

Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499)

DR. FRANCES CLYNES

The Renaissance

‘The great forward movements of the Renaissance all derive their vigour, their emotional impulse, from looking backwards. The cyclic view of time as a perpetual movement from pristine golden ages of purity and truth through successive brazen and iron ages still held sway and the search for truth was thus of necessity a search for the early, the ancient, the original gold from which the baser metals of the present and the immediate past were corrupt degenerations.’

- Frances Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, p. 29.

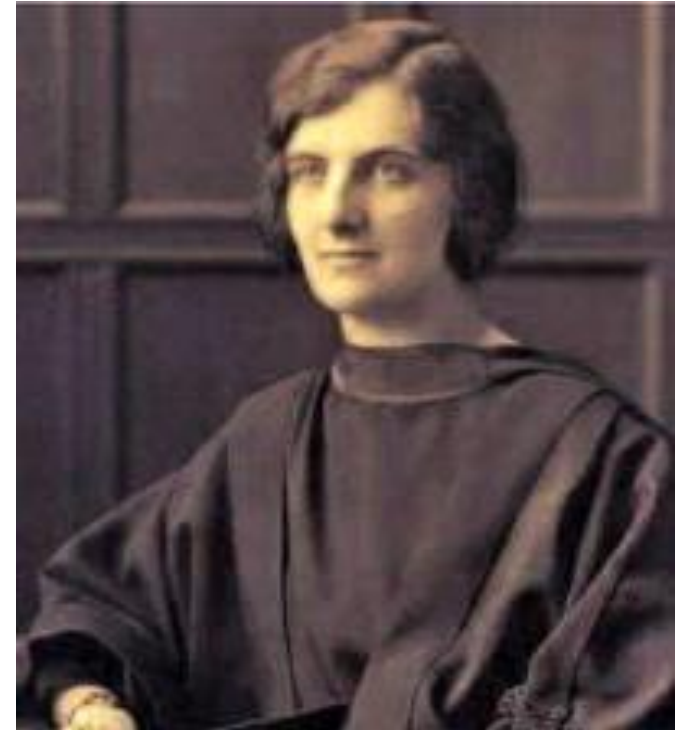
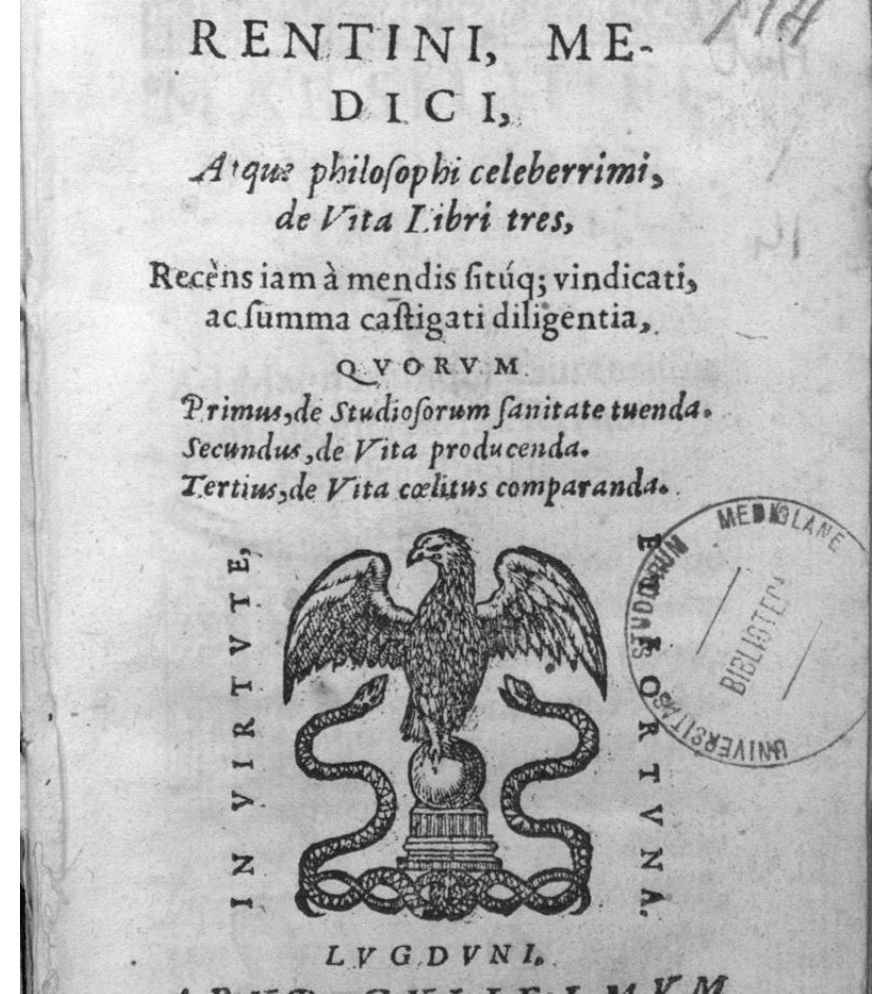


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Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499)

Bio Details

Born in 1433

Learned medicine along with Aristotelian philosophy, from a professor at the University of Florence, where he got most of his formal education.

1451 – Began clerical training

1452 – Met Cosimo de Medici. Became tutor to Lorenzo de Medici

1462 – Given a villa outside Florence by Cosimo de Medici to translate rediscovered classical texts and to head the restored Platonic Academy, which was established that year

1463 – Instructed by Cosimo to prioritise the *Corpus Hermeticum* which he completed the same year

1471 - *Corpus Hermeticum* printed

- There would be 16 re-editions by the end of the century not counting those where it appears with other works

Bio Details

1468/69 – Completed the translation of Plato's dialogues (published in 1484)

1473 – ordained as a Dominican priest. Later became a church official at Florence Cathedral. Came under the patronage of Lorenzo de' Medici

