Michael J. B. Allen. *Synoptic Art: Marsilio Ficino on the History of Platonic Interpretation*. Istituto Nazionale di Studi sul Rinascimento. Studi e testi, 40. Florence: Leo S. Olschki Editore, 1998. Pp. xiv, 236.

With the passing of Paul Oskar Kristeller in 1999, Michael J. B. Allen has become the leading expert on Marsilio Ficino in the world. Editor and translator of, and commentator on, Ficino's *In Phaedrum*, *In Philebum*, *In Sophistam*, and part of Bk. 8 of *In Republicam*, Allen has also written a series of important articles on Ficino, which are now conveniently gathered together in a Variorum volume of 1995 called *Plato's Third Eye*. What we have in the present publication are five fresh studies, loosely related to each other, but collectively and individually of great value to students of Ficino.

In the first of the essays, Allen tackles one of the leitmotifs of Ficino's Platonism, the myth of the *theologia prisca*, in the context of the charge the Augustinian friar Ianus Pannonius laid against Ficino in 1484–85: that he was irresponsible for having revived the pagan "ancient theology." As is well known, Ficino initially had this golden chain of six theologians begin with the Egyptian Hermes Trismegistus, but at a certain point he shifted the honor to the Persian Zoroaster. Allen offers us a wonderfully erudite and entertaining discussion of the sources for, and ideological implications of, the figures Ficino chose to make up his golden chain. Seeing himself as the "divinely appointed" instrument for the instauration of Platonic *ingenia*, Ficino, in Allen's telling, saw his *theologia prisca* as a symbolic, not a chronological succession, and in his syncretistic fervor even envisaged Jesus Christ as the "new Zoroaster" (pp. 39–40). Allen contends (p. 40) that Ficino's faith in Zoroaster derives, not from the Byzantine Platonist George Gemistos Pletho, as most believe, but rather from "Plato's own unimpeachable authority," i.e., *First Alcibiades* 121e–122a. I myself remain skeptical because the passage hardly suggests the golden chain, though Ficino could have considered it as legitimizing an idea he got from Pletho.

The second essay addresses the fascinating issues of what Ficino thought happened to the Platonic and, therefore, true theological tradition between Plato and Plotinus and how he dealt with anti-Christian Neoplatonists such as Porphyry and Proclus after Plotinus. Allen sees Ficino as creating an extraordinarily original dialectic between Platonism and Christianity that resulted in Ficino's envisaging himself as a "Neoplatonic magus and seer, who thought and who believed like Plotinus" (p. 90) and who considered his translation of, and commentary on, Plotinus "as a revival of patristic thought" (p. 92). It is for that reason that he felt justified in scandalously expropriating Scripture to image Plato saying of Plotinus, "This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased. Hear him."

In the third essay, Allen turned to the question of how Ficino addressed Plato's expulsion of the poets from his city. Ficino could not but uphold the Platonic edict. But this set him in opposition to a central current of Renaissance humanism. Allen takes us through a series of distinctions that Ficino implicitly and explicitly used to make sense of and, to a degree, mitigate the Platonic decree. In a useful appendix

Allen surveys Ficino's relationship with poets and poetry of the past and of his own time. The key to Ficino's thought, it turns out, is how Socrates differed, not just from the Sophists, but from the poets as well.

Not by chance, therefore, Allen's fourth essay concerns "Socrates and the Demon Voice of Conscience." Allen's main text in the matter is Ficino's epitome of the *Apology*. In an appendix he edits and translates Ficino's epitome and his related letter to Paolo Ferobanti.

Allen's final essay explores Ficino's answer to the syllogistic and propositional logic that permeated the curriculum and culture of contemporary Scholasticism. In contrast, Ficino sought to revive the Platonic method of division, a form of logic which he believed transcended purely ratiocinative thought and penetrated the realm of intuition. It is this "synoptic art" of Ficino that provides Allen with the title of his book. Allen shows how Ficino used this divine dialectic to penetrate the most abstruse of Platonic texts, Plato's *Parmenides* (a large part of the essay consists of Allen's analysis of Ficino's commentary on the dialogue), and to link the *Parmenides* to the theology of that most sublime of Christian authors, the virtually apostolic Dionysius the Areopagite.

Allen has focused on Ficino less as a Platonic exegete than as a "chosen instrument" (p. 13), highly conscious of his role in the cosmic drama. Thus, for the overarching scheme of the book, it was important for Allen to translate and analyze in depth Ianus Pannonius' letter questioning Ficino's goals and Ficino's response justifying his special mission in life. Thus it was also critically important to Ficino to make sense of the Platonic tradition after, as well as before, Plato in a way that meshed amicably with Christianity. The sanctifiable, if not sainted, Socrates, who was not a part of the golden chain of "ancient theologians," especially needed to be explained. The status of poets in the Platonic tradition relates to how Ficino fitted Socrates and the pagan religious and artistic tradition as a whole into his historic vision, especially since one of the *theologi prisci*, Orpheus, was himself a poet and a musician. The odd piece in the volume is that on Ficino's theory of Platonic division as a higher form of logic transcending the level of mere ratiocination. But since it elucidates Ficino's understanding of the *Parmenides*, we should be glad to have it here or in any other volume.

The one serious flaw of the book is that it lacks an *index locorum* and a detailed subject/name index. No index could capture Allen's many arresting, not to say memorable phrases, but indices would in other ways increase significantly the usability of the book. Allen's analyses are dense with stimulating ideas, fresh references, and comments on the conclusions of others. Scholars will want to refer to the book time and again for leads and opinions. Yet even if one has marked up its margins and the rear cover with notes, as I have done, consultation will not always result in one's finding an item that may in fact be in the book.

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