

Disreputable Bodies:
Magic, Medicine, and Gender
in Renaissance Natural Philosophy

Sergius Koderá





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This book is the revised version of my Habilitationsschrift which was accepted by the University of Vienna in 2004. The texts presented here developed over the past decade out of a series of talks and related articles, all focussing on the notion of bodies and matter in Italian Renaissance Philosophy. Chapters one to three and six to eight, as well as the Epilogue have been previously published, albeit in different forms.

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SERGIUS KODERA
VIENNA, 14 JULY 2010

ILLUSTRATIONS

- cover Giambattista Della Porta, *De humana physiognomia*. Naples: Apud Torquinum Longum, 1602 (colophon: 1601), p. 40. Universitätsbibliothek, Wien, by permission.
1. Correspondences between facial birthmarks and parts of the male and female body, from Giambattista Della Porta, *Della celeste fisiognomia del libri sei*. Padua: Pietro Paolo Tozzi 1623, p. 122. (Universitätsbibliothek, Wien)
 2. Sign of Cassiopeia, from: *Aratri phaenomena Gemanico Caesare interprete cum comentariis et imaginibus*. Venice: Aldus Manutius, 1499, sig. Hii^r [= fol. 12^r]. (Universitätsbibliothek, Wien)

INTRODUCTION: DISREPUTABLE BODIES

This book examines the contested position of the body in Renaissance philosophy, thus encompassing rarely studied material in close readings: it shows in which ways abstract metaphysical ideas evolved in tandem with the creation of new metaphors that shaped the understanding of Early Modern political, cultural, and scientific practises such as blood letting, distillation, iconography, that are important testimonies to the power of visual imagery in shaping novel approaches to the natural world. It considers the impact of Neoplatonism on Renaissance natural philosophy, magic and metaphysics, and thus includes the following influential and original thinkers: Marsilio Ficino, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, Leone Ebreo, Alessandro Piccolomini, Agrippa von Nettesheim, Bernardino Telesio, Giambattista Della Porta, and Giordano Bruno.

In recent years, many books on the function and perception of gendered bodies have appeared in a variety of academic disciplines. One particular focus of these studies has been the body's relationships to material culture and politics in Early Modern European societies.¹ This book approaches the topic from a slightly different angle: it contextualizes body discourses within the framework of the still largely unexplored ideas of some highly influential philosophers of the period. It thus provides a new approach to these issues by describing the function and interaction of new technologies (such as optics and distillation), popular beliefs (such as witchcraft and folk medicine) and their relationships to newly discovered texts from the Greek and Roman periods that captured the attention of Renaissance intellectuals between 1460 and 1600. It investigates how some philosophers forged their particular ideas on the body from both newly available and traditional materials and how, in so doing, they contributed in unexpected ways to the formation of new cultural practices, such as surgical intervention into the human body aiming at moral improvement of the individual, or medical vampirism — practices that entailed largely unexplored conceptualisations of physical bodies, but which were, as I show, tied inextricably to the formation of new and striking metaphors for the physical world.

¹ See, for instance, Lorraine Daston and Katherine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature* (1998); David Hillmann and Carla Mazzio (eds.), *The Body in Parts. Fantasies of Corporeality in Early Modern Europe* (1997).

Thinking about matter and the body in the Early Modern period did not only mean invoking a cluster of intimately connected ideas that encompassed physics, theology and philosophical anthropology, medicine, folk-lore and natural history; it also raised severe intrinsic methodological problems for Renaissance philosophers. For them, bodies were paradoxical entities, their metaphysical status wavering between God's first Creation and the scum of the universe, between resistant, bulky matter and indeterminate volatile entities, moving freely between the lowest and the highest realms of the universe. This book therefore combines a topic in the history of ideas with an analysis of how gendered metaphors were employed to describe the physical aspects of the world.

During the Early Modern period, such ideas formed in elliptical or self-referential ways. Philosophers were projecting gendered differences onto a universal cosmological screen, from which these distinctions were re-inscribed into relationships between men and women on earth, thus legitimising the supremacy of the former over the latter. The female body as a figure of male speech became a battleground not only in terms of the social regulations pertaining to the lives of actual women, but also in the purportedly abstract realm of metaphysics. Most Renaissance philosophers maintained that male and divine forms and female matter gathered in unstable mixtures that suggested more or less licit sexual unions. Bodies were understood to be in constant flux, hence potentially dangerous or uncanny, but also malleable and mutable to striking degrees. The images that philosophers employed in their attempts to explain the world of natural change took the lead and developed a historical life of their own, thus in their turn shaping ideas about natural bodies. This bodily imagery gravitated towards representations of more or less explicit sexual relationships in the Early Modern period: prostitutes, vampires, men cleft in half, panderers, and cosmetic surgeons. My study describes how these striking metaphors for the elusive physical world of change resulted in new perceptions of nature.

In that process, the often severe criticism of various tenets of Aristotle's doctrines voiced by different Renaissance philosophers proved an important factor for change. In particular, the many texts of the Platonic tradition contributed to the erosion of essential tenets of established natural philosophy. Novel ideas, such as the possibility of manipulating the physical world through a sort of natural, learned magic, significantly altered popular perceptions of bodies.

A key figure in the process of transmission and reshaping of such concepts was the Florentine philosopher and translator Marsilio Ficino (1433-99). His own version of Neoplatonism, together with the wide array of Greek texts he made available to Latin readers (Plato, Plotinus, Proclus, Iamblichus, Synesius or Ps.-Psellus), proved formative for many Early Modern intellectuals. Aristotelians, Platonists and independent philosophers alike referred to Ficino's work, even as their own ideas were departing in major ways from the original sources. The individuals encountered in this study — Ficino, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, Leone Ebreo, Alessandro Piccolomini, Agrippa von Nettesheim, Bernardino Telesio, Giambattista Della Porta, and Giordano Bruno — are examples of such interdependent influence between divergent intellectual and cultural traditions. These authors published books that captured the lasting attention of generations of intellectuals in the sixteenth century and beyond, both inside and outside universities and academies.

Chapter one surveys contradictory definitions of matter in Aristotelian natural philosophy and investigates the fortunes of a much-discussed passage in the *Physics* in which the work of Aristotle compares matter to a sexually aroused woman. In some Renaissance philosophers (Leone Ebreo and Alessandro Piccolomini), the original metaphor mutates into a comparison of matter to a nymphomaniac woman, thus emphasizing a generally ambivalent assessment of the physical world characteristic of many philosophers of the sixteenth century.

Chapter two shows how rudimentary scientific tools, mirrors of different kinds, were believed to have an uncanny capacity to contain and to alter the forms they “caught” (rather than “reflected”). The looking-glass consequently became a decisive metaphor for the paradoxical condition of physical bodies that were perceived to be unreliable, uncanny and deceptive containers of divine forms in Renaissance Neoplatonism.

Chapter three pursues this topic further by analysing medical instructions in Ficino's works for drinking human blood. This form of inverted blood-letting was built on a universal theory of the origin of life, according to which blood, through its innate vital power, animates bodies. Ficino maintains that this medical practice is confirmed by folk tales about *lamiae*, female vampires that he believed were trafficking with the life-giving substance of blood.

Chapter four examines Renaissance Neoplatonic dualistic ideas on the elemental world. The element of air functions as a ubiquitous animated and demonic mediator between the opposing poles of fire and earth or light

and darkness. I argue that these simplifications of the traditional Aristotelian elemental theory were encouraged by the novel process of distillation, which also entailed a sort of rarefaction of coarse substances into very powerful and transparent spirits. The recently invented technique for the production of liquors thus provided sixteenth-century philosophers with confirmation for the idea that bodies may exist in different degrees of refinement, and thus fostered a quantitative rather than a qualitative approach towards the physical world. As in the case of magic mirrors, the model of distillation testified to the important metaphorical role of instruments, which, even at a very early stage in the history of the European scientific revolution, became exemplary in shaping ideas about nature.

Chapter five identifies alternative body discourses in the philosophy of Leone Ebreo, a Jewish thinker who deliberately subverted the angst-ridden images of the physical world created by many Christians. Far from being uncanny demonic or repulsive entities, bodies were, to Ebreo, the beautiful completion and ultimate achievement of divine Creation.

Chapter six further pursues this topic by a comparison of divergent readings by Ficino, Leone Ebreo and Bruno of Aristophanes' speech from Plato's *Symposium*. The original text on the androgynous shape of primordial humans proved to be a notoriously difficult text to assimilate because it conveyed a highly positive assessment of same-sex relationships. My analysis shows how different anthropologies, in tandem with distinctive religious beliefs, entailed alternative perspectives on the role and the potential of physical bodies and human sexualities.

Chapter seven examines Giambattista Della Porta's theories on the artificial embellishment of the human body. According to him, surgical intervention may alter the person's fate and may bring about mental and intellectual perfection. Della Porta's radically naturalistic approach acknowledged the influence of physical over mental aspects of the human individual to a much greater extent than his predecessors.

The epilogue offers a feminist deconstruction of the Renaissance magus, portraying the cunning manipulator of bodies as an illicit and incompetent male matchmaker. I am thus subverting the image of a mastermind that has been (and indeed still is) the object of romanticism.

CHAPTER 1

NYMPHOMANIAC MATTER:
THE PROSTITUTE AS METAPHOR
FOR THE BODY
IN ITALIAN RENAISSANCE PHILOSOPHY

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
than are dreamt of in your philosophy.

Hamlet I, V, 166–167

In his dialogue *De la causa, principio ed uno* (1584) Giordano Bruno (1548–1600) has Poliinio, the Aristotelian pedant, say: “a woman is but matter. If you do not know what a woman is because you do not know what matter is, study the Peripatetics a little; they will teach you what a woman is by teaching you about matter.”¹ As clearly satirical as Bruno’s intention is, it captures the misogynist attitudes so characteristic of many established intellectual discourses during the Early Modern period — a sometimes violent hatred for women linked to Aristotelian natural philosophy. This hatred becomes obvious in another outburst by Poliinio:

in the first book of the *Physics*, at the end, where the philosopher, wishing to elucidate what primary matter is, compares it to the female sex — that sex, I mean, which is intractable, frail, capricious, cowardly, feeble, vile, cold, misshapen, barren, vain, confused, senseless, treacherous, lazy, fetid, foul, ungrateful, truncated, mutilated, imperfect, unfinished, defi-

¹ Bruno (1998) 74; Bruno (1584) 95–96.: “la donna non è altro che una materia; se non sapete che cosa è donna, per non saper che cosa è materia, studiate alquanto gli Peripatetici che con insegnarvi che cosa è materia, te insegneranno che cosa è donna.” An earlier version of this chapter was published in “The Body in Early Modern Italy” eds. Julia Hairston and Walter Stephens. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010: 109–22.

cient, insolent, amputated, diminished, stale, vermin, tares, plague, sickness, death.²

As usual, Bruno's irony is well targeted: the above quotation refers to a passage in Aristotle's *Physics* that will be crucial for my present topic, the history of the prostitute as metaphorical ascription for the material world. Before proceeding to that passage, however, allow me a short digression to clarify the context of the metaphorical identification between matter and an obviously very negative conceptualization of the female sex.

Why did Early Modern philosophers feel the need to use metaphors to describe the natural world at all? One answer is that Aristotle did not believe that bodies could be described satisfactorily by means of arithmetic or geometric figures. That is because he thought that natural bodies were composed of two principles, that is, form and matter, the latter being irreducible to abstraction as well as being the cause for the body's mutability and physical extension. In a famous passage, Aristotle says that there can be no true science of natural bodies because they are subject to constant change, the alteration being due to matter, the female substratum of all physical entities.

One can conceive of odd and even, and straight and curved, in isolation from change, and similarly number and line and shape; but this is impossible in the case of flesh and bone and man, which are defined like a snub nose rather than a curved thing.³

² Bruno (1998) 72; Bruno (1584) 93: "del primo della *physica*, in *calce*. Dove volendo elucidare che cosa fosse la prima materia; prende per specchio il sesso femminile, sesso dico, ritroso, fragile, incostante, molle, pusillo, infame, ignobile, vile, abietto, negletto, indegno, reprobo, sinistro, vituperoso, frigido, deforme, vacuo, vano, indiscreto, insano, perfido, neghittoso, putido, sozzo, ingrato, trunco, mutilo, imperfetto, inchoato, insufficiente, preciso, amputato, attenuato, ruggine, eruca, zizania, peste, morbo, morte." (my italics)

³ Aristotle (1996) 32 (193b 31–194a 11); Aristotle (1562–1574) IV: fol. 55r BC: "Et hoc potes scire, si incoeperis definire utrunque modum, scilicet naturam, & accidentia, invenies enim definitionem paris, & imparis, & recti, & curvi, & etiam numeri, & lineae, & figurae extra motum, quod non invenies in definitione carnis, aut ossis, aut hominis, sed ista dicuntur sicut dicitur simus, non sicut dicitur curvus." For a Peripatetic position that is contemporary to Bruno, see below and Piccolomini (1585) lib. II, ch. 3, fol. 25r: "non-dimeno in questo da tutti gli altri è differente il filosofo naturale, che non separando mai i concetti delle forme, da quei delle proprie materie loro; ambedue queste nature abbraccia, come rispettiva l'una dell'altra; cioè la materia: & la forma: lequali sono i due principij,

For Aristotelians, it was therefore impossible to establish an exact science of nature guided by the principles of mathematics or geometry. The difficulty in conceptualising changing physical objects due to their admixture of matter was also acknowledged in the Platonic tradition. Calcidius is a case in point: this fourth-century philosopher was viewed throughout the Middle Ages (and beyond) as a highly influential commentator and translator of Plato's *Timaeus*. Concerning the principle of matter he says:

so there remains only the possibility that the subject itself is difficult and obscure. In fact there exists nothing more difficult to explain than matter, and that is why everything said about its nature, although said in full agreement with truth, is not expressed clearly and distinctly.⁴

Given this particular situation, most Renaissance philosophers agreed that matter was to be grasped only by some kind of *cognitio adulterina*, a bastard acquaintance or knowledge that is conducive to mythic, anthropomorphic narrative strategies. The notion of *cognitio adulterina* goes back to Themistius who, in his commentary on Aristotle's *De anima*, attributed it (rightly) to Plato.⁵ Accordingly, Early Modern philosophers relied more often than not on powerful images to illustrate the otherwise elusive concept of matter: under such circumstances, the close relationship of theory to literature becomes more perceptible than usual.

& le due cause intrinseche delle cose naturali; che da quelle: come da lor parti essenziali dependano in modo: che dal separarsi, che faccia l'una dall'altra, è necessario, che la destructione de i lor composti nasca subito."

⁴ Winden, (1959) 175; Calcidius (1962) § 322: "restat ut res ipsa difficilis et obscura sit. Nec silva quicquam difficilior ad explanandum ergo cuncta quae de natura eius dicta sunt mere praedita veritatae sunt, nec tamen aperte dilucide."

⁵ Pernia (1570) fol. 15v a-b: "Themistius noster [...], materia enim inquit, secundum Platonem cognoscitur cognitione notha, et extranea, cognitio autem adulterina seu extranea nuncupatur tam in sensu quam in intellectu proprie illa, quae non de facie aut vultu rei, quam contemplamur, elicitur, sed de forma illa qua privatur [...]."

*Words for a Conversation:
Aristotle on Physical Bodies and the Role of Matter*

The following paragraphs do not intend to make significant new contributions to the subject, but rather to familiarize the reader with a few very basic assumptions in Aristotelian Renaissance philosophy. By providing the reader with this short outline, I do not wish to eclipse or underestimate the many divergences in an amazingly rich, influential and diversified tradition. Readers already familiar with hylemorphism are invited to skip the following pages.

Aristotelian philosophy must indeed be the starting point in any discussion of the concept of physical bodies in the Renaissance since this doctrine shaped the Early Modern intellectual discourse to an extent that is difficult to overestimate. I will therefore briefly sketch the function and place of physical bodies in Aristotelian natural philosophy (but see also chapter four). As Eckhard Kessler has brilliantly emphasized in a recent article, the situation was by no means univocal:

One of the most conspicuous inconsistencies in Aristotle's writings on natural philosophy is his twofold approach towards natural beings. The first approach is that of the *Physics*, where he defines the object of physics as the moveable body or being, *ens* or *corpus mobile*, reflects on the prerequisites for any kind of motion and change, and arrives at matter, form, privation and the four causes as the general principles of nature. The second is found in the treatise *On Generation and Corruption* and in the fourth book of the *Meteorology*, where he defines the object of natural philosophy as being the potentially perceptible body, *corpus potentia sensibile*, asks what might be the most basic object of sense-perception, and concludes that touch is the most fundamental sense and hot and cold, moist and dry, the fundamental first qualities. These qualities in different combinations constitute the four elements, which in their turn, thanks to the interaction of the first qualities, constitute the various species of mixed bodies. The first approach may be called a *metaphysical* one, since it is based on the purely rational analysis of the concept of a movable body or being —, and, indeed, corresponding

reflections are to be found in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*; the second approach which is based on an empirical analysis of what is or seems to be given in sense-perception, may be considered a naturalistic one."⁶

Keßler shows that this twofold approach resulted in the development of alternative Aristotelianisms during the sixteenth century and led to the emancipation of natural philosophy from metaphysics, not without the interceding of Florentine Neoplatonism, which integrated natural philosophy into a "general concept of philosophy."⁷ Aristotle had two main reasons for introducing his concept of a substrate underlying all changes in the sublunary realm: namely, to distinguish matter from space (Plato had identified the two concepts), and to explain the phenomenon of becoming or change that was essential for natural philosophy.

According to Aristotle, enmattered bodies in the proper sense occur only in the sublunary world (that is, in the region beneath the moon), on the earth, which is at the centre of the cosmos.⁸ In the sublunary realm, four elements constantly change into each other. Of these elements, fire occupies the most elevated position, with its "natural place" (that is, the place it tends to occupy of its own) immediately beneath the sphere of the moon, while the place of the element earth, instead, is at the bottom, or centre of the sublunary world.⁹

The complex cosmological model is instructively represented by a figure ascribed to Isidore de Seville, called the Tetragrammaton. The following chart indicates the traditional scheme of these four elements, each of which is assigned a proper movement and two tangible qualities, one of them prevailing (for example, fire is said to move upward and to be hot and dry, but more hot than dry). The inclusion of the four medical humours by medieval

⁶ Keßler (2001) 79–80 with references.

⁷ Keßler (2001) 81–82.

⁸ See *De caelo* 276a 30–32; 286a 3–5.

⁹ In *Physics* 254b 33–255a 5 Aristotle says that the elements do not move as living things move (i) because there is only one motion that is natural to them, and they cannot stop themselves moving in this way and (ii) because they do not consist of two parts of a different kind, one of which might move the other. See also *Physics* 255a 5–18; Waterfield in Aristotle (1996) lxiii.

Aristotelians enhanced the comprehensiveness of this universal system of categories for natural bodies.¹⁰

Element	Movement	Quality	Temperament
fire	up	<i>hot-dry</i> (but more hot than dry)	choleric (yellow bile)
air	up	<i>hot-moist</i> (but more moist than hot)	sanguine (blood)
water	down	<i>cold-moist</i> (but more cold than moist)	phlegmatic (phlegm)
earth	down	<i>cold-dry</i> (but more dry than cold)	melancholic (black bile)

Because the qualities of the elements are contradictory and one aspect prevails in them, the four elements and their mixtures are subject to constant change. In principle, each element can be transformed into every other element, but it will take more time for fire, for example, to convert into water than for water to transform into fire, since in the latter case the antagonism between the qualities is far greater than in the former.¹¹ In an ideal state of purity, the elements change into each other in the form of a circle, imitating the circular movements of the heavens.

Let us briefly look at this scheme around which all Renaissance discourses on *materia* revolve in the truest sense of the word, and not only in philosophy but also in medicine and theology. It is no exaggeration to maintain that this scheme had been deeply embedded into European habits of thought. Up to the middle of the sixteenth century very few people (with the exception of Marsilio Ficino and other Platonists we will encounter in the course of the present study) would have seriously questioned its validity. According to the Aristotelians, the elements are preventing their “natural movements” and since they are in a state of impure mixture, they move in irregular and chaotic ways. It is at this point that prime matter, *materia* in the most proper sense, enters into the picture.

¹⁰ Galen accepts the theory of the four elements which, as Temkin (1973) 17 says: “do not exist as such in the body; they are represented by the yellow bile (fire), black bile (earth), and phlegm (water). Only air is directly provided through respiration.”

¹¹ *De generatione et corruptione* II, 4, 331a 5–7.

It is well known that Aristotle did not believe in a *creatio ex nihilo*. According to him, only nothing will come out of nothing, therefore something must become something out of something else, out of something which was already there before, and this something must persist in the constant and eternal change of the elements. In the Aristotelian tradition, this substrate of change is called *prote hyle* (in Greek) or *materia prima* (in Latin) — prime matter.¹² Therefore, the conflicts within the elements are, so to say, fought within a substrate that remains eternally the same while its forms constantly change.¹³ The elements and all other bodily substances thus come into being out of prime matter and out of the coupling of at least two of the four primary and antagonistic qualities at any one time.¹⁴

Aristotle's concept is by no means unproblematic. Crucial for the present topic was the assumption that in order to be able to receive *all* the different forms, *materia* itself has to lack any definite form, that it does not even have spatial extension nor any other quality (such as hot or dry). The definition of *materia prima* must thus necessarily contain negative elements, otherwise matter would already have a definite form or quality, and it consequently would not be able to receive all the forms in the same way. *Materia* therefore remains in a constant state of plasticity and shapelessness.

Prime matter cannot actually said to be “seen” or to be perceived by the senses; its existence can be inferred only by analogy, by observing the perpetually changing forms. Matter cannot be separated from the forms (its “contraries”);¹⁵ it is only by a mental process of abstraction that *materia prima*

¹² For the history of the term itself, see Happ (1970) 307–308, who concludes that the term *prote hyle* does occur in Aristotle, but that its special significance was an invention of the immediate successors of Aristotle.

¹³ *Physics* I, 9, 192a 28 and the first definition of *materia*, *Physics* I, 9, 192a 31–32: “For my definition of matter is just this—the primary substratum of each thing, from which it comes to be and which persists in the result, not accidentally.”

¹⁴ If the elements had just a single quality, they would be unable to transform into one another.

¹⁵ *De generatione et corruptione* 329a 24–b3; 329a 25–30; *Aristoteles latinus* IX, 1: 53: “Nos autem dicimus esse aliquam materiam corporum sensibilium, sed hanc non separabilem sed semper cum contrarietate, ex qua generantur vocata elementa [...] Sed tamen quoniam et modo hoc sunt ex materia corpora prima, determinandum et de his, principium quidem et primum existimantes esse materiam, inseparabilem quidem, subiectam autem contrariis.”

can potentially be distinguished from the form that shapes it.¹⁶ The formal principle lends the object actual being, whereas matter is the *substratum* that lacks any kind of form and quality whatsoever. Central to this image of the natural world is the dualistic relationship of an unstructured and therefore passive matter and a determining and therefore active form. Both elements unite to uphold a physical individual, a substance that is the subject of Aristotelian natural philosophy. This doctrine has been labelled *hylemorphism* (Greek for *hyle*, matter and *morphe*, form). Aristotle's model for the process of the shaping of a natural body is that of a craftsman who educes a certain shape out of a given material. The analogy with the craft goes even further. Though matter is the basic substrate of all bodies, this does not mean that all *materia* actually has the capacity to embody every form; instead, there exists a hierarchy of materials, so that, for instance, earth transforms into wood, which in turn may become the recipient of another form such as a box.¹⁷

Any given natural substance may be described by the qualities that characterize the four elements, the means of differentiation being only an unquantified "more" or "less." Girolamo Savonarola's *Compendium totius philosophiae*, for instance, explains why arsenic putrefies easily and is especially effective;¹⁸ this is so because arsenic has a nature akin to earth and is therefore combustible. Arsenic is also akin to the greasy nature of sulphur,

¹⁶ *De generatione animalium* 320b 12–13.

¹⁷ *Metaphysics* IX, 7, 1049a 15–28.

¹⁸ Savonarola (1542) XI, 56: 244: "*Quare arsenicum est putrefactivum et mordicativum valde*: Quia est naturae terrae combustum habens aliquid de unctositate sulfuris et ideo habet cognationem quandam cum illo, sed est magis adurens, est etiam pulverizabile, calidum et siccum, licet magis abundet in caliditate quam in siccitate. Invenitur autem trium modorum, scilicet album citrium, quod est communis et pulverizabilis, caeteris auripigmentum nuncupatum, et rubeum. Et forte etiam multorum aliorum modorum invenitur secundum materiae dispositionem." Then, at chapt. 46, p. 236 we learn that (because of its mutable nature) sulphur is the universal matter of metals: "*Materia universalis omnium metallorum: est enim convertibile propter sui incomplexionem in omnia, sicut semina, et alia ex quibus generantur res naturae*." At chapt. 36, p. 228 Savonarola says that all metals are of a watery nature, yet with an earthly admixture. "Nam et si compunantur ex quatuor elementis, ut etiam dictum est de lapidibus, tamen in eis videtur abundare aqua, habens tamen terrenum subtilem admixtionem, cuius signum est, quia sunt liquabilia, et liquabile est unumquodque per humidum aquam incorporatum, a frigido etiam coagulatur [...] verum specialiter metalla generantur ex sulphure et argento vivo, sulphur enim se habet sicut semen paternum et argentum vivum sicut menstruum ex commixtione igitur diversa metalla." Chapt. 38, p. 230 shows how the seven metals correspond to the seven planets;

but it is more scorching (that is, more fiery), and can even be pulverized, it is hot and dry, and has more of heat than of dryness. It occurs in three different forms: first, in a yellow whitish form that can be pulverized; second, as *auripigmentum*; third, in a red form. It is also found in many other varieties, owing to the different dispositions of matter. This description of arsenic highlights three important aspects of the topic of this book. First, it shows the incapacity of the theory to describe adequately natural substances; arsenic, the deadly poison and powerful stimulant, is here reduced to a lot of fiery energy and highly combustible tinder (earth) that serve to explain its potent action in the human body. Second, owing to the different dispositions of *materia*, so many different varieties of arsenic exist that the substance cannot even be described in a definite way. In such ways, various and unpredictable dispositions of *materia* can be made responsible for any kind of inaccurate prognostic claim — for instance in medicine.¹⁹ Renaissance philosophers who disagreed with this approach, such as Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola (1469–1533), referred to arguments found in the recently discovered writings of Sextus Empiricus (2nd–3rd century) and emphasized the unreliability of that system.²⁰ Third, we may therefore conclude that in Aristotelian philosophy matter functions as non-teleological principle, diverting (by its various dispositions) the form from its proper goal or fulfilment.²¹

and chapt. 39, p. 230 describes how metals are of watery nature, and how it is possible that they easily change into each other.

¹⁹ See, for example, the following passage from Ficino (1576) II, 4–5: “Non ti maravigliare, che qualche volta la bestia, o huomo pigli detto vapore [della peste] & non sia offeso da esso, & offenda altri, perche il ferro candito infiamma, & consuma la stoppa, & la paglia, & non si consume lui. Questo procede per la dispositione del subietto, che riceve, nella quale consiste la maggior parte dell’effetto, secondo Aristotile, Galeno, et Avicenna. *Tieni a mente questa regola fisica, che quando la materia è molto disposta, la cagione agente per debole che sia, opera presto. [...] Et molte volte il vapore pestilentiale per la forza delle cause è fortissimo, et tu non sai quando, anchorche che chi non è disposto in un tempo, è disposto in un’altro.*” (my italics)

²⁰ Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola, *De elementis Liber*, chapt. 4 in Pico (1557) II: 172. On that author’s radical anti-Aristotelianism and scepticism see Schmitt (1967) *passim*.

²¹ Yet, in employing the craftsman analogy, Aristotle does not think of occult powers, which (for example) make *of necessity* a plant out of the seed, but rather describes conditions of development, which a complete description of a subject has to contain. Only later

The Peripatetics prove this assumption by maintaining that in the celestial realm all movements come about in a far less chaotic way than on earth. The space beyond the sphere of the moon is not subject to the constant transformations of bodies; the heavens are exempt from change and thus are eternal precisely because they are made of another element, the so-called *quinta essentia*, or aether (see chapter four of the present study).²² In contrast to the non-teleological *materia prima*, this fifth element does not distract the heavenly bodies from their regular movements. In such ways, in the Aristotelian cosmos the boundary between “mortal” and “immortal” does not run between bodies and minds, or between the moved and the unmoved, but rather between different forms of *motion*: the chaotic movements of the elements in the terrestrial realm are in sharp contrast to the more or less regular orbits of the celestial spheres. Yet the separation of the heavens in two distinct spheres is not as unambiguous as it may seem. The erratic movement of the planets can also be understood as a mediation between the circular movements of the planets and the circular transformation of the elements on earth.²³ According to the Peripatetic account, the constant transmutation of the elements into each other in the sublunary sphere imitates unsuccessfully, by rectilinear and erratic motions, the circular and regular movements of the celestial realm.²⁴

Apart from matter and form, Aristotle distinguishes yet another term — privation. In the *Physics*, he explains the function of privation by an example: education involves the change of the individual — from somebody who is just a man, one becomes an educated man.²⁵ In that context, “coming into being” or “generation” means that something changes from one given form into another. “In elaborating this idea Aristotle’s great discovery was the

interpretations will maintain that the form is an immaterial power that forcibly leads the organism to its *telos*, or goal.

²² The *quinta essentia* is also responsible for generation and other bodily functions of the soul.

²³ *De caelo* II, 12, 292a 18–29; see Happ (1970) 305.

²⁴ *De generatione et corruptione* II, 10, 337a 1–15; *Aristoteles latinus* IX, 1: 76: “Hoc autem [...] in circuito allatio: sola enim continua. Ideo et alia quaecumque transmutant ad invicem secundum passiones et potentias, verbi gratia simplicia corpora, assequuntur in circuito alterationem. Quando enim ex aqua aer generatur et ex aere ignis et rursus ex igni aqua, in circuito dicimus circuire generationem, quia rursus revertitur. Quocirca et recta allatio assequens quae in circuito continua est.”

²⁵ *Physics* I, 7, 190b 10–28.

concept of potentiality: when everything comes from everything, there must be something underlying. This may become everything, but by itself it not yet anything: it is mere potentiality.”²⁶ The particular something, which persists in that process of transformation, is called matter. Change is here conceived as a replacement of privation by form.²⁷ For Aristotle, “every change has an initial and a final state, and to describe these we shall need three distinct concepts — the concept of an underlying thing, present in both states, the concept of a form, present only in the final state, and the concept of its privation, present only in the initial state. [...] The underlying and persisting thing will be a substance, which at first lacks and later has the form in question.”²⁸ Aristotle emphasizes the distinction between the substrate (*materia*) and privation: the substrate persists through change, while privation does not. In the process of change or transformation, *materia* fulfils the function of a substance in the proper sense of the word. Yet, to be a substance (*ousia*), a thing normally has to have both form and *materia*. This creates a characteristic difficulty in the definition of matter, which is said to be without form. Aristotle accordingly holds that it is not a substance in the proper sense of the word and hence *materia* can only be a potential substance.²⁹ Aristotle says:

When all is taken away, evidently nothing but matter remains. For of the other elements some are affections, products, and capacities of bodies, while length, breadth, and depth are quantities and not substances. For a quantity is not a substance; but

²⁶ Winden (1959) 242; Baeumker (1890) 253 coins the term “Hypostasierung der Möglichkeit”.

²⁷ *Physics* I, 9, 192a 16–25.

²⁸ Waterfield in Aristotle (1996) xviii.

²⁹ In fact, the problem is intricate: in *Physics* I, 9 Aristotle is not inclined to bestow the title substance on *materia* (which he views here as the substratum of change). Matter is rather something in-between, and hence very close to being a substance: *Physics* I, 9, 192a 6–8; transl. Aristotle (1996) 30: “we say that matter and privation are two different things, one of which — matter — is a thing that coincidentally is not (and it is in a sense very close to being a substance) while privation in a thing that in its own right is not (and is nothing like a substance).” Hence we may conclude that Aristotle does not answer the question whether *materia* is a substance or not. On this, see Sorabji (1988) 13–14. This ambiguity led some authors even to suggest that *materia* might fall out of the categories altogether (Sorabji, 1988, 28). On matter as substance in Aristotle see Baeumker (1890) 254–255. The idea that matter is a substance is also prominent in Avicenna; on this, see Buschmann (1979) 33–34. and 72–73.

the substance is rather that to which these belong primarily. But when length and breadth and depth are taken away we see nothing left except that which is bounded by these, whatever it be; so that to those who consider the question matter thus alone must seem to be substance. By matter I mean that which in itself is neither a particular thing nor of a certain quantity nor assigned to any other of the categories by which being is determined. For there is something of which each of these is predicated, so that its being is different from that of each of the predicates; for the predicates other than substance are predicated of substance, while substance is predicated of matter. Therefore the ultimate substratum is of itself neither a particular thing nor of a particular quantity nor otherwise positively characterized; nor yet negatively, for negations will belong to it only by accident. For those then who adopt this point of view, then it follows that matter is substance. But this is impossible; for both separability and individuality are thought to belong chiefly to substance. And so form and the compound of form and matter would be thought to be substance, rather than matter.³⁰

I do not wish to discuss if this is a really convincing solution, but I would emphasize that Aristotle's theory triggered many subsequent debates and testifies to the ambiguous nature of *materia* in the Peripatetic system. According to the *De degeratione et corruptione* and the *Meteorologica*, matter is a real and not only a potential part of the individual being; an assumption that is in tension to the definition of matter in the *Metaphysics*.

The term *materia* becomes even more intricate as Aristotle introduces yet another definition of matter; it not only is the substratum of *change*, but also lends *individuality* to a particular being.³¹ These different concepts of *materia* (as something ultimately tangible, as a potential substance, and as a

³⁰ Trans. Aristotle (1928) VIII, *Metaphysics* 1029a 11–12: see also 1042a 27–28.

³¹ The most instructive quotation is perhaps from *Metaphysics* XII, 8, 1074a 33: "But all things that are many in number have matter. (For one and the same formula applies to many things, e.g. the formula of man; but Socrates is one.) But the primary essence has not matter, for it is fulfillment. So the unmovable first mover is one in formula and in number." On matter as the principle of individuation see also Robin (1944) 90–98; and Happ (1970) 296.

principle of individuation) create a characteristic tension within Aristotelian natural philosophy.

Given the lack of an univocal definition of matter, the use of metaphorical ways for describing the concept becomes an indispensable tool to negotiate the concept.³² I have already mentioned the powerful metaphor of the craftsman who elicits the forms out of *materia*. As will become clear in the course of my study, these metaphors developed a life of their own and in turn significantly influenced Early Modern perceptions of nature.

Woman is But Matter

The metaphorical description of *materia* as a woman is perhaps the most striking figurative representation of the concept of matter, the one that embodies the topic of this book in the most concise and at the same time most ambiguous way. For the metaphor of woman as matter is able to represent a process of transformation of natural objects in a particularly gendered way. Here, the formal principle appears to be male and active, while the material principle appears to be female and passive. Needless to say, this concept of the superiority and dominance of the male and formal principle over the female and passive *materia* is not restricted to the domain of natural philosophy; it also bears on a grievous social and political history that is all too well in accordance with theoretical views that were shared by Aristotle and later generations of philosophers, theologians and statesmen alike. In a famous passage of the *Physics* (I, 9 192a 20–22) Aristotle links, albeit metaphorically, *materia*'s appetite for form to women's sexual desire (see below). The ascription of male and female aspects to form and to matter was of course not an invention of Aristotle — the idea dates much further back, so that much of the discourse on matter, from Ancient to Early Modern, may also be read as a discourse on women, something that Giordano Bruno attacks in the opening citation of this chapter.

³² An interesting and much discussed passage in that context is here *De anima* I, 1 403a 8–10 where Aristotle asks whether cognition is achieved only in conjunction with an underlying *phantasma*, which points to the metaphorical character of *all* mental activities. The Latin translation of this passage “intelligere aut esse phantasiam aut non esse sine phantasia” is crucial for Pietro Pomponazzi's argument for the mortality of the individual human soul in Aristotle: see *De immortalitate animae*, chapt. 4 in Pomponazzi (1990) 15–41 and Aristotle, *De anima* III, 7 431a 16–17.

The ancient Greek theory of the four humours perceived women as moist and cold, and men as hot and dry. In fact, the domination of form over matter was understood to be a physiological process analogous to “concoction.” Aristotle used the term to describe the digestion of food in the bodies of both humans and animals. He maintained that during this physiological process heat successfully dominates the moisture of *materia*.³³ In accordance with this conceptualisation, soul is dry and that is why, for example, people who are drunk (and therefore have a moist psyche) tend to lose control of it.³⁴ “Understanding is the work of the pure and dry air. For moisture hinders intelligence, wherefore in sleep and [...] in surfeit understanding is diminished.”³⁵ (See also chapter four). Needless to say, Eros has liquid and liquefying qualities, and the dry stability of the male body is never achieved by the moist complexion of the female body. “United by a vital liquidity with the elemental world, woman is able to tap the inexhaustible reservoirs of nature’s procreative power.”³⁶ Moisture has a twofold function here. First, it is a metaphor for sexual desire. Second, it is a signifier for that which is boundless, for matter which is unlimited by form and is therefore in a state of transition. This condition is characteristic of generation and of corruption, of becoming and passing away. Aristotle says that what is moist cannot be limited by any boundary; it is therefore easily limited or enclosed by something else.³⁷ According to this discourse, “being without a limit” also implies

³³ *Meteorologica* IV, 2, 379b 33–380a 9; Trans. in Aristotle (1931) III: “Concoction ensures whenever the matter, the moisture, is mastered. For the matter is what is determined by the natural heat in the object, and as long as the *ratio* between them exists in it, a thing maintains its nature. Hence things like the liquid and solid excreta and waste-stuffs in general are signs of health, and concoction is said to have taken place in them; for they show that the proper heat has mastered the indeterminate matter. Things that undergo a process of concoction necessarily become thicker and hotter; for the action of heat is to make things more compact, thicker and drier. This is then the nature of concoction: inconcoction is an unperfected state due to lack of proper heat, that is, cold. That of which the imperfect state is, is the corresponding passive qualities which are the natural matter of anything.” On concoction, see chapter five.

³⁴ Carson (1990) 137; for a typical Renaissance quote, see *De vita* II, 2: 180.

³⁵ Diogenes of Apollonia A19 VS quoted from Carson (1990) 138.

³⁶ Carson (1990) 143.

³⁷ Carson (1990) 153; *De generatione et corruptione* 329b 31–33; trans. in *Aristoteles Latinus* IX, 1: 55: “Humidum autem indeterminatum proprio termino, bene terminabile ens. Siccum autem bene terminabile quidem proprio termino, difficiliter terminabile autem.” Aristotle (1984) I: 540: “And moist is that which, being readily adaptable in shape, is

a characteristic inclination to be infected by (potentially unwanted) forms. In medicine, for instance, this narrative accounts for phenomena such as contagion from disease.³⁸ In the Greek discourse, women differ from men not only as moist and dry are different; the two poles of the universe relate to each other as form and content do, like the limited and unlimited, the clean and the dirty. "Women are formless creatures who cannot or will not or do not maintain their own boundaries and who are awfully adept at confounding the boundaries of others."³⁹ As in the craftsman metaphor, woman's plasticity and malleability link her to the material, which is formed by the (male) form. Consensus on this representation of women was not restricted to philosophy, but structured an entire culture: figurations of the female as matter can also be found in the ancient Greek poets, in jurisdiction, social conventions, and religious ritual. "Deformation attends her. She swells, she shrinks, she leaks, she is penetrated, she suffers metamorphoses. The women of mythology regularly lose their form in monstrosity."⁴⁰ One of the basic preoccupations of ancient Greek society seems to have been to create for women a condition of life Aristotle predicated also for *materia*: never to be without the forming male boundary.⁴¹ For a woman, this meant being locked away in her father's house from the moment she was born and subsequently, after a brief rite of transition (marriage), to be sealed off again in her husband's house. Both

not determinable by any limit of its own; while dry is that which is readily determinable by its own limit, but not readily adaptable in shape."

³⁸ Carson (1990) 158: "That which confounds categories or transgresses boundaries is polluting, that which is so confounded or transgressed is polluted and threatens to pollute others. [...] Adulteresses pose a special threat to the public hygiene of the city; their dirt is something they carry with them like a contagion. [...] Dirt is a matter that has crossed a boundary it ought not to have crossed."

³⁹ Carson (1990) 153.

⁴⁰ Carson (1990) 154.

⁴¹ Trans. in Aristotle (1931) III: *De generatione et corruptione* 320b 12–17: "It is therefore better to suppose that in all instances of coming to be and passing away matter is inseparable, being numerically identical and one, though not one in definition. But the same reasons also forbid us to regard the matter of the bodies as points or lines. The matter is that of which points and lines are limits, and this is in something that can never exist without quality and without form." *Aristoteles Latinus* IX, 1: 27: "Melius igitur omnibus rebus inseparatam facere esse materiam ut entem eandem et unam numero, ratione autem non unam. Sed non neque punctos ponendum dum neque lineam corporis materiam propter easdem causas. Illud autem cuius hec ultima, materia erat, quam numquam sine passione possibile esse neque sine morfea."

concepts, that of *materia* and that of leaking boundless women, reinforced each other on the theoretical as well as on the political level. In the following paragraphs, we will investigate the *fortuna* of one of Aristotle's metaphorical ascriptions for matter in the Renaissance.

The irrationality of physical beings led Aristotle to introduce a potent and hotly debated metaphor to explain the nature of the body as a composite being consisting of a male and immutable form and female and changeable matter. In the passage to which Bruno refers in *Della causa*, Aristotle compared matter to a sexually aroused woman, longing for a man, that is, a male form (*Physics* 192a 20–24):

In fact, however, form cannot desire itself, because it is not in need of anything [...]. It is matter which does the desiring. You might liken it to a woman longing for a man, or what is ugly longing for what is beautiful, if it were not for the fact that matter is not in its own right something that is either ugly or female, except coincidentally.⁴²

⁴² Aristotle (1996) 31; Aristotle (1562–1574) IV, fols. 45v–46r M–F: “attamen neque ipsum suam ipsius possibile est appetere formam, propterea quod non est indigens, [...] sed hoc est materia, sicut si foemina masculum, & turpe pulchrum: verum non per se turpe, sed secundum accidens: neque foemina, sed secundum accidens.” (Moerbeke interp.); fol. 46r B: “impossibile est ut forma appetat se, quoniam non est diminuta, neque appetit suum contrarium, [...] sed materia appetit formam, sicut foemina mare, & turpe pulchrum: non quia in se est turpis, sed per accidens; neque quia est foemina, sed per accidens.” (Mantino interp.) Calcidius discusses the passage in his *Timaeus* commentary § 287: “Superest ergo, ut silva cultum ornatumque desideret, quae deformis est non ex se, sed ob indigentiam. Est enim turpitudine silvam cultu formaque indigere; sic quippe erit vidua carens specie, perinde ut carens viro femina. Proptereaque et, inquit, appetit speciem, ut sexus femineus virilem, quoque sit in aliqua posita deformitate, formam atque cultum, simul cupiens perire atque exolescere quod est in semet ex indigentiae vitio, contraria siquidem haec duo sibi et repugnantia, species et item carentia, quorum quod obtinuerit alterum perimit. Cupiditatem vero negat esse talem, qualis est animalium, sed ut, cum quid coeptum atque inchoatum, dicitur perfectionem desiderare, sic, opinor, etiam silva speciem cupit; potest enim eius florere consortio.” Winden (1959) 88–90: “So one possibility is that matter desires adornment and embellishment; for it is misformed, not however by nature but by privation. For the ugliness of matter consists in this, that matter is deprived of adornment and form; thus it will be bereft of form, like a woman without a husband. “And therefore” he says “it desires form just as the female desires the male” and because it lacks form it yearns for form and adornment. At the same time, it wishes that what is in it as a result of privation should perish and disappear. For both form and privation are

Note that Aristotle is very careful to emphasize the metaphorical character of his comparison between matter and a sexually aroused woman. According to the gendered framework inherited alongside Platonism from ancient Greek culture, woman is viewed exclusively from a male perspective, as total otherness, not as complementary to the male.⁴³ It should not go unmentioned that many thinkers were not in agreement and tried to qualify this conceptualisation. A fundamental criticism that will become important for Ficino's treatment of matter comes from Plotinus (3rd century).

According to Plotinus, when the female desires the male, or when she is inseminated by the male, she does not therefore somehow cease to be female. II 4.16 (13–16) On the contrary, she becomes more female. [...] the advent of form confirms, paradoxically, the absence of form, far from ousting the privation, form “preserves” the privation “in its existence.” Aristotle would reply, that change thus becomes impossible. And Plotinus would say: exactly so: the beauty of the world is a mere charade, matter in the sensible world remains forever deprived of form, precisely because matter and privation are

contradictory to each other; if one of them gets the upper hand, it eliminates the other. He says that this desire is not that of living creatures. But as we that a thing that begins to be made, desires completion, so I think, matter desires form; for it can only flourish, if form joins it.” In a fairly recent study, Happ (1971) 774–775 still shows a very positive attitude towards that passage (his main argument being that *materia* is not utterly bad or negative in Aristotle, but rather something like a necessary albeit non-teleological force “das Vollkommenheitstreiben des Unvollkommenen [...] am Schönsten hat dies Aristoteles [in der] *Physik* formuliert. Die sprachliche Form der Negation, mit welcher das Wesen der Hyle bezeichnet wird (*amorphon*, *apeiron*, *atelés* etc.) ist also zugleich Ausdruck der Sehnsucht zum Vollkommenen.”

⁴³ See Halperin (1990) 291: “The suppression of actual women in the Classical world created the invention of the gender ‘woman’ within the culture. This woman appeared on stage, in the myths, and in the plastic arts, representing the patriarchal values attached to the gender of ‘woman,’ while suppressing the actual experiences, stories, feelings and fantasies of actual women.” And at 297–298: “‘Woman’ is always a sign of something else — of a spurious sexual ‘difference’ that men (as they see themselves) at once lack and possess. Nothing in herself, ‘woman’ is that pseudo-other who both makes good what men want and exempts men from wanting anything at all; she is an alternate male identity whose constant accessibility to men lends men a fullness and totality that enables them to dispense with womanhood altogether. [...] ‘woman’ and ‘men’ are figures of male speech. Gender is an irreducible fiction.”

the same thing, with the result that the participation of matter in form fails to produce any real transformation of matter. The ugly remains ugly. In the eyes of the philosopher, the sensible world remains forever a mere “corpse animated.”⁴⁴

In his commentary on Aristotle’s *Physics*, Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225–74) mentions the objections raised by Avicenna (Ibn Sina, c. 980–1037) against the identification of matter with a desiring woman:⁴⁵ the Persian philosopher states that matter cannot be said to have an intrinsic desire because it has no natural inclinations of its own. Aquinas answers that the desire of matter is due to the ordering power of something else, as the arrow moves in a certain direction by the intention and impetus of the archer who points it. Avicenna’s further objection — that Aristotle speaks of matter in a metaphorical way that suits poets but not philosophers — is countered by Aquinas’ statement that female sexual desire serves not as metaphor but rather an *example*, since *materia prima* is known only indirectly through the changing formal proportions. In order to further de-escalate the debate Aquinas argues that Aristotle in other places (and even more commonly, one may add) uses different examples, such as the form of the statue that is educed by the craftsman out of the material.⁴⁶ In spite of Aquinas’ and other Aristotelians’ efforts to play down the significance of the conceptualisation of matter as desiring woman, the metaphor remained focal in the scholastic tradition and beyond (see below).

⁴⁴ O’Brien (1996) 180 with reference to Plotinus, *Enneads* III, 4, 5.

⁴⁵ Thomas Aquinas (1953) 68a (1, 15, § 137); Avicenna, (1508) fol. 15rb-va: “Dicunt autem in hoc loco yle affici desiderio formae: & yle assimiliant femine: formam autem assimiliant masculo: & hoc est quod ego non intelligo. Et desiderium animalis nemo est qui non removeat ab yle: desiderium autem naturale quo trahitur res sicut lapis deorsum: ut perficiatur post imperfectionem quam habebat sui loci naturalis. Illud etiam desiderium longe est ab ea: posset autem hoc concedi quod yle est desiderans formam: si ipsa esset vacua ab omnibus formis: aut esset affecta fastidio formae quae adiuncta est ei: aut si non esset contenta formis quae perficiunt eam et faciunt eam esse speciem. [...] Sed non est vacua ab omnibus formis [...] unde propter haec omnia: difficilis est mihi intellectus huius verbi, qui magis esse dictio figuratae loquentium quam phylosophorum. [...] Sed in yle impliciter desiderium non intelligo.”

⁴⁶ But it seems to me highly debatable if this example can account for the specific desire of matter for form. Thomas Aquinas (1953) 68b (1, 15, §138): “Nihil est igitur aliud appetitus naturalis quam ordinatio aliquorum secundum propriam naturam in suum finem. [...] nam forma est finis materiae. Nihil est aliud materiam appetere formam quam eam ordinari ad formam, ut potentia ad actum.”

I do not want, of course, to imply that Aristotle was not guilty of sexist positions in other instances, the most notorious one being perhaps his equation of the female (animal) as a somehow mutilated male (*Generation of Animals* 728a). In fact, the matter-desiring woman metaphor was more than just an innocuous “example” because it established a connection that fitted all too well into the social and political contexts of patriarchal societies. Commenting on *Physics* I, 9, Averroes (Ibn Rushd, 1126–1198), who in the Christian medieval tradition is simply called “the Commentator”, emphasizes the political relevance of such a *paragone* when he bluntly says that a woman is an imperfect man.⁴⁷ In a similar vein, Aquinas speaks of matter as being “incomplete.”⁴⁸ In referring to the same passage, the Renaissance Aristotelian Alessandro Accilini (1463–1512) finds even clearer words when he says that nature intends to bring forth men and that women are useful or necessary in the production of men only accidentally.⁴⁹

Hence, even if debated in its *locus classicus*,⁵⁰ the conceptualisation developed in the context of natural philosophy was also easily at hand to

⁴⁷ Aristotle (1562–1574) IV: fol. 46r-v, D-G (Averrois commentarium): “Et intelligit hic per appetitum illud, quod materia habet de motu ad recipiendum formam. appetitus enim alius ex naturalis sine sensu, ut in plantis ad nutrimentum: & alius est cum sensu, ut appetitus animalium ad nutrimentum in materia igitur est appetitus naturalis ad recipiendum omnes formas. recipit igitur eas alternatim, quando forma agens est praesens. [...] materia appetit formam sicut foemina marem. & licet non usitetur comparatio in doctrina demonstrativa, tum usitatur in rebus non sensibilibus, quae non intelliguntur nisi per comparisonem. deinde quia non est in se, sed per accidens. quia turpitudine accidit ei ex privatione mixta cum ipsa materia, & in se non est privatio, est igitur turpis per accidens. & similiter est foemina per accidens: quia foemina est homo imperfectus: foemineitas enim accidit ex ei privatione.”

⁴⁸ *De principiis naturae* § 2, in Thomas Aquinas (1976) 39: “materia habet esse ex quod ei advenit, quia de se habet esse incompletum.”

⁴⁹ Accilini (1545) fol. 87ra: “Nota octavo femina est homo imperfectus. Scias naturam intendere in generatione masculum, et non feminam, ideo si generatur femina. est per accidens, non tamen casuale vel fortuitum, quia ut in pluribus est. Istud tamen per se accidens est necessarium, sine quo non servatur duratio masculis in sibi simili aut dic mulierem esse intentam in quantum est aliquo modo masculus.”

⁵⁰ See for instance Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola, that important exponent of anti-Aristotelianism, who argues against the use of the gendered metaphor in the discussion of materia in *De appetitu materiae* chapt. 3 in Pico (1557) II, 157, “illa perfectum opus suo in genere, hoc imperfectum et mancum, ut hinc satis appetere incipiat, cum dicitur ab Aristotele ita appetere materia formam: ut turpe pulchrum, et foemina marem: non ita accipiendum, ut uno genere sit facta collatio, sed in longe diversis. appetere materia enim idem

describe and to cement existing power relations between men and women. Again, Bruno's *Della causa* satirizes the situation:

Behold, behold, divine spirit, how the great practitioners of philosophy and the acute anatomists of nature's entrails, in order to show us nature plainly, have found no more appropriate way than to confront us with this analogy, which shows that matter is to the order of natural things what the female sex is to economical, political and civil order.⁵¹

Given this evidence, it comes as no surprise that in a considerable number of medieval and Renaissance commentaries on *Physics* I, 9, the analogy between matter and a sexually aroused woman is pushed even further. Matter desires *all* the male forms in succession and thus eventually becomes weary of being constantly tied to a single male form. Matter therefore tries to rid itself of the present form, for it seeks "to lie under a new" form. It goes without saying that this metaphorical account of matter's fickle condition has a decidedly illicit sexual connotation that links the alterations of the physical world to a (male) representation of female infidelity. In a characteristic formulation, Giacomo Zabarella (1533–89) speaks of a *propensio materiae ad omnes formas indistincte* (an inclination of matter towards all forms indistinctly).⁵² This desire is due to privation, as we have seen, an additional concept introduced by Aristotle to account for change (that is, growth, birth and death) in natural bodies. What is common to these accounts is that they all take the emotional relationship of inferior and changing matter to superior and eternal form for granted. We have seen in which ways the metaphor of matter as a sexually

est quod desyderare, quod amare: quamquam hoc non ita exacte congruat rebus inanimis. Turpe quo ipsum in sese dum accipitur, id pulchrum esse nunquam potest: foemina vero suo in genere potest esse pulcherrima. Sed aliter intellexit Aristoteles." Pico is of course wrong to accuse Aristotle of neglecting the beauty of individual women, as we have seen above.

⁵¹ Trans. Bruno (1998) 71; Bruno (1584) 92: "Contempla, contempla, divino ingegno, qualmente gli egregi filosofanti, et de le viscere della natura discreti notomisti, per porne pienamente avanti gl'occhi la natura della materia, non han ritrovato piu accomodato modi, che con avertirci con questa proportionione; qual significa il stato delle cose naturali per la materia, essere come l'economico, politico e civile per il femineo sesso."

⁵² Zabarella (1590) 108; see also 109. Porzio (1553) chapt. 9 (unpaginated): "Itaque materia appetit essere, non tamen magis per hanc formam quam per aliam, idque ob suam potentiam indeterminatam."

aroused woman developed during the Middle Ages, in an outspokenly misogynist context, by relating the comparison to Aristotle's conceptualization of the female animal as an inferior or mutilated male in the *De generatione animalium*. A new and even more aggressive metaphor enters the discourse on bodies and women in Renaissance philosophy: the harlot, a person who epitomizes the uncanny urge for change and instability in natural bodies, a signifier for the potentially lethal disruption of stable male forms.

Alessandro Piccolomini

In some Renaissance Aristotelian as well as Neoplatonic treatises, one encounters a fascinating radicalisation of the metaphor of *materia* as a desiring woman: matter is represented as a prostitute (*meretrice*) or rather, in today's usage, as a nymphomaniac.⁵³ The following citation is from *Della filosofia naturale*, a lengthy treatise by Alessandro Piccolomini (1508–1579) first published in 1551.⁵⁴ The author is writing in the vernacular with the declared aim of promoting the Aristotelian doctrine by making it accessible to a wider audience and thus of defending the philosopher from recent unmerited attacks.⁵⁵

[Matter] is always ready to dispose itself for all [forms] in essentially the same way, like a person, that is never content or satisfied with a single form. By desiring all forms [at one time], and yet being under a specific one, matter starts (as though being remorseful and angry) to desire another one. That one does not pertain to her any more than this one, in a way that many philosophers like her to a most vulgar harlot (*publichissima meretrice*). Since it is appropriate for such a woman to be never satisfied by intercourse with any single man, and she is not especially in love with any of them, while still being under one man, she already desires the next and tries to get rid of the former; and it is the same with prime matter, which is naturally apt and ready to desire all natural

⁵³ Mazzi (1991) 189: "Per definizione esplicita della legge canonica una prostituta è una donna disponibile al desiderio di molti uomini, dunque l'essenza della sua funzione risale nella promiscuità."

⁵⁴ An expanded version followed in 1565. I quote from the 1585 edition.