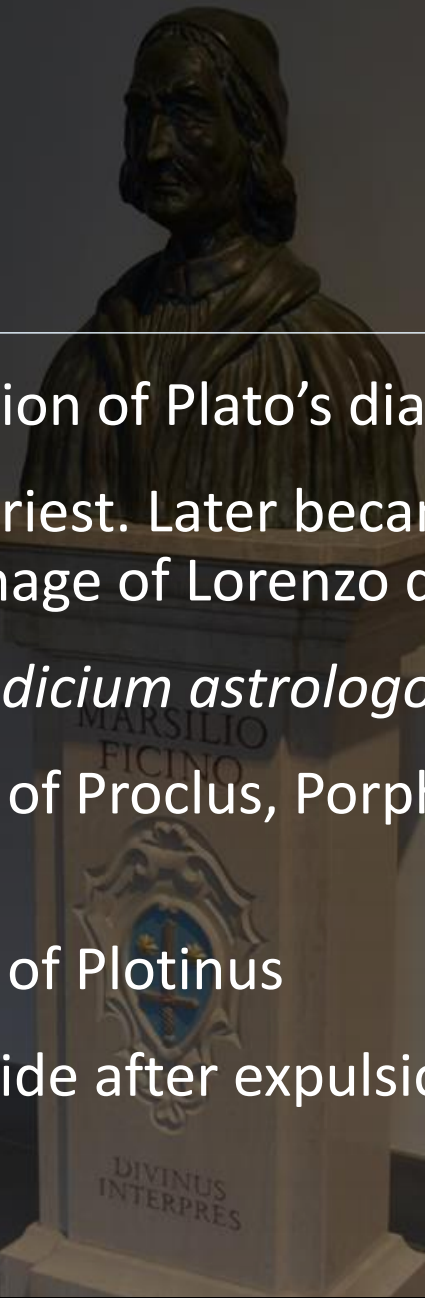
1477 – Wrote *Disputatio contra iudicium astrologorum*

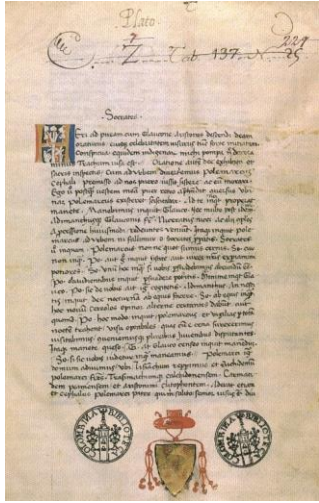
1489 – Completed the translation of Proclus, Porphyry and Iamblichus. Finished writing the *Book of Life*.

1492 – Completed the translation of Plotinus

1494 – Retired to Tuscan countryside after expulsion of the Medici from Florence

Died 1499





Pagan and Christian Texts

Corpus Hermetica

Plato and Neoplatonists

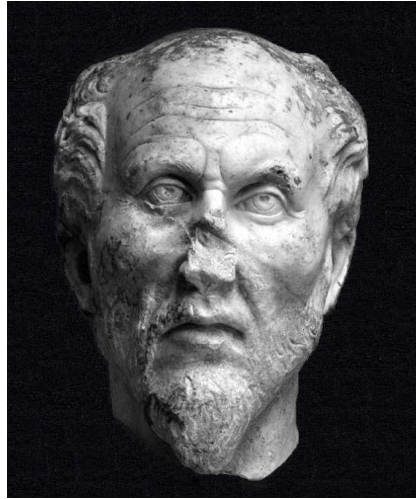
Orphic Hymns

Ptolemy

Picatrix

St. Augustine

St. Thomas Aquinas



Major Works

Platonic Institutiones, 1456

Corpus Hermeticum, 1463

Commentary on Plato's Symposium on Love, 1469

Liber de Christiana religione (Book on the Christian Religion), 1474

Theologia Platonica de immortalitate animae (Platonic Theology), written 1469-1474, published 1484

Commentaries on Plato, finished ca. 1470, published 1484

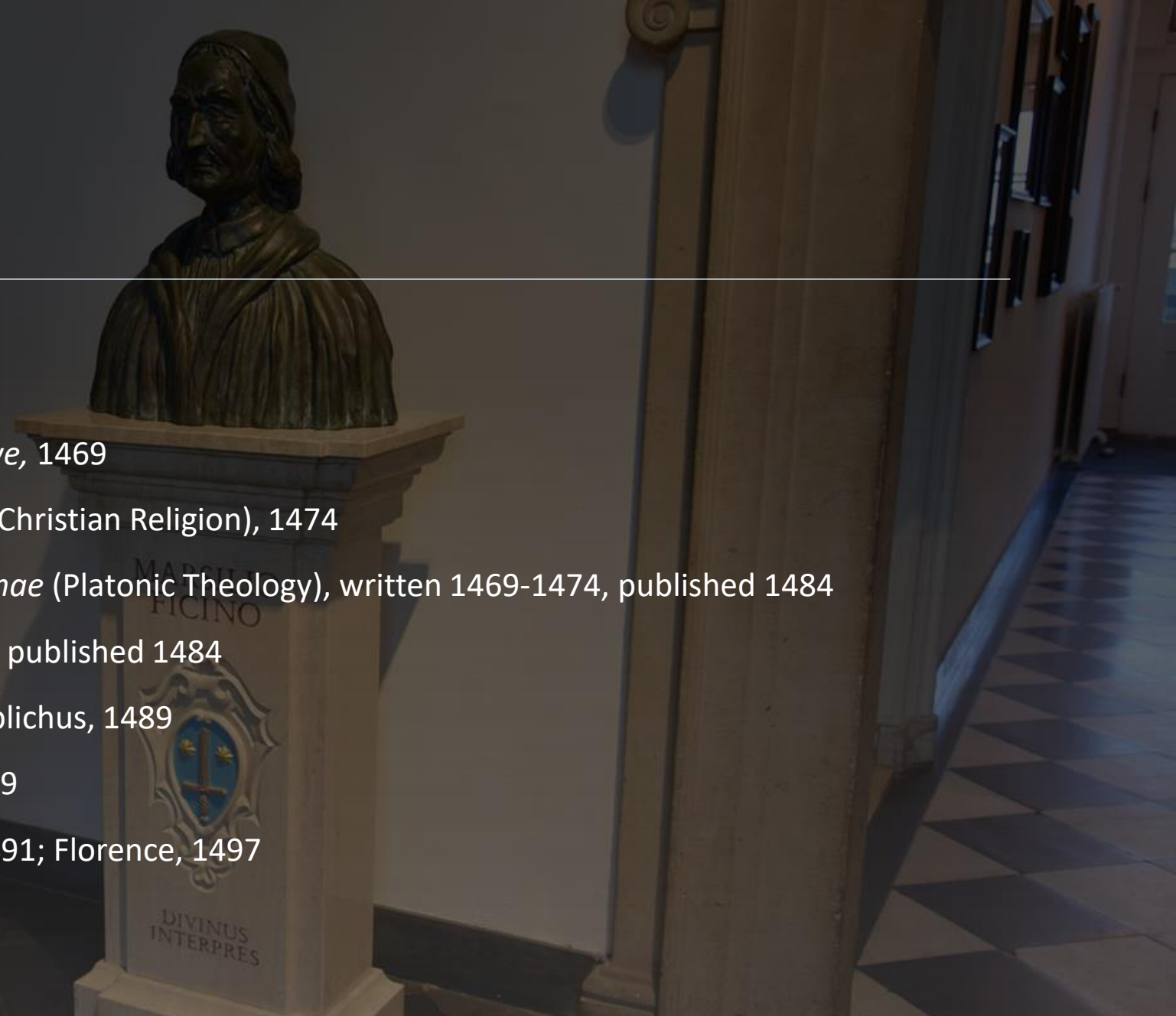
Translations of Proclus, Porphyry and Iamblichus, 1489

