Diacceto and his peers, as is suggested by our author in his letter to Rucellai.<sup>141</sup> We are therefore dealing with a figure whose influence on the religious and spiritual life of his city has been greatly underestimated and overlooked; Diacceto not only perceived himself as capable of finding solutions to theological concerns, but he was a figure who contemporaries sought out, over and above known religious authorities, to provide clarification and direction on the spiritual life.

### **6.3 Conclusion**

The Platonic and Neoplatonically inspired school of thought that united those who gathered around Ficino was not only used to defend the Christian religion but provided a kind of spiritual medicine for which they had spent decades searching. Though I do not seek to re-characterise the *academia* as inherently religious, it has been my intention throughout to highlight its religious aspects, and to show the ways that 'Platonism in the

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<sup>139</sup> See Kristeller, *Studies in Renaissance Thought*, 3:299–303; Gilbert, "Bernardo Rucellai and the Orti Oricellari," 101–131; Armand L. De Gaetano, "The Florentine Academy and the Advancement of Learning Through the Vernacular: The Orti Oricellari and the Sacra Accademia," *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance* 30, no. 1 (1968): 19–52. Further study on all three groups is necessary, in particular, to establish any religious character they may have had. As it stands, the evidence cited in Aristide Lesen, "Leone X e l'Accademia Sacra Fiorentina: La Reazione Contro il Neopaganismo Umanistico," *Convivium* 3 (1931): 232–246, is insufficient. The *Accademia Sacra*'s known interest in Matteo Palmieri's *Città di Vita*, and the religious interests of its members are grounds enough to begin this work.

<sup>140</sup> See Kristeller, *Studies in Renaissance Thought*, 3:321–324, at 321.

<sup>141</sup> "... I would certainly have either discussed the matter in person, or touched upon it in a light manner ..." Diacceto as translated in Brancato and Vanhaelen, "Francesco Diacceto and Boethius," 85.

private sphere' was understood and functioned in a practical sense. While this cohort undoubtedly conducted other activities together, and had different objectives at different times, it seems to me clear that spiritual renewal was a core tenet of what the Ficinian circle talked and wrote about, and which they actively sought to generate in their own day and age. With this study, we can see not only the effect that Ficino had on those who gathered around him, but we can also begin to develop a sense of the effect that they had on their respective circles. Indeed, throughout this chapter, I have shown that Ficinian theology fundamentally informed tangible efforts toward spiritual renewal in late fifteenth century Florence, which continued to flower into the early sixteenth century. Having painted a nuanced picture of the Ficinian *gymnasium* and its functions, this chapter has arguably validated its central role in the formation of a new religious culture, which wove together Ficinian ideas about pre-existence, contemplation, conversion, divine frenzy, and mystical union — all of which were believed to bring about spiritual renewal.

In recent decades we have seen a concentrated effort by historians to bring to light the religious activities of the laity — from artisans, to merchants, to women; throughout this study I have tried to bring to the fore that sometimes-overlooked group of people, who were neither clergymen nor philosophers proper, but who occupied a place somewhere in the middle. For it is these men who lead the charge in the cultural effort to bring theology out of the institutions and into their local environments — in the orations, sermons, and discussions among local confraternities, and in the epistles, poems, panegyrics and *zibaldoni* which were to be handed down within the family and circulated amongst their friends. In various ways, this chapter has demonstrated a number of these efforts, and has, significantly, confirmed the repetition of Ficinian ideas about the origins of the soul, and thus a shared theological goal. This chapter has moreover established the mutual employment of nuanced modes of communication — from language, to rhetoric, to genre, and has presented new perspectives on how these were understood and used in the period. In showing the ways that these ideas were transmitted by Ficino and diffused to a wider network, this chapter has highlighted the fundamental role played by 'second-tier' humanists, and in so doing, has illustrated a clear link between intellectual exchange and spiritual renewal in the later decades of the fifteenth century.

In large part, this chapter also contributes to a growing body of scholarship that changes the way we think about the questions of what it meant to ‘think spiritually,’ and what it meant to ‘do’ theology. As Christopher Celenza once remarked, “knowledge is social and socially created; no thinker develops a position in a vacuum, or in conscious or subconscious anticipation of a later ideal.”<sup>142</sup> Existing in the world Quattrocento Florentines lived in necessarily meant being part of that reciprocal dynamic, both religious and intellectual, which informed and was informed by the people, and in which religious and intellectual ideas were not ‘separate.’ It also meant expanding and reimagining the precepts, practices, and practitioners of theology and philosophy. Examining the ways that individuals outside the religious vocation stepped into the theological arena, and equally, the outreach of their peers to them as authorities on these matters, reveals to us a clearer picture of how this society understood the intersection of these various spheres. Fifteenth-century Florentines formed ideas and practices collaboratively, and the perceived call of duty — that charitable sense of obligation to the spiritual health of one’s city — was answered by ‘ordinary’ men. The two individuals studied in this chapter, Giovanni Nesi and Francesco Cattani da Diacceto, are prime examples of that way of thinking and living. As such, they equally deserve to be remembered for their role in the religious and spiritual life of their city, alongside Ficino.

Though a lengthier and more robust study would no doubt cultivate an abundant harvest, this chapter has examined but a few of the ‘saturnine farmers’ that we rightly ought to call the first campaigners of the *Theologia Ficiniana*. However, finding such expressions of spiritual renewal in the works of the individuals that gathered around Ficino is not altogether a difficult task, and there is certainly much work that can and should be done on this front. Indeed, one might begin with a study of Lorenzo de Medici, whose *rime spirituali* and *orazioni* offer reflections on melancholy, madness and the Boethian ‘light

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<sup>142</sup> Celenza, “Orthodoxy Reconsidered,” 279.

chariots' which were undoubtedly of the same calibre as those of Diacceto.<sup>143</sup> One could equally examine the less well-known Francesco Berlinghieri, who is remembered as a lay preacher, poet, and painter of worlds, but whose spiritual *carmine* and *sermoni* reveal a nuanced approach to the religious questions of his age.<sup>144</sup> If this chapter has been in any way successful, it should now be clear that a broader study which re-examines the activities of this cohort, and which brings to light their unique contributions to the spiritual, religious, and intellectual life of the city, is both warranted and overdue.

