
Receiving the ethics of power: Ficino, Plato and the education of a Prince

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Abstract

*In this paper I offer a preliminary investigation of the modalities of Plato's reception as evidenced in Marsilio Ficino's Letters to Lorenzo De' Medici. I examine some features of the genre *speculum principis*, which emerge from a study of this correspondence, in the light of Renaissance modes of reception, not only in relation to considerations of ethical principles, but also of specific vocabulary. In this instance, a vocabulary evocative of subjection and subservience. I hope to show how fruitful a detailed study of Ficino's correspondence might be to understand better both the significance of Plato's reception in the Renaissance and the influence that Ficino exerted on literature and the figurative arts in the 16th century and beyond.*

'And therefore, my dear Thrasymachus,' I concluded, 'no ruler of any kind, *qua* ruler, exercises his authority, whatever its sphere, with his own interest in view, but that of the subject of his skill. It is his subject and his subject's proper interest to which he looks in all he says and does.' (Plato, *The Republic*)

Any discussion of the modalities of Plato's re-discovery in the Renaissance and of the type of exegesis employed by humanist scholars in the assessment and reception of his work must be informed by the conclusions reached by James Hankins in a seminal account of Renaissance hermeneutics.¹ These may be summed up in a two-line sentence from his *Conclusion* (364):

For Renaissance hermeneutics, like medieval hermeneutics, was orientated overwhelmingly to the tasks of edification, not of criticism.

I should like to extend and supplement Hankins's argument, by offering a brief discussion of the possibilities disclosed by the process of hermeneutical reception when applied to a specific literary sphere of Renaissance political ethics, the *speculum principis* ('mirror of the prince'), or what may be called 'the education of a prince'.² In accordance with the conventions of this

didactic genre, a lengthy text, often in the form of a letter addressed to a powerful figure in the state or church, would be structured around maxims and principles distilled from classical philosophical sources. Although the tone would be consistently respectful, it remained wholly informed by the admonitory character of the document. Plato's *opus* was found to present innumerable opportunities for guiding a ruler towards justice and, therefore, towards effective and honourable governance. Indeed, Plato could be placed at the beginning of the long tradition of 'ruler education' writing that evolves through Aristotle, Cicero, Dante, Thomas Aquinas, Egidius Colonna and reaches its apogee in Machiavelli's *De principatibus* (better known as *Il Principe*, 'The Prince').³

Looking at Plato through the lens of Renaissance reception enables us to appreciate the prismatic quality of his thought, which opened itself to diverse interpretations and reconstructions in an epoch that saw a marked resurgence of interest in transcendent, as opposed to determinist, philosophy. Across diverse modes of reception, even such polarised positions shared a common feature in the expedient use made of Platonic texts. The exploitation of Platonic theology vs Aristotelian natural philosophy, in the debate on the immortality of the soul, or, conversely, the harsh condemnation of Plato by George of Trebizond in his *Comparatio Platonis et Aristotelis* (1458), show that Renaissance responses to ancient philosophy were deeply influenced by a strongly utilitarian sense of its (at least potential) usefulness in addressing current religious, ideological and political preoccupations. Exegesis, therefore, reflected the need to appropriate Plato to specific positions or functions, rather than a desire to critically analyse and evaluate his thought. This exegetical approach drew strength from a parallel development, a particular type of 'ethical criticism' or 'imitative reading', principally applied by humanist educators from the end of the fourteen century with a view to impart rhetorical skills in the mould of classical eloquence:

Ethical criticism – what I have here called 'imitative reading' – sought to transmit the accepted *ethos* or values of the educated classes in society by establishing them as the loci of imitation. Imitation in this sense could take a number of forms. Good or bad actions in the text, *exempla*, the educator might hold up for praise or blame; his hope was that his student would be stimulated to good acts or deterred from bad ones by the authority and eloquence of the *auctor* and the tradition of noble behaviour he represented as well as by the fame or infamy which was shown to accrue to his own moral choices.⁴

I would suggest that the general tendency to edify, in both rhetorical and ethical terms, is particularly evident in the genre of *speculum principis* writing, in which an author's didactic purpose, veiled or not, was further

sustained by the consciousness of the possible ramifications of its message, reaching beyond the private-literary sphere into the actualities of public power.

My present investigation of a limited selection of texts emanating from the genre, in this instance items from the epistolary correspondence between a patron and his protégé, will be closely linked to an examination of certain aspects of the custom of patronage in Renaissance Florence, as reflected in a specific relationship. Private correspondence – such as Cicero’s voluminous epistolary exchanges with family and friends – may provide illuminating insights, since it often performs a dual role. It functions as emotional outlet and its unguarded moments (whether genuinely so or not) allow glimpses into levels of interpersonal tensions that would otherwise remain inaccessible. At the same time, written private exchange reflects and records the tenor of public life and inscribes in its microcosmic concerns the larger patterns of existence in the city-state, ancient or modern. The existence of a wide range of texts, both personal and literary-historical, reveals a particular cultural aspect shared by classical and Renaissance societies, namely the adoption of an uncomplicated, if specific, vocabulary employed to verbally enact the complex mechanisms of patronage, a vocabulary borrowed from parallel affective relations, such as friendship and love.

