

ARTHUR M. FIELD

# The Origins of the Platonic Academy of Florence



PRINCETON LEGACY LIBRARY

THE ORIGINS  
OF THE  
PLATONIC ACADEMY  
OF FLORENCE



THE  
ORIGINS  
OF THE  
PLATONIC  
ACADEMY OF  
FLORENCE



*ARTHUR FIELD*



PRINCETON UNIVERSITY  
PRESS

*Princeton, New Jersey*

COPYRIGHT © 1988 BY PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS  
PUBLISHED BY PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS,  
41 WILLIAM STREET,  
PRINCETON, NEW JERSEY 08540  
IN THE UNITED KINGDOM:  
PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS,  
GUILDFORD, SURREY

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED  
LIBRARY OF CONGRESS  
CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA  
FIELD, ARTHUR M., 1948—  
THE ORIGINS OF THE PLATONIC ACADEMY OF FLORENCE  
BY ARTHUR FIELD.

P. CM.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: P.  
INCLUDES INDEXES.

ISBN 0-691-05533-5 (ALK. PAPER)

1. ACCADEMIA PLATONICA (FLORENCE, ITALY)
2. FLORENCE (ITALY)—INTELLECTUAL LIFE.
3. FLORENCE (ITALY)—HISTORY—1421-1737.  
I. TITLE.

DG735.6.F47 1988

945'.5105—DCI9 88-9952

THIS BOOK HAS BEEN COMPOSED IN GALLIARD

CLOTHBOUND EDITIONS  
OF PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS BOOKS  
ARE PRINTED ON ACID-FREE PAPER,  
AND BINDING MATERIALS ARE CHOSEN  
FOR STRENGTH AND DURABILITY.  
PAPERBACKS, ALTHOUGH SATISFACTORY  
FOR PERSONAL COLLECTIONS,  
ARE NOT USUALLY SUITABLE  
FOR LIBRARY REBINDING

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA  
BY PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS,  
PRINCETON, NEW JERSEY

TO RUTH AND ART



# CONTENTS

Preface / ix

Note on the Text / xiii

Abbreviations / xv

PART ONE *The Philosophical Renaissance and the  
Role of Intellectuals* / 1

I Introduction / 3

II Humanist Intellectuals and the Medici Party / 10

PART TWO *The Florentine Lyceum* / 53

III The Students of John Argyropoulos / 55

IV The Studio Controversy, 1455 / 77

V The Teaching of John Argyropoulos / 107

PART THREE *The Florentine Academy* / 127

VI Scholastic Backgrounds / 129

VII Marsilio Ficino and the Platonic Academy / 175

VIII Donato Acciaiuoli's Commentaries on Aristotle / 202

IX Cristoforo Landino and Platonic Poetry / 231

Conclusion / 269

Appendix A: One or Two Lorenzo Pisanos? / 275

Appendix B: Lorenzo Pisano's *De amore* / 277

Appendix C: Some Notes on Minor Works of

Lorenzo Pisano / 280

Select Bibliography / 283

Index of Manuscripts / 291

General Index / 293



## PREFACE

**F**OR the modern world the “problem of the Renaissance” is largely a problem of genius. Even if we strain our norms of relativism to where we can sniff at the humanists and sneer at the philosophers, we still have to move with leaden feet through the several great rooms of the galleries; or if we race through these rooms, it is only because we know them too well, want to study the forgotten pieces, or feel more comfortable around intellects closer to our own. Even those economic and social historians who in their studies have ignored the intellectual and artistic worlds altogether have been moved, for the most part, not simply by the richness of the archives but by the knowledge that “genius” cannot arise by accident.

Textbooks still refer to the period of Lorenzo de’ Medici as the “flowering of the Renaissance.” If the label is impressionistic, it is at least based on impressions gained by works all can see and most can appreciate, the great works of art and literature. Students of poetry and the fine arts have by and large looked kindly on the Lorenzo period. Students of philosophy and science have found there the first expressions of those systems that truly “belong” to the Renaissance—that is, the Neoplatonic and Hermetic philosophies. Historians, on the other hand, have not been especially generous toward Medicean Florence. Here we do not have to read far to discover what went wrong: With the Medici ascendancy over Florence, the heroic individuality of Petrarch, the civic ideals of Leonardo Bruni, the “activist” universality of Leon Battista Alberti were pushed aside as the “Medici intellectuals” began to speculate on the eternal verities in the villa and court.

If I look on the philosophical humanists more positively than is the

current fashion, I should like to think that my approach is not based on idolatry, simply, but on the belief that these humanists served an important intellectual function for an emerging political and social class, a class that held power, to be sure, but was ideologically unsophisticated. In this study I thus attempt to answer the old charge, found so often in the secondary literature, that the philosophical humanists of the Platonic Academy were creating an isolated, elite, villa- or court-centered culture, that these intellectuals were esoteric philosophers or “schoolmen” whose “external world” was measured by Medici patronage.

These humanists did indeed educate many Florentine laymen into a speculative philosophical culture. Their success in this can be seen in contemporary testimony from the bounds of our period. At the time of the Peace of Lodi of 1454 no one in Florence, it was said, knew any philosophy except some ethics. A decade later Donato Acciaiuoli would boast that all Florentines, it seemed, had been brought up in the Academy. And Cristoforo Landino, lecturing in Italian on Petrarch (ca. 1465), would describe for the Florentines the political and social dangers of having a citizenry that was philosophically illiterate.

