

VALERY REES

AD VITAM FELICITATEMQUE:
MARSILIO FICINO TO HIS FRIENDS IN HUNGARY

Between 1477 and 1490 Marsilio Ficino sent an abundant flow of study material to his friends in Hungary.¹ This paper will focus on what we can discover of his aims in this enterprise. How effective he was in achieving his aims can be dealt with only tangentially, for that is a very wide subject and one which I have tried to address in various aspects elsewhere.² But concentrating on Ficino's writings to his friends in Hungary during this fourteen year period yields some interesting rewards.³

During this period Ficino's supporters in the Hungarian court received the *De Christiana Religione*, published in Florence in 1476; Books III and IV of the collected *Letters*, sometime in the early 1480s⁴; the *Life of*

¹ An excellent review of the connections between Ficino and Hungary, backed up by supporting data from the Florentine State Archives is given by Sebastiano Gentile in 'Marsilio Ficino e l'Ungheria di Mattia Corvino,' in *Italia e Ungheria all'epoca dell'Umanesimo corviniano*, ed. S. Graciotti e C. Vasoli, Florence, 1994, pp. 89-110.

² V. Rees, 'Pre-Reformation changes in: Hungary at the end of the fifteenth century' in: *The Reformation in Eastern and Central Europe*, ed. K. Maag, Aldershot, 1997 and 'Education and the Church in Hungary and Transylvania, 1490-1530,' a paper delivered to the Reformation Colloquium, Oxford, 1998.

³ The present paper formed the basis of my contribution to the conference entitled Marsilio Ficino and Central Europe held in Budapest, May 1998 under the sponsorship of Pázmány Péter Catholic University, Collegium Budapest, and the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. In preparing it for publication, I have tried to take account of the stimulating discussions that arose, for which I would like to record my warmest appreciation. In particular, I would like to thank Michael Allen for his kindness in reading my final draft and for his most helpful suggestions, which I have incorporated. I would also like to acknowledge the long-standing support and encouragement of all my colleagues on the Ficino translation team in London at the School of Economic Science.

⁴ A fine illuminated presentation copy was despatched in September 1482 but was lost en route, and a replacement had to be made. Individual letters from those volumes would of course have arrived earlier, including the *Life of Plato*, revised in 1477 for Hungary. This revised version incorporates information on Plato's birth chart taken from Firmicus Maternus' *Mathesis*, VI, 30, 24, which was not available to Ficino when he wrote the earlier version. Whether it came from a Hungarian manuscript known to Bandini or others in Hungary is an interesting question. Shayne Mitchell, citing *Iulii Firmici Materni Matheseos libri VIII*, ed. W. Kroll and F. Skutsch, Leipzig 1897-1913 (repr. Stuttgart 1968), records the discovery of Firmicus Maternus by Francesco Pescennio Negro in Orossend but not until 1489-1491. See

Plato, included in Book III, may also have arrived as a separate work as early as 1477.⁵ It was to be used as an introduction to the Plato dialogues sent, after problems and delays, in 1484-5.⁶ Ficino's translation of Synesius on *Dreams* was also sent in 1484-5. Meanwhile the eighteen books of his own *Platonic Theology* had arrived in 1482, straight after their publication. The *De Vita* in its ornamented state may never have reached Buda⁷ but the plain exemplar was available by November 1489. In 1488 or 1489 Valori's presentation copy of Books I to VIII of the *Letters* arrived. Iamblichus' *Mysteries of the Egyptians and Assyrians* was copied for sending as soon as the translation was ready in 1489, despite some dissatisfaction

Shayne Mitchell, *The Image of Hungary and Hungarians in Italy 1437-1526*, PhD dissertation, Warburg Institute, London, 1994. A complete manuscript appeared in the Laurentian Library in Florence (Laurentianus XXIX 31) superseding a defective 13th century copy which lacked the relevant section and confirming interest in this writer at the Medici court, but not until 1479. An examination of this and two other contemporary manuscripts in Nürnberg (Norimbergensis cent. V 60 dated 1468) and Naples (Neapolitanus V A 17 15th century but undated) may reveal the source of the new information referred to, but I have not been able to pursue this. Its significance is that when Ficino refers to Bandini and Báthory as his own eyes in Hungary, in 1479, this is generally taken as referring to the outward flow of knowledge from Florence to Hungary and recalling the sparks of light that pour out from the heart through the eyes, spreading knowledge, cf. *De Amore* VII. and *Letters of Marsilio Ficino*, School of Economic Science, London, Vol. 3, p. 98 note 39.2. But if the astrological information incorporated in the letter was supplied by Báthory and Bandini, Ficino may also be acknowledging an inward flow of information, to Ficino, through their eyes. For further details of the manuscripts available see Firmicus Maternus, *Mathesis*, ed. P. Monat, Paris, 1992, Vol. 1, pp. 26-36.

⁵ Csaba Csapodi lists it separately in *The Corvinian Library, History and Stock*, Budapest, 1973, p. 218. He also summarises the information available on each of the individual works listed in this paper.

⁶ These delays were partly related to an episode described in three letters expressing dismay at the misdemeanours of the copyist engaged for the initial transcription of Ficino's Plato translations by the Duke of Urbino. This unnamed scribe not only made mistakes but subsequently used the books as collateral against payment of his lodging bills when the Duke died and his wages failed to materialise. This resulted in the 'captivity' of the books which Ficino likens to Plato's own captivity in Aegina. See Marsilio Ficino, *Epistolarum Liber VII*, letters 23, 33 and 43, *Opera Omnia*, pp. 856, 858 and 862.

Letters not yet published in the English translation series are referred to by the Book and letter number of the Latin, as here, as well as the page on which they are to be found in *Opera Omnia*, Basel 1576 (and its 1959 reprint). For letters that have been translated into English, the references given are those of the English edition, *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino*, School of Economic Science, London, citing volume and page as well as year of publication (from 1975 onwards). It should be noted that the Latin Books III and IV dedicated to Matthias appear in English as Volumes 2 and 3 respectively. Translations of Books V and VI are in print (as Volumes 4 and 5), and Book VII (Volume 6) is due to be published in 1999. The missing *Liber II*, being different in nature from the other books, will be published later. Three of its five treatises have been translated into German by Elisabeth Blum, Paul Richard Blum and Thomas Leinkauf, *Marsilio Ficino: Traktate zur platonischen Philosophie*, Berlin, 1993.

