

REVIEW ARTICLE

RENAISSANCE PHILOSOPHY

Christopher C. Celenza (ed.): *Angelo Poliziano's Lamia: Text, Translation, and Introductory Studies*, Brill's Studies in Intellectual History 189 (Leiden: Brill, 2010) pp. 272. \$140 (hb). ISBN 978-9004-18590-6.

Stephen Clucas, Peter J. Forshaw, Valery Rees (eds): *Laus Platonici Philosophi: Marsilio Ficino and His Influence*, Brill's Studies in Intellectual History 198 (Leiden: Brill, 2011) pp. 384. \$183 (hb). ISBN 978-9004-18897-6.

1. INTRODUCTION

Of all the periods in the history of philosophy, Renaissance philosophy is one of the more neglected and maligned backwaters, at least in the company of historians of philosophy. Although there is a steady stream of excellent work by intellectual historians and literary scholars, on the whole philosophers have remained far more sceptical about the period.¹ A recent volume exploring philosophical themes from the thirteenth to the seventeenth centuries by Robert Pasnau, aimed at making connections between medieval and early modern philosophy, is sceptical about the importance of the period in the few remarks it offers.²

¹ The label 'Renaissance' is itself a contested term, famously used to refer to a distinct period and intellectual movement by Nietzsche's Basel colleague Jacob Burckhardt (in *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, trans. S. G. C. Middlemore [Oxford: Phaidon, 1945]), but whose value has been increasingly called into question. The chronological limits of the period it is used to refer to are equally contested, ranging from a narrow 1400-1500 to a much broader 1350-1600. For present purposes I use the label 'Renaissance philosophy' to refer to that period in the history of philosophy that falls between the better defined periods of medieval philosophy and early modern philosophy. Inevitably there is overlap at either end.

² See Robert Pasnau, *Metaphysical Themes 1274-1671* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), who writes (p. 93) "It is perhaps too much to say that there is *no* philosophy in authors like Giovanni Pico della Mirandola and Marsilio Ficino" and (p. 419) "the so-called Renaissance philosophers". Note also the recent event at the British Academy (the Dawes Hicks Symposium 'Continuity and Innovation in Medieval and Modern Philosophy of Knowledge, Mind and Language', held on the 28th October 2011), that focused on making connections between medieval and early modern philosophy, while passing over Renaissance philosophy in silence.

This was not always so. Last century Ernst Cassirer and Paul Oskar Kristeller both wrote philosophical and historically informed studies of themes in Renaissance philosophy, and Kristeller of course went on to do so much to shape the modern discipline of Renaissance Studies.³ The two collaborated with John Herman Randall to produce an anthology of translated texts published in 1948, and in the introduction to that volume Kristeller mapped out the philosophy of the period.⁴ Although some now question the rigid divisions proposed by Kristeller, even so his framework remains a valuable point of departure and it will be helpful briefly to outline it here.

Kristeller suggests that philosophy in the Renaissance was dominated by three distinct movements: Humanism, Platonism, and Aristotelianism.⁵ The question whether Humanism ought to count as a philosophical movement (and in particular whether Humanists deserve to be called philosophers) is one that we shall turn to shortly. Recent work by Lodi Nauta has done an excellent job in showing the philosophical significance of the work of the Humanist Lorenzo Valla.⁶ But note that even if one were deeply sceptical about the philosophical credentials of the Humanists, Kristeller's model emphasizes that Renaissance thought was shaped by other, unambiguously philosophical, movements as well. We shall turn to the Platonic movement associated with Marsilio Ficino later on. As for the continuity of the medieval Aristotelian tradition, those modern scholars making connections between medieval and early modern philosophy should note that Kristeller's model already accommodates the continuity of Aristotelianism through to the seventeenth century, as well as encompassing the Humanist and Platonic traditions that they tend to overlook.⁷

³ See Ernst Cassirer, *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy*, trans. Mario Domandi (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1963), and Paul Oskar Kristeller, *The Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino*, trans. Virginia Conant (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943).

⁴ Ernst Cassirer, Paul Oskar Kristeller, John Herman Randall, eds, *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948). The 'General Introduction' is credited to Kristeller and Randall; I refer just to Kristeller partly for the sake of brevity and partly because the theme I mention was a recurrent one in Kristeller's work (see e.g. the opening three chapters of his *Renaissance Thought and its Sources* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1979]).