De vita libri tres (Three Books on Life), 1489

In Epistolas Pauli commentaria, Venice, 1491; Florence, 1497

Translation of Plotinus, 1492

Letters – 1474-1494





Christian Influence

Sought to replace the teachings of Aristotle with those of Plato, as the philosophy most in keeping with Christianity

- 'Let us by no means ever attempt anything forbidden by the holy religion. Moreover, in performing any work let us hope for and seek the fruit of the work principally from Him who made both the celestials and those things which are contained in the heavens, who gave them their power, and who always moves and preserves them.'
- Ficino, *On Obtaining Life from the Heavens*, p. 281
- 'In all things which I discuss here or elsewhere, I intend to assert only so much as is approved by the Church'
- Ficino, *On Obtaining Life from the Heavens*, p. 241



Ambiguous Relationship with Astrology

‘These astrologers, in declaring that every single thing is necessarily brought about by the stars, are themselves involved in three highly pernicious errors, and they involve the public in them too. For insofar as they are able, they take away from God, Almighty and Supreme, his own providence and his absolute sovereignty over the universe. Next, they deny the justice of the angels; for according to them, the angels move the celestial bodies in such a way that from hence come forth all the crimes of men, all evil events for good men and all good events for evil men. Lastly, they take away from men their free will and deprive them of all peace of mind, for it seems to the astrologers that men, no less than beasts, are driven hither and thither.’

- Letter to Francesco Ipoliti, Count of Gazzoldo, *Letters of Marsilio Ficino*, Vol 3, p. 37



Ambiguous Relationship with Astrology

‘If you do not approve of astronomical images, albeit invented for the health of mortals – which even I do not so much approve of as report – dismiss them with my competed permission and even, if you will, by my advice.’

- *Proemium to the Book ‘On Obtaining Life from the Heavens’, Kaske and Clark, p. 237*



Ambiguous Relationship with Astrology

1477 – Wrote but did not publish:

Disputatio contra iudicium astrologorum (A Disputation against the judgement of astrologers)

- 'A vehement attack on the practices of astrologers'
- Angela Voss, 'The Astrology of Marsilio Ficino: Divination or Science?', p. 29

Ambiguous Relationship with Astrology

‘The *Disputatio*, calling on the authority of Aristotelian, Platonic and Christian sources to refute the subjection of human reason to the stars, reiterates the objections of Aquinas with regard to the dangers of demonic intervention and the astrologers’ lack of piety. ***Yet on a closer reading we find something new. It becomes apparent that although Ficino rejects certain claims of astrologers, he does not deny the possibility that divinatory techniques in themselves may work.*** Indeed, he suggests that there are three kinds of foreseeing: through the infusion of divine knowledge, which may be received through magical means and the ‘divining of the spheres’; through natural means, such as a melancholic temperament which more easily allows the soul contact with its own divine nature; and through what he calls the ‘observation of heavenly patterns’. In all these, he says, judgement is very difficult. But it is not illicit.’

- Angela Voss, ‘The Astrology of Marsilio Ficino: Divination or Science?’, p. 32



Ambiguous Relationship with Astrology

‘Yet in the following year Ficino himself wrote to Pope Sixtus IV, as one ‘equally devoted to both prophecy and astrology’, predicting various misfortunes over the coming two years from specific astrological configurations. Indeed there is hardly a single letter amongst his vast correspondence in which he does not refer to the influence of planets on his own and his friends’ natal charts, on past, present and future events.’

- Angela Voss, ‘The Astrology of Marsilio Ficino: Divination or Science?’, p. 29



Ficino's Horoscope

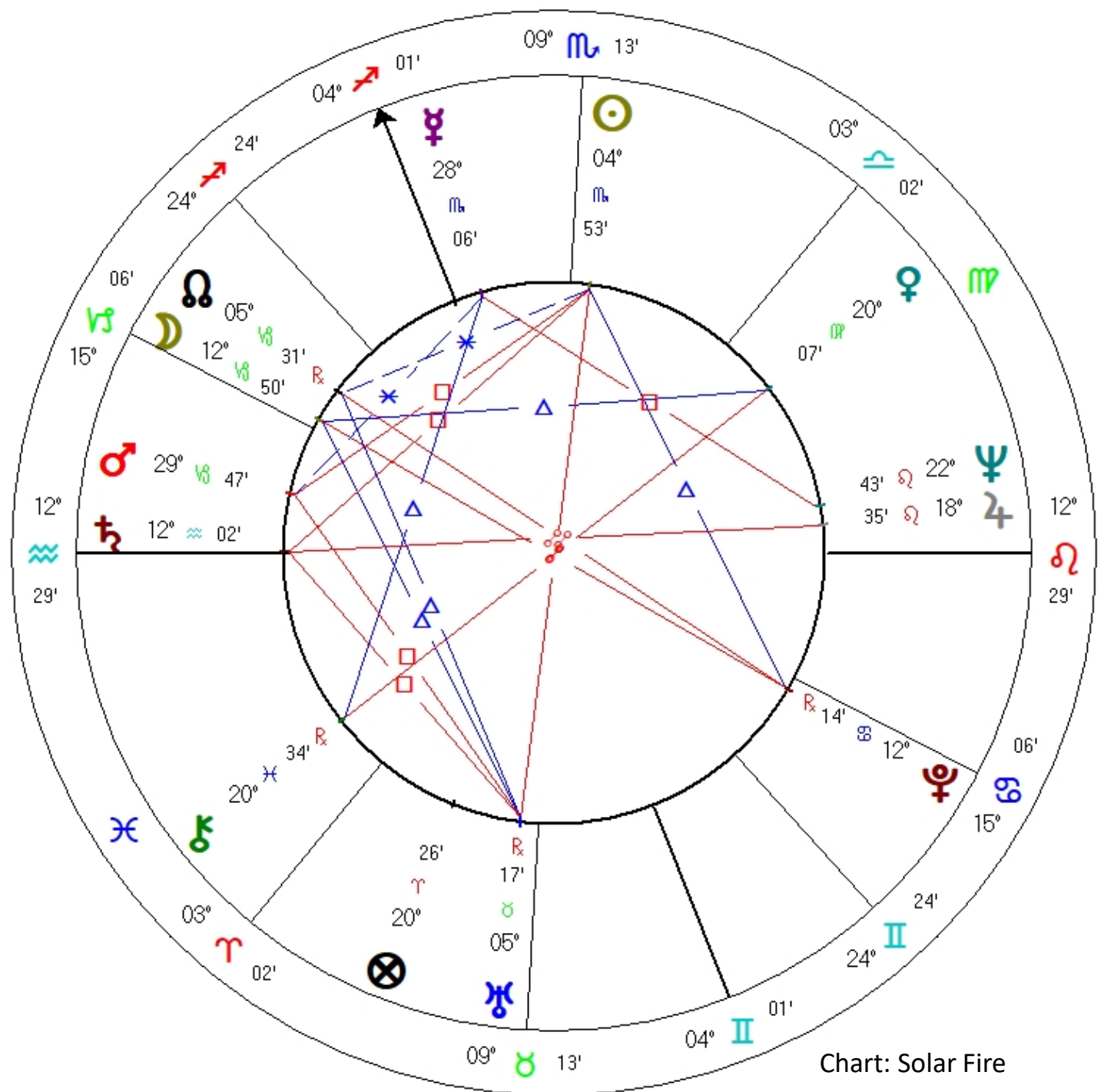
‘Ficino had a very bad horoscope. I believe this accounts in part not only for his peculiar adaptations but for his occasional rejection of astrology, as in the unfinished, unpublished *Disputatio contra iudicium astrologorum*... A person with a bad horoscope could hardly be casual and lukewarm towards astrology: he would have to either reinterpret it to give him some hope or else deny it outright.’