Volume 5 of the English translation also contains a facsimile reprint of the Latin text of the 1495 Venice edition. It is planned to repeat this improvement in succeeding volumes.

⁷ The presentation copy of the *De Vita* has the Medici coat of arms painted over that of Matthias perhaps because it was not ready to leave Florence before the King's death. See Csaba Csapodi, *Bibliotheca Corviniana*, Budapest, 1969 (English Edition), p. 53.

with its textual inadequacies⁸. Finally, 1490 saw the arrival of a comparative flood of books, eagerly awaited: the full Plotinus translations and commentaries, Pythagoras' *Symbola* and *Golden Verses*,⁹ Porphyry's *De Abstinentia*, Psellus on *Daemons*, and Priscus Lydus on *Theophrastus and the Mind*.

It is not clear when Ficino's translation of Hermes Trismegistus reached Buda. According to Naldi, this volume occupied the foremost place among the Greek authors in the Corvina Library.¹⁰ But the fact that it was so well known and well loved by the King and his circle suggests that the Latin translation was available to them. Antonio Bonfini incorporates substantial quotations from Hermes' *Pimander* in the speeches allotted to Matthias in the dialogue of the *Symposion*.¹¹ The appeal of Hermes at the Hungarian court may indeed give us some clues about the appeal of Ficino too. For the Hermetic writings, despite their puzzling aspects, are simple, direct and poetic. They speak of man's divine nature and how, through intelligence of the heart,¹² the human soul may be reunited with the source of all.

The other important work sent before the period we are discussing was the *De Amore*, Ficino's commentary on Plato's *Symposium*. An early dedication copy of this was sent to Janus Pannonius as early as 1469. Through his acquaintance with Janus Pannonius in the mid 1460s, Ficino had every reason to believe that in Hungary were men who would have an interest in the ideas that were beginning to distinguish the Academy of Florence from other groups of scholars.¹³

What were the real relationships between the individuals whose Platonic interests have been recorded, and the provider of this generous flow of

⁸ This time the deficiencies were with the Greek text available to Ficino.

⁹ Ficino made working translations of four other Pythagorean works too but these were not sent. They are the four treatises of Iamblichus, *De Secta Pythagorica*, namely *De Vita Pythagorica*, *Protrepticus*, *De Communi Mathematica Scientia* and *In Nichomachi Arithmetica Introductionem*. See Michael J. B. Allen, *Nuptial Arithmetic*, esp. p. 32 and n. 70.

¹⁰ Naldo Naldi, *De laudibus bibliothecae libri IV ad Mathiam Corvinum Pannoniae regem*, written between 1484 and 1486 according to Jolán Balogh, *A művészet Mátyás király udvarában*, (*Art at the court of King Matthias*), Budapest, 1966, p. 658.

¹¹ Antonio Bonfini, *Symposion de virginitate et pudicitia coniugali*, ed. S. Apró, Budapest, 1943. One example is III, 44-48, 'Of everything that takes upon itself the name of good, Hermes tells us that nothing can really be called good besides God Himself who is that true highest good itself. Nothing can be called good besides God Himself who is that true consciousness itself; nothing can be called good unless it comes very close to God by its likeness to Him. This Egyptian King of divine inspiration tells us that God is the light and the life, the father, from whom man is born and to whose light and life each is able to return again if he has come to know that he is made from light and life.' (My translation.) This work was written in 1484-5 but not presented until September 1486. It also contains many passages presenting Platonic ideas in very clear and simple form, as well as a hymn which Bonfini ascribes to Orpheus (*Symposion* III,66-69) which is actually part of the *Poimandres* of Hermes Trismegistus translated by Ficino (*Libellus* I, 31).

¹² For the heart as a centre of spiritual understanding, see Hermes, *Corpus Hermeticum*, ed. Brian P. Copenhaver, Cambridge, 1992, esp. pp. 17 and 24.

¹³ Pannonius' stay in Italy included a visit to Florence where he met Ficino. See Marianna Birnbaum, *Janus Pannonius, Poet and Politician*, Zagreb, 1981, p.165 and Vespasiano da Bisticci, *Renaissance Princes, Popes and Prelates*, ed. M. P. Gilmore, New York, 1963, pp. 192-7

material? For convenience I shall divide them into two groups, the Hungarians and the Italians.¹⁴

First the Hungarians: to Nicholas Báthory, the Bishop of Vác, Ficino sent three letters, to Peter Váradi one letter, to a Janus Pannonius, whose identity has been much discussed, there is one letter, a response to one included from him, though this may be a literary device.¹⁵ Peter Garázda is mentioned but receives no letters, King Matthias is the recipient of five. This makes ten letters in all, to Hungarians at Matthias' court – not a large number.¹⁶

Besides the Hungarians there are several Italians who had Hungarian connections or spent time in Hungary, some of whom played an important role in what was happening there. Of these, far and away the most important was Francesco Bandini. He received eighteen letters from Ficino in these fourteen years. Philippo Buonaccorsi, called Callimachus,

¹⁴ This is a somewhat arbitrary distinction. Generations of nationalistic historiography have emphasised differences, but both Hungary and Italy in the fifteenth century were countries of multiple allegiances. Moreover Hungarians educated in Italy were self-consciously international. Nevertheless, in noble circles there was a degree of loyalty to the idea of being Hungarian, reflected in the distinctive myth-history established for Hungary by Bonfini in his *Rerum Hungaricum Decades*, written 1487-1496 and pursued by later writers. See Amedeo di Francesco, 'Il mito di Mattia Corvino nei canti storici ungheresi del XVI secolo' in Matthias Corvinus and the Humanism in Central Europe, ed. T. Klaniczay and J. Jankovics, Budapest, 1994. Furthermore, the Latin spoken in Hungarian student houses in the universities of Vienna or Paris may also have sounded quite different to the local variety, and the separation of Latin and Italian is quite clear from Matthias' inability to understand the architectural treatise of Filarete that Bandini brought back for him from Italy in 1488 until it was translated for him from Italian into Latin (by Bonfini).