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁶ Lodi Nauta, *In Defense of Common Sense: Lorenzo Valla's Humanist Critique of Scholastic Philosophy*, I Tatti Studies in Italian Renaissance History (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

⁷ On the topic of the continuation of the Scholastic tradition through the Renaissance and into the early modern period it is worth noting two recent collections of essays devoted to the philosophy of Francisco Suárez: Daniel Schwartz, ed., *Interpreting Suárez: Critical*

2. POLIZIANO

Kristeller's threefold division of Renaissance philosophy is a useful point of departure but has been criticized for implying rigid divisions between three distinct movements. Inevitably things are never quite so neat and clear cut, and I doubt Kristeller was ever naive enough to think they were. A case in point is Angelo Poliziano, famed as a Humanist, but also closely associated with the Platonic circle around Marsilio Ficino, who towards the end of his career lectured on Aristotle. Just as modern academic philosophers might question Poliziano's status as a philosopher proper, so too did his contemporaries, and Aristotelian philosophers working within a broadly Scholastic tradition attacked Poliziano for moving onto their turf by attempting to lecture on the Stagirite.

Poliziano began his foray into teaching Aristotle with a series of lectures on the *Nicomachean Ethics* in 1490-91, followed by lectures on parts of the *Organon* (*Categories*, *On Interpretation*, also the *Sophistical Refutations*) in 1491-92, and then a series of lectures on the *Prior Analytics* in 1492-93. In the opening lecture to the last of these, his *Praelectio in Priora Aristotelis Analytica*, Poliziano responded to his critics via a series of reflections on the nature of philosophy and the relationship between philosophy and philology. This *Praelectio* has gained the alternative title *Lamia* as Poliziano opens by characterizing his critics as *lamias*, busybodies with removable eyes who gossip about the business of others when out and about, but with no perception of themselves when at home. This leads on to a discussion about the nature of the philosopher. Poliziano begins with a somewhat unflattering account of Pythagoras (reputed to be the first person to use the word 'philosopher') that implies that *not* being a philosopher is no bad thing. However, as the discussion progresses Poliziano offers a more thoughtful and positive account of what it means to be a philosopher, drawing on various Platonic sources as well as Iamblichus' *Protrepticus*. On this account the philosopher is someone with self-knowledge who takes care of his soul, and so cultivates virtue. This turns the tables on the Scholastic *lamias*, who claim to be philosophers but lack the necessary self-knowledge and so fail to live up to the ancient definition that Poliziano is keen to resurrect. Poliziano is happy to admit he doesn't meet this ancient standard himself, at the same time implying that neither do his critics. Instead Poliziano is content to call himself an interpreter of Aristotle rather than a philosopher, but he then goes on to add that his role as a philologist

Essays (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), and Benjamin Hill and Henrik Lagerlund, eds, *The Philosophy of Francisco Suárez* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

(*grammaticus*) places him above all other disciplines, including philosophy, and this makes him qualified to interpret *any* kind of text. The earlier sudden shift from mocking to idolizing the philosopher is followed by this sudden shift from modesty to megalomania. Poliziano admits he has no formal training in philosophy but adds that he is well versed in the ancient Greek commentators on Aristotle, implying that this is a far better qualification to interpret Aristotle than a contemporary scholastic education.

The recent volume edited by Christopher Celenza comprises a series of introductory essays by various hands followed by the text of the *Praelectio/Lamia* with a facing translation and notes. The text is taken from the critical edition prepared by Ari Wesseling and the notes draw on Wesseling's commentary.⁸ Celenza's new volume offers the first translation of the text into English and the essays by various hands offer a number of interesting contextual discussions. However, it is a supplement to Wesseling's volume rather than a replacement and anyone seriously interested in the text will still want to have Wesseling's volume to hand. Celenza's translation is highly readable, rendering the text into an accessible modern idiom. The text and translation are divided into numbered paragraphs, whereas Wesseling's text is not, his commentary referring simply to page and line numbers of his edition. So one minor gripe is that it would have been helpful to have had included Wesseling's page and line numbers in order to ease cross-reference to his commentary, not to mention being able to cite the text according to a single system of reference.

But before one gets to the text and translation Celenza offers us four introductory essays, one by his own hand and others by Francesco Caruso, Igor Candido, and Denis J.-J. Robichaud. Celenza's own essay offers a helpful overview of both the text and the context in which it was written and as such forms a fine introduction. An attempt to draw a parallel with Wittgenstein (pp. 34-5) seems a bit tenuous, but the discussion seemed much closer to the mark when emphasizing the presence of Stoic elements alongside the more explicit Platonic and Neoplatonic influences (p. 38).