In this book I attempt to look afresh at the role of humanist intellectuals in Florence during the first decade after the Peace of Lodi of 1454, a period that ends with the founding of the Platonic Academy and the Medici patronage of Marsilio Ficino in 1462 and 1463. Many years ago I proposed a study of the early Platonic Academy as a dissertation topic, and I was told by a prominent Renaissance historian that I would be wiser to choose a subject less thoroughly studied. As I began to look at the texts, however, I started to have an opposite concern: I wondered how many of the sources for the early philosophical renaissance had even been *read* by modern scholars. I do not see how any reading of the notebooks of John Argyropoulos’s lectures on Aristotle can yield the conclusion, repeated so often in the secondary literature, that he was actually a Platonist (or Plotinian) and not an Aristotelian, or how any reading, even a superficial one, of Donato Acciaiuoli’s commentaries on Aristotle can support the widely held hypothesis that he was repelled by Platonic metaphysics. There have been a few studies of Marsilio Ficino’s teacher of Aristotle, Niccolò Tignosi; but none has yet brought to light the one interesting autobiographical statement appearing in *all three* of his commentaries on Aristotle, that he had been a student of Paul of Venice. That Cristoforo Landino began to take a philosophical approach toward the Latin poets only from the Lorenzo period, that is, from the 1470s, appears in almost every detailed study of the literature of the Academy; but new manuscripts of his early lectures indicate that

he was a Platonic allegorizer certainly in the 1460s, and probably even earlier.

To others this work owes much. I feel privileged to have studied under Frederick Krantz (now at Concordia University, Montreal) and Hanna H. Gray and Karl J. Weintraub (University of Chicago). For my method and some fundamental ideas I owe them a great deal. Paul Oskar Kristeller has been bountiful, as is his custom, with his time and advice; he also criticized carefully an earlier form of Chapters IV–IX. Ralph G. Williams gave me many good suggestions about the same chapters, and Charles Trinkaus scrutinized them also. Thomas N. Tentler kindly read and criticized an earlier form of Chapter II. Chapter IV owes much to anonymous reviewers for *History of Universities* (University of London), and Chapter V to John Monfasani. James Hankins read the manuscript as a whole and provided a detailed and extremely useful critique. My colleague Anthony Grafton went over the text in page proofs and rescued it and me from several dozen small errors and more than a few major ones. The staffs of many libraries have been generous and helpful. I mention in particular those of three Florentine libraries: the Archivio di Stato, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, and Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale. This study, finally, would not have been possible without generous fellowships from the American Academy in Rome, the American Council of Learned Societies, the Fulbright Commission, and the Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies (Villa I Tatti).



## NOTE ON THE TEXT

**I**N the main text and the notes, all dates, unless otherwise indicated, are in the modern style.

The letters of Poggio Bracciolini will be cited by book and letter number, followed by the volume and page number of T. Tonelli's edition (Florence 1832) in parentheses. All are reprinted in Poggio's *Opera omnia*, ed. R. Fubini, vol. 3 (Turin, 1963). The letters I cite are not yet covered in the new edition being prepared by Helene Harth.

In Latin quotations, I often list two sources together, either two manuscripts or a manuscript and an edition, and these are sometimes listed consecutively, divided by a semicolon and then followed by a colon and then the Latin. In such cases I choose what I consider to be the better readings and do not always indicate variants. When the second source, whether a manuscript or an edition, is preceded by "cf." it means that I am following the first, but the second includes all or part of the corresponding passage. Where "cf." is followed by a printed edition, the reader should not assume that I consider the edition defective.

Several of the humanist works cited have good English translations. Where I indicate that I have used but altered a translation, in nearly every instance the adaptation has been made solely to make the terms and style conform to those I use elsewhere.

Unless otherwise indicated, text divisions and translations from the classics are taken from the Loeb editions.

For manuscript references, the shortened shelf-mark citations may be found in the list of abbreviations. In citations such as "fol. 47," the *recto* of the leaf is to be assumed.



## ABBREVIATIONS

Ambros.: manuscript, Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, main collection.

Casanatense: manuscript, Rome, Biblioteca Casanatense, main collection.

Cons. e Prat.: manuscript volume, Florence, Archivio di Stato, Repubblica, Consulte e Pratiche.

*DBI: Dizionario biografico degli italiani.* Rome, 1960–.

Ep.: Epistula.

Gino Capponi: manuscript, Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, fondo Gino Capponi.

*GW: Gesamtkatalog der Wiegendrucke.* Leipzig, 1925–.

Laur.: manuscript, Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, main collection (or minor fondo if not followed directly by a number).

Magl.: manuscript, Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, fondo Magliabechiano.

MAP: filza or manuscript volume, Florence, Archivio di Stato, Archivio Mediceo avanti il Principato.

Monte Comune: manuscript volume, Florence, Archivio di Stato, Monte Comune.

Naz.: manuscript, Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, fondo Nazionale or main collection.

Not. Antec.: manuscript volume, Florence, Archivio di Stato, Notarile Antecosimiano.

Ricc.: manuscript, Florence, Biblioteca Riccardiana, main collection.

Vat.: manuscript, Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana (with fondo defined by further abbreviation after "Vat.").

PART ONE

THE PHILOSOPHICAL  
RENAISSANCE  
AND THE ROLE  
OF INTELLECTUALS



# I

## INTRODUCTION

**I**N 1462 or 1463 the aged Cosimo de' Medici (1389–1464) gave to Marsilio Ficino, the son of his physician, both the annual profits from a farm near the Medici villa at Careggi and a Greek text of Plato.<sup>1</sup> Ficino was supposed to translate the Platonic dialogues and thereby make them available for the first time to a Latin audience. Ficino immediately began to draft translations, and in his lectures, commentaries, treatises, and letters, he explained Plato to the Florentine public. A circle of acquaintances interested in these studies called itself the Academy.