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<sup>143</sup> In particular, Lorenzo's *Commento* reveals the "... influence of Ficino's *De amore*, a principal object of which is to associate love melancholy, the alienation par excellence of heroic minds, with Plato's *furor amatorius*." "One moment Lorenzo imagined love as entering the mind through solitary philosophical contemplation, a property, he insisted, of but a rare few; another moment he pictured love as working its marvelous powers through harmonious sound, the special province of poets and musicians; another moment he presented love as painting a portrait or sculpting an image of the beloved on the lover's heart; and another moment he likened love's effect on the lover to that of a fiery furnace like that employed by the alchemists." The proem and chapters 8, 15, 19, 33 and 35 appear to speak to these themes. See De' Medici, *Tutte le Opere*, 2:101–237; Brann, "The Platonic Revival," 110, 112. Also see André Chastel, "Melancholia in the Sonnets of Lorenzo de' Medici," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 8 (1945): 61–67. One of Lorenzo's early *Orazioni* presents a "versified paraphrase of the Boethian passage that makes an explicit link between Boethius' «*leves currus*» and the Neoplatonic vehicle of the soul," of which Ficino was probably the source. As Brancato and Vanhaelen have noted, "the translation of *leves currus* by «*curri leggier' di pur fuoco*» suggests that Lorenzo equates Boethius' chariots with the Neoplatonic «*ὄχημα*» made of pure fire. Ficino, who had a major influence on Lorenzo in his youth, was the first to develop the doctrine on the basis of Neoplatonic original texts." Brancato and Vanhaelen, "Francesco Diacceto and Boethius," 57. See De' Medici, *Tutte le Opere*, 3:51–53. Also see Brancato, "Readers of the *Consolatio* in Italy," 381–384.

<sup>144</sup> In his 1476 *Exhortatio ad osculum crucis*, a sermon delivered in front of the confraternity of St. Vincentio, Berlinghieri mentioned the Platonic theory of divine frenzy and referenced Plato's *Phaedrus*. See Bibl. Ricc. 2204, fols. 165r–167v. There is also the '*carmen su difficili questioni religiose*' mentioned in Angela Codazzi, "Francesco Berlinghieri," in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, ed. the Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 100 vols. (Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1925–2020), 9:121–124, which cites Angelo Fabroni, *Laurentii Medicis Magnifici Vita*, 2 vols. (Pisa: Excudebat Jacobus Gratiolius, 1784), 1:289–290, which in turn appears to reference the sonnet recorded in ASF Acquisti e Doni 289, fasc. 2, fol. 32r, Bibl. Ricc. 817 and Bibl. Laur. Plut. 83.18.

## Chapter Seven: Conclusion

“From Happiness to Happiness, such is the course of the world,” began the inscription on the walls of Ficino’s *studiolo* at Careggi, for “all things are directed from the Good to the Good.”<sup>1</sup> “Rejoice in the present; set no value on property, seek no honours. Avoid excess; avoid activity. Rejoice in the present.”<sup>2</sup> These were the words which guided Ficino’s thinking, and which served as a constant visual reminder of the task incumbent upon mankind. Like rays of light which emanate from the Sun, so our souls follow a path which leads directly from God and later returns to Him — the path of contemplation. But the way is not easy, it is filled with distractions that hinder and deceive us. Ficino’s insistent prayer for his fellow Florentines was thus to rejoice in the present (*laetus in praesens*) and to take pleasure in it — to stop, rest, and reflect — for they could once again traverse this path and achieve unity with God and experience true happiness in their waking lives, if only they stayed their minds long enough to truly *know* themselves. Indeed, speaking of mankind’s salvation, “which is knowledge and reverence of oneself,” Ficino counselled his reader:

Know Thyself, offspring of God in mortal clothing. I pray you uncover yourself. Separate the soul from the body, reason from sensual desires; separate them as much as you can ... When the earthly grime has been removed you will at once see pure gold, and when the clouds have been dispersed, you will see the clear sky. Then, believe me, you will revere yourself as an eternal ray of the divine sun and, moreover, you will no longer venture to undertake or even contemplate any base or worthless action in your own presence. ... Nothing of yours lies hidden from the mind, the everliving image of God who lives everywhere.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The first clause of the inscription as translated respectively in Saffrey, “The Reappearance of Plotinus,” 506, and Ficino, *Letters*, 1:11–12. The Latin text reads: “A bono in bonum omnia diriguntur.”

<sup>2</sup> Ficino, *Letters*, 1:12. The Latin text reads: “Laetus in praesens neque census existimes, neque appetas dignitatem, fuge excessum, fuge negotia, laetus in praesens.” To understand what is meant by ‘activity’ (*negotia*) in this context, it is important to note the contrasts between *otium* and *negotium*. For the Renaissance citizen, *otium* meant the care of oneself and the cultivation of wisdom and self-knowledge, mediated through spiritual contemplation and study. It was a ‘leisurely’ model of existence that combined reading, philosophical meditation, an appreciation for art, physical exercise, and an active social life. *Negotium*, on the other hand, indicated the activities necessary for survival — work and business matters — and a total absence of leisure.

<sup>3</sup> Letter 110, *Knowledge and reverence of oneself are best of all*. Ficino, *Letters*, 1:134–135, at 134. Also see Letter 107, *The nature and duty of the soul; the praise of history*, including n.3. *Ibid.*, 129–130, 213.

These words echoed the maxim inscribed on the frontispiece of the Temple of Apollo at Delphi, *Know Thyself* (γνῶθι σεαυτόν).<sup>4</sup> As expounded by Socrates in Plato's *Phaedo*, self-knowledge was none other than the soul's recollection of the knowledge of its celestial origins.<sup>5</sup> Rejoicing in the present, and avoiding activity, excess, honours, money, and material goods gave the soul time to dwell in the calm of the present moment and thus recall its primordial knowledge.<sup>6</sup>

On these same walls at Careggi was a painting of the ancient philosophers, Democritus and Heraclitus. "Why is Democritus laughing? Why does Heraclitus weep?" Ficino had asked, "because the mass of mankind is a monstrous, mad and miserable animal."<sup>7</sup> He regretfully explained that mankind no longer recognised the poverty of their souls and did not care to "cultivate themselves in the same way as they cultivate their fields and other affairs."<sup>8</sup> Though Heraclitus would indeed have cause to weep for the folly of humanity, it seems far too cruel that Democritus would be amused by their foolishness. Perhaps, then, one of the many ways of viewing this painting is as an allegory of melancholy and happiness of the soul. According to Ficino, like Plato, the laughing Democritus, who arguably embodied spiritual happiness, believed that without divine frenzy no man can be great.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps Democritus, who understood the path to true happiness, here symbolised one who had attained what mankind had failed to.<sup>10</sup> But the

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<sup>4</sup> Like Ficino's own inscription, the Delphic maxim was followed by another: *Nothing in Excess* (μηδὲν ἄγαν), which promotes balance in all things, particularly the psychophysiological balance needed for the health of both body and soul.