Caruso's essay attempts to map out connections between Poliziano and John of Salisbury. The discussion is informed and interesting but, for this reviewer, ultimately unconvincing. It is true that John of Salisbury was also a Humanistically minded commentator on Aristotle's logic but there is no real evidence presented for the claim that Poliziano drew on John's *Metalogicon* and the textual parallels outlined on pp. 82-3 seem somewhat thin. Even so, Caruso's placing of Poliziano's text within a tradition

⁸ Angelo Poliziano, *Lamia: Praelectio in Priora Aristotelis Analytica*, ed. Ari Wesseling (Leiden: Brill, 1986).

stretching back through Petrarch to the Humanism of the twelfth century is a helpful and worthwhile exercise in contextualization.

Candido seeks to consider the *Praelectio/Lamia* alongside the famous epistolary debate between Giovanni Pico della Mirandola and Ermolao Barbaro on the relative merits of Humanism and Scholasticism.⁹ Doing so makes good sense but, again, although Candido's essay is packed with helpful contextual material, it doesn't quite manage to deliver. It is only after 25 or so pages of preamble that we finally turn to the Pico-Barbaro exchange and the essay ends before reaching any kind of detailed analysis of the parallels between the claims of the two texts.

Robichaud's essay addressing Poliziano's debts to Neoplatonism is likely to be the one of most interest to historians of philosophy. Unsurprisingly one of the themes that emerges in this essay is Poliziano's intellectual relationship with Ficino, and Robichaud suggests that both were "doing stylistic readings of Plotinus's *Enneads* around the same time and in dialogue with each other" (p. 135). Poliziano's debts to Iamblichus in the *Praelectio/Lamia* are explicit (Celenza § 58; Wesseling p. 13,38) but rather than go over these in too much detail Robichaud focuses his attention on wider issues concerning Neoplatonic models of textual interpretation in Plotinus, Porphyry, and Proclus, focusing on late ancient debates about the relationship between philosophy and philology. Although chronologically more distant, this close attention to the texts that Poliziano (and Ficino) were actually reading offers the most enlightening window into Poliziano's way of thinking.

Notwithstanding the few critical comments above, all of the essays have much to offer and the volume as a whole does a fine job in making Poliziano's little-known text significantly more accessible.

3. FICINO

As I have noted, one of the themes in the essays discussing Poliziano's *Praelectio/Lamia* is Poliziano's relationship with Ficino. While Robichaud stresses their shared debt to Neoplatonism others, noting Ficino's debt to Scholastic ways of doing philosophy, align him with the *lamias*. The

⁹ Pico's letter to Barbaro is available in English translation in Arturo B. Fallico and Herman Shapiro, eds, *Renaissance Philosophy I: The Italian Philosophers* (New York: The Modern Library, 1967), 105-17. I also note a helpful discussion of the debate in another relatively recent book on Renaissance philosophy: Jill Kraye, 'Pico on the Relationship of Rhetoric and Philosophy' in M. V. Dougherty, ed., *Pico della Mirandola: New Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 13-36.

volume as a whole tends to vacillate between presenting Poliziano and Ficino as mutual admirers or intellectual adversaries.

Ficino is the subject of another recent book on Renaissance philosophy, a collection of essays also published in the series *Brill's Studies in Intellectual History*. This collection has its origins in a conference held in London in 2004. It is in many ways a companion piece to a previous collection of essays on Ficino also inspired by a London conference, published in 2002.¹⁰ Both volumes also share a co-editor (Rees), a number of contributors (Toussaint, Hirai, Clucas, Rees), and the earlier volume was also published in the same series (they are volumes 108 and 198). Both volumes address a range of broadly religious themes and both volumes address Ficino's later legacy. Anyone familiar with that earlier volume should find this new volume equally interesting.

The Introduction bullishly asserts that Ficino's importance is well recognized in many fields, including philosophy (p. 1). Alas I fear that is not quite the case yet, even among historians of philosophy (cf. n. 2 above), although the continuing series of Ficino publications in the I Tatti Renaissance Library will hopefully encourage philosophers to start to explore his work more than they have to date.¹¹ A couple of pages later the tone is more defensive but realistic, suggesting that the value of some of the papers to follow is that they challenge the common judgement that Ficino was "primarily a translator rather than an original philosophical thinker" (p. 3).