According to Ficino, late in life Cosimo began to question commonly accepted worldly values, those that had helped make him the wealthiest and most powerful figure in contemporary Florence.<sup>2</sup> Spiritually troubled and in poor health, he looked to Ficino's words and music for comfort. Come to me quickly, he wrote Ficino, and explain to me Plato's *On the Highest Good* (that is, the *Philebus*)—and do not forget to bring your Orphic lyre.<sup>3</sup> Ficino was delayed in coming and so outlined, in

1. The traditional date for the Academy's founding is 1462, when Cosimo is said to have endowed Ficino with a villa at Careggi, which then became the site of the Platonic Academy. But the situation is complex: see Chapter VII, n. 96, below.

2. For Cosimo's "introspective" phase, see Vespasiano da Bisticci, *Le vite*, ed. A. Greco (Florence, 1970–1976), II, 210; Bartolomeo Scala, *Dialogus de consolatione* (Laur. 54, 10, fols. 104–22v); and C. S. Gutkind, *Cosimo de' Medici, Pater Patriae, 1389–1464* (Oxford, 1938), pp. 215–16, 242ff.

3. In Ficino's collected letters, in *Opera omnia* (Basel, 1576; rept. Turin, 1959), p. 608; cf. *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino*, trans. Language Dept., School of Economic Science, London (London, 1975–81), I, 32: "Contuli heri me in agrum Charegium, non agri, sed animi colendi gratia. Veni ad nos Marsili quamprimum. Fer tecum Platonis in nostri libri De summo bono, quem te isthic arbitror iam e Graeca lingua in Latinum, ut

writing, the substance of Plato's dialogue: great possessions and great virtues are useless, they can even be harmful, if they are not accompanied by wisdom.<sup>4</sup> Later that year, as Cosimo lay dying, Ficino explained another Platonic work, the *Axiochus*, or *On Death*. Through this work, Ficino wrote just after Cosimo's death, "Cosimo began to deplore the misery of this life, and he so inveighed against the errors of mortals that he called death a gain, and, since he aspired already to celestial beatitude, he said acutely and elegantly many things in contempt of life."<sup>5</sup>

Aristotle as well as Plato stimulated the aged Cosimo. Through Cosimo's efforts and especially those of his son, Piero, the Byzantine philosopher John Argyropoulos had been hired in the mid-1450s to teach Aristotle at the University of Florence. Cosimo provided Argyropoulos with a house near his own in Florence and met now and then with the Byzantine and his circle.<sup>6</sup> One of Argyropoulos's students, Donato Acciaiuoli, took his careful notes from lectures on the *Nicomachean Ethics*, made some substantive changes, gave them literary polish, and turned them into his own commentary. As he finished each fascicle, in 1463 or 1464, he sent a copy to Cosimo, at the latter's request, who was said to have listened eagerly as his secretary, Bartolomeo Scala, read the sections to him.<sup>7</sup>

Cosimo was only one among a great number of businessmen, politicians, humanists, poets, lawyers, students, and dilettantes who turned, rather abruptly, to Platonic and other philosophical studies in the first decade after the Peace of Lodi of 1454. The precepts of classical moral philosophy, to be sure, had always enjoyed wide currency in Renaissance Florence, and the humanists had incorporated some Aristotle, Cicero, and Seneca into their program of studies. In the first half of the Quattrocento, moreover, Leonardo Bruni and others translated some Plato.<sup>8</sup> But after the Peace of Lodi philosophical studies intensified, and,

---

promiseras, transtulisse. Nihil enim ardentius cupio quam quae via commodius ad felicitatem ducat cognoscere. Vale, et veni non absque Orphica lyra." As A. Della Torre (*Storia dell'Accademia platonica di Firenze* [1902; rept. Turin, 1968], p. 559n.) and others have noted, the letter was surely composed or rewritten by Ficino himself.

4. *Opera omnia*, p. 608.

5. Preface to his translation, to Piero de' Medici, in *Opera omnia*, p. 1965: "Die . . . vigesima antequam corporis vinculis purus eius spiritus solveretur, sole iam occidente coepit huius vitae miseriam deplorare, atque ita in errores mortalium inveni ut lucrum quoddam diceret esse mortem, ubi permulta et acute et copiose de huius vitae contemptu disseruit, utpote qui iam ad supernam beatitudinem adspiraret."

6. G. Cammelli, *Giovanni Argyropulo* (Florence, 1941), p. 120. For the Medici role in the appointment of Argyropoulos, see Chapter IV, below.

7. See Chapter VIII, n. 24, below.

8. See the survey by E. Garin, "Ricerche sulle traduzioni di Platone nella prima metà

within nonprofessional circles, their focus shifted from an earlier eclectic use and an emphasis on ethics toward an attempt to comprehend systematically moral, natural, and metaphysical philosophy. Contemporaries noted the suddenness of the shift. Alamanno Rinuccini would write that before his generation (that is, before the 1450s), no one seeking a general education would do more than take a “little sip” from the vessel of philosophy: all thought they had done more than enough if they knew some ethics. Doctors and theologians alone, he argued, took up natural philosophy and metaphysics.<sup>9</sup> Also, in a short treatise on education written for his son, Rinuccini explained that to be an educated Florentine one *now* had to move beyond ethics to natural and speculative philosophy.<sup>10</sup> Rinuccini’s friend Donato Acciaiuoli gives similar testimony. At the time of the Peace of Lodi, Acciaiuoli complained that learning in even the liberal arts seemed to be dead in Florence. Just one decade later he would write that the study of letters “never before so flourished in Florence” and that “many are so trained in the Aristotelian and Platonic teachings that they seem to have been brought up in the Academy.”<sup>11</sup>

That a dramatic expansion in Florentine humanist culture took place after the Peace of Lodi cannot be doubted, and any endeavor at trotting out examples of an earlier interest in speculative philosophy will not cancel this fact. As is apparent even from the citations above, the humanists themselves were aware that major intellectual changes were taking place.