<sup>5</sup> "When Socrates counsels his disciples 'to know thyself,' he is ... schooling them in nothing less than eternal verity. He is directing them how to render consciously explicit the knowledge that they implicitly carry." Stephen M. Fields, *Analogies of Transcendence: An Essay on Nature, Grace, and Modernity* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University Press of America, 2016), 20. Cfr. Plato, *Phaedo*, 64a–77a.

<sup>6</sup> "'*Laetus in praesens*' — 'Joy in the present.' We find this phrase as a salutation in Ficino's correspondence, and it was inscribed on the walls at Careggi. Pleasure ... stops the world, preparing an individual to be more receptive to the subtle nuances of his environment, luring him into reverie and reflection. ... Pleasure is time-out. Pleasure teases us to discover who we are instead of who we are trying to become. *Laetus in Praesens*. ... In pleasure time slows down. Reflections in the pool of the soul come into focus. Pleasure in doing nothing allows for a more receptive posture toward the creativity of the soul." Thomas Moore, *The Planets Within: The Astrological Psychology of Marsilio Ficino* (Great Barrington, MA: Lindisfarne Books, 1990), 82.

<sup>7</sup> Letter 58, *The folly and misery of men*. Ficino, *Letters*, 1:74. The letter was one of three moral sermons written by Ficino on this topic, which he also translated into Tuscan in 1478.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>9</sup> See Letter 7, *On Divine Frenzy*. Ficino, *Letters*, 1:13–14. Also see letter 57, n.2 and n.3. *Ibid.*, 196. Cfr. chapter two, n.72.

<sup>10</sup> See *PT* 13.2.2: "Many years before them we read that Heraclitus and Democritus had done the same. Both withdrew into solitude: one appeared forlorn of aspect from the intensity of his study, and the other,

desire for happiness, that is, “the unhindered fruition of the vision of God,” is innate in all men, who can “discern and choose the way to it through [their] powers of reason and free will.”<sup>11</sup> Ficino thus remained resolute in the belief that the spiritual medicine necessary to cure the diseases of the soul was accessible to all and that it was not altogether difficult to procure. The inscription would then appear to complement the painting, offering a solution to the dilemma depicted; this was Ficino’s mission as a doctor of souls. If we accept this reading, we can see that even the physical space created by Ficino reflected the inner, spiritual quest that he believed each and every soul must follow: renounce the desires and perceptions of the external world; seek the internal experiences of contemplation and conversion; recall the memory of the soul’s heavenly origins; experience union with God in the present life and return to it forever changed, wholly renewed in faith and belief; move ever closer toward spiritual perfection so that you might embrace the blessed salvation that awaits. This was the same message which Ficino imparted on his disciples, and which they, in turn, conveyed to the readers and listeners of Florence.

Though the revival of antiquity that saw the resurgence of Platonic and Neoplatonic texts and ideas was by no means an exclusively Florentine phenomenon, the unique socio-political, intellectual, and religious dynamics in Florence provided a perfect seedbed for the growth of these streams of thought into entirely new forms. While they continued to flourish throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, it was the Medicean project of translation begun in the 1460s that enabled these ideas to soar to new heights. In his restoration of ancient doctrines on the origins of the soul, Ficino stood entirely apart from his contemporaries, not just within his native city, but throughout Italy. His systematic formulation of these ideas was a mediated response to the spiritual and religious needs of his compatriots — a response which both sought and found solutions from within a new set of sources. As the translator of the Platonic corpus, and of many of the key Neoplatonic authors, from Plotinus and Porphyry to Iamblichus and Proclus, there was perhaps none more qualified to stand at the helm of this endeavour. Finding within these authors a path to spiritual renewal through inner conversion, which was both a turning towards oneself and God, Ficino developed a model of contemplation which had as its

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when he began to withdraw his mind from his senses and was still hampered by his eyes, blinded himself.” Ficino, *Platonic Theology*, 4:122–123.

<sup>11</sup> Robb, *Neoplatonism of the Renaissance*, 147.

focus the rekindling of the eternal vision of the heavenly origins of the soul. Not only did Ficino use Platonic and Neoplatonic thinking to reimagine and fortify religion itself, but he used it to formulate and institute a nuanced mode of religious practice. This aspect of Ficino's religious thinking has until been neglected, and the doctrinal issues raised by him have scarcely been examined. Certainly, though the question of why Ficino may have sought theological reform on this issue was implicitly raised more than a decade ago, the answers given were unsatisfactory, and at times unconvincing. Although endorsing a theory of pre-existence would indeed allow Ficino to revive Platonic doctrines on the vehicles of the soul and thus the magical powers exercised through them, and would achieve a more balanced syncretism between Platonism and Christianity, this endorsement does not speak to the religious and spiritual dimensions of this doctrine in Ficino's thought. Nor does this argumentation provide adequate justification as to why Ficino, or any thinker, would advocate unorthodox positions in the broader context of the fifteenth century. For Ficino, pre-existence was not a means to an end, as is implied by the commentary around the soul's vehicles, rather it was his principal focus; that pre-existence facilitated the revival of the soul's vehicles and their magical properties was a fortuitous consequence. Instead, it was the mystical and salvific possibilities that this doctrine afforded which was so appealing to Ficino, and as this thesis has shown, the doctrine of pre-existence was at the heart of both Ficino's religious and philosophical thinking. Moreover, the doctrine fits neatly into existing scholarly understandings of his approach to internal experience, love, and the immortality of the soul, itself central to his understanding of religion. With these new insights come new perspectives of Ficino's theology in its totality, as well as his programme of religious and spiritual renewal. Having firmly established Ficino's advocacy of the doctrine of pre-existence and its role in his thinking thus allows and invites scholars to re-evaluate other aspects of Ficino's thought which are inherently linked to it.

In the history of pre-existence, the chapter on the period in question is notably lacking. Beyond the rabbinic and kabbalistic speculations of the age, pre-existence in late-medieval Christian thought finds few expressions; beginning in England, with Julian of Norwich (1342–c.1416), and ending with the German mystic, Jacob Boehme (1575–1624), the historiography of this more than two-hundred-year interval falls strangely quiet, especially in Italy, and certainly in Florence, the cradle of Renaissance

Neoplatonism. And yet the remnants of this belief are dotted throughout the pages of Ficino's writings, and significantly, the writings of those around him.

