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# Ficino's Approach to Astrology as Reflected in Book VII of his Letters<sup>1</sup>

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## Julia Cleve

**Abstract.** The twelve volumes of Marsilio Ficino's correspondence are rich in astrological references. Most celebrated among these is Letter 17 in Book VII which is addressed to Federico, Duke of Urbino, and whose express intention is to *reconcile genuine astronomers and Christians*. Ficino himself was a practising astrologer, and yet the arguments he advances in this letter are taken from his unpublished treatise *Against the Judgement of Astrologers*. This apparent contradiction - is Ficino a champion or a scourge of *astronomia*? - may be resolved if considered in the light of his over-arching Platonic cosmology.

### Summary

On the day of the Feast of the Epiphany, 1482, 'Marsilio Ficino of Florence' wrote to 'the ever-invincible Federico, Duke of Urbino' on the subject of the Star of the Magi:

The star which with such good fortune led the Magi, those excellent astronomers of the East, to Christ on this very day has led me also to reflect on how I might with ease and brevity reconcile genuine astronomers and Christians.<sup>2</sup>

Ficino spoke here of brevity, but in fact this is a long letter. It is one of hundreds of letters that he wrote in the course of his life and which were collected and published in twelve volumes. (Over the past twenty-five years a team of translators at the School of Economic Science have been rendering these letters from Latin into English.) This Letter 17 in Book VII is particularly famous. It is characteristic of Ficino's correspondence in having a very august recipient - in this case, Federico da Montefeltro,

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Duke of Urbino, the great condottiere and patron of the arts; his broken-nosed profile is familiar to us all through the portrait by Piero della Francesca. The letter is also typical of Ficino in the depth of its metaphysical inquiry, and in its impulse to reconcile philosophy and religion - and, implicitly, the wisdom of the pagan Magi with orthodox Christianity. However, it is not typical in its rather formal, sermon-like quality; it lacks the affectionate playfulness of his more intimate correspondence. In its origins it is no letter at all, but an excerpt from a treatise which remained unpublished during his lifetime: *Disputatio Contra Iudicium Astrologorum*. - *Against the Judgement of Astrologers*.<sup>3</sup>

This is a stance which might, perhaps, be expected of a man of the church? Ficino was not only a doctor and a scholar: he had been ordained as a priest in 1473. In 1487 he was to become a Canon of the Cathedral of Florence. But, just as this is no ordinary letter, Marsilio was no ordinary priest. He was, of course, one of the greatest figures of the Italian Renaissance, leader of the Platonic Academy in Florence, translator, at the behest of Cosimo de Medici, not only of the works of Plato and his followers but also of the Gnostic writings of the *Corpus Hermeticum*. He had trained as a doctor at the Universities of Florence and Bologna. He was an exceptional musician, a player on the Orphic lyre, who pioneered the use of music in therapeutics.<sup>4</sup> Through his vast correspondence he was the inspirer and confidante of powerful political figures throughout Europe: Popes and Princes, people like Lorenzo de Medici and the King of Hungary, but also philosophers such as Pico della Mirandola, poets such as Poliziano and artists such as Botticelli.

But there is a paradox at the heart of Ficino's project: this writer of a treatise *Against the Judgement of Astrologers* was himself a practising astrologer. There is explicit evidence of this in Letter 28, Book VII<sup>5</sup> which has the title: 'A reply concerning a horoscope...'. The letter is addressed to Zenobio Romano, about whom, so far as I know, we know nothing, other than, presumably, that he had requested a horoscope. Ficino writes:

Although I do not have here with me at the moment the instruments normally used for examining and measuring the heavens accurately, let me...produce something for the time being. That configuration of the heavens does not seem good to me in which Mars occupies the mid-heaven, Saturn is in the sixth house, Jupiter is combust and the Sun is square to the Moon.

In fact, in terms of mundane astrology, this pattern of disharmony in the heavens, with its dominance of malefic planets portending conflict and dis-ease, turns out to have been a remarkably accurate picture of the outcome of the war which had just begun between Florence and the Papal States. To quote the translator's notes to this letter,<sup>6</sup> the last years of Pope Sixtus IV were marred by almost continual warfare.

But, while this letter is proof that Ficino had the necessary skill and knowledge to be expected of a serious and competent astrologer, there is a disconcerting shift of emphasis in the second half of the letter. Here Ficino issues a warning:

But it does not help to predict evils, nor is it right to place much trust in these things. For since judgement is often faulty on daily matters close at hand, no wonder it is so faulty on matters so remote; especially since our condition depends upon many other causes apart from the stars: birth, early upbringing, environment, education, guidance and fate...

What are we to make of this letter? On the one hand it purports to be a horoscope, on the other it issues a warning against such prognostications. It's addressed to an individual and yet its tone is very *general*....Is it possible to make sense of these ambiguities? I think it can be read on at least three different levels: on the personal level, as a response to a specific individual; on the public/political level, as Ficino treading a fine line between orthodoxy and heresy, and on the philosophical level as indicating his passionate opposition to fatalism.