In this study my object is to describe, as carefully as possible, this birth of a philosophical culture in Renaissance Florence; more ambitiously, I intend to offer hypotheses concerning the causes and origins of the Neoplatonic movement. I shall be analyzing in particular what may be called a new ideology. To begin, and to provide an outline of sorts for the rest of this study, I will take up one after another some

---

del sec. XV,” in *Medioevo e Rinascimento: Studi in onore di Bruno Nardi* (Florence, 1955), 1, 339–74.

9. Letter to Roberto Salviati, 1489, in *Lettere ed orazioni*, ed. V. R. Giustiniani (Florence, 1953), pp. 188–89.

10. Dated 1474, *ibid.*, p. 97.

11. Letter (composed for Vespasiano da Bisticci) to Alfonso de Palencia, 24 Sept. 1463, ed. in F. Fossi, *Monumenta ad Alamanni Rinuccini vitam contexendam* (Florence, 1791), pp. 61–62: “Primum litterarum studia numquam magis in hac urbe viguerunt, multique hic adolescentes, multique iuvenes reperiuntur eruditi litteris graecis atque latinis, plerique etiam ita Aristotelicis Platonisque disciplinis instructi, ut in Academia educati videantur.” For the text, see Chapter V, n. 1, below. For Acciaiuoli’s earlier, negative assessment of learning in Florence, see Chapter IV, below.

currently held hypotheses about the beginnings of Florentine Platonism.

Textbooks, especially, account for the revival of Plato with the fall of Constantinople. When the Turks took Constantinople in 1453, many Greek scholars fled to the Latin West, and they took their manuscripts and ideas with them. Ficino would write that the “spirit of Plato,” dead in the Latin West since antiquity, had dwelt in Byzantium until his own time, when it “flew to Italy.”<sup>12</sup> For the “Byzantine hypothesis” the role of John Argyropoulos is crucial. He came to Florence in the summer of 1454, was offered a job at the University of Florence teaching Greek language, literature, and philosophy in 1455, and finally accepted a university appointment in early 1457. Eugenio Garin has argued that Argyropoulos was a thorough Platonist: he wove Platonic doctrines into his lectures on Aristotle, lectured on Platonic texts privately, and would have lectured on Plato publicly had university rules permitted it.<sup>13</sup> According to Garin, Argyropoulos was the real founder of Florentine Neoplatonism, and Marsilio Ficino and his followers in bad faith attempted to claim for themselves the credit for a movement that was already well underway when they began their philosophizing. As they overemphasized their own roles, so too they sought to praise their patrons, the Medici, as the true founders of the Academy.<sup>14</sup>

Garin’s hypotheses have a paradoxical, or, perhaps we should say, an ambiguous edge, for although he gives great credit to Argyropoulos as the founder of Florentine Platonism, he yet attempts to divorce Argyropoulos and his followers from the speculative and metaphysical interests of the Ficino group. In fact, for Garin, Argyropoulos and those of his circle are anti-Medicean civic humanists: they are committed to the study of moral philosophy and the “active” study of rhetoric, and they disdain the metaphysical speculation characteristic of Ficino and his Academy.<sup>15</sup>

Many of those who became part of the Platonic Academy or were influenced by it got their first introduction to speculative philosophy through the lectures of John Argyropoulos. The Byzantine’s role is important, though I shall argue that Garin exaggerates its importance and misunderstands the force of Argyropoulos’s teaching. But since Garin’s

12. See below, Chapter v, n. 3.

13. For Garin’s arguments, see the sources cited below, Chapter v, nn. 5 and 6.

14. See the sources cited below, Chapter v, n. 8.

15. See especially Garin’s summary in his “Donato Acciaiuoli cittadino fiorentino,” in his *Medioevo e Rinascimento*, 4th ed. (Bari, 1973), pp. 202–3.

theses are both complex and widely accepted, I shall attempt, in later chapters, to take them up in some detail.

A safer explanation for the philosophical revival, which appears now and then in the secondary literature, is simply that humanist culture itself had become ripe for Platonic influence, that Platonism, in other words, was “due.” By the mid-Quattrocento, humanists were learning Greek earlier and better, a large number of classical and Christian Greek works had been translated, and earlier favorites among Latin texts had now been mastered. Rhetorical and other prose texts, for instance, continued to be studied, but they no longer proved a challenge to the humanist teacher’s genius—more difficult texts in Latin poetry were now preferred by the humanist lecturer.<sup>16</sup> Much of the humanist movement seems to have had an inner momentum, and fashions changed as familiar texts were assimilated and new ones approached. The revival of Greek studies in the Latin West was an Italian-wide phenomenon, and we can be reasonably certain that if Florence had gone into a deep sleep after the Peace of Lodi, other cities and other cultures would have had their Platonic translations and commentaries. Since late antiquity, moreover, many educated Christians believed that Platonism was the ancient philosophy most in harmony with their revealed religion. In its form developed by Marsilio Ficino, Neoplatonism permitted Florentines and others to study and enjoy pagan philosophy without religious fears. That Platonism was “due” is correct, and the observation has proved useful in refuting strained theorems of causality.<sup>17</sup> But even those who have presented this hypothesis, as valid as it is, have for the most part recognized that the new texts of Plato contributed little to the substance of the new ideas. Platonism through Ficino had been thriving some twenty-five to thirty years before the first complete Latin translation of Plato’s dialogues saw the light of day (the translation was published in 1482 and printed in 1484).<sup>18</sup> The form of the Platonic revival, especially in the earlier period, depended far less on individual scholarly critiques of the Platonic texts than on the types of scholastic Platonizing

16. For educational fashion, see the general remarks of A. Grafton, *Joseph Scaliger: A Study in the History of Classical Scholarship*, vol. 1 (Oxford, 1983), p. 15, and now Grafton and L. Jardine, *From Humanism to the Humanities: Education and the Liberal Arts in Fifteenth- and Sixteenth-Century Europe* (Cambridge, Mass., 1986), pp. 83ff.