- Kaske and Clark, *The Author in the Work*, p. 19.

Ficino's Interpretation

‘Saturn seems to have impressed the seal of melancholy on me from the beginning; set as he is, almost in the midst of my ascendant Aquarius, he is influenced by Mars, also in Aquarius, and the Moon in Capricorn. He is in square aspect to the Sun and Mercury in Scorpio, which occupy the ninth house. But Venus in Libra and Jupiter in Cancer have, perhaps, offered some resistance to this melancholy nature.’

- Ficino, *On Obtaining Life from the Heavens*, p. 19.



Ficino's Interpretation

'At the heart of Ficino's psychology was the concept of melancholy, the natural condition arising from the Neoplatonic orthodoxy that the soul does not want to be in the body.'

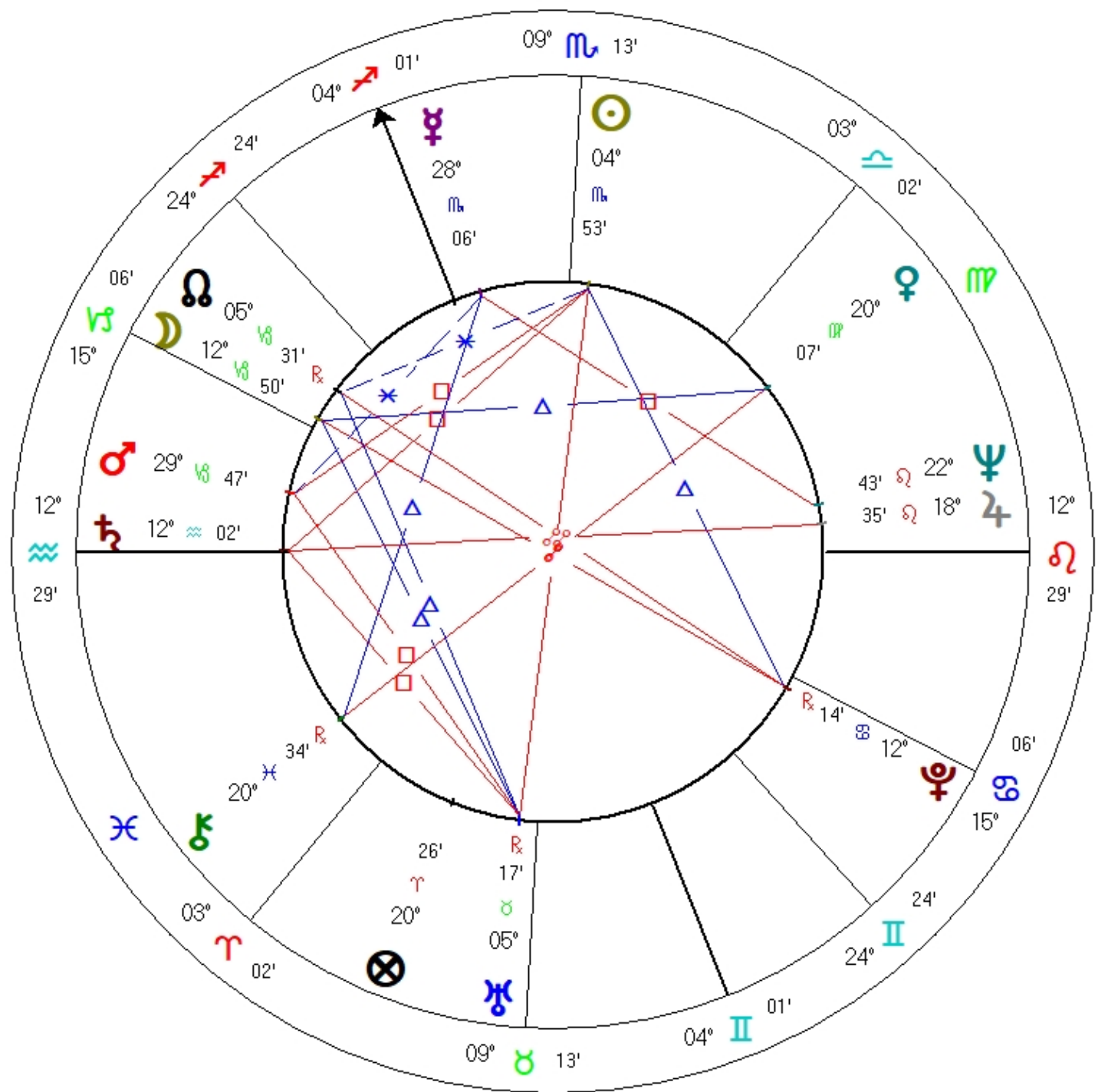
- Campion, *A History of Western Astrology Vol II*, P. 91

