
Flee the Loathsome Shadow:

Marsilio Ficino (1433-99) and the
Medici in Florence

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A man's reputation in Renaissance Florence was determined by few things: the venerability of his family and its connections, his political record and, perhaps most importantly, his fortune.¹ Yet a relatively new merchant family, the Medici, exercised control over Florence for the better part of the fifteenth century.² Cosimo de' Medici (1389-1464) was the founder of the Medici dynasty and responsible for initiating a period of relative peace and prosperity in Florence. His successors were Piero di Cosimo de' Medici (1416-1470) and Lorenzo the Magnificent (1449-1492), the latter of whom inaugurated a political and artistic golden age in Florence through his skill and patronage.³ Lorenzo's death marked the end of this golden age and the Medici's republican reign, although the family would later rule as dukes of Florence beginning in 1531 and lasting until 1737. Their ascendancy coincided with the rise of humanism, a philosophy that evolved from a new educational program called the *studia humanitatis* or liberal arts.⁴

This article will explore the precarious nature of clients in Renaissance Florence through the letters of Marsilio Ficino, a humanist philosopher largely responsible for the Florentine revival of Neoplatonism. Ficino was the first scholar to translate the extant works of Plato into Latin, an effort requested and funded by Ficino's patron, Cosimo de' Medici.⁵ Ficino's scholarly output was largely due to his status as a client of Cosimo and his gratitude is vividly described in his letters to the patriarch of the Medici family. His letters then might be seen as bastions of Medicean support in the face of criticisms surrounding the Medici chokehold on power in the nominally republican state. Yet, while it may be argued that Ficino's letters advocated Medicean rule in Florence, the

1 John M. Najemy, *A History of Florence, 1200-1575*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006).

2 John Rigby Hale, *Florence and the Medici*, (London: Phoenix Books, 1977).

3 Patronage is generally agreed to be 'the action of a patron in supporting, encouraging or countenancing a person (known as a client), to produce some kind of skilled work,' usually art, architecture or literature. Werner L Gundersheimer, 'Patronage in the Renaissance: An Exploratory Approach,' in *Patronage in the Renaissance*, eds. Guy Fitch Lytle and Stephen Orgel, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981), 3. See also F. W. Kent and Patricia Simons, 'Renaissance Patronage: An Introductory Essay,' in *Patronage, Art and Society in Renaissance Italy*, eds. F.W Kent and Patricia Simons, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 1.

4 Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Studies in Renaissance Thought and Letters*, (Rome: Edizioni Di Storia e Letteratura, 1956).

5 Patronage, a relationship between client (artist) and patron, is generally agreed to be 'the action of a patron in supporting, encouraging or countenancing a person, institution, work, art, etc'. Gundersheimer, 'Patronage in the Renaissance,' 3.

reality was far more complex.⁶ Ficino's epistolary support was limited to the rule of Cosimo, not his grandson Lorenzo. An analysis of Ficino's correspondence with both Medicean rulers reveals that despite his inferior role as client, Ficino felt obliged by his philosophical training to educate both rulers on the nature of rule. For Ficino, Cosimo was the personification of political virtue. Consequently, Ficino sought to see Cosimo reborn in his grandson, Lorenzo. Despite initial intimacy, however, the scholar and patron soon fell out.⁷ Lorenzo had chosen a different path and was more interested in cultivating political relationships than living virtuously. Ficino's attempts to change Lorenzo's political values eventually resulted in Lorenzo's abandonment of the philosopher following Ficino's apparent refusal to support his political reign.

The first part of this article demonstrates how Cosimo's approach to rulership mostly coincided with Ficino's own Neoplatonist ideals and how Ficino sought to reinforce Cosimo's support at any given opportunity in order to maintain this favourable *status quo*. The second part of this article analyses the political shift that occurred when Lorenzo took power and how Ficino reacted to this change, in contrast to how the philosopher may have been expected to have reacted. Lorenzo moved away from the precedents set by his grandfather and adopted his own practices of governance. One such practice was reduced patronage of literary and philosophical scholars and a greater interest in the fine arts. While we might expect a client to unequivocally praise his patron in the hope of further work, especially in the context of dwindling support, Ficino often reminded Lorenzo of his grandfather's hyperbolic skills (while hinting at Lorenzo's defects) and best means of governing, until Lorenzo cut ties with the philosopher. Ficino may have genuinely attempted to institute better political frameworks in Florence, while also aiming for increased patronage. Yet, Ficino failed on both counts as Lorenzo did not appreciate Ficino's lack of unadulterated loyalty and veiled criticism. The inability of the philosopher to balance his private satisfaction with public devotion to his ruler illustrates the nature of life in Renaissance Florence for the intellectual élite. While respected for their considerable intelligence, intellectuals were forced to rely on the fiduciary support of their patrons to continue their work. This could sometimes compromise their private fulfilment, a compromise that Ficino could not reconcile with his public duties.