17. P. O. Kristeller, “The Platonic Academy of Florence,” now in his *Renaissance Thought and the Arts* (Princeton, 1980), pp. 89–90.

18. P. O. Kristeller, “The First Printed Edition of Plato’s Works and the Date of Its Publication (1484),” in *Science and History: Studies in Honor of Edward Rosen*, Studia Copernicana, 16 (Wrocław, 1978), pp. 25–35.

carried out both in the university and in monastic circles, cultures in which Ficino himself was nurtured.

While usually not neglecting the Byzantine influence, a theory that is chronologically ideal, and while sometimes acknowledging that Platonism was “due,” historians have tended to seize on one central hypothesis to explain the revival of Plato. The Medici took the humanists outside the city and placed them in villas, where these intellectuals could reflect on the eternal verities with a closed circle of special associates. With the transformation of Florence from a republic to a princely state, the thesis goes, humanism underwent a transformation from a civic-humanist or worldly culture to a Platonic or courtly one.<sup>19</sup>

Rightly or wrongly, the historical portrayal of the Medici role in the transformation of Florentine culture is largely a reflection of a Platonic world realized in the golden age of Lorenzo the Magnificent (first citizen of Florence from 1469 to 1492). During the early Lorenzo period Ficino’s major philosophical works were being published, including his first commentaries on Plato (1469) and the *Theologia Platonica* (1474).<sup>20</sup> Here too Cristoforo Landino, in his *Disputationes Camaldulenses* of the early 1470s, described a philosophical discussion at the convent of Camaldoli, where Leon Battista Alberti donned a Platonic robe and expounded on the virtues of the contemplative life, the Platonic theory of the highest good, and the allegorical journeys of Aeneas toward wisdom.<sup>21</sup> And here also the young ruler of Florence, Lorenzo de’ Medici, wrote Platonic poetry and fulfilled each of Plato’s alternative recipes for a happy republic—one where philosophers rule or rulers philosophize.<sup>22</sup>

But if we wish to examine the Medici as agents of the intellectual changes, we shall need to look at the period some ten to fifteen years before Lorenzo came to power. With new discoveries and a new appreciation of Ficino’s early works, and new evidence relating to Landino’s early career, we now know that at the founding of the Platonic Academy by Cosimo in 1462 or 1463 many of Marsilio Ficino’s central ideas were already well developed, and we can be reasonably certain also that Cris-

19. The thesis has been forcefully presented by E. Garin in several publications: see especially “I cancellieri umanisti della repubblica fiorentina da Coluccio Salutati a Bartolomeo Scala,” in his *La cultura filosofica del Rinascimento italiano* (Florence, 1961), pp. 3–27; *L’Umanesimo italiano*, 8th ed. (Bari, 1975), pp. 94ff.; and “Donato Acciaiuoli cittadino,” pp. 199–267.

20. The commentaries were on the *Philebus* and the *Symposium*: for editions, see Chapter II, n. 21, and Chapter VII, n. 80, below.

21. Ed. P. Lohe (Florence, 1980).

22. A. Buck, *Der Platonismus in den Dichtungen Lorenzo de’ Medicis* (Berlin, 1936); P. O. Kristeller, “Lorenzo de’ Medici platonico,” in his *Studies in Renaissance Thought and Letters* (1956; rept. Rome, 1969), pp. 213–19.

toforo Landino had for several years been giving philosophical, Platonizing lectures on both Latin poets and Dante.<sup>23</sup>

Since Platonism as a movement really began to take off during the last decade of the life of Cosimo de' Medici (d. 1464), new questions must necessarily arise regarding the Medici role. It is far easier to speculate on a Medicean philosophical "court" during the 1470s and 1480s, where we can picture Lorenzo de' Medici reciting his Platonic verse to his courtiers and protégés. It is much more difficult to imagine a Cosimo intellectually suited to shape a philosophical movement or politically able or willing to do the same. What must be explored also is whether the ideology itself of Neoplatonism called for political passivity under princely rule, for the literal withdrawal of intellectuals and others from the active political and social life to a world of contemplative and speculative isolation.

But let us set aside, for now, this question of Platonic ideology, as we confront one startling fact regarding the timing of the rebirth of speculative philosophical studies in Florence. In the 1450s Florence and the Medici were in no position whatsoever to create any sort of villa-centered culture of isolated intellectuals enjoying the *Pax Medicea*. Rather, the first great burst in philosophical studies took place at a time of Medici party collapse, when Florence seemed to be characterized not by the Medici peace but by the *tumultus popularis*. This striking phenomenon, almost universally overlooked in intellectual histories of the period, forces us both to reexamine the entire question of the relation of the intellectuals to the Medici party and to reconsider the social function and meaning of the Neoplatonic movement itself.