Ficino's scholarly independence must therefore be appreciated in its entirety; he was uniquely positioned at the forefront of theological reform, religious change, and spiritual renewal because he subscribed to the belief that the Platonic and Christian traditions did not necessarily need to agree. The prevailing and, dare I say, myopic view that Ficino was always committed to upholding established Christian 'orthodoxies,' and that he was a 'Christianising' interpreter of Plato biases the reading of his works, such that the more innovative, and indeed radical aspects of his thought are often overlooked. For Ficino, a Platonic truth could be *true* even if it was not part of the established Christian narrative, but it equally need not be accepted in its entirety. This was seen especially with his adoption of the Platonic doctrines of the pre-existence, descent, and vehicles of the soul, which he upheld while still rejecting the doctrine of the transmigration of souls; there could be anamnesis without metempsychosis. The scholarly inclination to insist upon 'orthodox' readings means, moreover, that the nuances of Ficino's impact on those around him are also lost. From the more distant links in Ficino's network, like Giovanni de' Pigi and Carlo Altoviti, to those primary contacts like Giovanni Nesi and Francesco Diacceto, the doctrinal interventions explored throughout this thesis always stemmed from Ficino and were always made in connection to him, whether directly or indirectly. Showing his singularity as a religious, theological, and philosophical thinker, this study moves away from these traditional attitudes, and instead moves toward the much-needed shift in approach to Ficino's hermeneutical and philosophical endeavours.

It has moreover been my objective throughout this thesis to establish a new methodological approach, which reimagines the texts and contexts of theological reform, and which embraces a broader understanding of the social locations of reformist ideas and the manner in which they could be expressed. In the historiographical context of 'humanist,' 'rhetorical' or 'Renaissance' theology, this study has illuminated the need for a broader and more nuanced analytical criterion. As foregrounded by the scholarship, many locally derived theologies of the period were characterised by humanist attempts to reintroduce classical rhetorical models, motifs, and *exempla*, representing a significant shift in the way theology was 'done.' Ficino's own theology similarly incorporated these elements, albeit with some key differences. In Ficino we find a powerful combination of

epideictic and deliberative rhetoric, a compelling use of other rhetorical *topoi*, and calculated lexical and idiomatic choices. We also see a manipulation and manoeuvring of literary convention to promote new ideas and shape theological interpretation. These techniques represent nuanced modes of intellectual exchange, which, together, were of a calibre not yet seen in the fifteenth century. More than just representing a shift in the intellectual norms of the period, these tactics reveal an entirely new way of ‘doing’ theology, not only in the context of the period, but also the way in which we as historians might better understand and evaluate local theologies.

Furthermore, this thesis both adopts and calls for a broader understanding of what these theologies might set out — what doctrinal issues may be raised by thinkers outside the typical purview of these studies. For indeed, the texts and ideas which the humanist movement brought to the fore had a far more profound impact on local theologies than merely restoring the language of the ancients. Ficino and his disciples used Platonic teachings to defend religion, but they also defended Plato for the sake of the Christian religion, for the teachings of Plato and his followers transmitted the ancient wisdom that Christianity had earlier received and accepted, even if it subsequently lost contact with it. Ficino wished to restore Christianity, the one true religion, to its former unity and glory, and for him, the restoration of Platonic teachings on the origins of the soul was thus not only necessary, but imperative. Through their reading of the ancient philosophers, Ficino and his disciples slowly, but surely, introduced doctrinal interventions into the theological arena of the late-fifteenth and early-sixteenth centuries. However, this understanding of how antique philosophies came to bear upon contemporary religious, theological, and spiritual thinking has not been widely acknowledged by scholars, who prefer to view such expressions as philosophical speculation for the sake of satisfying intellectual curiosity. In the history of Florentine theological reform in the Quattrocento, the scholarly focus has traditionally been on Giovanni Pico della Mirandola’s *900 Theses*, but the public disputations presented by Pico were primarily concerned with questioning the manner in which theological consensuses had been reached, and with suggesting how to reconcile the differing opinions over time and traditions; his proposed theological reform was more institutional and historical than doctrinal, at least in the sense of proposing ancient alternatives to established Christian doctrines. With this understanding then, we see that the doctrinal issues raised by Ficino and his fellow Florentines are not only central to the

study of Ficinian theology but are precisely the kind of issues which should occupy a greater place in the study of local theology more broadly.

By shifting the focus from leading figures such as Ficino, to those ‘peripheral’ figures in the Florentine intellectual field, this study contributes to the critical task of re-contextualising a group of individuals who may be considered ‘second-tier’ only in relation to their treatment within the historiography. This approach encourages the reconceptualisation of what might be considered a meaningful contribution in the context of reform, and similarly, challenges the way that we as historians confront problematic notions surrounding ‘originality’ which are inherent within this understanding. As I have endeavoured to show, even the smallest contributions, such as the copying of excerpts to be shared within socio-familial and socio-intellectual networks form part of the rich mosaic that was Florentine spirituality. The independent re-working of these ideas represents an even greater contribution. The individuals in Ficino’s network therefore played an important role in the religious and spiritual transformations taking place in the second half of the fifteenth century. Responding to the spiritual direction given by their mentor, it was the commitment of these figures to advocating Ficinian understandings of the soul which led to the formation of a new religious culture, at least at the local level. Their efforts moreover stimulated a new collective ethos towards charity, salvation, and the perfection of the soul. Though the culture they fostered was nowhere near as pervasive as humanism, and though it did not reach the heights of the major reform movements, this does not make it an insignificant attempt at religious and theological reform, nor is it inconsequential in the history of spiritual renewal. Certainly, it was the critical role played by these figures which propelled Ficino’s agenda into the early sixteenth century. It is only in drawing out the spiritual contributions of these individuals that we are able to establish that Ficino’s ideas on pre-existence, contemplation, conversion, and renewal had a real basis in the period, that his methods and modes of communication were in fact effective in advocating new ideas, and that they were repeated by others. In uncovering the reproduction of Ficinian ideas and techniques, we may then definitively link intellectual exchange to Florentine spiritual renewal in a way that has not been done before. Indeed, we can now see that Ficinian theology, as it pertained to doctrines on origins of the soul, formed the basis of an intellectually driven campaign of theological reform, religious change, and spiritual renewal in late fifteenth-century Florence.

Having shown Ficino as a leader in effecting religious change, this thesis has re-characterised the way we think about him as a religious thinker, and the role which socio-intellectual networks and their dynamics played in this effort. Though this thesis has only just begun to study the implications of Ficinian theology in Florence (and the theology of his disciples), this is certainly a worthy field of study, which I hope will continue to grow in the near future. Nuancing scholarly understandings of the significance of Ficinian theology and its impact on the intellectual and religious spheres, this thesis both re-contextualises Ficino's place in our understanding of the intellectual *and* religious history of Renaissance Florence, and integrates an entirely new set of methods, ideas, and characters into this understanding.