Scholarship concerning Ficino has generally focussed on his role in advancing Neoplatonist thought in Florence. As a result, less attention has been given to the social and political implications of his life and letters. The classic work of Paul Oskar Kristeller painted Ficino as an ardent supporter of the Medicean regime.⁸ In recent times, Alison Brown has argued that Ficino propagated the Medici regime through his philosophical oeuvre.⁹ Yet, intellectual scholarship has overlooked Ficino's letters as fertile sources of his political predicament. James Hankins scrutinised a number of sources to come to the conclusion that Ficino operated as a sort of Socratic figure who led young scholars toward virtue.¹⁰ I posit that he also attempted to lead Cosimo and then Lorenzo toward virtue and that the rise and fall of their intellectual fortunes were reflected in the tone and content of Ficino's letters.

⁶ Alison Brown, 'Platonism in Fifteenth Century Florence and its Contribution to Early Modern Political Thought,' *Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 58, No. 2, (1986), 383.

⁷ Melissa Bullard, 'Marsilio Ficino and the Medici. The Inner Dimensions of Patronage,' in *Christianity and the Renaissance: Image and Religious Imagination in the Quattrocento*, ed. Timothy Verdon and John Henderson, (New York: Syracuse, 1990), 472.

⁸ Kristeller, *Studies in Renaissance Thought and Letters*, 99-122.

⁹ Brown, 'Platonism in Fifteenth Century Florence,' 383-5.

¹⁰ James Hankins, 'Cosimo de' Medici and the "Platonic Academy"', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, Vol. 53, (1990), 144-62.

Letters are fertile ground for exploring social and political sentiment for the Medicean regime, particularly from the intellectuals who thrived during Cosimo's reign and declined during Lorenzo's. Ficino may have written in laudatory terms, but criticism lay beneath the carefully constructed surface. Analysing these letters reveals how intellectuals reacted to political paradigm shifts and how they negotiated the confusing relationship hierarchies in fifteenth-century Florence. Early modern historians like Andy Wood have explored how deferential letters were used by socially subordinate writers as a strategy of resistance to challenge rulers and their political practices.¹¹ Further studies may use this increasing literature on the language of deference for studies of the élite in Renaissance Italy. The carefully constructed linguistic artifices of patronage make it difficult to understand the nature of the social and political ideas expressed by clients. However, an approach using the multiple methodologies of social, intellectual and art history, as advocated by historians such as F.W. Kent, can reveal how the intellectual élite conceived of their role in early modern society and contribute to an understanding of how 'social relations were conducted according to rules of deference and reciprocity', especially within the socio-political context of patronage as distinct from its artistic or intellectual context.¹²

Marsilio Ficino, Cosimo de' Medici and the Rise of Humanism

Marsilio Ficino, in his letters to Cosimo de' Medici, attempted to translate his Neoplatonist theory into political action. Ficino found in Cosimo de' Medici, considered the *pater patriae* of Florence, an individual who not only exhibited the Platonic values he treasured, but who was committed to funding Ficino's translations and commentaries of Plato and various Neoplatonists. Ficino saw Cosimo's rule as representing three Platonic values: power is justified when combined with knowledge, power should be distributed according to ability and rule by a philosophically virtuous man is preferable to rigid law or entrenched customs.¹³ These were more than abstract values, however, because these virtues allowed the Medici to legitimise their rule.¹⁴ Florence was nominally a republic and its rulers were elected, not hereditary. When the Medici took power, they were able to justify their rule in terms of the contemporary humanist argument that rulers who were philosophically enlightened and able were preferable.