On Obtaining Life from the Heavens

Aimed at students who are likely to suffer from melancholy

Contemplation and hard abstract study brings them under the influence of Saturn

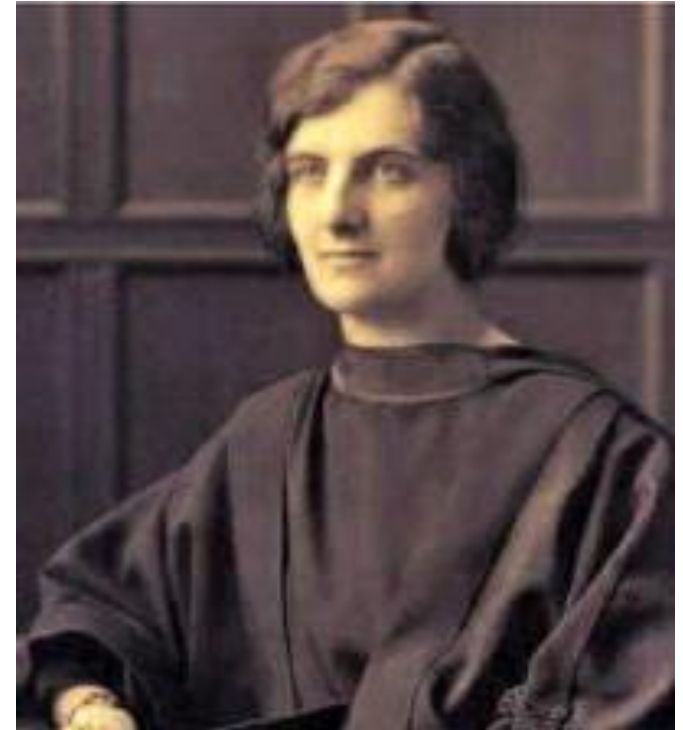
- Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, p. 67



Ficino's Horoscope

‘It is in a very timid hesitating and cautious manner that Ficino embarks on a mild form of astral magic, attempting to alter, to escape from, his Saturnian horoscope by capturing, guiding towards himself, more fortunate astral influences. Yet this comparatively harmless attempt at astral medical therapy was to open a flood-gate through which an astonishing revival of magic poured all over Europe.’

- Frances Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, p. 93.





Ficino and the *Corpus Hermeticum*

Translated 14 treatises

- *Pimander*
 - Hermetic account of creation
 - 'Son of God', 'the Word'
 - 'That Light, He said, am I, thy God, Mind, prior to Moist Nature which appeared from Darkness; the Light-Word (Logos) [that appeared] from Mind is Son of God'
 - CH I.6
- Addresses of Hermes to disciples Tat, Ammon and Asclepius
 - 'For no one of the other so-called gods, no one of men, or daimones, can be in any measure Good, but God alone; and He is Good alone and nothing else. The rest of things are separable all from the Good's nature; for [all the rest] are soul and body, which have no place that can contain the Good'
 - CH II.14



Corpus Hermeticum

‘The cosmological framework which they take for granted is always astrological, even where this is not expressly stated. The material world is under the rule of the stars, and of the seven planets, the “Seven Governors”. The laws of the nature within which the religious gnostic lives are the astrological laws, and they are the setting of his religious experience.’

◦ Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, p. 51.



Monotheism

Prisca Theologia

The original pure religion that originated with Hermes or 'Mercurius' and was perfected by the 'Divine Plato' in whose writing it culminated

Plato, the Neoplatonists and Hermes spoke of a supreme God and an immortal soul

St. Augustine's acceptance of Plato

In keeping with Christianity



Monotheism

‘He [Hermes] is called the first author of theology: he was succeeded by Orpheus, who came second amongst ancient theologians: Aglaophemus, who had been initiated into the sacred teaching of Orpheus, was succeeded in theology by Pythagoras, whose disciple was Philolaus, the teacher of our Divine Plato. Hence there is one ancient theology (prisca theologia)... taking its origin in Mercurius and culminating in the Divine Plato.’

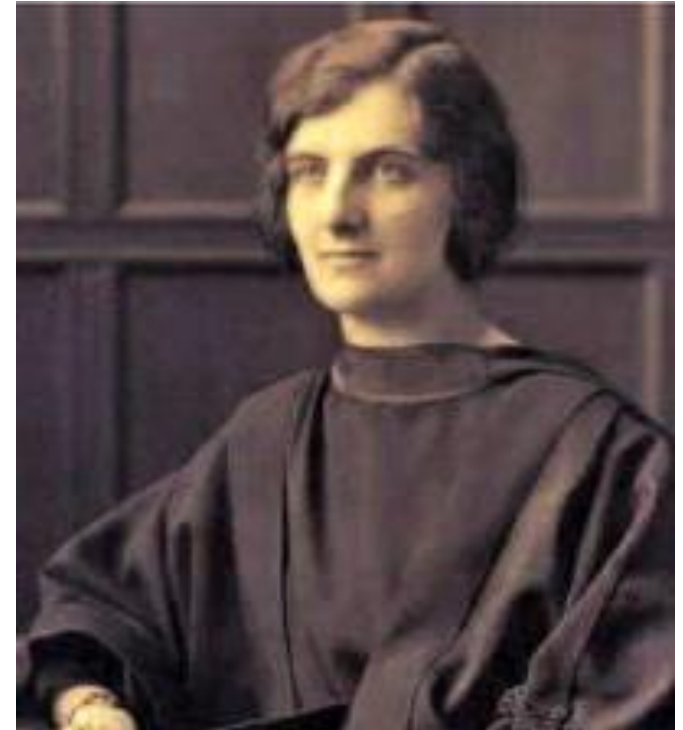
- Ficino, Preface to *Pimander*

Ficino's Astral Magic

Yates distinguishes astrology from Ficino's astral magic

‘This magic is astrological only in the sense that it too bases itself upon the stars, their images and influences, but it is a way of escaping from astrological determinism by gaining power over the stars, guiding their influences in the direction which the operator desires. Or, in the religious sense, it is a way of salvation, of escape from material fortune and destiny, or of obtaining insight into the divine. Hence “astrological magic” is not a correct description of it, and hereafter, for want of a better term, I shall call it “astral magic”.

- Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, p. 93.



MARSILIO FICINO

Three Books on Life

De Vita Libri Tres (Three Books on Life)

Book 1 - *De vita sana* – on a healthy life

Book 2 - *De vita longa* – on a long life

Book 3 - *De vita coelitus comparanda* –
On Obtaining Life from the Heavens.



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MARSILIO FICINO

Three Books on Life

De Vita Libri Tres (Three Books on Life)

Book III

The Book 'On Obtaining Life from the Heavens' by Marsilio Ficino of Florence, Which He Composed among His Commentaries on Plotinus

In What, According to Plotinus, the Power of Attracting Favor from the Heavens Consists, Namely, that Well-adapted Physical Forms Can Easily Allure the World-soul and the Souls of the Stars and the Daemons.