## Appendix A

### Latin Codices

#### **Florence, Bibl. Laur. Plut. 21.8**

fol. 1r *Proem*

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fols. 3r–40v Hermes Trismegistus, *Pimander* (trans. Marsilio Ficino), with *argumentum* to Cosimo de' Medici

fols. 40v–41r Excerpt from *Liber Alcidi* (trans. Marsilio Ficino)

fols. 41v–47v Xenocrates, *De morte* (trans. Marsilio Ficino), with preface to Piero de' Medici

fols. 48r–49v Marsilio Ficino, *Prooemium in Speusippum, Alcinoum, Pythagoram*, to Giovanni Cavalcanti

fols. 50r–56r Speusippus, *De diffinitionibus* (trans. Marsilio Ficino)

fols. 56v–85r Alcinous, *De doctrina Platonis* (trans. Marsilio Ficino)

fols. 85v–86v Pythagoras, *Aurea praecepta* (trans. Marsilio Ficino)

fols. 87r–87v Pythagoras, *Symbola Pythagore* (trans. Marsilio Ficino)

fol. 88r Marsilio Ficino, *Letter to Giovanni Cavalcanti*

fols. 89v–132v Marsilio Ficino, *De voluptate*, with preface to Antonio Canigiani

fols. 133r–138r Marsilio Ficino, *De divino furore*

fols. 138v–142v Marsilio Ficino, *De virtutibus moralibus*

fols. 143r–145v Marsilio Ficino, *De quattuor sectis philosophorum*

fols. 146r–146v Marsilio Ficino, *Prooemium in Commentarios Philebi*, to Lorenzo de' Medici

fols. 147r–257v Marsilio Ficino, *Ex lectionibus Marsilii Ficini in Philebum* (Books I and II)

fols. 258r–263r Marsilio Ficino, *Ex lectionibus Marsilii in Philebum*, including *Expositio de triplici vita & fine triplici* and *Apologi Marsilii in Philebum*

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**Florence, Bibl. Laur. Plut. 21.21**

fols. 1r–39r Hermes Trismegistus, *Pimander* (trans. Marsilio Ficino), with *argumentum* to Cosmo de' Medici

fols. 39v–41r Marsilio Ficino, *Prooemium in Speusippum, Alcinoum, Pythagoram*, to Giovanni Cavalcanti

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fols. 80r–86r Xenocrates, *De morte*, with preface to Piero de' Medici

fols. 86v–146r Marsilio Ficino, *De voluptate*, with preface to Antonio Canigiani

fols. 126v–130r Marsilio Ficino, *De virtutibus moralibus*

fols. 131r–135r Marsilio Ficino, *De furore divino*

fol. 135v Blank

**Florence, Bibl. Laur Conv. Soppr. 544**

fol. 1r Xenocrates, *De morte*, with preface to Piero de' Medici

fol. 8r Marsilio Ficino, *De divino furore*

fol. 14r Marsilio Ficino, *Commentarium in Platonis Convivium de amore*

fol. 98v Angelo Poliziano, *Epigram on Ficino*

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fols. 100r–124v Plutarch, *Consolatio ad Apollonium* (trans. Alamanno Rinuccini), with preface to Cosimo de' Medici

fols. 125r–127v Blank

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fol. 1r Hermes Trismegistus, *Pimander* (trans. Marsilio Ficino), with *argumentum* to Cosimo de' Medici

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fol. 114v Marsilio Ficino, *Epistola ad Bancum arithmetram*

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**Florence, Bibl. Ricc. 351**

fols. 1r–13r Leonardo Bruni, *Isagogicon moralis disciplinae*

fols. 13r–22v Basil of Caesarea, *De studiis secularibus* (trans. Leonardo Bruni), with preface

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fols. 25r–27r Marsilio Ficino, *De quattuor sectis philosophorum*

fols. 27v–31v Marsilio Ficino, *De furore divino*

fols. 32r–68v Marsilio Ficino, *De voluptate*

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fols. 51r–53v Marsilio Ficino, *De furore divino*

fol. 54r Marsilio Ficino, *De voluptate*

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fols. 91r–100v *Liber Birria* (a poem), including “Grecorum studia nimiumque diuque secutus”

fols. 101r–104v Donato Acciaiuoli, *Oration of the Florentine ambassadors to Sixtus IV*

**Florence, Bibl. Ricc. 966**

fols. 1r–62v Marsilio Ficino, *De voluptate*, with preface to Antonio Canigiani and autograph notes

fols. 63r–70r Marsilio Ficino, *De divino furore*

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fols. 74r–80r Marsilio Ficino, *De magnificentia*

**Florence, Firenze Marchese Filippo Serlupi**

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fols. 183r–190r Marsilio Ficino, *De furore divino*  
fols. 190r–194r Marsilio Ficino, *De quattuor sectis philosophorum*  
fols. 194v–200r Marsilio Ficino, *De magnificentia*

**Glasgow, Hunterian Museum U 1.10**

fols. 1r–8v Plato, *Phaedrus* (trans. Leonardo Bruni), with preface and *argumentum*  
fols. 8v–32v Plato, *Phaedo* (trans. Leonardo Bruni), with preface  
fols. 33r–75r Marsilio Ficino, *Commentarium in Convivium Platonis de amore*  
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fols. 96v–99r Marsilio Ficino, *De furore divino*  
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**London, British Library, Harley 5335**

fols. 1r–16r Cardinal Giacomo Ammannati, *Epistola de pontificio et sacri senatus officio libellus*  
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 fol. 7r Alcinous, *De doctrina Platonis* (trans. Marsilio Ficino)  
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 fols. 90r–120v Hermes Trismegistus, *Pimander* (trans. Marsilio Ficino), with  
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 fols. 126r–156r Marsilio Ficino, *De voluptate*, with preface to *Antonium Canisianum*  
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**Piacenza, Bibl. Com. Cod. Landi 50**

fols. 1r–47v Plato, *Gorgias* (trans. Leonardo Bruni), with *argumentum*  
 fol. 56r Marsilio Ficino, *De voluptate*  
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 fol. 110r Marsilio Ficino, *Letter to Antonio Serafico*  
 fol. 111r Francesco Patrizi, *Letter to Ficino*  
 fol. 111v Marsilio Ficino, *Letter to Michele Mercati*  
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## Tuscan Codices

### **Florence, BNCF Naz. II. III. 402**

fol. 1r Marsilio Ficino, *Di Dio et anima*

fol. 9r Marsilio Ficino, *Epistola ai fratelli*

fol. 19v Marsilio Ficino, *De furore divino*, with preface by Giovanni de' Pigli

fol. 24r Giovanni de' Pigli, excerpt includes "Liber hic est mei Jhoannis Jacobi Latini primeratii lotti domini folchetti chiariti coddam domini guidocti de piglis et propria manu scripsi"