⁵⁵ Piccolomini (1585) unpaginated *Dedication to Pope Julius III* (dated 28 April 1550).

forms and ready to follow them, and it is impossible for matter to sustain more than one [form] at a time; and it is necessary that, while being under one [form] she will rid herself of it; it is because of her desire for the other forms that she will rid herself of this form, and she then redresses herself with the new one, and this goes on and on while the forms perpetually succeed each other.⁵⁶

In this passage, Aristotle's desiring woman is quite spectacularly converted into a harlot that eagerly seduces unsuspecting males only to subsequently let them down. Obscure and sexist as this metaphorical ascription may be for modern readers, it is nevertheless a typical example of the projection of male sexuality on matter and women; here it becomes obvious that when men speak about women they tend to speak about their own anxieties and their own inclinations to promiscuity. It seems as if Piccolomini is neglecting all the aforementioned specifications by Aristotle himself, and as well as the injunctions raised by his followers, in order to substitute the *materia*-woman metaphor with the even more salient image of a *materia meretrice*. Again, the topic of changing matter is approached solely through a *cognitio adulterina*, a "bastard reasoning" that was, literally, in need of a truly adulterous representation. The harlot metaphor not only accounts for a hierarchical relationship between men and women, cementing the inferiority of the latter, but also embodies another crucial idea, namely that things which are made up of matter and form are subject to constant change, thus creating a kind of mnemonic image for the changeable, and hence metaphysically inferior position of matter in the hierarchy of being.

⁵⁶ Piccolomini (1585) lib. 1, chapt. 6, fol. 14v: "pronta sempre a disporsi per tutte ugualmente, come quella, che non si satia nè si contenta d'una forma sola; ma havendo appetito a tutte, non ha prima l'una sopra di se, che quasi pentita & infastidita, comincia ad aspirare all'altra; non essendole più propria questa che quella: di maniera che molti l'assomigliano ad una publichissima meretrice: perciocche, si come una donna tale, della conversazione di qualsivoglia huomo non si satia mai, & non più di questo che di quello essendo amica; non prima sta sotto l'uno che desiderando l'altro, cerca dal primo scostarsi: così questa prima materia commune atta, & pronta per natura sua à desiderar tutte le materiali forme, & a poter conseguirle, non essendo possibil che più d'una in un'istesso tempo sostenga mai; è necessario che mentre che sta sotto l'una, per l'appetito c'ha delle altre, si spogli di quella al fine; & quindi della nuova vestita poi, tosto per altre il medesimo faccia di mano in mano; mentre succedon le forme l'una dopo l'altra perpetuamente."

In tandem with the matter-harlot image, other objects pertaining to the world of illicit women are included into the representation of matter as prostitute: Piccolomini says that matter constantly hides under various masks because matter is never found without a definite form.⁵⁷ Masks are of course associated with make-up and other bodily practices tied to promiscuous sexual activities. For instance, *De eruditione principium*, a treatise attributed to Thomas Aquinas, emphasizes the connection between prostitution and the superficial change of the body through the use of face-paint, hair dyes, and other similar ways to alter one's outward appearance.⁵⁸ Aquinas says that matter by nature has no determinate form; even so, matter is never totally stripped (*denudatur*) of form and privation, for at any one time it is under a specific form that actuates matter. Therefore, matter can never be by itself.⁵⁹ Even more uncannily, Piccolomini also says that matter constantly takes up new forms, regardless of their dignity or position in the hierarchy of being, by, for instance, leaving the form of a human body in favour of the form of worms as matter "redresses" (*spogliare, vestire*) itself with ever new forms.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Piccolomini (1585) lib. 1, chapt. 6, fol. 15r: "Onde, si come, se fosse alcuna persona, che per non esser da noi conosciuta, andasse sempre nascosta in mascara non discoprendosi il volto mai, anzi doppio l'una mascara, subito prendesse l'altra, se bene in questo caso, noi non conoscessimo veramente qual faccia egli d'huomo avesse; nondimeno per rispetto, & proportion della mascara, conosceremmo che fusse un'huomo quello che di così fatta mascara coperto andasse; per non poter esser portata la mascara, se non è alcun huomo, che quella porti: così parimente stando sempre questa materia prima, sotto la mascara della forma che la ricopre tutta, nè discoprendosi un punto mai; altra notitia non sarà possibil, che mai se n'habbia, se non quanto il rispetto, & proportion alla forma, ci faccia havere, mentre che noi dalla successione delle forme argomentando, conosceremmo che un soggetto commun si trova, non generabile nè corrottibile, ignudo d'ogni forma propria, & d'ogni atto, & disposition domestica, il quale havendo appetito verso di tutte le forme materiali, successivamente le riceve di mano in mano."

⁵⁸ Guillelmus Peraldus (1980) chapt. 53: 115: "abominari debent [sc. puellae nobiles], quae solae meretrices facere solent, ut capillorum tinctionem, faciei dipinctionem, rugas vestimentorum."

⁵⁹ *De principiis naturae* § 2, in Thomas Aquinas (1976) 39: "Materia non habet in sua natura aliquam formam, [...] tamen numquam denudatur a forma & privatione. Quandoque enim est sub una forma, quandoque sub alia. Sed per se numquam potest esse [...] cum in actu non sit nisi a forma."

⁶⁰ Piccolomini (1585) lib. I, chapt. 6, fol. 15r: "vien perpetuamente spogliandosi dell'una, & l'altra vestendosi, à cercare con ogni suo potere, di far contento questo appetito eterno che tiene: non restando mai dispogliata, & ignuda al tutto di forme; anzi non prima dell'una si spoglia; che in quel medesimo instante è vestita di quella che ne succede: come

At this point, a potentially subversive side of the *meretrix* metaphor is accentuated: matter is steady, dressed, or masked with ever changing forms which take only temporary possession of it. These forms perish at the advent of another form, which is called on and desired by the underlying, eternal, and hence potentially divine matter. Viewed from this perspective, the allegedly stable male forms suddenly turn into temporary garments, which are merely hiding or veiling a female essence that is eternally desiring and, therefore, active. This account of natural change (which is openly endorsed by Giordano Bruno) supports the idea that forms are impermanent, whilst matter remains stable.

In such ways female desire assumes an uncanny potential, the harlot metaphor eclipses and at the same time displays specific male anxieties focusing on the control of female sexuality and on the generation of offspring. Furthermore, the idea that matter is dressed up with various masks or garments points to Neoplatonic ideas, rather than to genuine Aristotelianism (as indeed eclecticism was a characteristic trait of many Renaissance philosophers). Plotinus had already identified form with a cloak that was thrown over matter, a concept he identified with privation (see chapter two).⁶¹ Also, the idea of the repugnance (*fastidium*) of *materia* (that is, of a kind of physical aversion for a certain form) as the cause of change from one substantial form into another is foreign to the Peripatetic tradition. The Renaissance Aristotelian Giacomo Zabarella, for instance, says that matter is intrinsically inclined towards all possible forms, which change in matter not because *materia* hates the forms, but rather because matter is incapable of retaining one specific form indefinitely.⁶²

(per esempio) non prima della forma di Cornelio si spogliara questa materia commune, che dalla forma del cadavero rivestirassi: nè di questa restarà innanzi prima, che di un'altra forma, ò di terra ò di vermi ò d'altra cosi fatta, ricoprirassi, & cosi seguirà di far eternamente, succedendo d'una forma in l'altra, per la continua generation, & corrottion delle cose; generandosi sempre, & sorgendo una forma nella destruttion dell'altra."

⁶¹ O'Brien (1996) 182, with references; Klein (1956) passim.

⁶² Zabarella (1602) 1: 279 (ad textum 81): "materia enim secundum se aequae ad omnes est inclinata, formarum autem presentem non odio habet, quia secundum se omnes aequae amat, sed quia nulla forma potest in materia manere perpetuo, ideo materia non potens eam, quam habet, diu retinere, nolens rimanere, sine forma, aliam appetit, [...] ideo secundum se est contentus qualibet forma, quam habet, sed cum natura illius formae fit talis, ut necessario debeat corrumpi, ideo materia non potens eam retinere amplius, quam quaerit."

Piccolomini's emphasis on the repugnance of matter for a specific form is again a conceptualisation that points to the Renaissance Platonic tradition, and especially to the influential genre of treatises on love. These texts drew their inspiration not only from Plato's *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*, but also from Neoplatonic and medieval magic (see chapters two, three and epilogue). Here, the doctrine of universal animation translated into the idea that only a well disposed body can attract a beautiful soul, thus luring the latter to descend from its celestial dwelling and become prisoner in the physical world. In a characteristic passage from his influential *De vita*, Marsilio Ficino (1433–99) says that the foetus is a well disposed snare for the soul:

Is it not true that Nature in the foetus, as the artificer of the foetus, when she has disposed the little body in a certain way and shaped it, straightway by means of this very preparation, like a bait, leads down the spirit from the universe? And does the foetus not through this spirit as another fomentation absorb life and soul? And finally through a particular species and disposition of soul, the body thus animated is worthy at last of the presence of a divinely given mind.⁶³

The seductive gesture of the beautiful and deceptive body, luring and ensnaring a soul, corresponds to the seductive gesture of the prostitute.⁶⁴ (For further discussion of the above passage see chapter three and the epilogue). Not only did such “comprehensive discourses” reinforce each other, but they also show that there is a reciprocal influence between “woman” as a metaphor for matter and the philosophical concept of matter, women, and childbirth. As will become clear in the following chapters, the matter-woman allegory had a special intellectual appeal to Renaissance men because it allowed them to relate their social order to a hierarchical order of nature in which women were irredeemably man's inferiors.

⁶³ *De Vita* III, 26: 384–385: “Nonne in ipso fetu natura, fetus ipsius artifex, cum certo quodam pacto corpusculum affecerit figuraveritque hoc ipso statim praeparamento, velut esca quaedam spiritum ab universo deducit? Perque hunc velut fomitem vitam haurit atque animam? Ac denique per certam animae speciem dispositionemque corpus ita vivens dignum est praesentia mentis tandem donatae divinitus.”

⁶⁴ On the doctrine of *forma substantialis*, at which Ficino hints here, see Keffler (2001) 80–81 with references.

Leone Ebreo

Yet, even if employed in a slightly different context in Ficino's *De vita* (on which see chapter three) the idea of *materia* as *meretrice* is absent from the most influential of these love treatises, the *De amore*, Ficino's commentary on Plato's *Symposium* (1469) (on which see chapters two and three).⁶⁵ The metaphor does, however, occur in another very popular text on love and in nearly the same wording as in the *Della filosofia naturale*, that is in Leone Ebreo's *Dialoghi d'amore*.⁶⁶ The lengthy work was first published in 1535, but was written probably shortly after the turn of the century and went through many editions and translations during the sixteenth century. Filone, one of the two interlocutors, says:

According to Plato, [matter] desires and loves the forms of all created things with a love like woman's for a man. And as this love, appetite and desire are not to be appeased by the actual presence of any one form, it is ever enamored of another that is absent and, abandoning the one, seizes on the other; so that, as it cannot be actualized in all forms at once, it assumes them all successively one after the other. Its many parts do indeed embrace all forms simultaneously, but since each part desires to enjoy the love of all forms, they must needs be transmuted into one another in continual succession. For a single form is not adequate to sate its appetite and love, which greatly exceeds [all] satisfaction, so that no one form can satiate this insatiable appetite. [...] Hence some call [matter] a harlot, because of the variety and inconstancy of its lovers; for no sooner does it love one than it desires to leave it for another.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ For examples of gendered metaphors that Ficino uses in that work, see for instance, *De amore* I, 2: 140–141.

⁶⁶ A work that Piccolomini knew; see Garvin (2000) 178–179.

⁶⁷ Trans. Leone Ebreo (1937) 84; Leone Ebreo (1535) II, 11r: “[La materia ...] (come dice Platone) appetisce, & ama tutte le forme de le cose generate, come la donna l’huomo, & non satiando il suo amor’ l’appetito, el desiderio, la presentia attual’ de l’una de le forme s’innamora de l’altra che li manca, & lassando quella piglia questa, di maniera che non possendo sostener’ insieme tutte le forme in atto, le riceve tutte successivamente, l’una doppo l’altra; Ancor’ possiede in molte parti sue tutte le forme insieme, ma ogn’una di quelle parti, volendo goder’ de l’amore di tutte le forme, bisogna loro successivamente di

In this passage Leone Ebreo tries to qualify the misogynist significance of the *materia-meretrice* metaphor: to start with, matter is not *comunissima*, “most common” (as in Piccolomini), but just a harlot, and the ascription of that conceptualisation to *molti filosofi* (“many philosophers”) is reduced in the *Dialoghi* to *alcuni* (“some”). The wording in Piccolomini’s *Filosofia naturale* is thus harsher than in Leone’s *Dialoghi*. The following passage makes the fundamental difference between the two texts (originating from different cultural environments) obvious, as Leone Ebreo effectively subverts the negative meaning of the harlot metaphor:

Yet, it is this adulterous love that beautifies the lower world with such and so wondrous a variety of fair-formed things. So that the creative love of this first matter, and its desire for ever new mates, and the delight it takes in ever new copulations, is the cause of the creation of all created things.⁶⁸

In the *Dialoghi*, the nexus between anthropology and physics is even more outspoken than in Piccolomini; here *all* beings are classified as either male and female. Even God is not exempt from this sexualisation and subsequent polarization of the universe, a partition into male and female aspects which successively bring forth all creatures by carnal union.⁶⁹ Yet, and in pointed contrast to the majority of contemporary thinkers, Leone assesses this cosmic sexualisation as a *positive* phenomenon. In the *Dialoghi*, the entire creation is modelled on heterosexual relationships and can therefore be read as a genuine attempt (albeit within a male discourse) to alter the negative significance of the embodied world. His anthropomorphisms unify the cosmos to an ex-

continuo trasmutarsi de l’una, ne l’altra, che l’una forma non basta a satiar’ il suo appetito, & amore, il qual’ eccede molto la satisfatione, ch’una sola forma di queste non puo satiare questo suo insatiabile appetito, [...] per la qual’ cosa alcuni la chiamano meretrice, per non aver unico ne fermo amore ad’ uno, ma quando l’ha ad uno, desidera lassarlo per l’altro.”

⁶⁸ Trans. Leone Ebreo (1937) 84; Leone Ebreo (1584) II, 11r-v: “pur con quest’adultero amore s’adorna il Mondo inferiore di tanta, & cosi mirabil’ diversità di cose, cosi bellamente formate, si che l’amor generativo di questa materia prima, et il desiderio suo sempre del nuovo marito che li manca, e la diletatione che riceve del nuovo coito, è cagion’ de la generatione di tutte le cose generabili.”

⁶⁹ On Leone Ebreo’s thoughts in general, see Pflaum (1926), Perry (1980), Kodera (1995).

tent that it becomes impossible to distinguish between most phenomena (the female body as opposed to, for example, matter) as well as to draw a distinction between divergent concepts (ethics and physics, theology).

Piccolomini and Leone Ebreo use the *materia-meretrice* image to endorse divergent conceptualisations of the body. They also disagree on the philological and historical origins of the image: Leone ascribes the metaphor to Plato, whereas Piccolomini uses it to explain Aristotelian concepts. This is more remarkable in the case of Piccolomini, who claims to be a faithful follower of the doctrine of his master and who also emphasizes that Aristotle's and Plato's philosophy are in fact very different.⁷⁰ In this manner, not only does the adaptability of metaphors become apparent, but also the fact that in matters of natural philosophy the two doctrines were considered to be in harmony.⁷¹

Who were the *filosofi* Leone and Piccolomini were referring to? Certainly they were not to be found amongst the majority of orthodox Aristotelians. As we remember, that tradition was rather inclined to downplay the intellectual significance of the matter-woman metaphor. Even so, *Physics* I, 9 was often accompanied by convenient hints about the inferiority of women, thus corroborating the specific semantic connection under consideration.

Maimonides

Several times in the *Dialoghi*,⁷² Leone Ebreo refers to *The Guide for the Perplexed*, a book by Moses Maimonides (1135–1204) that compares matter with a married harlot, albeit without the least positive significance. Maimonides claims that philosophers and true religion had “concealed what they said about the first principles and presented it in riddles. Thus Plato [...] des-

⁷⁰ Piccolomini (1585) *Dedication to Pope Julius III* (unpaginated, fols. 4v-5r): “Hor’ io in questa impresa mi son’letto tra quanti dottamente ne gli anni corsi, han filosofato ne i libri loro: per mio Prencipe, & guida Aristotele, il quale in molte cose (secondo il mio giuditio) dissente da Platone, & più ordinatamente, scrive lui. Dalla dottrina d’Aristotele dunque, non si dilungaranno i scritti miei, se non inquanto alcuna volta la strada, ò del senso, ò di pianissima dimostrazione mi si disviasse.”

⁷¹ In *Timaeum* chapt. 41, OO 464: “Sed haec [sc. mixtio invicem commutatio elementorum] ferme omnia Pythagorico more sub obscuris metaphoris involvuntur: apertioribus autem verbis, Platonem auditoribus suis tradidisse putamus, et Aristotelem prae caeteris manifestius eadem literis commendasse.” Aristotle’s natural philosophy was already accepted by Middle Platonists: see for instance Winden (1959) 144–145.

⁷² Leone Ebreo (1585) II, 69v; III, 75v; III, 123v.

ignated matter as the female and form as the male.” It is interesting to note that in the *Timaeus* Plato says “mother and father”, perhaps acknowledging the metaphorical nature of his conceptualisation and thereby drawing a comparison that seeks to elide the more general terms “male and female”.⁷³ At this point, it is of crucial importance to note that “this example, presented as if random and innocent, becomes in fact the *master* allegory of Maimonides’ writing.”⁷⁴ The *Guide* alleges that “the commandments and prohibitions of the Law are only intended to quell the impulses of matter.”⁷⁵ In this radical formulation, the struggle against the material aspects of the human body becomes the prime target in the observation of the Jewish law. Accordingly, Maimonides introduces his formulation of the *materia-meretrix* metaphor in a highly misogynist context:

How extraordinary is what Salomon said in his wisdom when likening matter to a *married harlot*, for matter is in no way found without form and is consequently always like a *married woman* who is never separated from a man and is never free. However, notwithstanding her being a *married woman*, she never ceases to seek for another man to substitute for her husband, and she deceives and draws him in every way until he obtains from her what her husband used to obtain.⁷⁶

Maimonides’ violent outburst of misogyny essentialises “woman (as the allegorised term) into an ontological whoredom.”⁷⁷ In his excellent commentary on this passage, Boyarin has pointed out that this is not just a personal allegory or a metaphorical discourse, but that such a text also entails a reification of persons, with possible dramatic, devastating effects.⁷⁸

⁷³ Maimonides (1963) I, 18: 43; *Timaeus* 50 D.

⁷⁴ Boyarin (1993) 58; see Maimonides (1963) I, 1: 13.

⁷⁵ Maimonides (1963) III, 8: 431.

⁷⁶ Maimonides (1963) III, 8: 431. On the precedents of this idea in ancient Greek culture, see Carson (1990) 141: “The voracious woman, by her unending sexual demands, ‘roasts her man’ in the unquenchable fire of her appetite, drains his manly strength and delivers him to the ‘raw old age of premature impotence.’”

⁷⁷ Boyarin (1993) 58.

⁷⁸ Boyarin (1993) 58. On the reification of women in classical Greece, see for example Carson, *passim*. Maimonides (1963) III, 8: 431: “For example, man’s intelligent apprehension of his Creator, his mental representation of every intelligible, his control of his desire

Leone Ebreo's construction of the relationship between the sexes is radically opposed to Maimonides' approach. The entire setting and subject-matter in the *Dialoghi*, entailing a sexualisation of the universe (presented in the context of a couple's amorous conversation), thus can even be read as an intentionally anti-Maimonidean polemic; an attack on the philosopher-theologian who had maintained that "with regard to copulation, I need not add anything [...] about the aversion in which it is held by [...] our wise and pure law, and about the prohibition against mentioning it or against making it in any way or for any reason a subject of conversation."⁷⁹ (See also chapters six and seven of the present study.)

If one reads Leone Ebreo's philosophy as a return to the sources of Judaism, that is, to Rabbinic culture, famous for its distinctly more positive outlook on the body, it becomes very clear why the *Dialoghi* oppose Maimonides' negative attitude towards the body, an outlook the latter shared with Christian Neoplatonism. (It is tempting to assume that the author of the *Dialoghi* models his attack on Maimonidean anthropology on the return to the literature of Classical Antiquity originally advocated by Christian humanists.) In a similar way, Boyarin says:

Because the Rabbis understood the human being as body, sexuality was an essential component of being human, while in Platonised formations, one could imagine an escape from sexuality into a purely spiritual and thus truly "human" state. The rabbinic insistence on the essentiality of the corporeal and thus the sexual in the constitution of human beings represents then a point of resistance to the dominant discursive practices of both Jewish and non-Jewish cultures of late antiquity.⁸⁰

The above examples of the fortunes of the *materia-meretrix* metaphors show the malleability of the conceptualisation that could be put to very different uses: the image was either a testimony for the deceptive nature of the physical world or it could be read as an explanation for the diversity of bodies.

and his anger, [...] are all of them consequent upon his form. On the other hand, his eating, and drinking and copulation and his passionate desire for all these things, [...] are all of them consequent on his matter."

⁷⁹ Maimonides (1963) III, 8: 434.

⁸⁰ Boyarin (1993) *passim* and 35.

Solomon's Proverbs

Leone Ebreo's implicit attack on Maimonides seems to point towards an impasse in Scripture. Going back to Wisdom Literature, upon which Maimonides rests his claim for the ontological whoredom of the embodied world, one remains disappointed: Proverbs 6:26 (which is crucial for constructing the *materia-meretrix* figure), says "for the prostitute reduces you to a loaf of bread / and the adulteress preys upon your very life" (the Vulgate version substitutes "soul" for life).⁸¹ In the original context, this remark is part of an invective against adulteresses (further elaborated in Proverbs 7:1–21) and comes as a warning to young people against a promiscuous life. Indeed, Proverbs is a tutoring book, similar to "Egyptian texts used in the education of royal princes and state officials. [...] It has been argued that court schools also existed in Israel and that Proverbs had its roots in these schools as an adaptation of Egyptian wisdom and its educational context."⁸² What is even more amazing is that the Hebrew text of verse 26 is obscure. "The English versions are divided between the sense that a prostitute costs only the price of her fee and that a prostitute brings man to poverty."⁸³ Hence, Maimonides had to rely heavily on esoteric allegorical strategy to make his reading of the text viable, that is, to forge the body of the promiscuous woman preying upon an unsuspecting young man (Proverbs 7:1–21) into a highly contrived allegory explaining change in nature in general.

In this manner, the nymphomaniac woman became a metaphor for matter, that is, a place holder for the basic constituent of the physical bodies. We have seen how this metaphor evolved in the context of a sometimes violently misogynistic discourse. In this discursive structure, the *meretrix* became a powerful synthesis of previous metaphors for matter. The development from matter as "desiring woman" to "whore" is indicative for the dramatic violent development of a set of associations that were used by men to explain the phenomenon of change in nature. In Maimonides and Piccolomini *materia* is not conceptualised as *mother* (as in Plato) or *desiring woman* (as in Aristotle), but as wanton and death-bringing *harlot*. As an allegorised term within a male imaginary, "Woman" is thus represented as being continuously invested by ever

⁸¹ *Biblia sacra* (1994) col. 962: "pretium enim scorti vix unius est panis / mulier autem viri pretiosam animam capit."

⁸² Aitken (2001) 406a.

⁸³ Aitken (2001) 410b.

changing male forms, a trope that serves as a strategic device to simultaneously cover and expose a specific male anxiety about the material and procreative aspects of the world. Thus, to ward off any interpretation that ascribes matter, and hence women, with an equal or even dominant status in respect to male form, the metaphor of prostitution is instrumental for safeguarding the inferior status of women in the hierarchy of the sexes. (Time and again, we see how accurate Bruno's perception was, when he scathingly remarked that the Peripatetics teach you about matter by teaching you about women.)

For Renaissance thinkers, the prostitute was probably the most negative instance amongst a set of already highly ambivalent representations of women.⁸⁴ The body of the *meretrix* is an image that conveniently precludes positive associations with the material aspect of the world. On the one hand, the conceptualisation of matter as prostitute conveys the image of a beautiful and desirable body that is willingly at the disposal of the formative power of any man. On the other hand, the beautiful body of the woman is dangerously deceiving to unsuspecting male souls and therefore deeply disconcerting. Even so, the prostitute's deceiving beauty is designed to arouse sexual attraction and hence may exert considerable influence over men.⁸⁵ (See also the epilogue.)

⁸⁴ See for example Garzoni (1589) 601–602: “Per ultima conclusione si conchiude quanto da loro si riceve, et acquista, che non è altro, che mille immondezze, et sordidezze, le quali honestamente nominare non si ponno; et s'abellisce il concetto descrivendo quanto son brutte, sporche, laide, infami, furfante, pidocchiose, piene di croste, cariche di menstruo, puzzolenti di carne, fetenti di fiato, ammorbate di dentro, appestate di fuori, che le Gabrine in comparatione son piu desiderabili che loro.” For the use of the prostitute as a highly ambivalent metaphor describing Renaissance Rhetoric, see for example Rebhorn (1995) 140–141.

⁸⁵ Garzoni (1589) 597–598: “Da questo seguito grande, c'hanno havuto le femine vergognose et infami in tutte le parti dell mondo; infiniti danni particolari, & communi in processo di tempo si sono scoperti ai seguaci di quelle. [...] E in somma tutti i mali grandi son venuti per cagione delle meretrici. e che cosa di bene puo succedere da loro, essendo piene di tutte le malitie, di tutti gli inganni, di tutti i vitij che imaginar si possono? non son elleno maestre compite di tutti gli errori? E cosa di grandissima fatica, e d'un peso intollerabile a voler descrivere particolarmente l'astutie, & l'arti loro, e raccontar con che modo, con che piacevolezza con che sguardo, con che parole, con che baci, con che carezze, con che nodi, con che reti, con che lacci, con quai trattenimenti, con quai lusinghe, con quai toccamenti, con quai stringimenti, con quai capestrarie, con che accoglienze, con che atti, con quai lascivi maneggiamenti, con quai lotte, con quai costumi, con quai risi, con quali simulationi, con quai fraudi, e fntioni, con quai false lagrime, con che sospiri, con che gemiti, con che dipartenza, con qual prolungatione di piacere, con qual scambiamiento, et

The harlot therefore embodies a specifically male anxiety as her body, more than any other, is prone to contagion and to subsequent corruption due to lack of a definite male boundary. *Meretrix* thus “lacks character” in the double sense of the word: she has neither a definite shape (a husband), nor is she to be given any moral credit.⁸⁶ Like matter, the harlot can be grasped intellectually only through “bastard reasoning” and can be seized only through a “bastard action.” An unwanted (but characteristic) side-effect of the ambiguity of the *materia-meretrix* metaphor is that the image can also be viewed from a different perspective, that of a specific male anxiety that female bodies are *not* to be dominated at all. In fact, *materia* may be conceived as divine because it is eternal and persists, while forms constantly change inside it. This is actually the interpretation advanced by another Jewish philosopher, Solomon ibn Gabirol (c. 1021–c. 1057) that was later endorsed by Giordano Bruno, who completely subverted the negative connotations of the matter-harlot metaphor (see chapter six). In his *De vinculis in genere*, Bruno starts out by discrediting the validity of the matter-desiring woman metaphor in Aristotle:

That which is more perfect burns with greater love for the highest good than does that which is imperfect. Therefore, that principle is most perfect which wishes to become all things, and which is not oriented to any particular form and to any particular perfection but to a universal form and universal perfection. Of this kind is universal matter, without which there is no form, in whose power, desire and disposition all forms are located, and which receives all forms in the development of its parts, even though it cannot receive two forms at the same time. Hence, matter is in a sense divine [...].⁸⁷

con qual rinnovatione cerchino invesciare i giovanetti inesperti, e farseli servitori e schiavi ad ogni loro piacere.”

⁸⁶ Again, this approach could be read into one the *Timaeus* 50 BC; see Plato (1977) 69: “For it continues to receive all things, and never itself takes a permanent impress from any of the things that enter it; it is a kind of neutral plastic material on which changing impressions are stamped by the things which enter it, making it appear different at different times.”

⁸⁷ Bruno (1998) 173; *De vinculis in genere*, § 14 in Bruno (2000) 518: “Altius quippe summi amore boni flagrat quod perfectius est quam quod imperfectum. Perfectissimum ergo est illud principium quod fieri vult omnia, et quod non ad particularem formam fertur et particularem perfectionem, sed ad universam formam et ad universam perfec-

Hence, one of the Peripatetics was wrong in his statement about matter when he concluded that matter is ugly and evil, because the desire for the good and beautiful is itself evidence that matter lacks these properties. Aristotle said more carefully that matter is not “ugly” or “evil” as such. Rather, the actual truth is that which, like matter, tends and moves equally towards goodness and evil, ugliness and beauty, is in itself neither ugly nor beautiful, neither evil nor good. If matter were evil, it would be contrary to its nature to desire the good; the same would be true if it were naturally ugly. [...] That is, matter itself, in its bosom, is the beginning of all forms, such that all things originated from the outside as foreigners; indeed, outside of the bosom of nature there are no forms; rather, all forms are both latent within it and are derived from it.⁸⁸

In the following chapters we will look into some constructions of matter in the thought of Marsilio Ficino, the most important fifteenth-century Platonist and an exponent of a strand of thought that was in contrast to the Peripatetic approach.

tionem. Eiusmodi est materia per universum, extra quam nulla est forma, in cuius potentia, appetitu et dispositione sunt formae, et quae in partibus suis vicissitudine quadam omnes recipit formas, quarum simul vel duas recipere non posset. Et divinum ergo quoddam est materia [...].” For other references to Ibn Gabirol see for example Bruno (1584) 63 and 97.

⁸⁸ Trans. Bruno (1998) 172; *De vinculis in genere*, § 14 in Bruno (2000) 514–516: “Inde male concludit in proposito materiae Peripatheticorum aliquis materiam turpe[m] esse atque malum, quia appetendo bonum et pulchrum eodem carere se contestatur. Circumspectius dixit Aristoteles “sicut turpe”, “sicut malum”, non autem simpliciter huiusmodi. In rei autem veritate neque turpe, neque pulchrum, neque malum est neque bonum, quod ad bonitatem, malitiam, turpitudinem et pulchritudinem tendit et aequae fertur ut materia. Si materia esset malum, contra eius naturam esset appetere bonum, itidem natura turpe. [...] ut materia ipsa inchoationem habeat omnium formarum in sinu suo — ita ut ex eo omnia promat et emittat —, non puram illam exclusionem — ita ut quasi omnia peregrina concipiat ab externo. Extra quippe materiae gremium nulla forma est, sed in eodem omnes latent, et ex eo tum omnes educuntur.”

CHAPTER 2

MATTER AS A MIRROR: MARSILIO FICINO AND RENAISSANCE NEOPLATONISM

Ad lucernae lumen ne te contempleris.

Pythagorean precept

Good Camillo,

Your changed complexions are to me a mirror,

Which shows me mine changed, too.

Winter's Tale I, ii, 380–2

This chapter will examine the metaphor of the mirror as matter, an image that has an important function in Marsilio Ficino's highly influential explication of Platonism.¹ Apart from being yet another powerful metaphor, the image of the mirror as matter is of interest to us because it is also connected with the image of the *materia meretrix* we discussed in chapter one. There was, for example, a widely held belief that mirrors belonging to prostitutes had the power to infect decent people with physical disease and immoral behaviour. This belief underscores the idea that mirrors not only reflect images, but can also retain the forms they “catch.” The metaphor also illustrates the specific anxiety that mirrors could reflect these dangerous images back and thus contaminate and corrupt the environment, both morally and physically.²

¹ The material presented in this chapter is an extended version of Kodera (2002) and summarises part of the research I carried out during my stay at the Warburg Institute in London (1997–1998), made possible by a Frances Yates Scholarship and an Erwin Schroedinger post-doctoral grant from the Austrian Science Fund (FWF). I wish to thank both institutions for their generous support. Intellectually, this essay is most indebted to Michel Allen's edition and commentary on Ficino's *Sophist* commentary (1989) as well as to Frontisi-Ducroux's study on the role of mirrors in ancient Greece and Rome (1997). I wish to thank Valery Rees, Michael Allen, Georges Didi-Huberman and Tanya Pollard for their comments, corrections and reading of the preliminary draft.

² (Ps.-) Albertus (1500) fol. 92v; Agrippa von Nettesheim (1991) I, 16: 117 says: “ideo dicunt quod, si quis induet vestem vel camisiam meretricis vel secum habuerit speculum in quo ipse se quotidie speculaverit, reddetur audax, intimidus, impudens, luxuriosus.”

As in the previous chapter, the focus will be on gendered metaphors used to describe the material aspect of the world and an ostensibly abstract philosophical discourse on the order of the world. This chapter will thus refer to ideas about the relationship between actual men and women in the early modern period. In that context, the discussion of the metaphor of the mirror will be of crucial importance in a male discourse such as that of Ficino's philosophy. In his Neoplatonic philosophy, in fact, the mirror becomes the most important and highly ambiguous metaphor for the embodied world, and hence for the female and passive aspect of creation and, eventually, the crucial image for a particularly male fantasy of women. The metaphor of the mirror helped Ficino articulate two problems of immediate concern for his Neoplatonism: first, the ontological status of matter, such as the paradoxical fact that matter (as God's first Creation) on the one hand occupied the most elevated position in the hierarchy of being, whereas on the other hand it was equated with the scum of the universe; second, the mirror/matter metaphor highlighted the problematic ethical status of matter, that is to say, it pointed to the disputed question of whether matter was good (Iamblichus) or bad (Plotinus), and what role it played in the composition of the body (that is, to what extent matter was an impediment to the soul).

This chapter will also consider the ways in which the mirror functions as a quasi-scientific tool that makes the invisible visible, something that led to the association of the mirror with the performances of tricksters and sorcerers who employed reflecting surfaces to deceive an unsuspecting public. Within this framework of deception, but also at a philosophical level, the mirror functions as a metaphor for the female and material aspect of creation. In this context, the mirror eventually turns into the crucial metaphor which accounts for a particularly male fantasy of women.

A Renaissance Platonist on Matter and Women

Marsilio Ficino, a Florentine doctor and priest, the first translator of the complete works of Plato into Latin (published 1484), was a key figure in the transmission of Platonism to the Latin West after the Middle Ages. In addition, Ficino wrote sometimes lengthy commentaries or introductions to Plato's works. Their main objective was to present Plato as a sort of Attic Moses, as someone who wrote in Greek but formed part of a larger group of *prisci theologi* (ancient theologians) whose doctrines could be interpreted

as forebears of the truths of Christian doctrine.³ Ficino's translation of Plato adhered closely to the original text and was therefore highly influential well into the nineteenth century.⁴ To write about the concept of matter and its relationship to gendered ideas in the works of a Renaissance Platonist will perhaps seem strange at first, especially since Ficino is known mainly as a 'doctor of souls,' and as the promulgator of the intricate metaphysics expressed in the system of *hypostases* by Plotinus, Proclus and other Neoplatonists.⁵ Being 'the shadow of a shadow,' 'a corpse adorned,' 'evil itself' (to quote Plotinus), matter is either not mentioned at all in such Neoplatonic hierarchies or else it is unmistakably placed on the lowest level in the scale of being.⁶ And indeed, neither matter nor women are prominent topics in Ficino's writings. Nevertheless, Ficino's cosmology, as well as his metaphysics, refer implicitly (and hence perhaps even more decisively for this philosophy) to a gendered substructure: the partition of creation into male and female aspects. This becomes especially obvious in Ficino's ideas about matter, which he inherits and transforms from a complex amalgamation of divergent traditions from Classical Antiquity. During the past decades, scholars such as Evelyn Fox-Keller have sought to make this gendered and highly metaphorical discourse explicit; a mode of thinking that pervades even modern science to an amazing degree:

[...] gender and norms come to be seen as silent organizers of the mental and discursive maps of the social and natural worlds we simultaneously inhabit and construct even in those worlds that women never enter. I call this the symbolic work

³ Copenhaver (1992) 155; Allen (1984) *passim*.

⁴ For a positive assessment of the quality of Ficino's translations, see Hankins (1990) 1: 311–313.

⁵ Allen (1982) 19: "Indeed, the whole philosophy of Plotinus, the founder of Neoplatonism, is a consequence of his dividing reality into a hierarchical series of ontological states where the higher subsumes the lower and the lower emanates from the higher and ultimately prime hypostasis, the transcendent one." For a clear exposition of the hierarchy of being by Ficino himself, see Ficino (1975) chapt. 4: 88–102. The relevant passages from Plato are *Laws* X, 892A; 896A–898B; *Parmenides* 137C–142D and 159B–160B. For a detailed exposition of Plotinus' system of *hypostases*, see for example, Armstrong (1940) *passim*.

⁶ See O'Brien (1996) 182–184, with references.

of gender; it remains silent precisely to the extent that norms associated with masculine culture are taken as universal.⁷

Ficino's remarks about matter, scattered through his prolific writings and commentaries on Plato's dialogues and other works of the Neoplatonists, introduce a wide range of ideas foreign to the Aristotelian tradition. On top of this already complex *mélange*, Ficino has a characteristic tendency to adapt certain arguments to contemporary purposes. It appears that Ficino often simply wants to make his own arguments as convincing as possible and does not seem to be particularly worried about contradicting himself. Ficino's thoughts on matter serve different purposes, are highly eclectic and elusive, and often blatantly contradictory. There is, therefore, no entirely coherent or systematic doctrine of matter to be extracted from his writings. Different selections of his texts entail new and different readings of his ideas. Paul Oskar Kristeller, for one, long ago noted that, according to Ficino,

either an universal matter is conceived as underlying both corporeal and intelligible entities or there is supposed to be in incorporeal entities a particular element which has the same function that matter has in bodies. This element is called "essential" and corresponds to intelligible matter in the Neoplatonic sense, but it is more directly related to the Thomistic tradition.⁸

The Ambiguous Role of Matter in the Platonic Tradition

Ficino's elusiveness on the topic of matter is also due to the fact that the position of matter in Platonic philosophy in general is by no means clear. Is matter God's first creation and thus essentially good or is matter the filth at the bottom of the universe that distracts the soul by dragging it into the mud of the corporeal world? In the *Timaeus*, Plato presents an essentially optimistic outlook on the corporeal world whereas in the *Phaedo* (69C; 83D) he emphasizes its negative effects on the soul.⁹ Within the Neoplatonic tradition,

⁷ Fox-Keller (1993) 16–18.

⁸ Kristeller (1943) 39; Allen (1989) 69–70, 109–110., 144–115.

⁹ Yet, Shaw (1995) 37 says: "Even the optimistic *Timaeus* touched briefly on the cause for this pessimism in its description of the confusion that attends the embodiment of the

Plotinus is famous for his very negative attitude towards the corporeal world; according to him, matter never participates in the forms that are thrown over it “like a cloak”.¹⁰ Yet, sometimes even Plotinus mitigates his position by declaring that matter is actually never totally bereft of divine influence, because otherwise it would become an obstacle to the divine, hence the corporeal fulfills a necessary and positive function in the cosmos.¹¹ On the other side of the Neoplatonic spectrum stands Iamblichus (another important source for Ficino) who, on the contrary, holds that matter is divine: as the power of the gods cannot be diminished by matter, matter must participate in that power. Yet, in many instances in his *De mysteriis* Iamblichus also maintains that matter is basically dirty and that the soul has to be cleansed of its harmful and distracting influence.¹² We may thus detect in the entire Platonic tradition a characteristically ambivalent attitude towards embodiment: for the individual soul, matter is a prison, but from the perspective of creation as a whole, matter is a necessary constituent of the cosmos.¹³ As we shall see, both ap-

soul (*Timaeus*, 44).” Corrigan (1996) 3 says: “The idea that matter should possess both positive and negative characteristics is profoundly puzzling, as Plato himself explicitly recognizes in his account of the curious nature of the receptacle of becoming in the *Timaeus*. (49A-52D).”

¹⁰ Armstrong (1940) 95 says with regard to *Enneads* II, 4, 16: “Form and matter never really for Plotinus unite into an organic whole. Matter remains unchanged by the forms externally superimposed upon it.” *Enneads* II, 4, 5: “a corpse that has never known the breath of life.” See also *Enneads* III, 4, 1; *Enneads* I, 8, 3: “absolute evil.”; see also O’Brien (1996) 184.

¹¹ Nasemann (1991) 237–238; Hager (1961) 73–103; Corrigan (1996) 3; In the *Theologia* XVII, 2 Ficino repeats Plotinus’ argument that if matter were resistant, it would disobey God in the process of creation (see below).

¹² On Iamblichus and his positive assessment of matter in connection with his theurgical doctrines, see Shaw (1995) *passim* and esp. 24: “The theurgist’s highest good was not realized by escaping from materiality but by embracing matter in a demiurgic way. In this, Iamblichus virtually reversed the symbolic language of his age: apotheosis in theurgy could no longer be imagined as the ascent of the soul (the well-known Plotinian metaphor) without a corresponding descent and demiurgy. On the negative effects of matter on the soul, see Shaw (1995) 39ff; Nasemann (1996) 237–239. For a description of matter as divine in the *De mysteriis*, see Iamblichus (1965) V, 23: 232–234; on the negative effects of matter on the soul, see Iamblichus (1965 I, 11: 39; I, 18: 55–56; II, 5: 79–80; IV, 12: 196–197.

¹³ On this, see Shaw (1995) 46; Nasemann (1990) 244: “Die Hauptursache für diese Unausgeglichenheit im Denken Plotins ist wohl darin zu sehen, daß die Materie unter ethisch-religiösem Aspekt (in ihrer Bedeutung für die menschliche Seele) als schlecht

proaches to the material world are present in Ficino's philosophy: the concept of matter as something base and mean, lowest in the hierarchy of being, as well as the idea that matter is something divine, possibly even God's first creation. To varying degrees, all things, even intellectual beings, are composed of matter and form.¹⁴

As in the case of Aristotelian theorists, this paradoxical condition renders the concept of *materia* especially conducive to non-discursive structures of legitimation or explanation, such as metaphors, which are ultimately based on the narrative strategies of myth. To complicate matters further, we also have to consider that Ficino not only translated a wide range of texts from the Platonic tradition, but also inherited an elaborate scholastic tradition with a distinctively Aristotelian flavour. In his *Commentarium in Timaeum*, Ficino even implies that Aristotle's and Plato's doctrines of matter were in agreement.¹⁵

Perhaps surprisingly for the modern reader, this idea was not uncommon, for many Renaissance thinkers believed that Plato (who had expounded large portions of his natural philosophy in the *Timaeus*) was in accordance with Aristotle. Aristotle's brief remark that Plato's and his own ideas about matter were in accordance (*Phys.* 209b 11–13), was generally accepted by ancient Neoplatonists and consolidated in Calcidius' commentary on the *Timaeus*. This text was superseded, late in the fifteenth century, by Ficino's full translation and commentary.¹⁶ Ficino says accordingly that whereas Plato had hidden this (originally Pythagorean) doctrine in obscure metaphors (*obscuris metaphoris*), Aristotle had talked about it openly (and thus we may infer, is

erscheint, unter ontologisch-metaphysischer (als Aufnahmeort der Ideen und als letztes Produkt des Einen) dagegen als neutral und sogar als notwendig." Corrigan (1996) 48 criticizes O'Brien for his one-sided account of Plotinus' doctrine of matter, viewing it as something utterly negative and not participant in the intelligible.

¹⁴ On this originally Proclean metaphysics, see Allen (1982) 38–40, quoting Ficino OO, 1166.

¹⁵ On Ficino's *Timaeus* commentary in general, see, Allen (1987); Hankins (1999); Kefßler (2001) 82 with references.

¹⁶ Recently James Hankins has described the importance of both authors for Renaissance philosophers. Ficino's influential commentary appeared twice: in 1484 and in an enlarged version in 1496. "Ficino's study of the *Timaeus* began at a very early age and continued up to the last few years of his life." Hankins, (1999) 84 and *passim*, esp. 78 (on Ficino's copy of a Calcidius Ms.) and 84–86; see Allen (1987). On Calcidius, see also the classical study by Winden (1959); on Pythagoras in the Renaissance, see Celenza.

to be blamed for having broken the law of silence).¹⁷ This typical intertwining of Aristotelian and Neoplatonic traditions probably accounts for the limited extent to which Ficino took notice of the genuine Platonic idea that matter functions as a space or as a container. Rather than as a serious theoretical assumption, this appears in Ficino as merely another of Plato's metaphors for matter.¹⁸ In this, Ficino relies on Chalcidius who blurs the distinctions between the concepts of "matter as space" (Plato) and "matter as subject to change" (Aristotle).¹⁹ Even so, Ficino develops his own account of matter, which at first sight turns out to be fascinatingly un-Aristotelian. Yet, on closer inspection, many of Ficino's ideas can be found in the most widely studied peripatetic *libri naturales* or texts on natural philosophy. Treatises *On the Heavens*, *On Coming to be and passing away*, the *Meteorologica*, *On the Sense*, and the *Physics*, were all basic text books in contemporary Italian university curricula. The Aristotelian background probably accounts for the fact that Ficino does not equate matter with privation, as Plotinus had done.²⁰ The contrary is in fact true, for according to Ficino matter exists before quality, it never perishes or dissolves ("pure matter" has no contrary),²¹ and it is the foundation of all natures, the destruction of which would entail the ruin of the physical world (*machina mundi se corrueat*).²² As will shortly become

¹⁷ In *Timaeum* chapt. 40, OO, 1464: "sed haec [sc. mixtio invicem commutatio elementorum] ferme omnia Pythagorico more sub obscuris metaphoris involvuntur: apertioribus autem verbis Platonem auditoribus suis tradidisse putamus, et Aristotelem prae caeteris manifestius eadem literis commendasse." Aristotle's natural philosophy was accepted by Middle Platonists; see, for instance Winden (1959) 144–145.

¹⁸ In *Timaeum* chapt. 40, OO 1464: "Adduxit [sc. Plato] in medium multa materiae nomina, scilicet speciem invisibilem, Sinum informem omniumque capacem formarum, Naturam Potentiam, Matrem mundi, Nutricem formarum, Subiectum, Receptaculum, Locum. Sed ex hoc loci nomine videre licet Peripateticum adeo ineptum, sive malevolum potius, ut dementiae Platonem insimulet, quasi materiam voluerit esse proprie mathematicum. Quod quidem per caetera materiae nomina evidentissime confutatur." For further reference about the integration of Aristotelian natural Philosophy into Renaissance Neoplatonism, see for instance, Keßler (2001) 82 with n. 5.

¹⁹ Winden (1959) 249.

²⁰ *Theologia* I, 3: I, 112 emphasizes that matter is distinct from extension. See Allen (1989) 69–70 with n. 30.

²¹ *Theologia* X, 3: II, 62 is one of the rare instances in which Ficino associates matter with something clean.

²² *Theologia* V,8: I, 179: "Partes enim per quantitatem fiunt. Materia vero quantitati praecedit: est enim quantitatis qualitatique subiectum. Subiectum vero semper rem illam

more obvious, Ficino has thus a strong tendency to identify the primordial Platonic chaos of the *Timaeus* with the Aristotelian notion of prime matter. Yet, according to Ficino, just one kind of matter pervades the entire universe, whereas according to the Peripatetics, prime matter is restricted to the terrestrial realm.²³

To complicate things further, we have to remember that in the Aristotelian tradition the role and ontological status of matter was by no means univocal.²⁴ To give just one more example of issues under debate one might point to the question of to what extent matter may be called a substance: if matter by definition lacks form, but all substances are composed out of matter and form (again by definition), how can matter be said to be a substance? Or, again, how can matter be said to take up all kinds of different forms without substantially changing in the process? Ficino thus obviously found himself in the middle of a highly contentious debate on matter that was intrinsic to the Platonic and Aristotelian traditions. As we shall see, both approaches to the material world are present in Ficino's philosophy, that is, the concept that matter is something base and mean, lowest in the hierarchy of being, as well as the idea that matter is something divine, even God's first creation and that, in varying degrees, all things, even intellectual beings, are composed of matter and form.

quae in ipso iacet antecedit oportet. [...] Materia vero haec ideo numquam corrumpitur, quia totius naturae corporalis est fundamentum, quo diruto, omnis mundi machina corruet. Neque in partes dissolvitur umquam, quia non est per naturam suam ex partibus constituta. Materia ergo non interit. Multo minus interibit vis ipsa naturalis quae est materiae domina. Domina illius est vis ea efficiens quae format ipsam. Hanc format vis ea quae primum movet. Fons motionis est anima rationalis, cui qualitates ad movendam serviunt ut instrumenta."

²³ *De amore* I, 2: 19; see *Timaeus*, 32C.

²⁴ Corrigan (1996) 14–15 gives a good summary (with references) of the situation by saying that "in the Aristotelian Corpus [...] the notion of matter itself ranges in meaning from positive potentiality and neutrality to indeterminacy, unknowability, and even resistance to form." See also Allen (1989) 69–71.

Matter in Ficino's Cosmology

According to Ficino, matter is a principle in its own right and it is distinct and separable from form. The latter principle is imposed on, or given to the former by some supreme and divine artist.²⁵ Ficino's ideas about the material aspect of creation are thus related to questions of origin and, more precisely, of (male) authorship: what was created first by God, forms or matter? It seems likely that the Godhead first brought forth the unchanging and hierarchically higher "noble" forms which were to shape "base or common" matter. However, and quite unexpectedly, in several crucial passages Ficino maintains that God created shapeless *materia* *before* He created forms.²⁶ One especially pressing problem in this discussion is whether, according to Platonic myths of creation, the supreme God not only created but also shaped matter or whether this second task was left to one or more demiurges, inferior gods whose duty it was to shape the chaotic primordial matter in accordance with the forms flowing from the divinity.²⁷ Though the latter account of creation is not in accordance with Christian doctrines, it has the advantage of explaining the process of creation in accordance with human forms of creativity.²⁸ The following passage from Ficino's commentary on the *Timaeus* is a good summary of these problems.

Is God not only the author of the worlds, but also the former of matter? That would have been the answer given by the school of Ammonius and Origen. In the *Parmenides*, matter has to be viewed as originating from God in a certain way: whereas in the *Timaeus* — on the grounds that matter also accepts the good from God —, it has to exist before and then it is to be thought of as something good. The common school of Platonists though would have a different opinion, maintaining

²⁵ *De amore* V 5; see as precedents, *Metaphysics* VII, 7: 1032a26–b21; Plotinus, *Enneads* V, 8, 1.

²⁶ In *Timaeum* chapt. 26, OO 1449/445–145/446. On the *Theologia* XVII, 2, see *infra*.

²⁷ In *Timaeum* chapt. 41, OO 1463/461: "Quae autem de materia prima sit inter Platonicos ambiguitas, narravimus ab initio. Mandat ergo posthac architectus mundi filiis suis, id est animabus sphaerarum stellarumque et daemonum [...] ut ad imitationem sui, mixtionemque sub Luna rerum aggrediatur, hominisque subijciant omnia [...]."

²⁸ On this, and Ficino's connections with Arianism, see Allen (1987) 438–439.

that the god who creates [primordial] matter is different from the god who next shapes it. Matter is given being by the highest good; it is formed by the intellect, and subsequently moved by soul. Thus [matter] is before everything, but it is created by the first being.²⁹

In a disposition typical of Renaissance minds, Ficino often employs analogies deriving from the arts and crafts, especially from architecture and sculpture, in order to explain the relationship between matter and form. God is like a supreme city planner who not only constructs the “various houses of creation,” but also lends to these various buildings unity, whereas human architects are capable only of erecting isolated edifices.³⁰ Ficino also compares the supreme creator to a potter, who not only forms the clay with his comb and moves it with the wheel, but who also in the same moment *creates* the shapeless clay.³¹ In the process of moulding, the creator bestows matter with qualities that allow us to distinguish between three types of matter: primordial chaos, which is yet unformed and totally inert, midway between being

²⁹ According to Ficino, the *Timaeus* functions as Plato’s *Physics*, whereas the *Parmenides* represents Neoplatonic metaphysics. On this see Allen (1987) 423; *In Timaeum* chapt. 9, OO 1441/1434: “Sed numquid Deus mundi author, idem est materiae effector? Respondebit hic Amonnij, & Origenis schola, eundem esse. Et in Parmenide quidem tractari, quemadmodum materia esse a Deo accipit: in Timaeo vero, qua ratione ab eodem accipit bene esse, prius autem quoddammodo esse, quam bene esse excogitari. Respondebit aliter communis Platoniorum schola, non eundem esse Deum, qui materiam facit: & qui format proxime. Immo materiam a summo quidem bono esse: ab intellectu vero formari; ab anima postremo moveri. Immo vero omnia haec a primo, sed esse a primo tantum.”

³⁰ *In Timaeum* chapt. 16, OO 1444/440: “Profecto si posset architectus humanus dominari materiae, postquam plura aedificia effecisset, quorum quodlibet in se fit unum, cuncta uno quodam tandem circumvalleret: Deus autem potest omnino, cum sit materiae dominus.”

³¹ *In Timaeum* chapt. 9, OO 1441: “Perinde ac si fingamus figulum qui manu propria lutum faciat, factum per rotam formet, formando ligneo quodam distinguat pectine atque figuret. Nemo utique dixerit vas a pectine atque rota magis fieri quam a figulo.” On the analogy of God as a potter see also OO 492/493 (*De creatione rerum*): “Figulus in principio paeparat sibi lutum, quasi materiam, in qua formas vasculorum fingat, quas habet in mente. In una, inquam, mente multas habet, et similiter in luto multos effingit, dum informe lutum prius a se formabile extendit, atque extendendo figurat. Similiter Deus ab initio unam creavit materiam, [...]. Materia haec in primo suae creationis momento, nec formam habebat, ut dixi, nec etiam magnitudinem.” On clay as image of matter see also Iamblichus (1965) VII, 2: 250–251.

and non-being; the matter in the universe, which is already endowed with primary forms; and already seeded matter, which will bring forth the myriad forms.³² In an analogous way, nature organizes matter from within, while man is capable of shaping matter only from without and in imitation of nature's art.³³

Yet, as we have seen, even according to Plato himself the position of matter within the hierarchy of being was by no means clear. Matter may either be God's first creation (this is the position of the *Timaeus*) or the lowest element in the hierarchy of being (as in the *Parmenides* and in the *Sophistes*). As Ficino writes: "And this very matter, which in the *Parmenides* is assigned the lowest rank in the scale of things, is in the *Timaeus* said to be, as it were, already created and subordinated to the architect of the world who realizes the creation."³⁴

This unresolved tension or equivocity of ideas, which is intrinsic to Platonic philosophy in general, indicates that the abstract philosophical discourse is inextricably bound to a metaphorical substructure. It links the concept of matter to ideas and to specifically male anxieties about origin, procreation, bodies, and the female aspect in creation. The discourse about the material world refers to a gendered structure that marks a dialectical relationship between two universal principles: male (active form) and female (matter/potentiality). Kristeller observes that:

In the degree to which each object is composed of potency and act, it is characterised by a passive element and an active element. In that sense, the relation of act and potency is applicable not only to corporeal changes but to almost all objective relations as well, so acquiring a fundamental significance. [...] The relation between matter and form appears therefore as a particular case of that relation, with the result that matter is called "potency," form on the other hand, "act."³⁵

³² On this, see Allen (1989) 14; for a similar distinction of matter in its various stages of formation see OO 492–493 (*De creatione rerum*).

³³ *Theologia* IV, 1: I, 146–147; see Allen (1989) 144.

³⁴ In *Timaeum* chapt. 9, OO 1441: "Hanc utique materiam in Parmenide, ab ipso bono in ultimo rerum gradu deductam, acipit in Timeo, quasi iam genitam et architecto mundi, ad effectum mundani operis subditam."

³⁵ See Kristeller (1943) 40; OO 81, 349, 386–387; Collins (1974) chaps. 1 and 4.

I disagree with Kristeller insofar as I believe that the argument is to be viewed instead from a different perspective: I tend to view abstract concepts such as “potency” and “act” as manifestations of originally gendered concepts. In such ways, “marks” or “signs” become projected onto a universal or cosmological screen. They return as universal and eternal laws, and are thus re-inscribed as normative standards into the relationships between men and women. Ficino’s cosmology abounds in such animistic and gendered assumptions. According to the *Theologia platonica*, for instance, the earth is a womb, a living and receptive female body that gives birth to numerous and different male seeds; the insemination by various forms indicates the potentially disreputable wantonness in the female aspect of creation, which forms a constant threat to male identities.³⁶

Errico Vitale has recently tried to demonstrate that matter in Ficino’s *Theologia* has a certain kind of receptive *force* for form. According to Vitale, that force of potentiality delineates a fundamentally dynamic conception of (an ultimately passive) matter: Vitale thus correctly highlights the paradoxical quality of matter as passive recipient of forms described above and below.³⁷

In many instances Ficino indeed adopts a fundamentally negative and subordinate position on matter, which becomes easily associated with the female and passive aspects of creation.³⁸ Matter is dark, mixed, and contagious, and therefore threatens the unmixed state of clean, bright and shiny principles.³⁹ Ficino frequently calls matter dirty, naked, and humid.⁴⁰

³⁶ *Theologia* V, 1: I, 144–145: “Quis foeminae huius ventrem vita carere dixerit, qui tam multos sponte sua parit foetus et alit? qui sustinet seipsum? cuius dorsum dentes promit et pilos.”