Humanism and the Neoplatonist revival took place within the new humanist style of education, roughly the study of rhetoric, history, poetry and moral philosophy. The increased emphasis on Plato came as a result of 'rediscovering' his work, to the detriment of Aristotle, the previous significant philosophical figure and basis of scholasticism (the style of education which immediately preceded humanism). Ficino, a keen student of the Neoplatonists Plotinus and Proclus, was committed to reconciling the pagan wisdom of Platonism with Christianity. Ficino hoped that his new ideas might initiate a spiritual revival and return of the golden age in Florentine politics.¹⁵ When Ficino saw Cosimo employing the aforementioned Platonic values in his political practices, he sought to encourage Cosimo to maintain his commitment to philosophical virtue through letters.

¹¹ Andy Wood, *The Politics of Social Conflict: The Peak Country, 1520-1770*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 30.

¹² See, for example, Kent and Simons, *Patronage, Art and Society in Renaissance Italy*. Wood, *The Politics of Social Conflict*, 30.

¹³ Brown, 'Platonism in Fifteenth Century Florence,' 388.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ James Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance*, (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishing, 1991).

Ficino's letters to Cosimo are far less complex than those sent to Lorenzo, but they are a necessary control for demonstrating the contrast between Ficino's unwavering loyalty to Cosimo and the liberties he took with Lorenzo's goodwill. This section will use extracts from letters sent to Cosimo to demonstrate Ficino's desire to impart further philosophical knowledge on the Florentine leader as well as his desire to maintain his level of funding. It will become apparent in Ficino's letters to Lorenzo that Ficino believed Cosimo successfully integrated Platonic virtue into politics and that Cosimo was a worthy *exemplum* for Lorenzo to model himself on. Although many intellectuals engaged in praise to advance the possibility of future sponsorship by wealthy patrons, it appears that Ficino genuinely admired Cosimo. In a dedication to Giuliano de' Medici (1453-78), brother of Lorenzo, Ficino wrote fervently of the respect he had for Cosimo's Platonic virtues:

The great Cosimo ... often spoke these words of Plato: that in undertaking important affairs, nothing is more profitable than the good-will of prudent and learned men. And there is no clearer evidence of justice and prudence in such affairs than if friends of this kind are present; not of injustice and imprudence if they are absent. This is the golden rule of Plato.¹⁶

Although Ficino was unlikely to criticise Cosimo in the pursuit of future sponsorship, the intrinsic intention of the dedication is revealing. Ficino dedicated his work to a member of the Medici dynasty. While this may have been a simple attempt to gain prestige, Ficino used the (apparent) thoughts of Cosimo to promote a text he himself had written. Moreover, while the text was one of abstract philosophical commentary, Ficino explicitly referenced its practical application in 'important affairs' or politics. Ficino, in dedicating the text to a member of the Medici dynasty, desired not only that it would be read by the family, but also that the family would read and internalise Cosimo's 'prudent and learned' approach to governance and justice. Ficino, like most Florentines, recognised that despite the nominally republican structure of its governance, the Medici family was in control of the city. By appealing to the Medici's admiration of their patriarch, Ficino hoped to persuade Cosimo's descendants to emulate the *pater patriae* in their future roles as powerful Florentine politicians. Such emulation could only be good for Ficino because it would continue the Medicean commitment to Platonic values and to those intellectuals who could provide learned assistance in their translation from abstract ideas to politics. This subtext was skilfully hidden behind deferential *encomia* and prevented Ficino's didactic attempts from appearing too imperious to Cosimo's next of kin.

Previous scholars have argued Ficino actively removed himself from politics and yet this preface demonstrates his subtle political ministrations.¹⁷ He was hopeful that Cosimo's kin would embrace their forefather's values and build a powerful Florence.¹⁸ Ficino's civic values are crystallised in his *De officio civis* (On the citizen's duty). Although not addressed to the Medici, as that would be too bold, Ficino suggested that *all* citizens, which included the Medici, ought to be wise and prudent. According to Ficino:

The duty of a citizen to consider the state as a single being formed by the citizens who are the parts ... when the good of the whole is sought, the good of both is assured.¹⁹

¹⁶ Marsilio Ficino, *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino*, Volume 1, tr. Michael Shepherd, (London: LSE, 1975), 31.

¹⁷ Hale, *Florence and the Medici*, 14.

¹⁸ Brown, 'Platonism in Fifteenth Century Florence,' 385.

¹⁹ Ficino, *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino*, Volume 1,123.