¹⁵ The original Janus Pannonius, Bishop of Pécs, had been dead for a decade. The identity of this new John the Hungarian has been the subject of various suggestions of which the two leading contenders are Janos Váradi, see F. Bánfi, 'Joannes Pannonius – Giovanni Unghero, Váradi János' in *Irodalomtörténeti Közlemények* LXXII (1968) pp. 194-200 and János Vitéz the younger, Bishop of Szerém and, like his relative the famous Janus Pannonius, also a nephew of Matthias' great Chancellor also called János Vitéz. This latter identification is supported by Klára Pajorin in her paper *Ioannes Pannonius e la sua lettera a Marsilio Ficino*, delivered at this conference, with persuasive if not conclusive evidence. It is also espoused by Marianna Birnbaum, *op. cit.* and cf. *The Orb and the Pen*, Budapest, 1996, pp. 75-6. Yet Michael Allen's demonstration of the strong Augustinian basis of the views expressed rather favours Bánfi's earlier proposal. However I would like to suggest a further possibility, that this vigorous exchange may represent an imaginary engagement, either with the earlier and famous Janus Pannonius, or indeed with one of the other candidates. Ficino would have perhaps composed the letter from Janus himself. Certainly it raises the very issues on which Ficino was keen to publicise his point of view, against charges of *curiositas* and undue interest in pagan antiquity. In Ficino's reply, besides the important defence of his position on Providence and free will, there is a quotation from Virgil attesting the recipient's deep love of classical pre-Christian poetry; but a love of Virgil could be a characteristic of any educated churchman, humanist or not, so it cannot confirm the identity of the addressee. However the choice of passage is significant: the plucking of the Golden Bough which grants access to the secrets of the underworld and the return to life above. Liber VIII, 19 and 20, *Opera Omnia*, pp. 871-2. Virgil, *Aeneid*, VI, lines 146-8.

¹⁶ There were other followers of Platonism in Matthias' court who became important in the next generation e.g. George Szatmáry, Orbán of Nagylucs and László Geréb, but I have not included them here because they were not in direct correspondence with Ficino.

in Hungary as Polish ambassador in 1483, received three letters from Ficino in the period in question; Giovanni of Aragon, Cardinal and primate of Hungary from 1480-85¹⁷, and brother of Matthias' Queen, received three, and their father, King Ferrante of Naples, one; Sebastiano Salvini, Ficino's distinguished cousin and occasional amanuensis who was considered for a career in Hungary, received four;¹⁸ Filippo Valori, the wealthy Florentine patron who sponsored many of the works that were sent to the King, and made (or prepared to make) a journey to visit him in person in the last months of Matthias' life, received seven letters between Books II and X (which broadly cover the period we are speaking of); Bartolomeo della Fonte, Professor of Poetry in Florence, who took an active part in the development of the Corvina library and visited Hungary in 1489, received one letter in this period; Taddeo Ugoletto of Parma, who arrived in Hungary around 1480 and was in charge of the library from 1485-1490 as well as tutoring the prince Janus Corvinus received one; Ugolino Verino, in Hungary in 1483-4 received one, and there were seven to fellow philosophers, five to friends in general and a few letters to mankind or unspecified recipients.

In addition two Florentine members of Ficino's circle were in Hungary: one, Raffaello Maffei of Volterra, came to Hungary in 1479-80 with Giovanni of Aragon, but is not mentioned in any letters; the other, Jacopo Acciaiuoli, was mentioned twice by way of commendation to Bandini. He is referred to as Jacobus Azaroli and came in 1487 on the staff of Ippolito d'Este (the Queen's nephew, who came to take up a bishopric as a cure for his teenage delinquency).¹⁹

Galeotto Marzio, a prominent Italian in Hungary, present in 1479 and 1482 as well as earlier, received no mention.²⁰ This is not surprising as his philosophy of life was diametrically opposed to that of Ficino's circle. More surprising is the absence of any apparent contact with Antonio Bonfini, in Hungary from 1486 onwards, and an eloquent spokesman for many of Ficino's own ideas. Francesco Sasseti, of Ficino's circle, may have visited Hungary on business during these years, but the one letter add-

¹⁷ His appointment was not confirmed by the Pope until 1483 as the previous incumbent, Beckensloer, had fled without formally relinquishing his post.

¹⁸ On Salvini see Sebastiano Gentile 'Note sullo scrittoio di Marsilio Ficino,' *Supplementum Festivum: Studies in Honor of Paul Oskar Kristeller*, ed. J. Hankins, J. Monfasani, F. Purnell, Binghamton, N.Y., 1987, pp. 339-397, and Cesare Vasoli, 'Brevi considerazioni su Sebastiano Salvini,' *Italia e Ungheria all'epoca dell'Umanesimo corviniano*, ed. S. Graciotti e C. Vasoli, Florence, 1994, pp. 111-132.

¹⁹ On Ippolito d'Este's behavioural problems, see the perceptive remark in Queen Beatrix's letter to her sister, Eleanora d'Este, his mother, 25th April 1486, discussed in V. Rees, 'Renaissance Ideas on Hungarian Soil,' *Hungarian Quarterly*, 37, Spring 1996, p. 132. Source: A. Berzeviczy, *Acta Vitae Beatricis Reginae Hungariae Illustrantia*, Budapest, 1914, p. 100.

²⁰ There is a Galeotto, prince of Faventia Book VIII, 10. If Faventia is modern-day Faenza, then he cannot be identified with Galeotto Marzio (in spite of reference in the letter to Mars) as Narni, the latter's home town is in Umbria, not Emilia.

ressed to him bears no relevance to our concerns; similarly for Francesco Giugni, involved in the production of works for the Hungarian court, and whose brother Domenico was present in Buda. The Pietro Nero who received four letters in this period has an indirect connection with Hungary as he was charged with the defence of the *De Vita* whose third book bears King Matthias' name. But he was not the Pietro Nero who taught at the Dominican Academy in Buda in the 1480s.²¹

One final character in this drama deserves mention: a Hungarian, Nicholas de Mirabilibus, the theologian from Kolozsvár who profited from a year in the Dominican school of Florence before going home to teach in the Dominican College in Buda in 1489. Ficino's description of his seeming ability to be in both cities at once is a warm testimony to the impression he made on Florentine men of learning,²² and his further influence in Buda would be a subject well worthy of investigation.