³⁷ Vitale (1999) 340, 359, 364 says that Ficino reduces the concept of matter/potency to a force and that he is consequently arriving at the genuinely paradoxical qualities of matter, the present study tries to describe. See Vitale (1999) 368: “La *passivitas* indica tipo di ‘azione’ proprio della materia.”

³⁸ On the passivity of bodies see for example Ficino (1975) chapt. 1: 78–79: “Patitur corpora et quae corporis sunt coniuncta. Mens autem a corpore libero.” Kristeller (1943) 38–39.

³⁹ *De amore* V, 4: 186: “Ac duo invicem corpora mixta mutua se contagione inficiunt. Quod in aque et vini, ignis et terrae confusione conspicimus.” The Italian version, Ficino (1973) 68 has: “E duoi corpi insieme misti, con iscambievole contagione si turbano. E questo veggiamo nella confusione della Acqua e del Vino, del Fuoco e la Terra.” See *In Timaeum* chapt. 25, OO 1149/445.

⁴⁰ *Theologia* XVII, 2: III, 145; “feces iste mundi” (*De amore* VI 3: 191); “feces corporis” (*De amore* VI, 10); *Theologia* X, 3: II, 63: “nudus”; *Theologia* I, 2 “humidus.”

Fluctuating matter becomes associated with the river Lethe or with oblivion, as well as tied to Dionysus, who is not only the god of drunkenness, but also the head of the cosmic region of generation.⁴¹ Matter is indifferent; by its own nature it has nothing good, but it nevertheless may become everything.⁴² The female, subordinate, passive, motionless, and nourishing material desires to be shaped by the (higher) active and male principle.⁴³ In order to enable matter to accommodate the hostile forms at least in various places, God bestowed it with extension or quantity.⁴⁴ Once subjected to quantity, matter becomes divisible, thus carrying all the negative birthmarks of the female.⁴⁵ A single matter hides under various forms, as the female constantly wears different masks or dresses.⁴⁶ When commenting on the Platonic *Timaeus* (50E-51B), Luce Irigaray reaches similar conclusions about the status of the feminine aspect of the cosmos:

⁴¹ *Theologia* I, 3: I, 95: "fluctuating"; see also Allen (1998) 112; *Theologia* I, 3: I, 103: Lethe, see also Enneads IV, 3, 26, 54–55. Hesiod, *Theogony* 227 and *infra*.1; see *In Timaeum* chapt. 26, OO 1450/446: "[Dionysius] in natura quasi ebria, id est immensa materiae." On Dionysius and his disfigurement and subsequent restitution in a mirror see, below.

⁴² OO *In Timaeum* chapt. 12, OO 1141/439: "quae sua natura nihil boni haberet et tamen fieri omnia posset. Erat enim sua ipsius natura inordinata, informis, inanimata, omnino varia, incongrua, inconcinna, inconstans, apta quae in contrarium mutaretur, & optimarum rerum rationem susciperet, formae videlicet, animationis, similitudinis, congruitas, concinnitas: omnium denique rerum ideae melioris."

⁴³ *In Timaeum* chapt. 11, OO 1142/438: "Sic utique omnia conversione quadam naturali bonum appetunt, tanquam finem: quoniam ab ipso bono, communi quadam processione, tanquam principio provenerunt: atque adeo cuncta ipsum appetunt, ut materia infima appetat appetitu non infimo. Perpetuo siquidem in omnibus generandis ad ipsam boni vergit similitudinem; ut appetat hanc a bono pendere." See *Philebus* commentary Ficino (1975) chapt. 4, 99: "Omne enim corpus ab alio quodam movetur. Movere autem se ipsum natura sua non potest, sed propter animae participationem ferme se ipso movetur vivitque per animam."

⁴⁴ *In Timaeum* chapt. 18, OO 144/441: "procedente vero primo gradus multos divisione, in repugnantiam denique provenitur praesertim quum mundi materia ob imbecillitatem nequeat ita invicem formas conciliare, ut mundus ille superior in seipso concilat. Quo factum est ut Deus materiam dimensione protenderet, ut repugnaturas inter se formas hospitii diversis exciperet." On quantity and its relation to matter see also Kristeller (1943) 41–42.

⁴⁵ *Theologia* V, 4: I, 178.

⁴⁶ *Theologia* V, 4: I, 178: "Itaque materia quae prius sub aquae frigore latuerat, iam sub aeris calore eadem diletescit. Vides autem unam omnes vicissim induit formas, dum et ascendit rarefactione et densitate descendit."

properly speaking, one can't say that she mimics anything for that would suppose a certain intention, a project, a minimum of consciousness. She (is) pure mimicry. Which is always the case for inferior species, of course. Needed to define essences, her function requires that she herself have no definition. Neither will she have any distinct appearance. Invisible, therefore.⁴⁷

In the list of the meanings of matter in Ficino mentioned above, the qualities or rather metaphorical ascriptions all refer to a matter that lacks form or shape, a definite boundary. This, in turn, points to the extent to which physical assumptions about the shape of the universe refer to a gendered sub-structure. With the evidence presented so far, we may conclude that matter in Ficino clearly occupies the lowest rank on the scale of being. However, in contrast to Plotinus, Ficino's approach differs in at least one respect. In Plotinus matter and form do not mingle at all, and therefore the participation of matter in form is a mere (deceptive) appearance. For Plotinus, matter remains "a corpse adorned."⁴⁸ According to Ficino, instead, form is united with matter throughout the entire creation (see below).

Bodies and Souls: Matter and Form in Ficino's Psychology

The following section will consider what can be learned about the function and relationship between matter and form by examining Ficino's concept of the human soul, certainly his most important concern. In a famous passage from the *Theologia platonica*, Ficino describes soul as the bond or knot that holds the entire universe together:

Under God everything in creation is each some entity in itself, but soul is simultaneously in all things. In herself she possesses the images of things divine from which she depends, and the reasons and models of lower things which in a way she also produces. As the middle of all, she possesses the power of all; and, if this is so, she passes into all. As the true connecting link of all in the world, she does not abandon

⁴⁷ Irigaray (1985) 307.

⁴⁸ *Enneads* II, 4, 5; see O'Brien (1996) 184; Armstrong (1940) 95 for references.

others when she goes forth into some one individual thing; but, while she preserves all she goes forth into individuals. Justly we are entitled to call her, therefore, the centre of nature, the universal mean, the chain or succession of the world, the face of all, the knot and bond of the universe.⁴⁹

In this case, soul not only functions as the mediating agency in the centre of creation, but may even be said to produce *lower* things. For the lowest manifestation of form, the qualities, the contact with the material world has disastrous consequences: matter, which is in itself motionless and entirely passive, is moved by the qualities. Once they become immersed into the corporeal world, the qualities lose in power and become the potentially inefficient tools of the soul.⁵⁰

Ficino says that these “instruments of the soul” become crippled as they get immersed in matter, plunged as they are like the souls of the deceased into the river Lethe. By extension, matter dilutes the powers of the concentrated principles.⁵¹ That embodied qualities become “lame” points

⁴⁹ Trans. Allen (1987) 399; *Theologia* III, 2: I, 141–142: “Reliqua enim sub Deo unum quidam in se singula sunt, haec omnia simul. Imagines in se possidet divinorum, a quibus ipsa dependet inferiorum rationes et exemplaria, quae quodammodo et ipsa producit. Et cum media omnium sit, Vires possidet omnium. [Quod] si ita est, transit in omnia. Et quia ipsa vera est universorum connexio, dum in alia migrat, non deserit alia, sed migrat in singula, ac semper cuncta conservat, ut merito dici possit centrum naturae, universorum medium, mundi series, vultus omnium nodusque et copula mundi.” On soul producing bodies, see *Theologia* VI, 1: I, 271.

⁵⁰ Collins (1974) 21: “Each level in the hierarchy of the universe is related to its superior as moved to mover; thus, each level is superior in efficacious power to the one below it. The hierarchy of the universe consists of various grades of power, and power is identified with unity. This framework within which Ficino’s whole discussion proceeds is taken from Proclus. Also, Ficino insists that efficacious power belongs only to the incorporeal; the corporeal is completely impotent because of its divisibility. He argues that quality is perishable because it is divided in the body and because it belongs to a substance by which it cannot be abandoned. He places the soul between mind which is completely stable and quality which is completely unstable, and concludes that the soul is stable, but mobile in operation. These themes are to be found in Proclus’ *Elements of Theology*.”

⁵¹ *Theologia* I, 3: I, 51: “Qualitas autem est proxima quantitati. Itaque non est omnino sufficiens qualitas ad extrinsecam actionem. Si ergo claudicat ad agendum, a substantia superiore dirigitur, quae omnino sit potens. Merito qualitas claudicat, quoniam eo ipso momento quo nascitur spargitur per materiae latitudinem profunditatemque, et quasi Letho flumine mergitur. Quo fit ut, antequam ipsa agat quicquam, a materia

to the dilemma of the extended world in general: unlike spiritual qualities, material bodies cannot be compressed into narrow spaces, yet precisely this high concentration of formal qualities is a prerequisite for the efficacy of a principle.⁵² (See also chapter five.) Through its very passivity, matter is capable of resisting form.⁵³ Hence, the relationship between form and matter in Ficino is obviously more reciprocal and dialectical than might have appeared so far.⁵⁴ Moreover, as the hypostases or hierarchies of being do not exist in isolation from each other, the precarious relationship between matter and quality is not only characteristic of the lowest echelon of the hierarchy of being, but also affects soul, the next higher hypostasis. Located, as it is, in the centre of the hierarchy of being, soul is half spiritual and half material. Its task is to enter and shape the physical world. In fulfilling this

quasi inficente quodammodo superetur. Numquam ergo vis eius vincit per se materiam. Idcirco numquam per se movebit, nisi a superiore causa roboretur, roboratur profecto et ducitur a vita quadam, quae etiam ex luto non vivente quando ranae generantur et muscae, vitam gignit ac senum, ex una deformique materia varios speciosissimosque procreat flores, per varia et speciosissima semina, quae cum saepe non inveniuntur, in fimo, necessario in ipsa vita sunt." See Macrobius (1994) I, 11–12: 45–51.

⁵² On this, see also *Theologia* I, 2: I, 40–41, where Ficino describes the vexed situation of the body: "Idem quoque ex eo patet, quod ad actionis cuiusque naturalis perfectionem tria potissimum exiguntur. Primum, ut agens in seipso potentissimum sit. Secundum, ut ad motum promptissimum. Tertium, ut facile penetret patiens, atque ipsum patiens agentis proxime uniatur. His omnibus moles corporis impedimento esse videtur. Primum, quia cum in partes plurimas porrigatur, virtus agens in ea dispersa est, et a seipsa distans et distracta quam plurimum. Virtus vero sicut unione augetur, ita dispersione minuitur. Idcirco siccitas vim tum caloris tum frigoris auget, quia unit; humiditas vero debilitat, quia dispergit. Deinde, quo maius corpus est, eo secundum seipsum pigrius [est] ineptiusque motum. Igitur quanto magis augetur corpus, tanto magis retardat motum ac differt diutius actionem [...]. Itaque distantia partium virtutem agendi debilitat, molis amplitudo retardat motum, crassitudo penetrationem corporeum impedit. Et, quod deterius est, si distractas corporis alicuius partes natura coarctet ad augendam ex unione virtutem, interim crassius corpus ipsum evadit et ineptius ad ingressum. Ac si rarefaciat ipsum ad acquirendum motus penetrationisque facilitatem, statim virtus agendi dispergitur. Quapropter cum tres esse debeant perfectae actionis conditiones, corpus aut habet tres alias illis adversas, aut unam illarum accipiendo, non accipit aliam; Oporteret quippe brevitatem simul habere, levitatem, et raritatem. Quae quidem tria ad incorporalem quendam habitum corpus ipsum reducant, ut omnis agendi virtus sit ad naturam incorpoream referenda."

⁵³ On matter as the resistant principle that existed before the creation of the cosmos by the demiurge see *Timaeus* 30A; 48A; 53B; 56C; Corrigan (1996) 10–11.

⁵⁴ On this, see also Proclus (1963) §80: 76–77.

duty, the soul moves downward from the celestial spheres to the centre of the universe. Here it may be arrested against its will by the physical attractions of the body. In order to explain how souls and bodies may communicate, Ficino introduces the concept of *spiritus*. This term was widely used in contemporary medical discourses to account for what we would call today psycho-physical phenomena. *Spiritus* is an intermediary substance, a kind of pure and clean envelope or robe (*purum tegumentum*). This fabric is less bright and clear than the soul, but more transparent than the body.⁵⁵ According to Ficino, the soul has the capacity to imprint the forms (it receives from *mens*) “without difficulty” into this ethereal body. Once activated by soul, the *spiritus* turns into a fine vapour originating from the thinnest blood and corporeal heat. The *spiritus* spreads from the heart to all parts of the body. In this case, *spiritus* functions like a mirror that communicates the powers of the soul to the body, transforming “a lifeless substance into the form of our lives.” The *spiritus* thus has a vital function in explaining the embodiment of souls.⁵⁶ (See also chapter five.)

In the Neoplatonic tradition, this embodiment of the soul is described in terms of reflection in a mirror. In most instances, Ficino describes the descent of soul into the corporeal world as a disastrous event that imprisons a spiritual being into a body and thus diverts soul from its

⁵⁵ The paradoxical quality of *spiritus* is well expressed in the *De vita* III, 3: 257, it is “quasi non corpus et quasi iam anima” and “excelentior corpus, quasi non corpus” (253).

⁵⁶ *De amore* VI 9: 225 and V 6: 205; *De vita* III, 22: 368: “intellige tum corporum coelestium dotes in corpora nostra venire per spiritum nostrum rite paratum [...]” Then at III, 1: 247: “redigitur per spiritum nostrum ad vitae nostrae formam.” In other places, Ficino identifies this vehicle of the soul with complexion, which he calls the fifth constituent of a body: the ingredient of a body which is extremely susceptible to the messages and commandments of the stars; *complexio* is the preparation or right disposition of the inanimate body for the reception of soul which is transmitted by celestial music, to which the body answers like resonant guitars do. See also *De lumine* chapt. 9, OO 979–980; Matton (1993) 143, with references: “À l’âme du monde correspond donc un esprit du monde, au moyen du quel elle communique partout la vie au corps du monde. Comme le voulait Porphyre, cet esprit du monde est directement produit par l’âme du monde sous forme d’un halo lumineux, qui, explique Ficin, est formée de la lumière incorporelle et du diaphane, son véhicule. L’esprit du monde précède ainsi les quatre éléments, que l’âme du monde produit à partir de lui; c’est pourquoi il constitue bien une quinte essence.” On the topic in general, see Walker (1958) *passim*.

proper goal, which is intellectual contemplation.⁵⁷ In ideas reminiscent of Plotinus, the soul's shaping of material bodies is here viewed as a failure to contemplate the real metaphysical being, a failure that is due to the soul's auto-erotic activity.⁵⁸ Plotinus had maintained that anything that may be subsumed under the category of soul in the broadest sense has self-reflection as a primary activity; action, on the other hand, is an incidental consequence of, or an inferior substitute for contemplation.⁵⁹ The failure of soul thus consists in directing its energies towards the lower part of creation; instead of contemplating the real forms, it turns to the realm of shadows and is deceived by mere reflections. Ficino says: "Only our soul, I say, is so captivated by the charms of corporeal beauty that it neglects its own beauty, and forgetting itself, runs after the beauty of the body, which is a mere shadow of its own beauty."⁶⁰ Soul gets anxious, stupefied and eventually fails, as reason gives way to the senses. Leading a laborious life, it is immersed and imprisoned in matter, where it assumes a "perverse figure." In this fallen state, soul is like a man hanging by his feet, his head pointing towards the ground.⁶¹

⁵⁷ See Ficino's *Argumentum in Platoniam theologiam*, OO 713, which quotes Virgil, "Anima, tenebroso corporis huius carcere circumsepta mirabile veritatis lumen et vera quae mirifice in illo refulgent minime percipit, quia minimam ad illud habet proportionem." Also in Ficino (1993) 86; Allen (1984) chapt. 7.

⁵⁸ On Ficino and contemplation, see Allen (1984) chaps. 4 and 5.

⁵⁹ *Enneads* II, 3, 8 and 9; Armstrong (1940) 93–94 comments: "For Aristotle, on the contrary, contemplation does not occur till we reach the human soul at its highest. Even the lowest soul for Plotinus is not Aristotelian because it is not truly or solely immanent. Soul is not the form of body."

⁶⁰ Trans. Ficino (1985) 140–141; *De amore*, VI, 17: 235: "anima inquam, sola ita corporalis formae blanditiis delinitur ut propriam posthabeat spetiem, corporis vero formam, quae suae umbra est, sui ipsius oblita sectetur."

⁶¹ *In Timaeum* chapt. 42, OO 462: "Circuitum intelligentiae impediri ait, rationis vero circuitum distrahi, duabus praecipue rationibus, tum quia prius, quam adultum sit corpus, anima tota in fabrica corporis occupatur: tum quia quae extrinsecus sensus movent, in teneriori aetate offendunt vehementius, & propter novitatem rerum animam circa corpora reddunt admirabundam. His ergo de causis, diu & intelligentia a divino vacat officio, & rationalis ipse discursus circa inferioribus distractus, quasi demens, turbatur et fallitus. Sic igitur totus animus perversam figuram subit, vitamque ducit laboriosam, dum ratio cedit sensibus, perinde ac si quis caput pro pedibus humi figat, pedes vero pro capite tollat in altum." See also Macrobius (1994) I, 12: 47–52. The image of the hanged man is from the *Timaeus*; see also *Phaedo* 81B.

The Descent of Soul: Narcissus

Accordingly, Ficino links this deviant movement of the soul towards deceptive images in bodies to the myth of Narcissus. This myth will turn out to be crucial for an understanding of the role of matter in Ficino's metaphysics as well as in his cosmology.

Hence the tragic fate of Narcissus, which Orpheus records. Hence the pitiable calamity of men. Narcissus, *who is obviously young*, that is, the soul of rash and inexperienced man. *Does not look at his own face*, that is, does not notice its own substance and character at all. *But admires the reflection of it in the water and tries to embrace that*; that is, the soul admires in the body, which is unstable and in flux, like water, a beauty which is the shadow of the soul itself. *He abandons his own beauty, but he never reaches the reflection*. That is, the soul, in pursuing the body, neglects itself but finds no gratification in its use of the body. For it does not really desire the body itself; rather seduced, like Narcissus, by corporeal beauty, which is an image of its own beauty, it desires its own beauty. And since it never notices the fact that, while it is desiring one thing, it is pursuing another, it never satisfies its desire. For this reason, *melted into tears, he is destroyed*; that is, when soul is located outside itself, in this way, and has sunken into the body, it is racked by terrible passions and, stained by the filths of the body, it dies, as it were, since it now seems to be a body rather than a soul.⁶²

⁶² Trans. Jayne (1985) 140–142; *De amore*, VI, 17: 235: “Hinc crudelissimum illud apud Orpheum Narcissi fatum. Hinc hominum miseranda calamitas. *Narcissus quidem adolescens*, id est, temerarii et imperiti hominis animus. *Sui vultum non aspicit*, propriam sui substantiam et virtutem nequaquam animadvertit. *Sed eius umbram in aqua prosequitur et amplecti conatur*, id est, pulchritudinem in fragili corpore et instar aquae fluenti, quae ipsius animi umbra est, ammiratur. *Suam quidem figuram deserit. Umbram numquam assequitur*. Quoniam animus corpus sectando se negligit et usu corporis non impletur. Non enim ipsum revera appetit corpus sed sui ipsius spetiem a corporali forma, quae spetiei suae imago est, illectus, quemadmodum Narcissus, affectat. Cumque id minime advertat, dum aliud quidem cupit, aliud sequitur, desiderium suum explere non potest. *Ideo in lacrimas resolutus consumitur*, id est, animus ita extra se positus et delap-

Amazingly to the modern reader, Ficino (or rather the Orphic source he comments on) maintains that Narcissus does not look at his *own* face, but sees something different in the unstable reflection of the water — a beauty that is only a shadow. Narcissus is thus not an emblem for conscious self-love, but rather an allegory for soul that falls victim to the deceiving powers of a mirror.⁶³ The surface in the pond is tied to a negative description of the physical world and the mirror image in the pond serves as an allegory for soul's calamitous descent into body. Ficino's reading was not uncommon, for the myth of Narcissus was highly popular throughout Antiquity and during the Middle Ages when it was linked to the soul's descent into the material world.⁶⁴ Obviously, Ficino's interpretation marks a significant alteration to the original account. According to Ovid, Narcissus was chastised by Eros for his refusal to participate in the sexual life appropriate to free Greek men by sharing his body with men and women alike.⁶⁵ The punishment imposed on the beautiful youth, solicited by a rejected lover — the nymph Echo — consists in his falling in love with his own image, a reflection he continues to worship in Hades even after his death.

Plotinus had already related this story to an entirely different context, namely to the soul's failure to contemplate the higher world, which resulted in its getting lost in the shadowy and totally illusory world of matter:

When he sees the beauty in bodies he must not run after them; we must know that they are images, traces, shadows, and hurry away to that which they image. For if a man runs to the image and wants to seize it as if it was the reality (like a beautiful reflection playing on the water, which some story somewhere, I think, said riddlingly a man wanted to catch

sus, in corpus pernitiosis perturbationibus cruciatur corporisque infectus sordibus quasi moritur, cum iam corpus esse potius quam animus videatur." Ficino here refers to *Orphica fragmenta*, 315.

⁶³ Vinge (1967) 127–129 comments that (as in other medieval interpretations) Narcissus lacks self-knowledge; his affection is not self love but love for a shadow. See for instance the *Roman de la rose* verses 2,0876–78 and Vinge (1967) 81–82. for references.

⁶⁴ On the myth of Narcissus in Classical Antiquity see Frontisi-Ducroux (1997) 200–241.

⁶⁵ Frontisi-Ducroux (1997) 240: "Le mythe qui fait mourir Narcisse met en scène l'erreur du jeune homme qui ignore l'indispensable détour par autrui que le mâle doit accomplir pour devenir lui-même, pour devenir sujet."

and sank down into the stream and disappeared) then this man who clings to beautiful bodies and will not let them go, will, like the man in the story, but in soul, not in body, sink down into the dark depths where intellect has no delight, and stay blind in Hades, consorting with shadows there and here.⁶⁶

The original meaning of the Ovidian myth is thus significantly altered. Plotinus remodels the story of Narcissus into an allegory of the worldly temptations of the soul that distract it from its proper goal, contemplation of the eternal forms. Narcissus' fate is sealed by his mistaken dedication to the embodied and treacherous world of corporeal beings, shadows of the higher truths. His transgression consists in ignoring or forgetting the origin of the reflection in the water, namely that the soul is the cause of the physical shadow.⁶⁷ According to Plotinus, it was Narcissus' own *fault*, not his *punishment* that led to his drowning in the pond. His fate thus becomes an allegory for the soul which ceases to contemplate the hierarchy of being and falls in love with the base images of its own making.⁶⁸ In a movement that is central to his philosophy, Plotinus eclipses the idea that the descent of soul into the corporeal world is a creative and positive act (as opposed to a dramatic event). Ironically, by using the story of Narcissus to illustrate the descent of soul into the world, Plotinus opens the door for an entirely different understanding of the myth: by gazing at the reflecting surface, Narcissus imprints his form onto matter and hence shapes or even *creates* the physical world. The Plotinian version of the Narcissus story certainly appealed to Ficino for its moralising content, but yet he inserted it into a different context. Whereas Plotinus had assumed that soul and body never enter into a unity, matter being a mere

⁶⁶ Trans. Plotinus (1966–1988) I: 257; *Enneads*, I, 6, 8.

⁶⁷ Plotinus, *Enneads*, V, 8, 2. See Hadot (1976) 99: "Si Narcisse entent pour une réalité substantielle ce qui n'est qu'un reflet, c'est qu'il ignore la relation entre ce reflet et lui-même. Il ne comprend pas qu'il est lui-même la cause de ce ombre."

⁶⁸ Plotinus, *Enneads*, I, 6, 8; Hadot (1976) 107 comments: "Narcisse se laisse hypnotiser par une réalité partielle et imparfaite au lieu de déployer son regard vers le vaste horizon du tout. Pour Plotin, aussi Narcisse est un contempteur d'Eros, ou plus exactement il se laisse fasciner par la magie de l'Eros inférieur." See *Enneads* IV, 4, 40; Frontisi-Ducroux (1997) 222–224: "L'âme est coupable de restreindre sa vision elle-même en oubliant qu'elle n'est que parcelle et reflet de la totalité divine."

reflection and product of the lowest parts of soul,⁶⁹ according to Ficino matter and soul do enter into a union of some kind.

This idea leads us to another important text, the *Corpus hermeticum* which Ficino translated. In it, Hermes recounts a story that is eerily reminiscent of the Narcissus myth when he describes how primordial man, still immortal and without a body, fell in love with his own image as reflected in nature. This love story began when primordial man saw the reflection of his own body in the water, whereupon “he desired to be united to it.” This desire was answered by nature who, after being united to primordial man, gave birth to ordinary man, who is half mortal and half immortal, composed of a soul and a body.⁷⁰ In this version the versatility of the Narcissus theme becomes obvious: according to the *Corpus hermeticum*, the reflection of the body of primordial man does not cause tragic destruction, but rather is a model for a creative process. This version of the story is different from Plotinus’ account in another crucial aspect: according to the *Corpus hermeticum*, nature or matter was already there, it pre-existed and hence was different from soul. Primordial man fell in love only with matter. By mingling with it, man shaped the already extant substance that desired a sexual union. In that respect, Ficino’s cosmology resembles the account of the *Corpus hermeticum*, rather than that of Plotinus. The idea that matter and form have to be united like the man and his image in a mirror or as a reflection in water is repeated in the *Picatrix*, which is perhaps the most important magical manual of the Middle Ages. Here, the union of matter and form appears in the context of the magical opus, where the mental disposition of the magus has to be brought in line with the material form he wants to influence.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Hadot (1976) 100–102; Plotinus, *Enneads*, I, 1, 12.

⁷⁰ *Pimander* I, 14, OO 1837–1839: “[natura] utpote qui humanae pulchritudinis speciem in aqua specularetur, eiusdemque admirationem quandam in terra conspiceret, ille praeterea consecutus similem sibi formam in seipso existentem, velut in aqua amavit eam, secumque congregi concupivit. Effectus e vestigio secutus est voluntatem, formamque carentem ratione progeniuit. Natura illud, in quod toto ferebatur amore, complexa, illi penitus sese implicuit, atque commiscuit, quandoquidem solus homo ex universis terrenis animantibus duplicis naturae censetur, mortalis quidem propter corpus, immortalis autem propter hominem ipsum substantialem, immortalis enim est.” On the *Corpus hermeticum* in general, see Copenhaver (1992).

⁷¹ See *Picatrix latinus* I, 4, 32: 14 : “Et erit opus quod queris quousque materia et forma erunt in unum coniuncte ut unitur figura hominis in speculo et aqua et sicut est

The version of the myth from the *Corpus hermeticum* uses a decidedly heterosexual metaphor to account for the relationships between bodies and souls. Male soul gets attracted by beautiful female matter and eventually falls for her, without recognizing her as his own image in the material world. This again marks a significant departure from the Ovidian version of the myth of Narcissus, who consciously perceives the image in the pond as his *own* reflection and eventually perishes in the activity of self-speculation. Ovid shows unequivocally that Narcissus is in love with the reflection he perceives as male, since it is his own image. The myth is thus set in a homoerotic context characteristic of the social and political situation in classical Greece.⁷² The later suppression of the homoerotic context of the Narcissus myth emphasizes the deceptive potential of the mirror.⁷³ Much later and closer to Ficino's cultural environment, Boccaccio recounts another heterosexual version of the myth that underscores this aspect of *deception* through, or transformation in, a mirror. According to Boccaccio, Narcissus misapprehends the sight of his face as that of a beautiful female, a nymph, in which case the reflection in the mirror implies the disfigurement of the sexual identity of the onlooker by the reflection of a mirror. Here the mirror is understood as an instrument that transforms the images it reflects.⁷⁴

unitas spiritus cum corpore." The Arab original version continues, *Picatrix German* 22 : "oder wie sich Gottsein und Menschsein in der Lehre der Christen vereinigen."

⁷² In Ovid's *Metamorphoses* III, 455, trans. Ovid (1955) 86, Narcissus cries out "Whoever you are, come out to me! Oh boy beyond compare, why do you elude me?" According to Hadot (1967) 93, Ovid is the only author in Classical Antiquity who suggests that Narcissus is not entirely deceived by the reflection in the water.

⁷³ I am conscious that the terms homoerotic and heterosexual are perhaps anachronistic; in the present context, they are used only to denote sexual relationships between males or between men and women and not the constitution of subjective identities (see also chapter seven).

⁷⁴ Boccaccio (1574) 131: "nel chiaro ed limpidoso fonte, del quale veggendo l'idea, e la imagine di se stesso che prima non havea mai piu veduto, et istimando quella essere una ninfa di quel fonte, tanto di lei si fieramente s'accese, che di se medesimo scordandosi, dopo lunghi lamenti ivi morì di disagio, et per compassione della ninfe fu cangiato in fiore che tiene il suo nome." On Boccaccio's reading of the Narcissus myth and of the role of Echo as an allegory of fame, see Vinge (1967) 102–103. For a brilliant analysis of Pausanias' heterosexual version of the story, which assumes that Narcissus had a twin sister who dies and is subsequently recovered by Narcissus when looking at his own face in a pond, in which the female becomes a "garçon manqué," see Frontisi-Ducroux (1997) 217–219.

Another story closely related to the Narcissus myth is that of the mirror of Dionysus. For our interests, it is worth noting that in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* the birth of Dionysus is immediately followed by the Narcissus episode. This god of matter also has a special relationship with distorting mirrors as well as with narcotics in general (and, last but not least, to matter).⁷⁵ Dionysus is one of the several illegitimate children of Zeus, born either of Rhea, Demeter, or Persephone. He is soon sequestered by the jealous Hera who diverts the child's attention by using various toys (including a mirror) and eventually has him torn to pieces by the Titans, who cook and devour the god. Athena, however, saves the child's heart and this allows Dionysus to be reborn from Zeus and Semele.⁷⁶ The Titans are then thrown into Tartarus and from their ashes the mortal humans are born, who thus have in themselves a part of the divine Dionysus. Already in Antiquity Herodotus and Plutarch pointed out that this myth was linked to that of the Egyptian god Osiris.⁷⁷

In Antiquity, convex mirrors were used in the cult of Dionysius in order to visualize the disfigurement of the child god by the Titans. The initiates into the mysteries of Dionysus had to look at the distorting reflection that appeared in the mirror. But that is not all: Proclus tells us that, after having looked into a mirror fabricated by Hephaestus, Dionysius started to reform himself and proceeded to create the entire universe. According to Proclus, Dionysus allows human souls to look at themselves in his mirror; after having seen their own image they experience an ardent desire to descend into the created universe.⁷⁸ As in Plotinus' version of the Narcissus story, the mirror serves as a symbol of the disorder that befalls souls after they become fascinated by their own reflection. The function of the mirror in the Dionysus story parallels the Narcissistic glance in the water. Olympiodorus even paral-

⁷⁵ The intoxicating powers attributed to Dionysus link him to the myth of Narcissus, as the Narcissa is a narcotic drug. On this aspect see Hadot (1976) 82–83 and 89–90.

⁷⁶ On Ficino's account of the birth of Dionysius, see Allen (1981) 46–47.

⁷⁷ On this story, see Nonnus, *Dionysiaca* VI, 172–173; Detienne (1977) *passim*; Frontisi-Ducroux (1997) 186–190; Pépin (1970) 305–306 gives a good summary of the story and its subsequent interpretations.

⁷⁸ Proclus in *Timaeum* 33B and 163F attributes this story to the Orphics; Macchiorio (1930) 88–90 and 93; Pépin (1976) 202. A further important source is *Enneads* IV, 3 12; see Guthrie (1952) 122–123; Frontisi-Ducroux (1997) 119–120 for a reference to Plutarch according to whom the mirror is a tool which, by inducing self-reflection, is conducive to a reform of the self and consequently to a restoration of order.

lels the two stories by maintaining that soul is attracted by a mirror image of its own and loses itself therein; the soul is subsequently devoured like Dionysus, not by the Titans but by its own passions.⁷⁹

The story of the disfigurement of Dionysus is not only reminiscent of the myths of creation in the Hermetic *Pimander* and of Plato's Demiurge, but also illustrates how mirrors were thought to produce images: first, the reflecting surfaces receive the forms; then, in a metamorphosis from passive into active, they transform the received images and give them forth again. In this context, the Dionysian mirror functions as a highly ambiguous metaphor for distortion and disfigurement as well as for the soul's desire to descend into the corporeal world. This metaphorical construction fulfilled a crucial role in Neoplatonic cosmologies. Pépin goes even so far as to maintain that Plotinus' entire theory of matter as a reflection of soul refers to the Dionysian mirror.⁸⁰ Ficino was familiar with at least some of these ideas and the relevant passages in Plotinus, and was also aware that Dionysus features in Greek mythology as the god of matter and generation.⁸¹

What is common to all of these stories is the idea that mirror reflections are identified as instrumental for self-cognition as well as self-deception, and that the mirror has the capacity to change the active gaze into a passive object that is victimised by its own glance. According to Ovid, Narcissus' gaze transforms him into a motionless statue: "Spellbound by his own self, he remained [by the pond] motionless, with a fixed gaze, like a statue carved from Parian marble."⁸² Let me emphasize that the story of a creative Narcissistic glance, as will become clearer soon, also entails a confusion between the concepts of reflection and of imprint. Within this Neoplatonic context,

⁷⁹ Hadot (1976) 102; with references.

⁸⁰ Pépin (1970) 315–316 says that according to Plotinus (*Enneads* IV, 3, 12–14) the soul is never severed from its origin and emits only images (*eidola*) which are reflected on matter (*Enneads* I 12, 21–31). The mirror as a base that repels the images instead of absorbing them becomes the central metaphor for matter in Plotinus (Pépin, 1970, 318): "les multiples développements de Plotin sur la matière comme miroir laissent supposer que c'est le cas du miroir de Dionysios."

⁸¹ *Enneads* IV 3, 12; In *Phaedrum* in Ficino (1981) 134–135: "Nymphae sunt numina, quae generationi praesunt. Ideo dicuntur aquas inhabitare vel sylvas quoniam generatio. Et per humorem expletur et descendit ad sylvam, id est, materiam primam. Dionysus his est praeaeffectus. Est enim, Deus generationi regenerationisque praesidens. Ideo forte bis natum fingitur huic conveniunt hymni."

⁸² Trans. Ovid (1955) 85; *Metamorphoses* III, 417–418.

Ficino was able to apply the myth of Narcissus to a wide range of phenomena: primordial man may recognize his shadow in nature just as humans may recognize themselves, their bodies, or other products of their skill in their debased mirror images.

This assumption links the myth of Narcissus to the myth of Pygmalion, another story recounted in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Here the sculptor falls in love with one of his statues which eventually becomes alive by divine intervention. The tale of Pygmalion, set by Ovid in a characteristic context of artistry and misogyny that must have been highly attractive to Renaissance minds, underscores again the idea that the soul's shaping of the material world ultimately relies on a Narcissistic strategy of self-fashioning, that is, in the recognition of one's own beauty in a material mirror.⁸³ Ficino says:

If each of us, essentially, is that which is greatest within us, which always remains the same and by which we understand ourselves, then certainly the soul is the man himself and the body but his shadow. Whatever wretch is so deluded as to think that the shadow of man is man, like Narcissus is dissolved into tears.⁸⁴

Within the Neoplatonic discourse, the stories of Narcissus and Pygmalion, who fell in love with an image of their own making, point to the dangers the physical world poses to unsuspecting souls, to a word in which the hierarchy of active subject (soul) and passive object (matter) becomes inverted. This erosion of authority may prove perilous, for soul runs the risk of becoming entirely immersed in body, of thus being killed like Narcissus by a deceptive image. This implies that matter has significant and potentially threatening power over soul. From the perspective of the Neoplatonists, this situation gives rise to anxieties about the potential vindictiveness of matter, which might take revenge for form's attempt to vanquish it entirely. The potential vulnerability of soul leads to anxieties about infiltration, penetration, and contamination, and to fears of being transformed from agent into recipient, from active into passive, from male

⁸³ On Pygmalion, see Ovid, *Metamorphoses* X, 240–242; a special irony lies in the fact that according to Ovid the Propoetides, the whorish women of Pygmalion's home town, are eventually turned into stone (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* X, 238–242).

⁸⁴ *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino* I, 54, Letter 12 (August 1st 1473).

into female. The fear about soul's boundaries thus harks back to the violence implicit in the Narcissistic act of creation that left no room for otherness or for the world. Ironically, it is precisely this negation that is decisive for the fate of Narcissus. According to Ficino's readings he drowns in the pond of matter *because* he fails to acknowledge the reflection in the water as his own image. In the end, this is a male strategy of self-fashioning, which not only entails a fantasy of absolute power intrinsic to that process, but at the same time betrays a deep anxiety that female matter actually will *not* be fully dominated.⁸⁵ Obviously the erotic, potentially uncontrollable involvement of soul with matter deeply worried Ficino, yet, paradoxically, he developed a cosmology that put particular emphasis on the domination of matter by soul by transferring the model of the Narcissistic and creative gaze to the story of divine Creation.

*Ficino's Narcissistic Account of Divine Creation:
Matter, Shadow, Reflection*

The idea of a Narcissistic gaze that orders or even creates the world is rooted in one of the most fascinating (in the literal sense of the word) accounts of cosmogenesis to be found in Ficino. A crucial passage in this context is *Theologia platonica*, XVII, chapter 2, which promises to explain the ideas of the two last Platonic academies about soul.⁸⁶ Ficino sets out by stating that, according to

⁸⁵ These remarks are indebted to Stanley Cavell's essay on the relationship between Othello and Desdemona in Shakespeare in Cavell (1987) 125–142. One may well wonder why I do not mention the fate of Echo. After all, Narcissus is punished because he refuses the Nymph's love, which emphasizes his reckless attitude towards the other humans, the embodied world. I was deliberately reluctant to include Echo here, for several reasons (a) the gendered relationship between Narcissus and Echo again is very complex; I believe that Ovid mainly wanted to emphasize the parallelism between the voice that is thrown back by Echo on the one hand and the image that is reflected in the pond on the other (a similar parallelism between voice and image is to be found in Aristotle, *De anima* 419ab; and (b) because my focus here is on the Narcissus story in the broader context of the *Corpus hermeticum* and in Plotinus, and (c) because Echo is not mentioned in Ficino's account of the Narcissus story.

⁸⁶ *Theologia* XVII, 2: III, 149–151: "Plato in Parmenide [137D] quidem Deum vocat infinitum, in Philebo [16D–23C] vero nominat terminum. Infinitum scilicet, quia nulum aliunde accipit terminum, terminum autem, quia formis quasi mensuris passim distributis omnia terminat. Hinc Platonici disputant, quatenus Deus tanquam infinitus omnem a se excludit terminum, eatenus ferme ex eo quasi umbram pendere po-

Plato, God is both infinite (*Parmenides* 137D) and limit (*Philebus* 16D–23C). He is infinite because he does not accept limits from anything else and he is limit because he determines (defines) all beings by means of the forms or measures which he imposes on them. Apart from this paradoxical God, there exists a certain indefinite and formless potency, which is, *as it were*, a shadow in need of being limited. It is crucial to note that Ficino explicitly identifies this shadow with “most common matter.” When God looks at this shadow/matter it turns into a mirror, reflecting the image of the creator. Hence, matter is a mere (yet primordial) shadow, something without real existence that God converts into a mirror reflecting his own image. Matter is created and at the same time shaped by a divine glance. By begetting matter in this way, the supreme creator does not part with anything, does not lose or even diminish

tentiam quamdam quasi materialem termini cuiuslibet indigam informemque natura sua et, ut ita loquar, indefinitam. At vero quatenus Deus tamquam terminus umbram suam respicit tamquam speculum, eatenus in umbra iam velut imaginem resultare infinitatemque ipsam, id est materiam communissimam, formis ordinatissime terminari. Si in Deo semper est universi faciendi potestas, merito semper extra Deum universi, ut ita loquar, fiendi [est] potentia. Non enim facere ille semper omnia posset, ut opinantur, nisi semper fieri omnia possent. Potentiam eiusmodi materiam communissimam, id est vim formarum omnium aequaliter receptricem nominant, quae natura sua neque ad ipsum esse vergat, alioquin superno formatore non indigeret, neque ad non esse, alioquin formatori non obediret, sed ad esse pariter atque non esse; item ad formas tales aut tales quasi medium quoddam aequae se habeat atque a formatore determinetur. Sit quoque in omnibus una, non numero, non specie, non genere, sed analogia et proportionem quadam potius, scilicet quoniam ab uno dependet atque unius Dei infinitatem, utcumque potest, modo quadam umbratili repraesentat, quemadmodum et actus quodammodo unus in omnibus nominatur, quoniam ab uno terminatore et unius terminationem imaginarie refert. Atque actus huiusmodi potentiam superat, propterea quod a Deo manat non fugiente ulterius, sed iam respiciente materiam. Huiusmodi potentia in spiritibus nonnihil corporis habere videtur, siquidem in mentibus habet corporum rationes, in animabus insuper motiones, in utrisque formabilem facultatem. Rursus in corporibus incorporei nonnihil videtur habere, quia et dum antecedit quantitatem, indivisibilis apparet, et semper vires quasdam quodammodo incorporeas sustinet. Ex hac infinitate, ex hoc termino, id est potentia receptrice formabilique atque actu formali constare sub Deo omnia putant.” On the origins of this doctrine in Plotinus, see *Enneads*, II, 4, 5 and Armstrong (1940) 66–68; see also *Enneads*, IV, 3, 8; V, 5, 11; VI, 5, 4 and 11. For a discussion of this passage from a completely different perspective, see Collins (1974) 42–46 and 61–63. On the doctrine of limit and infinite in Platonism, see Ficino (1975) bk. 2: 384–425; Allen (1989) 61–64; see also Proclus (1963) § 89–96: 82–87.

his integrity: he only gazes at his own image.⁸⁷ Irigaray describes the implications of this Platonic account of parthenogenesis:

Being has nothing that predates it, nor anything ahead that it should aim for. Everything is already (in) Him. [...] Flooding the universe with the seeds he scatters everywhere. [...] Thus, every “being” [...] can only try to mimic God, copy him more or less well, for there is no other perfection to rely on. [...] There is nothing outside or even behind, that is not subject to his designs. Everything is enclosed in a super-celestial gaze.⁸⁸

In accordance with this, Ficino maintains that matter, after being shaped by the divine glance, represents divine unity according to its own diminished capacity, in a “shadowy way.” Thus, matter is God’s first creation, but that is not all: as God could have created the universe at any given time, matter has always existed potentially, as the withheld divine gaze, so to speak. Ficino then goes on to say that matter has no definite characteristics whatsoever: it is neutral and malleable and can assume any given form. As universal potentiality, matter is neither inclined towards being (because then it would not need a higher forming power), nor towards non-being (because then it would not obey the divine craftsman). The precarious relationship we have already detected between soul and matter is transferred onto the relationship of God to his shadow: disobedient matter poses an alarming threat to divine omnipotence.⁸⁹ The idea that matter could become such an obstacle to the divine is a direct result of the Narcissism involved in the process of creation, which always conveys a solipsist fantasy of absolute power that does not tolerate any opposition.

The evidence of the *Theologia platonica* is corroborated by Ficino’s *Philebus* commentary in which the act of creation is again described as a Narcissistic process in which God is mirrored in a shadow, matter, or otherness.⁹⁰

⁸⁷ Actually, Ficino is in dire need here of stressing that nothing is given away, as the contrary is true in his theories of vision: see *infra*.

⁸⁸ Irigaray (1985) 329.

⁸⁹ See Plotinus, *Enneads*, II, 9, 3.

⁹⁰ Ficino (1975) 389: “Ideo communis materies velut umbra quaedam fugientem sequitur deum. Forma vero in materia velut in speculo ex quodam benefico divini vultus aspectu resultat.” See also Ficino (1975) 417: “Therefore universal matter, like some shadow,

Again, Irigaray's remarks on the consequences of such parthenogenetic acts of creation are to the point:

the mother's relation to the specular is an issue that cannot be raised. [...] The father does not accept [...] that everything has already been started by resemblance, for he wills himself eternally self-identical. He prefers to be (his) absolute mirror, reflect (himself) in(de)initely. [...] As a result, you will never see the Father appear, come into life, into existence. The father is, has always been, pure speculation.⁹¹

The way Ficino uses the concepts of reflection and shadow interchangeably may seem quite awkward to the modern reader. The confusion between the two ideas dates back to classical Greece and Rome. In his version of the Narcissus story, Ovid for instance identifies mirror reflections and shadows, a feature persistent in later European literature.⁹²

Poor foolish boy [...] the thing you are seeing does not exist. [...] What you see is the shadow cast by your reflection; in itself it is nothing. It comes with you, and lasts while you are there; it will go when you go if go you can.⁹³

In spite of Plato's attempts to distinguish the two different though closely related concepts of shadow and mirror image, the Platonic tradition nevertheless has a significant tendency to blur the two notions with one another. Plato also uses the metaphors of shadow and mirror to denote the process in which matter is formed (imprinted) and thus becomes a debased imitation of the original form.⁹⁴ Ficino writes for example that "the light of the sun in water is a kind of shadow."⁹⁵ The idea that the shadow is a sub-

follows after God who is fleeing away. But the form in matter, as in a mirror, results from a certain beneficent glance of the divine countenance."

⁹¹ Irigaray (1985) 308.

⁹² Vinge (1967) 12 and n. 33–35

⁹³ Trans. Ovid (1955) 85; *Metamorphoses* III, 343–344; and at III 417: "He fell in love with an unsubstantial hope, mistaking a mere shadow for a real body."

⁹⁴ Plato, *Republic* 510A; *Sophist* 266C; Frontisi-Ducroux (1997) 171–173.

⁹⁵ *De amore*, VI, 17: I, 234: "Lumen preterea Solis in aqua umbra quaedam est."

category of reflection, that is, a reflection that never met a mirror is, however, Aristotelian in origin.⁹⁶ Plutarch maintains that all creative acts include the distortion of the original form that is imprinted on matter; just as mirrors render side-inverted images, any other material adds a difference, and thereby contaminates the original.

For pure design cannot be seen by us, and when it is made manifest in another guise and through another medium, it becomes contaminated with the nature of this medium. Wax, for example, and gold and silver I leave out of account as well as other kinds of material, which, when moulded, take on the particular form of the likeness which is being modelled; and yet each one of them adds to the thing portrayed a distinguishing characteristic which comes from its own substance; and so also the numberless distortions seen in mirrors both plane and concave and convex.⁹⁷

The confusion between mirror reflection, shadow, and imprint structures the entire complex of ideas involved in the notion of a creative and Narcissistic look at matter. The gaze, a kind of emission, as will soon become clearer, has the power to shape and to act upon the world; conversely, a shadow still carries and embodies the powers, the virtues, of the object it represents — much to the detriment of Narcissus who is killed by his own beautiful image, the product of a deceptive mirror.

Ficino's metaphorical use of mirrors is not restricted to his *Theologia platonica* or to the *Philebus* commentary. In his earlier work on the *Symposium*, he used *specula* in a similar context where the divine order is propagated

⁹⁶ Aristotle, *De anima* 419B; Frontisi-Ducroux (1997) 171; Guidorizzi (1992) 37, with references.

⁹⁷ Plutarch (1927–1969) 404 C-D: vol. V: 314–315; Frontisi-Ducroux (1997) 161. For a parallel citation in Ficino, which does not however mention mirrors, see *De amore* II 4: 151: “Sequenti enim gradus post animum forme corporum disponitur. Quorum nihil sufficienter se habet. Forme huiusmodi neque sufficienter sunt, neque sufficienter nobis divina ostendunt. Verae namque res, ideae, rationes et semina sunt. Corporum vero formae umbrae rerum potius quam verae res esse videntur. Quemadmodum vero corporis umbra exactam atque distinctam corporis figuram non indicat, ita corpora divinorum naturam propriam non demonstrat. Circa ipsum regem et ea quae dixi nihil est tale. Quo enim pacto mortalia immortalibus et falsa veris similia sint?”

throughout the entire universe by a set of three mirrors. Ficino sets out by stating that prior to the act of creation everything, even the first emanation from the Godhead, mind, is a dark shadow in need of illumination by divine light: “that light descending from God is certainly not received by the mind (in its own nature dark) with as much brightness as it is given by God. Therefore, through the violence of the receiving nature the light becomes darker.”⁹⁸ If we read this passage together with *Theologia platonica* XVII, 2 it becomes obvious that the primordial shadow is identical with universal matter. Mind, too, originally consists of dark and passive matter which, in the process of creation, becomes activated by the Godhead.⁹⁹ By speaking of the impetuosity (*natura violenta*) of the angelic mind, Ficino underscores the idea that even the second hypostasis shows a resistant quality, the trait characteristic of all matter. The same applies to primordial soul, as we learn from the commentary on the *Timaeus*: here Ficino says that in its primordial state the soul, too, was passive and easily malleable matter, and was only subsequently illuminated by intellect.¹⁰⁰ Body, too, receives the divine forms in an analogous manner, so that Ficino arrives at a set of three mirrors reflecting and thus transmitting the divine order onto the entire creation. Communication between the higher and lower parts of the universe is achieved by rays of light

⁹⁸ Trans. Ficino (1985) 100; *De amore*, V, 11: 195–197: “mens, [...] diligit auctorem. [...] lumen illud a deo descendens non tanta claritate recipiatur a *mente natura sua obscura*, quanta a deo tribuitur. [...] Ideo violentia nature suscipientis fit lumen obscurius.” (my italics) On the different forms of chaos in the hypostases, see Allen (1980) 140–142.

⁹⁹ On this, see also Ficino (1975) II, 4: 417.

¹⁰⁰ In *Timaeum* chapt. 40, OO 1464/463: ‘Mundus est ex intellectu, et necessitate compositus, id est, ex ipso formarum ordine atque materia. Possumus quinetiam sub necessitatis nomine intelligere, non materia[m] solum, sed animam quoque eius in primo processioneis suae signo, signo velut informem materiae instar consideratam. Utraque enim, tam anima, quam materia, in primo originis suae signo informis quidem est, sed facile et formabilis per intelligentiae munus, unde et ipsi animae rationis seminaque formarum naturalium infunduntur, et materiae qualitates atque formae. [...] Necessitate, sic accipe, ut prima illa materiae animaeque natura quamvis cogitetur informis, tamen praeparationem a Deo ad formas adeo formabilem suscepit ab initio, ut non potuerit esse paratior.’ In *De amore*, V, 11: 195–197, Ficino identifies the descent of light into material darkness with the alternate reigns of necessity and of intellect in Plato’s *Timaeus* (34–35).

that increasingly materialize as they pass downwards through the hypostases — that is the ontological entities — which Ficino equates with mirrors.¹⁰¹

As soon as the angels and the souls are born from him, the divine power [...] infuses into them the ray in which there is a fecund power of creating all things. This imprints the arrangement and order of the whole world much more exactly in them, [*the angels* and souls] because they are nearer to him, than in the matter of the world. [...] In the angels, these pictures are called by the Platonists archetypes or ideas; in the souls they are called reasons or concepts; in the matter of the world they are called forms or images. They are certainly bright in the world, brighter in the soul and brightest in the angelic mind. Therefore the single face of God shines successively in three mirrors, placed in order: the Angel, the soul and the body of the world. [...] In the most remote [...] most dimly.¹⁰²

In an important move, in this passage Ficino equates *all* the hypostases to mirrors that reflect the divine forms. Towards the bottom of creation, these mirrors become increasingly unable to reproduce the divine order adequately, just as the light reflected in a series of mirrors gradually becomes fainter. The way Ficino identifies the hypostases with mirrors alerts us to the sexual connotations of such an ascription. It again underscores the age old identification of women with mirrors, duplicity, otherness and, last but not least, reproduction; even more crucially, the impetuous nature of the primordial shadow echoes the Classical Greek perception of women as wild

¹⁰¹ Ficino identifies daemons and rays in his *De vita* III, 23: 377; see also Ficino (1989) 271: “Et in lumine potestas quaedam est daemonica, effectrix videlicet imaginum et umbrarum, quemadmodum et daemones solent mira quaedam visa non solum dormientibus et abstractis sed etiam vigilantibus ostentare.”

¹⁰² Trans. Ficino (1985) 89–91; *De amore* V, 4: 184–185: “Divina potestas [...] statim a se natis angelis atque animis, suum illum radium in quo fecunda vis inest omnium creandorum, [...] infundit. Hic in eis utpote sibi propinquioribus totius mundi dispositionem et ordinem multo pingit exactius quam in mundi materia. [...] Picturae huiusmodi in angelis, exemplaria et idee, in animis, rationes et notiones, in orbis materia, formae atque imagines a Platonis nominantur. Clare quidem in orbe, clariores in animo, in angeli mente clarissime. Unus igitur dei vultus tribus deinceps per ordinem positus lucet in speculis: angelo, animo, corpore mundi. [...] In hoc remotissimo, [...] obscurissime.”

and undomesticated, potentially threatening to male identities.¹⁰³ According to Ficino, soul is to be faulted for being foolish enough to fall in love with an image of its own making, a shadow:

God is certainly never so deceived as to love the shadow of his own beauty in the angel and neglect his own true beauty. Nor is the angel so taken by the beauty of the soul, which is its shadow, that it becomes detained by its shadow and forsakes its own beauty. But our soul does. This is greatly to be lamented, for this is the origin of all our woe.¹⁰⁴

Ficino emphasizes the constant degradation of matter and form that is due to the shadow's incapacity to represent the higher realities in their fullness. The idea of a gradual transition from divine splendour into bodily darkness is prominent in the relatively early commentaries on the *Symposium* and the *Timaeus*. In his late work on the *Sophist*, Ficino moreover acknowledges, in Allen's words, "the co-presence (if not coexistence exactly) of being and not-being not at the extremes of an ontological hierarchy but *within each* existent in that hierarchy."¹⁰⁵ According to Ficino's later interpretation, the transition from light to darkness thus happens at every stage in the hierarchy of being; every hypostasis is identified with a mirror that undergoes a radical transformation in the process of being illuminated by the divine ray. What was formerly dark and passive becomes bright and active, and in the process the object is transformed into subject.¹⁰⁶ It remains unclear, however, whether Ficino actually thinks that matter is universally the same and hence occurs in different degrees of refinement throughout the universe (in some passages of the *Theologia*, the *Symposium*, and the *Timaeus* commentary Ficino inclines

¹⁰³ Frontisi-Ducroux (1997) 57.

¹⁰⁴ (Slightly modified) trans. Ficino (1985) 140; *De amore* VI, 17: 234–234: "Deus numquam ita decipitur ut suae spetiei umbram in angelo amet quidem, propriam sui ac veram negligat pulchritudinem. Neque angelus usque adeo capitur animae spetie, que ipsius est umbra, ut sui umbra detentus, figuram propriam deserat. Anima tamen nostra, quod summopere dolendum est, hec enim totius nostre infelicitas origo."

¹⁰⁵ Allen (1989) 69.

¹⁰⁶ Allen (1989) 69–71; Ficino maintains that each celestial sphere is, as it were, a world in itself; *In Timaeum* chapt. 40, OO 1461: "Hinc sit quod saepe dicimus, ut quaelibet sphaera mundi, quasi totus sit mundus, cuncta videlicet sua quadam proprietate complectens."

to this solution); or that matter becomes different on each level of being. This is the position Ficino holds in the *Sophist* commentary, which envisages the idea that each degree of being undergoes a radical change from passive and hence material object to acting subject in the process of being shaped by the higher hypostasis.

The closer we come to the centre of the universe, to the terrestrial realm, the less matter (the dark aspect of creation) will be able to accommodate the ever changing forms in the way they peacefully co-operate in the higher world of mental, invisible, light.¹⁰⁷ In the middle of the earth even celestial fire transforms into a hellish dark heat:

the immense size, power and motion of celestial beings brings it about that all the rays of all the stars penetrate in a moment the mass of the earth (which is as a point in relation to the sky) and with consummate ease straight to the centre. In the centre, as the Pythagoreans and Platonists would have it, the rays are strongest, both because they touch the centre perpendicularly on all sides and because they are all collected in a confined space. By the ray's intensity, the material of the earth there — being dry and far from any moisture — is immediately kindled, and, once kindled, is vaporized and dispersed through channels in all directions and blows out both flames and sulphur. But they think that this fire is very dark and, as it were, a sort of flame without light, just as the heavens light is without flame, whereas the fire between the celestial and the infernal combines light and heat.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ In *Timaeum* chapt. XVII[I], OO 144/441: "non solum vero distinctionem formarum, sed etiam repugnatiam videmus in mundo, procedit enim a primo, & procedendo degenerat. Processio quidem distinctionem facit: degeneratio repugnantiam."