I propose to argue that the texts I will examine ought to be read both as examples of a specific paradigm of philosophical reception and as literary witnesses to the strategies of power *bilaterally* employed in a relationship of patronage. The pointed paradox of the inherent disparity between powerful patron-pupil and subject protégé-teacher buttresses the intellectual parity of the correspondents in ways that recall Aristotle’s relationship with Alexander (in contrast to the one shared by Plato and Dyonisius), and serves to frame the invited parallels between classical antiquity and early Renaissance.⁵ Further, I suggest that the concept of mutual obligation firmly underpins the exchanges and provides an interesting counterpoint not only to the hortatory, and therefore theoretically unilateral, thrust of the *didáskalos’* addresses, but also to the ‘loaded’ responses of the *didaskómenos*. The ‘institution’ of patronage engendered relations consciously codified within the framework of a form of friendship that, I suggest, aims to be closely modelled on received patterns of ancient socio-political *philia*. The reception and adaptation of this particular referential framework under Medici rule in the early Renaissance gains greater significance if we recall that the city-state of Florence aspired to emulate the example of the ancient *polis*, both in its independent status and form of governance.

The passages I have chosen are taken from letters exchanged by two Renaissance figures, who were, in several ways, emblematic of humanist

responses to classical antiquity: Lorenzo de' Medici, or the Magnificent (1449-1492), ruler of Florence and Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499), Neo-Platonist philosopher at Lorenzo's court. Lorenzo's well-known eclectic abilities – as foremost poet of his period, humanist scholar, collector of rare manuscripts, patron of the arts and, most importantly, immensely powerful, if unofficial, ruler of the Republic of Florence – epitomise the multiplicity of cultural skills deployed by several major figures of the Italian Renaissance.⁶

A brief reference to the importance of political 'friendships' in maintaining Medici control over Renaissance Florence (and beyond) will furnish an appropriate context to the discussion of the texts. Since the time of Cosimo's rule, the Medici family drew its strength from a cohesive network of alliances, which included other influential families and individuals:

Lorenzo followed his father's and grandfather's example when he responded to hundreds of pleas for financial assistance, arranged marriages of convenience (his own had been one as well), regulated the exchange of favours amongst powerful individuals or families, and even controlled commissions to artists loyal to him. By the time Lorenzo had established himself as the governing force in the city, after surviving the Pazzi conspiracy in 1478, the Medici's extended web of mutually beneficial connections reached well beyond the confines not only of the city, but also of Tuscany. From the 1480's after his recently established close connections by marriage with the Papacy yielded him not only a cardinal-son, but ready access to the vast pool of Roman ecclesiastical patronage, [Lorenzo] had emerged as a very considerable patron not just by Tuscan, but by Italian standards. Lorenzo's patronage and influence spread well beyond the purely commercial, social and political sphere. He gathered the different strengths of architects, sculptors, painters, poets and philosophers to forge a framework of propaganda that augmented his power and, at the same time, created a connective tissue that held the disparate and centrifugal forces of Florentine politics together as well. Although his rule over Florence was never absolute but was held in constant tension with other powerful families, Lorenzo's shrewd management of the mechanisms of obligation and gratitude resulted in a largely reliable network of loyalties that sustained his political aspirations and achievements.⁷

It is clear that, under Medici rule, friendship, cast in the mould of ancient Greco-Roman concepts of political *philia/amicitia* and patterned on its emblematic *patronus-clientis* relationship, grew to be defined in political and financial terms, rather than being fostered solely by mutual affection and the ties of shared interests. The social-ideological code regulating the exchange of gifts and favours transformed the act of reciprocal giving into an obligatory rite of passage that enabled access to the body of citizenship. A ritual vocabulary of offering and acceptance, of assurances of mutual esteem and caring commitment often supplanted plain commercial parlance, in a renewed appropriation of the vocabulary connoting political

friendship in the ancient Greek and Roman empires. Terms such as *patronus* and *cliens* gained wide currency, and declarations of subjection shaped by the explicit terminology of slavery are found in several letters addressed to Lorenzo by figures of high social standing.⁸ The power of patronage became coextensive with the power of ruling, as public friendship increasingly drew its strength from mutual expediency. It would be worthwhile to explore how this inescapable public attitude might affect the private sphere and to question whether there could be a wholly private aspect to patronage, even between true friends.