23. See below, Chapters VII and IX.

## II

# HUMANIST INTELLECTUALS AND THE MEDICI PARTY

IN the Age of Lorenzo one may happily and readily find the philosophical expressions and intellectual settings that invite hypotheses about a new speculative culture. Set now in the villa, now in the court, this fashionable Neoplatonism honored its new Florentine prince. Whether such a depiction of the Golden Age of Lorenzo is true or false is not our subject here. In this chapter, instead, we shall look at the intellectuals and the Medici rather more broadly; at the same time we shall focus on that period when Florentine Neoplatonism first flourished, the decade from the Peace of Lodi (1454) to the death of Cosimo de' Medici (1464). We shall begin with Cosimo, the founder and first patron of the Academy, and look first at some of the limits of his personal ability to shape the philosophical renaissance. We shall then turn to Cosimo's party.

While Lorenzo de' Medici was a humanistic and philosophical poet, Cosimo's learning came from the book of life.<sup>1</sup> He did, of course, ini-

1. I have seen no study of Cosimo's level of literacy. Vespasiano da Bisticci remarked on his "bonissima peritia delle lettere latine" (*Vite*, II, 168, cf. 169), but Vespasiano was not especially learned himself, and, like the modern scholar with his curriculum vitae, his heroes often acquire one more language than they actually have. Much of the evidence for Cosimo's learning is late and seems forced. In a preface to Cosimo of December 1463, Alamanno Rinuccini recalled a meeting where Cosimo quoted from Cicero's *Dream of Scipio* as if he were reading it (*Lettere ed orazioni*, p. 62); and Bartolomeo Scala, in January 1464, described for Lorenzo de' Medici Cosimo's wide learning in all areas of the classics (see A. M. Brown, "The Humanist Portrait of Cosimo de' Medici, Pater Patriae," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 24 [1961], 199-200). But the casual remark of Niccolò Machiavelli, that Cosimo was "without learning, . . . but filled with a natural prudence" (see below, p. 14), is probably closer to the mark. For a recent, positive assessment of Cosimo's intellectual role in the philosophical renaissance, see

tially endow the Academy and hence had a major role in the philosophical renaissance. But it is doubtful that Cosimo could have recognized subtle intellectual changes beyond their dimmest outlines, and he certainly could not have determined formally in any thinker their particular direction. He may have had something of a humanist education under Roberto de' Rossi, but this is not certain, and such training left no clear mark.<sup>2</sup> He wrote little or nothing in Latin (nor, indeed, anything of literary or philosophical note even in Italian). His hand is found in the margin of no classical text, and the letters he himself composed, probably all in Italian, are bare of classical references.<sup>3</sup> Cosimo evidently claimed that he had read all "thirty-seven" books of Gregory the Great's *Moralia* in "only" six months, and Vespasiano da Bisticci recorded this as a illustration of Cosimo's great learning.<sup>4</sup> The work is not short, and it would have taken a good scholar more than a week, I suppose, to get through it. Cosimo had a copy of it in his study: whether he was plodding through the original or an Italian translation is not known.<sup>5</sup> His private library also contained much Italian popular and devotional literature. The classical authors represented are for the most part trophies of his book hunting or, perhaps, relics from his earlier studies under Rossi.<sup>6</sup> Cosimo was an exceptionally intelligent businessman and political craftsman. He was clever and had a remarkably shrewd sense of timing. Humanists called him wise, but they really meant he was astute—and that he supported the humanities. Had there been one Platonic idea in Cosimo's brain we can be sure the humanists would have seized on it.<sup>7</sup>

But Cosimo learned from the humanists how to be decorously un-

---

A. M. Brown, "Platonism in Fifteenth-Century Florence and Its Contribution to Early Modern Political Thought," *Journal of Modern History* 58 (1986), 383–413 at 389ff.

2. Vespasiano, *Vite*, II, 168; Gutkind, *Cosimo*, pp. 4–5, 207n.

3. Some of the letters are edited in A. Fabroni, *Magni Cosmi Medicei vita*, vol. 2 (Pisa, 1788).

4. Vespasiano, *Vite*, II, 195.

5. F. Pintor, "Per la storia della libreria medicea nel Rinascimento," *Italia medioevale e umanistica* 3 (1960), 198 ("Moralia di San Ghirigoro in III volumi lettera antica").

6. See the list of books, *ibid.*, pp. 197–99. For a good summary description of the contents, see also Gutkind, *Cosimo*, p. 227.

7. To be sure, humanists and philosophers did argue that Cosimo's mind was *objectively* Platonic and that he himself fulfilled a Platonic ideal: see especially Niccolò Tignosi's description, pp. 150–52, below. Also, Cosimo seems to have had some considered appreciation of the notion that the artist as a creator gave form through his activity to higher ideals resting in his brain (see Gutkind, *Cosimo*, p. 234): some might call this Platonic rather than Aristotelian or even commonsense, and the Platonists certainly used the image often. Alison Brown has recently attempted to show that Cosimo was attracted to some Platonic opinions: "Platonism in Fifteenth-Century Florence," esp. pp. 389ff.

learned. He used to call Franco Sacchetti the “kidney,” since Sacchetti had no learning but liked to have intellectuals around him, the kidney being a lean organ surrounded by fat.<sup>8</sup> Then and now, Cosimo’s wisdom appears attractive. He spoke with aphorisms and disjunctive statements, and he won fame as a careful spectator of the human condition.<sup>9</sup> Not long after the Medici palace on the Via Larga was finished, his most promising son, Giovanni, died, and Cosimo remarked, “This is too big a house for so small a family.”<sup>10</sup> We can imagine an analogous but light-hearted statement from Cosimo when the priest Lorenzo Pisano wanted to dedicate to Cosimo his commentary on the *Song of Songs*. With the commentary still unfinished after eighteen books, Lorenzo seems to have approached Cosimo as a patron. “This is too long a commentary for so short a work!”—what else could have evoked Ficino’s jocular letter to Cosimo?