¹⁰⁸ *De vita* III, 16: 320–332: "Immensa ferme coelestium magnitudo, virtus, motio facit, ut omnes omnium siderum radii terrae molem, quae quasi punctum est ad coelum, momento facillimeque usque ad centrum recti penetrent, [...]. Ibiq[ue], ut placet Pythagoreis atque Platoniciis, fortissimi sunt, tum quia recti undique centrum tangunt, tum quia in angustum collecti sunt cuncti. Quorum vehementia materia ibi terrae sicca, procul ab humore remota, prorsus accenditur accensaque extenuatur atque dispergitur per meatus undique et efflat incendia pariter atque sulphur. Sed ignem hunc putant valde caliginosum esse et quasi incendium quoddam luminis expers, sicut in coelo extat expers incendii lumen; ignis autem inter coelestem atque infernum lumen cum fervore coniungit." In

The main cause for this is the weakness or impotence (*imbecilitas*) of matter, which becomes increasingly incapable of accommodating the ever changing forms in the way they peacefully co-operate in the higher world.¹⁰⁹

The mirror, which is a signifier for matter, shadow, and otherness, is a crucial metaphor in Ficino's metaphysics. The looking-glass becomes the omnipresent image of all transactions between "above" and "below," a metaphor that may be used whenever Ficino wants to bridge gaps, especially when he needs to explain the communication between spiritual and corporeal substances, between form and matter, between male and female. The mirror functions as a medium of transmission and, at the same time, as a potentially deceptive screen reproducing divine order on a lower level.

In elaborating this referential structure, Ficino had some important predecessors. The concept that the passive object is transformed into active subject within an emanational framework is present in Avicenna (Ibn Sina, c. 908–1037). According to that medieval Persian philosopher, matter comes into being through the self-cognition of an intelligence which reflects upon the possibility of its essence. Matter is thus the cognition of the potentiality of that sphere, which becomes the object of cognition for the sphere beyond it. Therefore no single matter pervades the entire universe, but rather each "matter" belongs to a distinct sphere or hypostasis. The "ultimate matter" is identical with the lowest sphere and hence the lowest form of matter.¹¹⁰

The idea that a set of mirrors serves as a medium for the propagation of divine forms through the diverse hierarchies of being has medieval ori-

Timaeum chapt. 24, OO 1449/445 "Ergo una cum Heraclito & Empedocle dicemus ignis ipsius, qui in idea est, intellectuale lumen, in coelo quidem visibile lumen ad oculos emicare: sub coelo autem in aethere puram ipsius, & innoxiam vigere flammam: in terra vero carbonem, in aspera materia comburentem."

¹⁰⁹ In *Timaeum* chapt. XVII[I], OO 144/441: "Quinimo divisionis ipsius origo est foecunditatis causae foras exuberantis, seque propagantis in amplum, procedente vero per gradus multos divisione, in repugantiam denique provenitur: praesertim quum mundi materia ob imbecilitatem nequeat ita invicem formas conciliare ut mundus ille superior in seipso conciliat." For similar ideas in Aristotle, see, *De gen. et corr.* II, 10, 336b 17–24; *De gen. animalium* IV, 10, 778a 5–9; Happ (1971) 745.

¹¹⁰ It goes without saying that this approach fosters Avicenna's monistic tendencies in which matter appears as the result of a narcissistic process of self-cognition. On this, see Buschmann (1979) 72, with references; see Proclus (1963) § 20: 23.

gins.¹¹¹ The *motif* of three mirrors reflecting the ideas or archetypes in varying degrees of refinement is also present in the *Anticlaudianus* of Alain de Lille (c. 1123–1202). This text mentions a glass mirror where the forms appear mixed with subjects; a silver mirror, which reflects primordial matter as well as forms in their purer state; and, lastly, a looking glass made of gold in which the ideas themselves can be perceived.¹¹² In a similar vein, in his *Theologia*, Ficino speaks about images that are impressed into an eternal mirror.¹¹³ In Dante's *Divina commedia* the idea of a hierarchy of mirrors that reflect the image of God on a lower level appears in a different context; here the mirrors do not render a *darker* image (as in Ficino) but a *smaller* one.¹¹⁴

At this point it is perhaps fair to mention another author who is often seen in connection with Ficino: the idea of a living mirror (*speculum vivens*) is present in Cusanus (Nicholas of Kues or of Cusa, 1401–64), though again in a slightly different context. According to Cusanus, all created things are mirrors whose curved and irregular surfaces are incapable of adequately representing the divine image of truth. Only the mirror of the human mind has the capacity to remodel itself into such a perfect surface, to smoothen out all the distortions and finally adequately to reflect the divine truth.¹¹⁵ The im-

¹¹¹ According to Goldberg (1985) 242, the *Roman de la rose* (c. 1273) uses a strikingly similar concept: "Jean de Meun used the mirror as a symbol of human reproduction, tying it analogously to the chain of being. The chain of being can be considered as a chain of mirrors dependent from God, the successive members of which reflect God's image with less and less distinctiveness. On a lesser scale, the reflection of an image within a mirror is a distinct analogy to reproduction. As a son is called „the image of his father," so all God's creatures [...] may be called his images. The mirror, therefore, which symbolizes the radiant source of life also symbolizes the process of generation of the individual. Jean de Meun's ulterior aim is to encourage man to generate true and living images of God. To emphasize his purpose, he chastises those who generate false and lying images, [...]. He asks the reader to enter the world of true and faithful images, each of which is reflected from the ever-luminous mirror which is the mind of God."

¹¹² See Dronke (1974) 148 n. 2 with references.

¹¹³ *Theologia*, V, 13: I, 209. Giordano Bruno uses the metaphor of a *speculum videns* in his *Summa terminorum metaphysicorum*, OL I; IV 31–32.

¹¹⁴ Dante, *Paradiso*, II, 97–105. On this, see Miller (1977) 266–268 and 266: "Creation becomes a hierarchy of mirrors, each chasing an image of god. The further off the individual mirror is from god, the smaller the image of him it reflects, but his brightness never diminishes."

¹¹⁵ Kues (1967) 69 : I: 192–193 on the concept of distorted mirrors.

age of the living mirror occurs in Augustine,¹¹⁶ but is restricted to the human mind. As the entire context and wording in Cusanus is different, I cannot see how Ficino could have been directly influenced by him.¹¹⁷

The Mirror as Daemonic Womb

We already had ample occasion to notice that the mirror in Neoplatonic discourses adds something to the image it represents. According to Ficino, the mirror has a characteristic creative potential that consists in more than merely distorting the represented image. The mirror reflection is, in fact, a new object with a life of its own. In elaborating this referential structure Ficino had several Platonic myths to draw upon: first, the myth of the cave (whose inhabitants are able to perceive only the shadows of real things);¹¹⁸ second, the assumption that humans cannot look at truth directly, but only at its reflection in water (*Phaedo*, 99D/100A); third, the myth of the birth of love as mirrored by a glance (*Phaedrus*, 255D); and fourth, and perhaps most crucially, Plato's metaphor of the mirror that (re)produces a false image of the cosmos (*Republic*, 596C). This last myth, together with a passage from the *Sophist* (239D-240B), became decisive for subsequent Neoplatonic theories of the image.¹¹⁹ Here Plato maintains that mirror images fall under the same category as the products of any other artist: they are deceiving images that result from an imprint of a form that is ontologically higher and therefore more real. The term "fabrication of images" (*eidolopoia*) denotes not only the formation of a reflection in a mirror, but all kinds of artistic production (*Timaeus*, 46A; *Critias*, 107B).

So far, we have had occasion to notice that the mirror is an important metaphor for the material world. But what actually happens in the process of reflection? Plotinus interpreted the mirror passage from the *Republic* (596C)

¹¹⁶ *De trinitate* XV, 8.

¹¹⁷ This is the closest parallel to Ficino's concept of the mirror that I could find in *Idiota de mente* at V fol. 85r in Kues (1995) 41–42.

¹¹⁸ Irigaray (1985) 255 says: "But this cave is already, and ipso facto, a *speculum*. An inner space of reflection. Polished, and polishing, fake offspring. Opening, enlarging, contriving the scene of representation, the world as representation. [...] This cave intercepts the games of copula in a miming of reproduction and in each figuration of the inner space the image of the sun engenders sham offspring."

¹¹⁹ On this, see Allen (1989) 170–172; Frontisi-Ducroux (1997) 164.

by maintaining that the soul's image is reflected in the physical world, though in a deceptive way. "[This lower part of the soul] is pictured as being present in bodies since it shines into them and makes living creatures, but not of itself and body, but abiding itself and giving images of itself, like a face seen in many mirrors."¹²⁰ According to Plotinus, matter reflects soul in many different images, but without ever entering into union with soul. Hence, in Plotinus, the mirror is a metaphor signifying detachment, as opposed to communication or sexual union. Ficino sometimes uses the mirror in an analogous way: for instance, when he compares the way the mind perceives corporeal beings to the reflection of the flame of a candle in the mirror where the fire is not hot. In a way reminiscent of celestial fire (which lacks heat), this is an instant in which the lower (the body of the candle's coarse material flame) is subsumed by a higher potency (mind) and purified and de-materialised in the process.

Yet, in accordance with the ascent towards the divine so characteristic of Neoplatonic philosophies in general, the process may also work the other way around: instead of conveying the idea or the image of deception and deterioration, the mirror may *focus* divine influx. Quite unexpectedly, Ficino sometimes even maintains that the rays of common light are "restored and illuminated" in the mirror:

Indeed, so great is the "friendship" of light for the mirror that lights and visual rays and radial images are not dissipated or weakened in it, but immediately enhanced and strengthened. Thus intensified, [...] the light instantly illuminates a wall opposite.¹²¹

In several other instances Ficino maintains that the light that falls onto a body is collected there and (presumably after a certain time) reinvigorates again, especially in bodies that are congruous to it. Then the light starts to redirect itself in the opposite direction, just as a mirror casts light "on the opposite wall and creates splendour there." Thus, the light first orders this

¹²⁰ *Enneads* I, 8 15–17.

¹²¹ In *Timaeum* def. 30, OO 473: "Tanta profecto amicitia luminis est ad speculum, ut in hoc ipso lumina radii visuales, radiales imagines non infrangantur quidem, sed ita protinus invalescant, ut hinc statim multiplicatum lumen oppositum illuminet parietem, [...]" See Allen (1989) 185.

body (by penetrating it) and then unfolds itself again (*replicat/explicat*).¹²² It is fascinating to notice that the idea of a transformation from passive object into active subject in the mirror (so prominent in Ficino's emanationist concepts) is here transferred onto ordinary, material mirrors. Instead of being a mere image of deception or degradation, the mirror may thus also focus and enhance light, acting as a screen that receives and eventually becomes creative itself.¹²³

The mirror's capacity to enhance the force of light might at first seem to the modern reader to be a simple confusion between plain mirrors and burning glasses (or burning lenses),¹²⁴ but this assumption has other and quite unexpected foundations in ancient theories of vision.¹²⁵ By amalgamating two conflicting and older theories of visual perception, Plato had maintained that daylight meets and coalesces with a visual ray emitted by the eye itself. Visual perception is thus active as well as passive because in the act of vision certain particles or rays are emitted by the eye: vision means contact.¹²⁶ But what is emitted by the eye?¹²⁷ Ficino says that according to the Platonic tradition not only do rays and spiritual images exist, but so do material images; the latter are constantly emitted from the pores of bodies, transmitting not

¹²² On mirrors which actually restore an image see Ficino (1989) 275 and *In Theophrastum de somn.* chapt. 33, OO 1816: "Lumen incidens in corpus quodammodo densum lenaque & nitidum sistit seipsum, colligitque, & protinus conualescit in corpore videlicet tum firmiore, tum ei prae caeteris congruo. Congregatum ideoque & validum agit hinc iterum in oppositum quando scilicet est corporibus quoquo modo specularibus resultat in oppositum parietem, ibique splendorem procreat. Resultat item in alia & in oculos. Nunquam itaque frangitur, sed explicat primo seipsum, deinde replicat atque applicat. Et utrobique unus continuusque videtur luminis actus Radius similiter visualis corpus attingens quomodo libet speculari firmatur, congregatur, corroboratur, et replicatur."

¹²³ Apuleius accordingly calls the mirror an *opifex* of the reflected images. Apuleius, *Apologia* XVI, 8; cited by Ferwerda (1965) 17.

¹²⁴ For an example of the mirror as burning glass in Ficino see *De vita*, III 26: 333: "Figura speculi lenis, concava, nitens, coelo congrua ob hoc ipsum proprie munus tantum coelitus accipit, ut radios phoebe in se cumulatissime complectantur, et solidissimum quodque ad centrum suum e conspectu locatum repente comburat." The *Theologia*, XVI, 6: III, 128, emphasizes the impetuousness implied by this kind of reflection.

¹²⁵ On this, see Frontisi-Ducroux (1997) 133–146; Eastman (1972) 306–308.

¹²⁶ *Timaeus* 45BD; *Thaetetus* 156E; Frontisi-Ducroux (1997) 139–140.

¹²⁷ According to the Classical tradition, vision is aqueous, humid and the rays emitted by the brain are of a similar substance as sperm, which is again produced in the brain. On this, see Frontisi-Ducroux (1997) 136.

only the qualities, but also their shape to other bodies which act as screens. A prodigious consequence of this materialist theory of vision (which dates back to the Epicureans) is that we can see in the dark.¹²⁸ Here, Ficino refers to the theory of vision advanced by Lucretius, who had maintained that all objects continuously emit tiny material films that make them perceptible: "It is established, then, that these films [...] are moving about everywhere, sprayed and scattered in all directions."¹²⁹ It is therefore by no means surprising if Ficino maintains in his Commentary on the *Sophist* that "matter probably proceeds even farther than the shape mingled with it."¹³⁰

One of the choice screens or mirrors for these little images, the so-called *eidola*, is the human imagination, the faculty mediating between the senses and reason.¹³¹ In his influential work on prophetic dreams, Synesius of Cyrene had assumed that such images were still lingering around even after their emission from sensible objects, leading a sort of afterlife, waiting for a suitable screen where to recover. (The Aristotelian doctrine that identifies the shadow with a reflection that has failed to find a mirror is conducive to such an idea.) According to Synesius, the human imagination (again a mirror of some sort) was precisely such a chosen place of rest (*domicilium*) for *idola*, because here they recovered and regained their strength. Even more amazingly, the images of things to come, too, were to be caught in that faculty.¹³² Synesius'

¹²⁸ On this, see Allen (1989) 185–186 with references.

¹²⁹ Trans. Lucretius (1994) 101; *De rerum natura* IV 240. Mirrors act as repellent bases from which these films are constantly bouncing off: *De rerum natura* IV 150. On the rather elusive distinctions between the different ancient concepts of vision and Ficino's precarious relationship to Lucretius' materialistic theory of vision, see Allen (1989) 193–195, with references.

¹³⁰ Ficino (1989) 275: "Proinde probabile videtur ulterius quidem materiam procedere quam figuram materiae mixtam."

¹³¹ See Ficino (1989) chapt. 5.

¹³² Synesius, *De insomniis* reads in Ficino's translation OO 1976.2: "Ab omnibus, qui in natura comprehenduntur sive sine sive in praesentia, sive facta fuerit in praeterito, sive futura dicantur, nam hi sunt quidem existentiae modi: *idola* profluunt, et ab eorum substantia iugiter evibrantur, si enim sensibile quolibet est *eidōs* id est species in materia, cum materia simul extenso, deprehendimus autem ex composito materiam foras effluere, ratio certe dicat. Formarum quoque naturam extrinsecus per *idola* derivari, ut ex utraque parte ea quae in generatione versatur, ab ipsa entis dignitate degenerent. Omnium vero, quae diximus *idolarum* a rebus ubique manantium spiritus ipse phantasticus speculum est certe clarissimum. aliter enim circumeuntia, et a statu labentia, tum in indefinitam essendi tum quia a nullo entium cognoscuntur, cum primum irretinetur in spiritus ani-

theory of prophetic dreams must have been particularly attractive to Ficino because it can be related to a passage in Plato's *Timaeus* (71B) according to which the liver, the seat of sexual desire, is composed "of a certain solidity and of a shining slowness" in such a way that it "easily" takes up and gives forth the images of the world "as in a mirror" and this makes the liver a favourite receptacle for prophetic vision. In his commentary on the *Timaeus*, Ficino adds that in its function as a mirror the liver also "easily" impresses the foetus in pregnant women with the images the mother desires, thus influencing the shape of the future child. (On this see the excursus on dreams and the chapter on the *magus*). In other words, Ficino's account of the physical properties of mirrors also serves him as an (optical) explanation for the interaction of physiological processes with cognition and memory.¹³³ The idea that the liver was considered to be the seat of sexual desire alerts us to the erotic connotations not only of optical communication through mirrors (again reminiscent of the story of Narcissus), but of the act of cognition itself.¹³⁴

males, qui et ipsi sunt idola, sed in natura habentia sedem. His protinus innituntur et tamquam in domiciliis conquiescunt." On the Epicurean origins of this passage see Allen (1989) 192. It is well in accordance with Ficino's idea that idola occur everywhere as an ordering force in creation, see *Theologia* XIII, 2: II, 213: "Ac licet dispositio mundi, [...] perenni quadam continuatione tota simul nostrae menti se offerat, temporalis mundanorum seminum vicissitudo sicut paulatim in idolis naturisque illarum animarum sibi ipsi succedit, ita simili quadam successionis continuatione per omnium animarum idola omniumque corporum naturas descendit usque ad idolum animae nostrae et corporis nostri naturam, ut ecce ratione pluviae cras futurae hodie regnat in animarum caelestium idolis coelorumque naturis." On Ficino and Synesius, see Toussaint (1999) and Copenhaver (1987).

¹³³ In *Timaeum* chapt. 42, OO 1465: "Irrationalem vero in membris quodammodo residere & [...] partem concupiscentiae deditam, iecori commendatam. Verum de hoc ipso iecore miram Pythagoricorum notabis opinionem, videlicet id membrum ex certa soliditate, & clara pariter lentitate sic esse temperatum, ut speculi modo imagines rerum accipiat facile admodum atque reddat. Profecto quemadmodum imaginatio vehemens gravidae mulieris in foetu tenerrimo, saepe exprimit rei desideratae notas: ita vehemens, sive mentis notio, sive sensus imaginatio naturam iecoris speculari facillime format. In hoc ipso speculo daemones superique futurorum effingunt imagines, quoties pacato prorsus animo aliunde illic imagines non pinguntur. Itaque futurorum notae speculo huic infusae in mentem protinus imaginationemque resultant." (See also the epilogue of the present study.)

¹³⁴ Fox-Keller (1985) 26 shows that sexual metaphors for knowledge are at least a pre-eminently biblical characteristic of Western culture, knowledge is a form of consumption "just as sex is a form of knowledge. Both are propelled by desire. Whether in fantasy, ex-

By linking the ideas of deception, reproduction of an image, and childbirth, the mirror in the female body becomes a highly concise figuration of Ficino's ambivalent attitude towards matter as a receptacle of all forms. It is precisely the neutrality of the mirror (so desperately argued for in this partenogenetic masculine discourse), its capacity to receive any form whatsoever, and its unlimited potentiality that poses a threat to domination by form. There is an obviously close conceptual relationship with the *materia meretrix* metaphor discussed in chapter one. The womb is to be isolated not only from insemination by other men, but also from alien images, *phantasmata* that enter the body through the liver. The passive and hence female mirror is imprinted and subsequently falls into danger of begetting monsters as well as demi-gods. Viewed from this perspective, Ficino's elaborate metaphysical theory of reflection turns out to be an index for the patriarchal anxiety about the legitimacy of the offspring.¹³⁵

An important consequence of these many and divergent functions of the mirror is that the concepts of reflection and imprint become interchangeable. As a womb may receive the stamp of a form in the way an image is reflected in a mirror, so conversely the looking-glass may be inscribed with forms, retain and eventually even transform them. In the latter case, the womb (which previously had been explained by analogy to the mirror) demonstrates an occult property of reflecting surfaces, namely that of retaining and even transforming images. In an amazingly elliptical argument structure, both mirror and womb reinforce the concept of transformative reflection that structures all sorts of physiological functions and, at the same time, explains

perience, or linguistic trope, sexual union remains the most compelling and most primal instance of the act of knowing. Even when unrecognized by metaphor, the experience of knowing is rooted in the carnal. It does not, however, remain there. What classically distinguishes knowledge is its essential thrust away from the body, its ambition to transcend the carnal. Mind is not simply immanent in matter: it is transcendent over it. All visions of knowledge must accordingly struggle with the dialectic between immanence and transcendence. What is especially striking is how often the metaphoric field for this struggle is that of sex and gender, and, I shall argue, how deeply these metaphors have influenced the disciplines of knowledge."

¹³⁵ On the powers of the imagination and its ability to infect and contaminate, see *Theologia* XIII, 4: II, 233–235. "L'affaire est claire: si la femme est le miroir de l'homme, [...] elle ne possède en propre nulle lumière; mais c'est surtout que, comme tout principe féminin, elle est la matière à quoi le mâle impose forme, comme l'artisan qui modèle la cire ou la glaise, frappe ou cisle le métal, façonne le bois et sculpte la pierre." Frontisi-Ducroux (1997) 129–130.

the relationship of matter and form. The idea that the liver as well as the foetus is “easily impressed” betrays a striking resemblance of content and language to the soul’s shaping of *spiritus*, the ethereal body that is given to soul during its descent into the material world. Here, too, Ficino underscored that soul “easily” shapes its body. Down on earth, *spiritus* is again “easily” impressed by the manifold and new forms. Not quite unexpectedly, Ficino therefore maintains that the *spiritus*, too, is a mirror that allows the intellectual soul to perceive the corporeal world.¹³⁶

It is within this peculiar amalgamation of psychology, prophecy, and physical theory of reflection that Ficino develops his theory of the demonic capacities of mirrors. As we have seen, this approach entails that bodies send out images that are, so to say, still material, yet in a diminished or subdued way. It is therefore no wonder that in his *Sophist* commentary Ficino maintains that images in a mirror do not only exist, but also have their “own act and mode”:

Several have done away with such [mirror] images and have urged that the eye is deceived when it supposes, while it gazes at the thing itself, that it sees an image. But, along with his followers, Plato wishes the images to be something. Otherwise no objects could appear in mirrors unimpaired. Both here and in the *Timaeus*, he therefore maintains that images exist. [...] The images have, as it were, their own act and mode just as the mathematical have their own act and mode.¹³⁷

¹³⁶ See Ficino, *In Synesium* OO, 1976.2: “Sed anima ubique spiritui presens imagines corporum in eo tamquam in speculo relucens facile inspicit perque illas corpora iudicat?” See also *De amore* VI 6: 206–208. In a similar vein the *Picatrix latinus* III, 4.4: 111 identifies the *spiritus* with a burning glass “Et attrahit [sc. spiritus] radios et componit eos in rebus quas componere intendit quemadmodum in speculo quod, quando versus lucem Solis elevatur, eius radii reflectuntur versus umbram collateralem; et recipit solis suo lumine, & proicit ipsos ad locum umbrosum; et ipsius umbre locus lucens efficitur et illuminatur; nec propter hoc aliquid uniuntur ex lumine solis.” On Ficino’s doctrine of *spiritus*, and its relationship to Synesius, see Walker (1958) 38–39; Allen (1989) 193–195; Allen (1993) 96–100 and the entire chapter 3.

¹³⁷ Ficino (1989) 272: “Nonnulli imagines eiusmodi sustulerunt, falli oculum putantem, dum rem ipsam intuetur, imaginem quandam se videre. Plato vero cum suis imagines esse vult aliquid, non enim res integras in speculis aliter apparere posse. Igitur et hic et in *Timaeo* existere imagines asserit. [...] Sicut mathematicae formae ad divinas sese habent, sic ad corpora imagines speculares; quasi actum suum modumque proprium ha-

Like matter, the shadow is not completely deprived of being, the image in the mirror remains “a something” leading a life of its own. Here it becomes obvious that mirrors do not merely *reflect*, they also have the capacity to *retain* the forms they receive, like a womb. Actually, this is the obvious conclusion to be drawn from Ficino’s cosmology: we just have to remember that each hypostasis first behaves like a mirror/shadow/matter collecting the higher influence which it then independently transmits to the next lower echelon of being down to the bottom of creation. The process of creation thus requires that each hypostasis retain the images from above, transform them, and then reflect them onto the level beneath.

It is interesting to note that the passage cited above stands in pointed contradiction to modern readings of Plato’s doctrine of *idola*, such as Irigaray’s. According to her interpretation, Plato’s myth of the cave was designed to rule out any sort of transformation occurring in the process of projection and reflection.¹³⁸ I do not wish to discuss Irigaray’s reading here,¹³⁹ but I would stress that according to Ficino the image in the mirror remains a “something” leading a life of its own. Ficino consequently parallels the qualities of matter

beant, sicut mathematica suum.” According to Michael Allen, the source is Proclus (1970) II, 98–100. Allen (1989) 169 further argues: “It follows from the whole set of negative hypotheses in the Neoplatonist’s *Parmenides* [...] that, since the One exists both absolutely and immanently, then not only do the realms of Mind, of Soul, of the corporeal forms, and of body itself exist but also, in an unitary if unsubstantial way, does the realm of shadows and of dreams; and it exists immediately subordinate to the realm of corporeal forms and material species upon which it directly depends and of which it is an imitation.” For a parallel comment, see *Appendix in Timaeum* 40, OO 1473: “Quae [sc. imagines] quidem nimis exilem habent essentiam, ut non aliter palam ostentare se oculis possint, quam in corporibus specularibus aequabiliter stabilitae, redintegratae, illustratae, pristinam vim quandam modumquae formae, unde processere, recipiant.”

¹³⁸ Irigaray (1985) 309–310: “No proper value will be put upon the specular inversion that [this kind of] projection erases by magic. Being, Good, Truth, the power of the Father are in no way amenable to being turned around. They go on and are eternally made manifest in their rectitude. With no back side or flip side. And the receptacle, the place of becoming, remembers nothing. Otherwise it would — perhaps — bear witness to the irreducible inversion that occurs in specula(riza)tion and in the re-production of any imprint, [...] even ideal ones. It must absolutely, not be known how much the procreation of the ‘son,’ of the logos by the Father owes to inversion. Nor that the mother is the place where that inversion occurs.” See also Irigaray (1985) 331–333.

¹³⁹ Actually, Plato discusses the inversion that takes place in the mirror; see *Timaeus* 46C and especially *Theaitetus* 193D.

and mirror, that is transformation and retention of the received forms, and subsequent reflection (birth) of new images.

The question remains as to what actually appears in the mirror. In the *Sophist* commentary, we read something that at first sight seems disappointingly incompatible with my identification of matter and mirror — Ficino says that “certainly here when [Plato] says that *idola* are not the same as bodies, he means that they possess their own nature but do not have matter.”¹⁴⁰ Yet, in this passage Ficino wants to point out that the images of material bodies participate even less in being than the bodies themselves. Hence, they must lack a quality which the bodies possess, namely solid matter and extension. In a parallel passage, Ficino actually says that these *simulacra* are “as it were” substances. I conclude, therefore, that they are composed of matter and form, but obviously to a lesser degree than the bodies they represent. (Of course, the precarious relationship between original and *simulacrum* refers to the central problem of Platonism, the relationship between forms and their images in matter.)¹⁴¹ The point Ficino wants to make in the present context is that *idola* do retain some of the power inherent in the things they represent, albeit to a lesser extent. And he illustrates this idea with an example of how such mirror images, such diminished substances, retain the capacity to influence bodies.

[Proclus in his commentary on Plato’s *Republic*] strives to assert that shadows have a power and nature as it were of their own when he tells the story of the Hyena that trod on the shadow of a dog sitting above it and made the dog fall down from above and then devoured it. Solinus also writes that a dog cannot bark when it is within the shadow of a hyena.¹⁴²

¹⁴⁰ Ficino (1989) 273: “Hic certe, dum inquit *idola* non esse eadem atque corpora, significat naturam quidem suam habere, sed non habere materiam.”

¹⁴¹ Ficino (1989) 192, OO 941 [In Martin Uranium (i.e. Proemium in compendium Proculi)]: “Dicendum ergo secundum sententiam Platonis in *Sophista*, apparentes imagines, esse substantias quasdam quorundam simulacrorum machinatione quaedam daemonica fabricatas.”

¹⁴² Ficino (1989) 275: “[Proclus] vero et umbras vim quandam et quasi naturam habere suam asservare contendit, narrans hyenam calcantem canis in alto sedentis umbram illum ex alto praecipitare atque devorare. Scribit quoque Solinus canem intra Hyenae umbram latrare non posse.” For the source of this passage and Ficino’s paraphrase of Proclus see Ficino (1989) 192 and OO, 171: “Iam vero et umbrae quas cum imaginibus

The hyena's impressive capacity to avoid the hardships of hunting (as well as the annoying sound of barking dogs) is thus due to that animal's skilful manipulation of the shadows of things. Needless to say, the hyena is an animal frequently associated with magic; according to Ovid "the hyena can change its sex, the female that lately allowed the male to mount her becoming now a male herself."¹⁴³ This is an important detail, since it reminds us of the mirror's capacity to transform something from passive object into active subject. Hence the hyena's ability to affect other sentient beings by manipulating their shadows becomes a model for the manipulation of all things and provides a theoretical basis for magic. Ficino consequently parallels the qualities of matter and mirror, that is transformation and retention of the received forms, and subsequent reflection (birth) of new images. Images do retain some of the power inherent in the things they represent, albeit to a lesser extent:

Proclus adds that magicians are accustomed to affect things' images and shadows in marvelous ways, and by means of these affected images and shadows similarly to affect the things themselves. It is as if the images and shadows had some nature of their own that reached to things and that through this nature a certain mutual sympathy can be achieved.¹⁴⁴

commemorat quasi cognatas, eiusmodi naturam habent, sunt enim & ipsae corporum figurarumque imagines, plurimamque sympatiam, id est compassionem consensionemque cum illis ipsis habent a quibus decidunt. Quemadmodum declarant quotcunque Magorum artes pronuntiant, promittuntque ad idola umbrasque conficere. Quid vero dicam imaginum umbrarumque vires per quas sunt in animalibus ratione carentibus saepe multa, quae omnem superant rationem? Nam hyenam ferunt calcantem canis in alto sedentis umbram, illum ex alto praecipitare statim atque devorare." *De amore* VII, 4: 246–249, esp. 248; Allen (1989) 189–191, notes that the passage about the Hyena is from Proclus (1970) II: 98–99.

¹⁴³ Trans. Ovid (1955) 345; *Metamorphoses* XV, 407–410; on the magical power of the hyena see, for example, Della Porta (1650) I 14 who maintains that the hyena's fur deters panthers and even makes them lose their hair when wrapped in a hyena's skin. On the hyena as a hieroglyph of instability, see Horapollo (1531) II: 177: "Instabilem aliquem, neque in eodem statu permanentem, vero modo fortem & audacem, modo imbecillum & timidum, cum volunt significare, Hyenam serpentem pingunt, haec enim modo mas modo foemina fit."

¹⁴⁴ Ficino (1989) 275: "Adiungit Proclus solere magos miris modis afficere rerum imagines atque umbras, hisque affectis similiter res ipsas afficere, quasi imagines atque

Plato's *Republic* (596C), where the mirror is said to reproduce a false image of the cosmos, is again crucial for the reading of this passage. The Neoplatonic tradition links this trope to the myth of the demiurge in the *Timaeus*, who by looking at divine forms creates an image of heaven and earth. In so doing, the divine craftsman produces an appearance or likeness of the realm of ideas. This image-creating by the demiurge is imitated by a so-called sublunar demiurge or by humans, who are images of the higher demiurge. Sophists, rhetoricians, and magi (who are the human demiurges) are therefore likewise trafficking with all kinds of truth-images, or mirrors of truths.¹⁴⁵ In this context, it is by no means surprising if Allen concludes that "the magician has the knowledge and ability either to employ a mirror to concentrate and direct rays, or even in a mysterious way to use himself as a mirror."¹⁴⁶ This idea is confirmed by Michael Psellus' treatise *De daemonibus*, which Ficino translated. Here the demons communicate with the souls of men in the way objects appear in mirrors or objects akin to mirrors. The demonic messages are thus generated by a certain "specular art" that involves Sophistic deception and motivates humans to perform all sorts of actions.¹⁴⁷

umbrae naturam aliquam habeant suam ad res attinentem, per quam mutua quaedam fieri compassio valeat."

¹⁴⁵ Allen (1989) 170–172. On the connections between magic and rhetoric see Kingsley (1995) 306, with references; on this topic, with special reference to Ficino, see Zambelli (1991) 29–31.

¹⁴⁶ Allen (1989) 192; see also OO 941; Allen (1993) 96–100. In his commentary on Plotinus (1559) IV, 4, 39: 221v Ficino says: "Potest tamen magus maleficium reddere, non aliter atque ille, qui ex concavo speculo collectos solis radios conjicit in oppositum, atque comburit."

¹⁴⁷ *Ps.-Psellus*, in OO 1941: "Sicut enim aer praesente lumine colores, et formas accipiens traducit in illa, quae naturaliter accipere possunt; sicut apparet in speculis, rebusque quasi specularibus: sic et daemonica corpora suscipientia ab ea, quae intus est, essentia phantastica figuras, atque colores, et quas[i]cunque ipsi voluerunt formas in ipsum animale, nostrumque spiritum transmittunt, multa nobis negotia praebent, voluntates, et consilia suggerentes, formas subindicantes, suscitantes memorias voluptatum, simulacra passionum frequenter concitantes vigilantibus, atque dormientibus, nonnumquam vero femora nobis, ac inguina titilantibus, incitantes insanos, et iniquos amores subiciunt, et subacuunt, precipue vero si humores calidos humidosque ad id conducentes nacti fuerunt. Sed hi Plutonis galeam subinducentes perturbant animas arte quadam, et sophistica fraude." On this treatise, wrongly ascribed to Michael Psellus, see Gautier (1980). See Allen (1989) 176–178 on the ways in which daemons influence the consciousness of humans.

The idea that humans themselves not only look into mirrors or skillfully manipulate them, but can also turn themselves into mirrors becomes even more obvious in the *De amore*, where Ficino underscores the emotional aspect of this exchange of images. The accomplished lover, again a sort of *magus*, must first turn himself into a mirror that reflects the beloved, whereupon the latter acknowledges his own beauty in the person opposite. Ficino maintains that, ultimately, one falls in love with a person in whom one recognizes one's own image; the beloved becomes a magical, living mirror, the object of desire to which the lover eventually falls prey, converting himself from agent into passive subject.¹⁴⁸ The idea that a person could assume the form of a mirror is also encountered later, perhaps most prominently, in Shakespeare's *Winter's Tale* when Polixenes says: "Good Camillo, Your changed complexions are to me a mirror, which shows me mine, too." (I, 2, 380–2) Ultimately, these words relate to a passage in Plato's *Phaedrus* (253D–255D) as well as to Aristotle's concept of friendship, which is valuable because it imparts self-consciousness by acknowledging the friend as *alter ego*.¹⁴⁹ The idea that the friend serves as the mirror image for the self is in accordance with the broader Aristotelian concept that "in both sensation and thought, in different ways, knowledge involves an identity of some kind of the knower with the object known."¹⁵⁰

So why did the concept of mirrors which *embody* the images they reflect become so attractive to Ficino? The idea is absent in Plotinus, who is all too keen to ward off the idea that mirrors may have the capacity to retain images, because to him matter is — paradoxically — "a receptacle that

¹⁴⁸ The idea that the lover is actually transformed into the beloved object has interesting consequences, especially if applied to God himself: does the supreme creator actually want to be transformed into his creation? Leone Ebreo and, to a much greater extent, Giordano Bruno would later address this question.

¹⁴⁹ On this, see Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1170b 6–8; *Eudemian Ethics* 1244b 24–26, *Magna moralia* 1313a; Frontisi-Ducroix (1998) 122–123; Kenny (1978) 229; Kenny (1992) 46–48. To my knowledge, the relationship between Ficino's ideas about friendship and Aristotle's Eudemian ethics, with its Platonic undertone, has never been investigated; the concept of the will to knowledge, which is inextricably linked to Aristotle's theory of friendship, is particularly fascinating. Kenny (1992) 50 summarises Aristotle's complex argument in the *Eudemian Ethics* 1245a 5–10 as follows: "We wish to go on living because we wish to go on knowing; and that amounts to wishing that one should be in some sense identical with the object of knowledge."

¹⁵⁰ Kenny (1992) 50, commenting on *De anima*; 418a 13–16.

receives nothing,” a “repellent base.” Plotinus thinks that if matter does not remain by itself, it would swallow the forms.¹⁵¹ Porphyry’s *Sententiae*, translated by Ficino in 1488, repeats the same concept.¹⁵² In commenting on the passage in the *Enneads*, Ficino says that Plotinus wants to alert us to the difference between divine and earthly things because the latter are just specular images of the former in the way the Apostle Paul had said *nunc videmus per speculum in enigmate* (1 Cor. 13:12). Ficino must have deliberately wanted to blur the specific implications of Plotinus’ idea, namely that earthly matter is like a repellent base, a mirror that reflects but does not take up any forms whatsoever. Ficino applies this idea to another level of the hierarchy of being, that is, to the paradoxical relationship between God and creation in general that is characteristic of Negative Theology.¹⁵³

¹⁵¹ *Enneads* III, 6, 15; on this, see also Ferwerda (1965) 19; O’Brien *passim*; *Enneades* III, 6, 14; trans. Plotinus (1966–88) III: 271: “But if matter was really participant and received being in the way one thinks it does, what came to it would be swallowed and sink into it. But as things are, it is apparent that it is not swallowed but matter remains the same and receives nothing, but checks the approach as a repellent base and as a receptacle which for the things which come to the same point and there mingle; it is like the polished objects which people set against the sun when they want to get fire (and they fill some of them with water), so that the ray, being hindered by the resistance within, may not pass through, but be concentrated on the outside.” On Plotinus claiming that matter is incapable to unite with forms, see also Corrigan (1996) 1.

¹⁵² Porphyrios (1987) chapt. 20: 69: “Sed dum ab ente deficit (sc. materia) quamobrem quae in ea sunt imagines insunt in deteriori rursus imagine, quemadmodum in speculo id quod alibi situm est apparet alibi et ipsum speculum plenum esse videtur nihilque habet dum omnia videtur habere.” Also cited, for example, in Pereira (1585) V, 11: 307.

¹⁵³ Commenting *Enneads* III, 6, 15 Ficino says in Plotinus (1559) 161vE–162rA: “Post haec, memento materiam quidem esse inanem essentiae primae umbram, formas vero materiales esse varias imagines idearum, quae in prima continentur essentia, nullam habentes cum illis similitudinem in natura, quamvis in effectu repraesentandi similitudinem aliquam videantur habere. Atque ideo materiam instar speculi, dum vel solas imagines accipit, vel forte nec istas quidem accipit sed videtur accipere, revera nihil pati, praesertim quoniam materia in aliud cum ipsa sit ultimum, resolvi non potest, ideoque nec pati. [...] Item materia ex praesentia formae nullam sibi propriam qualitatem contrahit, vel virtutem, & idcirco non patitur. [...] Materia utique quum sit malum, id est maxime distans ab ipso bono, non sic appetit bonum, ut naturale aliquid inde sibi vindicet, sed ut quandam imaginariam vestem inde induat, atque fallat: & quo magis in sua infortitate permanet, eo magis est mala, sive malum [...]. Maxime vero inter haec observabis, quod ait naturalia si cum divinis comparentur, non maiorem habere substantiam, quam imagines corporum in speculis apparentes. Nec aliter haec a divinis perpetuo dependere, quam imagines ab obiectis. Huc Salomonis illud tendit

That Ficino believed in the capacity of mirrors to contain and retain images becomes obvious from his remark in the same passage, that according to the people who are drawing perspectives (*persectivici*), the image is just a reflection of an object in the mirror, whereas according to the natural philosophers (*physici*) the image resides there and is in the mirror. An amazingly similar passage is also to be found in *Nature's confession* in the *Roman de la rose*:

Nor, [...] do I wish to say where such images have their being, whether inside or outside the mirror, and I will not give any account of other marvellous sights, that are suddenly seen to occur, or whether to my knowledge they have external existence or are simply the product of fantasy.¹⁵⁴

Omnia vanitas. Huc illud Pauli; videmus nunc per speculum in enigmate. Sed quoniam nunc & in corpora videmus, & speculum: a quibus in quo imagines omnino dependet ideo ipsam in se imaginum deprehendimus vanitatem, alioquin nisi videmus illa, hanc redarguere non possemus: sed quae imagines sunt, esse res veras arbitraremur: sicut & nunc quae naturalia nominantur veras esse substantias opinamur, quoniam neque divinam neque materiam aspicere possumus, a quibus in quam ceu simulacra ab obiectis in speculum prosiliunt atque resiliunt. Profecto vel sicut putant physici imagines rerum ipse sunt in speculis, velut sicut perspectivi tradunt nullae in speculis sunt imagines, sed radii rerum in speculum incidunt atque inde si iisdem reflectantur ad occultum. Quod accidit, ubi ad pares angulos reflectantur, tunc res ipsae per eiusmodi suos radios oculis ita redduntur, ut tamen sensus ibi fallatur, putans alibi se res videre quam videat, quomodocunque vero res se habeat, qualis est comparatio speculi ad res visibiles atque visum, talem esse Plotinus vult atque Porphyrius materiae ad res divinas, & sensum: quam sane materiam velut ipsi prorsus oppositam, existimat radios actusque primi entis & mentis, non quidem intus admittere, sed ceu densum quoddam & propter diversitatem entibus invium repercutere proutinus actus eorum, atque haec ipsa quasi reverberatione apparere sensibus quasi sensibilia, quae in seipsis intelligibile sunt, adeo ut putemus in materia nos inspicere quae in primo ente intellectuque sunt, at quae inde movent animum ut cognoscat: deinde quoniam ipsa entia vel ideae, dum in materiam agunt, neque de natura sua quicquam amittunt, neque de statu moventur neque in proportionem vel affectu conveniunt cum materia: ideo quod dari videtur inde velut inane debilissimumque materiali semper hac indiget sede. Atque interim materia haec quia nec verum aliquid accipit unquam, neque quaecunque videtur accipere, ob naturalem falsitatem vere accipit, ideo impletur nunquam, sed semper affectans transmutationi perpetuae prebet occasionem."

¹⁵⁴ *Romance of the Rose* vs. 18,217: 281; see also Seneca, *Quest. naturales* I, 5,1, who says that there are two different theories about mirror-images; according to the first, the mirror gives forth *simulacra* that are emitted by the reflected bodies, whereas according to

If we adopt Ficino's terminology, Plotinus would be on the side of the *perspectivici*, whereas, I think, Ficino was inclined to listen to the opinion of the *physici*, or natural philosophers,¹⁵⁵ because for him the mirror functions precisely as an image of union as well as the tool that allows for a conversion from active into passive object. In that context, another passage from Plotinus was conducive to the idea that mirrors catch (and hence retain) images:

And I think that the wise men of old, who made temples and statues in the wish that the gods should be present in them, looking to the nature of the All, had in mind that the nature of soul is everywhere easy to attract, but that if someone were to construct something sympathetic to it and able to receive a part of it, it would of all things receive soul most easily. That which is sympathetic to it is what imitates it in some way, like a mirror to catch a form.¹⁵⁶

The above passage turns out to be of crucial importance to Ficino, for it led him to write his most controversial work, the third part of the *De vita*, his influential treatise on magic.¹⁵⁷ (See also chapter three and the epilogue of the present study.) Amongst other things, Ficino here tried to establish the extent to which material images of the gods (again some sort of mirror images) actually reflect/embody the virtues of their celestial counterparts (an idea to be found also in the *Asclepius* 37). In this case, the mirror functions as a container of souls. Interestingly, the Plotinian passage cited above stands next to that author's only direct mention of the story mirror of Dionysius.

the second theory the things themselves are reflected. Seneca thus implies that the visual ray is detoured. See Frontisi-Ducroux (1997) 145.

¹⁵⁵ On the history of that term, see Keßler (2001) 82, with n. 5.

¹⁵⁶ Trans. Plotinus (1966–1988) IV: 71; *Enneads* IV, 3, 11.

¹⁵⁷ According to Kristeller, the *De vita* is a commentary on *Enneads* IV, 3 11, whereas Walker has pointed also to *Enneads* IV, 4, 30–42. On this, see Copenhaver (1987) *passim*, but esp. 442–443.

Mirrors as Containers: Some Early Modern Cultural History

It is fascinating to notice that the idea of a transformation from passive object into active subject in the mirror (so prominent in Ficino's emanationist concepts) is here transferred onto ordinary, material mirrors. Yet, Ficino was not alone in using this complex of ideas: accounts of the amazing capacities of mirrors were very common in medieval and Renaissance texts and in certain cultural practices. The following detour into some of the more common assumptions about mirrors in Ficino's time will confirm the idea that mirrors in general have the capacity to catch the reflection of a form in a particularly magical context. Instead of being a mere image of deception or degradation, the mirror may also focus and enhance light, thus acting as a screen that receives and eventually itself becomes creative.

The mirror's capacity to enhance the force of light, which at first might seem to the modern reader to be a simple confusion between plain mirrors and burning glasses, turns out to be actually founded in a theory that conflates the concepts of mirror image reflection and procreation.¹⁵⁸ In his writings Ficino mentions several types of mirrors. For example, he uses the metal mirror with a polished surface, which produces rather faint and dark images, to illustrate the concept of gradual deterioration in the hypostatic mirrors discussed above.¹⁵⁹ Apart from the burning glass that focuses and enhances solar power and is conducive to the idea that light once captured in the mirror reinvigorates again, Ficino also mentions other concave reflecting surfaces, each of which distorts the original image and produces a different and deceptive image. The mirror with a plain surface, for instance, gives forth side inverted images, whereas a concave but oblong mirror gives forth upside down images.¹⁶⁰ In the latter case, Ficino could also be referring to a long tra-

¹⁵⁸ For an example of mirrors as burning glasses in Ficino see *De vita* III, 26: 332: "Figura speculi lenis, concava, nitens, coelo congrua ob hoc ipsum proprie munus tantum coelitus accipit, ut radios Phoebi in se cumulatissime complectantur, et solidissimum quodque ad centrum suum e conspectu locatum repente comburat."

¹⁵⁹ On the metal mirror which renders deteriorated images, see Plutarch (1927–1969) 404D; 521B who says that mirrors only *eidola* of reality appear.

¹⁶⁰ In *Timaeum* def. 40, OO 1473–1474: "Differentes autem apparitiones ex differentis speculorum, & aspectus situsque contingunt: In speculo plano dextrae partes imagines, sinistris nostris respondent, sinistrae vero dextris marginis. Ac si speculum formam imbricis habeat eminentes utraeque eius imaginis utrinque transmutant [...] Verum si oblongum marginibus eminentibus speculum sit per obliquum, ita nobis expositum,

dition of all sort of optical tricks involving mirrors; for example to let ghosts appear on stages.¹⁶¹ As we had occasion to notice, the mirror's transforming powers underscore the idea that it does not merely reflect the object itself, but creates a new and structurally deceptive image of the object.

Since Antiquity the mirror was believed to have the capacity to convey knowledge of things divine. As such, it could be both an instrument of self-knowledge and the receptacle of diabolic or destructive forces. This ambivalent attitude was also present in the Renaissance (and indeed, later on): the mirror was an image of deterioration, as a screen, a focusing lens, an instrument of deception, a magical object, an image of vanity or self-cognition.¹⁶² In Renaissance art, the mirror served as an allegory for virtue (*Prudence*) as well as for vice (*Superbia*). In the very early 1500s, just a few years after Ficino's death, the Netherlandish painter Hieronymus Bosch, in his "The Garden of Earthly Delights" (Prado, Madrid), included a woman looking into a mirror that is nothing more than the rear end (to use a euphemistic English expression) of a devil, thus illustrating the equally explicit French proverb *Le miroir est le vrai cul de diable*.

It was precisely this ambiguous nature of mirrors that made them magical tools par excellence, instruments that were used to summon de-

[...] imagines indicat resupinas [...]. Proinde cum radius visualis intuitus speculum illinc obiecta plurima reflectatur eaque prospiciat per pares videlicet incidentiae reflexionesque (ut ferunt) angulos simulque eorum imagines attingat in speculis. Cur non circa idem duo quaedam sibi videatur idola contueri? Quia videlicet perfecta quadam imaginis ad obiectum similitudine fallitur. Fallitur quinetiam rem obiectam putans esse duntaxat in speculo ubi eius intuetur imaginem: imagines quasdam e speculis resultare, & si nonnulli negant: Theoprastus tamen in libris de anima, ut Iamblichus et Priscianus exponunt, cum Platone consentit: Et Proclus in sexto de Republica probat." For the passage on distorting mirrors, see *Timaeus* 46A and Lucretius (1994) IV, 311: 103.

¹⁶¹ Hero (1899–1911) *passim*.

¹⁶² Frontisi-Ducroux (1998) 122 comes to similar conclusions about the function of the mirror in Classical Greece: "tantôt projecteur, tantôt instrument d'exploration interne, le plus souvent récepteur de ce qui vient d'en face, il est aussi passage ou lieu d'émergence de ce qui sans lui resterait inaccessible." See also, 59–62. On the one hand, the mirror effeminates and depersonalizes men; for a free male Greek citizen it was disgraceful to use a mirror in private. On the other hand, Socrates recommended the mirror as an instrument for self-cognition; see Diogenes Laertius (1925) II, 33; an opinion Seneca shares (1971–2) I, 17, 4, 6.

monic as well as saintly powers.¹⁶³ Already in Antiquity mirrors had been used for divination¹⁶⁴ (a papal bull later banned these practices)¹⁶⁵ as well as for deceptions. In his *De mysteriis*, Iamblichus repeatedly describes the practices of tricksters who produce images of gods or dead persons in bowls filled with water or in half-transparent mirrors.¹⁶⁶ Drawing from a tradition that went back at least as far as Apuleius, fifteenth-century demonologists considered the possession of mirrors (especially mirrors with engravings on their surface) as clear evidence of involvement in illicit magical or divinatory practices.¹⁶⁷ In the following century, Giambattista Della Porta described the magician as an expert in *trompe l'oeil*.¹⁶⁸ In the influential thirteenth-century magical text the *Picatrix*, there are recipes for the preparation of mirrors that, through various suffumigations and inscriptions, acquired and retained demonic forces, as well as instructions on how to use a plain steel mirror to ward off thunderstorms.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶³ On the medieval metaphor of the mirror as instrument of self-reflection/speculation, see Cardini (1984) 71–79. esp. 74; see also West (1983) 156.

¹⁶⁴ Originally, a bowl filled with water served as a mirror, linking the mirror to this element and, to the moon; which was supposed to be like a big aqueous mirror. On this, see Cardini (1984) 76 and Apuleius (1971) chapt. 42: 52, who recounts a story about a child who catches the sight of Mercury in a water bowl and is thus able to foretell the future. On the use of reflections in water for divinatory purposes see also Augustine *Civ. Dei* VII 35 who condemns such practices. For further references, see Macchorio (1930) 112.

¹⁶⁵ See the bull by Pope John XXII 1326/7 *Super illius specula*. Bullarum Collectio III Paris 1741 pars III: 194; see also Hansen (1901) 43–45; many other references in Macchorio (1930) 85–87; Thorndike (1923–58) III: 23–24 and 30.

¹⁶⁶ Iamblichus (1965) II, 10: 93–94; III, 28: 167–171.

¹⁶⁷ Apuleius (1994) chaps. 13–16: 217–221 defends himself for owning a mirror by saying that possession of other effigies, such as paintings and statues, does not lead to suspicions of sorcery. On mirrors owned by suspected sorcerers see Hartlieb (1989) chaps. 86–93; for English village wizards in the seventeenth century who gazed at reflections in mirrors, polished stone, buckets filled with water, or even polished thumbnails of boys to detect the features of thieves see Thomas (1971) 117, 215, 254, 549, with references. For magical mirrors with engravings from the early modern period, see Scott (1584) lib. 15: 414: “A figure or type proportionall, shewing what forme must be observed [...] in closing a spirit in christall.” As well as the magic mirror from Saragossa described and reproduced in Maury (1846) 154.

¹⁶⁸ Della Porta (1611) I, 3: 5.

¹⁶⁹ *Picatrix latinus* IV, 7, 32: 209–210. The long instructions on how to prepare this mirror through various and protracted suffumigations and ointments by using more or less repulsive substances culminate with the promise of unlimited power over winds, men,

One issue is crucial in this magical context, namely the question of whether the image in the mirror was considered to be just a *reflection* or whether it actually resided, remained *in* the mirror?¹⁷⁰ Demonologists as well as devout Christian pilgrims seemed to incline towards the latter possibility, at least as far as the supernatural image was concerned. During the mid-fifteenth century for instance, the *Liebfrauenkirche* in Aachen witnessed a very peculiar kind of pilgrimage involving mirrors:

The holy nature of mirrors lay in the manner in which they were employed by the pilgrims. They would hold these mirrors up to the sacred relics to catch them in a reflection. When they returned to their villages, they exhibited their mirrors to friends and relatives boasting that they had brought back [...] the inspirational qualities [...] because their mirrors had captured the reflection of the sacred scene.¹⁷¹

In accordance with such beliefs, we find that in many Renaissance paintings Christ as Saviour of the world is portrayed as holding a crystal orb that contains a landscape or reflects the surroundings in a transparent object akin to mirrors. The idea that the mirror would capture and retain a portion of the supernatural was perhaps influenced by medieval ideas about of a stainless “mirror of divine providence” (a remarkable invention indeed) that, according to Bernhard Silvestris, has the capacity to retain all images. “There was then the mirror of providence, it had a huge circumference, boundless width and vast surface, with forward looking reflection, so that no rust could

and demons: “Custodias hoc [speculum] et totum illud intelligas quod tibi dixi; nam potens eris super ventos, homines, & demones, & facies quod volueris.” Interestingly, the passage above is an interpolation missing in the Arabic original; the Latin version attributes the recipe to Geber, the Arabic master alchemist. The instruction on how to prepare a polished surface to ward off thunderstorms reads: “Recipe de puro calibe (quod est terrum andanicum), ex quo speculum facias optime politum. Et versus nubes vadas, praedictum speculum in tuis manibus deferendo & versus nubem elevando, vocem fortiter emittendo; sic ab eodem loco tempestas recedet.” *Picatrix latinus* IV, 7, 22: 209.

¹⁷⁰ The question remained subject to debate as late as the eighteenth century, see Nolan (1990) 287 with references.

¹⁷¹ Goldberg (1985) 139.

ever tarnish the images it once contained, neither would old age destroy them nor onslaught trouble them.”¹⁷²

In an inversion that was characteristic of European magical theory and practice, the mirror of providence found sinister uses. Powerful sorcerers were believed to have the capacity to trap the souls of the deceased (preferably the souls of recently executed criminals) in crystal bowls. Sometimes, these magical tools were even sold to be used by other persons, presumably less potent manipulators of images.¹⁷³ Although imprisoned into a mirror (like a soul into a body), the evil spirit (packaged in a bowl and turned into a commodity) nevertheless continued to lead a life of its own.¹⁷⁴ In his *Disquisitiones magicae* (1599–1600) the Spanish Jesuit Martin del Rio recounts the story of a Bordeaux lawyer who believed that he kept a spirit in a bottle, an indication that even educated people could adhere to these superstitious beliefs.¹⁷⁵ Other sceptical views about the demonic potentials of mirrors had been held at least since Roger Bacon’s *De multiplicatione specierum*, where the author says: “the opinion of the vulgar [masses], who hold that forms or species are impressed in the mirror and that vision by reflection is completed

¹⁷² *Cosmographia*, cited after Dronke (1974) 123: “Erat igitur speculum providentiae, cuius magna admodum circumferentia, intermina latitudo, extensa superficies, propicius introspectus, ut quas diu contineret, imagines non rubigo deterret, non deleret antiquitas, non turbaret incursus.”

¹⁷³ For folk beliefs that demons actually resided in the magical instruments, see Roper (1994) 186: “Witches accused of using crystal balls for divination in late sixteenth-century Augsburg defended themselves by disclaiming any involvement in the production of the magical instrument, but they presented themselves rather like operators of pre-fabricated demons [...]. As far as possible, crystal ball-gazers sought to distance themselves from the powerful, hypothetical sorcerers who had set up the balls; but their reluctance to claim power to conjure and their refusal to speculate on the mechanisms ultimately served to strengthen the belief that crystal magic did, in the last analysis, rest on the conjuration of very powerful spirits, by very powerful sorcerers.” See also, 133.