Marsilio Ficino, tutor, mentor and protégé of Lorenzo, was the son of the private physician to Cosimo the Elder, the patriarch of the Medici family. Cosimo, who inaugurated a long tradition of Medici patronage in both cultural and political spheres in the Republic of Florence, strongly encouraged the young Ficino to learn ancient Greek so that he could study in the original Plato's works, only a few of which were available in Latin at the time. With such enthusiasm was this task taken up that, by 1469, Ficino had not only learned Greek, but had drafted his own translation of all thirty-six Platonic dialogues, although it was only in 1484 that he readied for publication the first complete Latin rendering of these works. He had prefaced each dialogue with a brief philosophical 'argument', and appended detailed commentaries to several to elucidate their meaning. Ficino's *Plato latinus* for the first time offered early modern Europe ready access to the ancient Platonic tradition, in a unified corpus of scholarly translation, which remained its most important link to Platonic philosophy, until the dialogues began to be translated into national languages during the 18th and 19th centuries.⁹

Ficino's selection as tutor for the young Lorenzo was influenced not only by his obvious intellectual abilities, but also by his proven devotion and loyalty to his first patron in the Medici family, Cosimo, Lorenzo's grandfather (1389-1464).¹⁰ The tutorship developed into friendship, a bond that lasted till Lorenzo's death in 1492.¹¹ We are left in no doubt about the depth and significance of the relationship by the repeated assurances of esteem and affection found in the correspondence between mentor and pupil. Nevertheless, since the pupil soon assumed the role of powerful ruler and patron, and the mentor that of subject and protégé, it is legitimate to ask whether their relationship may have been drawn into the sphere of *regulated* friendship, the socio-political *philia* that I mentioned above.

The term designates a relation that is sustained both by the provision of services on the part of the client and by the assurance of protection, support and advancement extended by the patron.¹² It may be useful to consider how we should look upon Ficino's subtle efforts to continue and prolong the tutoring of the youth into the education of the ruler. What, we

may ask, appear to be the delimitations – emotional and political – of the boundaries between plain friendship and complex *philia*, and the consequent ethical considerations emerging from the subject's efforts to shape the mind of his ruler? And to what extent does the purposeful adaptation of concepts and terminology, both philosophical and ideological, from classical antiquity influence and even determine the observance, or the breach, of these boundaries? How does Ficino's use of Plato intersect with his un-stated, and yet obvious, project to guide and influence Lorenzo's stance as a ruler while retaining his own stance as (merely) spiritual tutor?

I will comment on some letters that were exchanged by Ficino and Lorenzo between 1473 and 1474. These letters are drawn from the first of twelve volumes of correspondence that Ficino collated and published in 1495¹³. As these collections may not be readily accessible, I shall quote extensively from the texts.

Letter 26: Mirabilium auctor Deus est, non homo (God, not man, is the author of wonders)

Marsilio Ficino to the magnanimous Lorenzo de' Medici: greetings.

I do not know what to do now, Lorenzo. For your wonderful letter fills me with such admiration, that only philosophical modesty prevents me from crying out. Your exceptional humanity and your noble qualities arouse in me the deepest gratitude, which your letter discourages me from expressing. Allow me, at least, I entreat you, my Lorenzo, to give thanks to Almighty God, that in our times he decided to unite, in a citizen of ample fortune, a modest disposition with an illustrious mind. In a young man as a private citizen, he combined prudence with power; in a man of power, restraint with freedom; in a man of affairs, wisdom with eloquence. Great qualities are in you, Lorenzo, without doubt. Lest anyone suspect the vice of flattery, which should be quite alien to a man who is both philosopher and dear friend, I say these qualities are in you, but do not originate from you. For such wonders are the work of omnipotent God alone. Excellent man, you are the instrument of God, fitted to perform great deeds... You will therefore continue to perform successfully these wonderful works, so long as you obey the divine creator. But, believe me, your obedience will be complete, if you often ask him to show you the way to obey. If you ask, he will surely show you. Indeed, he prompts you to ask before you do so. He shows you not only what to ask, but how to ask it.

Farewell, O hope of your country. Before I end, however, I beseech you, my Lorenzo, both in the name of the Academy, which flourishes through you, and in the name of your country, which is dear to you before all else, that you should take care of your health. Unless you are well, I think that neither the Academy nor your country can prosper in these times.

Into the flow of expressions of affection and gratitude to his patron, Ficino

effortlessly inserts the admonition that the *just* ruler should ever strive for *sophrosune*, for temperance, restraint and inner harmony, clearly echoing Plato's *Republic* (443d-e):

One who is just does not allow any part of himself to do the work of another part or allow the various classes within him to meddle with each other. He regulates well what is really his own and rules himself. He puts himself in order, is his own friend, and harmonises the three parts of himself [reason, spiritedness and appetite] like three limiting notes in a musical scale – high, low, and middle. He binds together those parts... and from having been many things, he becomes entirely one, moderate and harmonious.

Ficino's words deliberately recall the emphasis Socrates places throughout *Republic* upon the necessity to practise justice with prudence, *dikaiosune meta phroneseos*, in contradiction to the arguments presented by Thrasymachus and Glaucon in Books 1 and 2 of the dialogue, in which they contend that a ruler may be good without being just and that justice is not essential for human happiness. In a carefully constructed enumeration of his pupil's laudable traits, Ficino places a triad of tested virtues in counterpoint to a triad of potentially harmful attributes. Prudence, restraint and wisdom are antithetically combined with power, freedom and eloquence in a rhetorical series of pairings that reflect Lorenzo's successful passage from youth to manhood, while underlining the constant presence of mature thought behind his actions.