Although the total number of letters involved may seem small by the standards of the King's correspondence or the Medici archive, this list nonetheless conveys the variety of contacts Ficino had with the Hungarian scene. Moreover, in considering Ficino's purposes in writing all these letters we must never lose sight of the fact that letters were a literary form. He himself started gathering them for publication from 1473²³, and they circulated in manuscript before they were eventually printed in Venice in 1495. This may account for the relative absence of personal information: there is just enough personal detail that they should meet their mark with individual recipients but never so much as to divulge anything private or confidential. More importantly, it means that all the letters that Ficino wrote – to correspondents not named here as well as those that are – were deemed to be written for the benefit of everyone else as well. As he said to Berlinghieri in the Preface to Book VII, 'Greetings, therefore, my excellent Francesco, greetings every time my friends are greeted, not in this book alone, but in all the books of my letters.'²⁴

These greetings likewise come from every member of the Academy: 'For us, as for the Pythagoreans, all things are in common.'²⁵

Yet by the varied tone and content of the letters, the nature of relationships is often revealed, for it was a gift of Ficino's to be able to tailor advice very specifically to the needs of the recipient, and this is what gives the letters their warmth and readability.

²¹ This latter has been identified as a German Dominican, Peter Schwarz. See Ágnes Ritoók Szalay, 'Peregrinazioni erudite nel regno di Mattia Corvino' in: *Italia e Ungheria all'epoca dell'Umanesimo corviniano*, ed. S. Graciotti e C. Vasoli, Florence, 1994, pp. 61-70.

²² Marsilio Ficino, *Epistolarum Liber IX*, 19, *Opera Omnia*, p. 902.

²³ possibly in response to the circulation of damaging spurious letters. See Translators Note, *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino*, London, Vol. 1, 1975, p. 27.

²⁴ Liber VII, Preface, *Opera Omnia*, p. 841, to be published in forthcoming volume of *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino*, vol. 6, London, 1999.

²⁵ *ibid.*

What can we learn of the nature of the relationships from the letters we have available? It is a pity that in very few cases do we have both sides of the exchange. Kristeller found and published five letters from Callimachus that roughly match the three sent in return.²⁶ He also published some of Salviati's letters to Ficino, four of which relate to Ficino's answers.²⁷ Ten letters of Bandini's survive, but none of them is to Ficino, and of Matthias' copious correspondence I have not found a single one that ranks as a humanist letter of the kind we are discussing here. So in the remarks that follow I shall be mainly relying on Ficino's own side of these relationships. Luckily Ficino is a fairly dependable guide, being a friend of truth: 'Only those live truly and happily who live in truth, the fount of true happiness.'²⁸ Occasionally he may be *artificiosus*,²⁹ a user of literary artifice, but he is certainly free of artifice in the sense of guile.

In some cases we can clearly characterise the relationships: with Callimachus he is playful and intimate. In his first letter, a response to Callimachus' challenge on *daemonic* thinking, Ficino shows how Callimachus is nonetheless beneficiary of the gifts of such daemons, and calls him *Polydaemon*.³⁰ When Callimachus complained then of fiery spirits, causing his house to burn down, Ficino turns serious: picking up his cue from an Orphic poem Callimachus had sent him five years earlier, he reminds him that fire will bring the ultimate destruction of the whole creation. 'Besides,' he says, 'you were looking for light in your books and your books were turned into light for you.' Prometheus' theft of fire and wisdom from the gods has been redeemed at last. 'What can we divine from this for you, my friend? You will in the end shine more in death than in life.'³¹ For Ficino, life does not end with death but includes eternity: the life of the soul when it leaves the prison house of the body, and returns to its homeland in its pure and shining form, an eternal ray of the Divine Sun.³²

Yet he is no gloomy salvationist, nor does he lack zest for the details of daily life, or considerable insight into the workings of the mind. His love of music and poetry, his care for the health of scholars, his praise of fine wine and ginger and almonds,³³ his genuine delight in the suc-

²⁶ P. O. Kristeller, *Supplementum Ficinianum*, Florence, 1937-45, Vol. II, pp. 224-230.

²⁷ *Ibid.* pp. 291-304.

²⁸ *Letters*, Vol. 5, 1994, p. 41

²⁹ This adjective is used by Ficino to describe his own style in the title of a letter to Bandini, *Liber VII*, 30.

³⁰ Letter VIII, 6, *Opera Omnia*, pp. 865-6.

³¹ Letter VIII, 61, *Opera Omnia*, p. 891.

³² Ficino's letter to Ferrante, *Oraculum Alfonsi Regis*, presents Ficino's view of the life of the soul after death in the form of an imaginative description, recounted by the soul of Alfonso, revisiting his son from heaven. *Letters*, Vol. 5, 1994, pp. 24-30.

³³ C. V. Kaske and J. R. Clark, *Marsilio Ficino: Three Books on Life*, Binghamton, 1989, which will be referred to hereafter as *De Vita*. On wine, ginger, almonds and other happy substances, see especially Book II, chapters VII-IX.

cess of others³⁴ and in friendship all shine through the pages of his work. *Vita* and *felicitas* are obviously prime concerns.