¹⁷⁴ On transparent things as “friends of light” and hence objects akin to mirrors see Ficino, *In Theophrastum de somniis* chapt. 14, OO 1807: “diaphanum, id est transspicuum, & radiis undique pervium, & amicum, quasi facilis hospes [...]” On the function of the diaphane as universal medium of communication, even in opaque objects, see Ficino, *In Theophrastum de somniis* chapt. 17, OO 1809.

¹⁷⁵ *Disquisitiones magicae* IV, 2 q. 6 sec. 4: reprinted in *The Occult in Early Modern Europe* 42.

through these forms, is false.”¹⁷⁶ The following description from the medieval *Roman de la Rose* of a crystal at the bottom of the fountain of Narcissus gives a very accurate synopsis (in the truest sense of the word) of ideas about mirrors and translucent objects as potentially demonic and even lethal objects, but also erotically attractive:

The crystal is so marvellous and has such power over that whole place, with its trees and flowers and everything adorning the garden, is revealed there in due order. Just as things placed in front of a mirror are reflected in it, and their appearance and colour are seen quite plainly, exactly so [...] does the crystal truly disclose the whole of the garden to him who gazes into the water. [...] And there is nothing so small, so secret, or so hidden that it is not displayed there, as if it were etched into the crystal. This is the perilous mirror where proud Narcissus looked at his face and his bright eyes, and afterwards lay stretched out in death. Whoever looks at himself in this mirror can have no help or remedy against seeing something which causes him promptly to fall in love. [...] for Cupid, Venus’ son, sowed here the seed of Love which covers the whole spring; here he sets his nets and snares to trap young men and maidens. [...] I was happy then to linger, admiring the spring and the crystals revealed to a thousand things around me.¹⁷⁷

In the *Roman de la Rose* the mirror functions as an advanced tool of perception (with a remarkable capacity for synthesis) that represents objects that otherwise would pass unnoticed. As was the case with the mirror of providence, the crystal at the bottom of the font is able to “capture” the objects it reflects, to dominate them and even to kill them; this optical device exerts considerable and highly uncanny power over the things it reflects. In the *Roman de la Rose*, the fate of Narcissus is sealed by his looking into a crystal, which

¹⁷⁶ Ed. Lindberg (1983) 146: “falsa est illa opinio vulgi quae estimat formas seu species imprimi in speculo ad hoc, ut visus eius contemplatur per illam formam.”

¹⁷⁷ *Romance of the Rose* vs. 1530–1532; On the Narcissus episode in this work, see Vinge (1967) 81–32 with references; Vitti (1992) 53–57.

induces in him a lethal affection for an object that is out of reach; the active gaze transforms the onlooker into a passive object of his own desire.

Mirrors: Physical Creation

It is precisely this paradoxical quality of reflection and imprisonment, a form of “embodiment without body,” that allows the mirror to become Ficino’s most concise metaphor for the state of matter. Like matter, the mirror willingly receives and embodies any form; hence the paradoxical condition of matter, namely that it is supposed to remain unchanged in the process of receiving and embodying the myriad forms, is solved. As a tool that embodies forms without a body, Ficino’s mirror is the perfect vehicle to adapt Plotinus’ teaching that matter was the “shadow of a shadow.” In the mirror, actual bodies seem to vanish and hence to become nothing but mere optical illusions. The equation of mirror and matter therefore precludes the association of matter with any sort of tactile perception. This, however, is only half of the story, because we know that even in the higher and highest levels of being the reflected image retains its material character, albeit in different degrees of refinement. Towards the lower end in the hierarchy of Creation the objects which mirrors retain and subsequently reflect become increasingly tangible. Their relationship to, and their connection with women and physical procreation thus becomes even more obvious. A material exchange takes place between object and reflecting surface to such an extent that the reflected object may even stain the mirror. Not quite unexpectedly, Ficino repeats the Aristotelian story of the menstruating woman who looked at herself in the mirror and the image it reflected assumed the colour of blood.

Ficino comes up with this story in his Commentary on the *Symposium* when he accounts for love as a kind of infectious disease transmitted by the visual ray emitted by the eyes:

Aristotle writes that women, when the menstrual blood flows down, often soil a mirror with bloody drops by their own gaze. This happens, I think, from this: that the spirit, which is a vapour of the blood, seems to be a kind of blood so thin that it escapes the sight of the eyes, but becoming thicker on the surface of a mirror, it is clearly observed. If this falls on some less dense material, such as cloth or wood, it is not seen, for

the reason that it does not remain on the surface of that thing but sinks into it. If it falls on something dense but rough, such as stones, bricks, and the like, because of the roughness of that body it is dissipated and broken up. But a mirror, on account of its hardness, stops the spirit on the surface; on account of the evenness and smoothness of its surface, it preserves it unbroken; on account of its brightness it aids and increases the spirit's own ray; on account of its cold, it forces its very fine mist into droplets.¹⁷⁸

We are here confronted with a highly compressed argument, as well as a complex range of ideas, which ultimately dates back to Aristotle's short treatise on dreams. He says:

For in the case of very bright mirrors, when women during their menstrual periods look into the mirror, the surface of the mirror becomes a sort of bloodshot cloud; and if the mirror is new, it is not easy to wipe off such a stain, while if it is old it is easier. The cause is, as we said, that the eye is not only affected by the air, but also has an effect upon it and moves it – as bright objects do (for the eye is a bright object and has colour). Now it is reasonable that the eyes, like any other part whatsoever, should be affected during the menstrual period; for they are veined by nature. That is why, when the menstrual discharges occur because of a disturbance and bloody inflammation, the

¹⁷⁸ Trans. Ficino (1985) 160, *De amore*, VII, 4: II, 247–279: “Scribit Aristoteles, mulieres quando sanguis menstruus defluit, intuitu suo speculum sanguineis guttis saepe foedare. Quod ex eo fieri arbitror, quia spiritus, qui vapor sanguinis est, sanguis quidam tenuissimus videtur esse, adeo ut aspectum effugiat oculorum, sed in speculi superficie factus crassior clare perspicitur. Hic si in rariorem materiam aliquam, ceu pannum aut lignum incidat, ideo non videtur quia in superficie rei illius non restat, sed penetrat. Si in densam quidem, sed asperam, sicuti saxa, lateres et similia, corporis illius inequalitate dissipatur et frangitur. Speculum autem propter duritiem sistit in superficie spiritum; propter equalitatem lenitatemque servat infractum; propter nitorem, spiritus ipsius radium iuvat et auget; propter frigiditatem, rarissimam illius nebulam cogit in guttulas.” For another quotation in Ficino, see OO 941: “Atque Aristoteles, inquit, mulierem in purgatione menstrui sanguinis constitutam foedare sanguine quodam obiectum, speculum et imaginem.” See also Allen (1989) 190 n. 25. For a repetition of the same story, see Della Porta (1611) VIII, 15: 380–381.

change in the eyes is not evident to us although it is present (for the nature of the discharges is the same as that of semen); and the air is moved by them, and has a certain effect on the air on the surface of the mirror which is continuous with it, i.e. it makes that air affected in the same way that it is itself; and the air on the mirror affects the surface of the mirror. As in the case of clothes, the purest mirrors are most quickly stained; for a pure mirror shows accurately whatever it receives, and the purest shows the smallest movements. The bronze, because it is smooth, perceives best any touch at all (one should think of the touch of the air as a sort of rubbing, — like a wiping or a washing), and because it is pure the touch, however slight it may be, becomes apparent in it. The reason why the stain does not leave new mirrors quickly is their purity and smoothness; for in their case it penetrates both in depth and all over — in depth because of their purity, all over because of their smoothness. The stain does not remain on old mirrors because it does not penetrate in the same way but more superficially.¹⁷⁹

In this amazing description of tactile vision, Aristotle introduces the bloody mirror to account for time-delayed action that occurs in our sensory organs while we are dreaming; the story serves him as example of how sense-impressions linger in the mind, even when the object that caused them is no longer present. The dream is a phenomenon analogous to sense-perception. Obviously, it may be subsumed under the larger category of events called “action at a distance.” Moreover we learn from this passage that a material exchange takes place between eye and reflecting surface to such an extent that the reflected object (in our case, a menstruating woman) may even *stain* a mirror. Obviously, in the process of reflection (that is in our context, while we are dreaming) some sort of matter is impressed with a form. And indeed, the story of the bloody mirror provides us with the key to the mechanisms of transmission, reflection, transformation, and retention of dreams in our imagination as the images are *captured* by a reflecting surface.

The theoretical assumptions that structure the account of the bloody mirror may be outlined in the following way: a beam of highly refined menstrual blood is emitted by pores of the body and the sense organs

¹⁷⁹ Trans. J. I. Beare in Aristotle (1984) 73; 459b 28–30.

in general, but in particularly concentrated form by the eyes which, in the act of perception, project this vapour onto the surface of all surrounding objects. In accordance with that, Aristotle maintains that the blood will become visible only on hard and polished things, such as mirrors, otherwise it is dispersed. The story of the bloody mirror highlights the Greek idea that vision entails the exchange of material particles; to see means to enter into a contact of some sort with the perceived object. Normally, this exchange is imperceptible, as the visual rays emitted by the eye are very fine; yet, in the case of a very dirty and particularly material gaze, such as that of a menstruating woman, the visual ray may condense on the surface of a very fine and clean mirror. The context of the observation is particularly important: no man has the capacity to stain a mirror by looking at it; only a woman can soil a mirror and only at the particularly dangerous and taboo-loaded period in her life.¹⁸⁰

But nothing could easily be found that is more remarkable (*monstrificium*) than the monthly flux of women. Contact with it turns new wine sour, crops touched by it become barren, grafts die, seeds in gardens are dried up, the fruit of trees falls off, the bright surface of mirrors in which it is merely reflected is dimmed (*hebetatur*), the edge of steel and the gleam of ivory are dulled, hives of bee die, even bronze and iron are at once seized by rust, and a horrible smell fills the air. To taste it drives dogs mad and infects their bites with an incurable poison. [...] Not only does this pernicious mischief (*malum*) occur in a woman every month; but it comes larger every three months [...] the substance in question is the material for human generation, as the semen from the males acting like rennet collects this substance within it, which thereupon immediately is inspired with life and endowed with body.¹⁸¹

The exchange of material particles has the potential to transmute distant objects, in our context to soil a clean mirror. Indeed, the story of the bloody mirror provides us with the key to the mechanisms of transmission,

¹⁸⁰ Frontisi-Ducroux (1997) 147–154.

¹⁸¹ Pliny (1938–63) VII, 15, 64; II 549; see also XXVI, 23, 77–79; VIII, 55–59.

reflection, transformation, and retention because it illustrates how images are *captured* by a reflecting surface. The concept that structures the story of the bloody mirror underscores several crucial assumptions, one of which is that vision entails the exchange of material particles: to see means to enter in contact with the perceived object. Sixteenth-century medical treatises on fascination, a genre emerging around the year 1500, emphasize women's natural capacities to fascinate and to infect through their dangerous menses, by polluting the air: children conceived during the menstrual period are prone to suffer from leprosy, epilepsy, or to become monsters.¹⁸²

The story of the bloody mirror was one of the most famous and frequently cited testimonies for occult phenomena such as infection, fascination, or evil eye during the Middle Ages and the Early Modern period.¹⁸³ The special appeal of the bloody mirror can be attributed to at least three different factors. First, its reflecting surface functions as a scientific optical tool, which (like a magnifying glass) enhances the human capacity for perception, thus uncovering the material principles of occult phenomena that otherwise would pass unnoticed.¹⁸⁴ Second, the mirror is a receptacle that retains the blood emitted from the woman's eye. And third, the bloody mirror accounts for otherwise inexplicable phenomena that may be seen as the "imposition of a higher form onto a lower passive material." This story explains not only how divine or diabolic images may enter the mind, but also how one may be infected with a contagious disease through the gaze of an infectious person (the evil eye):¹⁸⁵ to see means to enter into contact with the perceived object. In accordance with that, a sixteenth-century Spanish physician reports that a man was able to break a mirror just by the demonic power of his eyesight.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸² On this see the excellent paper by Cabré (1998) *passim*, esp. 61–65 with references to works in Spain during the first third of the sixteenth century. On infected air, see chapter four of the present study.

¹⁸³ Kovach (1980) 173–175, with references, 209–211, 211 n. 117; Cabré (1998) 59.

¹⁸⁴ In that sense, during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance the noun "mirror" was a signifier for optical tools in general, such as magnifying lenses, crystal bowls used for divination, or burning glasses.

¹⁸⁵ It is interesting to note that mirrors worn around the neck were used as (illicit) charms to ward off infection from the evil eye; see Cabré (1998) 56. This practice confirms the popularity of the idea that (some) mirrors have the capacity to contain or to absorb the images they reflect.

¹⁸⁶ Cabré (1998) 60.

Even more generally speaking, all creative processes may be explained in terms of a debased reflection in a mirror — for example, the way in which the form of a statue in the sculptor's mind is subsequently impressed onto the marble.¹⁸⁷ The blood-stained mirror is one of the few instances where women enter Ficino's discursive universe; significantly, the context of the female appearance is associated with the demonic, with action at a distance — infection through the evil eye.¹⁸⁸

Contrary to Thomas Aquinas and other medieval authorities, Ficino maintains that the material exchange in the mirror is not restricted to the terrestrial realm, that it is not limited to the specific sociological problem of potentially contagious menstruating women. According to Ficino's metaphysics, the bloody mirror embodies one of the lowest manifestations of the sinister agency of the female aspect of Creation. The bloody mirror thus becomes a powerful metaphor that accounts for the deceptive and potentially rebellious "shadow" that is intrinsic to all created beings. Once inserted into this cosmological context, the reduction of matter to a shadow of the divine form, to a "body without a body,"¹⁸⁹ inherently carries with it an unwanted consequence: the corporeal, embodied world returns in the guise of the demonic, uncontrollable entities that may potentially threaten the domination of form. Because the shadow is part of, or even a creation of, the form it represents, it may, to a limited extent, retain the power of that form. We need only remember that it was such a parthenogenetic scheme of birth that

¹⁸⁷ For a concise overview that brings mirrors, statues, echoes, and magic together see Ficino's *Epitome in Apologiam Socratis*, OO 1388/384.

¹⁸⁸ Let me emphasize that the female presence here is not a kind of allegory for positive abstract ideas such as Love, Truth, Philosophy, or divine and quasi divine beings such as Athena, Venus, the Muses, or the Graces, but an embodied woman, a person in flesh and blood.

¹⁸⁹ See the ambiguous ontological status of images in Ficino's *Sophist* commentary, ed. Allen 275 and of *spiritus* in *De vita*, III, 3: 257. Such paradoxical beings appear to fulfill a key function as mediators, tying the world together. Ficino is here influenced by Michael Psellus *De daemonibus*, who defines the demonic nature precisely in terms of such a paradoxical quality of disembodied embodiment: "Natura daemonum non est absque corpore, sed habet corpus, et versatur circa corpora." (Ficino's translation, OO 1939.) As Stephens (2002) 62, emphasizes, Aquinas (*Summa theologiae* I, 51, 2) ascribes the same ambiguous status to the bodies of angels and demons: "Aquinas argues that angels and devils have bodies that both are and are not real. This in-between state of reality is accompanied by the creation of a virtual body."

brought forth the entire creation.¹⁹⁰ At this point, matter (which from the very beginning in the act of creation had been reduced to a mere yet omnipresent shadow) re-enters the world: not body, not form, yet perilous to the imprudent soul whose gaze is only towards the material world, with no memory of the divine source. Ficino's theorizing centres on a fundamentally solipsistic vision of creation and creativity in which the material world, by being tied to the ambiguous metaphor of the mirror, becomes associated with a particular and paradoxical condition of disembodied embodiment and consequently associated with the demonic. The myth of Narcissus has deep correspondences with this view. In the following chapter we will see how Ficino uses the figure of the female vampire as an embodiment of this complex of ideas.

¹⁹⁰ For example, in *Theologia platonica*, XVII, 2 where God creates the world by looking into a shadow which becomes his mirror. The physical aspect of the act of creation, involving parturition, is thus excluded. I use parthenogenetic in this sense.

CHAPTER 3

LADY VAMPIRES: MARSILIO FICINO ON BLOOD

Blut ist ein ganz besondrer Saft.
(Goethe, *Faust I*)

In the preceding chapter, we saw how in the philosophy of Marsilio Ficino the mirror became an all-pervasive metaphor for the physical world. In this chapter, I examine certain ideas about blood in the context of strategies for the preservation of physical life which Ficino discusses in his the *Three Books on Life*. This text enjoyed some notoriety and saw nearly thirty editions in more than 150 years. It may thus be labelled if not a medical best-seller, at the least a highly successful work in that genre of Renaissance treatises on medicine and magic.

As in the texts we have examined in the previous chapters, so in the *De vita*, metaphysics becomes akin to philosophical anthropology. That is to say, an ostensibly abstract philosophical discourse on the order of the world shapes a normative theory on the relationship between men and women. To give just one example, in the third book of the *De vita* Ficino provides us with an impressive description of the macrocosm in which male and female aspects mingle in a harmonious and well coordinated way:

the wise men of India testify, [that] the world binds itself together; and they say that the world is an animal which is masculine and at the same time feminine throughout and that it links everywhere with itself (*coire*) in the mutual love of its members and holds together; [...] Hence Orpheus called the very nature of the cosmos and the cosmic Jupiter masculine and feminine. So eager is the world everywhere for the mutual union of its parts, that the masculine sex is truly everywhere mingled with the feminine. The order of signs testifies from up there, where successively in that unending

order the preceding one is masculine, the subsequent one, feminine.¹

My claim is that the phantasm of cosmic order invoked here actually testifies and refers to a deep (male) anxiety that the body is and remains totally uncontrollable. This fear is openly expressed in the idea that the descent of soul into the physical world is a disastrous event that has to be compensated for by an ascent toward the realm of the divine ideas.

In this chapter I shall investigate another such instance, namely Ficino's ideas on blood: it is the fountain of life and the cause of the organic body. In Ficino's account reproduction is a process whereby blood is transmitted to another body, an idea which is modeled on, or refers to a remarkable mythical figure: the female vampire.² The *meretrix* we encountered in chapter one as a figuration of matter returns here in the guise of the female vampire who plays an important role in the cosmic transactions described in the above quotes from the *De vita*. In the language of Renaissance Neoplatonism, the body becomes a trap for souls. The third book of the *De vita*, for example, emphasizes that the foetus is a well disposed snare for soul:

¹ *De vita* III, 26: 386/387: "Quo quidem attractu secum ipso devinciri mundum testantur sapientes Indi, dicentes mundum esse animal passim masculinum simul atque feminam, mutuoque membrorum suorum amore ubique coire secum, atque ita constare; [...]. Hinc Orpheus naturam ipsam mundi Iovemque mundanum marem appellat et feminam. Usque adeo mutui partium suarum coniugii ubique mundus est avidus. Esse vero masculinum sexum feminino ubique commixtum, declarat illinc quidem ordo signorum, ubi praecedens perpetuo deinceps ordine masculinum est, subsequens femininum." The entire passage is very influential in sixteenth-century theories on magic and is for instance plagiarized in Della Porta (1611) I, 9: 23. See also introduction to *De vita* 29–30: "whereas in his earlier work, the cosmic love, like the human love was a spiritualized homosexual one of the like-for-like, in the *De vita* he has made the love one of heterosexual opposites which lasciviously attract. [...] A notion which one misses in the *De vita*, if one comes to it fresh from Ficino's *Commentary* on the *Symposium*, is his famous rediscovery, the doctrine of 'platonic love,' the idea that affection between two friends, — a non-orgasmic love of the sort he attributes to Plato [...] can be spiritually uplifting." On the history of the analogy between microcosm and macrocosm in Ficino, see the introduction to *De vita*, 40.

² This chapter is an expanded and revised version of Kodera (2003a); I wish to thank Valery Rees and Michael Allen for their meticulous and thoughtful and critical comments and proof reading, as well as Alice Pechriggl for many important conversations and encouraging remarks.

Is it not true that Nature in the foetus, as the artificer of the foetus, when she has disposed the little body in a certain way and shaped it, straightway by means of this very preparation, like a bait, leads down the spirit from the universe? And does the foetus not through this spirit as another tinder absorb life and soul? And finally through a particular species and disposition of soul, the body thus animated is worthy at last of the presence of a divinely given mind.³

Ficino provides us here with a theory of how the body, through some intermediaries, is able to attract soul, even to draw celestial beings down to earth who become trapped by a well shaped, seductive and treacherous body, hence echoing the motif of *materia meretrix* we encountered in chapter one. This passage has received a lot of attention by recent scholars who have investigated Ficino's theories on magic. I would like to emphasize that in this passage Ficino also presents a theory of how bodies get animated, become human, and what happens in the process of procreation: significantly, childbirth and magic are here addressed on the same level. Body is an artful trap for souls who get distracted from their proper goal, the contemplation of the divinity. As will become clear in the following section, the precarious union between body, the debris of the universe, and soul, the form of forms, is brought about by various go-betweens, amongst them blood. Such mediators are neither body nor soul and yet they paradoxically embrace both aspects at the same time. As we shall see, ensouled bodies become daemonic entities through these intermediaries.

³ *De vita* III, 26: 384/385: "Nonne in ipso fetu natura, fetus ipsius artifex, cum certo quodam pacto corpusculum affecerit figuraveritque hoc ipso statim praeparamento, velut esca quadam spiritum ab universo deducit? Perque hunc velut fomitem vitam haurit atque animam? Ac denique per certam animae speciem dispositionemque corpus ita vivens dignum est praesentia mentis tandem donatae divinitus."

The De vita

The *De vita* was completed by 1489.⁴ Originally its three parts were composed as separate treatises over a period of almost a decade. The first book, *De vita sana* (1480) defends the melancholic humour imparted by Saturn (black bile) as the physical basis for the kind of madness which is conducive to genius and was originally intended to be part of Ficino's collection of letters.⁵ The second book, *De vita longa* (composed in August 1489), is concerned with methods to keep an aging body young and contains remarkable information on the nature of body, life and blood. The third book, *De vita coelitus comparanda* (an amazing title which may be translated as "On how to obtain life from the stars" or "On how to make one's life more heavenly" or "Compare one's life in a heavenly way"), written earlier in the same year became somewhat notorious and may have caused difficulties with ecclesiastical authorities for the ordained priest Ficino, because it expounds his ideas on astrology and the construction of talismans.⁶ In short, the third book of the *De vita* is a learned treatise on white magic or on the art of influencing natural bodies without the assistance of demonic powers. The *De vita coelitus comparanda* has received considerable attention in the twentieth century, notably from D. P. Walker, and Frances Yates, as well as from Brian Copenhaver and Paola Zambelli, who studied Ficino's exposition of magic and emphasized his competence in using the relevant sources from the Neoplatonic tradition of Late Antiquity.⁷

⁴ The following introductory remarks are drawn primarily from the introduction to *De vita* 3–90 and from Copenhaver & Schmitt (1992) 159–161, with references.

⁵ On melancholy, see the now classical study by Klibansky & als. (1964). For its place in the letters, see *Letters of Marsilio Ficino* VI: 4 and 67.

⁶ On this, see introduction to *De vita* 55–70.

⁷ Again, see introduction to *De vita* 45–55. The third book of the *De vita* was originally intended by Ficino as part of a commentary on a passage by Plotinus that addressed the question of the magical animation of statues by Egyptian priests — *Enneads* IV, 3, 11.; trans. Plotinus (1966–1988) IV: 71: "And I think that the wise men of old, who made temples and statues in the wish that the gods should be present in them, looking to the nature of the All, had in mind that the nature of soul is everywhere easy to attract, but that if someone were to construct something sympathetic to it and able to receive a part of it, it would of all things receive soul most easily. That which is sympathetic to it is what imitates it in some way, like a mirror to catch a form." This Plotinian idea is of crucial importance to Ficino because it caused him to write the third book of the *De vita*. According to Kristeller, the *De vita* is a commentary on the above passage, whereas Walker has also indicated

My approach to the *De vita* is different from that of these authors, in that I pay special attention to the second book of the *De vita*, that is, to the treatise on the preservation of life. To the best of my knowledge, this part has been rather neglected by contemporary scholars. Here in the *De vita longa*, we find one of the instances where Ficino is talking about the human body from a merely physical perspective. As the author's main concern here is with sustaining and preserving life, he also expounds a theory on the nature of animated bodies in general.

A first glance at the short *De vita longa* (roughly 35 pages in the modern edition) gives the confusing impression characteristic of many Renaissance medical treatises. The reader is confronted with an array of quotations and anecdotes from Classical literature (Galen calls digestion the root of life II, 4), interesting recipes for health-giving drinks such as *aurum potabile* (drinkable gold II, 10), and the repeated advice to use clysters frequently (but to abstain from more violent purges such as hellebore). Moreover, the book contains information on the medical virtues of the colour green (II, 14), as well as the myrobalan. The attentive reader can also find a crash course in identifying and appreciating fine wine (II, 17).

Much of what Ficino has to say is therefore quite conventional in that it refers to the precepts of Galenic medicine, a tradition that sought to maintain a balance among the fluids responsible for a healthy body by following a dietary regimen which was in accordance with the planetary constellations conditioning the body.⁸ Galen taught that the human body was composed of basic constituents, namely blood, phlegm, black bile and yellow bile; these so-called four humours bear a resemblance and a relationship to the four elements, and have to be kept in equilibrium (*temperamentum*) for the body to remain healthy.

Enneads IV, 4, 30–42 as a source. On this, see Copenhaver (1987) *passim*, esp. 442–443, with references.

⁸ On Galenism in general, see for instance Temkin (1973); on the medical tradition in the Renaissance, see Siraisi (1990) 97–106.

Blood, Spiritus and the Elixir of Life

By putting special emphasis on the mediating and vital role of blood, Ficino discreetly modifies Galen's theories in order to fit them into a Neoplatonic scheme of Creation. Ficino again operates with a metaphysics of light that conceptualises the intellect as radiating sun and the realm of shapeless matter as darkness which, to varying degrees, is formed by divine light. In the context of his medical physiology, Ficino adopts a similar but originally Aristotelian concept according to which the living body functions like a burning candle or like an oil lamp that radiates the force of light (II, 2 and 3).⁹ In accordance with this metaphor, Ficino maintains that the spirit of life has to be looked after in the fashion one tends the candle flame. It should be protected from burning too fast as well from suffocating slowly. Ficino associates these extremes with two planetary gods, Venus and Saturn respectively, who are in competition for the energy of our life. He says that Venus (who is a signifier for the sexual body) is responsible for a quick dispersion of the flame of life, whereas Saturn (who imparts intellectual contemplation) causes gradual suffocation:

But finally, to be medical: just as there are two violent means whereby a flame can generally be extinguished — either being blown out as it were by wind or, contrariwise, being compressed by ashes — so we either quickly dissipate the spirit by the Venereal effect (*effectu Venereo*, e.g. by ejaculation) or gradually suffocate it by the Saturnian, [...].¹⁰

I will return to Venus in the next section of this chapter, but for now let me emphasize that, in an important move and in accordance with Galenic and Aristotelian physiology, Ficino equates the oil of the lamp with blood, thus highlighting the importance of just one of the original four constituents of the body. Human blood has to be light and bright, neither too watery nor too

⁹ This idea goes back to Aristotle, *On length and shortness of life* 5, 466a 17 – 466b 33; especially 466b 29–31, and is again alluded to in Galenus (1821) 519–23 (= *De temperamenti* 1, 3).

¹⁰ *De vita* II, 16: 216/217: “Sed ut tandem simus medici, sicut flamma duobus communiter modis violentis extinguitur — aut velut diffusa ventis, aut contra quasi compressa cineribus — sic spiritum vel celeriter effectu Venereo dissipamus vel sensim Saturnio suffocamus.”

fiery (II, 5: 177). Too great a moisture is dangerous because it is conducive to putrefaction and therefore to destruction,¹¹ while an excess of fiery qualities causes the candle to burn too quickly and dry the body out, thus also precipitating destruction.

Ficino's theory endorses a gendered structure: on the one hand the fiery aspect which is male and formal, delimits and therefore shapes the body; on the other hand, there is the moist and shapeless element, which is feminine, and the cause of instability and decay.¹² I take this theory about preservation of life to be a reference to fear of the unbounded, of that which lacks the distinctions imposed by male form, or in other words, the female body which is conceived in terms of otherness. With regard to medieval and Renaissance medicine Nancy Siraisi says: "Complexion theory usefully accounted for psychological as well as physiological characteristics or stereotypes. The cold and moist attributed to women explained timidity as well as menstruation."¹³ In the previous chapter we saw how Ficino introduced the concept of *spiritus* to account for the communication between souls and bodies. In the present context, this mediating function is taken over by air (on which, see also the following chapters):

Let not the blood be fiery either, nor watery, but airy — not airy like a too-dense air, lest it be too much like water, nor like a very subtle air, for fear it may easily kindle into fire; but let it maintain moderation in its substance; let the middle sort of air greatly predominate.¹⁴

We remember that such mediating agents have a paradoxical nature: *spiritus*, is a low manifestation of soul, or in Ficino's words: "a very

¹¹ *De vita* II, 6: 180: "humida tanquam putrefactioni obnoxia fuge"; *De vita* II, 19: 230: "Hoc humorem proculdubio naturalem a putrefactione tuebitur."

¹² An instructive and characteristic quote on the instability of bodies that is due to their liquid nature is in *De amore* IV, 2: 171: "Corpus iugiter fluit crescendo, decrescendo, resolutione continua, liquefactione, calore vicissim et frigore permutatum. Anima semper eadem permanet."

¹³ Siraisi (1990) 103; MacLean (1980) 35, 57.

¹⁴ *De vita* II, 5: 176/177: "Sanguis ergo non igneus esto, nec aqueus, sed aerius — non aeri crassiori similis, ne proclivior sit ad aquam; non aeri subtilissimo, ne facile incalescat in ignem; sed substantiam teneat mediocrem, in qua medius aer dominatum habeat plurimum."

tenuous body [...] not a body" (III, 3).¹⁵ Like *spiritus*, such middle terms have a body and at the same time are incorporeal.¹⁶ Like blood, they are not entirely formal and at the same time not entirely physical and, therefore, as we shall see in a moment, daemonic. According to Ficino's account, blood contains the virtues (the powers) of the celestial world that reigns over the body; it is akin to, or is indeed the lowest manifestation of, the *spiritus vitalis*, which is again a crude manifestation of soul. The key role of blood in physiology is emphasized in the first book of the *De vita* where Ficino maintains that one should be very cautious about blood-letting, citing *Leviticus* (17:14 ff.) which says that blood is the "repository of life" (*vitalis thesaurus*, *De vita*, I, 22: 153). As is well known, the vital function of blood is confirmed by Aristotle, Galen, and Avicenna.¹⁷ Blood is therefore the foundation of life as well as the lowest manifestation of *spiritus*. It fulfills a central function in Ficino's medical theory, a function that is paralleled in and confirmed by the introduction of middle terms, like soul and spirit, and

¹⁵ On the doctrine of medical *spiritus*, see Walker (1958).

¹⁶ For Ficino's doctrine of *spiritus*, more or less embodied garments of the soul, see Introduction to *De vita* 41–42 and *De vita* III, 11: 256 on the *spiritus*: "Ipse [sc. spiritus] vero est corpus tenuissimum, quasi non corpus et quasi iam anima, item quasi non anima et quasi iam corpus." See also *De vita* III, 26: 384/385: "[Mundus est...] non solum corporeus, sed vitae insuper et intelligentiae particeps. Quamobrem praeter corpus hoc mundi sensibus familiariter manifestum latente in eo spiritus corpus quoddam [...]. In spiritu viget anima; in anima fulget intelligentia. Atque sicut sub Luna nec miscetur aer cum terra, nisi per aquam, nec ignis cum aqua, nisi per aerem, sic in universo esca quaedam sive fomes ad animam corpori copulanda est ille ipse quem spiritum appellamus." *Theologia* XVI, 7: III, 137: "anima [...] in medio mentium corporumque confinio creata est." *Theologia* XVI, 17: III, 153: "anima verissimum omnium, quae a Deo componuntur, medium, [...] in ea, ut caetera pretermittam, partibile impartibili, alterum eodem, motus statu quasi actum gravi harmonice temperatur." A related phenomenon is to be found in Ficino's theory about the salutary powers of the colour green, according to which the mean is between the two extremes black and white; *De vita* II, 14: 405. On the importance of the principle of mediation in Ficino in general, see Kristeller (1943) 101–102; on Ficino and the principle of mediation in his magic and cosmology, see introduction to *De vita* 41, with references. Plotinus too sometimes blurs the distinctions between matter and spirit by confounding it with a doctrine of degrees of refinement, reminiscent of concepts we know from Stoicism. See also Armstrong (1940) 54.

¹⁷ Aristotle, *Part. anim.* II, 2. 647b 1 – 648a 35; Avicenna (1508) bk. 1 fen 1 doctrina 4, fols 4v–6v. On this topic in general, see Siraisi (1990) 105, who says that "such echoes and repetitions from one work to another, one author to another, and one discipline to another were often taken as providing corroboration from independent sources." (103)

air, (as we shall see in the following chapter) into his cosmology. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that the transfusion or transmission of blood fulfills a strategic function in the prolongation or preservation of life. It is at this point that Ficino's ideas about female vampires come into play.

Lady Vampires and the Exchange of Blood

In order to restore youth in an aging body, Ficino resorts to what he imagines to be a technique practised by witches: he advocates the drinking of blood as a cure against aging.

There is a common and ancient opinion that certain prophetic women who are popularly called "screech-owls" suck the blood of infants as a means, insofar as they can, of growing young again. Why shouldn't our old people, namely those who have no [other] recourse, likewise suck the blood of a youth? — a youth, I say who is willing, healthy, happy and temperate, whose blood is of the best but perhaps too abundant. They will suck, therefore, like leeches, an ounce or two from a scarcely-opened vein of the left arm; they will immediately take an equal amount of sugar and wine; they will do this when hungry and thirsty and when the moon is waxing. If they have difficulty digesting raw blood, let it first be cooked together with sugar; or let it be mixed with sugar and moderately distilled over hot water and then drunk."¹⁸

This account of vampirism is especially striking as it powerfully inverts and demonises the functions traditionally ascribed to the female body in patriarchal societies: instead of giving life, the demonic women on which

¹⁸ *De vita* II, 11: 196–199: "Communis quaedam est et vetus opinio, aniculas quasdam sagas, quae et striges vulgari nomine nuncupantur, infantium sugere sanguinem, quo pro viribus iuvenescent. Cur non et nostri senes omni videlicet auxilio destituti sanguinem adolescentis sugant? — volentis, inquam, adolescentis, sani, laeti, temperati, cui sanguis quidem sit optimus, sed forte nimius. Sugent igitur more hirudinum ex brachii sinistri vena vix aperta unciam unam aut duas; mox vero sacchari vini que tantundem sument, idque esurientes et sitibundi facient crescente luna. Si crudus aegre concoquitur, coquatur prius una cum saccharo, vel ad aquam calidam moderate destillet saccharo mixtus; deinde bibatur."

Ficino's medical practice is modelled, kill babies; instead of nourishing the newborns with their milk, they suck their blood.¹⁹ This inversion strongly indicates male anxieties about female powers of procreation, which tend to undermine the concept of total male domination characteristic of androcentric discourses. The way in which Ficino presents his medical vampirism shows beyond a doubt that such eccentric practices were at least *intended* to be put into practice. My conjecture is further corroborated in the paragraph which immediately follows, where Ficino gives a long theoretical explanation of how it is possible that the blood is not digested in the stomach but rather becomes refined there. The potent new substance subsequently enters the heart because of an occult affinity between the foreign and the patient's blood. Let me emphasize again that Ficino models this cure on what he imagines to be a witch's way of prolonging life. Ficino's therapy differs from the illicit form of vampirism only because the donors act voluntarily and because the *De vita* offers an elaborate recipe for the preparation of the blood; the substance thus seemingly becomes a medical drug. Even so, Ficino recommends a medicine for prolonging life that he copies from an illicit demonic practice. Significantly, he constructs this medical theory out of some fragmented eerie stories and from at times highly sceptical reports from Classical literature.²⁰ Apart from being a rather unlikely story — at least for Ficino's less credulous contemporaries — the citation above is by

¹⁹ For an interesting variant of the story in which the *striges* actually breast-feed the children see Pliny, *Natural history* XI, 232, which emphasizes the link between procreation and death.

²⁰ For two important testimonies on the screech owls from antiquity, see Ovid, *Fasti* 6. 131–143; and Pliny, *Natural History*, XI, 232; interestingly, both authors leave the question open whether this story of women who devour children is fictitious (e.g. referring to birds rather than to transformed women) or not. Gianfrancesco Pico, in his dialogue *Strix*, (published 1523) addresses these sceptical attitudes, in order to refute them, see Pico (1864) 23–24; see Stephens (2002) 89–98; 232–238; 278–281. On Roger Bacon's *De retardatione* 7 as a possible source, see *De vita* 422 (n. ad II, 11 /2). On the entire *striges* topic in Classical Antiquity, see Pauly IV, A, 1 col. 355–363 with references. On the idea that the *striges* are killing children, see esp. col. 558–560. Alexander Goldbloom has noted that Arnaldo da Villanova describes a medicine which is distilled from the blood of young men, but here the blood is used only in a highly refined state after being subjected to an alchemical process that reduces it to the pure quality of the four elements. See *De sanguine humano* in *Opera* (Basle, 1597) 145–149: quoted after Alexander Goldbloom: “The hidden properties of blood in medieval and early modern Europe: an unpublished paper given at the Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine, London, May, 1998.

no means the single occurrence of vampirism in the *De vita*. The practice of drinking blood is not confined to the realm of medicating aging humans. In fact, it has a cosmic precedent, for it is modelled on the queen of vampires, the goddess of love, sex and procreation:

Venus endowed you with only one pleasure, and that harmful, with which she harms you but profits those to come, little by little draining you as it were through a secret pipe (*per latentem quandam quasi fistulam*), filling and procreating another thing with your fluid, and leaving you finally as if you were an old skin of a cicada drained upon the ground, while she looks after the fresh cicada. Don't you see that Venus generates a fresh being, living and endowed with sense, from your own matter? She steals from you, therefore, the youth, life, and sense, from your whole body, I say, through pleasure of the whole body, that she may from thence make a whole body.²¹

Intercourse drains unsuspecting men of the most valuable substance their organisms can produce: their sperm, which is the purest and highest manifestation of blood, which according to Aristotle contains parts of the *aither*, the life-giving substance of the stars.²² The appearance of the goddess of love (whom Ficino obviously introduces as a powerful endorsement for his medical vampirism) is associated with chaos, wantonness, even prostitution. Like a praying mantis, Ficino envisions Venus — or the influence channelled through her planet — as eating her male partners after sexual intercourse. I therefore take the above citation to be of crucial importance

²¹ *De vita* II, 15: 208–211: “Unam profecto noxiamque Venus vobis indidit voluptatem, qua noceret quidem vobis, prodesset vero futuris, exhaustiens paulatim vos per latentem quandam quasi fistulam, aliudque vestris liquoribus implens atque procreans, vos tandem quasi vetustum quoddam spoliū cicadarum iam exhaustum humi relinquens, cicadae interim teneriori prospiciens. Nonne videtis, quod Venus de materia vestra generat esse recens quiddam et vivum sensuque praeditum? Surripit ergo vobis iuventutem et vitam atque sensum ex toto, inquam, corpore per totius voluptatem, ut efficiat inde totum.” It is interesting to note certain affinities to the lower Venus described in Ficino's *De amore* II, 7. The cicadas are of course reminiscent of Plato's *Phaedrus* 259BC, but see also the relevant Commentary in *De vita* 195 and Allen (1984) 24–27.

²² *De generatione animalium* 736b 30–32. See below.

because Ficino here inserts the story of the screech-owls, a fairy tale without systematic intention, into a wider cosmological context, and hence he universalizes fragmented weird reports to lend them a general validity in an intellectually coherent system. One also notes important additions to the original folk story: procreation on the cosmic level is conceptualised as a loss of one's own substance. Moreover, the body is merely a container (like the old skin of the cicada) into which the spirit of life (blood) has to be infused in order to ensoul it. In Ficino's account of medical vampirism, blood, the vivifying substance, becomes a commodity that can be transferred from one individual to another and that has to be protected from theft (like money) in order to keep the individual being alive.

At this point I conclude that the vital virtues of blood are not produced by the (female) body, they rather come from outside. In this account, it is not the woman who gives birth, but rather she is treacherously trafficking in the spirit of life by draining it from unsuspecting bodies. The vivifying power of blood seems to exist only in a strictly limited quantity and hence it has to be stolen from other living beings in order to beget new life. This is a direct result of Ficino's static vision of Creation, the conceptualisation of the macrocosm as an organism where only a fixed and limited amount of spirit of life is available, just as in any other living being. The human body — female, passive and inferior — is incapable of producing this elixir of life on its own. As in Classical physiology, blood is linked with the unchanging celestial bodies, hence it comes as no surprise if Ficino believes that the essential part of blood is not produced by the body. This view is linked to Aristotelian natural philosophy, where the concept of *pneuma* or *spiritus* is tied to ideas about a *quinta essentia* or a fifth element out of which the stars, those unchangeable and unalterable heavenly beings, are made. In human and animal bodies, this substance becomes effective in the zone around the heart where, like a catalyst, it causes and reacts to qualitative change, though without undergoing alteration itself.²³ According to Aristotle, *pneuma* is air of some sort with a special kind of heat which makes the sperm fertile or procreative.²⁴

From what has been said so far, it becomes obvious that the male magus (whom we encountered as a cunning manipulator of the secret bonds of the universe) is actually just a pale and rather helpless imitator of the erotic spells of Venus, the chief witch, and of her followers on earth, the female

²³ *De generatione animalium* 703a 11–14 and 25.

²⁴ *De generatione animalium* 736b 30–32.; see Nussbaum (1978) 156–163.

vampires. They are dangerous deceivers of unsuspecting males, as becomes obvious from the following passage:

if at any time you see Venus, you see her looking youthful and embellished with the rouge and ornaments of a courtesan/prostitute. Because she is ever new, therefore she always likes new things and hates old things. She destroys what has been made in order to construct from them what is still to be made. Again like a prostitute (if I may say so), not content with one man, she loves the crowd and (to speak like a dialectician) favours the species generally rather than the individual.²⁵

Here the goddess of love, the arch-vampire is linked to the figure of the prostitute, another emblematic image for the disruption of order imposed by the eternal male forms. Venus is conceptualised as a kind of nymphomaniac, a meretricious expert in deception, insidiously depriving the individual of its vital power, and hence parallels the Renaissance Aristotelian figurations of matter we have investigated in chapter one. This gloomy outlook on creation, conception, and childbirth is, essentially, a direct result of the violence imposed on the female aspect of Creation in the act of totally subordinating it to a static universe of unalterable, male forms. In this complex of ideas one not only encounters a personal allegory or a sort of metaphorical discourse, but also a text that functions as a reification of persons, with possible dramatic, devastating effects especially if real women become accused of actually using such techniques.²⁶ The uncanny potential of bodies to resist male domination becomes obvious again in the following passage:

Mars indeed harms you very rarely, and face to face. [...] Only Venus comes outwardly as a friend, secretly as an enemy [...] stop your ears to her flattering promises as to

²⁵ *De vita* II, 15: 210–211: “si quando vidistis Venerem, iuvenilem admodum vidistis et quasi meretriciis fucis et ornatibus expolitam. Haec ergo, quae nova semper est, nova semper affectat, odit vetera. Facta destruit, unde construat facienda. Haec rursum, si dictu fas est, quasi meretrix non uno quovis est contenta viro, vulgus amat et, ut dialectice loquar, speciei passim potius quam individuo suffragatur.” (Slightly modified translation.)

²⁶ Boyarin (1993) 58. On the reification of women in classical Greece, see also Carson (1990) *passim*.

the lethal songs of the Sirens [...] avoid the sorcery of this Circe. She promises (rather than gives) you at last barely two pleasures, and these indeed lethal.²⁷

A central idea in Ficino's account of life is that the wantonness of the female body is dangerous because it is deceptive for prudent male souls. Once this metaphor becomes inserted into a universal cosmological context the physical world returns in the guise of the demonic, of uncontrollable entities which become potentially threatening to formal domination. The particularly dangerous aspect of the lady-vampire lies in her half-ensouled and half-physical nature: though an evil spirit, her activities have bodily consequences.²⁸

However, at least one difficulty remains in my account: Ficino's negative description of Venus appears in the literary framework of a speech given by Mercury. In that speech, the god insinuates that he might be lying to his audience (II 15: 208/209). This is a tactic probably employed to avoid accusing the goddess of love directly of vampirism or prostitution. As we have seen, earthly things in Ficino's cosmos always exist in analogy to their heavenly counterparts. I therefore conclude that the recurrence of the female vampire in the heavenly spheres (Venus) as well as on earth (*strix*) provides strong evidence that Mercury is Ficino's mouthpiece.²⁹

Moreover, the voluptuous female vampire is a highly persistent figure that again appears in the third book of the *De vita*. Here, Ficino's allusions to the venerable witches and goddesses of ancient Greece and to their sophisticated handling of unsuspecting mortals occur in an even more explicit and highly condensed image in the guise of the *lamia*. This type of vampire

²⁷ *De vita* II, 15: 210–211: “Mars quidem raro admodum vobis palamque nocet. [...] Sola Venus palam ut amica venit, clam inimica venit. [...] Aures autem ad blandas pollicitationes eius tanquam ad letales Syrenum cantus obstruite. [...] Circes huius veneficia devitetis. Haec vobis duas vix tandem et has quidem letiferas pollicetur voluptates, potius quam largitur [...]” For a refreshing discussion of the roles of Circe and Venus in the context of Renaissance rhetoric, see Rebhorn (1995) ch. 3, esp. 188–189.

²⁸ In accordance with such ideas, Ps.-Psellus, an authority among demonologists says in his *De daemonibus* that demons have a body and that their activity is directed towards the physical world. The passage reads in Ficino's translation OO 939: “Natura daemonum non est absque corpore, sed habet corpus, & versatur circa corpora, quod & venerandi patres nostri iudicaverunt.”

²⁹ Moreover it is noteworthy that Ficino uses this rhetorical stratagem only once in the entire *De vita*.

appears within the deeply erotic context of the passionate love characteristic of the transactions between bodies and souls:

It is however more likely that [passionate love] is achieved by Venereal daemons who rejoice in such deeds and words or by daemons who are simply seducers. For they say Apollonius of Tyana often caught and unmasked *lamiae*, that is, lascivious and Venereal demons who take up the shape of beautiful girls and entice handsome men; as the serpent with its mouth sucks the elephant, so they likewise suck those men dry, using their vulva as a mouth, and drain them (*exhauriant*).³⁰

It is significant that Ficino magnifies the singular event of Apollonius catching a *lamia* (as related by Philostratus) into a regular practice of uncovering female vampires, thereby insinuating that such demonic beings exist in large numbers. As in the instances discussed above, the vampire is a figuration of the material world and of the female body; it becomes associated with wantonness and the drinking of blood. Again the choice of words is significant: the demon is unmasked, just as was Venus, the death-bringing divine harlot who hides under illusory make-up and ornaments. The special threat of the female vampire consists in the idea that her beautiful body is actually not what it appears to be: a fear that is translated into the notion that women may use their sexual organs to drain men, to kill them, and not to give them birth. The substance of life is not nourished and multiplied in the woman's womb, but rather taken away from the unsuspecting prudent male soul: to give birth means to kill. The seductive gesture of the beautiful

³⁰ *De vita* III, 21; 354–355: “Probabilius autem est effectus eiusmodi vel per Venereos daemones confici his operibus verbisque gaudentes, vel per daemones simpliciter seductores. Nam et Apollonium Theaneum saepe lamias deprehendisse et prodidisse ferunt, daemones scilicet quosdam salaces Venereosque, qui formosas puellas simulent pelli-ciantque formosos quos, ut serpens elephantem ore, sic illi illos ore vulva pariter exsugant ac prorsus exhauriant.” Slightly modified translation. See Philostratus (1912) IV, 25: I, 403–409, which recounts a tale that Apollonius exposed a *lamia* or lady-vampire “at Corinth who was fattening up a young man in order to suck up his blood”; see also Thorndike (1923–1958) I: 263. The story is repeated in Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy*, III, 2, 1, 1, which inspired John Keats's poem *Lamia*. On the *lamia* in Classical Greece, see Pauly 12, 1, cols. 543–547. *Lamia* was also the name of several famous prostitutes in Classical Antiquity (Pauly, 12, 1, cols. 546–547). On another typical discussion of the *lamia* from the Renaissance, see Pico (1864) 45–46.

vampires mirrors the seductive gesture of the physical body where soul finds itself trapped.

Common to all these accounts is the idea that unstable (and therefore insatiable) female bodies desire male forms and that this erotic aspiration leads to the corruption of the male forms after they have mingled with the deceitful bodies. This set of ideas is tied to the passage we discussed in chapter one from Aristotle's *Physics*, I, 9 192a20, extensively commented during the period under consideration, where matter is associated with a physically desiring woman.

Once this male discourse is projected onto the entire physical world, female wantonness becomes the universal cause of all destruction and change. Instead of being the cause of procreation, sexual desire is turned into an impediment to the preservation or prolongation of already existing life. In the context of Aristotle's *Physics* it is now possible to address an important objection to my indiscriminate equation between the female and the daemonic body, for indeed experts in that field such as Michael Psellus (whom Ficino translated) inform us that daemons are sexless.³¹ At first sight my claim that body, women, and daemons go together seems to be untenable. Psellus maintains that the daemon is unable to retain a stable form, that it assumes ever new forms which constantly vanish and dissolve, just as the shapes we sometimes detect in clouds, a physical versatility that allows the daemon to assume whatever shape it wants.³² I believe it is important to note that daemons share this instability of form, their intrinsic fluidity, with matter, body and women. Hence the autonomy of the demon to assume any form whatsoever undermines or subverts the superior realm of stable male forms.

³¹ I wish to thank Stéphane Toussaint for the information that daemons are sexless, and reply herewith to his objection. For Ficino's ideas on daemons, see also *De amore* VI, 3 which, however, is about good daemons only. For a clear differentiation between Neoplatonic and Christian d[ae]mons see Stephens (2010), who points out that Neoplatonic daemons are always corporeal and may be either good or evil, while Christian demons are (for Thomists) incorporeal and (for Christians in general since even before Augustine) corporeal (but only via "spiritual matter" and not via "material matter").

³² OO 1943: "Non enim solidum corpus daemonum, quo possit acceptas retinere formas. Sed [...] mox diffunditur atque dissolvitur [...] docuit itaque Marcus has maris, & foeminae differentias non inesse daemonibus, sed apparere, nullamque eiusmodi formam in eis stabilem permanere." OO 1942: "corpora vero daemonum, simplicia sunt ductu, flexuque facilia, ad omnemque configurationem naturaliter apta, sicut enim nubes suspicimus nunc hominum, nunc ursorum [...] aliorumve praeferre figuras, sic & corpora daemonum. [...] corpus enim daemonis ad utrumque est natura paratum."

This instability of shape, a direct reference to the female body, allows for a description of the daemonic body as matter gone rampant. In that context, it comes as no surprise that according to Psellus daemons often appear in the shape of harlots. It is interesting to note that Ficino, too, had emphasized the link between prostitution and daemons. Indeed, as we had occasion to note, he portrays Venus as the arch-harlot, always in need of new forms, just like matter desiring form. In that context we saw how the fear of deceptive bodies was again expressed on a different but related level: make-up, an erotically charged skill producing deceptive beauty, is associated with prostitution. It thus follows that daemons are believed to appear frequently as harlots, who are neither passive nor docile women. Again, the same metaphor is used for matter and the daemonic body. And finally, Ficino himself seems to have forgotten Psellus's teaching that daemons are sexless, when he says in the above passage that the *lamia* is a *daemonia*, that is, a female being; an assumption that again fits neatly into the context of the tale of Apollonius' exorcism of a voluptuous woman trying to seduce a young contemplative philosopher.

I take the frequent appearance of the mythical figure of the *lamia*, the blood sucking female daemon, as an indication that this metaphor was a central element in Ficino's explanation of the relationship between the spiritual and the material aspects of Creation. It is well known that Ficino's theories about the transfusion of blood are not confined to the medical physiology of the *De vita*. Such ideas are also discussed in Ficino's earlier and perhaps most influential restatement of Platonic philosophy throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, his *Commentary* on the *Symposium*. As in the case of Apollonius's *lamia*, the exchange of blood is discussed in the context of the causes for falling in love. Ficino maintains that infatuation is due to a highly refined ray of blood, which is emitted by the lover's eyes, a *spiritus* that subsequently infects the blood of the beloved. (See chapters two and four.) As in the *De vita*, the exchange of blood is linked to a deeply erotic context that is potentially perilous to the individual.³³

It is perhaps more than a remarkable coincidence that at the time of the composition of the last two books of the *De vita*, that is in 1489, Ulrich Molitoris's work *De laniis* was published. This dialogue, written in elegant humanist Latin, argued strongly for the existence and deviousness of witches. Frequently reprinted throughout the sixteenth century and be-

³³ *De amore* VII, 4: 246 and 248–249; VII, 5: 249–250.

yond, it was also often published together with the *Malleus maleficarum*.³⁴ Ficino's repeated mentioning of the blood sucking witches who exist on all levels of creation may hence be seen as a reference to the witch-craze, incipient in the fifteenth century. More is at stake here than lofty metaphysical ideas, as many women were going to suffer for this in subsequent centuries. Let me clarify though that I do not think that the *De vita* was one of the main literary sources that fostered the witch-craze. Other and more systematic works, such as the *Malleus maleficarum* were probably much more closely connected to the implementation of the actual repression.³⁵ Nevertheless, I believe that one of the characteristic traits of the *De vita*, namely that the female vampire fulfills a strategic and systematic function in Ficino's cosmology and natural philosophy is significant for the changing body discourses of the Early Modern period.

Blood, the lowest manifestation of *spiritus* and of soul, half-physical half-incorporeal, and hence the daemonic origin and cause of life, exists only in strictly limited quantities within a static universe governed by immutable eternal forms. The *lamia*, a daemon trafficking in this life-giving substance, functions as a trope for the embodied world as well as for the dangers that the physical realm poses to potentially imprudent souls. By using scattered, unsystematic, and highly sceptical testimonies about singular events from ancient literature (this is true at least in the cases of Ovid and Pliny, but even of Johannes Damascenus),³⁶ Ficino constructed a universal and demonic image of the female aspect of creation. In significant ways, the *De vita* is thus indicative of an intellectual environment which increasingly links women

³⁴ For the transformation of the bodies of sorcerers discussed cf. Molitor (1926) ch. 11, fol. 2r.

³⁵ See Stephens 2002.

³⁶ On Damascenus see *Patrologia Graeca*, vol. 94, col. 1603 (I quote from the Latin translation of that edition): "Quidam ex indoctoribus ineptioribusve narrant, Stryges esse mulieres, quae et Geludes dicantur. Eas autem per aerem conspici fabulantur, dumque circumueunt domum, nequaquam foribus et clausuris prohiberi, sed ianuis diligenter clausis ingredi, et pueros suffocare. Quin etiam aiunt eas hepar infantium vorare, et omne ex quo habitu corporis illorum constat; insuper et vitae terminos definire. Atque haec quidem asservant alii se vidisse, audisse alii: quomodo nempe, oclusis foribus, domos ingrediantur cum corpore, vel nuda saltem anima." Another figure related to the Lamia is of course the Jewish Lilith, as the editors of Damascenus have already noticed (cf. *ibid.* n. 2). *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol 94, col. 1603. On Lilith, see *Encyclopedia Judaica* vol. 11; cols. 245–249; Boyarin (1993) 95, with references.

with the daemonic. That such ideas have disastrous consequences not only for women, but also for men becomes obvious in the threat the daemonic body of “the woman” in such discourses poses to the integrity of a static universe constructed by unalterable male forms. Ironically, the threat grows out of a philosophy, Neoplatonism, that had a strong tendency to do away with the physical world altogether. The bodies of women in such male fantasies constitute an intrinsic and therefore powerful threat to the idea of masculine domination. *Vampirella*, a radio play by Angela Carter, brings these transactions to the fore.

Countess: I am not a demon, for a demon is incorporeal; nor a phantom, for phantoms are intangible. I have a shape; it is my own shape, but I am not alive, and so I cannot die. I need your life to sustain this physical shadow, my self. Please give it to me.

Hero: [...] I felt myself seized by the most powerful erotic attraction; only the exercise of iron self-control prevented me from throwing myself at her little feet.³⁷

³⁷ Carter (1996) 27.

CHAPTER 4

DISEASE, INFECTION, COGNITION: AIR AS A UNIVERSAL AND DAEMONIC MEDIATOR IN RENAISSANCE ARISTOTELIANISM AND NEOPLATONISM

And I will purge thy mortal grossness so
That thou shalt like an airy spirit go.