Thus, Ficino believed the citizens owed a duty to the state to be virtuous. As the Medici were technically citizens of the state who were elected to government, they were included under the auspices of this text. Indeed Ficino argued that the 'right government of men' could only be achieved through philosophy. Therefore, as a member of Cosimo's inner circle, it was Ficino's philosophical duty to promote virtue.²⁰ Cosimo was the most powerful medium for persuading Florentines of the benefits of philosophy, as who could argue with the *pater patriae* of Florence?²¹

Yet, Ficino did not revere Cosimo unconditionally, in life or in death, as an omniscient Platonic ruler. During his reign, Ficino did not hesitate to counsel Cosimo, as we witness in the *De felicitatis desiderio* (On the desire of happiness).²² Cosimo made a simple request for Ficino to visit him at his villa. Ficino replied with the aforementioned treatise on happiness, which at first glance appears to be a mere show-piece for Ficino to gain further patronage from Cosimo. There are subtleties in the text, however. Ficino frequently engaged Cosimo and provided several pieces of advice. For example, he encouraged Cosimo to seek wisdom above all things and reject ignorance for 'only in this way does the soul become most like God, who is wisdom himself'.²³ Although this is hardly a remarkable piece of guidance on its own, the fact that Ficino supplied this advice without prompting from Cosimo is significant. Ficino felt licenced to provide unsolicited advice to the ruler of Florence, which could be perceived as highlighting a flaw or defect in the ruler's practices. While Cosimo appeared to react with pleasure to this piece of advice, perhaps for the prestige it brought him, we shall see that in similar letters addressed to Lorenzo, Ficino's uninvited critiques provoked irritation, not gratitude. Ficino made the mistake of believing that Lorenzo would emulate the revered figure of his grandfather, a not unreasonable assumption, but one that cost him significant social status, possibly the most powerful currency in fifteenth-century Florentine society.

Marsilio Ficino, Lorenzo de' Medici and the Effects of Political Change

When Cosimo died in 1464, Florence looked hopefully to his son, Piero de' Medici (1416-69). Although it is unfair to view Piero as a mere ligament linking two great statesmen together, Piero was not a grand instigator of change as he died less than five years after coming into power.²⁴ Tangible change came when Lorenzo rose to power in 1469. Ficino rejoiced at Lorenzo's ascent, sending a letter lauding Lorenzo to prominent Florentine Niccoló Michelozzi.²⁵ Niccoló would later become Lorenzo's secretary in 1471 and perhaps Ficino's praise was a superficial attempt to court favour. Ficino did not yet know whether Lorenzo would follow Cosimo's style of leadership (and patronage) and probably felt it necessary to establish himself as Lorenzo's personal philosopher as he had with Cosimo. Thus, Ficino wrote extensively to Lorenzo and sought to endow him with the same knowledge his father embraced.

Although ostensibly Cosimo and Lorenzo were very much alike, Cosimo created the basic structure for Medici rule and Lorenzo developed it further, embracing the magnificence for which he became so well-known. Cosimo established one-family rule in Florence, the characteristic that

²⁰ Ficino, *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino*, Volume 3, 28-31.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Ficino, *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino*, Volume 1,34

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Judith Hook, *Lorenzo de' Medici: An historical biography*, (London: H. Hamilton, 1984), 19-24.

²⁵ Ficino, *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino*, Volume 1,67.

distinguished Florence from its days as a reasonable imitation of a republic with elected rulers. Using his extraordinary wealth, derived mostly from banking, Cosimo reasserted Florence's prominence on the Italian peninsula. Cosimo was a significant patron of both the arts and learning, influencing painting, sculpture, architecture and philosophy. He established the first public library at the monastery of San Marco in Florence and emphasised the importance of a humanist education. Cosimo's wealth allowed him to construct a particular representation of himself as a wise, prudent and pious leader who revived Florence with his generosity. Ficino attributed such prominence to Florence's reliance on Platonic values, but one might think that Cosimo's style and Plato's virtues happily coincided. Regardless, Ficino received significant status not only from being a client of the Medici, but as a confidante, an intellectual capable of critiquing Cosimo without upset, as we saw above. Lorenzo was far more ostentatious and strategic than Cosimo, funding many artistic projects and securing many more political allegiances with powerful factions. From Ficino's letters, it appears the humanist saw the abandonment of philosophy in favour of the fine arts as a superficial move and a deliberate rejection of Cosimo's rulership practices.²⁶ Perhaps Ficino found Lorenzo's *style* of leadership, despite being in *substance* similar to Cosimo, to be worthy of criticism in that the magnificent façade that Lorenzo presented did not suit the austerity and prudence required of a Platonic ruler.