Yet underneath all this there is a seriousness of intent: a preference for the life of the soul rather than the life of the body. In the letter introducing the *Life of Plato*, he says, "True philosophy is the ascent from the things which flow and rise and fall to those which truly are, and always remain the same."³⁵ "The minds of those practising philosophy, having recovered their wings through wisdom and justice, as soon as they have left the body, fly back to the heavenly kingdom. In heaven they perform the same duties as on earth. United with God in truth, they rejoice. United with each other in freedom they give thanks. They watch over men dutifully, and as interpreters of God and as prophets, what they have set in motion here they complete there. They turn the minds of men towards God. They interpret the secret mysteries of God to human minds."³⁶

He also speaks of the unique part the ruler has to play in this: "The Golden Age will return only when power and wisdom come together in the same mind... Philosophy... is the ascent of the mind from the lower regions to the highest and from darkness to light. Its origin is an impulse of the divine mind; its middle steps are the faculties and the disciplines which we have described; its end is the possession of the highest good. Finally its fruit is the right government of men."³⁷

What brings these two trends together is a belief in the practicality of philosophy. He sent to Nicholas Báthory in May 1479 a copy of one of the *Keys to Platonic Wisdom*, the praise of philosophy written earlier for his close friend, the Venetian diplomat Bernardo Bembo. Here he states "If life is a kind of activity, and the finer the activity the finer the life, then surely contemplation... is... the greatest and most distinguished life; ... For unlike sense it does not deal with the impure, false and fickle delight arising from external images but... it feeds on and rejoices at that which is pure, true and permanent. I say it takes boundless joy in the boundless and, what is more important, such a life, being most near to the life of God, is transformed into his perfect image."³⁸

³⁴ e.g. letters of congratulation to Cardinal Riario, *Letters*, Vol. 4 p.43 and to Bandini, VIII, 48 *Opera Omnia*, p. 886.

³⁵ *Letters*, vol. 3, 1981 p. 28. This letter, to Giovanni Francesco Ippolito, Count of Gazzoldo, immediately precedes the *Life* in the collected letters. Originally the two items together formed the introduction to the *Philebus Commentary*, ready in its early form in 1469, and used as the text for public lectures given on Plato in the Camaldolese church of Santa Maria degli Angeli or possibly in Brunelleschi's unfinished Rotunda on the same site. See Michael J. B. Allen, *Marsilio Ficino: The Philebus Commentary*, Los Angeles and London, 1979. If in the Rotunda, Michael Allen has pointed to the doubly symbolic circumstance, as Brunelleschi's design for the sacred space contained conscious echoes of the architecture of the pagan Pantheon. See also Ficino, *Letters*, vol. 3, 1981, p. 88, n. 1 and Notes 4 and 50 of the present article.

³⁶ *Letters*, vol. 3, 1981 p. 28.

³⁷ *ibid.*

³⁸ Letter to Bernardo Bembo, Venetian statesman and fellow humanist, *Letters*, Vol. 1, 1975, pp. 188-9.

He describes contemplation as the queen of all the arts. The senses should serve reason, active reason should serve contemplative reason, and contemplation should serve God. Although seemingly inactive, the practical use of such contemplation is to guide all our activity towards success. 'Contemplation is the light and eye of action, and God is the light and eye of contemplation.'³⁹

Ficino offers his friends every encouragement to pursue this path, the only way to real happiness, and he communicates his own enthusiasm for the undertaking. In his letters to Matthias he is keen to impress upon him both the urgency of the task, and the real power he has to undertake it. Thus it is no idle rhetoric when, quoting Virgil, he tells Matthias to 'set the Ocean as the shores of his sway and the stars as the limits of his glory'.⁴⁰ Keenly aware of Matthias' interest in scholarship and mysteries, he has every confidence that 'sustained at once by a wonderful power and wisdom in these years of manifest decline, (he) will provide once more a sanctuary to the wise and powerful Pallas, that is, the philosophic schools of the Greeks.'⁴¹

Whether Ficino is alluding here to Matthias' plans to found a new university to eclipse all the other universities of Europe, I doubt.⁴² Less still should these remarks be considered as an overture to a closer relationship of patronage. We can dismiss any suggestion that Ficino was seeking a patron in the way that so many sought reward at Matthias' court.⁴³ Though we know he had financial problems – relations with Lorenzo de' Medici cooled after 1477 and there is even a rare mention of his having no way of providing for his nephews and goddaughter⁴⁴ – yet we know he did not consider material reward important. He had a house, and books to work on, and all that he needed for his own spiritual and material welfare in Florence. Through Nicholas Báthory, Matthias did invite Ficino to go and teach in Buda as early as 1479.⁴⁵ The invitation was repeated, but politely declined in 1482 with four alternative elegant excuses.⁴⁶ In 1482

³⁹ *ibid.*

⁴⁰ Letters, Vol. 2, 1978, p. 5

⁴¹ Letters, Vol. 3, 1981, p. 78

⁴² These plans are discussed in detail in Tibor Klaniczay, 'Egyetem Magyarországon Mátyás korában' (The University in Hungary in the time of Mátyás) *Irodalomtörténeti Közlemények*, 1990, XCIV, 5-6 pp. 575-613 and in my paper 'Education and the Church in Hungary and Transylvania, 1490-1530,' see note 2 above.

⁴³ See Shayne Mitchell, *The De Comparatione Rei Publicae et Regni (1489-92) of Aurelio Lippo Brandolini*, M. Phil Thesis, Warburg Institute, London 1985. Humanist works dedicated to Matthias are also listed in Jolán Balogh, *A művészet Mátyás király udvarában*, Budapest, 1966, Vol. I, pp. 656-60.

⁴⁴ Letter VIII, 25 *Opera Omnia*, p. 874

⁴⁵ Matthias had previously invited John Argyropoulos, but after protracted negotiations for release from his contract with the City of Florence, he eventually left for Rome. For this episode, in 1471, see Sebastiano Gentile, 'Marsilio Ficino e l'Ungheria di Mattia Corvino', *op. cit.*, p. 95.

⁴⁶ Letter VIII, 43, *Opera Omnia*, p. 884 'It would be a wonder for me to leave the home of my birth, whether Saturn, rising for us in Aquarius, were to prevent the change, which

he proposed that Salvini his cousin should go in his place. This never happened. Whether the suggestion was therefore also a polite artifice is harder to discern. The fact that Salvini wrote his own personal dedication at the end of the copy of Book IV of the Letters that he transcribed for Matthias suggests that there was a genuine intention of making the journey. Yet in August 1483 he writes to a friend that Ficino was telling him not to go.⁴⁷ Vasoli suggests that this may have less to do with the Hungarian court and more to do with Salvini increasingly distancing himself from Ficino's views on certain controversial matters.⁴⁸

Whether the situation would have been different had Matthias succeeded in establishing the university he planned for Buda is an interesting hypothetical question. The plans for this were grandiose: a seven storey palace of the liberal arts to be built on the banks of the Danube, which would draw the finest scholars of Europe.⁴⁹ I am not suggesting that Ficino would have gone there to teach in person. The reasons he gave in 1482 were genuine. His health was not good. He did not move out of Florence any further than to go to Careggi. He had more than enough work to do, or, as he says, his frailty of body, his contemplative nature, his Chaldean daemon and Saturn his star all conspired to keep him where he was.⁵⁰ But had Matthias' dream of an Academy been realised, we could expect there might have been some focus on Ficino's ideas.