On the personal level, we don't and can't know the exact circumstances of this request for a horoscope. The first oddity is that a personal request is met by a seemingly impersonal reply; the tone is uncharacteristically brusque and negative ('That configuration of the heavens does not seem good to me...'). Elsewhere, the overwhelming impression we gain from reading Ficino's works is that he was motivated by LOVE in all his undertakings, as priest, scholar, doctor and friend. But here it is as if he were administering an implicit rebuke to Zenobio by baldly stating unwelcome news: a corrective to any tendency to be over-credulous or reliant on the stars. Certainly he saw himself as a 'doctor of souls', perhaps here addressing the *needs* rather than the wants of his querent.

On a public level the letter may be read as a subtle piece of rhetoric in which Ficino diplomatically negotiates between his role as an astrologer and his role as a priest. The official position of the Church at the time was

that specific and personal horoscopes were banned, although general predictions were permitted. This would explain why, in response to a request for a *personal* horoscope, Ficino appears to shift ground to deliver some very *general* observations. However, it would be a mistake to read the letter as Ficino simply being politic: his fundamental point is a philosophical one. He is issuing a caveat to all astrological practice: a warning against making a fetish of fatalism and on the dangers of relying solely on human opinion for human judgement may be very faulty.

So where does all this leave the status of astrology and astrologers? Returning to Letter 17, the express intention of which is to reconcile genuine astronomers and Christians. Is it also possible to reconcile the apparent contradictions in Ficino's own approach to astrology? Is he a champion or a scourge of *astronomia*? The majority of scholars and commentators appear to be unsure; they speak of his 'oscillations', his 'inconsistent views, self-contradiction, somewhat double-faced attitude, peculiar adaptations of astrology...'.<sup>7</sup>

In order to counter these accusations, Ficino's approach needs to be understood in its full philosophical context and depth. The key to this perspective is to be found in Letter 17 when he writes: 'But Marsilio offers to Federico... a gift that speaks of God, the heavens and the physical world all at the same time'.<sup>8</sup> This is very Platonic: to speak of a hierarchy of three worlds and to insist both on their distinctness and ultimate unity. The highest of the three worlds is that of divine law, the domain of what Ficino calls universal religion, the realm of Providence. The lowest of these worlds is that of physical nature, the sub-lunary, the domain of Fate. In between lies the province of the heavens, the celestial realm, influencing the world below but, in turn, under the jurisdiction of the divine world above. So Ficino's model of the cosmos is tripartite. His concern is with the nature of inter-relations between these three spheres - and, here in particular, with the crux issue of how to interpret the Star of Bethlehem:

Now if any astrologer says that the Christian law has arisen following a conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter, for some astronomers attribute the greatest power for establishing laws to such conjunctions, we shall forthwith reply as follows...<sup>9</sup>

He proceeds to martial arguments against the claim that the Star of Bethlehem can be reduced to a purely astronomical event. What is at issue is the *judgement* of astrologers and the inescapable fact that this

judgement is most likely to be fallible when applied (outside its proper sphere) to divine purpose:

But now let us return to the astrologers. They certainly seem to experience much more difficulty in judging matters which relate to purpose, understanding and God than those which pertain to the feelings, actions, and sufferings of the body and to bodily labours.<sup>10</sup>

In support of his argument he enlists a whole series of illustrious authorities: Plotinus, Avicenna, Ptolemy...

Plotinus, who draws on Plato's teaching, argues most precisely, as does Avicenna, that **ALL AND EVERYTHING IS HELD UNDER DIVINE POWER AND PROVIDENCE**. It is all so arranged that the incorporeal causes, namely God, the angels and the souls of the celestial bodies, are the authors of things in the natural world, whereas the corporeal causes are but their instruments<sup>11</sup> (capitals mine).

What is central to Ficino's argument is this distinction: between the heavenly sphere and what is *beyond*: the realm of divine law. It is a distinction easily lost sight of. Now, as then, in our conventional thinking we tend to collapse these two worlds into one. We speak simply of 'heaven', conflating the celestial with the divine. Ficino's chief challenge to any lazy thinking about the 'heavens' turns on the nature of CAUSE: 'The astrologers, however, leaving aside the divine as well as the lower causes and their arrangement, look up at the heavenly bodies alone'.<sup>12</sup>

However knowledgeable, there are limits to the astrologers' ability to assess the causes of things. These limitations are set not only by Providence above, but also by the multiplicity of causes in the material world. He quotes Ptolemy:

Ptolemy therefore said that the effects of the stars on us are often completely altered or obstructed by the different configurations of moving matter. Indeed he observed that things different in genus, species and number as well as in shape, fortune and ending are born at the same moment every day so that we are quite unable to make an adequate judgement of anything merely from the moment of an earthly birth or a conjunction of the heavens...<sup>13</sup>

Having brought us to a state of proper humility with his emphasis on the complexity of causes and the need for subtle and discriminative judgement, Ficino reaches the nub of his argument, summed up in the famous dictum: *SIGNS NOT CAUSES*.