The series is surely intended to hark back to the tripartite structure of *epithumia*, *thumos* and *nous* (*Republic* 435-444), employed in the Socratic description of justice as a system that institutes and maintains an appropriate division of labour, a system in which the ruling political class, the guardian class, is defined by its possession of *nous*, 'reason', in contrast to the labour and fighting classes, which are controlled by *epithumia* and *thumos*. Justice is ensured in society by preserving the discrete ordering of the three classes, as *sophrosune* in the individual is constituted and preserved through the tripartition of the soul's corresponding dispositions.¹⁴ The government of the city is analogous to the governance of the soul and the task of the ruling element in both is the philosophical contemplation of the 'good':

'Then do we not call him self-disciplined when all these three elements are in friendly and harmonious agreement, when reason and its subordinates are all agreed that reason should rule and there is no civil war among them?'

'That is exactly what we mean by self-control or discipline in a city or in an individual' (*Republic* 442c-d).

Onto Platonic thought Ficino grafts the Christian transcendental vision of the divine aspect in the human being, the distillation of virtue that cannot be of human making. Furthermore, he adds the need for humility before the omniscient guide and for obedience, which alone can ensure the continuance of those 'great deeds' for which Lorenzo is 'fitted', as 'instrument of God'.¹⁵ Ficino's exhortation to justice imparts a Platonic character even to his vision of divine guidance, inscribing both Lorenzo's virtues and duties of obedience within ethical structures determined by *nous*. His request to Lorenzo that he pay due consideration to his physical well-being provides another link to *Republic*, at the point where the equilibrium of the different elements in the city and the soul, which produces justice, is related to a correct balance of corresponding elements in the healthy body:

'Well,' I said, 'there is an exact analogy between these states of mind and bodily health and sickness.' 'True.' 'Well, then, don't just actions produce justice, and unjust actions injustice?' 'They must.' 'And health is produced by establishing a natural relation of control and subordination among the constituents of the body, disease by establishing an unnatural relation.' 'True.' 'So justice is produced by establishing in the mind a similar natural relation of control and subordination among its constituents, and injustice by establishing an unnatural one.' (444c-d)

Two important centres of intellectual activity, the city and the Academy, depend on Lorenzo's well-being, that is, on his ability to maintain the equilibrium of all elements conducive to just and therefore productive governance. Motives more urgent than courteous friendliness dictate the wish for the ruler's good health. The integrity of the city-state and of its intellectual life of the city is at stake, yet injunctions directed at fostering an ethical approach to leadership are abstracted from quotidian realities and reframed within a discourse of justice embedded in Platonic discussions of the 'good'.

The letter evidences, in its restricted compass, the purpose that sustained Ficino's lifelong work on both Plato and the Neo-Platonic school: the attempt to reconcile Platonic philosophy with Christian belief. It also furnishes a clear example of Ficino's skill in evading the restrictions of his role as protégé of a powerful patron. The introductory remarks contain a warm acknowledgment of both patron's generosity and protégé's gratitude, but these are soon carried over into praise for the ruler's virtues, as discussed above. The shift is seamless, but it is clear that the protégé's role changes from subject's gratitude to concerned, if well disguised, mentor's guidance on what real virtue is in a leader. At the close of the letter, Ficino leaves the reader with the impression that, though officially in an inferior position to Lorenzo, the mentor has exploited the possibilities offered by the Platonic text to address the powerful prince with a didactic purpose. Ironically so, perhaps, when we consider that the context addresses the

ordering of individuals according to distinct classes and functions. If the irony is deliberate, there could be space for arguing that Ficino, in a humorous way (see remarks on *Letter 23*, below), shows his correspondent that boundaries of power and subjection may be dissolved in the search for true wisdom and justice.

Letter 29: Matters of love; how each man should be loved and how praised (1473)

Marsilio Ficino to the magnanimous Lorenzo de' Medici: greetings.

...

What shall I say of the rest? The morning sun gathers the clouds, and the mid-day sun disperses them. Youthful virtue arouses envy, but virtue in a mature man dissolves it and overcomes that jealousy which previously dominated every other idea. You have converted almost everyone's envy to admiration. Many now openly praise Lorenzo who previously envied him. But although hardly anyone who praises Lorenzo speaks falsely, no one, except the Platonists, praises him justly. Since the Aristotelians see Lorenzo so successful in everything he does, they praise him in all things; on the other hand, the Platonists praise all things in him. For when they consider how quickly he has become master of each art, they realise that these arts have not been acquired by labour, but supplied by nature and granted from God.

Farewell.