The first half of the volume is entitled 'The Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino' and its eight papers address a range of themes in his work. Although they all make interesting reading, taken together I doubt they will convince many contemporary philosophers of Ficino's philosophical weight. Contributions include discussions of levitation (Toussaint), astrology (Clydesdale), and the magical power of hymns (Wear). Ficino's relationships with his contemporaries Giovanni Pico della Mirandola and Georgios Gemistos Plethon are recurrent themes (esp. Blum), and we also hear much about his use of and debts to Plato (Aasdalen), Lucretius and Galen (Hankins), and

¹⁰ *Marsilio Ficino: His Theology, His Philosophy, His Legacy*, ed. Michael J. B. Allen and Valery Rees with Martin Davies, Brill's Studies in Intellectual History 108 (Leiden: Brill, 2002).

¹¹ The major step forwards is the edition and translation of Ficino's *Platonic Theology*, by Michael J. B. Allen and James Hankins in 6 volumes (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001-6). This is now being supplemented with a series of volumes devoted to his *Commentaries on Plato*: the first volume (also by Allen) with commentaries on the *Phaedrus* and *Ion* appeared in 2008, and a two-volume edition of his commentary on the *Parmenides* (by Maude Vanhaelen) is scheduled for publication in 2012.

Plotinus (Dillon). A number of the papers in this section focus on material drawn from Ficino's correspondence (Rees, Clydesdale), while the more philosophically interesting contributions are those that get stuck into the details of Ficino's *magnum opus*, the *Platonic Theology*. Particularly worthy of note are the contributions by James Hankins and John Dillon.

Hankins' chapter on 'monstrous melancholy' suggests that the origins of this idea in Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* can be traced back to Ficino. I don't have much to say on the main concern of the chapter but Hankins makes two points about influences on Ficino that are worth noting. The first is that Ficino was a follower of Galen as well as Plato, as much interested in the health of the body as the health of the soul (p. 31). From Galen he took a concern for the body and the idea that the body can affect the soul, both of which temper his Neoplatonism. The second is that Ficino was a fan of Lucretius in his youth and, although he later repudiated it, his familiarity with Lucretius formed an important influence on the development of his mature work (p. 34).¹² One might say that Ficino's *Platonic Theology* is his reply to Lucretius' *On the Nature of Things*. Both of these observations help to complicate our picture of Ficino's philosophical development and to rescue him from the charge of merely regurgitating late Neoplatonism.

Ficino's debt to Neoplatonism is the topic of Dillon's chapter, focusing on Plotinus. It is well known that Ficino was heavily indebted to Proclus – especially in his commentary on Plato's *Parmenides* – but Dillon suggests that Ficino has good reasons to want to distance himself from Proclus due to the latter's multiplication of gods, as well as his claim that the highest principle is, as Dillon puts it, “supra-essential and supra-noetic” (p. 15).

So, notwithstanding his genuine admiration for Proclus and late Neoplatonism, Ficino is theologically committed to downplay these two aspects of Neoplatonic thought. Dillon suggests that the way Ficino tries to do this in his *Platonic Theology* (esp. 2.6, 2.12) is to turn to Plotinus. Although in some respects Plotinus is as committed to these two aspects as Proclus, Dillon draws attention to a number of tractates in the *Enneads* (esp. 6.4-5, 6.8) where they are given much lesser prominence.

In the first of these (the pair *Enn.* 6.4-5) the distinction between Intellect and the One is played down, making it much easier for Ficino to identity

¹² This topic is also addressed in another recent book worth noting: Alison Brown, *The Return of Lucretius to Renaissance Florence*, I Tatti Studies in Italian Renaissance History (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), esp. pp. 92-4, citing a draft of Hankins' chapter.

both with each other and with God. This suits his purposes very well in his construction of a monotheistic Neoplatonism. The second (*Enn.* 6.8) discusses the will of the One, again opening the way for its identification with God. In particular Plotinus' discussion seeks to combine divine freedom with necessity in a way that proves highly appealing to Ficino, who follows a similar line in the *Platonic Theology* (2.12). Dillon points to a series of conceptual (rather than textual) parallels but the lack of explicit textual debt is hardly a problem for his argument given what we know about Ficino's thorough immersion in Plotinus' texts. Dillon stresses at the end that this is not merely a repetition of Plotinian ideas, as Ficino's very different theological context means he has to engage in a creative yet "delicate juggling act" (p. 24) when handling Neoplatonic ideas in a Christian context.