It's a nice distinction: the stars do not *make* the future, but they may mirror it. The ability to read the signs is as much a property of soul as it is of reason. It requires the exercise of our highest human faculties. It is more a question of seership than of science. The archetype for this role is that of the Chaldean Magi, the three Wise Men from the East. It is not just their knowledge but their wisdom which enables them to correctly interpret the signs of the heavens and to act appropriately upon this interpretation. Ficino agrees with Ptolemy that:

human wisdom so far overrides external influence, by which he means the stars, that by its own effort it can often ward off the stars when they threaten and welcome them when they hold promise.<sup>14</sup>

He cites Plotinus and Avicenna: 'The heavens are a living being obedient to God'. And he says that, viewed from this perspective, the Star of the Nativity is a 'miraculous rather than natural' event. It announces rather than determines the Incarnation. The same is true of the eclipse of the sun which occurred when Christ was dying. This was an event *outside the order of nature* since the crucifixion took place at the time of Passover and Passover, according to Jewish law, was celebrated only at the full Moon - which would make an eclipse of the sun astronomically impossible - which

being outside the order of nature, was the clearest declaration that Christ had been born from an order higher than the celestial...so that the heavens acknowledged Christ's death with a strange darkness, just as they acknowledged His birth with a strange light.<sup>15</sup>

And so, to briefly conclude on this vast subject: Ficino's model of cause and effect is one mediated through a hierarchy of worlds, consistent with Platonic, Christian, Hermetic and Cabalistic thinking. The heavens are subject to divine law. Through the mystery of cosmic correspondence they *indicate* but do not decree what happens to humanity on earth. For the astrologer to discern and interpret these indications requires the exercise of our highest faculties of intellect and intuition, what the Greeks would call *nous*. (What Ficino himself calls *notio*.<sup>16</sup>) To act upon them

involves the special grace granted to humanity of free will. Nowhere does Ficino denounce astrology as such: his quarrel is with its misapplications, the literalism and impure motives of empty-heads.<sup>17</sup> While he acknowledges the power of astral forces over the physical realm (and hence the efficacy of natural magic), he challenges the sway of fate. If we choose, instead, to align ourselves with Providence, wisely interpreting the gifts and portents of the heavens, we stand the chance of realising our true destinies, of living a blessed life. He ends a letter to Lorenzo de Medici with these words:

Finally, to sum up, if by this reason you prudently temper within yourself the heavenly signs and the heavenly gifts, you will flee far from all the menaces of the fates and without doubt will live a blessed life under divine auspices.<sup>18</sup>

#### References.

1. This paper was originally presented at the Nineteenth History of Astrology Seminar, organised by the Astrological Lodge of London, in October 2002.
2. *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino* Vol. 6 (*Liber VII*) letter 17, pp 23-31 (London: Shephard-Walwyn, 1999) [hereafter, *Letters*].
3. *Supplementum Ficinianum*, ed. P.O. Kristeller, 2 vols. (Florence, 1949), vol. 2 pp11-76.
4. See Angela Voss, *Magic, astrology and music: the background to Marsilio Ficino's astrological music therapy and his role as a Renaissance Magus*, Doctoral Thesis, City University of London, 1992.
5. *Letters*, vol.6, p 42.
6. *Ibid.*, p 84.
7. See D.P. Walker. 'Marsilio Ficino and Astrology', *Marsilio Ficino e il Ritorno de Platone*, 2 vols. ed. G. Garfagnini (Florence, 1986), 341-2; C. Kaske, 'Ficino's shifting attitude towards astrology in the *De vita coelitus comparanda*, the Letter to Poliziano, and the *Apologia* to the Cardinals', *Marsilio Ficino e il Ritorno de Platone*, pp 372, ref.2; 376; L. Thorndike, 'Ficino the Philophastrer', *History of Magic and Experimental Science*, 8 vols. (New York, 1923-58), vol.IV, p 572; J. Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance* (Leiden and New York, 1991), p 282. [All of the above references are cited by Angela Voss in her article, *The Astrology of Marsilio Ficino: Divination or Science?* Angela Voss, 'The



Astrology of Marsilio Ficino: Divination or Science?', *Culture and Cosmos*, Autumn, Autumn/Winter 2000 Vol. 4 no 2. pp. 29-45., note 8, which concludes: "For a more balanced consideration of Ficino's astrological views, see M. Bullard, 'The Inward Zodiac: A Development in Ficino's Thought on Astrology', *Renaissance Quarterly*, no. 42, 1990, pp 687-708."]

8. *Letters*, vol.6, p 23.

9. *Ibid.*, p 23.

10. *Ibid.*, p 24.

11. *Ibid.*, pp 24-5.

12. *Ibid.*, p 25.

13. *Ibid.*, p 25.

14. *Ibid.*, p 28.

15. *Ibid.*, p 30.

16. See Angela Voss, 'On the Knowledge of Divine Things - Ficino's concept of *Notio*: Divinatory Versus "Scientific" Astrology' in *Sphinx 6 - A Journal of Archetypal Psychology and the Arts*, 1994, pp 149-172.

17. *Letters*, vol.6, letter 40, p 53.

18. *Letters*, Vol.4, letter 46.