### **Florence, Bibl. Ricc. 1074**

fol. 1r–13v Giovanni Boccaccio, *Epistola a messer Pino de' Rossi*

fol. 13v–19r Francesco Petrarca, *Epistola a messere Niccola Acciaiuoli*

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fol. 38v–65r Stefano Porcari, 16 various *Orazioni* and *Risposte*

fol. 65r–69v Leonardo Bruni, *Risposta facta agli imbasciadori del re de Araona*

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fol. 70v–74r Brigida Baldinotti, *Epistola mandata alle religiose et divote donne dello spedale di Sancta Maria Nuova di Firenze*

fol. 74r–78r Leonardo Bruni, *Storia di Seleuco a Antiocho e di Stratonica*

fol. 78r–83r Giuseppe Flavio, *Oratione del re Agrippa*

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**Florence, Bibl. Ricc. 2544**

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- fol. 5r–22r Giovanni Boccaccio, *Lettera a Pino de' Rossi*
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- fol. 132v–134v Florentine state letter (January 1390), includes “Solevano gliantichi litterati”
- fol. 134v–139v *Lettera a un amico*, with a contemporary note: “B. Alberti scripsit”
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**Siena, Bibl. Com. Cod. I. VI. 25**

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fols. 119r–128r Marsilio Ficino, *Epistola ai fratelli*  
fols. 128r–132r Marsilio Ficino, *De divino furore*  
fol. 143v Brunetto Latini, *Volgarizzamenti*  
fols. 166v–168v Francesco Filelfo, *Orazione in laude di Dante*  
fols. 168v–170r *Orazione in sulla spositione di Dante*  
fols. 170r–172v *Oratione d'uno discepolo del Filelpho in laude di Dante*

fols. 172v–174v Another such oration

fols. 174v–178v Giannozzo Manetti, *Protesto*

fol. 179r Publius Lentulus, *Lettera di Publio Lentulo*

fols. 179r–181r Giovanni Boccaccio, *2 Lettere a Giovanni de' Bardi*

fols. 181r–186r Leonardo Bruni, *Orazione*, to the envoys of King Alfonso

fol. 186v Blank

## Appendix B

The transcription is borrowed from Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Supplementum Ficinianum: Marsilii Ficini Florentini Philosophi Platonici Opuscula Inedita et Dispersa*, 2 vols. (Florence: Leo S. Olschki Editore, 1973), 1:68–69.

### BNCF Naz. II. III. 402

[fol. 19v] Proemio del volgarizzatore della pistola di Marsilio Fecino a Pellegrino degli Agli. Lege feliciter.

Avendo a questi dì lecta la gravissima et ornatissima epistola del nostro divino filosofo Marsilio Fecino, et quella più che l'usato sommamente diletatami, feci proposito che i volgari lectori da me ricevessino questo breve dono, però che debito è di qualunque studioso non solo a se, ma ancora agli amici et domestici i suoi studii referire. Invitami a ciò fare la materia in se delectabile et non poco utile. Et quale ingegno è tanto inetto et rozzo, che veggendo con quanto ingegno el divino Platone le origini delle principali nostre affezioni scrisse, in quello non si dilecti [e] l'utilità [ad] altri racconti. Conciosia cosa che secondo e gravissimi scriptori la filosofia è via alla perfezione nostra. Et questo d'una delle più eccellenti parti di filosofia trattando, seguita che non con poco utile sia la lezione sua. Questo più per sperienza si conosce, onde non è necessario el disputarlo. Scrisse il divino Platone nella sua greca lingua opere innumerabili [fol. 20r] le quali ai latini furono grandissima quantità d'anni incognite, eccetto che per leggere fama ne [abbiano] memoria [alcuni] antichi scriptori ne' loro libri lasciata. Finalmente a' nostri tempi et da molti altri et dallo eccellente uomo, gloria de' nostri secoli, Lionardo Aretino a' latini sono stati trasferiti e greci libri di Platone, e quali benchè leggissimo, poco era, meno [intendendoli]. Ma ultimamente è stato dato un nuovo intelletto di Platone e [elquale] sì colla sua subilità d'ingegno sì col continuo studio in età tenerissima ha potuto quello aprire et quasi sviscerare. Questo è el soprannominato Marsilio, el quale — tanto ardisco [consideratamente] dire che ragionevolmente tribuire si gli potrebbe, — ornoncioè manifestò gli antichi filosofa, e intra gli altri già pieni d'anni e loro volume costui l'opere loro, appena si può dire dal petto materno spiccato, ha lette et rivoltate et tutti snodati e fondamenti. Quante antiche openioni già quasi perdute dal suo studio sono state riuscite. Et sopra l'altre cose gli oscurissimi parlari di Platone già per tanti secoli

da molti con ammirazione lecti, ma non intesi da costui sono stati dichiarati et quasi posti in piano. Chi di questo fosse dubbio, legga i pienissimi commentari del Timeo di Platone da lui composti et l'acutissime disputazioni sopra molti enimmati compilate. Vedrà chi quelle leggerà, molto più essere che da me non si scrive. Per la qual cosa si può credere, lui a questo ufficio esserci [fol. 20v] stato dal celo concesso, che per una opera tucte le oscure cose della antichità ci sieno dichiarate. Ma di ciò altra volta più largamente parleremo. Resta che già avendo proposto la presente epistola in toscano tradurre, m'occorse alla memoria l'amicizia vostra degnissima a cui questa operetta s'adirizzi. Il che ho facto, perchè intendiate me non solo nelle comuni cose, ma eziandio ne' miei studii sempre avervi quasi presente, e acciò che delle mie operazioni, qualunque quelle sieno, voi faccia partefice. Et già Marsilio udiamo per così parlante.

## Appendix C

Though the full contents of BNCF Magl. VI. 176 are still unknown, several excerpts have been identified by Paul Oskar Kristeller, Stéphane Toussaint, Filippo Zanini and Rosella Bonfanti. I have identified a number of additional excerpts. These are listed together below. See:

Rosella Bonfanti, “Su un Dialogo Filosofico del Tardo ‘400: Il *De Moribus* del Fiorentino Giovanni Nesi (1456–1522?),” *Rinascimento* 11 (1971): 212, n.4, which cites excerpts from Francesco Filelfo Antonio Manetti, Matteo Palmieri and, above all Ficino.

Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Iter Italicum*, 6 vols. (London: Warburg Institute; Leiden: Brill, 1963–1996), 1:128.