Ficino pursues here the argument put forward in *Letter 26*, introducing a slight twist. The transition from (and contrast between) youthful and mature states is rendered obvious by antithetically positioning envy and admiration; more importantly, the further antithesis between Aristotelians and Platonists is emphasised by implicitly associating the former with opportunistic behaviour, the latter with true understanding of virtue and justice. The exhortation to foster virtue and equilibrium is couched here in the description of the triumph of these qualities over petty envy and lack of insight into the higher levels of the leader's soul. Which, of course, is intended to subtly and respectfully nudge the leader into a reflection and scrutiny of his own self, of his abilities and shortcomings. For the mature ruler ought to gather in himself both the dignity born of superior knowledge and insight, and the transcendence of the merely material. Wealth and power when placed at the service of justice and truth bend, or 'convert', even the unjust and envious to a higher vision of civic life. Plato's *Apology* (29d-e) is recalled here, as in other letters:

Are you not ashamed of your eagerness to possess much wealth, reputation and honours as possible, while you do not care for nor give thought to wisdom and truth, or the best possible state of your soul?

And *Republic* (414a):

And any Guardian who survives these continuous trials in childhood, youth and manhood unscathed, shall be given authority in our state; he shall be honoured during his lifetime and when he is dead shall have the tribute of a public funeral and appropriate memorial. Anyone who fails to survive them we must reject.

Ficino emphasises that the process of honouring and 'memorialising' Lorenzo's actions and behaviour has begun already. Envy and admiration are the alternate instruments by which the ruler's reputation is inscribed into the consciousness of his citizens and, thus, into public memory. The welfare of the ruler is reflected in that of his subjects and both parties, in Ficino's Christian reinterpretation of Plato, derive their benefits from God. But it is only the enlightened ruler, the ruler possessed of knowledge and true virtue, who is able to sustain the nurturing the body of citizenship needs and expects:

'Well, then,' I said 'is there any form of knowledge to be found among any of the citizens in the state we have just founded which is exercised not on behalf of any particular interest but on behalf of the city as whole, in such a way as to benefit the state both in its internal and external relations?' 'There is.' 'What is it and where shall we find it?' 'It is the Guardians' knowledge,' he answered 'and is to be found with those we call the Guardians in the full sense.' 'And how do you describe the state because of it?' 'I say it has good judgement and wisdom.' (*Republic* 428d-e)

Thus philosophical knowledge of truth melded with Christian faith shapes the premises for just rule and its benefits to the governed body of citizens. The concept of God-given ability, introduced in the previous *Letter*, is reiterated against the background of criticism levelled against Aristotelian positivism, not only to score a point in the ongoing controversy of the *comparatio Platonis et Aristotelis*, but especially to emphasise the transcendent quality of Platonic wisdom, which uniquely equips its beneficiary with the potential to ascend to the divine. In the experience of Platonic love, of course, the ascent reaches its fullest expression and the excerpt from the same *Letter*, discussed below, reveals Ficino's, and Lorenzo's, interest and belief in its power.

The passages from the correspondence that we have discussed above reflect close engagement with works such as *Republic* and *Apology*, which both Ficino and Lorenzo (and their Platonic Academy coterie) knew thoroughly and respected as texts embodying both philosophical and theological authority. I should like to turn to passages that clearly respond to the theories put forward in the *Symposium*, a dialogue very close to Ficino's interests.¹⁶ Establishing a parallel between Platonic and Christian concepts of love, Ficino asserted in his commentary that the highest form of human

love and friendship is a communion created by the soul's love for God. In Plato's *Symposium*, erotic love is the force that enables the soul to ascend to the Form of Beauty, having attained a union between reason and passion:

In the *Symposium*, what is required for realizing the love of wisdom is not the death of love [as in the *Phaedo*] but its service. For it alone can power the ascent to the world of Forms. The *Symposium* advocates the conversion of *eros* (instinctual love) to *philosophia* (love of wisdom).¹⁷

Ficino's definition of love in his *Commentarium* is drawn in two parallel movements of descent and ascent. As beauty emanating from God gradually descends towards material substance, the human soul ascends to the divine essence, passing through several degrees of beauty (*a corpore in animam, ab anima in angelum, ab angelo [Diotima Socratem] reducit in deum*). Thus, Ficino fused Plato's ascent to Beauty into the soul's ascent to God, attained through the pure communion of friendship and love. In Christian terms, Diotima's description of the ascent could be paralleled to Jacob's ladder:

Anyone who has been guided and trained in the ways of love up to this point, who has viewed things of beauty in the proper order and manner, will now approach the culmination of love's ways and will suddenly catch sight of something of unbelievable beauty, something, Socrates, which in fact gives meaning to all his previous efforts.....