Or can we? Does it need a university to teach what Ficino was keen to convey? In the letter of 1487 to Matthias, Ficino clearly envisages the teaching of philosophy in a religious context: he invokes the crucifixion to show 'how much God has done for our soul.' and proposes to 'present the philosophy of our Plato in the midst of this our Church... in this temple of the angels.'⁵¹ He calls upon Matthias personally to undertake the quest and ends, 'We must first of all acknowledge our soul, through which we are able happily to look upon the adorable face of our Father as if in a mirror.'⁵²

In a sense Ficino was already represented at the court of Matthias, by Bandini. Whether he taught formally in the Dominican Főiskola (Col-

perhaps an astrologer will judge, or whether some guiding spirit forbid it of the kind a Magus might suppose, or whether my feeble frame unfit for hardships prevents my travelling, or whether a mind that is always intent on contemplation bids me keep repose.'

⁴⁷ The manuscript for Matthias is Wolfenbüttel, Herzog August Bibliothek, 12 Aug. 4. (3011). To his friend, Vat. Lat. 5140, 132r quoted in Cesare Vasoli, *Brevi considerazioni su Sebastiano Salvini, in Italia e Ungheria all'epoca dell'Umanesimo corviniano*, ed. S. Graciotti e C. Vasoli, Florence, 1994, pp. 131-2, n. 67.

⁴⁸ *ibid.*, p. 131.

⁴⁹ See note 42 above.

⁵⁰ Letter VIII, 43 to Nicholas Báthory, *Opera*, p. 884, see note 46 above.

⁵¹ Letter VIII, 47, *Opera Omnia*, p. 885. This letter draws on material from the Philebus lectures of 1469 delivered in Santa Maria degli Angeli or the Brunelleschi Rotunda. While his remarks had special significance for the original church in which they were delivered, as noted above (note 35), their general intention remains relevant in any ecclesiastical setting.

⁵² *ibid.*

lege) I have not yet been able to confirm satisfactorily. Bandini was not a first rank intellectual. He was certainly not of the stature of Regiomontanus or other leading professors. Yet he was persuasive and interesting, and it is possible to imagine that within the *Studium Generale* run by the Dominicans in the St Nicholas cloister his accounts of the gatherings in Florence to celebrate Plato's birthday would have made a pleasant addition to the daily routine of lessons, once the essential harmony of Platonism and Christianity had been established. The harmonization of classical and Christian thinking had been at the root of Ficino's endeavours. In a letter to Rome written probably between 1481 and 1483 Ficino writes 'that we are led to truth by a two-fold path, that of authority and reason.'⁵³ He can cite St Augustine as a precedent in this: 'He puts the authority of Christ before all others, but the statements of reason which accord most closely with this authority he finds only in the Platonic writings, among which, he says, almost the whole of the opening of St John's Gospel could find a place.'

The value of studying Platonic philosophy is 'so that all those subtle minds who find it difficult to yield to the sole authority of divine law may at least yield in the end to the reasoning of Plato, which gives its full support to religion.'⁵⁴

Ficino tells Bandini that in the circles of the court he must be Plato's host, his herald and his defender.⁵⁵ We have every reason to believe that Bandini took this charge seriously, and that his commitment to furthering what we might loosely call Ficino's Platonism was sincere.

To be assured of this we need look no further than the letter he sent to the relatives of Simone Gondi. The Gondi episode is instructive in its entirety, and helps to counter any suggestion that Bandini was merely a dilettante place seeker.⁵⁶ For Bandini undertook the nursing of a young Florentine business trainee who had caught the plague in 1479 and

⁵³ Letter VII, 21 to Archbishop Niccolini, *Opera Omnia*, p. 855.

⁵⁴ *ibid.*

⁵⁵ Letter VIII, 15, *Opera Omnia*, p. 870

⁵⁶ This reputation rests on three things: (I) his role as generous host in the Platonic convivium celebrated in Ficino's *De Amore*; (II) the paucity of writings left behind and their spontaneous, idiosyncratic style; (III) the fact that one of these few documents consists of an extravagant praise of the Naples of Ferrante, on whom posterity passed extremely unfavourable judgement. The first of these items should not condemn him; the third is not as simple as it seems, since the most recent interpretations of Ferrante suggest a more favourable view. See J. Bentley, *Politics and Culture in Renaissance Naples*, Princeton, 1987, pp. 21-22 and David Abulafia, 'The Crown and Economy under Ferrante I of Naples' in *City and Countryside in Late Medieval and Renaissance Italy*, ed. Trevor Dean and Chris Wickham, London, 1990. This leaves only the second argument, which still allows room for the talents of a devoted and active organiser, even if not for a literary giant. Any reading of his character should take full account of his role in Hungary, which included being entrusted by the King with delicate and complex diplomatic negotiations with the Pope over Ancona in 1488. All Bandini's known writings are published by P. O. Kristeller in: *Studies in Renaissance Thought and Letters*, pp. Rome, 1956, pp. 395-435.

fled to Visegrád. At first Bandini thought he too would die of the contagion, and he took himself off to a secluded place in the forest, 'scared of his own death.' When it became clear he was not infected, he returned to Vác and penned a dialogue of consolation to the relatives of the young man, though he did not know them. It represents an imaginative attempt to share with complete strangers Platonic ideas on the immortality of the soul, and although it is written in Tuscan, or a Tuscan-Latin mixture that is at times difficult to read, it has an immediacy that is very appealing.