(*A Midsummer-Night's Dream* III, 1, 167–168)

Vampires, Mirros, Nymphomaniacs: we have already encountered a wide array of examples for bodies that have paradoxical qualities. This chapter will explore some Renaissance Aristotelian and Neoplatonic concepts about the elements, with a special emphasis on air. This element has always been closely related to, or even became identified with, soul. In the human body air, as the breath of life and the *spiritus*, fulfills many and important physiological functions. On a cosmological level, its transitory qualities make air into a preferred medium for disembodied embodiment and a formidable dwelling place for daemons. I would like to begin this chapter with a rather unwelcome quotation, at least for a Platonist: the passage is from Aristophanes' *Clouds*, a parody of contemporary philosophy and sophistry in classical Athens. In that play, Socrates makes his first appearance on stage from above, sitting in a basket that is suspended over the stage. Upon his arrival on the ground he explains to a surprised naïve admirer:

I tread the air and the sun. [...] For accurate discoveries about meteorological phenomena I had to suspend my mind to commingle my rarefied thought with its kindred air. If I had been on the ground and from down there contemplated what's up here, I would have made no discoveries at all: the earth, you see, simply must forcibly draw to itself the moisture of thought. The same thing happens to watercress.¹

¹ *Clouds*, 225–233, trans. Henderson (1998) 39. The play was popular throughout the Byzantine world, the Greek *editio princeps* appearing as early as 1498 from the Aldine press.

Aristophanes' intention here is clearly satirical and well known in contemporary Greek culture. Even within the Platonic tradition the amusing episode did not go unnoticed as it is mentioned in Plato's *Apology* of Socrates (19C). Ficino, too, playfully alludes to the Socrates of the *Clouds*.² Moreover, the above passage contains a lot of highly compressed information on the element of air in Classical culture.³ First, there is the association with dry air and intellect or mind, and its differentiation from vaporous unclean air which is akin to water.⁴ In this latter case, air is akin to clouds and, because of its moisture, air is linked to inertia, stupidity, drunkenness, and disease.⁵ Second, the idea that thinking itself is influenced by the physiological state of the brain. Third, Socrates sitting in a basket, suspended in the air, can be read (at least from one perspective) as a playful allusion to, or parody of the divine cavalcade described in Plato's *Phaedrus*. This myth was dear to the Renaissance Neoplatonic tradition for its description of human beings who — by dint of their philosophical and speculative lives — are lifted into the heavens in order to join the gods in their race through the skies.⁶ Fourth, in its different states of refinement air is the medium and the dwelling place of daemons whose qualities vary. As in the preceding chapters, scientific and cosmological phenomena thus become associated with an entire host of anthropomorphic assumptions. The first part of this chapter will look at these cosmological aspects of air, with special attention given to the modifications Marsilio Ficino introduces into the standard Peripatetic account of the role of the elements. In the following section we will see how air becomes a transmitter substance (to use an anachronistic term), which assumes mediating functions which are structurally similar to the unifying role of soul. The last section of this chapter will highlight the physiological, medical and daemonological implications of the concept of air in Ficino.

² *Apologiae Epitome* OO 1387/383: "Item daemones alios naturales ab initio constitutos, alios peregrinos, scilicet hominum animos in aerea translatos corpora, hominesque ea, qua antea consuerant ratione curantes."

³ The passage reads in Ficino's translation in Plato (1602) 15D: "et vos vidistis in Aristophanis comoedia: Socratis v[idelicet] illuc persona circumferetur, affirmatus per aerem vagari: et complures eiusmodi nugas."

⁴ See also Aristotle *Meteorologica* II, 4, 360a 20–21.

⁵ See, for example *Timaeus* 86D; *In Timaeum* ch. 27, OO 1449/447.

⁶ *Phaedrus* 245C–249D; see also *De amore* VII, 15: 259–260; Allen (1984) 88–90, 105,

Air had always played an important role in Classical thought. Anaximenes, for example, had maintained that everything originates from air in a process of condensation and rarefaction. By expanding this process, he thought that air ignites “as fire at one extreme, and at the other to solidify into earth and stones”.⁷ Diogenes from Apollonia is known to have held similar views on the universal function of air and his ideas are reported (disapprovingly, of course) by Augustine and in Theophrastus’ *De sensu*, a treatise which Ficino commented.⁸ According to Diogenes the air must be pure and dry in order to become the agent of thought, for moisture is akin to drunkenness.⁹ He goes even so far as to identify soul with air, in itself an age-old belief.¹⁰ Aristotle reports that

Diogenes [...] thinks that the soul is air, regarding this as composed of the finest particles, and as an ultimate principle; for this reason the soul both knows and causes movement; it knows because it is primary and from it all else comes; it causes movement because of its extreme tenuity.¹¹

Such materialistic explanations of soul as breath of air and foundation of everything were thus not foreign, but nevertheless deeply disconcerting for a Renaissance Platonist. This is especially true of Ficino, one of whose main intellectual goals was to prove the unique and immortal nature of the human individual soul. It is therefore only consistent, when Ficino in his commentary on Theophrastus emphasizes that air is just a medium and can-

⁷ Diehls, fragment 13; Guthrie (1957) 48; Calcidius, *In Timaeum* § 280b; trans. Winden (1959) 71; *Metaphysics* I, 4, 984a 4–5.

⁸ *De Sensu* 39–40 trans. Stratton (1917) 101–107; *Civitas Dei* VIII, 2 in Augustine (1899) V, 1: 356: “Diogenes quoque Anaximenes alter auditor aerem quidem dixit rerum esse materiam, de qua omnia fierent; sed eum esse compotem divinae rationis, sine qua nihil ex eo fieri posset.” See also Macrobius (1994) I, 14, 20.

⁹ Guthrie (1962–81) II: 374.

¹⁰ On the sources of that idea, see Guthrie (1950) 131–143. Aristotle reports the Orphic creed that soul comes from space, it is borne by the winds, as we breathe (*De anima* I, 5, 410a 28); see also *Diogenes Laertius* VIII, 30.

¹¹ *De anima* I, 2, 405a 21–25, trans. Hett (1957) 27. See also Aristotle, *De Spiritu* 5, 483a 33–34, where air functions as principle and foundation of soul.

not be identified with Soul.¹² Even so, in a Neoplatonic conceptual framework that embraces the idea of universal animation, it remained difficult to keep the two notions, that is, air and soul apart. The ambiguity of the two notions becomes obvious in the common functions both entities share in the metaphysical as well as in the natural hierarchy of being: air and soul stretch and communicate between the realm of mind and that of body.

Ficino's ideas on air in his cosmology and physics are inextricably tied to his metaphysical thought, as well as to his daemonology and his medical teachings, a list of different fields of knowledge that seems curiously wide-angled and unfocused for the modern reader, but which is nevertheless typical for the Classical tradition, as well as the Renaissance. It is important to keep in mind that when it came to natural philosophy the vast majority of fifteenth-century philosophers subscribed to an Aristotelian conceptual framework, developed and modified by the commentary traditions, whereby in the region below the moon the four elements, that is fire, air water and earth, are in a constant state of transition that causes generation and corruption, birth and death.¹³ The earth is at the centre of a finite universe, surrounded by spheres in which the planets have their eternal though somewhat erratic movements, encircled by the sphere of the fixed stars, which form the border of Creation. The regular movement of the heavenly spheres is caused by *aether*, which is the

¹² *In Theophrastum* ch. 25, OO 1813: "Ignis agit in aerem, aer in hominem." But the forms are not assimilated to the quality of air; they are just using it as a medium of transport, as the rider rides the horse. *Ibid*: "Nunc autem colorem perspicue cernimus, quoniam lucidus eius actus ad nos usque pervenit, & quidem momento, & totus in qualibet aeris portione. Totum enim repente & ubique videmus, ex quo patet non esse hunc aeri mixtum nec factum aeris qualitate, sed aeri potius (ut ita dicam) insidere sicut eques equo, non sicut in equo figura. Atque sic se separatim adesse diaphano, sicut anima corpori." See also *In Theophrastum* ch. 30, OO 1815: "Res videnda non imprimit aeri formam aliquam vel figuram, sed ab ea iam illuminata procedit ab eius specie lucidus quidam actus, & specialis, atque specificus non mixtus aeri, & ideo aerem non figurans, sed cum primum attingit lucidum in nobis spiritum, rursus evadit in speciem speciei unde venerat congruentem." *In Plotinum* II, 1, 6, OO 1600 emphasizes the idea that translucent air and water are just media for the divine forms: "Cum enim terra naturaliter opaca neque per se luceat, neque lumen intus accipiat, aqua vero & aer tanquam diaphana, id est, translucida & lumini pervia, non habeant quidem ipsa lucem, sed subito capiant." On the doctrine of illumination, see below.

¹³ The idea of the transmutation of the elements is also encountered in the *Timaeus* 49D; for a medieval conceptualization, see Calcidius, *In Timaeum* § 325; Winden (1959) 181.

constituent element of the stars and a substance that has nothing in common with the terrestrial elements. Below the sphere of the moon, the regions of fire, air, water and earth are arranged on corresponding circular spheres. In this hierarchy of terrestrial elements, fire occupies the highest position, while earth occupies the lowest. In the *Timaeus* commentary, Ficino introduces an important modification to Peripatetic natural philosophy: he presents a table of elemental qualities in which fire is entirely active whereas earth is totally passive, and the remaining two elements share active and passive aspects to different degrees, thus mediating between antagonistic fire and earth. (The traditional Aristotelian elemental qualities are listed in brackets; see also chapter one.)

ignis (hot/dry)	subtilis (fine)	acutus (sharp)	mobilis (mobile)
aer (hot/moist)	subtilis	obtusum (blunt)	mobilis
aqua (cold/moist)	crassa (thick/dense)	obtusa	mobilis
terra (cold/dry)	crassa	obtusa	immobilis (immobile)

From this chart (which was not invented by Ficino)¹⁴ it is again apparent that air and water are by no means unimportant links in the metaphysical hierarchy of beings, because they oversee and secure the union between intellectual fire and physical earth. Hence air and water form a third term; we see Ficino constructing out of the fourfold structure given by the traditional number of elements a tripartite scheme which is much more akin to his cosmology as well as his psychology. The chart aptly depicts two opposed, yet mediated basic constituents. The proximity between water and air is a very old idea, linked to the observation that water dissolves into air, becomes mist, air again becoming watery, carrying rain. In such ways water is turned into a rather crude manifestation of air or, vice versa, air can be viewed as a refined product of water.¹⁵

¹⁴ In *Timaeum* ch. 23, OO 1447/443; see also *Appendix in Timaeum* ch. 42, OO 1471/475. The chart is to be found in Isidore of Seville's *De natura rerum* XI, 1. The elemental qualities were also mentioned by Chalcidius. In accordance with this dual structure, Ficino says in the *Theologia* XVI, 6: III, 129: "Denique super lunam ignis, infra vero terra ubique regnat."

¹⁵ *Timaeus* 47C; *Appendix in Timaeum* ch. 43, OO 1471/475. On the laws of transformation of the elements into each other, see Aristotle, *De gen. et corr.* II, 4, 331a12–35; *De caelo* IV, 3, 310b10–11; *Meteorologica* I, 3, 340a 24 - 340b 4 discusses the problem why it is raining only in the lower strata of air: see *infra*.

According to Ficino air, the universal mediator between above and below, becomes the “most mutable element,”¹⁶ whereas fire is the most subtle, acute, mobile, penetrating (*penetratione aptissimum*) and hence masculine element. Matter is the most obtuse substance, itself being motionless, passive and extended. It is important to bear in mind that air and, to a lesser degree, water assume a mediating role that is akin to the function of soul in Ficino’s psychology. Soul was of basic concern and accordingly captured most of Ficino’s attention, so it comes as no surprise that this Neoplatonic hypostasis or manifestation of the ineffable One also fulfills an important role in Ficino’s natural philosophy.¹⁷ The mental and the material structures of the universe are organized in an analogous structure: a spiritual element which is separated from a material; but the gap between the two poles is bridged by intermediate substances which are spiritual and physical.¹⁸ (See also chapter three.) Again, Ficino could refer here to the Neoplatonic tradition.

So far we have seen that air (like fire, and to a certain degree, like water) moves in two directions: upwards and downwards, and thus functions as a mediator in the cosmic hierarchy. Within this larger context, the elements are arranged on concentric spheres moving in circles, a scheme that fits neatly into the order of Creation, as this circular movement imitates the regular and eternal motions of the planetary spheres. Fire, being closest to the heavens, moves in the most regular way, whereas earth, the lowest element, is virtually motionless.¹⁹ Ficino discreetly though significantly reshapes the

¹⁶ In *Plotinum*, II, 1, 6, OO 1599: “Nihil enim facilius quam aer in aliud permutatur. Itaque si propinquet coelo tam valido in coeli formam subito permutabitur.”

¹⁷ Just to cite one frequently quoted passage, *Theologia* III, 2: I, 141–142: “Et cum [sc. anima] media omnium sit, vires possidet omnium. [Quod] si ita est, transit in omnia. Et quia ipsa est universorum connexio, dum in alia migrat, non deserit alia, sed migrat in singula, ac semper cuncta conservat, ut merito dici possit centrum naturae, universorum medium, mundi series, vultus omnium nodusque et copula mundi.”

¹⁸ For Aristotle’s criticism of such a tripartite elemental structure, cfr. *De gen. et corr.* II, 3, 330b 9–21.

¹⁹ In *Timaeum* ch. 25, OO 1449/445: “Profecto quaelibet sphaera mobilis, tam elemental, quam coelestis, pro figura sua naturaliter movetur in orbem, sic loco suo plenius futura. Motus autem rectus ubicunque est, non tam naturalis est, quam reductus in naturam. Si cui vero corpori circuitus convenit, maxime convenit igni. Cum etiam a terra distantissimus sit etiam per naturam, sicut terra est semper immobilis, ita ille est semper mobilis. Si semper mobilis, ergo in orbem. Quod enim movetur in rectum, peracto spatio, quod finitum est, finit & motum.” *Phaedo* 108E–109A says that the spheres hold the earth in the center. On earth as the center of the universe, see *De Caelo* I, 8, 276b 5–6.

Aristotelian doctrine of the four elements: by stressing the *hierarchical* structure of the elements and their circular motion, he eclipses the Aristotelian doctrine of the natural motions and transmutations of the elements. Aristotle, too, had arranged the elements in spheres, though this was not central to his doctrine of prime matter. The elements were composed of couples of antagonistic qualities which made them unstable, an instability that served to explain their constant transformation into each other. The phenomenon of change, or transformation of the elements had served Aristotle as proof for the existence of *materia prima*, the common substrate of all bodies in the sublunary world. He emphasized the *circular* arrangement of the elements in the realm beneath the moon, and their constant transformation into each other: fire, for instance was placed *next* to earth. Ficino accepts this notion of a common substrate; the Aristotelian idea that the four elements are composed of conflicting principles which account for the constant transformation of terrestrial things is superseded by the (un-Aristotelian) notion that the elements function as more or less material principles, rather than as the unstable compounds of the terrestrial world of change. In Ficino the idea that the elements are arranged within a hierarchical order in which they *mingle* with each other eclipses the concept of the constant transformation of the world's constituents. Admittedly, though, the idea of the transformation of elements (an important topic in the *Timaeus*) is not completely foreign to Ficino. According to him, a single matter hides (*delitescere*) under various formal guises,²⁰ the dark fire in the world's centre, for instance vaporizes earth and transforms it onto a higher ontological level: "But the rays' intensity, the material of the earth there — being dry and far from any moisture — is immediately kindled and, once kindled, is vaporised and dispersed through

²⁰ *Theologia* V 4: I, 177: "Animadvertite naturalem elementorum commutationem, si cupis latentem hanc materiam invenire. Nam quando cernimus ubi prius terrae species fuit, ibi aquae postea speciem apparere, dicere non possumus aquae formam quae nuper advenit in terrae forma recipi. Hae namque oppositae quodammodo sibi invicem sunt, quippe cum terra siccitatem, humiditatem aqua contineat. Non igitur forma terrae formam suscipit aquae sed, accedente aquea species, abit in chaos. [...] Eadem ergo materia, quae terrenae formae subiecta fuerat, aquae iam subit formam. Atque haec est argumentatio qua in *Timaeus* Pythagoricus utitur." See *Timaeus* 49–51. On the other hand, it must not be overlooked that, if Ficino was not very interested in processes of transformation of the elemental world, he was nevertheless very attentive to all kinds of metamorphoses linked to the emotional life. This becomes obvious in Ficino's philosophy of love where the lover strives to transform himself into the beloved object. *De amore* II, 6: 153: "ut se in amanti persona quisque transferre cupiat."

channels and blows out flames and sulfur.”²¹ Such remarks, made more or less in passing, made Ficino into an authority for later alchemical writers.²²

In such ways, Ficino adopts a chart in which the sphere of the fixed stars with its perfectly regular movement is at the top of the cosmic hierarchy, whereas the earth is at its bottom. For Ficino, earth, lowest on the ontological scale, seems to take over the function of prime matter. It is in such instances that the extent to which Ficino’s physics differs from Aristotelian natural philosophy comes to the fore. According to the *Peripatetics*, fire and earth are the “purest” elements, easily interchangeable into each other,²³ whereas *materia prima*, the constituent of all physical beings below the sphere of the moon and the shapeless substratum of all physical beings, becomes in Ficino identical with one single element or principle in the centre of the universe.²⁴ In the *Meteorologica*, Aristotle says succinctly that “the body that is below the circular motion of the heavens is, [...] matter, and it is potentially hot, cold, dry, moist, and possessed of whatever other qualities are derived from these.”²⁵ In general, Aristotelian natural philosophy had paid greater attention to the erratic movements of the elements which were the ultimate cause for generation and corruption of physical beings in the sphere below the moon than to the regular motions of the elemental spheres.²⁶

The four elements are arranged on concentric spheres moving in circles, a scheme that fits neatly into the larger cosmic pattern because the planets, too, rotate around the earth in circular spheres. Accordingly, Ficino

²¹ *De vita* III, 16: 320: “Quorum vehementia materia ibi terrae sicca, procul ab humore remota, prorsus accenditur accensaque extenuatur atque dispergitur per meatus undique et efflat incendia pariter atque sulphur.” On subterranean gases and spirits, exhalations and fumes which incline the mind to magic and give marvelous visions in Oreseme’s *De configuratione qualitatum*, see Thorndike (1923–1958) III: 431.

²² On Ficino’s connections with alchemy, see Matton (1993).

²³ *De gen. et corr.* II, 3, 330b 35.

²⁴ Aristotle, too, often equates earth with matter: *De gen. animalium* II, 1, 732b 28–30; IV, 11, 761a 32–42; *Motu animalium* IV, 13, 435b 1; *Meteorologica* IV, 12, 390b 2.

²⁵ *Meteorologica*, I, 3, 340b 15–8; see also *De gen. et corr.* II, 2–3, 329b 7–331a 6.

²⁶ Although the cosmic hierarchy of planets and elements is present for instance in Aristotle’s *De mundo* 392a 23–25 and 396b 35, Aristotle clearly denies that any of the elements is more powerful than the others, see *De gen. et corr.* II, 3 and II, 4 esp. 331b 1–3.

arrives at a cosmology in which the planets and spheres of the four elements are disposed on concentric and rotating circles.²⁷

Earth
Water
Air
Fire
Moon
Sun
Venus
Mercury
Mars
Jupiter
Saturn

²⁷ See also *Theologia* IV, 1: I, 160: "Porro, naturalis motus elementorum est, qui cancellos naturae naturalisque loci non transgreditur, id est perpetuus circuitus in suo loco atque sphaera naturali figurae suae persimilis. Circuit ignis et aer, ut Luna, quod crinitarum indicat revolutio. Circuit aqua iugiter refluendo. Terra si, ut voluit Aegesias, moveretur, in circulum moveretur; ut volunt plurimi manet per superficiem. Circuunt partes eius mundi centrum quodammodo, prout se invicem circa ipsum undique sempiterno coarctant annixu. Ascensus autem aut descensus non proprie naturalis est motus, sed ad locum motumque naturalem subita per rectam lineam restitutio, quae, quoniam ab alio terminatur, perque unicum semper dirigitur tramitem, liquido nobis ostendit elementorum partes ex seipsis minime agitari." Knox (2003) 414–416, has argued that the above quote served as inspiration for Copernicus' cosmology. What is difficult to decide though is the question how this movement of earth can be brought in accordance with astronomical charts and predictions, which took it for granted, that earth was quiet at the center of the universe. Apart from the *Timaeus* 34A which says that the cosmos is spherical and revolves around its axis, an important source for this idea is of course the Greek *Corpus Hermeticum* ch. 12 OO 1854 which Ficino himself translated, though admittedly this source does not mention a circular movement of earth. "Tat: Nunquid immobilis tibi terra videtur? TR: Minime, sed multis motibus agitata, sola tamen haec quemadmodum stabilis. An non ridiculum esset ipsam nutricem omnium, concipientem, parturientemque singula motu carere? Impossibile enim aliquid absque motu parere. Nec enim generatio, vitae creatio est, sed latentis explicatio vitae, neque mutatio mors, sed occultatio potius." In his commentary to this chapter, Ficino says OO 1856: "de materia nihil esse vitae expers, [...] nihil immobile." On the scholastic tradition of arguments for and against the earth's rotation, especially in Burdian and Oresme, who both adduced a whole host of arguments for movement, only to refute them ultimately, the former on an argumentative basis, the latter on scriptural evidence, see Grant (1994) 639–647.

In spite of some statements to the contrary, Ficino in some instances accepts the idea of earth being in motion on the grounds that circular movement is characteristic of *all* spheres of the universe. This is not true of linear movement (*motus rectus*) which terminates after a finite distance.²⁸ This assumption is of course not only in contradiction with the Platonic elemental chart above, where earth is said to be *immobilis*, but also in disagreement with Aristotelian cosmologies.

In his *De amore*, for instance, Ficino says that a sphere is reserved for prime matter which represents the soul of the cosmos as a whole and which secures the unity of Creation.²⁹ Here matter clearly fulfills a crucial, strategic function which is albeit difficult to reconcile with the chaotic aspect of dark or low matter. Nor is this the only occasion in which Ficino ascribes to matter unificatory powers akin to the Godhead: in the *Theologia Platonica*, the soul of prime matter co-ordinates the various different aspects and elements of the universe, thereby unifying the divine edifice.³⁰ Hence, as we have seen in chapter two, according to Ficino ultimately one single material principle (together with the World soul) pervades the entire creation. To substantiate his claim, Ficino adduces astrological as well as Biblical evidence and the testimony of certain Jewish philosophers, mentioning Philo's *De Opificio mundi* (134–135), a text that states that God created the material universe before he created the souls of men, just as a perfect host prepares everything before his guests arrive.³¹

Ficino makes an even more important modification of Aristotle's teachings, when he maintains in several instances that the four elements are

²⁸ Hankins (1999) *passim*.

²⁹ *De amore* VI, 3: 202: "Una igitur erit unius primae materiae anima, duodecim circulorum anime duodecim. [...] Animam mundi, id est, materiae primae et duodecim spherarum et siderarum animas, deos Platonici nominant, tamquam angelice mentis summi-que dei pedissequas."

³⁰ *Theologia* IV, 1: I, 161: "Merito cum lateat, [...] in omnibus sphaeris una prima et informis per se materia, una illius est anima. Quidnam in causa est quod, licet contraria inter se sint mundi membra, in unum tamen conspirant et alia aliis vires suas communicant, nisi quia una anima huius ingentis animalis humores quamvis diversos contemperat, ac membra per situm seiuncta et qualitatem vitae et motus conspiratione continuat?"

³¹ *In Timaeum* ch. 12, OO 1441/439; on this, see also *De amore* III, 3: 89; Kristeller (1972) 293–296. The Passage in Philo is *De opificio mundi* 7; according to Philo, human beings are created out of the very refined manifestations of those four elements which are also the building-blocks of the entire Creation (146).

present on all levels of creation: the heavens are immutable because of a divine command. Following Plotinus, he says that the stars are made of the same material as terrestrial things, the only difference being that the celestial bodies are composed of the four elements in a highly refined state, containing much heavenly, pure fire, the remaining three are invisible due to lack of fire.³² This assumption stands in clear contradiction to Renaissance Aristotelianism, where the more or less chaotic change of the elements was firmly restricted to the realm beneath the moon while the heavens consisted of a fifth element, aether, and were therefore *immutable*.³³ In Ficino it is one universal matter that pervades the entire creation, though in different degrees of refinement: the hierarchical relationship between male form and female matter is inscribed into all created beings. Ficino relates this idea to the issue of domination, communication, and

³² In *Timaeum* ch. 27, OO 1450/447: "Imo vero in toto coelo ignem vult caeteris [sc. elementis] dominari: sed in stellis una cum quadam terra coelesti. In reliquis coeli partibus cum aere, vel aqua coelesti. [...] Sed [...] neque soliditatem, neque lucem tantam habent, aut talem, ut cerni possint." In *Timaeum* ch. 24, OO 1449/445: "Meminisse oportet, tanquam esse in coelesti substantia virtutem, tanquam ad conciliandum efficacem, ut qualitates & motiones, quae apud nos sunt, inter se repugnantes, ibi non pugnent. Item ut reliqua illic elementa statim a prima genitura mundi informam praesentissimi, id est, ignis redacta furerint: quemadmodum per motum coelestem elementa quatuor apud nos, in quavis genitura ad unam reducuntur mixti formam. Neque miraberis in unum illic elementa constari: sic cogitabis etiam infra lunam molem esse compactam, & ignem esse soliditatis terrenae participem, ne ob tenuissimam mobilissimamque naturam continuo dispergatur: terram per se torpentem, ignis consortionem, actionem, vitamque nancisci. Quod si extrema miscentur, nimirum & media mediis extremis misceri. Item si tanta est infra lunam unio, super lunam esse multo maiorem: sed terrae soliditatem sive stabilitatem illic absque crassitudine in vaporea, quasi forma regnare." See also *Theologia* IV, 1: I, 159: "Sic enim excellentissima materia excellentissimae formae id est intellectuali, coniugitur usque adeo, ut numquam dissolvatur." The idea that the heavens are composed of the same kind of matter as terrestrial things puts Ficino in agreement with Aegidius Romanus and William Ockham, and in disagreement with Thomas Aquinas, on this, see Grant (1994) 258–262. On the idea that stars are made of fire and not of quintessence in Plotinus, see Armstrong (1940) 90. On the opinion that the stars contain solid matter, see Plotinus, Enn. II, 1, 6; see *In Plotinum*, OO 1599: "Significat inter haec Plotinus, si coelum tangatur, [...] blando sentiri calorem, soliditatem vero quasi terrenam adesse, ratione potius coniectari, ipsam denique terrae natura quae & opaca est, ideoque opposita luci, & densissima, atque idcirco ad motum precipue talem, omnium ineptissima, nullo modo inesse vult coelo lucidissimo prorsus atque celerrimo." And "Inter haec dum convincere student, nihil esse in coelo praeter igne, dubitationem illam adducit Timaei sententiam."

³³ On Aristotle's concept of aether, see *Meteorologica* I, 3, 339b 19–21; *De caelo* I, 3, 270b 16–25; *De mundo* 392a 5–7.

control over the lower and increasingly material spheres in the earthly realm. He says that if the heavens were not composed of the four elements, they would be unable to *govern* the lower world by their influences. Thus, the elemental structure must needs pervade the entire creation, “as the four elements exist as ideas in God, whereas as virtues in the heavens, as *rationes* in the *anima mundi* and as seeds in nature.” Ficino relates this cosmological hierarchy to a social structure in which the peasant is subordinate to the architect, who in turn is inferior to the geometer, since the latter are increasingly able to understand the immaterial principles of their arts.³⁴

Air as a Mediator in the Universe

At this point air comes into play: Ficino says that the antagonism between the fire and earth is so enormous, that it requires two further mediating elements, that is, air and water, which function as vehicles or media of communication that bring about union.³⁵ To be able to fulfill this double function,

³⁴ *In Timaeum* ch. 24, OO 1448/444: “Esse utique elementa haec sub luna, nemo negabit. Esse vero in coelo, physici nonnulli negabunt. Sed isti audiunt metaphysici precor, probantes elementa per ideas suas esse in ipso mundi opifice: esse inde in anima mundi per rationes suas: esse in natura per semina. Ergo & in coelo per virtutes: et sub coelo per formas. Quo enim pacto a causis coelo superioribus elementorum naturae transeunt infra coelum: et ibi quidem protinus naturae, nisi virtutes horum moderatrices coelo interim infundantur? [...] sicut agricola quidem non regit architectum, quoniam architecturae nullas continet rationes: geometra vero has possidens, regit illum: sic & coelum nisi elementorum elementaliumque comprehendat vires, haec gubernabit numquam: gubernans vero complectitur: imo complectendo gubernat.” For a similar passage, *De amore* II, 5: 152: “Pulchritudo actus quidam sive radius inde per omnia penetrans; primo in angelicam mentem, secundo in animam totius et reliquos animos, tertio in naturam, quarto in materia corporum. Mentem idearum ordine decorat. Animam rationum serie complet. Naturam fulcit seminibus. Materiam formis exornat.” See also *De amore* IV, 3: 201–203. The assumption that the celestial bodies govern the fates of the lower world was common to Renaissance Aristotelians as well as Platonists, see Garin (1976). For an interesting Aristotelian example, see Pietro Pomponazzi’s *De incantationibus*, passim.

³⁵ *In Timaeum*, ch. XVII[I], OO 1444/441: “Opus autem esse duobus saltem mediis inter contraria omnino corpora: ostendit ex numeris: atque dimensionibus, quae naturalia corpora quodammodo antecedunt.” See also *Theologia* XVI, 6: III, 127: “Timaeus, Moysem imitans, inquit Deum in principio igneum caelum terramque crassa quasi praecipua mundi membra, atque ut duo haec aptius inter se vinciret, aerem mox aquamque interiecit, quasi non sui, sed illorum gratia sunt inventa.” See also Macrobius *Somnium Scipionis* I, 6. The idea goes back to *Timaeus* 32A; see also *In Plotinum* II, 1, 6, OO 1599/599: “Duo scilicet

(which works in two opposite directions, “above” and “below”), air is said to be the partly formal, partly material link between antagonistic fire and earth. In accordance with such ideas Ficino maintains in the *Theologia Platonica* that parts of fire and air, “as it were” respond to celestial influx, which prepares the lower bodies to receive the minds in matter.³⁶ And so air (as a go-between, so to say) lends to the entire Creation a stability it would otherwise lack. Cosmic union is brought about by the elements’ versatility, which is constantly in motion and thus intercedes between above and below. Is interesting to note that according to Aristotle the natural movement of air is just upwards.³⁷ Again, Ficino turned to the Neoplatonic tradition as a model for his modifications of Peripatetic physics. For in an remarkable passage of the *Enneads*, Plotinus blurs the distinctions between matter and spirit by confounding it with a doctrine of degrees of refinement, reminiscent of concepts we know from Stoicism.

Plotinus says that light itself is *logos* and *eidos*, the principle of form in the material world. Moreover, he goes on to make the surprising statements that fire ‘holds the position of form in relation to the other elements and that it is near to the incorporeal inasmuch as it is the subtlest of bodies that the others receive it into themselves but it does not receive others.’ [...] the whole passage is on the borderline between Neo Platonism and Stoicism. It combines the doctrine that

cet solida & extrema duobus semper mediis indigere.” On air and water as intermediaries, cfr. *Timaeus* 31B–32B; Allen (1993) 29, 62–63; 101–102. Albertini (1997) 207–234. On air as intermediary in Aristotle, see *De caelo* I, 8, 277b 14–15; *De gen. et corr.* II, 3, 331a 1. For the Neoplatonic tradition, cfr. Macrobius, *Somnium Scipionis* I, 6, 38: “Illud vero quod est inter aquam et aerem Harmonia dicitur, id est apta et consonans convenientia, quia hoc spatium est quod superioribus inferiora conciliat et facit dissona convenire.” Ficino in his *Appendix in Timaeum* ch. 14, OO 1467 says the same with regard to the soul bringing about harmony in its middle part: “Anima composita est ex natura individua immobilique; item ex natura dividua mobilique, atque media essentia, cunctis in unam speciem perfecte conciliatis, musica videlicet proportionem.”

³⁶ *Theologia VI,1: I*, 164: “Sunt praeterea in igne et aere, propter situm perspicuitatemque ipsorum caelis convenientem, partes aliquae quasi e regione sideribus respondent, quae directis quibusdam nobilitatae influxibus, sufficienter praeparantur ad mentes suscipiendas.”

³⁷ Yet, see *De caelo* III, 2, 301b 23–24; *Physics* IV, 8, 216a 23–25 for air’s natural movement upwards and downwards.

there is no clear frontier between material and spiritual because the principle of reality even in material things is spiritual with the doctrine that there is no clear frontier because 'spirit' is only the finest and subtlest form of matter. This unguarded remark about the nature of fire is, I think, unparalleled in Plotinus. He is not usually in danger of falling into naive confusions between matter and spirit.³⁸

What Armstrong calls Plotinus' "unguarded remarks," that is, the blurring of distinctions between matter and spirit, appealed to Ficino who was very well prepared to elide Plotinus' normally more radical separation between bodies and minds and higher and lower parts.³⁹ Ficino was obviously willing to synthesize Neoplatonic doctrines metaphysics with Stoic natural philosophy. In other instances, Ficino emphasizes the purely formal nature of fire by assuming that neither the warming quality of celestial light, nor (to a lesser degree) the heat of earthly fire are caused by bodily phenomena such as friction or repercussion; heat is rather an intrinsic quality of light.⁴⁰ Ficino thus wavers between the different philosophical approaches, at times considerably naturalizing the metaphysics of light in a manner that is quite foreign to his Neoplatonic predecessors. In other instances, we see him de-materializing the elemental world to such an extent that it becomes a metaphysical entity.

In such ways, the hierarchical arrangement of the elements relates to Ficino's metaphysics of light in which the entire creation appears as a gradual transition from brightness into darkness. In comparison with the other elements, fire is most spiritual because is akin to light, the divine medium of communication. Ficino says that fire is the most effective element because it lacks extension:⁴¹

³⁸ Armstrong (1940) 54, with references.

³⁹ On the separation between higher and lower parts of the soul in Plotinus, see *Enneads* II 1, 5; Armstrong (1940) 90.

⁴⁰ Ficino touches here upon the problem of heat that is structural to Aristotelian cosmology. See also *Theologia* I, 2: I, 42.

⁴¹ *Theologia Platonica* I, 2: I, 40: "siccitas vim tum caloris, tum frigoris auget, quia unit; humiditas vero debilitat, quia dispergit."

And this is clearly demonstrated to us by fire, which because of its subtlety (*tenuitas*) is closer to spiritual things than the other elements. It also is the most efficient of all, since it accomplishes in an instant what takes other things a long time. Unlike the remaining elements, it does not tolerate an admixture of others; a spark of fire, if it is given the [right] matter will set the whole world on fire. The other elements do not spread so quickly and vehemently.⁴²

As we have seen in chapter two, fire increasingly becomes coarser and more destructive as it approaches the centre of the universe.⁴³ In a characteristic passage in the *Commentarium in Timaeum*, Ficino maintains that earthly fire is burning whereas the celestial fire does not need to use bodily force to control the celestial material, which has a distinctly refined, vaporous nature in the heavens.⁴⁴

According to Ficino, it is not utterly impossible that in the heavens fire is actually cold: some philosophers even deny that destructive heat is a property of fire, since the less fire is mixed with crude matter (*materia aliena*) the less it consumes matter. An increasing admixture of crude matter is therefore responsible for the destructive quality of fire, which gets brighter and eventually even imperceptible, as celestial light “shines long before it illuminates.”⁴⁵ The harmful, burning quality of fire is caused by an increasing

⁴² *Theologia Platonica* I, 2: I, 41: “Idem nobis ostendit ignis, qui sua tenuitate prae ceteris elementis naturae spiritali propinquat. Est autem efficacissimus omnium. Memento enim paene facit, quod alia corpora longo tempore. Admixtionem in se aliorum non patitur, qualem caetera corpora patiuntur. Scintilla ignis, si detur materia, totum ferme occupabit orbem. Reliqua elementa non tantum, non tam cito, non tam vehementer seipsa diffundunt.”

⁴³ In the *Theologia* I, 3: I, 48, Ficino introduces a “generative fire” (*ignis generaturus*) which acts as an intermediary between the celestial spheres and the earth.

⁴⁴ In *Timaeum* ch. 24, OO 1449/445: “sed terrae soliditatem sive stabilitatem illic [sc. super lunam] absque crassitudine in vaporea quasi forma regnare.”

⁴⁵ In *Timaeum* ch. 24, OO 1449/445: “Ergo una cum Heraclito & Empedocle dicemus ignis ipsius, qui in idea est, intellectuale lumen, in coelo quidem visibile lumen ad oculos emicare: sub coelo autem in aethere puram ipsius et innoxiam vigere flammam: in terra vero carbonem in aspera materia comburentem.” See also ch. 25, OO 1449/445: “Neque negent aliqui coelum esse calidum, sed negent potius esse urens. [...] Siquidem quo minus alienae miscetur materiae, minus urit. Sed dicant lumen ignis proprium. Quo enim purius, eo lucidius, licet oculis quibusdam non manifestius : & lucet longius quam cale-

admixture of matter, an idea which is of course in conflict with the assumption that fire is purely a formal principle. Therefore, the closer divine light gets to earth, the more destructive (*urens*) and crude it becomes. In the centre of the universe, the heat of fire/form actually shapes corporeal beings by gluing together the dusty material powder of matter/earth. (This image obviously derives from pottery.)⁴⁶ Gemstones and minerals derive their power to attract celestial influences from this dark fire.⁴⁷ Hence, as with matter, there are three different types of fire in the universe: a subterranean fire, which is just hot; a fire in the middle that combines heat and light; and an intelligible fire, a third sort of incorporeal radiation which is located in the highest realms of Creation.

In such ways, Ficino constructs a system in which dryness is linked to the formal, masculine, active, and bright aspect of Creation, whereas humidity is associated with the material, female, passive, and dark side of Creation, that is, with matter which is slow and extended.⁴⁸ This dual structure is modeled after the dialectical interplay between intelligence and necessity, as outlined in the Platonic *Timaeus*. In his commentary on that work, Ficino equates necessity with (primordial) matter and passivity.⁴⁹ Below the sphere

faciat, & prius illuminat, & momento, & calorem largitur calefacto post ignem ad tempus servante calorem.”

⁴⁶ *In Timaeum* ch. 17, OO 144/441: “A media vero illius forma humorem ignis terraeque conciliatorem: qui et conglutinet terram, natura propria dissipabilem: et nutriet ignem ex se facile resolubilem: et tria quaedam in seipso possideat: hinc quidem igneum: inde vero terreum: sed nonnihil in medio purumque aereum proprium cum aliunde sublimis vergat ad ignem: aliunde per infimum vergat ad terram.” See also *Theologia* X, 3: II, 62.

⁴⁷ See *De vita* III, 16: 322–323.

⁴⁸ *Theologia* I, 2: I, 40: “His omnibus moles corporis impedimento esse videtur. Primum, quia cum in partes plurimas porrigatur, virtus agens in ea dispersa est, et a seipsa distans, et distracta quam plurimum. Virtus vero sicut unione augetur, ita dispersione minuitur. Idcirco siccitas vim tum caloris, tum frigoris auget, quia unit; humiditas vero debilitat, quia dispergit. Deinde, quo maius corpus est, eo secundum seipsum pigrius [est] ineptiusque ad motum [.]. Igitur quanto magis augetur corpus, tanto magis retardat motum ac differt diutius actionem.”

⁴⁹ *In Timaeum* ch. 40, OO 1464/463: “Mundus est ex intellectu et necessitate compositus, id est ex ipso formarum ordine atque materia. Possumus quinetiam sub necessitatis nomine intelligere, non materiam solum, sed animam quoque eius in primo processione suae signo, signo velut informem materiae instar consideratam. Utraque enim, tam anima quam materia in primo originis suae signo informis quidem est, sed facile & formabilis per intelligentiae munus, unde & ipsi animae rationis seminaque formarum naturalium

of the moon, “down to earth,” so to say, the two antagonistic principles appear as *form* (which Ficino identifies with fire and limit) and as *materia* (earth, unlimited and shapeless).⁵⁰ In that context, the factual abolishment of the Aristotelian system of basic qualities makes air even more akin to soul, as it stresses the mediating functions of that element. It is therefore no surprise if Ficino subscribes to the ancient creed that air is populated by demons.⁵¹

Alternately, Ficino sometimes speaks of three different kinds of matter in the universe, which correspond to a tripartite division of Creation into angelic mind, world soul, and body of the universe.⁵² In such ways, the idea of the domination of immaterial and male forms over the extended bodies and, with it, the paradigm of a hierarchic relationship between the sexes are transferred onto the cosmological plane. Now it becomes also clearer why Ficino abolished the Aristotelian doctrine that the four elements are composed of antagonistic principles (which lend them an intrinsic instability). According to Ficino’s approach, the elements represent the more or less refined intellectual principles which pervade the entire creation; to be able to fulfill their universal function the elements have to be more akin to poten-

infunduntur, & materiae qualitates atque formae. [...] Necessitate, sic accipe, ut prima illa materiae animaeque natura quamvis cogitetur informis, tamen praeparationem a Deo ad formas adeo formabilem suscepit ab initio, ut non potuerit esse paratior.”

⁵⁰ In *Timaeum* ch. XVII[I], OO 1444/441: “Oportet tamen hunc mundum perpetua novarum generatione formarum aeternam superioris omniformisque mundi actionem pro viribus imitari. Esto itaque, ut poesis canit Empedoclis, contraria inter se elementa. Esto & inter contraria medium: quando contraria & maxime distant, & absque medio minime congruunt. At medium hoc indivisible esse nequit, alioquin per ipsum contraria non distrahunt, habet ergo dimensionem. Sed qua parte alterum tangit, non tangit alterum. Et habet insuper partem necessario mediam, per quam aequae discrepet ab extremis. Propterea Plato inter contraria semper media saltem interserit duo: quemadmodum ex verbis eius evidenter apparet. Interserit & tertium: ubi ait, medium vim habere, per quam non solum extremorum, sed suam quoque custodiat unionem. Sed ponat manifesto duo, neque enim nunc id contendimus: ceu inter ignem & terram, duo quaedam: Aerem sicut licet atque aquam.” On air being more substantial or formal than earth, Aristotle, *De gen. et corr.* I, 3, 318b 28–29; On fire as form see also II, 8, 335a 18–19. On the origins of this idea in Plotinus, Armstrong (1940) 54, Burnett (1930) 109.

⁵¹ According to Calcidius, the region of air and water is inhabited by demons, In *Timaeum* § 131, trans. Boeft (1977) 26–27, whose function is to mediate between the higher and lower aspects of creation In *Timaeum* § 132 trans. Boeft (1977) 28–29. Calcidius also maintains that demons are souls (probably even of men who were once on earth); see In *Timaeum* § 135, 136; see also Allen (1984) 8–28; and below.

⁵² On this, *De amore* I, 3:139.

tially stable non-contradictory principles than to the rather unstable compounds of qualities such as hot and dry or cold and moist which constitute the elements in Aristotelian natural philosophy. Ficino therefore maintains that the instability of the material world is due to the increasing admixture of coarse matter, the dark principle in Creation. This idea also accounts for the qualitative distinctions between terrestrial and celestial bodies. Ficino's idea that celestial spheres and terrestrial bodies are made of the same matter is genuinely Platonic. In the *Timaeus*, *aether* is identified with a kind of air that is alight with celestial fire. This way of reasoning is conducive to the idea that the heavens are made of the same material as things here down to earth.⁵³ Renaissance Platonists therefore had to ask themselves whether the region of the stars consisted exclusively of fiery air or airy fire. If this was the case, was the domain of this element much bigger than suggested by the Aristotelian elemental table, where air was sandwiched between water and fire?⁵⁴ If this was actually the case, then the material universe would become more unified than in the Peripatetic approach: the strict distinction between sub- and supra-lunary spheres with their different manifestations of matter was thus superseded by the idea of a qualitative transition from coarse matter at the bottom of the cosmic hierarchy, to its gradually more and more refined elemental forms at the top.

Existing in different forms and oscillating between dry and hot, cold and moist, air was the element where this idea of a gradual transition (rather than an abrupt change) of the physical qualities of an object could best be verified by observation. The condensation of dry air into watery clouds provided evidence of the versatility of the elements which were sharing qualities in different degrees. Aristotle, too, had distinguished between moist and hot air and those vapors which are moist and cold.⁵⁵ In accordance with these different qualities of air, Ficino's *Symposium* commentary tells us to distinguish between the daemons who live in clear air (*aer purus*) and those who dwell in

⁵³ *Timaeus* 40A, 58D, In *Timaeum* ch. 27, OO 1450/447: "Aer autem [sc. Lunae vicinus] sic ignitus dicitur aether, nec ita comburitur ut noster in materia, sicca angusta, densa, violentus evadens." On air/ aether, in the classical tradition, see Guthrie (1957) 50 and Guthrie (1962–81) V 284.

⁵⁴ About a century later, Giordano Bruno would come to the following conclusion: "Mosè, che chiama firmamento l'aria; nel quale tutti questi corpi [celesti] hanno la persistenza e situazione, e per gli spacci del quale vengono distinte e divise le acqui inferiori." *Cena de le ceneri*, in Bruno (1985) 125.

⁵⁵ *Meteorologica* II, 4, 360a 20–26; *De gen. animalium* V 4, 784b 1–3.

clouded air (*aer nebulosus*).⁵⁶ The element could thus be distinguished into at least two parts. Good air is dry and clean; it has its seat in the upper sphere, which is close to the realm of fire; and is presumably the type of air the Aristophanic Socrates tried to breathe whilst sitting in his basket. And then there is stale, humid, and thick air in the lower spheres that, again according to the *Clouds*, is where watercress is grown. The double aspect of air is in accordance with Ficino's (un-Aristotelian) assumption that air is capable of moving in two directions, upwards and downwards. This volatility also corroborates the similitude between the element air and soul. For the latter is divided into a higher part, which is directed towards the intellect, and to the ascent to the realm of ideas, and a lower and organic part that cares for the body and in so doing is in constant danger of being infected or even swallowed by the material world.

Different Strata of Air

To complicate the situation, however, it also seems that air exists not in just two, but in *three* different forms.⁵⁷ This variant is due to the ambiguous position of aether, the element (according to Aristotle) that constitutes the celestial spheres and is utterly different from the four terrestrial elements. According to Plato this element is only the brightest part of air, or "pure fire or fiery air".⁵⁸ Already Calcidius in his *Timaeus* commentary had tried to deal with this puzzling issue, when he said:

⁵⁶ *De amore* VI, 3: 202: "animalia, quae ignis aetherei sub luna locati, aut puri aeris, aut nebulosi aeris, aquae proximi regione habitant, daemones."

⁵⁷ Though Ficino is not consistent on that issue see Allen (1984) 12, n. 27.

⁵⁸ Ficino (1989) 177; Allen (1984) 11, n. 24 says: "The usual Neoplatonic view, following the Stoics and Plotinus (*Enneads* II, 1.1; IV, 6, 7; VI, 7, 11) was to assume that the aether was identical with the pure fire which was the stuff of the stars; they agreed, however, that it had a naturally circular motion." See *In Timaeum* ch. 27, OO 1448/447: "Hunc nostrum cum Aristoteles nominavisset ignem, sublunarem, appellavit Pyroides, id est, igneum aliquid, vel uniforme: quasi cum Platone consentiens, cumque huic ademptum coeli circuitum tribuit sempiternum, & ideo [...] ad ignem pertinere, non tam rectum motum, quam circularem, in hoc etiam cum Platone conveniens." Ficino notes that fire, as indeed any other element, contains parts of the remaining elements. *In Plotinum* II, 1, 7, OO 1160/601–602: "Sic coelestis ignis, non terram, non aerem, non aquam, sed consistentiam, vel aliquam resistentiam habere terrae quodammodo similem, item facilem liquiditatem, sive agilitatem aeri congruam, denique lenum blandamque & lubricam aequalitatem aquae persimilem, caeteraque similiter reliquorum aliquid possidere: neque tamen ea mix-

For [Plato] says that the highest place belongs to bright fire; next to this is the sphere of aether, of which the substance equally is fire, but considerably more dense than that higher heavenly fire, next comes air, after that the humid substance called '*hygra ousia*' by the Greeks, which is a denser condition of air, so that it is the air which men breathe, the lowest and farthest place belongs to earth.⁵⁹

According to Calcidius, *aether* is a kind of "lower fire." It is related to the celestial *pneuma* or spiritus which is placed below the region of fire and above the realm of air. Calcidius here refers to the hierarchy of elements and daemons given in the spurious Platonic *Epinomis* (984D–985C). Ficino's commentary on this text gives a good impression of the efforts of a Renaissance Platonist to deal with the issue:

After the heavenly fire, [Plato] locates another one which is located below the moon. It is of fiery nature, already more heating than lighting and the vestige of our fire, which is not only warming, but burning; burning, I say, because of the admixing of earth. [...] Underneath, he locates the [sphere] of air, water and earth, as every sphere of the world is composed of those five, in order to bring about a perfect union, power and mobility between all of them. Because in every sphere one [element] is prevailing, but nevertheless the sphere contains the other ones, according to [that sphere's specific] nature. And thence aether is earthy in the [sphere

tionis ratione confundi, in qua ipsum totum soleat cum toto misceri, nec qualitates tantum quaedam, sed ipse quoque naturae materiaeque conflari."

⁵⁹ Trans. Boeft (1977) 18; Calcidius, *In Timaeum* §129: "Summum enim esse locum ait ignis sereni, huic proximum aethereum, cuius corpus esse ignem aequè sed aliquanto crassiorem, quam est altior ille caelestis, dehinc aeris. Post humectae substantiae, quam Graeci *hygran usian* adpellant, quae humecta substantia aer est crassior, ut sit aer iste, quem homines spirant. Imus vero atque ultimus est locus terrae." And § 132: "Huius porro generis est illud aethereum, quod in secundo loco commemoravimus esse positum." Boeft (1977) 20 says: "In the rest of the treatise, however, aether certainly does not belong to the highest part of the cosmos. Otherwise the daemons, whose nature is ethereal, would belong to the sphere of the star-gods and they would not be able to fulfill their function as mediators."

of] the earth, earth evaporates in the region of aether, and correspondingly in the heavens.⁶⁰

Here *aether* is the exclusive domain of very pure daemons whose realm is located “under the moon” and thus forms an intermediary space between celestial fire and air that is close to the moon. Like soul, air spans from the highest of regions down to the sphere of the earth, and even farther below. Again like soul, this element functions as a kind of universal mediator. The Neoplatonic emphasis on the coherence of the entire Creation thus perceives the elements in their hierarchic, but reciprocal relationships. Ficino’s commentary on Plotinus gives perhaps the clearest explanation of this intricate system of elemental spheres that is usually envisioned in conjunction with hierarchies of corresponding daemons who govern the elements. The highest divinities are made exclusively of fire, whereas the second class of celestial beings populate the region of *aether*. Their bodies are a mixture of fire and air “in the best possible way,” whereas the aqueous daemons consisting of fire, air and “a very subtle part of water,” which renders them visible, in a hazy way. The terrestrial beings, finally, with their admixture of (vaporous) earth are the most condensed ones and hence they may live even below the ground. Again, Ficino depicts the cosmic hierarchy of being as a gradual transition from a refined fiery and formal state into an increasingly coarse and material form of existence. In so doing, he is paying greater attention to the various physical states of the daemons than Calcidius did before him.⁶¹ In such descriptions of the daemoniac hierarchies of

⁶⁰ *In Epinomis*, OO 1527: “Post coelestem ignem [Plato] alter[u]m collocat ignis speciem, calentem iam magis quam lucentem sub luna aetheris nomine nuncupatam. Cuius quidem vestigium quoddam est noster ignis, iam non solum calens, sed adurens: adurens inquam ob nimiam asperitatis terrenae permixtionem. [...] Huic subdit aerem aquamque & terram. Putat autem quamlibet mundi sphaeram ex his quinque componi, ut perfectissima inter omnes sit, tam in substantia connexio, quam in virtute & actione communio. Verum in qualibet sphaera unum esse praecipuum, ac pro natura sua reliqua insuper contineri. Sic & aether in terra terrenus est: & terra in aethere evadit aethera, similiter & in coelo.” See Allen (1984) 11–12 with notes; *Timaeus* 58D and Calcidius, *In Timaeum* § 178.

⁶¹ *In Plotinum*, II, 3, 5, OO 1715: “Sunt igitur animalium rationalium quinque genera: prima sunt, quorum corpora solus est ignis, ac si visibilis ignis stellae sunt, quos antiqui deos nominat: si invisibiles, daemones Orpheus igneos, vel coelestes appellat, qui in Planetarum circulis stellarum vicem teneant sub Planeta duce. Non enim decet ab innumeris animalibus, quae sunt in firmamento, mox ad amicum infra descendere. Secunda quorum sunt ignis, et aer optime mixtus: has daemones idem aethereos, vel aereos nominat. Sunt

being the differences between Aristotelian and Platonic natural philosophies becomes apparent; the Platonists had five elements, with *aether* sandwiched between air and fire, whereas the Peripatetics believed that the *aether* region stretched down to the sphere of the moon. As we shall now see, it was again air which played the crucial part in a reconciliation of the two systems.

The Aristotelians had a conceptual problem with the description of the fiery region, because it is not ablaze in the way we imagine a fire burning. This realm is, as Aristotle says, “not really fire, for fire is an excess of heat and a sort of ebullition.”⁶² In his discussion of this idea Aristotle proposes an intricate solution to the problem. In *Meteorologica* (I, 3, 340a 19–20) he maintains that in the region below the moon there exist three different kinds of air: upper or fiery air, middle or pure air, and lower or impure air. (In this way, the highest realm of air, which is lacking heat, could easily be confounded with the lowest region of fire.) Aristotle also discusses the position of fire and air in relation to the celestial *pneuma*, which he calls the “first body” (*proton somatos*; 340a 24–340b 3). He argues that clouds cannot form in the upper region because that realm is heated by a “sort of fire” (340b 35–36). Therefore, there is no rain in the altitude of the highest mountaintops because they reach into a relatively calm stratum of air that is composed of air and the exhalation of fire. Below this dry and hot upper stratum of air there is a relatively moist region in which clouds, exhalations from water and rain, take shape. In the realm of air next to earth, clouds cannot always form because they are sometimes dispelled by the heat of the earth. By this sequence of arguments Aristotle arrives at three different strata of air, the highest or purest (dry and hot), close to the region of fire, which is easily mistaken for the *aether* in Platonic cosmologies. This upper level is followed by the central sphere which is cloudy (moist and cold). Lastly, and closest to earth, Aristotle locates a sphere of low air (moist and hot) that is alternatively wet with rain or hot with the

& animalia tertia, in quibus ignis & aer cum subtili quadam aqua componitur, quos daemones iam nominat aqueos, qui quandoque paulo densiores facti, aspici possint. Neque desunt quarta, quae ex tribus iam dictis subtilem adhibebant terram, quasi quendam terrae vaporem. Hi ab Orpheo terreni daemones apellantur: qui & aliquando paulo ulterius condensati etiam valeant attrahere. Hoc etiam nuncupat subterraneos, quotiens videlicet subeunt terrae cavernas. Quinta sunt hominum, quasi infimorum daemonum corpora, in quibus praeter daemonicam illam ex quatuor subtilibus mixturam, qua daemones sumus, quae quae in nobis spiritus est, primoque vivit et sentit, mixtura solidorum est adiuncta.”

⁶² *Meteorologica* I, 3, 340b 23.

vapours emitted by earth.⁶³ The set of arguments from the *Meteorologica* became the standard view for medieval and Renaissance natural philosophers.⁶⁴ Paul of Venice (1369–1429), for instance, gives the following typical medieval paraphrase of that difficult text:

The sphere of air is necessarily divided in three garments, as we have proven that this element mediates between fire, water, and earth. Therefore [air] has one part which is always hot, the one that always receives the heating influence from fire: and this is called the first region or the first garment of air. Then there is a part which is always cold, that is, the one that receives the cooling influence from earth and water: And this is called the second region, or the second garment of air. In the same way there is, of necessity, a part which is sometimes hot and sometimes cold because of the presence or absence of the sun, and this one is called the third garment or the third region of air, which is close to the [spheres of] earth and water. This one is hot in summer and cold in winter.⁶⁵

⁶³ Hett (1952) 26–27 says: “The earth, when heated by the sun gives off two kinds of exhalations, one hot and dry, from the earth itself, the other cool and moist, from the water on the earth. The outermost terrestrial stratum, [...] ‘fire’ is composed of the hot-dry exhalation, which rises above the cool-moist. [...] The inner stratum, ‘air’ is composed of a mixture of the two exhalations, and is therefore hot and moist. It is the material from which clouds, rain, etc. are formed.”