You should use the things of this world as rungs in a ladder. You start by loving a beautiful body and step up to two; from there you move on to physical beauty in general, from there to the beauty of people's activities, from there to the beauty of intellectual endeavour, which is no more and no less than the study of that beauty, so that you finally recognise true beauty. What else could make life worth living... than seeing true beauty? (*Symposium* 210e2-11d5)

Ficino's tutoring of Lorenzo as ruler included the nurturing of noble and elevating feelings, which would render his soul's ascent to God an attainable certainty. The *Symposium* provided strategies for the transformation of *eros* into *amor Dei*, and for the elevation of earthly desires to the highest level of transcendence. In Ficino's view, friendship and profound mutual trust offered the starting point for this particular ascent, attempted in the midst of pressures from the temptations of worldly power, greed and self-preservation. Although Ficino accepted that ephemeral attractions may provide the first rung in the ladder, he deemed that recognition of their transient value is essential to progress in the soul's ascent. Similarly,

Ficino stressed that although God was reached by means of his creations, we were not to love them for themselves but rather to love God in them: 'In bodies, we shall love the shadow of God; in souls, the likeness of God; in

angels, the image of God. Thus, in the present life we shall love God in everything so that in the next we might love everything in God.¹⁸

The passages below reflect how Ficino's distillation and transformation of Plato's theory of erotic love could be employed to draw a powerful prince towards spiritual and intellectual resources that might encourage and foster just and wise governance.

Letter 28: Amatoria (Matters of Love), 1473

Lorenzo to Marsilio, reproaching him for writing so seldom and so little:

...

By this you have betrayed your faith and our friendship... But much more wounding still is that, in setting the love between us at naught, you have separated me from the goodwill of all other men, and there seems no one left now to whom I can entrust my faith. For there appeared to be nothing so perfect, so constant, so true, as our friendship which has grown by your virtue and the passage of time, to such an extent that, if this is now bankrupt, there is no friendship left in which I can safely trust.

And Ficino's answer, ***Letter 29:***

That you esteem me, Lorenzo, I have known for a long time, since you have given me many clear proofs. That you love me, I have recently realised from this sign in particular: that you get angry, as though you were jealous, at the most trifling and imaginary offences. Get angry if you like, jealous man; provided you get passionate. The fire of anger and the fire of love are alike; for when I become angry with you, which I often do, then I burn with the fire of love. You too are on fire with no ordinary passion; I know what I am saying...

In these passages, the friendship that binds subject and ruler clearly becomes elevated to a transcendental love that unites, as equals, two congenial intellects in one faith – in each other, and in a superior being.¹⁹ We also note that Ficino does not hesitate to remind Lorenzo of their frequent outbursts of anger; a deliberate allusion to the fact that, within the love that binds them, there is place for freedom and spontaneity, as between true equals? The vocabulary of erotic engagement that Ficino employs with jovial naturalness, with no fear of misunderstanding, reveals the depth of his conviction that *amor platonicus* unites kindred spirits in a relationship that transcends merely human boundaries and conventions.

One might think that there could be no clearer or shrewder soliciting for patronage of oneself than the title of *Letter 17: Quantum utile sit alere doctos* (How useful it is to support scholars). But the explicitness itself sweeps away any such suspicions. Ficino praises Lorenzo's benevolence towards Angelo Poliziano and encourages him to persevere in his support of 'such

artists'.²⁰ But couched in the fulsome praise is a veiled warning to avoid the example of those who give support for purely hedonistic ends. Here, Lorenzo is cast as the saviour of Homer, a gracious host who, in the true Homeric spirit of sacred hospitality, rescues the wandering beggar and restores due glory to his work. Thus, praise of the patron is blended with praise for the poets, whose words bestow immortality more assuredly than any painting could do.

The quiet humour of the concluding remarks, as explication of the usefulness of supporting scholars, would not have escaped Lorenzo; who, in *Letter 23*, remarks on his friend's ability to blend sternness with humour:

Everything that comes from you is good, everything that you write is profitable and delightful to me. What makes me so long for your letters is that in them humour appears so mixed with gravity, that, if considered light-heartedly, everything seems full of humour; if seriously, then they seem more serious than anything else.

In an aside in the same *Letter*, Lorenzo, surely not for the first time, notes:

I know that you are no more solicitous about the affairs of others than about your own.

The *disinterestedness* of Ficino in worldly matters, even those that might affect him closely, is clearly both a concern and a motive of satisfaction to Lorenzo. Even from a brief glance at these exchanges, it becomes clear that understatement and allusion play as great a part in the definition of the friends' roles, as open praise or jocular criticism. The outlining of the boundaries between patron and protégé is subtle, careful, and always guided by mutual affection. But, certainly, it is there.

Letter 82

The divine soul delights only in the divine food of truth, by which it is nourished and strengthened. For the rest, the absurdity of fleeting trifles does not satisfy immortal mind, which, by natural inclination, demands the eternal and immeasurable. I beseech you, therefore, dearest patron, through eternal God, to spend the most precious moment of time, brief as it is, cautiously and wisely, lest you have cause to repent in vain your prodigality and irreparable waste.... I beg you, set against foolish cares, empty pastimes, and unnecessary activity what Socrates said: "Be gone, endless enemies! Be gone, at once, thieves of my soul, lest I am forced away from myself!" By degrees, these steal you away from yourself, and lead captive the man born to rule. Free yourself from this miserable captivity while you can. But you can only do it today: for the first time, be independent today. Believe me, it is not wise to say "I shall live"; tomorrow is too late for living; live today. What I ask, Lorenzo, is easy. To spend one hour rightly and usefully is not difficult: use well, I pray, one hour each day

for nourishing the mind in liberal studies, and that little time profitably for yourself. For the rest, if you wish, live for others... But make me no more promises for the morrow; promising what you neither have nor know that you will have... nothing is more false than this tomorrow, which has deceived all men that the earth has brought forth.