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MARSILIO FICINO

Three Books on Life

De Vita Libri Tres (Three Books on Life)

‘It was absolutely inevitable that a medical treatise of the Middle Ages or the Renaissance should make use of astrological presuppositions universally taken for granted. Medical prescriptions were normally based on assumptions such as that the signs ruled different parts of the body, that different bodily temperaments were related to different planets. Much of Ficino’s book could therefore be regarded, as he claimed, as normal medicine. Nevertheless he was also putting forward in it a subtle and imaginative kind of magic involving the use of talismans. He was nervously aware of possible dangers in this, and in his preliminary address he tells the reader that ‘if you do not approve of astronomical images’ these may be omitted.’

Yates, Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition, p. 94



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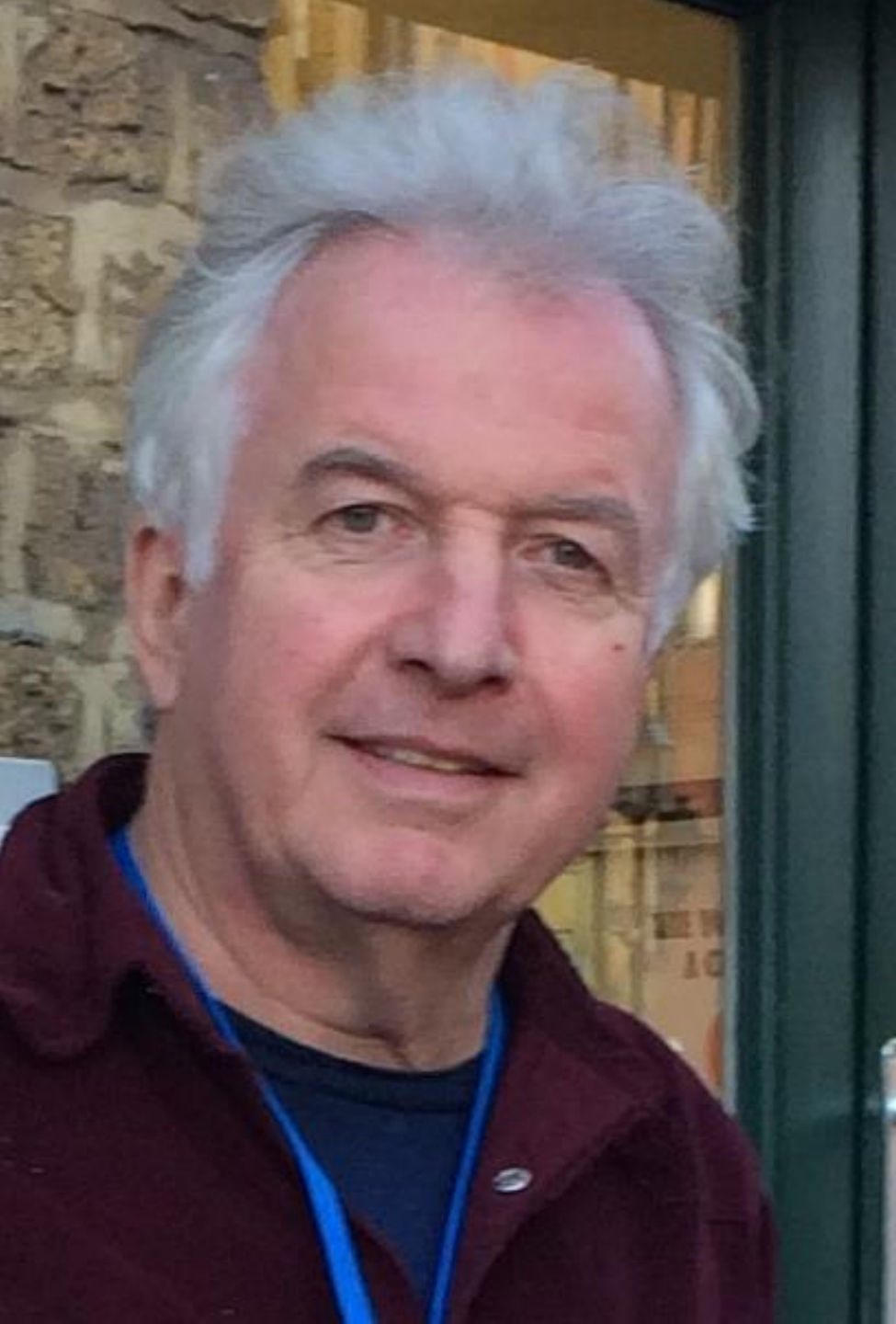


Ficino's Astral Magic

Planets as rays of divinity rather than prediction

The gods are embodied in the planets and in the material world

- 'Our Spirit absorbs the Spirit of the World through the Rays of the Sun and of Jupiter, Insofar as It becomes Solar and Jovial Itself.'
- Ficino, *On Obtaining Life from the Heavens*, p. 259



Sympathy

‘The harmonization of one’s life with the cosmos through ritual, meditation, the use of talismans, colour, music and herbs.’

‘Not only did he legitimise astral magic in a Christian context but he also elevated the planetary deities to a more important function by emphasizing their role as aspects of the internal, individual psyche with whom one can genuinely communicate – as opposed to seeing the planets merely as external transmitters of primarily physical influences. Physical influences were real and were key to the functioning of astral magic, but they were also, as was the entire cosmos, of divine origin.’

◦ *Campion, A History of Western Astrology Vol. 2, p. 90.*



St. Thomas Aquinas

St. Thomas Aquinas

- The celestial realm influenced our bodies and the physical world but not our souls

Ficino

- 'I intend to assert only so much as is approved by the Church'
- **But**
- The psychic and physical worlds are intertwined and the planets are as alive in our minds and souls as in our bodies



In Ficino's Words

'At the same time we do not say that our spirit is prepared for the celestials only through qualities of things known to the senses, but also and much more through certain properties engrafted in things from the heavens and hidden from our senses, and hence only with difficulty known to our reason. For since properties of this kind and their effects could not come into being by elemental power, it follows that they proceed from the life and spirit of the cosmos, particularly through those very rays of the stars; ***and that therefore through them the spirit is affected as much and as soon as possible and exposed very much to celestial influences.***'

- Ficino, *On Obtaining Life from the Heavens*, pp. 299-301



Ficino's Astral Magic

Earthly objects are associated with a specific planet

- '...the Mercurial things, which include: tin, silver, especially quicksilver, silver marcasite, agate, glass – both porphyritic and those kinds which mix yellow with green – emerald, lac, animals which are sagacious and clever and at the same time active such as monkeys and dogs, and people who are eloquent, sharp, and versatile, and who have oblong faces and hands which are not fat.'
- Ficino, *On Obtaining Life from the Heavens*, p. 251