Lorenzo Pisano, the priest, is expounding for you Solomon’s *Song of Songs*. He has so far written eighteen books, if I remember aright, to explain one small book. If you are surprised, Cosimo, that Lorenzo wrote so lengthily when Solomon was so brief, I reply that Lorenzo was obliged to be lengthy because Solomon was so brief. The more intricate the knot which Solomon tied, the more devices were necessary to unravel it.

. . . But farewell, lest I become prolix myself while excusing prolixity.<sup>11</sup>

What was Cosimo’s contribution to the new learning? Ficino stated that Cosimo was inspired by speeches of Gemistus Pletho to found the Platonic Academy. Here we have no other literary evidence and must speak of possibilities.<sup>12</sup> The Byzantines at the Council of Florence had made a striking impression on the Florentines. Vespasiano da Bisticci remarked that the Greeks were dressed in the same “serious and digni-

8. Angelo Poliziano, *Detti piacevoli*, ed. T. Zanato (Rome, 1983), p. 46, no. 16; Poliziano, *Tagebuch*, ed. A. Wesselski (Jena, 1929), p. 12, no. 16. Zanato’s edition is based on more manuscripts and is more complete; but the older edition has copious notes—and an index. That these sayings and witticisms are to be attributed to Politian is questionable.

9. Gutkind, *Cosimo*, p. 240.

10. Niccolò Machiavelli, *History of Florence*, VII, 6, in *The Chief Works and Others*, trans. A. Gilbert, vol. 3 (Durham, N.C., 1965), p. 1345.

11. *Letters*, I, 48–49 (trans. altered very slightly); cf. *Opera omnia*, p. 615.

12. The useful recent study by C. M. Woodhouse, *George Gemistos Plethon, the Last of the Hellenes* (Oxford, 1986), contains no new information linking Pletho, Cosimo, and the young Ficino.

fied” way that they had been for some “fifteen hundred” years or more!<sup>13</sup> With their full beards the Greeks physically resembled the Magi in paintings of the Adoration, and vice versa: this gave them an aura of wisdom and mystery even before they spoke.<sup>14</sup> The only idea of Pletho yet discovered that may have influenced the early development of Florentine Platonism is the notion of the unity of ancient philosophical systems. With Cosimo’s commonsense approach toward learning and his cleverness in penetrating human nature, it is not wholly implausible that the theory that Plato and his student Aristotle were not as different as the schoolmen claimed had its appeal. Cosimo, too, like many merchant-humanists such as Alberti, Manetti, and Palmieri, seems to have been genuinely interested in bringing teachings reserved for professionals into the public forum. He, after all, created Florence’s first public library, and he underwrote the book-hunting efforts of such figures as Poggio Bracciolini and Niccolò Niccoli.<sup>15</sup> Cosimo could have been moved to found the Academy simply by a sense of duty. Pletho was a respected and renowned Platonist, Platonism was the fairest flower of ancient Greek philosophy, enjoying a special affinity with Christianity, and Florence was the new Athens. It was probably a combination of historical vision as to Florence’s role in Western culture and pride with regard to his role as *primus inter pares* that led Cosimo to support the revival of the Platonic Academy. Not dissimilar was his earlier patronage of Ambrogio Traversari’s Latin translations of pseudo-Dionysius and the Greek Church Fathers.<sup>16</sup>

As to Cosimo’s interactions with the world of ideas, little can be said. He was certainly involved in learned discussions, and the roles given him in humanist dialogues do not appear wholly unnatural. In his introduction to his collection of eulogies of Cosimo, the *Collectiones Cosmianae*, Bartolomeo Scala claimed that Cosimo was well read in ancient philosophy.<sup>17</sup> But Scala, as editor of the pieces, faced the wretched requirement of having to surpass his contemporaries in their praise, and his arguments appear strained indeed. Another philosophical humanist

13. See below, Chapter v, n. 10.

14. See below, Chapter v, nn. 10, 12.

15. B. L. Ullman and P. A. Stadter, *The Public Library of Renaissance Florence: Niccolò Niccoli, Cosimo de’ Medici and the Library of San Marco* (Padua, 1972), pp. 3–27; R. Sabbadini, *Le scoperte dei codici latini e greci ne’ secoli XIV and XV* (1905; rept. Florence, 1967, with the author’s additions and corrections ed. by E. Garin), esp. I, 72–92.

16. For Traversari, see C. L. Stinger, *Humanism and the Church Fathers: Ambrogio Traversari (1386–1439) and Christian Antiquity in the Italian Renaissance* (Albany, N.Y., 1977).