The language of slavery employed in this *Letter* forcefully addresses the important issue of the mastery of the self and returns with impassioned vigour to the problem of ordering and controlling the dispositions of the soul that we have seen addressed in *Letter 26* above. An added dimension to the mentor's concern is the wasting of time in ephemeral employments, time that the ruler might usefully spend in the contemplation of the 'eternal and immeasurable'. Ficino does not intend Lorenzo to become a reclusive monk, but he fears the 'thieves of [his] soul', who might draw (perhaps already have drawn) the Prince away from his paramount duty, which is to guide and rule with justice the citizen body. The urgency openly conveyed in this *Letter* reveals also a different stage of the relationship between subject and ruler: reprimand lies just below the surface of exhortation and the forcefulness inherent in the vocabulary is reminiscent of a homily rather than of a casual reproach from a friend, or subject.

Expressions of gratitude form an important part in patron-protégé relations, as they are the concrete sign that a favour has been bestowed and acknowledged. In *Letter 24*, *Gratiarum actio* ('Giving thanks'), we find an extravagantly witty and clever formulation of thanks. On his taking the vows, Ficino had received the parish of St Christopher as gift from Lorenzo. The joy and gratefulness he conveys are genuine, but even in this seemingly impetuous response, Ficino couches the hope that St Christopher, the patron of his new church, may protect and strengthen Lorenzo in the administration of his public powers. Thus, the writer subtly shifts the focus of his letter from gratitude to the heavy burden that his patron must bear, and bear responsibly and with courage.

The roles of patron/protégé become temporarily blurred, as the new priest dispenses advice and guidance, and acknowledges a power greater than any earthly patron's. In his answer, in *Letter 25*, Lorenzo playfully overturns the implicit gravity of his friend's thanks, in a dazzling display of wit and conceits that recall Shakespeare's sonnets. He restates his love for Ficino, but warns him, in his turn, not to indulge in open expressions of gratitude, unseemly in a bond as deep as theirs:

Reading your letter, I find it in no way un-Marsilian, except for the expression of gratitude. For this kind of gratitude would not seem to befit either our friendship or the man who has surrendered himself to me so completely that he has left nothing for himself.

What is interesting here is the vocabulary of 'belonging' and of 'surrender', which echoes the vocabulary of slavery employed in other letters. While explicitly declaring his love, Lorenzo couches the declaration in terms clearly reminiscent – to a man of his time – of the obligations of patronage. At the same time, the language is typical of the Platonic love Ficino praised, so that the significance of these terms remains ambiguous. In his reply, Ficino introduces yet another twist, by attributing the marvellous qualities of Lorenzo to the grace of God, and Him alone.

On the strength of these and many other letters, I would conclude that relations governed by the conventional rules of patronage are at work here as much as pure love and deep friendship. I have argued that the imprint of socio-political *philia* is deep and extended to personal engagement as much as to public ties of obligation. Ficino's interpretation of Plato functions as palimpsest to our reading of this complex relationship, at once conducted within the boundaries of (accepted) social inequality and breaching through these very boundaries into a sphere that transcends the merely human. It is, perhaps, at the intersection of human philosophy and divine grace, fraught with contradictions and extraordinary visions, where we ought to look for the elusive yet quintessential spirit of the Renaissance, in the words of Hans Baron:

Humanism as moulded by the Florentine crisis produced a pattern of conduct and thought that was not to remain limited to Florentine humanists. From that time on there would exist a kind of humanism which endeavoured to educate a man as a member of his society and state... a humanism which sought to learn from antiquity by looking upon it not melancholically as a golden age never again to be realised, but as an exemplary parallel to the present... whereas such an approach had never been found before 1400, it became inseparable from the growth of Humanism during the Renaissance.

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1. Hankins 1990; for a clear and well-documented exposition of the problems inherent in attributing Plato's appeal primarily to a critical-philological bent of his humanist interpreters, see especially Vol. 1, Introduction (3-26) and Conclusion (360-366).

2. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the Annual Symposium of the Medieval and Renaissance Society (University of Johannesburg, September 2006) and at the 5th International Philosophy Conference, 'Ethics in the public and private spheres: ancient Greek and modern perspectives' (Pretoria April-May 2008). I am grateful for the insightful observations and suggestions offered by members of the audience on both occasions.