It is a shame that more of the papers in the first half of the volume did not get involved with the detail of philosophical positions in Ficino's substantial philosophical works (such as the *Platonic Theology* or his commentaries on Plato's *Parmenides* or *Sophist*) in the way that Dillon does. For that kind of detailed account of Ficino's philosophy one must look elsewhere.¹³ Having said that, the fact that some of the papers deal with (what now look like) more esoteric themes, rightly highlights the distance between Ficino's conception of philosophy and our own. The role of levitation or astrology in his thought, for instance, have their own rational foundations when approached within the context of the Neoplatonic worldview with which he is operating, and Toussaint and Clydesdale both do admirable jobs in explaining how this is the case.

The second half of the volume is devoted to Ficino's influence. Some of these papers explore his impact beyond the confines of philosophy narrowly conceived, including Italian literature (Panizza), occultism (Clucas), and alchemy (Forshaw). Others tackle more explicitly philosophical topics. Hiro Hirai's chapter examines Ficino's theory of spontaneous generation or, to be more precise, criticisms of Ficino by the Paduan professor of philosophy Fortunio Liceti. Much the chapter is devoted to a close study of Liceti's *On The Spontaneous Generation of Living Beings* (*De spontaneo viventium ortu*) of 1618. Hirai offers a nice account of Liceti's analysis of three distinct Platonist responses to the problem of (apparent) spontaneous generation: 'junior Platonists', who refer to the World-Soul as the cause; 'major Platonists', who refer to the Ideas as the cause; and Ficino, who cites the 'earth's soul' as the cause (as outlined in Book 4 of the *Platonic*

¹³ In many ways Kristeller's monograph (see n. 3 above) remains the best available account of Ficino's *philosophy*, even if it is in some respects outdated, not least due to Kristeller's own subsequent contributions to the field.

Theology). Liceti attacks Ficino's theory, doubting both the existence of an earth's soul and the possibility that such a thing, if it existed, could adequately explain the origin of life. Liceti's objections, as Hirai presents them, seem well founded and they also help to bring into focus Ficino's own view. Indeed, it is a somewhat odd view for a Neoplatonist, effectively proposing the generation of something 'higher' from something 'lower', when we might expect the order of generation to be the other way round. Hirai points to possible influences from Plotinus and Proclus but, following Liceti, also notes potential Stoic sources, via Seneca's *Natural Questions* or Cicero's *On the Nature of the Gods*. This intriguing suggestion closes Hirai's chapter, which notes that more work might be done on this topic.

One of the most philosophically interesting contributions to the whole volume is David Leech's study of the influence of Ficino on the Cambridge Platonist Henry More. Although it is commonly held that Ficino was an important influence on the Cambridge Platonists, there are few direct citations, making pinning down the nature and extent of that influence a difficult task. Leech focuses on More's arguments for the immortality of the soul and the shift in his position that takes place between his earlier philosophical poems and his later prose works. In his later works in particular More draws on Ficinian arguments against the monopsychism of Averroes in order to defend a version of Lockean personal identity (*avant la lettre*), using Ficinian arguments in a philosophical context that Ficino would never have known.

What is especially noteworthy in Leech's account is the way in which it highlights continuity in the history of philosophy. More is working within a distinctively early modern context (responding to Hobbes, pre-empting Locke), drawing on Renaissance arguments (Ficino) in order to respond to a problem inherited from medieval philosophy (Averroist monopsychism). This neatly brings us back to my opening remarks, for what this account does is places Renaissance philosophy in dialogue with both its medieval predecessors and its early modern successors. The final contribution to the volume, by Constance Blackwell, does something similar, examining concordism in Simplicius, Ficino, and Cudworth, emphasizing continuity in a Platonic tradition running through late antiquity, the Renaissance, and the early modern period.

Both of these volumes are welcome additions to the scholarly literature on Renaissance philosophy. Yet they both indicate in different ways how much more work remains to be done. The fact that Celenza's volume makes a text available in English for the very first time highlights the extent to which Renaissance philosophy remains largely uncharted territory for all but a few specialists. Those essays in the volume by Cluclas *et al.* that engage with

Ficino's *Platonic Theology* in particular whet the appetite for more thorough philosophical studies of this work, studies that will continue to draw connections back to late ancient and medieval philosophy, and forwards to early modern philosophy.