⁶⁴ *De mundo* 3, 393a 1–9.

⁶⁵ Paul of Venice (1514) ch. 25: “Necesse est sphaeram aeris esse divisam in tres tunicas, scilicet superiorem, mediam, & inferiorem, probatur elementum mediat inter ignem & aquam & terram. igitur habet unam partem semper calidam illam quae semper recepit influentiam calefactivam ab igne: & haec vocatur prima regio, sive prima tunica aeris. Deinde habet unam partem semper frigidam, scilicet illam quae semper recepit influentiam frigefactivam ab aqua & terra. & haec dicitur secunda regio, vel secunda tunica aeris. Item necessario habet unam partem quae aliquando est calida & aliquando frigida per praesentiam & absentiam solis, & haec dicitur tertia tunica videlicet tertia regio aeris, quae est immediata terrae & aquae: haec enim tempore estivo est calida: et tempore hyemali est frigida.” I find it striking that Paul uses the term *tunica* (garment) to denote different states of air, because this word is also occurs often to denote the different layers of *spiritus*, or material garments of soul. On this, see below.

This threefold division of air was accepted by many Renaissance Aristotelians such as Gregor Reisch or Alesandro Achillini.⁶⁶ Here we see how Platonic and Aristotelian traditions were viewed as complementary: while the former was explaining which daemonic intelligences inhabit the different strata of air and the function of these beings as mediators between of the upper and lower realm of Creation, the Peripatetics described the meteorological context. In this case, the Platonic *aether* bore striking resemblances to the uppermost fiery sphere of air in the *Meteorologica*. In the *Theologia Platonica*, Ficino accordingly says that pure air, is, as it were, fire, which comes down to infect the lower sphere and air moving upwards to receive fire, the former achieving a high degree of refinement “so that whoever sees such air, would affirm it to be a fire, even if the sphere of fire lies beyond the realm of air”⁶⁷ — a statement that highlights the actual frailty, the transitory nature of the boundaries of bodies not only in the elemental hierarchy, but also in the entire Creation.

Whether there are two or three different layers of air, the qualities or strata of that element point to the different degrees of refinement, there is the higher, the “best air”, which is close to the intellectual fire, followed by the “air in the proper sense” so to say, with its realm in the centre, and, lastly, the moist air at the bottom of the sphere. This hierarchy implies that the closer to earth, the coarser, more material, or more palpable air would become: this is the realm of Aristophanes’ watercress, which, due to its association with moisture, is contrary to intellectual contemplation. In his cosmology, Ficino blurs, but at least on the surface does not entirely discard, an elemental hierarchy he shares in common with Renaissance Aristotelianism. It is crucial, however, that in contradistinction to that tradition, in Ficino the four elements are present at all

⁶⁶ Achillini (1568) ch. 13: 252. Reisch (1503) IX, 7 describes the first layer as *pura, rara, lucida*, the second as *frigida, tenebrosa, tempestuosa*. See also Reisch (1503) VII, 1.

⁶⁷ *Theologia* VI, 2: I, 236: “Scitis in sphaeris elementorum ignem infimum usque adeo ad naturam superni aeris declinare; aerem vero contra supremum ita ad ignem illum at-tolli, ut et ignis ille nihil ferme aliud videatur esse quam tenuis aer et aer ille crassior ignis, adeo ut quicumque aerem illum cernit, vidisse se ignem possit absque mendacio affirmare.” Immediately afterwards this structure is compared to soul. See *Theologia* XI, 6: II 137: “Siquidem in aere saepe aliud igneum est, semper situs aliquis praeter aeris rationem.” *Theologia* XVI, 5: III, 123; *Appendix In Timaeum* ch. 44, OO 1471/475 says that fire, once it invades the sphere of air, makes it similar to itself: “Ignis [...] sibi reddat similem: haec si ad relutandum sit debilis, vel confugit ad elementum suum, vel in ignem conversa, locum ignis petit, nec iam ab igne patitur, eadem de caeteris ratio est.” See Aristotle, *Meteorologica* I, 3, 340b 3–5; I, 8, 345b 33–34.

levels of creation: this is especially true of air and fire, which form important parts of the realm below as well as above the moon. In Ficino's cosmology it is varying degrees of refinement, rather than distinctive qualities such as hot or cold and moist or dry, that mark the differences between celestial and terrestrial elements. Ficino employs two concepts to illustrate his scheme of elemental interaction in the universe: the dialectics of light and darkness transferred onto matter and form and the image of distillation of vapours, or the phenomenon of condensation and rarefaction of one and the same substance, universal prime matter. Whereas the Peripatetic tradition had put greater emphasis on the topic of motion, change and other vital features in the living organism,⁶⁸ Ficino underscores the hierarchical relationship and the communication between the elements. His *de facto* reduction of elements from four to two, that is fire and earth (or three, if we take the mediating agents water and air into consideration) endorses a dualist physics and psychology that is in accordance with a Neoplatonic metaphysics of light and its dialectical interplay with dark matter.

*Daemonic Air: The Secret Life of an Element
in an Animated Universe*

In the preceding section we had occasion to notice in passing that there is a significant tendency in Ficino to blur the distinction between elements and metaphysical entities, that is, with daemons. Ficino's ideas about universal animation become apparent in the following passage from his *Timaeus* commentary:

And as God wanted to achieve a perfect creation, he made the world alive and filled it with intellect: and in order to better connect this world, made of matter and mind, he distinguished matter in four elements, as we say, elements which are, as it were the humours of this world, as he commanded also their spirits to be divided in four, as those four pertain to the *spiritus* of the world.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ See for instance, *De long. et brev. vitae* 3, 465b 25–35.

⁶⁹ In *Timaeum* ch. 26, OO 1450/446. "Volens itaque Deus opus perfectum facere, vivum & intellectualem efficit mundum: atque ut ex ipso spiritu, & materia mundi commodius animal unum connecteretur, materiam distinxit in quatuor ut diximus elementa, quasi animalis huius humores, quia et spiritum eius in quatuor voluerat distinctum." See also *Appendix in Timaeum* ch. 87, OO 1484/481. For a parallel restating of this recurrent idea in Ficino, see *In Plotinum* II, 1, 7, OO 1160/601–602: "Cum enim mundus sit animal

It is interesting to note that in this passage the elements become synonymous with the temperaments. Ficino is mixing terms which normally belong to natural philosophy with concepts developed in Classical medicine.⁷⁰ Once again we notice the extent to which the term “element” loses the specific meaning it has in the Aristotelian tradition, where it signifies tangible entities. In Ficino’s conceptualization, the word “element” assumes metaphysical connotations which are foreign to the Peripatetic approach, with its characteristic aim to explain the phenomenon of change in the elemental world.

In Ficino, fire becomes associated with divine intellect and the mover of the heavenly spheres, whereas air is the intelligence infused by God into the souls of the spheres, the material aspect of which is represented by water. Earth stands for nature, which is to be influenced by the celestial movements.⁷¹ Ficino maintains that the souls of the elemental spheres have conscience as well as the power to reign and enliven the body of their respective realm. Ficino (who is following an Orphic tradition repeated by Aristophanes) accordingly maintains that Jupiter is the mind of the sphere of air, whereas Juno is its mover, the life of the spheres, that functions in analogy to the soul. The lower part of soul is directed to the physical world, whereas its higher part is oriented towards cognition.⁷² According to this scheme, and on a cosmic level, air therefore represents the cognitive faculties of soul, whereas water becomes the material aspect. By analogy, Ficino transfers these elemental qualities also onto the human soul. The idea that air is an enlivened sphere governed by daemons assimilates that element to an even greater extent to soul:

unum, una ubique primum anima vivens, unaque materia factum, necessario membrum quodlibet ob eiusmodi unionem habet aliquid commune cum aliis: & aliorum qualitatis est particeps: sicut in corpore humano apud medicos est compertum.” See also *De vita* III, 11: 289: “magis super terram in corporibus viget subtilioribus tanquam propinquo animae. Per cuius vigorem intimum aqua, aer, ignis viventia sua possident atque moventur.” On the idea that the motion of the three elements imparts the life of the world upon human beings, see below.

⁷⁰ On the medical concept of humours, see Siraisi (1990) 104–106, who writes: “The four humours were real body fluids, to which largely hypothetical origins, sites and functions were ascribed.” (105)

⁷¹ In *Timaeum* ch. 26, OO 1450/446: “Horum quatuor imagines sunt quatuor elementa. Ignis enim intellectum refert, Terra naturam, intelligentiam, Aer Aquam, denique animam.”

⁷² *Theologia* IV, 1: I, 160f.; *ibid.*, 164: “[...] theologiam sphaerarum animas ita partiti, ut quaelibet vim geminam habet, unam in cognoscendo positam, alteram in sphaerae corpore vivificando atque regendo;” Guthrie (1950) 142; Allen (1987).

The intellect [fire] is indivisible, uniform, eternal. Nature [earth] is divisible, multiform, and temporal. Soul is the middle between these, through a kind of intelligence [air] it seems to be more in accordance with nature than with intellect itself, so that soul, through the animal potency [water] it is closer to nature [earth]. And hence, Soul is called partly indivisible and partly divisible, at the same time similar to the uniform, as well as to the multiform, as well as eternal, and temporal.⁷³

Here, air in its different manifestations becomes virtually indistinct from soul: the mobility of soul and its function as a mediator is reflected in the movement of its corresponding sphere. In the preceding section we have seen how air functions in analogy to soul, both assuming the role of mediators, in the psychological as well as in the physical realm, respectively. Air imitates the movement of soul towards the higher sphere of the intellect, as well as soul's descent to shape the material world of bodies. The spherical motion of the elements is interrupted or accompanied by a vertical exchange between these realms, which are guarded and guided by daemonic entities, just like the celestial spheres.⁷⁴ As we shall see in the following section, the association with daemons and air was not uncommon.

⁷³ In *Timaeum* ch. 26, OO 1450/446: "Intellectus enim individus est, uniformis, aeternus. Natura dividua, & multiformis, & temporalis. Anima vero inter haec media, per intelligentiam quidem, magis intellectus ipsius particeps evadit, quam naturae per animalem vero potentiam, cum natura potius, quam cum intellectu convenit. Quamobrem partim individua dicitur, partim quoque dividua. Item uniformis similiter & multiformis. Rursus aeterna partim & temporalis."

⁷⁴ In *Timaeum* ch. 27, OO 1451/447: "Sunt enim ibidem sub duce planeta, ferme eiusdem generis animalia multa, quomodocunque vocentur. Ergo nunc communiter appello daemonia: sive illic naturalia, sive ex hominibus adventitia, quae officio circuituque planetarum dominum imitantur. Similiter & in aere eiusmodi sunt daemonia, partim naturalia, partim ex hominibus peregrina: sub ducibus, quaeque suis quodammodo coelestis choreas imitantia. Denique sphaera quaelibet, quodammodo totus est mundus."

Elemental Daemons, Music and Air

Air is associated with daemons in general, that element is their preferred medium, no matter if they are of the highest and divine order or of the lowest and terrestrial kind. The daemonic bodies are ever changeable, mutable and remain airy for the most part. Even so, and like air which is infected with water, some daemons become soiled with coarse matter to a greater degree than others. The degree of elemental refinement of the daemonic body is indicative of its quality and power as well as of its moral inclinations.⁷⁵ Ficino's *Phaedrus* commentary therefore says that good daemons live by pure air and by the power of their songs.⁷⁶ The commentary on Plato's *Apology* maintains that fiery daemons lead soul to a contemplative life, whereas airy ones (which are, we remember, under the guidance of Jupiter) lead it to the *vita activa*. Watery daemons are more dangerous, for they impose sensual passions upon us. (Needless to say, in Ficino's account Socrates' daemon was fiery.)⁷⁷ In the commentary on Plotinus, Ficino says that even if daemons are generally of an airy nature, they can nevertheless be associated with the three different spheres of air, which are influenced by fire, air proper, and water. He is thus assigning daemons to the different strata, the "tunics" or "garments" of air. Three tribes of daemons who are under the respective influences of Gemini (in the fiery and highest realm) correspond to this scheme. Libra reigns the middle part, while Aquarius is responsible for the lowest, watery sphere of air.⁷⁸ According to Ficino's commentary on the *Epinomis* (984D-E) the lower

⁷⁵ *Appendix in Timaeum* ch. 23, OO 1469: "Utrique per aerem summum, mediumque, & infimum, pro dignitate sunt [sc. daemones] distributi, opificis quidem mundani filii sunt naturales." See also ch. 24, OO 1469; Allen (1984) 14. On air as demonic medium in the sixteenth century see, for example, Agrippa von Nettesheim (1991) III, 19: 457.

⁷⁶ Ficino (1981) *Summa* 35: 194; trans. Allen: "The good daemons live by song, that is by the contemplation and by the praise of divine things. They are satisfied with the air; and as easily as they see, to dissolve, so they are recreated inwardly by the perpetual drinking of it."

⁷⁷ *In Apologiam*, OO 1387/383: "Aereos autem daemones rationali potius favere potentiae, eamque a vegetali sensualique natura quodammodo segregare. Igneos tandem discursum rationis ad sublimiora contemplando convertere. Atque hoc pacto voluptuosae vitae daemones aqueos, activae aereos, contemplativae igneos dominari. [...] Si quaeras qualis Socratis daemon fuerit, respondebitur igneus, quoniam ad contemplationem sublimium erigebat."

⁷⁸ *In Plotinum* II, 1, 6, OO 160/601: "Quamvis autem daemones propria animalia sint aerea, tamen & igneos &, aquaeos saepe cognominant. Tres enim proprie sunt ordines

elemental spheres are populated by daemons who are invisible in the fiery region and in the sphere of clean air. Yet, and beginning with the realm of water, these beings are called demi-gods which are not visible but sometimes “perceptible more through the inner eye than through the outer.”⁷⁹ Even if most of the airy daemons remain invisible to human beings, they can at least be heard. This is not surprising because, according to Pythagorean and Platonic traditions, air (the daemoniac element) is associated with music. Its harmonic sounds transmit the ideal mathematical proportions to the physical world. Music is the most powerful physical manifestation of the geometrical proportions which structure the entire universe. This divine order is visible in the harmonious movement of the stars, which are the powers that rule the lower elemental spheres. Ficino says that bodies are moved by music, which has air “as its medium and instrument.” That element becomes enlivened in the process of transmitting mathematical proportions to the lower world. In this manner pure air is said to be a vehicle to induce movement in the human intellect as well as in the body.⁸⁰ D. P. Walker has described in the following way the relationship between air and the human *spiritus*, the faculty in the human body responsible for the reception of music: “that is to say, the peculiar power of music is due to a similarity between the material medium

daemonum tribus plagis aeris assignati: Primi sublimem colunt aerem Lunae proximum, caeli calore motuque, & luce calentem atque lucentem, quem ignem aetheremque apellant: Secundi medium, Tertij tertium: Summus aer nominatur igneus: medius aer aerius, infimus aer est aqueus: daemonesque similiter. Aeri rursus ita distributo preaeest (ut aiunt) aeria quaedam astrorum triplicitas. Summo quidem aeri Gemini: medio Libra, Aquarius infimo, similiter daemonibus. Hos antiqui nonnumquam apellant Deos: non quidem simpliciter, sed divinos daemones.”

⁷⁹ In *Epinomis*, OO 1528: “Et aethereos quidem aereosque [sc. Daemones] invisibiles: Aquaeos vero, quos nominant semideos, videri ait nonnumquam & vix, visu scilicet intimo potius, quam externo.” Ficino took the *Epinomis* as “appendix to, or the thirteenth book, of the *Laws*.” Allen (1984) 11 n. 24. Cf. also *Theologia* IV, 1: I, 152.

⁸⁰ In *Timaem* ch. 29, OO 1417/449: “Concentus autem per aeream in motu positam movet corpus: per purificatum aerem concitat spiritum aereum animae corporisque notum: per affectum, afficit sensum simul & animum: per significationem agit in mentem: denique per ipsum, subtilis aeris motum penetrat vehementer: per contemplationem lambit suaviter: per conformem qualitatem mira quadam voluptate perfundit: per naturam, tam spiritalem, quam materialem, totum simul rapit & sibi vendicat hominem.” On the relationship between senses and elements, see *De amore* V, 2: 179, where Ficino says that fire is the medium for vision, air for hearing, and vaporous air for smelling. Ficino (1989) 174; Allen (1984) 25–26. *Theologia* VII, 6: I, 276; Walker (1958a) 6–10. On air as a medium for sounds, see Aristotle, *De anima* 435a 3–4.

in which it is transmitted, air, and the human spirit, to the fact that both are living kinds of air, moving in a highly organized way, and that both, through the text of the song, can carry an intellectual content.”⁸¹ Given this universal and immaterial power of music over bodies, it comes as no surprise that in the *De vita*, Ficino maintains that song is a more powerful medicine than usual drugs.

Now the very matter of song (*materia ipsa*) is altogether purer and more similar to the [physical] heavens than the matter of medicine (*materia medica*). For this, too, is air, hot or warm, still breathing and somehow living; like an animal, it is composed of certain parts and limbs of its own and not only possesses motion and displays passion but even carries meaning like a mind, so that it can be said to be a kind of airy and rational animal.⁸²

When Ficino describes air and its salubrious effects, the notion that this element is alive and akin to soul becomes very clear: “Whether walking or sleeping, always breathe living air, air living with light.”⁸³ On the other hand, however, there are very clear attempts to distinguish between air and soul, for example when Ficino says that if the divine numbers were not innate to soul itself (*nisi ipsa harum causas in se haberet*) and with it some inborn harmony that is capable of responding to the affections caused by music, then soul would be unable to discern the harmonies conveyed by that element.⁸⁴ From

⁸¹ Walker (1958a) 6; see also, 8: “Thus, whereas visual impressions have no direct contact with the spirit, [...] sounds, being moving, animated air, combine directly with the spiritus aereus in the ear, and, without changing their nature, are not only conveyed to the soul but also affect the whole spirit, dispersed throughout the body.”

⁸² *De vita* III, 21: 358: “Iam vero materia ipsa concentus purior est admodum coeloque similior quam materia medicinae. Est enim aer et hic quidem calens sive tepens, spirans adhuc et quodammodo vivens, suis quibusdam articulis artibusque compositus sicut animal, nec solum motum ferens affectumque praefrens, verum etiam significatum afferens quasi mentem, ut animal quoddam aereum et rationale quodammodo dici possit.” See also *De vita* II, 11: 297.

⁸³ *De vita* III, 24: 379: “Spirate semper et vigilantes et dormientes aerem vivum, aerem luce viventem.”

⁸⁴ *In Timaeum* ch. 29, OO 1417/449: “Anima profecto, non possit universam harmoniam diiudicare, absolutasque proportionales promere, tam in aere per musicam, quam in

the perspective of daemonology, air, like soul pertains to the entire creation, from the top to the bottom so to say, with the possible exception of the highest divinities which would be mostly made of fire. Air, in different degrees of refinement, alive and sentient, is the principal means of communication between above and below; it fulfills the important function of bringing about union to the entire creation, because it works as an ubiquitous mediator between the realm of the body and the realm of the mind.

Air and the Human Body

We have already seen that in Ficino's cosmology air is akin to soul. In his animated universe, the four temperaments appear as the more or less refined states of the elements, and therefore they can meaningfully be described as aspects of the one large world animal. We have to keep in mind that according to traditional Neoplatonic doctrines, soul has the role of an universal mediator in an animated universe. Upon its descent from the sphere of the fixed stars, the human (and immortal) soul is covered in elemental veils in order to be able to govern the body. Just as the stars dominate the lower world by their refined essences of the elements, so soul is clothed in garments that are increasingly coarse and that enable soul to govern and to move the body. In his commentary on the *Sophist*, Ficino speaks about "the celestial vehicle [of our soul which is] covered entirely with a fiery and an airy veil, and such a veil surrounded with spiritus, with a spirit, I say, compounded from the vapors of the four elements." These veils bear a striking resemblance to the three layers of air. Already Paul of Venice had described the strata of air as *tunicas* (see above). In such ways, the ancient doctrine of the vehicles of soul becomes confounded with the concept of *spiritus*, the medical term which accounts for the communication between body and soul. In his commentary on Theophrastus, Ficino says that *spiritus* is a kind of vapour originating from the blood in the heart, composed of highly refined, clear blood. Because of the continuous motion of that organ, the *spiritus* is fiery, whereas in the liver is has an airy nature and is therefore able to digest food. *Spiritus* is also the

corpore per naturam, nisi ipsa harum causas in se haberet, essetque harmonia quaedam in se subsistens super harmoniam in alijs inde factam. Constat enim anima nostra ex omnibus proportionibus quibus anima mundi."

principal means of generation;⁸⁵ Ficino refers here to the idea that sperm is akin to *aether*.⁸⁶ He thus links the theory that *spiritus* is an instrument of soul (a garment in different degrees of refinement that is acquired during the descent from the realm of the fixed stars onto the earth) to the Aristotelian meteorological theory which distinguishes three strata of air.⁸⁷ It is fascinating to observe that this combination of concepts has immediate consequences for the regimen of health Ficino elaborates in the *De vita*. As we had occasion to notice in chapter three, in order to prolong our lives and to stay healthy, Ficino recommends that blood, the “repository of life” and therefore a low manifestation of *spiritus*, should be airy because that element holds the middle position between the coldness of water and the heat of fire:⁸⁸ “let not the blood be fiery either nor watery, but airy — not airy like a too dense air lest it be too much like water, nor like a very subtle air for fear it may easily kindle into fire; but let the middle sort of air (*medius aer*) greatly predominate.”⁸⁹

⁸⁵ In *Theophrastum* ch. 44, OO 1821: “Spiritus est vapor quidam sanguinis, sicut sanguis sic ipse ex quatuor componitur elementis, quamquam longe subtilioribus. Spiritus in corde vitalis evidenter est igneus ex perpetuo cordis motu, efficaciaque, & ira talis apparet, spiritus naturalis in iecore plurimum est aerius ita concoctioni generationique prorsus accomodatus, spiritus animalis in cerebro igne & aqua est quasi pariter temperatus sensib[ilia] sic expositus, [...] Temperies illa quidem ex aere, atque aqua ad omnes scilicet sensus accomodatissima est. Non tamen ubicunque est ibidem sensus omnes existunt, nisi & in hanc temperie sint formales omnes proprietates ad omnia sentienda, & in corpore sint omnia sensuum instrumenta.” In the *De Vita* III, 6: 271–272, Ficino once more underscores the digestive power of air: “Now fiery things aid the attractive power, earthly things the retentive power, airy the digestive, and watery the expulsive.” See *Appendix in Timaeum* ch. 71, OO 1478; and ch. 80, OO 1479.

⁸⁶ See Aristotle, *De sensu* 481a 13–15; Nussbaum (1978) 160–162, who says: “We can only say that *pneuma* is, apparently, air with a special kind of heat in that it makes it behave unlike ordinary air, more like a different element” (163). But see also *Timaeus* 91A on the connexion between air and generative powers. The connection between air and digestion is reported in the *De vita* III, 6: 271–273, where Ficino says that the animal spirit is strengthened by airy things.

⁸⁷ On the descent of soul and *spiritus*, a topic dear to Neoplatonic writers in general, see for instance, *De Amore* VI, 6: 206–208 and Macrobius (1994) I, 11, 12–14.

⁸⁸ On the idea that the lungs have the task to cool the heat that is generated by the blood in the heart, see *Timaeus* 79DE, a doctrine repeated in Aristotle, *De respiratione* 16, 475b 18–20, and 21, 478a15–25. *Appendix in Timaeum* ch. 64, OO 1477: “Pulmo aerem haurit, ad incendium cordis refrigerandum.” See also ch. 81, OO 1479 and ch. 93, OO 1482.

⁸⁹ *De vita* II, 5: 176/7: “Sanguis ergo nec igneo esto, nec aqueus, sed aerius — non aeri crassiori similis, ne proclivior sit ad aquam; non aeri subtilissimo, ne facile incales-

In this passage, Ficino alludes once again to the idea that air exists in three different qualities. Not surprisingly, human bodies function in analogy to the movements of the entire creation.⁹⁰ In order to maintain one's health and in accordance with the Classical European medical tradition, Ficino recommends the synchronization of our bodies with the macrocosmic movements of the stars.⁹¹ Again it is air which fulfills the crucial mediating function: "the natural motion of the air, which goes perpetually round and round, although it is scarcely perceived by anyone on account of its gentleness and daily presence, laps you freely and penetrates you purely when you are walking about by day in the open air and dwelling in open and lofty places and it wondrously furnishes your spirit with the power of the world."⁹² Apart from recommending exposition to the right kind of spiritual air, Ficino also emphasizes the importance of a dietary regimen that enhances the "airy quality of blood". Olive oil, for instance contains "much air"⁹³ as well as other select

cat in ignem; sed substantiam teneat mediocrem, in qua medius aer dominatum habet plurimum." *De vita* I, 10: 135 gives a recommendation against the negative effects of black bile: "Avoid air which is hot or too icy or cloudy, but let in freely air which is temperate and clear (*temperatus serenisque*)." See also *In Epinomis*, OO 1529: "Laudat enim [sc. Plato] ad ingenii virtutem temperatam aeris qualitatem."

⁹⁰ On the connexion between human bodies, cosmic movements and health in general, see for example the instructive passage in the *Timaeus* 87C- 89A, together with *Appendix in Timaeum* ch. 28, OO 1472: "Quoniam igitur & imaginationes perturbatae, & hinc opiniones falsae & utrinque perversi mores exoriuntur. Dictum est circuitus animae a sua figura progressionemque detrahere."

⁹¹ *Timaeus* 87-88 stresses the necessity for an equal balance between body and mind, and their connection to the stars, which are never at rest, but rather in a continuous movement, our bodies should imitate. See *Appendix in Timaeum* ch. 100, OO 1483: "motus interim nostros, & pro viribus moderatos, & rite electos [...] imitantes universalem mundi naturam, perpetuo se motu versantem." See also *ibid.*, ch. 101: "Contemperatio quoque spiritus primi hinc quidem, ad membra, illic vero ad ipsam coeli temperiem, ad vitae modum maxime confert."

⁹² *De vita* III, 11: 290/1: "[...] naturalis ipse motus aeris qui perpetuus est in orbem, quamvis ob lenitatem suam consuetudinemque diuturnam vix percipiatur ab ullo, te die sub divo deambulanti habitanti in patentibus editisque locis libere lambere penetratque pure; ac motum vigoremque spiritui tuo mundanum mirifice praestat."

⁹³ *De vita* II, 3: 168: "Minerva interim olivifera, olei vitalis origo." Here, Ficino relates wisdom to the flame of life, see the entire chapter. The idea that olive oil contains much air and is, therefore, able to prolong the life of animals is traditional Aristotelian, see for instance *De long. et brev. vitae* 466a 23. On dietary regimes being central to Classical medicine, see Siraisi (1990) 121-122.

“animals and green vegetables [...] from regions which are high and fragrant, kept clear by temperate winds [...] places where no waters are stagnant.”⁹⁴ This sounds a bit like an advertisement for organically grown food and finds its analogy in an European kind of *Feng Shui* or geomancy, as Ficino also advises that dwelling places should be in lofty and temperate regions, high up where the wind prevents putrefaction, a type of decay caused by vapours originating from moist earth.⁹⁵

Ficino recommends breathing clear air at sunrise when that element is akin to spirit, “stirred, rarefied, and clear” as “the blood and the spirits are compelled by necessity to imitate the motion and quality of air because it surrounds them and is similar in nature.”⁹⁶ Odours, such as incense, which are akin to the heavenly constellations “strongly influence the air and the spirit.”⁹⁷ As we have seen, the *De vita* emphasizes the airy nature of the *spiritus* and thus recommends the following to scholars:

For intellectuals, the quality of the animal spirit is of the highest concern because they work mostly by means of this spirit; and so they, more than anyone, have to select pure and luminous air, odours and music. [...] Most important [...] is choice air (*aer electus*) [...] always well selected; the *spiritus* should also be refreshed daily by a similar variety of choice odours; for air and odours seem to be things resembling spirits.”⁹⁸

⁹⁴ *De vita* II, 7: 184: “animantes, herbas [...] ex altis odoriferisque (ut diximus) regionibus eligere oportere, quas venti temperati serenant, suaves solis radii foveant, ubi ubi aquae nullae stagnant [...]” See also Ficino (1983) 61 and *De vita* I, 10: 133.

⁹⁵ *De vita* II, 7: 184: “Aristoteles habitationem eligit altam ad meridiem orientemque spectantem, sub aere subtili, nec humido, nec frigido; et Plato longaeuos in editissimis atque temperatis repperit regionibus. Deterrimum vero est stercorare agros, vel aquas stagnantes ex agris minime derivare; omnia enim illic citae corruptioni subiecta nascuntur.” See Aristotle, *De gen. animalium* V, 4, 784b 8–9.

⁹⁶ *De vita* I, 7: 124 “oriente sole movetur aer tenuaturque et claret, occidente vero contra. Sanguis autem et spiritus motum qualitatemque aeris circumfusi naturaeque similis sequi necessario compelluntur.”

⁹⁷ *De vita* III, 20: 353: “Ego vero odores quidem tanquam spiritui aeri que persimiles natura, et, cum accessi sunt, stellarum quoque radiis consentaneos arbitror [...] afficere aerem ac spiritum vehementer [...]” On different kinds of odours, see Aristotle, *De sensu* 5, 442b 28–29; *Appendix in Timaeum* ch. 60 - 61, OO 1476–1477.

⁹⁸ *De vita* II, 18: 222–224: “Cuius [sc. spiritus animalis] quidem qualitas maximi momenti est ingeniosis eiusmodi spiritu plurimum laborantibus, itaque ad nullos potius

The special care for a lofty environment for scholars is in accordance with Ficino's claim that philosophers will eventually become airy daemons themselves.⁹⁹ As blood is akin to air, a spirit of some kind, Ficino maintains that in regions where it is very hot, people live off the highly refined exhalations of food (II, 18, 223). It is interesting to note that Aristotle had denied this possibility.¹⁰⁰ In Ficino, this theory is linked to a cosmological context: the world soul which animates the entire Creation exhales the very spirits we inhale and which form and nourish the spirit (III, 4: 259; also III, 16).

The world does wholly live and breathe, and we are permitted to absorb its spirit. This is absorbed by man in particular through his own spirit which is by its own nature similar to it, especially if it is made more akin to it by art, that is, if it becomes in the highest degree celestial.¹⁰¹

In physiological terms, air is thus a vital and potentially highly beneficial element — not such an amazing conclusion, to be sure, but more interesting when we confront Ficino's ideas about salubrious air with the potential dangers and devastating effects of putrefying, moist air.¹⁰² In Aristophanes' terms, we have to descend in Socrates' lofty basket from high up in the *Clouds* to the realm of the watercress.

quam ad eos attinet puri luminosique aeris odorumque delectus atque musicae. [...] Potissimus vero ad vitam est aer electus. [...] ita spiritus similiter compositus varietate quadam aeris semper electi oblectandus est atque fovendus; simili quoque electorum odorum varietate quotidie recreandus, nam aer et odor quasi quidam spiritus esse videntur." See also Aristotle, *De gen. animalium* IV, 10, 777b 6–7.

⁹⁹ Ficino (1981) 195 (Summa 25) and Allen (1984) 27. Aristotle says in *De partibus animalium* II, 7, 652b 8 that fire is the instrument of soul.

¹⁰⁰ *Timaeus* 70B; 79AB; on Aristotle's disagreement with this idea, see *De sensu* 5, 445a 17–18 whereas the (spurious) *De spiritu* 1, 481a 13–14 seems to be more in accordance with Plato's and Ficino's opinions.

¹⁰¹ *De vita* III, 4: 258: "omnino vivit mundus atque spirat, spiritumque eius nobis haurire licet. Hauritur autem proprie ab homine per suum spiritum illi suapte natura conformem, maxime si reddatur etiam arte cognator, id est, si maxime coelestis evadat."

¹⁰² *De gen. animalium* IV, 9, 777b 5–6 says that longevity depends on air tempered in the right way.

Bad Air: The Plague and, Once Again, Menstruating Women

Uncannily, at least for a Christian Platonist, air, the universal mediating agent between above and below, is akin to soul. The element is alive and populated with daemons of all kinds that are shaping or influencing the lower world. In such ways, air may also function as a medium for infection and contagion, just as the heavenly, the mathematical proportions are transmitted by the motion of that element, which, as we have seen, becomes itself animated in the process.¹⁰³ Baleful air, especially if it is of a watery or dense and cloudy nature, may contain the seeds of disease. This idea goes back at least to Anaxagoras, who taught that air contains the seeds of things and that they are brought down to earth together with water and generate the plants.¹⁰⁴ Lucretius had maintained that polluted air is the main cause for the plague, the disease thus being capable of migrating for long distances.¹⁰⁵ Avicenna's *Canon medicinae* repeats this idea, together with the notion that air, once it gets out of its place in the natural hierarchy of things, easily becomes infected by poisonous vapours which originate in water or in earth.¹⁰⁶ These doctrines were taken up by Gentile da Foligno (d. 1348) in his treatise on the plague and subsequently repeated by Ficino.¹⁰⁷ In the *Consiglio contro la pestilenza* Ficino says that the disease is caused by a poisonous vapour which draws together in the airy

¹⁰³ *De vita* III, 11: 290/1; Aristotle, *De anima* III, 12, 435a 5–6.

¹⁰⁴ Guthrie (1957) 56: "Theophrastus writes of Anaxagoras as saying that 'air contains the seeds of all things and that these are brought down together with the water' and generate plants." Guthrie also cites the following sources: Theophrastus, *Hist. Plant.* 3.1.4. (A 117); Lucretius, *De rerum natura*, VI, 112–113; Diogenes Laertius II, 9. On impregnation through air, cfr. *Iliad* XVI, 150; Vergil, *Georgica* III, 271ff.; Ficino (1983) 105.

¹⁰⁵ Lucretius, *De rerum natura* VI, 1119–1137.

¹⁰⁶ Avicenna (1507) IV, fen. 1, doct. 4, ch. 1, 416r a: "Quandoquidem accidit aeri quod docuimus [...] sicut accidit aque de alteratione in qualitate sua ad calorem et frigus, et de alteratione in calorem & frigus, & de alteratione in natura sua ad profunditatem et putredinem sicut profundatur aqua & fetet & putrefit: & sicut aqua non putrefit ullo modo propter suam simplicitatem: immo propter illud quod admiscetur ei de vaporibus malis qui permiscetur ei & accipit tota qualitas mala. Similiter aer non putrefit ullo modo propter suam simplicitatem: immo propter illud quod admiscetur ei de vaporibus malis: & accipit tota qualitas mala. [...] pestilenciales febres vero fiunt aere turbido et humido."

¹⁰⁷ Who mentions Gentile's name in *De Vita* I, 21: 150. On Gentile, see Thorndike (1923–58) III: 233–252; Campbell (1931) 53 says: "Gentile wrote the longest *consilium* against the plague; which occurs on the opening of wells and caverns shut up for too long; or they rise from lakes or ponds, corpses or other putrefactions." And: "Though a simple

region and which is hostile to the vital spirit. This nocive vapour is incapable of forming in clean air because clean air is akin to the vital spirit and, like fire, it is not prone to putrefaction.¹⁰⁸ Hence, in fighting the plague it is of vital importance to improve the quality of air, which means its desiccation and the cleansing of the element of its humid vapours.¹⁰⁹

In the *De vita*, Ficino writes accordingly that “odours, being very similar in nature to spirit and to air [...] especially if they are burning with the rays of the stars, [...] strongly influence the air and the spirit towards capturing the gifts of the sun.”¹¹⁰ Disease originates from the vapours produced by lakes, ponds, or from the baleful air which develops below the ground. This nocive substance can be released by earthquakes and the winds can carry it swiftly over long distances.¹¹¹ Just as soul may become imprisoned in a body, thus diverting its attention from the contemplation of the divine ideas, so air, being held far away from its natural place high up in the sky, may acquire dangerous qualities by being infected with putrefying moisture that makes it prone to swift decay.¹¹² Therefore (and again following Avicenna) Ficino

body, the air can be corrupted because of other substances mixed with it.” (54). For a general overview of the topic, see Biraben (1976).

¹⁰⁸ Ficino (1983) ch. 1: 55–56: “La pestilenzia è uno vapore velenoso concreateo nell’aria, inimico dello spirito vitale.” And: “Non si può fermare nell’aria pura perché tale aria, è conforme allo spirito. Et come il fuoco, perché per sua potenza non piglia mixtione, però non si putrefà, così l’aria pura non avendo mixtione con la putrefazione.” (56). See also ch. 2: 56: “Questo vapore velenoso si conerea nell’aria, nelle pestilenze piu generali, [...] el sopradecto veleno nasce da’ venti e da vapori maligni, dalli laghi & pantani & da’ terremoti. [...] principalmente regna nelle arie grosse & padulose & nebula.”

¹⁰⁹ Avicenna (1507) IV, fen. 1, ch. 4, 416v a: “Summa curationibus [sc. febrium pestilentialium] earum est exsiccatio.”

¹¹⁰ *De vita* III, 20: 352/3: “odores quidem tanquam spiritui aerique persimiles et, cum accensi sunt, stellarum quoque radis consentaneus arbitror, [...] afficere aerem ac spiritum vehementer ad dotes Solis [...] sub radiis capiendas.”

¹¹¹ Ficino (1983) ch. 2: 56; see *Meteorologica*, II, 7, 365b 21–366° 5; II, 8, 368a 26–33. For a later example of this conceptualisation, see Telesio (1580) fol. 8v: “frequenter itaque terrae motus in calidis, densisque & cavernosis fiunt terris; in quibus [...] vapores plurimi fiunt, & quae capere eos, & retinere possunt.”

¹¹² Ficino (1983) ch. 2: 57: “non si potendo putrefare lo elemento puro, ma el mixto, quanto meno mixto è (come è l’aria sottile) meno è apto alla putrefazione. [...] l’arie grosse & nebulose facilmente si putrefanno, come l’acqua grossa & mixta & ferma.” And at ch. 23: 108: “che appariscono e’ segni di peste, che sono: l’aria, quando esce fuori del suo naturale di tale luogo, pendendo inverso caldo e umido, & nebbie & nugoli spessi, & polveri & venti grossi tiepidi, [...] ancora quando l’acque & campi fumigano spesso & rendono

recommends fleeing to mountainous areas to avoid the plague because they are close to the lofty spheres of clean air where we may breathe living air akin to the spirit: “Whether walking or sleeping, always breathe living air, air living with light.”¹¹³

Time and again we see how accurate Aristophanes’ parody remained, with Socrates sitting in a basket high above the stage in order to be removed from potentially poisonous humid air. We have come back full circle to the *Clouds*: air, the universal element, the mediator between above and below, is alive and always in danger of being infected, altered for better or for worse. Always in motion and easily mistaken for soul, air is more dry and stable farther up than in the lower and moist regions. Like soul, air stretches in Ficino’s universe from the realm of the stars downwards to the surface of the earth and even below it, and serves as a universal but potentially harmful medium of communication between the intellectual realities and their effigies in the lower world. A truly universal constituent of creation, air is connected to the activities of thinking and shaping of bodies. The element therefore constantly vacillates between material and ensouled manifestations. A passage from Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* reminds us of the universal, yet puzzling qualities of air — Feste the Fool says to Viola, who is disguised as a man: “Who you are and what you would are out of my welkin — I might say ‘element’ but the word is overworn.” (III, 1: 58–60)

odore non buono.” Decay may be swift, but after three months, the air will be pure again, whereas other objects, will remain infectious for longer periods of time. And then, at 110: “In quanto alla qualità del aria, basta tre mesi, al quale spazio è una delle quarte dell’anno, in modo che, ave nessuno per tre mesi è morbato, l’aria s’intende purgata. Purche sia cautiſſimo del toccare l’altre cose. Che tengono più el veleno che l’aria.” See Avicenna (1507) IV, fen. 1, ch. 3, 416r b-va: “Quotiens videris turbiditatem aeris: & nebulositatem eius: & existimaveris pluviam, et inveneris aerem vacuum siccum & non pluvit: tunc scias quod complexio hyemis erit corrupta.”

¹¹³ *De vita* III, 24: 379–380: “Spirate semper & vigilantes & dormientes aerem vivum, aerem luce viventem.” See Avicenna (1507) IV, fen. 1, ch. 4, 416v b: “In illa vero quae est cum sanos intentio est ut exiccetur aer & fiat boni odoris & prohibeatur eius putritur cum quacumquae re sit & rectificetur cum xyloaloe et ambra et ture [...]” Ficino (1983) ch. 4: 61: “Bisogna ancora, l’altre cose, cuocerle o corregere con odori buoni & [...] maxime quando la peste nasce dopo tremoti. & è più utile usare cose di luoghi arioli, odoriferi, montuosi, che altre cose; & abitare s’monti & in palco.”

CHAPTER 5

THREE ELEMENTS INSTEAD OF FOUR?

Upon the corner of the moon
There hangs a vap'rous drop profound;
I'll catch it ere it come to ground:
And that distilled by magic sleights
Shall raise such artificial sprites
As by the strength of their illusion
Shall draw him to his confusion
(*Macbeth* III, v, 23–29)

As became evident in the preceding chapter on air, there is a strong tendency in Ficino's natural philosophy to reduce the number of elements from four to three, and thus to bring the theory of the elements in tune with a Neoplatonic metaphysics. Ficino's perspective entails not only significant modifications of traditional Aristotelian natural philosophy, but also the conceptual endorsement of a new technology — distillation — as testimony for a tripartite elemental structure.

Since, where Moses said that in the beginning God created heaven and earth, Plato says that God first created fire and earth; by fire he understood mostly the heavens. In the beginning he considered of the sphere of the earth in the centre and the outer sphere. The other [elements] are introduced [by Plato] for their sake.¹

This passage from the commentary on Plato's *Timaeus* is instructive for Ficino's ideas about the elemental world. In it, Ficino is referring to his most important authorities, Plato and Moses, and compares their ideas on cosmology, thereby implying their compatibility. It is quite clear that the basic

¹ In *Timaeum* ch. 24, OO 1449/445: "Quod enim Moyses ait: in principio fecit Deus coelum & terram: Plato ait Deus primo ignem fecit & terram, ignem intelligens praecipue coelum. Principio enim in sphaera mundi centrum consideravit & ambitum. Reliqua [sc. elementa] horum gratia interiecit."

original elements are fire and earth, with a yet undefined number of secondary elements sandwiched between the fiery heavens and the centre of Creation, earth. As will become clear in the course of this chapter, Ficino's ideas about the elements, their position and reciprocal relationship in the hierarchy of creation, not only fitted well into his boarder metaphysical ideas, but also proved curiously influential in the later and distinct natural philosophy of another thinker, Bernardino Telesio (1509–88).

As we have seen, Ficino's Neoplatonic cosmology and metaphysics rests on a gendered and tripartite structure which consists of a male and a female aspect respectively, plus a third term that acts as a mediating agent. The intellectual and divine realm is connected to the world of bodies by the intermediating agent of a third term which is soul.² According to Ficino, "soul is created between the divine intelligence and the body."³ Soul thus functions as a universal middle term that connects two opposed aspects of Creation. Such go-betweens are, as we have seen in the preceding chapters, present at every level of Creation: in medicine, as well as in Ficino's psychology, the *spiritus* fulfills the important function as a mediator between the physical aspects of sensation and the immaterial soul. The *spiritus*, one of Ficino's key examples for such go-betweens is "a most subtle body, and nearly a soul, and at the same time not a soul and, as it were, a body."⁴ This passage alerts us to the paradoxical qualities of intermediaries. They are neither entirely spiritual nor utterly material. Such mediators are not only responsible for communication among human beings, they also exist on the macrocosmic level of Creation. Ficino says:

The world is not only corporeal but participating in life and intelligence as well. Accordingly, besides this body of the world, constantly evident to our senses, a body that is spirit hides within it [...]. In this spirit flourishes a soul; and in this soul shines an intelligence. And just as in this sublunary

² On Ficino and the principle of mediation in his magic and cosmology, see Ficino (1989) 41, with references. On the importance of the principle of mediation in Ficino, see Kristeller 101–102.

³ *Theologia* XVI, 7: III, 137: "Anima [...] in medio mentium corporumque confinio creata est."

⁴ *De vita* III, 3: 256: "Ipse [sc. Spiritus] vero est corpus tenuissimum, quasi non corpus et quasi iam anima, item quasi non anima et quasi iam corpus." For Ficino's doctrine of spiritus, as more or less embodied garments of the soul, see Ficino (1989) 41–42.

realm air is not mixed with earth except through water, nor fire with water except through air, so in the universe a sort of bait and kindling for linking soul to body is that very thing which we call spirit.⁵

By means of these mediators, intelligence, soul, and body become interconnected with the terrestrial four elements. In all cases, the different forms of *spiritus* are a necessary prerequisite that enables the communication between higher and lower forms of being. This tripartite structure is also a salient feature in Ficino's metaphysics. We remember that Aristotle had segregated the sublunary world of change from the higher and celestial spheres: he introduced a dividing line below the sphere of the moon where the four elements reign with their erratic movements. The elements are manifestations of one universal prime matter and have tangible qualities such as hot cold, moist and dry. In the *Meteorologica*, Aristotle says succinctly: "The body that is below the circular motion of the heavens is [...] *matter*, and it is potentially hot, cold, dry moist, and possessed of whatever other qualities are derived from these."⁶ It is true that a ternary structure, as in Ficino, was also introduced in Aristotle's *libri naturales*, but there the issue was treated in a different context. The *De caelo*, (I, 1, 268 a) referred to a third element as the space that follows line and plane in geometry, rather than to the elements, as Ficino does. Moreover, for instance in *De gen. et corr.* (II, 3, 330b 9–21) Aristotle explicitly opposes a tripartite elemental structure.

Hence, the function of the elements in Ficino differs from Aristotle. Rather than pertaining to natural philosophy alone, and thus explaining the phenomenon of change in sublunary bodies, the Neoplatonic approach emphasizes that the four elements are not merely physical but also metaphysical entities. In different degrees of clarity and refinement spiritual fire, air, water and even earth reflect and govern the hierarchies of being on all its levels. In Ficino, the elements thus become an explanatory foil that accounts for the idea of the universal communication between, and the formative power of,

⁵ *De vita* III, 26: 384/5: "[Mundus] est [...] non solum corporeus, sed vitae insuper et intelligentiae particeps. Quamobrem praeter corpus hoc mundi sensibus familiariter manifestum latet in eo spiritus corpus quoddam [...]. In spiritu viget anima; in anima fulget intelligentia. Atque sicut sub Luna nec miscetur aer cum terra, nisi per aquam, nec ignis cum aqua, nisi per aerem, sic in universo esca quaedam sive fomes ad animam corpori copulandum est ille ipse quem spiritum apellamus."

⁶ *Meteorologica*, I, 3, 340b 15–8; see also *De gen. et corr.* II, 2–3, 329 b7– 331 a6.

divine ideas over entire Creation. As we have seen in chapter two, this Neoplatonic cosmos has a unified, hierarchical and dual structure, the ultimate goal of which is the perfect (albeit *in praxi* often unsuccessful) domination of *dark matter* by *bright light*, which extends divine beauty to all created things. Ficino thus emphasizes that even the lowest elements are trying to imitate the regular movements of the celestial bodies, albeit with varying success.⁷ In Ficino's cosmology light fulfills a crucial and highly metaphorically charged function as a formal principle which is opposed to darkness, otherness, or matter. It is in such instances that the extent to which Ficino's physics differs from Aristotelian natural philosophy becomes apparent: according to the Peripatetic tradition, fire and earth are the "purest" elements, easily interchangeable into each other,⁸ whereas *materia prima*, the shapeless substratum of all physical beings, is for Ficino identical with one single element or principle in the centre of the universe and not as one of the basic constituents of the four elements on earth.⁹ The idea of the gradual transition of elements becomes also apparent when Ficino maintains that the stars are made of the same stuff as terrestrial things, the only difference being that the celestial bodies are composed of the four elements in a highly refined state, containing much heavenly, pure fire, whereas the remaining three are invisible due to lack of fire. As we have seen, this assumption stands in clear contradiction to Renaissance Aristotelianism, in which the heavens consisted of a fifth element, *aether* and were therefore *immutable* (see the preceding chapter).

Time and again, Ficino uses a dualist model by which two opposite qualities, such as light and darkness, or mind and matter, or fire and earth are mediated by two interceding elements. It is these go-betweens, rather than Aristotle's detached unmoved mover, who bring motion into Creation. Thus, air and water are by no means unimportant links in the metaphysical hierarchy of being because they oversee and secure the union between intellectual fire and physical earth. Air and water together form a third term; we see Ficino constructing out of the fourfold structure given by the traditional number of elements a tripartite scheme which is much more akin to his cos-

⁷ In *Timaeum* ch. XVII[I], OO 1444/441: "Opportet tamen hunc mundum perpetua novarum generatione formarum aeternam superioris omniformisque mundi actionem pro viribus imitari."

⁸ *De gen. et corr.* II, 3, 330b 35.

⁹ Though Aristotle too often equates earth with matter: *De gen. animalium* II, 1, 732b 28–30; IV, 11, 761a 32–42; *Motu animalium* IV, 13, 435b 1; *Meteorologica* IV, 12, 390b 2.

mology as well as his psychology. In his *Commentarium in Timaeum*, Ficino introduces yet another hierarchy, in which the four elements do not appear as the four lowest strata of the cosmos any more, but rather as the basic constituents of the entire Creation.

1. intellect (<i>in se manens immobilis</i>)	fire
2. intelligentia (<i>intellectu superiore insita</i>)	aer
3. anima (<i>sphaerae motor sive rector</i>)	water
4. natura (<i>seminaria vitalisque virtus ab anima passim infusa materiae</i>)	earth

The dualist structure intrinsic to Ficino's metaphysics of light is here applied to the elemental world. Characteristically, only two elements remain substances, namely fire and earth, whereas air and water seem to become simple qualities of the former pair. Here again one can detect Ficino's characteristic tendency to create a tripartite structure *en lieu* of a fourfold scheme implied by the common elemental theories of his day.¹⁰ However, one might object the obvious, namely that Ficino here lists four and not just three elements: the answer is that soul once again serves him as a model in assuming two middle elements instead of one. In Ficino's psychology, soul has a twofold aspect, a higher or more refined part and a lower or organic aspect that allows it to reign over the body. It is important to bear in mind that air and, to a lesser degree water, assume a mediating role that is akin to the function of

¹⁰ In *Timaeum* ch. 26, OO 1450/446: "Primum quidem intellectus, in se manens immobilis, sphaerae motor, sive rector, ita gerendis sphaeris ab autore rerum omnium institutus. Secundum sphaerae anima, motor mobilis quidem, sed mobilis per seipsum. Tertium intelligentia quaedam, huic animae a Deo, & intellectu superiore divinitus insita. Quartum natura, id est, seminaria vitalisque virtus ab anima passim infusa materiae. [...] Horum quatuor imagines sunt quatuor elementa. Ignis enim Intellectum refert, Terra naturam, intelligentiam Aer, Aqua denique animam. Et sicut igni tria propria sunt, tria quoque opposita terreae, mediisque media quadam ratione conveniunt: sic tria intellectui propria eorumque opposita propria sunt naturae, mediis quoque media. Intellectus enim individuus est, uniformis, aeternus. Natura dividua, & multiformis, et temporalis. Anima vero inter haec media, per intelligentiam quidem, magis intellectus ipsius particeps evadit, quam naturae, per animalem vero potentiam, cum natura potius quam cum intellectu consentit. Quamobrem partim individua dicitur, partim quoque dividua. Item uniformis similiter & multiformis. Rursus aeterna partim et temporalis." For a similar hierarchy, see *De amore* II 3: 43; see also Ficino (1975) ch. 4: 101. For this fourfold hierarchy of being and its connections with Plotinus' notion of *logos* and *physis*, see Armstrong (1940) 104–105.

soul in Ficino's psychology.¹¹ The proximity between water and air is a very old idea, linked to the observation that water dissolves into air, becomes mist, air again becoming watery, carrying rain. In such ways water is turned into a rather crude manifestation of air or, vice versa, air can be viewed as a refined product of water.¹² Water (traditionally connected to moisture, lack of boundaries and associated with drunkenness), controls the lower part of the soul. Similarly, air commands the psyche's higher and mental aspects: an idea that is reminiscent of the age-old identification of soul with air, with the "breath of life." In bringing about communication between above and below, soul must have two distinguishable aspects, a mental and a physical one.¹³ In an analogous way, the movements of the mediator-elements air and water fulfill *one* function: to bring about union to the physical universe. In accordance with this idea, Ficino says that the universal mediator between above and below is the "most mutable element"¹⁴ just as soul may indeed become "everything."¹⁵

In Renaissance Neoplatonism, the human (and immortal) soul, upon its descent from the sphere of the fixed stars, is covered in elemental veils in order to be able to govern the body. In his commentary on the *Sophist*, Ficino says that "the celestial vehicle [of our soul is] covered entirely with a fiery and an airy veil, and such a veil surrounded with *spiritus*, with a spirit, I say, compounded from the vapours of the four elements." Just as the stars dominate the lower world by their refined essences of the elements, so soul is clothed in garments that become increasingly coarse. Yet, this materiality enables soul to govern and to move bodies. Instead of Aristotle's opposing qualities, which entail a radical change between mutually exclusive elemental *qualities*, Ficino

¹¹ A formative passage for these ideas is ch. 39 of the *Sentences* of Porphyry, which Ficino translated (probably in 1488). See Porphyrios (1987) 84–85.

¹² *Timaeus* 47C; *Appendix in Timaeum* ch. 43, OO 1471/475. On the laws of transformation of the elements into each other, see Aristotle, *De gen. et corr.* II, 4, 331a 12–35; *De caelo* IV, 3, 310b 10–11; Ovid, *Metamorphoses* XV, 237–238.

¹³ *In Timaeum* def 27, OO, 1471

¹⁴ *In Plotinum*, II, 1, 6, OO 1599: "Nihil enim facilius quam aer in aliud permutatur. Itaque si propinquet coelo tam valido in coeli formam subito permutabitur."

¹⁵ Just to cite one frequently cited passage, *Theologia* III, 2: I, 141–142: "Et cum [sc. anima] media omnium si, vires possidet omnium. [Quod] sit ita est, transit in omnia. Et quia ipsa est universorum connexio, dum in alia migrat, non deserit alia, sed migrat in singula, ac semper cuncta conservat, ut merito dici possit centrum naturae, universorum medium, mundi series, vultus omnium nodusque et copula mundi."

is more interested in the gradual transition between the elements, an idea that implies that difference is caused by varying degrees of refinement. In such ways, it seems that Ficino's metaphysics is actually paving the way for a *quantitative* paradigm in natural philosophy. I will try to corroborate this idea in the following section: here I will argue that the comparatively recent technology of distillation of liquors or spirits served Ficino as an important model for his metaphysics.

Distillation

In contrast to Aristotle, who focused on the continuous transformation of the elements, implying a radical change causing life and death or coming-into-being and passing away on a horizontal basis below the sphere of the moon, Ficino emphasizes that the elements may undergo a vertical process of condensation and rarefaction.¹⁶ The Plotinus commentary has an interesting passage which gives a good impression of how Ficino understood the transmutation of the elements as phenomena relating to condensation and rarefaction rather than to a genuine and abrupt transformation:

And as air is something of its own before it is poured into earth, so earth is something on its own, before it swallows air. And as air existed before in its own refined state, before it is condensed (pressed together, *condensetur*) into earth, and earth existed before on its own, before it condenses air which, when it is condensed by water, that is, something else, it transforms into water.¹⁷

According to Ficino's perspective, the composition of an actual object is therefore determined by its more or less refined state rather than by its intrinsic and tactile qualities, such as hot or cold, moist or dry, as in Aristotelian physics. In a similar vein, in the *Theologia Platonica* Ficino says that one single matter is hiding under the various shapes or forms and that this

¹⁶ *Timaeus* 49B–D.

¹⁷ In *Plotinum* II, 1, 6, OO 1600/600: "Rursus aer prius in se aliquid est, quam infundatur in terram, terra similiter prius aliquid in se est, quam hauriat aerem. Tum vero aer in raritate propria prius existit, quam condensetur in terram, ac terra prius in se consistit, quam condenset aerem, qui si condensetur ab alio, scilicet aqua, transibit in aquam."

matter is dressing itself in various garments which are determined by states of density or rarefaction.¹⁸ In Ficino, I venture to say, the historical position in time of an object is decisive for its ascent or its decline in the hierarchy of being, and not the intrinsic, mortal and irremovable quality of any given object (Aristotle).

Apart from Ficino's attempts to bring Platonic metaphysics in accordance with physics, it was probably a novel technical process which helped structure this approach in physics: evidence that material things might become spirit was to be found in the distillation of liquors, which seems to have been invented sometime during the late Middle Ages. Just as clear and powerful liquor condensates in the alembic, distilled from must, grain or even sawdust, Ficino's approach emphasizes that matter may pass from a crude state to a highly refined entity.