Ficino's Astral Magic

Objects associated with a planet carry the power of the planet

- 'If you want your body and spirit to receive power from some member of the cosmos, say from the Sun, seek the things which above all are most Solar among metals and gems, still more among plants, and more yet among animals, especially human beings; for surely things which are more similar to you confer more of it. These must be brought to bear externally and, so far as possible, taken internally, especially in the day and hour of the Sun and while the Sun is dominant in a theme of the heavens.'
- Ficino, *On Obtaining Life from the Heavens*, p. 249



Ficino's Astral Magic

Elect a time when the planet is strong

- 'But those things which pertain to any planet should be sought and performed precisely when it has dignities as I have previously specified: in its day and hour if possible, also when it is in its own house or in its exaltation or at least in its triplicity, in its term, or in a cardine of heaven, while it is direct in motion, when it is outside of the burnt path, and preferably when it is east of the Sun, if it is above the Sun, if it is in apogee, and if it is aspected by the Moon.'
- Ficino, *On Obtaining Life from the Heavens*, pp. 251-253



Ficino's Astral Magic

When we carry out tasks associated with a planet we come under the influence of that planet

- 'We come under the influence of Jupiter by civic occupations, by those occupations which strive for honor, by natural philosophy, by the kind of philosophy which most people can understand, by civil religion and by laws; of Mars, by anger and contests; of the Sun and of Mercury, by the pursuit of eloquence, of song, of truth, and of glory, and of skill; of Venus, by gaiety and music and festivity; of the Moon, by a vegetable existence.'

- Ficino, *On Obtaining Life from the Heavens*, pp. 253-255

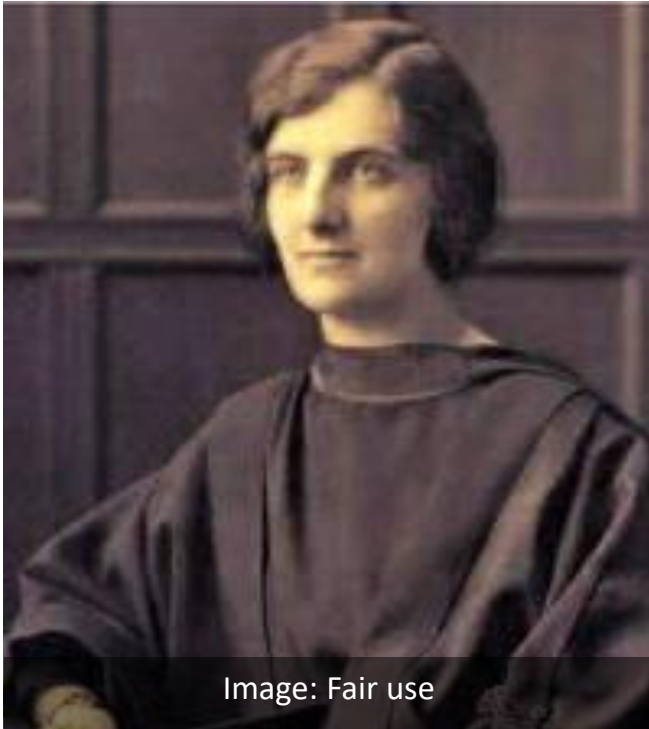


Ficino's Astral Magic

Know your chart and understand the domain of individual planets and play to your strengths

- 'The specific rule for an individual would be to investigate which star promised what good to the individual at his nativity, to beg grace from that star rather than from another, and to await from any given star not just any gift and what belongs to other stars, but a gift proper to that one.'
- Ficino, *On Obtaining Life from the Heavens*, pp. 253-255

Ficino's Astral Magic



‘To complete our view of Ficino’s natural magic, we thus have to think of him drawing down the stellar influences by musical incantations as well as by sympathetic arrangement of natural objects, talismans, exposing oneself to the air, and so on, for the spiritus is caught by planetary songs as well as in the other ways described. There may be an even closer connection between the Ficinian talismans and the Ficinian incantations, for in chapter XVIII, after his long and involved defence of his talismans, he seems to say that these are made “beneath a harmony similar to the celestial harmony” which excites their virtue.’

- Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, p. 113.

Ficino's Cosmology

Hierarchical universe:

- God, Angelic Mind, Soul, Spirit, Body
- Only God, 'The One' – is perfect unity and is symbolised by the Sun

The World-soul and the human soul are interconnected

The cosmos is a unity

Humans are a microcosm – a cosmos in miniature – and therefore the planets, which are divine, are also present within us



The World Soul

A tripartite division of the soul

- Intellect – motionless and far away from Body
 - Connected to divine and contains the Ideas
- Soul – refers to Soul as the ‘Primum Mobile’
 - Contains seminal reasons, as many in number as the Ideas in Intellect
- Body – powerless and far removed from Intellect
 - Contains species which reflect the reasons and depend on them

Intellect and Body cannot communicate without Soul

Soul is equidistant from Intellect and Body and can move between them

- ‘That is why every single species corresponds through its own seminal reason to its own Idea and oftentimes through this reason it can easily receive something from the Idea – since indeed it was made through the reason from the Idea. That is why if at any time the species degenerates from its proper form, it can be formed again with the reason as the proximate intermediary and, through the Idea as intermediary, can then be easily be reformed.’
 - Ficino, *On Obtaining Life from the Heavens*, p. 243



The World Soul

The links between lower forms and the reasons in the World Soul

These links are everywhere present

They depend not on stars or daemons but on the World Soul

Even celestial forms proceed from reasons of the Soul



‘Again, let no man wonder that Soul can be allured as it were by material forms, since she herself has created baits of this kind suitable to herself, to be allured thereby and she always and willingly dwells in them. There is nothing to be found in this whole living world so deformed that Soul does not attend it, that a gift of the Soul is not in it. Therefore Zoroaster called such correspondences of forms to the reasons existing in the World-soul “divine lures” and Synesius corroborated that they are magical baits.’

◦ Ficino, *On Obtaining Life from the Heavens*, p. 244

The World Soul

‘When therefore the Soul gives birth to the specific forms and the powers pertaining to the species of things below, she makes them through their respective reasons with the aid of the stars and the celestial forms. But she produces the endowments peculiar to individuals ... likewise through the seminal reasons, but not so much with the aid of celestial forms and figures as by the location of the individual stars and the relation of the motion and aspects of the planets both among themselves and with respect to the stars which are above the planets’.



‘In the same way, the World-soul, which is active everywhere, unfolds in every place its power of universal life principally through the Sun. Accordingly, some thinkers say the entire Soul, both in us and in the universe, dwells in any member but most of all in the heart and in the Sun’.