3. Machiavelli's work represented a radical departure from previous treatises in its almost total disregard of abstract models for the ideal ruler, earlier embodied in Dante's view of the Prince as an intermediary between man and God, or in the humanists' catalogues of virtues, which clearly reflected those recommended by Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* or Cicero's *De Officiis*. Several contemporaries of Machiavelli had composed treatises in a similar humanist vein: Pontano (*De principe liber*, 1503), Poggio (*De officiis principis liber*, 1504), Bracciolini (*De officiis principis*, 1504).

4. Hankins (1991, vol 1, 22). Hankins offers a valuable discussion and bibliography on different modes of Renaissance interpretation of classical texts (18-26). Also useful Gaisser (2002, 398-400).

5. The exploration of the power of patronage in Renaissance Florence is intimately related to the conceptual centre of a current research project, relationships of power in Greco-Roman antiquity and later ages. I am interested in exploring the ways in which values and judgments traditionally applied to define the role of power in interpersonal relations, whether pertaining to the private sphere, such as friendship, or to the public one, such as patronage, may emerge, from detailed textual study, as fragile, variable and, perhaps, not wholly reliable.

6. The bibliography, both popular and scholarly, on Lorenzo il Magnifico and the character of his rule of Florence is extensive. The most recent scholarly discussion on his role as collector and patron of the arts, complemented by an excellent bibliography, is found in L. Fusco & G. Corti, *Lorenzo De' Medici. Collector and Antiquarian.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

7. Kent 1993:296.

8. For instance: 'sono e sempre sarò cane e schiavo di Vostra Magnificentia', ('I am and ever shall be the dog and slave of Your Excellency'), in a letter from Vecchietti to Lorenzo, 1475.

9. The translation won great scholarly esteem in the sixteenth century and later ages. Ficino's name is perhaps most readily associated in modern times with 'Platonic love' (*amor platonicus*), a theory that proved deeply influential in the field of Renaissance literature and figurative art. However, amongst his contemporaries, Ficino was known primarily as the writer of an important philosophical work, the *Theologia platonica. De immortalitate animae* ('Platonic Theology, On the Immortality of the Soul'), published in 1474, which employed Platonic theories to counter scholastic arguments refuting rational proofs of the immortality of the soul, thus providing a serious challenge to the dominance of Aristotelian philosophy in the field of theology.
10. Ficino's Platonic Academy in Florence numbered some of the most important thinkers of the Italian Renaissance, such as Lorenzo de' Medici, Leon Battista Alberti, Angelo Poliziano, Cristoforo Landino, Pico della Mirandola. It is thought that his Neo-Platonic theories may have exerted considerable influence on artists such as Botticelli, Donatello, Dürer, Michelangelo, Raphael, Titian. As Paul Oskar Kristeller has remarked, 'the whole intellectual life of Florence in Ficino's time was under his influence' (P. O. Kristeller, *Eight Philosophers of the Italian Renaissance*, London 1965, ch. 3).
11. The obvious parallel that may be drawn to Alexander's connection with Aristotle calls attention to an interesting aspect of reception, patterns of emulation of personal relationships from antiquity, which has not received much attention.
12. Excellent bibliography on the concept of socio-political friendship in ancient Greek and Roman cultures in David Konstan *Friendship in the Classical World*, 1997.
13. The list of Ficino's correspondents, both in Italy and in foreign countries, covers an impressively extensive range of contemporary prestigious figures in the fields of politics, philosophy, religion and the arts.
14. Compare *Republic* (440e-441a): 'The state was made up of three classes, businessmen, auxiliaries and governors; is the soul like it in having spirit as a third element, which, unless corrupted by bad upbringing, is reason's natural auxiliary?' 'There must be a third element.' 'Yes, there must,' I said 'if spirit can be shown to be different from reason, as it is from appetite.'
15. Through his keen interest in the therapeutic aspect of ancient philosophy, possibly rooted in his early medical training, Ficino individuated the close connection between medicine and philosophy in Plato and the Hellenistic philosophers. He asserted that sound psychological health is maintained through the cultivation of moral virtue and the fostering of a proper balance between states of the body and states of the soul.
16. Ficino had written a commentary on the *Symposium*, called *Commentarium in Convivium Platonis. De Amore* (1469). The theory of spiritual or 'Platonic' love, which he developed there deeply influenced European literature and art during the 16th century and beyond.
17. Seung 1996:60-61.
18. Kray 1988:354.
19. Ficino's commentary on the *Symposium* constituted 'the first formal theory of love which allowed the compatibility of the love which is spiritually perfective with that which is instinctively based; the term "Platonic love" described the spiritually perfective affection. But the fact that in this account of the soul's ascent to beatitude there is no formal separation of natural and supernatural and that, in this system, religious perfection,

therefore, becomes intrinsic to *moral* fulfilment, may explain why Ficino's *Commentary* on the *Symposium* was so frequently exploited by the humanists of the sixteenth century.' Kray 2003:66.

20. Angelo Poliziano was one of the Florentine Renaissance's greatest classical scholars and a gifted poet in his own right. He dedicated his translation of Homer's *Iliad* to Lorenzo in 1472.