——— *Supplementum Ficinianum: Marsilii Ficini Florentini Philosophi Platonici Opuscula Inedita et Dispersa*, 2 vols. (Florence: Leo S. Olschki Editore, 1973), 1:XXI.

Stéphane Toussaint, “La Voix des Prophètes. Un ‘Inédit’ pour Giovanni Nesi et Paolo Orlandini,” *Bruniana & Campanelliana* 10, no. 1 (2004): 111.

Filippo Zanini, “L’Incompiuto *Poema* di Giovanni Nesi: Edizione Critica,” (PhD thesis, Università degli Studi di Firenze, 2013), 102.

——— “Osservazioni sulla Fortuna di Dante nel Rinascimento Italiano: Il Caso di Giovanni Nesi,” in *AlmaDante Seminario dantesco 2013*, eds. Giuseppe Ledda and Filippo Zanini (Bologna: Edizioni Aspasia, 2015), 257–258.

### **BNCF Magl. VI. 176**

fol. 29r Marsilio Ficino, *De amore*

fol. 32r Excerpts on charity

fol. 45v Dante Alighieri, *Dvina Commedia*, Paradiso, Canto XX, vv. 94–99, 139–141

fol. 47v Excerpts about the sun, a chariot drawn by four horses, and the sun as the son of Hyperon

fols. 49v–52v Federico Frezzi, *Il Quadriregio*, excerpts from chapters 8, 9, 11, 12, 13, 17, 19, 21

fols. 53r–53v Blank

fol. 54r Excerpt includes “Ma platone non solo nobile, non solo sapientissimo: Ma divinissimo philosopho: Platone da Numenio pythagorico attico Moyse nominato quella non mente: non volunta: ma divina legge esse afferma. Divina legge non sarebbe seda la sapientia de la mente istituta”

fol. 55v Excerpt includes “Et come Tymeo Locro diceva l’huomo esse solamente il capo: li altri membri esse che Democrito prima et poi Aristotele conferma tutti gli altri membri coloro ...”

fol. 62r Excerpt includes “Sicome la luna è ombra del sole così voi ombra del superceleste sole ...”

fols. 64v–65v Stefano Porcari, Excerpts

fol. 66r Francesco Filelfo, Excerpts

fol. 66v Marsilio Ficino, *Epistola ai Fratelli*

fol. 69r Marsilio Ficino, *De Deo et natura*

fol. 70r Marsilio Ficino, *Di Dio et anima*

fol. 71r Marsilio Ficino, *Che cosa è fortuna (Epistola ad Joannem Oricellarium)*

fols. 71v–74v Marsilio Ficino, *Visione d’Anselmo*

fol. 74v Giovanni Nesi, Excerpts including “Ex me pono haec super morales virtutes” “Come tutte lespere deplaneti sono instrumenti”

fol. 76v Giovanni Nesi, Excerpts

fol. 83r Marsilio Ficino, *Theologia Platonica* (excerpts in Tuscan)

fol. 86v Blank (note, folio 86 is listed twice)

fol. 105v Stefano Porcari, Excerpts

fol. 106v Dante Alighieri, *Divina Commedia*, Paradiso, Canto XX, vv. 67–69

fol. 113v Excerpts on the sun, Orpheus and Phoebus, includes notes in Ficino’s hand

fols. 122v–126v Marsilio Ficino, Excerpt on the *Lyra del sole*

fol. 130r Thomas Aquinas, Excerpts from *Summa Theologiae*, on justice

fol. 132r Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles*

fol. 132v Giovanni Nesi, Excerpts

fol. 135r Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*

fol. 135r Giles of Rome, Excerpt from his *quodlibeta*

fol. 135v Giles of Rome, *De regimine principum*

fol.136r Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*

fol. 136r Giovanni Boccaccio, *Comedia delle ninfe fiorentine*, XXI

fol. 136r Marsilio Ficino, *Theologia Platonica* (excerpts in Tuscan)

fol. 148v Final folio

## Appendix D

### Latin De Amore Libri Tres

- BNCF Naz. II. IV. 34, fols. 226r–266v (including *Panegyricus*, fols. 324r–333v)  
BNCF Naz. II. I. 379, fols. 63r–92r (including *Panegyricus*, fols. 61r–63r)  
Bibl. Laur. Ashb. 925, fols. 5r–35v  
BAV Vat. gr. 1033, fols. 44v–52r  
London, Trinity College, 0.8.38. fasc. 2 (fragment contains end of Book II and beginning of Book III)  
BNF Lat. 6687, fols. 3r–42v  
BNF Lat. 6688, fols. 4r–67r  
Wien, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek 10056, fols. 253v–258v

### Latin Panegyricus in Amorem

- BAV Vat. Ross. 423, fols. 71r–83v  
BAV Vat. Gr. 1033, fols. 44v–52r  
Viterbo, Biblioteca Capitolare 53, fols. 11r–15r

### Tuscan Tre Libri d'Amore

- Ricc. 2070, fols. 1r–66r (including *Panegirico*, fols. 67r–84r)  
BNB A D XII 1, fols. 1v–46v  
BNCF Magl. VIII. 1444, fols. 178r–257v (marked B. Varchi)  
Padova, Museo Civico C M 328, fols. 230r–238r  
British Library, Sloane 3270