- Ficino, *On Obtaining Life from the Heavens*, p. 244

The Human Soul

‘Our soul by means of the intellect and will, as by those twin Platonic wings, flies towards God, since by means of them it flies towards all things. By means of the intellect it attaches all things to itself, by means of the will, it attaches itself to all things. Thus the soul desires, endeavours, and begins to become God, and makes progress every day. Every movement directed towards a definite end first begins, then proceeds, then gradually increases and makes progress, and is finally perfected. It is increased through the same power through which it was begun: it makes progress through the same power through which it was increased; and finally, it is perfected through the same power through which it made progress. Hence our soul will sometime be able to become in a sense all things, and even to become God.’



- Ficino, *Theologia Platonica* XIII.3, trans. C.Trinkaus, cited in Angela Voss, *Marsilio Ficino*, p. 11

Spirit

The human soul integrates the World-soul through its quintessence – which is Spirit

- ‘Always remember, thought, that just as the power of our soul is brought to bear on our members through the spirit, so the force of the World-Soul is spread under the World-soul through all things through the quintessence, which is active everywhere, as the Spirit inside the World's Body.’
- Ficino, *On Obtaining Life from the Heavens*, p. 247



Ficino and the Sun

Book of the Sun

Astrological and astronomical content

Chapter 2 - How the Light of the Sun is Similar to Goodness Itself, Namely, God

Above all the Sun is most able to signify to you God himself. The Sun offers you signs, and who would dare to call the Sun false? Finally, the invisible things of God, that is to say, the angelic spirits, can be most powerfully seen by the intellect through the stars, and indeed even eternal things - the virtue and divinity of God - can be seen through the Sun.

- Ficino, *Book of the Sun*, Chapter 2.

‘In brief, god, the One, to which the soul has an irrepressible desire to return, shines through the Sun.’

- Nick Campion, *A History of Western Astrology Vol II*, p. 91



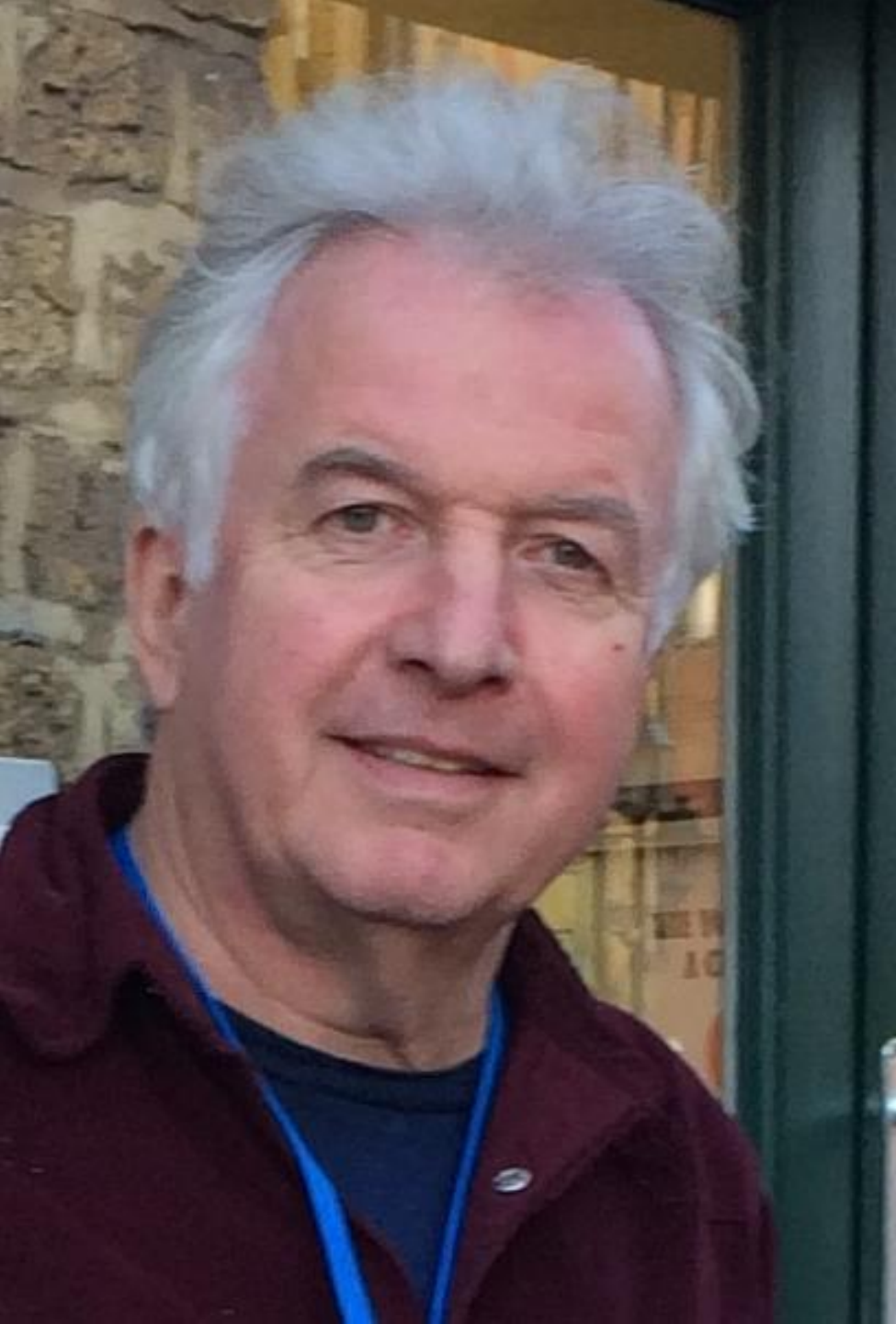


Ficino's Influence

Renaissance revival of magic

Change in how magic was viewed

- 'The learned and assiduous reader of such authors as Iamblichus, Porphyry, or even of Plotinus, could no longer regard magic as the trade of ignorant and inferior persons.'
- Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, p. 46)



Ficino's Influence

‘The consequence was a reordering of the relationship between the soul and the cosmos, or at least a sympathetic part of it, back to before the Church Fathers’ denunciation of astrology’

◦ Nick Campion, *A History of Western Astrology Vol II*, p. 86.



Ficino's Influence

Re-birth of classical leaning in the Renaissance

A new emphasis in Christianity on the capacity of the human soul to realise its innate divinity

Growth in 16th and 17th centuries of occult societies such as Rosicrucianism and Freemasonry, with their emphasis on initiation and 'hidden' knowledge of the secrets of the universe

The birth in the 19th century of the theosophical movement led by Helena Blavatsky

The astrology of Alan Leo

The psychological astrology of Dane Rudhyar and Liz Greene

◦ Voss, *Marsilio Ficino*, p. 24

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Bust of Cosimo de Medici, in Ritman Library, Amsterdam. Photo by: Poul Madsen

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