Ficino began as Lorenzo's tutor and had a profound effect on the shaping of the young man's mind.²⁷ Ficino taught Lorenzo to value history and use the human experience to judge one's actions.²⁸ When Ficino provided examples for his protégé, he did not draw from the gallery of classical models recently revived by humanism. For a model of perfect behaviour, Ficino used Cosimo for the reasons described above. Cosimo was considered particularly virtuous by Ficino on account of his dedication to Platonic education, but veneration of the ruler was derived from the benefits his wealth brought Florence. Cosimo used his business connections through the Medici bank, as well as his own diplomatic skill, to strengthen Italian alliances and secure significant periods of peace throughout Italy. Lorenzo actually was more successful in securing peace, on account of his increased emphasis on political connections. He also extended Medici patronage to famous artists such as Leonardo da Vinci, Sandro Botticelli and Michelangelo Buonarroti. Ficino was very much involved in Lorenzo's inner circle during this first stage of his reign and we see in the letters they exchanged the mutual admiration they held for each other.

At the beginning of his reign, Lorenzo and Ficino shared a warm epistolary friendship marked by lengthy missives exchanged every few days. Omnipresent in Ficino's letters, however, was the spectre of Cosimo. He praised Cosimo's piety, his sense of justice and, most importantly, his virtuous rule.²⁹ In one letter, he described Cosimo as hard working and careful, both in relation to his own business affairs and to those of Florence; a man 'greedy of time as Midas was of gold'.³⁰ Strikingly, Ficino appeared to value Plato and Cosimo equally and urged Lorenzo to mould himself on Cosimo: 'Certainly I owe much to our Plato, but I confess I owe no less to Cosimo. For Plato put before me the concept of the virtues but once; Cosimo put them into practice every day'. He finished the letter by stating that 'God created Cosimo as a model of the universe, mould yourself

²⁶ Kristeller, *Studies in Renaissance Thought and Letter*, 56.

²⁷ Hook, *Lorenzo de' Medici*, 19.

²⁸ Hook, *Lorenzo de' Medici*, 14-15.

²⁹ Ficino, *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino*, Volume 1,135

³⁰ *Ibid.*

on the model of Cosimo. Indeed you have begun to do so'.³¹ Ficino was simply continuing the style of philosopher-confidante that had so impressed Cosimo. Ficino perceived that, having been the tutor of the young Lorenzo, his protégé would eagerly wish to continue to rely upon his former mentor.

During 1474 the intensity of their letters reached its zenith and it seemed an exciting exchange of ideas would continue indefinitely.³² Lorenzo at this stage still appreciated his former tutor's opinion, having only just been ordained as Florentine ruler five years prior at the age of twenty. In a reply to Ficino's letter about the sparing use of time, Lorenzo was grateful to Ficino for reproving him.

You have often unfolded your mind to me, but in this letter of yours you seem repeatedly to have gone beyond every other proof of friendship in good will towards me. Perhaps this is because you are first in love and far exceed all others in friendship to me; perhaps it is because you are not able to bestow abundantly those gifts of friendship which others cannot.³³

Yet all was not as it seemed in this letter. Despite the light tone, subtle hints at a fracturing friendship were present. Ficino was 'not able' to be the friend, or the political supporter, that others were to Lorenzo. It is unclear why Lorenzo felt this way, but there are two possible explanations. Firstly, Ficino had often 'unfolded' his mind, but perhaps this time he had gone too far in his criticism. After all, Lorenzo was concerned with prestige and magnificence in addition to maintaining political ties.³⁴ He likely had little use for a philosophy which urged restraint in favour of grandeur. Secondly, some scholars have linked Ficino to the Pazzi conspiracy of 1478.³⁵ The Pazzi Conspiracy was an attempted *coup d'état* by leading Florentine families (and supported by other Italian states) against the Medici family in Florence. Lorenzo escaped but his brother Giuliano was killed. Ficino's close friends were implicated in the conspiracy and it seems Lorenzo did not trust him after this event despite Ficino's apparent attempts to turn the conspirators from their course and warn Lorenzo.³⁶ Although these letters were sent four years prior to the conspiracy, there were already indications from Florentine families in 1474 that they were displeased with Medici totalitarianism. Lorenzo had attempted to make changes to the Florentine constitution to grant him even more power and such acts were frowned upon by some of the city's élite and perhaps Ficino. These letters might be read then as attempts by Lorenzo to gauge Ficino's loyalties and Ficino's failure to write exactly that which the Florentine wished to hear. Ficino's resistance to obsequiousness, while noble, eventually resulted in Lorenzo excommunicating him from the higher echelons of Florentine society. Through their letters, we can identify the decline in their friendship in line with the conspiracy.