17. Cited by A. Brown, “Platonism in Fifteenth-Century Florence,” p. 392.

and Medici protégé, Marsilio Ficino, also labored to find in Cosimo every intellectual virtue. But his praise, fulsome as it is, rings far truer. While Plato showed us what virtues are, Ficino wrote, “Cosimo put them into practice every day.”<sup>18</sup> Humanists did indeed find in Cosimo the embodiment of Platonic virtue. But the object of this sort of praise has the air of the unlearned good man, the one who, led solely by his instincts and practical knowledge of the world and of man, seizes on truths by his natural cunning. Niccolò Machiavelli, who had no especial reason to find praise or blame in this prince of an earlier era, remarked in passing that Cosimo was “senza dottrina, ma eloquentissimo e ripieno d’una naturale prudenza.”<sup>19</sup> His judgment rings far truer than do those of Cosimo’s contemporaries, determined to discover a sage as well as a statesman. To be sure, Cosimo had a degree of direct contact with Ficino’s philosophizing. He was evidently consoled by Ficino’s “philosophical” music from his lyre. In Ficino’s one letter to Cosimo that has philosophical content, the summary of the *Philebus*, mentioned earlier, he underscored Cosimo’s great material and moral virtues, and he stated that we attain happiness through wisdom, which permits us to make “right use” of our gifts.<sup>20</sup> The letter is neither philosophically imaginative nor groundbreaking. One might suppose that if Cosimo had been up-to-date with the wider range of Ficino’s Platonism, he might have viewed the letter’s emphasis on his “possessions” as somewhat indiscreet. A year or so later Ficino would describe the dialogue in terms much more abstract, as dealing with hierarchical relations between relative and absolute goods, between intelligence and will, and between beauty and truth.<sup>21</sup>

18. *Letters*, I, 108; *Opera omnia*, p. 649 (letter to Lorenzo de’ Medici entitled “Imitatio potior est quam lectio”).

19. *Istorie fiorentine*, VI, 6, ed. F. Gaeta (Milan, 1962), p. 461; cf. *History of Florence*, in *Chief Works*, III, 1344.

20. *Letters*, I, 32–34; *Opera omnia*, p. 608. See p. 191, below.

21. *Argumentum* to translation of the *Philebus*, 1464, ed. M. J. B. Allen, in Ficino, *The Philebus Commentary* (Berkeley, 1975), pp. 485–87. As Cosimo was approaching death, Ficino read to or paraphrased for him his translation of the ps.-Xenocrates, *De morte*. According to marginal notes in some manuscripts (see P. O. Kristeller, *Supplementum Ficinianum* [1937; rept. Florence, 1973], I, cxxxvi–vii), at one point Cosimo exclaimed, “Oh, how true is this utterance!” (*O quam vera sententia!*). The passage (at Ficino, *Opera omnia*, p. 1965, lines 35–36) is the conclusion of a section on the misery of the human condition, where the Platonic author goes through the various stages of a person’s life to show that each is characterized by grief. The section prompting Cosimo’s exclamation (“Demum senectus ipsa clam serpit, in quam omne naturae sordidum et insanabile malum confluit”) describes the physical sufferings of old age. Cosimo’s reaction has less the smell of a Platonic philosopher than that of an old man suffering from gout. The statement is typically Cosmian in that, amid a philosophical discussion, he seizes on a

Cosimo's contacts with the Aristotelian school led by John Argyropoulos are no more striking. Vespasiano da Bisticci recounts a debate between the jurist Otto Niccolini and John Argyropoulos on whether law was part of moral philosophy or subservient to it. Cosimo was present and, according to Vespasiano, knew the answer (Argyropoulos's position, that law was subservient to ethics), but "for the sake of hearing the two debate" he pretended not to know.<sup>22</sup> Cosimo's reticence may have been Vespasiano's flattery. Even if Vespasiano's account is accurate, it reveals only that Cosimo knew some Aristotelian ethics or that he was abreast of recent developments in legal humanism, which emphasized the positive, functional nature of law rather than its participation in a divine and transcendental truth. These developments, owed largely to the brilliant critique of law by Poggio Bracciolini, were significant in laying the theoretical groundwork for the Medici regime.<sup>23</sup> In old age, as we stated earlier, Cosimo heard Bartolomeo Scala read or explain to him Donato Acciaiuoli's commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics*, based largely on Argyropoulos's lectures. Cosimo's interest in the text was probably genuine, but it should be remembered also that late in life Cosimo was preoccupied with dying well, which, as he learned from the humanists, meant also appearing to die well. This required him to have learned from his life that knowledge was more important than things and to approach death with Socratic good humor. Cosimo's wife

---

commonsense passage he could relate to. If indeed he made the statement, I imagine that it provoked hearty and good-natured laughter from those present.

22. *Vite*, II, 203-4.

23. See F. Krantz, "Florentine Humanist Legal Thought, 1375-1450" (Ph.D. diss., Cornell University, 1971), esp. pp. 206ff., and now also his "Between Bruni and Machiavelli: History, Law and Historicism in Poggio Bracciolini," in *Politics and Culture in Early Modern Europe: Essays in Honor of H. G. Koenigsberger*, ed. P. Mack and M. C. Jacob (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 119-51 (hereafter "Poggio"). We will later look briefly at Poggio's theory of law. For the debate on law between Cosimo, Niccolini, and Argyropoulos, cf. A. Brown, "Platonism in Fifteenth-Century Florence," pp. 390-91. Brown notes correctly that Cosimo wanted to make law subject to moral philosophy, and she states that "here Cosimo is disassociated from Niccolini's attempt to free law from moral constraints." Hence Cosimo here would want law "subject to the moral restraints imposed by the church and customary law." But at the same time Brown wants Cosimo to be part of a more modern approach, and she emphasizes his interest in the idea of "law as an aspect of truth to be discovered freely by the philosopher ruler." I think, however, that her discussion of Cosimo in the debate is somewhat confused. Law as *scientia* was a more conservative position, defended by those jurists who held it to be part of a superior truth. Humanists such as Bruni and especially Poggio wrested law from science and made it part of moral philosophy. That is, they said that good men holding power should use law as they see fit, and they should not let it be subject to "scientific," juridical formulas. That law was subject to moral philosophy, in other words, did not mean that it was subject to "the moral restraints imposed by the church and customary law" (as Brown argues) but that it was closer to what she describes as "an aspect of truth to be discovered freely by the philosopher ruler."