Bandini was not afraid to present Platonic teachings to the uninitiated, but Ficino was a master in the art of presentation. He could be infinitely resourceful, using imagery, fables, imaginative settings and devices.⁵⁷ He was painstaking, maintaining the highest accuracy in translation and expression, courageous and persistent, drafting three versions of a letter to Pope Sixtus IV to persuade him to desist from his policies of destructive aggression.⁵⁸

Ficino could find an infinite variety of ways to express and communicate the beliefs he held dear. Yet the variety flowed from a constant source. The substance of Ficino's teachings is what matters and this stays the same. While we can see various developments, or changes of emphasis according to which classical texts he was absorbed in at the time, there is nonetheless a singularity of purpose underlying them all. What is the key to this singularity of purpose? When Cosimo chose Ficino to learn Greek, to study Plato and to translate Hermes, the direction was set that would hold for his whole life. But there was another external impulse, connected with the words of George Gemistos Plethon, who lectured in Florence on a practical, spiritual turning: a quest that both Cosimo and Ficino took to heart: I think it is not fanciful to see in Plethon's *Chaldaean Oracles* material which, when meditated upon, called forth a response.

Dixeo su yuchs oceton...

Seek out the escape channel of your soul, from which... having been in bondage to the body, you may rise again to that rank from which you were drawn, perceiving that action is in the holy word.

Mhde catw neushs...

*And do not incline downwards for an abyss lies under the earth, which leads down to the steps of the seven-paths, under which is the terrible throne of necessity.*⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Examples of this are his Oracle to Ferrante, spoken by his late father King Alfonso in the Angelic tongue from heaven. *Letters*, Vol. 5, pp. 23-30; the personification of Philosophy addressing the young Riario; *ibid.*, Vol. 4, pp. 37-42; and the personified scene of the Dialogues of Plato coming forward to meet Braccio Martelli as he enters the Academy, Letter VIII, 8, *Opera Omnia*, pp.866-7. Gentle humour and irony are used frequently too.

⁵⁸ *Letters*, Vol. 5, 1994, pp. 3-8, 15-20 and p. 93.

⁵⁹ I am much indebted to Brigitte Tambrun-Krasker's recent edition of the Chaldean Oracles and commentary of Plethon, which presents the Greek text and French translation, together with an Arabic recension by Michael Tardieu, under the title *Μαγικά λογία των απο Ζωροαστρου μαγων*, Athens, 1995. The English is my own.

These new strange words echoed and expanded the biblical quest: 'See, I have set before thee this day life and good, and death and evil... the blessing and the curse; choose life that thou mayest live.'⁶⁰

Ficino's gift to his followers was to show that Chaldaean, Egyptian and Greek words of wisdom could be welcomed back into the Christian fold, not only as a source of intellectual inspiration but as real teachings, for life.

What concerned him was not just that Platonic doctrines should be understood but that the understanding should inform the life in every aspect of conduct and emotion. In the *Proemium* to Book III of *De Vita*, dedicated to Matthias, the concern of philosophy – both of natural philosophy based on observation of the elements and the world around us, and of speculative philosophy which includes astronomy and astrology – is life and happiness. Neither is of any use unless they lead to that, *ad vitam felicitatemque*.

We cannot here do justice to the question of astrology, though it is, in the Hungarian context, a key issue. The letter to Péter Váradi and the exchange with Janus discussed above are both concerned with it;⁶¹ the *De Vita* lies at the heart of it;⁶² and Matthias and his circle, as we know, were crucially interested in it. Independent evidence for this includes the concentration of specialists in astronomy at the University of Pozsony from 1472,⁶³ the surviving fresco at Esztergom of an archway decorated with the signs of the Zodiac for use in observation; and reports of an astronomical observatory in Oradea.⁶⁴ The dedication of the *De Vita* to Matthias took account of his deep interests in these matters. However this book, together with the Hermetic texts, led to Ficino's acclaim by followers of occult science in the 16th and 17th centuries. It is therefore necessary, without entering fully into the debate that has raged about Ficino's astrology,⁶⁵ to quote his own disclaimer: 'In all things which I discuss here or elsewhere, I intend to assert only so much as is approved by the Church'⁶⁶

⁶⁰ In the beautiful poetry of Deuteronomy the injunction to take to heart the Lord's commandments and apply them in life forms a peroration at the end of the Pentateuch, before the death of Moses. In Deuteronomy 29,9 all of the people are called out to be reminded of this teaching, which are summed up in the verses quoted above, Deuteronomy 30, vv. 15 and 18.

⁶¹ Letters, Vol. 3, 1981, pp. 75-7 and Liber VIII, 19 and 20, Opera Omnia, pp. 871-2. These are both very fully discussed in Michael J. B. Allen, 'Nuptial Arithmetic, ch. 4 'Jupiter, the Stars, and the Golden Age,' pp. 106-142.

⁶² See introductory chapters to Kaske and Clarke, op. cit., esp. pp. 17-71. Eugenio Garin, *Astrology in the Renaissance: The Zodiac of Life*, tr. C. Jackson, J. Allen, and C. Robertson, London 1983, (Bari 1976) sets the debate in a wider context, esp. pp. 56-82.

⁶³ Especially Regiomontanus, who had been Bessarion's pupil, and Martin Ilkusz, See Klaniczay op. cit., p. 579.

⁶⁴ See L. Jardine, *Worldly Goods – A New History of the Renaissance*, London, 1996, p. 202.

⁶⁵ See references in notes 61 and 62 above. The main issues are whether he changed his mind about the value of astrology, and whether he maintained the supremacy of free will over predestination by the stars.