In another letter from this period, Lorenzo wrote to Ficino to remonstrate him for failing to reply to a letter of his sent four days prior. Such tardiness was most unusual on Ficino's part; we saw before that Ficino could write a treatise in response to a simple request. Lorenzo's reply was ominous despite its tone.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Bullard, 'Marsilio Ficino and the Medici', 468.

³³ Ficino, *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino*, Volume 1,133

³⁴ Hook, *Lorenzo de' Medici*,45.

³⁵ Hook, *Lorenzo de' Medici*, 49.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

Dearest Marsilio, when I was leaving for this place I urged you not to let me await your letters too long while I was away, and to this you agreed. But already four days have passed since our parting and there is still no letter from you; although a great many letters have been delivered to me from my household and other friends. Thus I am surprised and sorry at your delay in writing, because I fully believed that if good will were equally strong in us both there would be equal enthusiasm in correspondence, which is a duty of love.³⁷

First Lorenzo accused Ficino of breaking a promise. Although this is in the context of a letter, it could equally be applied to Ficino breaking away from support for the Medici. This accusation was amplified by Lorenzo writing that many letters had arrived at his household from many other *friends*. It appears that Lorenzo was questioning Ficino: Are you my friend? Or are you an enemy? Lorenzo's criticism of Ficino's belated reply should therefore not be taken at face value; it was the delay in Ficino's total support that drew Lorenzo's ire, not his epistolary responsiveness. Lorenzo had now warned Ficino that he was aware of his wavering loyalties. Ficino had to continue to be outwardly loyal lest he lose Lorenzo's patronage altogether. Soon after, Lorenzo began to lose interest in philosophy and, seemingly, in Ficino. The epistolary frenzy of 1474 would not be repeated. After 1474, Lorenzo ceased writing to Ficino and, aside from several unanswered missives to Lorenzo, Ficino too fell silent in 1482. In the interim, Ficino's unrequited letters became increasingly desperate in their attempts to sway Lorenzo.³⁸ Ficino had perhaps realised the fatal error he had made in attempting to counsel Lorenzo and failing to submit to his authority – or simply that Lorenzo had lost interest and Ficino wished to renew the relationship. Through the auspices of Platonic virtue, Ficino begged Lorenzo to return to Platonist values that his grandfather embodied, but Lorenzo did not reply to his exhortations.

My lord, flee the loathsome shadow, from that miserable image of the impure and ignorant mind. Bestir yourself, and every day with all your strength pursue more and more closely, as you do, the form of the good and wise soul, full of light and bliss.³⁹

In the midst of the Pazzi conspiracy, the stresses of war and the death of his brother, Lorenzo had drifted away from his former tutor's beliefs. The master had become disillusioned with his pupil as Florentine civic traditions were slowly being surrendered to Lorenzo's personal power.⁴⁰ One historian has argued Lorenzo's procuring of a *benefice* (a church office), formerly in the Medici family, for Ficino in 1487 reflected no estrangement whatsoever.⁴¹ Yet, this *benefice* coming so late in life, and so long after Ficino's last letter, was likely a formal parting gift, recognition for services rendered, rather than any substantial reconciliation. Ficino had erred in some way, either failing to support Lorenzo or incorrectly believing himself to be allowed to criticise the leader of the Florentine state. The philosopher no longer had Medicean support and had to turn to other patrons for support.⁴²

Once Ficino stopped receiving support from the Medici, he allowed himself to privately criticise Lorenzo's regime. In an unsent fragment of a letter from Ficino, intended for Lorenzo, Ficino

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Bullard, 'Marsilio Ficino and the Medici', 480.