## Appendix E

### Bibl. Ricc. 2070, fols. 42r–47r I Tre Libri d'Amore, Book II, Chapter VII

[fol. 42r] El divino Platone dice nel Timeo l'anima [fol. 42v] nostra essere suta creata nel medesimo cratere: nel quale fu creata l'anima mondana delle relliquie de medesimi generi, volendo significare l'anima nostra havere proprieta, et potentie simile all'anima mondana: et all'altre anime divine, ma in un certo modo piu imperfecto: questo vuole significare l'anima nostra benché habbia le medesime virtu, nondimanco non opera nel medesimo modo perché intenta alla generatione, et cura del corpo caduco dimette la contemplatione della vera bellezza: Pel contrario intenta alla verità intelligibile dimette la cura della generatione: Et questo adviene ragionevolmente: Imperochè non potendo adempire insieme l'uno et l'altro officio, è necessario la expeditione dell'uno sia accompagnata della dimessione del'altro: Quando è [fol. 43r] intempta alla contemplatione generatione si dice descendere: quando è intenta alla contemplatione si dice ascendere: non perché l'anima ascenda, o scenda secondo el costume dei corpi: Imperochè sendo essentia separabile, et non partecipando di conditione alchuna corporale. Secondo che piace a Platone et Aristotile: ma stando di fuori, è al tutto assoluta dalla natura del luoco: al quale solo è obligato el corpo di cui è proprio l'ascenso et el descenso: Ma diciamo, ascendere, o descendere in questo modo le cose divine sonno presente secondo che epe operano: Imperochè diciamo la divinita essere in cielo, o in terra, secondo che epsa opera in cielo, o in terra, altrimenti non po essere determinatamente in luoco alchuno: Della operatione è principio l'affetto com'è manifesto [fol. 43v] chi è quello che operassi in alchuno modo se prima non fussi mosso da un'effecto antecedente: Questo affecto non è altro che un desiderio d'operare: el quale pendendo dalla cognitione, è principio dell'operatione: Prima concepe Phidia la forma della sua Minerva: di poi desidera di produrla, o nel marmo, o nel rame di poi la produce, se non havessi desiderio di produrla, non mai la produrrebbe: et se prima non concepessi la sua forma: non mai desiderarebbe di produrla: adunque la cognitione et principio dell'affecto: et l'affetto dell'operatione: Et pero Platone dice nel Timeo che l'oepifice del mondo fece tante forme nel mondo quante haveva vedute la mente nel vivente: per significare la productione del mondo pendere dalla cognitione: Infra le quali come fra due [fol. 44r] extremi è mezzo el desiderio di produrre: Sendo adunque l'anima nostra nel numero delle cose divine diremo

essere presente ove essa opera: et operare ove epsa è tratta, dall'affectio et desiderio d'operare: el quale affectio pende dalla cognitione: Imperochè gli è impossibile noi havere desiderio d'operare quello che al tutto c'è nascosto: per la qualcosa quando l'anima nostra concepe la vita sensibile et la generatione: Et havendo affectio ad epsa la produce et explica: Noi diciamo l'anima descendere: Imperochè la natura mortale, ove epsa opera è l'infimo del universo: Ma quando epsa concepe la vita delli Dii et la vita intelligibile: lontana da ogni molestia et ogni tristitia et con affectio l'explica: diciamo ascendere sendo li Dii el supremo del universo: Rectamente adunque [fol. 44v] dice Porphirio, nel primo libro dell'abstinentia delli animali, se noi desideriamo ritornare ad quello ch'è proprio nostro et alla vita delli Dii: essere bisogno noi al tutto di porre qualunque cosa habbiamo preso dalla natura mortale, insieme con l'affectio declinante ad epsa, quasi non per alto descenda, o ascenda l'anima nostra che per l'affectio piace al divino Platone et Plotino l'anima nostra quando vive colla vita intelligibile, et delli Dii: conseguire tanto grado de dignita che fatta collega dell'anima mondana, insieme seco regga tutto el fato et la generatione, vive alhora colla vita delli Dii, quando ridotta ne penitissimi Thesauri della sua essentia, et de quindi nell'amenissimo prato della verità intelligibile, contempla essa iustitia, epsa bellezza: epsa bonita: ove intendendo tutta la natura di quello [fol. 45r] che veramente è non solo intende tutte le cose che de quindi procedono, et tutti e gradi della processione infino all'ultima natura: Ma anchora consequentemente opera secondo che epsa intende: onde meritamente è ditta collega dell'anima mondana: la quale havendo intelligentia et providentia universale: è principio del cielo et di tutta la generatione: Onde Platone nel Philebo, dice in Iove essere regio intelletto: et regia anima significando come nell'anima mondana è intelligentia et providentia universale: Così anchora essere vita et principio universale di produrre: Ma quando epsa declina alla generatione et al corpo mortale, dimettendo l'intelligentia universale: Et pero oppressa dalla oblivione delle cose divine attende alla fabrica di quello, che offerendosi alli ochi nostri, è chiamato dalli ignoranti huomo [fol. 45v] sendo piuttosto imagine et hombra del huomo che vero huomo: Quella dimensione, et quella oblivione è significata dal divino Platone nel X° Libro della Repubblica quando dice che l'anime che descendono nella generatione beveno dell'acqua del fiume Amelita et vengano nel campo Letheo Imperochè Amelita significa negligentia, et Letheo significa oblivione: nondimanco non gli è negata la via di poter tornare alla vita intelligibile: se separandosi dal senso excita el lume della ragione: per la quale finalmente usando per instrumento la bellezza è revocata in epsa verità: insomma l'anima quando vivendo colla vita intelligibile contempla la verità: veramente si po dire

integra: Imperochè fatta collega del anima mondana, regge el fato et tutta la natura corporale: Ma quando intenta alla generatione s'ingegna [fol. 46r] effingere nel caduco corpo la natura del mondo: dimettendo al tutto la speculatione della verita: et obligandosi a sensi veramente si po dire dimidiata: la quale è restituita nella sua integrita: quando s'accende in epsa un'intensissimo amore: El quale incominciando dalla bellezza corporale, finalmente la revoca nel meraviglioso splendore della bellezza intelligibile: Di qui apparisce quello ch'è incluso nel portentoso figmento di Aristophene nel Symposio: Imperochè da principio essere l'huomo di figura circolare: et coe membri adoppiati essere partito in dua per repressione del suo fasto: tentando di combattere con li Dii, poi che gli è così diviso cercare del suo dimidio, desiderando intensamente ritornare nel primo stato: Incontratolo quasi infuriato non concedere per un breve momento di [fol. 46v] tempo mancare d'epso: Onde essere nato l'amore conciliatore: dell'antiqua forma: Medico et curatore della generatione humana: non vole altro significare che da principio l'anima nostra vivere colla vita intelligibile: La cui contemplatione ha seco coniuncta la cura della natura corporale: et meritamente è detta circolare: Sendo la contemplatione uno circolo: Quando crescendo lo stimolo della generatione dedita al proprio opificio crede se essere abastante el mondo in epso perde la contemplatione: et pero veramente come elata dal fatto è divisa, cerca del suo dimidio, perché epsa ottimamente conosce quello che ha perso per la inclinatione et affetto al corpo mortale: Ove non trova niente di verità: nel quale incontrandosi, cioè in qualche imagine della [fol. 47r] divina bellezza: subito como da un profondo sono svegliata se ricorda della divina bellezza: Per l'amore della quale expurgata dalle sorde materiale finalmente recupera el perduto dimidio: Meritamente adunque l'amore è detto medico & curatore dell'humana generatione restituendo l'anima alla vita divina: la quale è la sua integrita: Questo sonno forsi e vistigii: perché uno solerte investigatore della verità conseguirà el secreto senso di Aristophane: Non havendo in animo al presente minutamente interpretare el divino Platone ad noi sarra abastanza quasi col dito havere accennato el Camino in si profonda intelligenza.

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