⁶⁶ Verba Marsilii Ficino ad lectorem sequentis libri, on pp. 240-1 of C. Kaske and J. Clark's edition of *De Vita*, Binghampton 1989. Kaske's introductory chapters are a useful introduction to

What this meant is expanded in a long letter to the Duke of Urbino on the Star of the Magi entitled *Divine law cannot be made by the heavens, but may perhaps be indicated by them*.⁶⁷ It gives a clear enough indication that the stars do not cause events, though they may indicate them. When Ficino speaks of the heavenly bodies and their influences on those beneath, we should therefore hold in mind the possibility of a more psychological interpretation. The universe, being essentially one, is full of correspondences. Whatever is on earth is a reflection of what is in heaven.⁶⁸ In discussing the drawing down of influences from the heavens, Ficino is attempting to make sense of the puzzling passages in the Asclepius and in Plotinus. Moreover we should never forget that he is master of the poetic image. The real aim of the *De Vita* remains the finding of the *gubernator* or, in other words, the soul's return to God.⁶⁹

How far were these ideas of a practical philosophy pursued in Matthias' court? In the space that remains I can do no more than throw out some suggestions for further investigation, and invite others familiar with the sources to join me in continuing to explore them.

Bandini was close to the Queen. What was her part in all this? This is difficult to assess, particularly for Hungarians, who have always held her in deep mistrust. She was indeed a fiery hothead. Yet she had a deep commitment to music, which has proved much harder to assess than art, and in her final refuge in Ischia she was recorded as being a bringer of peace to others in their troubles.⁷⁰

Was Bonfini involved in the Platonic quest? Conventional wisdom denies connection between the Ancona humanists and those of Florence. Yet Lazzarelli and his conversion through Hermes may supply the missing link.⁷¹

Again, where should we look to measure the effects of Platonic teachings on the King's thoughts or actions? The Corvina library gives *prima facie* evidence of his interests, but the range of books is very wide – total knowledge was the aim – and there are difficult questions to be answered about who read the books there and to what effect. Certainly art commissions, palace architecture, fountains, gardens, courts, and court entertainment, the whole panoply of state for a philosopher king, all reflect the

the discussion of Ficino's thinking on astrology. Their conclusion is that Ficino was devoutly Christian but also committed to the task of extending human knowledge and understanding.

⁶⁷ Letter VII, 17, *Opera Omnia*, pp. 849-53. This exactly echoes Plotinus' position that the stars signify events but do not cause them.

⁶⁸ cf. Hermes, Asclepius, 24, Copenhagen, op.cit., p. 81.

⁶⁹ Proemium in *Librum De Vita Coelitus Comparanda*, Kaske & Clark, op. cit., pp. 236-9. *Gubernator* is there translated as helmsman, p.237. This term refers to God as guiding principle of the cosmos.

⁷⁰ A. Berzeviczy's biography, Beatrice d'Aragona, 1911 is the best starting place but a modern assessment is sorely needed.

⁷¹ S. M. Mitchell, 'A Most enthusiastic and exaggerated Hermetist. Lodovico Lazzarelli and Renaissance neo-Platonism.' in *Proceedings of the 5th Conference of the International Society for the Study of European Ideas*, Utrecht, 1996, publication forthcoming.

new, humanist concerns. Educational foundations and the increased role of educated administrators in institutional life show humanist ideas at work in ever widening circles. In the Dominican academy of Buda, the next generation of priests was being trained and Florentine ideas were certainly available there. Arguably the education of a priesthood is the education of a nation. Could it be that the resilience in adversity that is so striking a feature of Hungarian life during the troubled times to follow may have had some connection with the teachings of Ficino to his friends in the Buda court?

Tracing a direct connection is not a practical possibility: one cannot just count texts available or follow lines of development in scholarly works. For it is not an academic understanding of Plato or Plotinus that we are pursuing, not even a love of Hermes or an embracing of oriental themes. Ficino's teaching was for life and for happiness. Its practical nature cannot be overstressed. His main topics were love, learning and the soul. Certain of the unity of creation, he was moved to embrace the words of all traditions, and offer his own findings to all who sought them. The practical results of this were that he was able to count all men as his friends. Assuming a common purpose in life opened the doors of his heart to the needs of others. Dialogue flowed. Knowledge was shared, advice arose to meet the recipients needs and Ficino himself felt free to ask in return, whether asking the Pope for peace or whether asking Matthias to free the unfortunate friar Vincentius, imprisoned for inadvertently breaking currency control regulations while on an official tax collecting mission – and then, when he was freed, to dare to ask again that Vincentius' money be restored to him.⁷²

For all the disciplines that Ficino so often describes himself as being under, those disciplines ruled by stern unbending Saturn,⁷³ a real freedom becomes apparent. We see the clear sight and quick wit of Mercury, the humanity and urbanity of Venus, the magnanimity of Mars and the *gravitas* of Jupiter.⁷⁴ Above all we see an abundant enjoyment of life, and a path

⁷² Letter VIII, 32, Opera Omnia, p. 880; VIII, 52, p. 888; and IX, 6 p. 896

⁷³ The conception of Saturn as a malevolent force imposing melancholy and suffering is perhaps more safely applied to Dürer's famous drawing than to Ficino's character. See R. Klibansky, E. Panofsky and F. Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy: Studies in the History of Natural Philosophy and Art*, London, 1964. Although Ficino does make remarks about his own melancholic tendencies, his Saturn presides also over saints, ascetics and madmen. It thus suggests an exacting master, who nevertheless cannot be separated from one's own inner inspiration.

⁷⁴ I am here following the attribution of qualities to the planets or gods used by Ficino in Letter VIII, 6 to Callimachus. It may be compared with the linking of planets to personal characteristics in the famous letter to Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici, *Letters*, Vol.4, 1988, pp. 61-63, which has in turn been linked to Botticelli's *Primavera* and to a controversy involving many illustrious historians of art. The most important sources for this discussion are Edgar Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance*, London, 1958, reissued 1980; Sir Ernst Gombrich, *Symbolic Images*, London, 1972, reprinted 1993, pp. 31-81, where the challenges to the thesis are reviewed in addition to the original thesis being represented; and Charles

to happiness. This was his example. And his teaching can be summed up in the words of Ficino's letter to Mankind, 'Know yourself offspring of God in mortal clothing... When the earthly grime has been removed you will at once see pure gold... Then, believe me, you will revere yourself as an eternal ray of the divine sun and you will not venture to contemplate or undertake any base or worthless action in your own presence...'⁷⁵

Dempsey, 'Mercurius Ver: the sources of Botticelli's Primavera,' *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, XXXI, 1968, pp. 251-73.

⁷⁵ Letters, Vol. 1, 1974, pp. 164-6.