³⁹ Ficino, *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino*, Volume 5, 67-69

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Bullard, 'Marsilio Ficino and the Medici', 470.

⁴² Filippo Valori financed the publication of his writing and Francesco Salviati assisted Ficino in the advent of the new clergy tax. *Ibid.*, 469.

described a great feast that had been celebrated every year since the era of Cosimo. Lorenzo rejected his presence, however, and asked him to leave, despite the fact that Cosimo had previously 'on high freely invited' Ficino.⁴³ A second unpublished letter emphasised this exclusion from the court.⁴⁴ Exclusion from Florentine society, at least at this level, would have made it extremely difficult to find patronage as supporting Ficino could be seen as betraying Lorenzo. He did find support, however, and was writing quite prolifically until his death at Careggi, outside Florence. Despite his success, a letter to his closest friend, the poet Giovanni Cavalcanti (1444-1509), revealed the extent of his disillusionment with Lorenzo, the Medici 'prince'.

Truth does not dwell in the company of princes; only lies, spiteful criticism and fawning flattery, men pretending to be what they are not and pretending not to be what they are.⁴⁵

This letter is severely critical in its assessment of Lorenzo's style of leadership and, indeed, Lorenzo himself. It seems that the reasons for Ficino's 'delay' in 1474 had fully manifested. It is revealing that he chose to send such an acrimonious letter to a fellow intellectual. Ficino no longer believed in Medicean support and confided his bitter disappointment in a close friend in a similar position. The harmony between the active and contemplative life that Ficino had advocated had failed to develop in the governance of Florence. Lorenzo's unwillingness to reach the apogee of Platonic ideology caused nostalgia for the days of Cosimo amongst his clients. Ficino's downfall reflected the precarious nature of clients generally in Renaissance Florence and how necessary it was, at least outwardly, to follow the current regime.

Conclusion

Ficino could not quite reconcile his personal need for philosophical fulfilment with an unflinching loyalty to the most powerful man in Florence. Lorenzo was just as unyielding as Ficino in pursuing his objectives, philosophical or political. The changes in Ficino's attitudes to Medicean rule represented the perilous status of the intellectual elite in Florence should they challenge the *status quo*. Even though Ficino had become disillusioned and embittered, he never outwardly rejected Lorenzo as his patron nor denied the crucial role Cosimo and his family had played in his life.⁴⁶ Doing so would most likely have caused him to be a social pariah in Florence and he certainly would not have received the *benefice* in 1487.

Yet, Lorenzo's silence is telling. Ficino had betrayed him, in some way, and he responded by withdrawing his support. Ficino's plight demonstrates that not all clients were obsequious in the pursuit of patronage. Intellectual elites close to the political elite sometimes saw themselves as capable of assisting with the act of ruling. Particularly in the case of Ficino, having had such success with Cosimo, he had few reasons to cease his silent participation in politics when Lorenzo assumed his grandfather's role. Pointedly, Ficino was Lorenzo's tutor and confidante in his adolescence and Ficino could have reasonably assumed such a formative relationship would continue in Lorenzo's adulthood. Yet, Lorenzo's focus was not philosophy and politics, but magnificence and politics, within which philosophy did not form the influential role it did during Cosimo's term as ruler. Leading up to and following the Pazzi Conspiracy, Lorenzo was more attentive than ever to the loyalties of his friends. Ficino, patently, did not pass his tests.

⁴³ Ficino, *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino*, Volume 4, Appendix A, 58

⁴⁴ Ficino, *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino*, Volume 4, Appendix B, 59

⁴⁵ Ficino, *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino*, Volume 4, 22

⁴⁶ Bullard, 'Marsilio Ficino and the Medici', 483.

The *benefice* provided to him almost fifteen years after their initial falling out demonstrates the extent of Lorenzo's disappointment in his former tutor. Thus, Ficino's letters demonstrate how the social formation of early modern society was fluid and how subordinates, such as clients, could sometimes play a role in influencing contemporary politics. However, this influence was dependant on the personality of whoever was in power and the betrayal of so many former allies during the Pazzi conspiracy caused Lorenzo to be quite hesitant in seeking counsel, regardless of his or his grandfather's history with intellectuals like Ficino.