Distillation of "spirits" seems to have been invented during the twelfth or thirteenth centuries.¹⁹ Taddeo Alderotti (d. 1292) called the substance that was the product of novel technology *aqua ardens*.²⁰ In thirteenth-century Nürnberg, *Hausbrand*, a kind of brandy from grapes, was sold inexpensively by apothecaries, while the distillation from beer and grain spirits commenced around the year 1400. Tracts with numerous and detailed illustrations of the new instrument in its amazing varieties ranked amongst the more popular books streaming from Early Modern European printing presses; apart from producing brandy and supplying ingredients for new medicines and tinctures, the novel technique was also praised as a means to extract *quinta essentia*, the alchemist's *elixir*, a substance closely related to or even identified with *aether*, the celestial substance. Later in the sixteenth century, Giambattista Della Porta writes that distillation is a way to make bodies spiritual, for he maintained that the process was purifying the material substratum of any substance.²¹

¹⁸ *Theologia* V, 4: I, 178: "Itaque materia quae prius sub aquae frigore latuerat, iam sub aeris calore eadem diletescit. [...] Vides materiam unam omnes vicissim indui formas, dum et ascendit rarefactione et densitate descendit."

¹⁹ On the following, see Multhauf (1984) 219–220, who also discusses the (rather improbable) older origins of that art.

²⁰ Ficino uses this term in *De Vita* I, 6: 120/1 and III, 1: 247. The word 'alcohol' was introduced perhaps by Paracelsus to denote pure wine spirit and refers to the Arabic word for "finely divided".

²¹ Ramon Llull says that the elixir is extracted like alcohol from wine and that this spirit is akin to the human medical spiritus (*De quinta essentia libri duo*, fols. 6r and 5v respectively); for characteristic illustrations, see for instance pp. 13v and 14r. For a late

Della Porta also emphasizes the importance and efficiency of distillation, because the process imitates “celestial rain” that was traditionally thought to be the transmitter of astrological influences.²² As in Ficino’s physics, air/water is the crucial medium in the process of distillation. The must to be distilled, contained in the cucurbit or gourd-shaped vessel, is surmounted by the head or alembic, whose beak conveys the vaporous product to a receiver where it is condensed. Della Porta also implies that in the process of condensation and rarefaction the alembic imitates the natural movements of matter up and down the hierarchy of being. It is well known that Della Porta knew Ficino’s *De vita* and was therefore familiar with the Neoplatonic idea that all objects can be conceptualised according to their degree of refinement.²³

It would not have been Ficino if the idea of refinement had been restricted to the elemental realm: it is the myth of the ascent of the soul — as well as the threat of soul’s descent and eventual dissolution in dark matter — described by Diotima in the *Symposium* and the myth of the divine cavalcade in the *Phaedrus* that are formative for Ficino’s the idea of the ascent of physical beings. In accordance with the aim of spiritual refinement of the individual, Ficino says that air, lifted by the winds, becomes dry and eventually may be refined to such a degree that it assumes the form of *aether*, moving in orbs, close to the moon.²⁴ In a similar way, the heart functions as alembic where the

sixteenth-century example, see Della Porta (2000); Della Porta (1611) X, *proemio*: 430 says the following on distillation: “Impara questa scienza cose mirabili, come i corpi, che son così gravi divenghino spirituali, e sottili, e montino in alto fatto leggeri, e così spirituali, che di nuovo diventino gravi, e corporei, e calino giù. L’essentie, overo virtù delle cose, che stanno nascoste nella sua mole sotterrate, conculcate, e disperse, ne’ suoi ripostigli, come nelle sue camerette, ma pure, e sottigli quasi senza meschiamento di materia impura, così nelle piante, come ne’ metalli, pietre, e gemme, e noi non contenti di quelle manifeste virtù, che possiedono, le vogliamo più nobili, e più gagliarde, e far le sublimi, e quasi inalzarle infin al cielo.”

²² Della Porta (1611) I, 3: 5: “Ognuno debba chiarissimamente sapere quanto giovi saper l’arte del distillare, imitatrice della celeste pioggia, e figlia, perche da quella son nati maravigliosi inventioni.”

²³ On the relationship between distillation and *spiritus* in Renaissance medicine, see also the brief remarks in Putscher (1973) 62–63.

²⁴ In *Timaëum* ch. 27, OO 1449/447: “Proinde quemadmodum aer propinquus aquae evadit crassus, & caliginosus, & frigidus: ac ventis agitatur in rectum, sic aer Lunae vicinus, motu, luce, calore coelesti sit lucidus, serenus, fervens; ac movetur in orbem [...]. Aer autem sic ignitus dicitur aether, nec ita comburitur ut noster in materia, sicca, angusta, densa, violentus evadens.” See also chapter four and *Introduction* to the *De vita* 63–66.

more refined blood condenses.²⁵ Just as souls change their degree of purity, so distillation works as a model for the historical conceptualisation of any given object. Accordingly, Ficino maintains in the *De vita* that bodies “coalesce” only at certain times and in special places.²⁶

In this way, experience with the technique of distillation seems to have served Ficino and others, though in a more naturalist context such as in Della Porta’s (on whom see chapter eight of the present study), as powerful paradigms in the development of new philosophies of nature, an approach towards physical bodies emphasising *quantitative* (that is, degrees of refinement) approaches rather than the traditional *qualitative* descriptors (that is, hot, cold, moist, dry). In Ficino, the idea that matter exists in different states of condensation or refinement eclipses the Aristotelian doctrine that the four elements are composed of antagonistic principles. The elements may now be viewed as representations of universal intellectual forms which spread throughout all of Creation. The elements are thus more akin to potentially stable non-contradictory metaphysical entities which may move up or down rather than to the unstable compounds of *qualities* causing erratic movement in Aristotelian physics.

In a similar vein, for Aristotle the technique of cooking, or transforming food by means of boiling, had resulted in the paradigm of concoction. The cooking of food served as an explanatory foil for physiological processes in which transformations of matter occurred, such as in digestion.²⁷ It is plausible to assume, then, that the advent of distillation in Europe brought an alternative to the concoction paradigm. The alembic was not only a more so-

²⁵ *De vita* II, 18: 223–225.

²⁶ *De vita* III, 12: 302: “Sicut ergo certa passim corpora eorumque formae certis et locis et temporibus coalescunt, atque servantur, sic, et proprie quaedam actiones ex propriis quibusdam temporibus efficaciam nanciscuntur.”

²⁷ *Meteorologica* IV, 2, 379b 33 – 380a 9; trans. Aristotle (1952): “Concoction ensues whenever the matter, the moisture, is mastered. For the matter is what is determined by the natural heat in the object, and as long as the *ratio* between them exists in it, a thing maintains its nature. Hence things like the liquid and solid excreta and waste-stuffs in general are signs of health, and concoction is said to have taken place in them; for they show that the proper heat has mastered the indeterminate matter. Things that undergo a process of concoction necessarily become thicker and hotter; for the action of heat is to make things more compact, thicker and drier. This is then the nature of concoction: but inconcoction is an unperfected state due to lack of proper heat, that is, to cold. That of which the imperfect state is, is the corresponding passive qualities which are the natural matter of anything.”

phisticated instrument than the boiling pot, but the apparatus also produced a liquid with more spectacular properties than, for example, cooked vegetables. The process of distillation was capable of purifying virtually any organic substance from a state of decomposition into a clear and transparent liquor that preserved still recognizable traits of the original material. In a process that paralleled the change of forms on matter, the coming into being and the passing away in hylemorphism, the alembic was obviously an instrument by means of which one could extract the most characteristic property of a given substance, its essence. This spirit, which we still call liquor today, could then be used with spectacular results as a medical drug. A passage from Tommaso Garzoni's rather ambiguous report on the "small brains of the alchemists" (*cervellazzi alchimistici*) in his *Teatro de' vari e diversi cervelli mondani* amply demonstrates how commonplace such ideas had become by the late sixteenth century. Garzoni says that the alchemists who invented distillation were the inventors of "l'acque vite" and of "these essential spirits, these quintessences which, [...] as it were, resuscitate the dead."²⁸ Alcohol is still called water of life in many European languages (Ital. *acquavite*; Fr. *eau-de-vie*; Ger. *aquavit*; the English *whiskey* comes from the Gaelic equivalent). The idea that liquor resuscitates the dead is thus in accordance with the conceptual world of Renaissance Neoplatonic natural philosophy. For combustible alcohol was obviously embodying the properties of fire, that most spiritual of all elements; booze was a burning liquid, with properties akin to, or even identical with, *spiritus*, that finest and shining product of the human blood. Especially when administered to undernourished patients, the substance would have spectacular and perceptible effects. In chapter three we saw that Ficino developed a theory by which blood or the *spiritus* it contained was exchanged by means of medical and controlled vampirism that rejuvenates (if not exactly resuscitates) elderly people. The somatic effects of liquor not only corroborated Ficino's theory about the efficiency of the oral blood-transfusions, according to which the human *spiritus* inherent in the donator-blood is assimilated into the patient's body. Distillation was actually the technical process that led this particular form of vampirism for it seemingly corroborated the physiological assumption that spirits were airy, and therefore that volatile bodies that could be exchanged between different bodies.

²⁸ Garzoni (1999) *Discorso* 49: 222: "quelli spiriti essenziali, quelle quinte essenzie che [...] fanno quasi suscitare i morti."

In this way, the new process of distillation seems to imply a more concise imitation of the *machina mundi*, very much in the same way as, say, computers or other technical apparatuses were in later times employed to explain the phenomena of sensation or of cognition in the human brain.

To conclude, then, Ficino sought to achieve a simplification of traditional physics in order to bring it in accordance with a Platonic metaphysics; basically a dualist scheme with a third term as a mediating agent.²⁹ In his cosmology, it is varying degrees of refinement that mark the differences between celestial and terrestrial elements. He employs two concepts to illustrate his scheme of elemental interaction in the universe: the Platonic dialectics of *light* and *darkness* transferred onto matter and form and the image of distillation of vapours, or the phenomenon of condensation and rarefaction of one and the same substance, universal prime matter. Ficino emphasises the hierarchical relationship as well as the communication between the elements which become metaphysical principles rather than the tangible constituents of physical bodies. Ficino's *de facto* reduction of the number of elements from four to two, that is to fire and earth, or to three, if we take the mediating agents water and air into consideration, endorses a dualist physics and psychology.

Ficino does not discard the notion that there are four elements, probably because this was an idea too deeply rooted in Pythagorean numerology to be eliminated altogether.³⁰ However, the function of the elements (that is, air and water) significantly differs from the role of the corresponding elements in Aristotelian natural philosophy, which had emphasized the (mutually exclusive) *haecceitas*, the "thusness" of the perishable individual natural body, whereas Ficino was more interested in the malleability, the possibility for refinement, that is, in the ascent of ensouled being on the ontological scale. The Platonic idea of the ascent of the individual (Diotima's ladder) is here transposed onto all of Creation.

²⁹ Ficino's discreet distinctions bear on the core of Aristotle's natural philosophy, because he seems to be aiming at a reduction of the ten categories to two, namely quantity and quality.

³⁰ Kucharski (1952) *passim*; Celenza (1999) *passim*.

*Bernardino Telesio (1509–88)
and the Continuation of Ficino's Physics*

In later sixteenth-century natural philosophy, the idea of rarefaction and condensation surfaces again, but in a different context. Ironically, Ficino's ideas, developed originally in the context of a metaphysics of the soul, seem to have a *nachleben* in Bernardino Telesio, one of the most influential and radical critics of Peripatetic natural philosophy. In his influential *De rerum natura iuxta propria principia* (1565, 1570, 1586), Telesio explicitly voices some of Ficino's implicit critiques of Aristotelian physics.³¹ Like Ficino, Telesio opposes Aristotle's claim that the four elements are equally important:³² water and air are only secondary elements, whereas the basic antagonism is between fire and earth, heat and cold, which I translate into Ficino's terminology as light and darkness.³³ As in Ficino, the elements tend to become metaphysical principles, even if Telesio holds that their existence is verified only through sense perception. Telesio, too, assumes a constant exchange between the sun and the earth, the representatives of the basic principles hot and cold, above and below.³⁴ As in Ficino, matter in Telesio functions as a third constituent and is found in all natural bodies. Telesio presents his triad of natural principles as an alternative to the Aristotelian terms of form, matter and privation.³⁵ In accordance with such reductionism, in Telesio there is one active principle, heat, and a single passive principle, matter, which tends however to be con-

³¹ On Telesio, see Leijenhorst (1999) 137–149; Bondi (1997); Kristeller (1964) 91–109; I cite from the 1570 edition.

³² Telesio (1999) II, 26: 294–296: “Manifeste itaque iuxta proprium actum, propriamque perfectionem et iuxta propriam igitur substantiam, summe ignis Terrae opponi Aristoteli videtur, non aqua, quae veluti et aer illorum media videtur. Et iuxta proprium igitur motum propriamque operationem videatur necesse est, quia nimirum a propria manat substantia et videtur omnino; summe enim motus qui ad supera ei qui ad inferna contrarius Aristoteli videtur.” See *In Timaeum* ch. 17, OO 144/441.

³³ Telesio (1999) I, 4: 14: “aer et mare aquae omnes secundae, ut quaevis alia e Terra et ipsae a Sole effectae, et ab iisdem assidue immutatae corruptaeque sacrae etiam divinae Litterae Coelum solum et Terram solam prima esse corpora testantur, a Deo Optimo Maximo in principio constituta esse effectaque enuntiantes.” See *In Timaeum* ch. 24, OO 1449/445.

³⁴ Telesio (1999) I, 5: 14: “Et Coelum et Terra in sese mutuo agendi utrumque, videlicet alterum in propriam substantiam invertendi vi praeditum videri debet.”

³⁵ Telesio (1999) I, 16: 18; I, 20: 62–66.

founded with coldness.³⁶ Telesio also emphasizes the gradual transformation of natural bodies, rather than their spontaneous change from one form into another.³⁷ He opposes the Peripatetic concept of privation, which he wants to understand as the active contrariety of two opposed principles.³⁸

These analogies between the two thinkers, barely sketched here, should not let us overlook the divergent positions between the Naturalist Telesio and the Platonist Ficino: the tripartite structure of the universe had been developed by Ficino as confirmation for his *metaphysics* of the immortal individual human soul as a universal mediating principle, (*vinculum et nodus mundi*). Telesio, on the contrary, sought to outline a radically naturalist physics that emphasised sensual perception as the only proper tool to explore the natural world. Even so, he seems to have been influenced by Ficino's implicit criticism and discreet erosion of Aristotelian natural philosophy.

³⁶ Telesio (1999) I, 47: 153.

³⁷ Telesio (1999) I, 5: 16: "sed in aliud ens omnia, ut nec generatio nec corruptio entis cuiusvis vera entis totius generatio vel corruptio sed eius immutatio videri possit."

³⁸ Telesio (1999) I, 7: 20.

CHAPTER 6

MASCULINE / FEMININE.

THE CONCEPT OF MATTER IN LEONE EBREO'S *DIALOGHI D'AMORE* OR THE DIFFICULT QUESTION: WHO'S ON TOP?¹

This and the following chapter will examine certain concepts of *materia* used by Leone Ebreo in his *Dialoghi d' amore* (1535), a work which may be described as a Renaissance re-statement of Platonism from a particularly Jewish point of view, hence an alternative discourse to the general demonization of bodies in Ficino. The *Dialoghi d' amore*, a very popular work during the sixteenth century, was probably written around 1512 but published only in 1535.² The author, Leone Ebreo (Judah Abravanel) was a Jewish philosopher and physician who in 1492 emigrated from the Iberian peninsula to Italy. In the *Dialoghi* Leone Ebreo consciously subverts the Christian tradition by investing the body with a positive significance. In this context a comment by Boyarin is to the point:

rabbinic Judaism invested significance in the body which in the other formations [Christian or Jewish] was invested in the soul. That is, for rabbinic Jews, the human being was defined as a body — animated, to be sure, by a soul — while for Hellenistic Jews (such as Philo) and (at least many Greek-speaking) Christians (such as Paul) the essence of human being is a soul housed in a body.³

¹ An earlier version of this chapter was published as "Masculine/Feminine. The Concept of Matter in Leone Ebreo's *Dialoghi d' Amore*" in *Zeitsprünge. Forschungen zur Frühen Neuzeit* 7 (2003) 481–517. This chapter is intellectually indebted to the work of Perry on Leone Ebreo as well as to Daniel Boyarin's study of the Rabbinic Tradition. I wish to thank Barbara Garvin for her editing, proof reading, and comments. Some of the arguments refer to Kodera (1995).

² On the date of the composition of the *Dialoghi*, see Garvin (2000) 207–210.

³ Boyarin (1993) 5; see also 32–34, 77–79, 231. On the difficult question to which extent rabbinic anthropology can also be applied to Leone Ebreo, that is, to a Jewish thinker who lived much later and in an entirely different cultural environment, see below.

As in the preceding chapters, my interest lies in the way in which divergent philosophical positions relate to ideas about the body that are again in conflict with each other. In Christian formations, the body is associated with women and both are seen as inferior in the hierarchy of being, whereas the mind is associated with men and is seen as superior. Jewish discursive formations sometimes oppose this dualism. In doing so, they not only significantly modify their abstract philosophical ideas, but also their discourse on women. The female body thus becomes a battleground not only in terms of the social regulations pertaining to actual women, but also in the purportedly abstract realm of metaphysics. Although the *Dialoghi* will propose a more positive outlook on the metaphysical status of matter (and consequently will be less misogynistic than its Christian counterparts), nevertheless I do not intend to write a “triumphalist history” of Jewish over Christian anthropology. Instead, I would prefer to look at a text in Boyarin’s terms, “as [a] (necessarily failed) attempt at proposing utopian solutions to cultural tensions.”⁴

Filo — Sophia

To modern readers the most salient feature of Leone Ebreo’s *Dialoghi d’amore* is perhaps the explicit physical desire expressed by Filone, the dialogue’s male protagonist, that is hard to reconcile with the Platonising philosophy of love he expounds to Sofia, the mysterious object of his desire. The entire setting of the *Dialoghi* harks back to the sexual urge of a man madly in love with a reluctant woman: it is only upon her insistent requests for more information about the nature of love that their conversation eventually develops.

SO.: Do you really love me so much, Filone?

PHI.: You see, you know, I do.

SO.: Since love is wont to be mutual and twin, (as I have so often heard you say), it can not but that either you feign to love me or I feign [not] to love you.

PHI.: I should be satisfied if your words were as false as mine are sincere. But I fear your words are as candid as mine: for love can neither be feigned nor be dissimulated for long.

SO.: If your love be true, I cannot be loveless.

⁴ Boyarin (1993) 15.

PHI.: You wish me to believe by implication from your arguments what you hesitate to assert because it would be false. I tell you that my love is true but barren, since it is unable to beget its like in you, and that it is strong enough to bind me though not you.

SO.: How so: is not love's nature like that of the magnet, which unites opposites, draws the distant together, and attracts the reluctant?

PHI.: Though love has greater power of attraction than the magnet, yet whoever will not love opposes to it far more reluctance and resistance than iron.⁵

SO.: You cannot deny that love unites lovers.

PHI.: Yes, when both are lovers. But I only love and am not loved, and you love not but are beloved only: how then do you expect love to unite us?

SO.: Who ever saw a lover unloved?

PHI.: I, and I fancy that you and I are a second Apollo and Daphne.⁶

This passage is quite typical of some of the more lively parts of the *Dialoghi* and underscores the intricate relationship between the two speakers. Amazingly for an androcentric discourse — doubtless the context in which Leone wrote — it is the *woman* who propels the action. In the course of the conversation, Sofia turns out to be a highly intelligent disciple who forces her reluctant teacher to expound an encyclopaedic wealth of divergent doctrines ranging from eth-

⁵ This passage can be read as an ironic criticism of Ficino's *De vita* III, 26: 386–387. See also chapters three and eight below.

⁶ Trans. Leone Ebreo (1937)192–193; *Dialoghi*, II, fols. 74v–75r: “S.: Et tu, Philone, in effetto mi ami assai. F.: Tu il vedi, o il sai. S.: Poi che l'Amore suole essere reciproco, & di geminal' persona (secondo tante volte ho da te inteso) bisogna che tu, o simuli meco l'Amore o vero ch'io lo simuli teco. F.: Sarei contento che tanto di fallacia havessero le tue parole quanto hanno le mie di verità, ma io temo che tu come io non dico il vero cioè, che l'Amor' longamente non si può fingere, ne si può negare. S.: Se tu hai verace Amore, io non posso esserne senza. F.: Quel che non vuoi dire, per non dire il falso, vuoi ch'io il creda per coniettura di argomenti. Io ti dico ch'el mio amore è verace, ma che è sterile poi che in te non puo produrre il suo simile, & che basta per legar me, ma non per legar te. S.: Come nò, non ha l'Amore natura di calamita, che unisce i diversi, arossima i distanti, & attrahe il grave. F.: Se ben' l'Amore è piu attrattivo che la calamita, pur' a chi non vuol amare è molto più grave, & resistente ch'el ferro. S.: Tu non puoi negare che l'amor' non unisca gli amanti. F.: Si quando ambi due sonno amanti, ma io son' solamente amante, & non amato, & tu sei solamente amata, & non amante, come vuoi tu che l'amore ci unisca. S.: Chi vidde mai uno amante non essere amato. F.: Io, & credo esser teco uno altro Apollo con Dafne.”

ics and psychology to the euhemeristic interpretation of the myths of Classical antiquity, from Biblical exegesis to cosmology and theology.⁷ Instead of Filone it is Sofia who, with her constant questions and her common sense arguments, appears to be directing the dialogue. It remains to be seen, of course, whether and to what extent Sofia merely ventriloquizes a male voice.⁸ Another example for the couple's more lively conversation is the following:

PHI.: The end of all love is pleasure, and none is truer than my love, for its end is the enjoyment and pleasure of union with you: [...] For if love was born throughout the whole universe and in each of its parts, in you alone, it seems, it could never have come to birth.

SO.: Perhaps it was not born because it was not well sown.

PHI.: It was not well sown because the soil was unwilling to receive the perfect seed.

SO.: Is it therefore defective?

PHI.: In this respect, certainly.

SO.: Every thing defective is ugly. How, then can you love what is ugly? For if your love seems beautiful [only] to you, it is therefore neither right nor true, as you allege.⁹

⁷ On androcentrism, see the following remark by Boyarin (1993) 87: "rabbinic gender relations which, while generally patronizingly solicitous toward women (as opposed to cultures which are violently misogynistic) at the same time marginalize them utterly." On gender asymmetry in rabbinic culture, see also 106.

⁸ On ventriloquy, see Boyarin (1993) 161, with n. 46: "The term 'ventriloquy', indicates that one should *not* understand that there is an *expression* here of women's subjectivity: there is, however, a *representation* of an imagined woman's subjectivity. Women are often represented in rabbinic texts as subjects; their subjectivity is, however, [...] only represented as an object of rabbinic discourse." For the an analysis of analogous phenomena in Castiglione's *Cortegiano*, see Finucci (1992) 39–40 and *passim*; and especially 59: "The result is that none of the women of the Urbino Court can recognize herself, unless she does so passively, in the iconic image of femininity that the Magnifico produces and codifies for himself and for the Gonzaga court. Like Galatea, the court woman pieced together by our Renaissance Pygmalion, stands as another symbolic representation of femininity, a woman-fetish allowed to think and speak only as long as she thinks and speaks to her creator's experiences. Formed without history and without desires, this ventriloquial woman does not threaten the Magnifico's social identity or his own eros." As will become clear, the situation is different from the *Dialoghi*, where Sofia, in many instances at least, appears to be in a leading and emotionally threatening role.

⁹ Trans. Leone Ebreo (1937) 463; *Dialoghi* III, 151r–v: "F: Il fine d'ogni amore è il diletto, & il mio è veracissimo amore, & il fine suo è fruirti con unitiva diletatione, al qual"

Here, again it is difficult to ascertain who actually dominates the conversation: after all, Sofia wants to be taught the theory of love while Filone is more inclined to teach her the practical aspect of the subject. She remarks:

SO.: [...] can you not understand that what I want from you is the theory of love, and what you want from me is the practice; and you cannot deny that knowledge of the theory should always precede application because it is reason which rules man's actions. [...] because if, as you allege, you feel true love for me, you must love the soul more than the body. Do not, therefore, leave me on the brink of knowledge of such price [...].¹⁰

Clearly, Sofia is able to use her teacher's doctrines to defend herself from his amorous advances. Ironically, she uses Filone's own arguments to defend the integrity of her body. All too often Filone turns out to be an unwilling master who nevertheless has to go on explaining, defending, expounding, and relating the philosophy of love, as he is continuously incited by his desire for sexual union with the woman he adores.¹¹

PHI.: Sofia, you are irresistible: when I think I have barred your every avenue of escape, you flee by a new path; so that you must needs have your pleasure.¹²

fine l'amante, & l'amore è intento, [...] però che se in tutto l'universo, & ogn'una de le sue parti l'amore nacque, in te sola mi pare che non nacque mai. S.: Forse non nacque perche non fu ben' seminato. F.: Non fu ben' seminato perche il terreno non volse ricevere la perfetta semenza. S.: Adunque è difettoso. F.: In questo si veramente. S.: Ogni defettoso è deforme, come adunque ami il deforme? se perché ti pare bello l'amore tuo, adunque non è retto ne vero come dici."

¹⁰ Trans. Leone Ebreo (1937) 233–234; *Dialoghi* III, 21r: "S.: [...] non vedi tu [che] cio ch'io voglio da te, è la theorica dell'amore, & quel che tu vuoi da me è la pratica di quello, non puoi negare che sempre debbe precedere la cognitione de la theorica all'uso de la pratica, che ne gl'huomini la ragione è quella che indirizza l'opera, [...] che tu (se come dici) rettamente m'ami, più l'anima ch'il corpo amar' déi; dunque non mi lassar' imperfetta di sí alta e degna cognitione."

¹¹ As Perry already has pointed out: see Perry (1973), (1980) esp. 25–29 and in his edition of Leone Ebreo (1974); Kodera (1995) 70–89 develops this approach.

¹² Trans. Leone Ebreo (1937) 234; *Dialoghi* III, 21r: "F.: Non ti si puo resistere, o Sophia, quando penso haverti levato tutte le vie del fuggire, tu ne fuggi per nuova strada, si che bisogna far' quel che ti piace."

Filone turns out to be victimised by his own theories, as he is incapable of relating the doctrines he expounds to a practice of love. He is thus unable to fulfil his desire and to seduce the woman. His love is sterile, as Sofia rightly emphasizes several times during their conversation. Being constantly forced to speak and driven by his physical desire, Filone discusses an encyclopaedic variety of incompatible or even contradictory topics, which he himself does not seem to take very seriously.

PHI.: [...] for example, you owe me a remedy for my suffering, and this is a true debt, for although you have made no promise, however, was not to pay you a debt but a kindness, nor do you stand in any need of it, since it was not to rescue you from some danger or hurt, but only to give you pleasure and ease of mind. The payment of your debt, therefore, which was not promised, should precede that of mine, which was a promise freely given.¹³

Given his emotional state, it is by no means clear to which extent the reader of the *Dialoghi* is supposed to take seriously the various doctrines Filone is expounding. One thing becomes quite clear, however: the male speaker is not necessarily Leone Ebreo's mouthpiece.¹⁴

¹³ Trans. Leone Ebreo (1937) 233; *Dialoghi* III, 20v: "E: [...] mira che dar' tu remedio a la terribil' pena mia è vero debito, (poi che noi siamo veri amici) ben' che non l'habbi promesso, ma la promission' mia non fu per debito anzi di gratia, ne a tè è molto necessaria, che gia non è per remediarti di pericolo, o danno, ma solamente per darti qualche diletto, & satisfatione di mente, debbe dunque precedere il tuo debito non promesso, quel di mia libera promissione."

¹⁴ Of course, my claim that the full range of Leone Ebreo's thought is to be grasped only by paying attention to the relationship between Filone and Sofia hinges on the extent to which one is willing to acknowledge the function of the literary context in which a work of philosophy is set, a claim repeatedly made, for instance, for Classical Greek philosophy, and especially for Plato's dialogues, by Nussbaum (1990) 15: "Forms of writing were not seen as vessels into which different contents could be indifferently poured; form was itself a statement, a content"; see also Nussbaum (1986) 227. See also Cox (1992) 1–2: "It has come to be acknowledged, increasingly, in the field of intellectual history, that the literary form of a scientific or philosophical work is not mere 'verbal dressing,' but an essential part of its message: that even those genres, like the academic monograph, which 'pretend disingenuously not to be genres,' must be considered as rhetorical artefacts and not as the parthenogenetic products of reason."

As we have seen, in connection with his reluctance as a teacher, Filone is unable to convince, that is, to seduce Sofia who, upon the male's reproaches about his unrequited love, repeatedly indicates the possibility that his love has not been "sowed" (*seminato*) in the right way. This aspect was already obvious in the passage above, but here is another example:

SO.: Although, Filone, I used to imagine that yet another end for which love was born was sometimes to afflict and torment lovers who are enamoured of their beloved.

PHI.: Although love brings affliction, torment, distress and grief in its train, and many other troubles which it would be tedious to you, these are not its true end, but rather than sweet delight which is the very contrary of these things. [...]

SO.: Why, then, does the rule find its exception in you? And why should your love be deprived of that which is the rightful end of all love?

PHI.: This you may ask yourself, not me. It is my part to love you with all the powers of my mind; if you make this love barren and deny it its lawful end, do you wish me to make excuse for you?

SO.: I wish rather that you would search for your own. For since your love is without that true end which you have assigned to all love, either it cannot be true love, or else this is not the true end of love.¹⁵

Are we, therefore, to conclude that Filone's ideas are in principle in agreement with the author's intentions and that the former is merely unable to present them appropriately to his beloved? The reader may already have understood that, not uncommonly for sixteenth-century literature, the two

¹⁵ Trans. Leone Ebreo (1937) 463; *Dialoghi* III, 150v-151r: "S.: [...] Ben' che io mi credeva, o Philone che ancora il fine perche nacque l'amore fusse qualche volta affliggere, & cruciare gl'amanti che affettuosamente amano le sue amate. F.: Ancora che l'amore porti seco afflittione & tormento, ansietà & affanno, & molt'altre pene che saria lungo à dirle, non sonno già queste il suo proprio fine; Ma piu presto il soave diletto, che è contrario di queste, [...]. S.: Come adunque falla in te la regola, & il tuo come è privo di quello che ogn'altro conseguir' debbe? F.: Questo il puoi domandare à te et non a me; À me sta amarti quanto ne l'animo mio puo capire; Se tu fai l'amore sterile, & privo del suo debito fine, vuoi tu chi cerchi la tua escusazione. S.: Voglio che cerchi la tua, che essendo l'amor' tuo nudo del proprio fine che hai dato all'amore, bisogna chel tuo non sia vero amore, o che questo non sia il vero fine suo."

interlocutors in the *Dialoghi* are allegories, the combination of their names renders the word “philosophy”.¹⁶ In that context, Filone’s personification is relatively easy to decode: he embodies the urge for sexual union, carnal desire which at the same time is convertible into intellectual cognition. The question “who is Sofia?” is less easy to answer: is she the humble, prudent woman in need of instruction by an omniscient man (why should she then be called Sofia?) or is she the personification of a divine and paradox primordial divine wisdom? (But if so, why does Sofia appear to be an ordinary and down-to-earth woman, insisting on her ignorance and resisting Filone’s attempt to model her into a goddess, a spiritual image of his desire?) How does the relationship between Filone and Sofia connect to the topic of matter in Leone Ebreo? It remains difficult to determine what Leone Ebreo’s intentions really were, and therefore it is also difficult to ascertain precisely what his ideas about matter were. Incompatible and hence eclectic doctrines relating to these questions can be extracted from different passages in the *Dialoghi*. Like Ficino, Leone does not give us a precisely elaborated and fixed doctrine of matter. This situation is concisely reflected in Filone’s confused mental state, which leads the ardent lover into many contradictions. It seems that Leone Ebreo quite purposely sends the reader off in different directions by letting Filone’s ideas remain inconclusive. Furthermore, the heterogeneous doctrinal content of the *Dialoghi* also testifies to the irreconcilable nature of two different forms of desire, intellectual as well as physical, thus creating a structural tension between literary form and intellectual content characteristic of Leone Ebreo’s work.

It is my contention, therefore, that on the one hand the literary setting or frame of the *Dialoghi* provides a labyrinthine structure that does not allow for doctrinal coherence and that, on the other hand, Filone’s erotic desire functions as a key or self-referential instruction on how to read the text. I do not wish to imply that *all* the various ideas produced in the *Dialoghi* can be ordered and fitted into a homogeneous system, nor do I wish to propose

¹⁶ On the significances of the use of different characters (whether historical or allegorical or persons from contemporary political or life) in Renaissance dialogues, see for example Cox (1992) 3; 10–40; esp. 28 on the genre the *Dialoghi* belong to, for example, the Lucianic dialogue: “Around the third and fourth decades of the [sixteenth] century, particularly in Venice and Siena, dialogues with fictional interlocutors of a low social standing were frequently used as vehicles for social satire and erotic fantasy of a type which would have been inconceivable in the stricter atmosphere of post-Tridentine Italy.” For the historic development of this literary genre, see also 62–67; 72 and Girardi (1989) *passim*.

a kind of Leo-Straussian exegesis in which every contradiction in a text may become a deliberate hint at, say, a heterodox doctrine, which is addressed only to a group of initiates who are bright enough to grasp the esoteric meaning of a literary work —this kind of approach towards texts from the Renaissance is problematic because it tends to overlook the fact that these works were not necessary expected to form coherent, non-contradictory statements, but were intended, instead, to document an ongoing debate.¹⁷

It is Filone's explicit heterosexual desire which sets the *Dialoghi* in pointed contrast to other important classical sources for a philosophy of love, such as Plato's *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*; (Leone Ebreo had some firsthand knowledge of the former¹⁸); in these works a sort of homosexual ethics between free Greek male citizens had been elaborated.¹⁹ Doubtless, the differences between the Christian Neoplatonist Ficino and the Jewish philoso-

¹⁷ Strauss (1952) 30 says that: "the real opinion of an author is not necessarily identical with that which he expresses in the largest number of passages. In short, exactness is not to be confused with refusal, or inability, to see the wood for the trees." In his analysis of Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed* (38–94), Strauss suggests that we are to perceive the "apparently bad composition" of that work as "purposeful irregularities" (60–61) because they refer to the structure of the texts of texts, the Torah: "if we accept the thesis of modern Biblical criticism, we have to say that [Maimonides] took as his model a book which unintentionally lacks order and that by doing so he wrote a book which intentionally lacks order." (61) "That is to say you must do with the chapters of the *Guide* what Solomon did with the words and parables of the Bible; just as Solomon found out the secret teaching of the Bible by connecting word with word, parable with parable, in the same way we may find out the secret teaching of the *Guide* by connecting chapter with chapter, and, indeed, secret word with secret word." (65) That is, in reading the *Guide of the Perplexed* one has to pay special attention to contradictory statements hidden in the text (70–71) because they are not the result of lack of care in the process of writing on the author's side, but rather a disguise for Maimonides' most controversial and heterodox ideas. "Therefore the duty of the interpreter is not to explain the contradictions, but to find out in each case which of the two statements was considered by Maimonides to be true and which he merely used as a means of hiding the truth." (69–70) For a similar, though independent reading of the *Dialoghi*, see Koderá (1995) 31–42.

¹⁸ See, for example Leone's detailed exposition of the myth of Aristophanes in Plato's *Symposium* (*Dialoghi* III 81r–83r) and the discussion in the following chapter of the present study.

¹⁹ On Plato's homosexual ethics, see Halperin (1990) *passim*; Waterfield (1984) xv–xviii. I am aware that the terms *homoerotic* and *heterosexual* are perhaps anachronistic; in the present context, they are used only to denote sexual relationships between males or between men and women and not the constitution of subjective identities.

pher Leone Ebreo are rooted in different anthropologies intrinsic to the two different creeds. This has been recently and elegantly discussed by Boyarin. “Some Christians [...] would declare that there is no Greek or Jew, no male or female. No rabbinic Jew could do so, because people are bodies, not spirits, and precisely bodies are marked as male or female, and also marked, through bodily practices.”²⁰

Female Matter: Top or Bottom?

In the *Dialoghi*, this nexus between anthropology and physics is clearly enunciated. In it, all principles are classified as either male and female. Even God is not exempt from this sexualisation and subsequent polarization of the entire universe, a partition into male and female aspects which successively bring forth the entire creation by carnal union:

albeit generation is common to all things in the universe, from the most high God to the most insignificant thing therein, save that He only generates but is not generated, whilst all other things are generated and most also generate. And most generated things have two principles of their generation, one formal, the other material, [...]. And for these two principles to co-operate in the generation of whatever is generated, it is necessary that they should love each other and unite in love to produce offspring, as do the fathers and mothers of men.²¹

It is thus evident how all of Creation is explainable in terms analogous to human sexuality or may be explained in these terms. Because for Leone Ebreo all beings function along *heterosexual* role models or relationships, there is room for only two principles: masculine and feminine (see also chapter seven below). Such anthropomorphisms of course unify Creation to an extent that

²⁰ Boyarin (1993) 10; see also 18.

²¹ Trans. Leone Ebreo (1937) 121–122; *Dialoghi* II, 33r: “E: [...] Pure la generatione è comune in tutte le cose del Mondo, dal primo Dio fin’ a l’ultima cosa del Mondo, eccetto che esso è solamente generatore, & non generato, l’altre cose son’ tutte generate, & la maggior parte anchora generatrici, & le piu de le cose generate hanno due principii di sua generazione, l’uno formale, & l’altro materiale [...], & per concorrere questi dui principii ne la generatione d’ogni generato, fu di bisogno che l’un l’altro s’amassero, et s’unissero mediant’ l’amore per produrre il generato, come fanno li padri, & le madri de gli huomini [...].”

it becomes impossible to distinguish between most phenomena (the female body as opposed to say, matter) as well as to draw a distinction between divergent concepts (ethics and physics, theology). Elsewhere in the *Dialoghi* we learn that the material heaven is male and produces sperm to inseminate female earth. Leone thus once more emphasizes the extent to which human sexuality is projected onto Creation as a whole: "[The sperm] is produced by the entire heaven through its perpetual motion, even as semen is produced by the whole body of man."²² In another passage, heaven figures as the ardent lover or perfect husband (for once there seems to be no difference between the two roles) of earth:

PHI.: [...] Heaven is a most perfect husband to the earth [...]. Do you not see that such extreme diligence, such subtle providence, could not be maintained save by the most fervent and most delicate love in Heaven, as in an actual human father, for earth in common with the other elements and first matter, as for an actual woman, his beloved or consort.²³

The model of human sexuality is clearly not confined to the physical aspect of the entire creation but extends to the emotional aspects of all possible relationships which are thus conceived in analogy to human feelings. The formal principle, the male aspect of the macrocosm, is in a passionate relationship with its female counterpart, prime matter and the elements. The distinction between lover and husband (indicating two different kinds, or ways, of desire and possession) made by Leone in the passage above should not be overlooked because it emphasizes the possibility that matter may be insubordinate and therefore acknowledges that matter is an independent principle or being.

²² Trans. Leone Ebreo (1937) 90; *Dialoghi* II, 14v: "F: Tutt' il cielo produce [il seme] col suo continuo moto, si come tutto il corpo de l'uomo in comune produce il sperma."

²³ Trans. Leone Ebreo (1937) 93; *Dialoghi* II, 16r: "F: [...] il Cielo è il perfettissimo marito de la terra. [...] Non vedi tu che non si continuaria una così somma diligentia, così sottile provvedimento, se non per un' ferventissimo, & finissimo amore del Cielo, come proprio huomo generante, ha a la terra, & a gli altri elementi, & a essa prima materia in commune, come a propria donna de la qual sia innamorato, o ver maritato con lei."

Not surprisingly, and in close parallel to Maimonides' *Guide*,²⁴ the story about the difficult relationship between men and women, matter and form, originates in the primal story of division and separation to be found in the Bible. Filone puts it, quite directly:

PHI.: [...] In this respect, therefore, the masculine and feminine parts were separated for a good and necessary end, and there followed the resistance of feminine matter and the inclination of masculine intellect towards it, with a due recognition of the needs of the body. When, however, inclination was no longer tempered by reason, as was meet and the purpose of the Creator, but overstepped the dividing line between intellect and matter, it became submerged in sensuality, and therefore followed the fall of man.²⁵

Obviously, some form of resistance by the female principle is to be expected. The sexualisation of the macrocosm allows for a translation of the anthropological context of the story of the fall into all of Creation, including the relationship between Filone and Sofia. The idea that matter is resistant to form is again indicated in the following passage:

PHI.: [...] Now when matter is stubborn, the form is unable to unite and order the parts of the whole after the manner of the intellect, and the body remains deformed and its beauty is decreased on account of the disobedience of defective matter to the informing and beautifying form.²⁶

²⁴ On Maimonides, see Boyarin (1993) 57–59, with references, and chapter one of the current study.

²⁵ Trans. Leone Ebreo (1937) 357; *Dialoghi* III, 89a r–v: “E: [...] tanto che la divisione fra il mezo masculino, & femminino per buon’ fine & necessario fu fatto, & *ne seguì la resistentia de la materia femminina e l’inclinatione de l’intelletto masculino à quella con temperata sufficientia de la necessità corporea, ne piu fu moderata per la ragione come era giusto, & intentione del creatore, anzi escedendo la divisione de l’intelletto alla materia e la sommersione sua ne la sensualità, succese il peccato humano.*” (italics added)

²⁶ Trans. Leone Ebreo (1937) 382f.; *Dialoghi* III, 104r: “E: [...] et quando la materia è inobbediente, [la forma] non puo così unire, e ordinare le parti intellettualmente nel tutto, e resta men’ bello, e deforme, per la disobbedientia de le forme materia a’ la informante, & bellegiante forma.”

As we had occasion to notice in chapters two and three, Ficino employed the ideas of universal sexualisation of the universe to establish a static and rigid order in which (at least according to the *De vita*) the male and female principle, matter and form, already constitute an androgynous animal. On the surface, Ficino's ideas seem to be very similar to Leone Ebreo's cosmology. Yet, in the static picture which Ficino outlines we miss the aspect of friction, of struggle, so prominent in the *Dialoghi*. The context of the *De vita* is radically different: according to it, the female and subordinate aspect of creation is obediently impregnated and domesticated by its male counterpart. Ficino's description of a sexualised universe tries to eclipse the erratic manifestations of physical desire. In the *Dialoghi*, on the other hand, the actual conversation/relationship between Filone and Sofia gives the impression of a more dynamic image of creation. By acknowledging the actual resistance, emotional investment and possible frictions in the cooperation between the male and female elements, Leone highlights the idea that matter is an independent principle, not a shadowy daemonic entity with paradoxical qualities that disrupts the ordered universe. However, in the *Dialoghi* there are also accounts of the physical world that are reminiscent of Ficino: that is, Leone envisions a hierarchical structure in which the male part is active and formal, while the female counterpart is passive and material, eager to be united with her correlative. In the *Dialoghi*, the rigid hierarchy in which the male and formal principle is superior to female shapelessness is often subverted, as is evident in the relationship between Filone and Sofia. Far from being a docile woman, Sofia quite effectively resists Filone's amorous intentions. She does so not only by critically questioning the male's intellectual assumptions, but also by resisting her lover by denying him her body.

Why is Leone Ebreo subverting, at least in part, the traditional categories of Hellenistic Philosophy? One possible answer is to be found in the complex sociological environment, in which the *Dialoghi* were written. At the time, Jews and Christians were competing for authority over the newly recuperated texts of Classical Antiquity. Leone Ebreo is thus responding to a set of doctrines in the dominant culture: on the philosophical level, he adopts a Natural Philosophy over-determined, since its origins in Ancient Greece, by anthropomorphisms; these constitute a rigid cosmic hierarchy which reflect a social order in which the female is associated with the body which is inferior, and the male with the mind, which is superior. On a different plane, Leone adopts some doctrines of courtly love and reinserts them into what he

perceives to be the true source of such ideas, that is the *Song of Songs*.²⁷ As a result, Leone Ebreo's restatement on Platonic Love (or rather his reversal of the Christian Neoplatonists' doctrine of a non-bodily, purely intellectual love between men) may also be read as a conscious effort "by which the colonized culture undermines the hegemony of the colonizer."²⁸ That, indeed, such a cultural struggle on the role and position of Plato and other ancient theologians was underway between Jewish and Christian intellectuals is emphasized by internal textual evidence on the position of Plato who, according to Leone Ebreo, was not a forerunner of Christ but a rather inept disciple of Moses.²⁹

Yet, serious difficulties remain: contrary to what has been said so far about the elevated and independent position of female matter in Leone Ebreo's work, in many passages matter is described in negative terms and often clearly subordinate to form, just as in Ficino. We learn that prime matter is the basest element of the universe, an entirely passive woman, to be formed by the higher forms the male heavens (II, 33r–v). Matter is described as dirty (*loto della materia* I, 14r), shadowy (*tenebrosità della materia* I, 18v), darkness (*materia e oscurità* I, 11v), evil (*malizia de la materia* III, 133v), and total privation (*assoluta privazione* III, 69r). In such contexts, the *Dialoghi* often refer to commonplaces from a typically Renaissance Neoplatonic discourse, that is to a metaphysics of light that serves to explain the interplay of formal and divine light and material and evil darkness or matter.

PHI.: You must know that matter, the substratum of all lower bodies, is in itself formless and the mother of every deformity; but being informed in all its parts by the influence of the spiritual world it becomes beautiful, and it is the forms transmitted by the divine intellect and the soul of the world [...], which take away its deformity and give it beauty. Thus beauty in the lower world comes from the spiritual and heavenly world, just as ugliness and deformity are properties peculiar to it by reason of its defective and imperfect material nature which goes to the making of all its bodies.³⁰

²⁷ On courtly love in Leone Ebreo, see Perry (1980) 29; Kelso (1953) 137.

²⁸ Boyarin (1993) 18.

²⁹ See *Dialoghi* III 54r; Hankins (1990) 2: 464; Lesley (1986) 81.

³⁰ Trans. Leone Ebreo (1937) 381–382; *Dialoghi* III, 103v: "F: Sappi che la materia fondamento di tutti li corpi inferiori è da se deforme, & madre d'ogni deformità in quelli,

Matter is here firmly placed at the bottom of the cosmic circle of Creation. This Neoplatonic idea is in complete agreement with the notion that matter is actually the product of incorporeal forms.

PHI.: You know that the corporeal world proceeds from the incorporeal as the true effect from its cause and creator. None the less the corporeal does not inherit the perfection of the spiritual, and you may see how defective is the body compared with the mind. And if you find many imperfections in the body such as dimension, division and, in certain cases, mutation and corruption, you must therefore not conclude that these defects pre-exist in the intellectual causes [...].³¹

In the above passage, Leone Ebreo defines matter as utterly dependent on, and hence inferior to form. Yet, as we have seen in chapter one, he does not stop here: in what appears to be a staggering amplification of the metaphor for matter from Aristotle's *Physics* I, 9, in the *Dialoghi* prime matter is even defined as constantly desiring the male forms, much like a harlot. The wantonness of matter is actually described in the *Dialoghi* as a necessary constituent and hence as a positive force in Creation. Far from being a threat to the eternal and unchangeable Platonic masculine realm of ideas, the desire innate in matter is the cause of the beauty and variety of the inferior world. Leone thus subverts the originally negative approach to the matter/prostitution story: even as harlot, matter is a positive principle which causes the unfolding of the universe.

Leone's tactic is to accept the identification of matter with the female and form with the male, but to expand this relationship in an unprecedented

ma informata in tutte sue parti per participatione del mondo spirituale, si rende bella, sí che le forme radiate in lei da l'intelletto divino, & da l'anima del mondo [...] sonno quelle che gli leván' la deformità, & porgeno la bellezza: sí che la bellezza in questo mondo inferiore viene dal mondo spirituale, e celeste, cosí come la bruteza, e deformità è propria in lui da la sua deforme, & imperfetta madre, di che tutti li suoi corpi son' fatti."

³¹ Trans. Leone Ebreo (1937) 406; *Dialoghi* III, 118r-v: "F.: Tu sai chel mondo corporeo *procede* da l'incorporeo come proprio effetto de la sua causa, & artefice, niente di manco il corporeo non contiene la perfettione de l'incorporeo, & tu vedi quanto manca il corpo da l'intelletto, & se truovi nel corpo molti defecti come la dimensione, la divisione, in alcuni l'alteratione, la corruttione, non però giudicarai, che presistino ne le lor' cause intellettuali." (italics added)

way to the entire world, even to the Creator himself. This then allows for a more positive assessment of the function of matter, which becomes not only a necessary, but also a highly desirable constituent of the world.

And indeed, at closer inspection, one encounters a great deal of evidence for a more positive picture of matter in the *Dialoghi*. Matter fulfils a substantial, primordial, and hence very important role in God's creation of the world. One first hint at such a positive estimation is encountered in the following remark:

PHI.: First matter is, like a female, endowed with a body [...]. The body of first matter is earth, which receives all the influences of heaven, its husband; the liquid which nourishes is water; the spirit which penetrates it — air, and the natural heat which tempers and vivifies it — fire.³²

In contrast to the common opinion in Greek philosophy, matter is here identified as having a body. Far from being a wanton shadow of divine light, matter constitutes an independent principle. Nevertheless, Leone says that matter receives the formal and masculine qualities which descend from the heavens in the form of qualities derived from the four elements. In the passage above, Leone says that matter is a substance and emphasizes its role as principle independent of form. The shaping of the primordial body antecedes the creation of matter:

And Juno is supposed to have issued first from the mother's womb, because [the poets] held that the creation of the entire universe started at the centre and that it thus grew successively until the last orbit of the Heavens, like a tree which grows to its top; accordingly, the Psalmist says that on the day God created earth and heaven, he preferred the inferior body to the superior one in the order of creation.³³

³² Trans. Leone Ebreo (1937) 89–90; *Dialoghi* II, 14r: “F: La materia prima, com’ una femina, ha corpo [...]. La terra è il corpo della materia prima, ricettaculo di tutte l’influentie del suo maschio, ch’è il cielo. L’ha acqua, è l’humidità che la nutrisce. L’aere è il spirito che la penetra. Il fuoco, è il calor natural che la tempera, et vivifica.”

³³ *Dialoghi* II, 43v–44r: “F: [...] et dicono [gli poeti] che Iunone uscì prima del ventre de la madre, perché intendevono che la formatione di tutto l’universo principiassse dal centro, et che fusse così successivamente, salendo fino a la circonferentia ultima del Cielo,

In this passage Leone is perhaps referring to the first two verses of Psalm 24 "The earth is the Lord's, everything in it; the world and all who live in it, For he founded it upon the seas and established it upon the waters."

Be that as it may, Leone Ebreo, like Ficino but with a different emphasis, makes it quite clear that in the act of creation matter *preceded* form: by conflating the creation myth in Genesis with classical mythology, he maintains that the universe grew from the centre to the heavens like a tree. This idea is of course deeply anti-emanationist and thus fundamentally opposed to Neoplatonic cosmology. This is especially true of Plotinus, who maintains that matter is the *last* entity emanating from the lowest manifestations of soul.³⁴ In Leone Ebreo, on the contrary, matter or the female aspect of generation is actually *older* than the male and formal one, but not older than the creator himself. In that context it is crucial to notice that in the *Dialoghi* it is not the soul which produces the body, but rather prime matter which begets the human intellect out of love for the world soul. This idea is in accordance with Leone Ebreo's vision of Creation as a great cycle of being which (as many others have already seen) entails a constant transformation of all of Creation and does not allow for the establishment of a rigid hierarchy because everything is constantly moving in eternal circles.³⁵ As Filone explains:

PHI.: Since the beginning and end of the circle is the most high creator, the first half is the descent from Him to the lowest and most distant point from His supreme perfection. And first in order of descent comes the angelic nature with its ordered degrees from greater to less; then follows the heavenly, ranging from the heaven of the Empyrean, which is the greatest, to that of the moon, which is the least; and finally the circle passes to our sphere, the lowest of all, to wit, first matter, the least perfect of the eternal substances and the farthest removed from the high perfection of the Creator. For as He is pure actuality so it is pure potentiality. And it is the terminating point of the first half of the circle of being, which descends from

come arbore che vada crescendo fino a la cima; Conforme al detto del salmista, che dice nel di che creò Dio Terra, & Cielo, che antepose, ne l'ordine de la creatione l'inferiore al superiore corporeo."

³⁴ See O'Brien (1996) 182–183, with references.

³⁵ Heiber (1986) 45; Soria Olmedo (1984) 179; Fontanesi (1932) 3: 54, n. 1; Gebhardt (1924) 76; *De amore* II, 2: 146; see *Symposium* 216A.

the creator through successive degrees, from greater to less, to first matter, the least of all. At this point the circle begins to turn through its second half, ascending from lesser to greater, [...] that is from first matter to the elements, thence to the compounds, from these to the plants and the animals, and finally to man. In man it ascends from the vegetative to the sensitive soul and finally to the intellect, and in intellectual activities from one less intelligible object to another more so, until it reaches the supreme act of intellection, which has as its object the Divinity; and this is final union, not only with the angelic nature, but through its medium with most high Divinity itself. Behold how the second half of the circle, ascending through the various degrees of being, reaches its end in the divine origin, and the hierarchic circle of all being is made perfect and whole.³⁶

In this passage, matter actually produces the forms of elements, animals, plants, and even the highest forms of the human intellect and the angelic intellect, driven by its desire for the beautiful. This longing is not envisioned as the inchoate sexual yearning of the harlot, but rather as the constructive desire that executes the divine plan of Creation. According to this reversal of the order of Creation, matter fulfills an eminently positive, creative role it did not have in Christian Neoplatonic formations. In accordance with this

³⁶ Trans. Leone Ebreo (1937) 450–451; *Dialoghi* III, 143v–144r: “F: Essendo il principio, & fine del circolo il sommo produttore, il mezo di quello è discendendo da lui fino a l’infimo piu distante da la sua somma perfezione, però che da lui prima succede la natura angelica per suoi ordinati gradi di maggior’ á minore, & di poi la celeste con suoi successivi gradi dal Cielo empireo, che è il maggiore, fino al minore, che è quel de la Luna, & da quello viene nel nostro globo piu infimo, cioè a la materia prima, che è de le sustantie eterne, la meno perfetta, & la piu distante da la somma perfettione del Creatore, però che si come egli è puro atto, così essa è la pura potentia, in questa si termina la prima medietà del circolo de li Enti discendente dal Creatore per gradi successivi da maggiore a minore fino à essa materia prima, infima d’ogni grado di essere; da lei il circolo volge la seconda medietà ascendendo da minore à maggiore [...] cioè da la materia prima a gl’elementi, di poi a li misti, di poi a le piante, di poi a gl’animali, di poi a l’huomo, ne l’huomo da l’anima vegetativa a la sensitiva, & da quella a l’intellettiva, & ne gl’atti intellettuali da uno intelligibile minore à un’altro maggiore, fino a l’atto intellettuale del suppremo intelligibile divino, che è ultimo unitivo, non solamente con la natura angelica, ma quella mediante con essa supprema divinità. Vedi come la seconda medietà del circolo ascendendo li gradi de li Enti, viene à terminarsi nel primo principio divino, come in ultimo fine integrando perfettamente il circolo graduale di tutti li Enti.”

elevated status of matter, in another passage Filone says that prime matter generates the human intellect, out of love for its divine cause:

PHI.: [...] prime matter [...] is perpetually moving from form to form which is due to the continuous generation and succession and due to the contemplation and love [prime matter] has for the beauty of its cause, it produces the human intellect.³⁷

Matter is here said to produce actively the human intellect, which therefore becomes an expression of matter's love for the divine. Again, it is not the inchoate desire of matter/woman for any male (that is, formal) company, as in the Peripatetic discourses in chapter one. In the *Dialoghi*, it is the conscious love (*contemplatione*) of mater that brings forth all beings.

The Woman on Top: Primordial Matter, Divine Sofia

In another important passage Filone repeats and emphasized the idea that matter precedes form (though not the Creator) and that matter is the subject of all forms.³⁸ It thus comes as no surprise to learn that *bereshit*, the first word in Scripture, does not mean "in the beginning", but "before" God created the world there was already Chaos.³⁹ The idea that matter actually precedes the

³⁷ *Dialoghi* III, 76r: "F.: [...] la materia prima [...] sempre muove di forma in forma, per la generatione, & successione continua, & per la contemplatione, e amore de la bellezza de la sua causa produce l'intelletto humano [...]."

³⁸ *Dialoghi* III, 48r-v: "F.: Dio non è formato, nè ha forma, ma è somma forma in se stessa, dal quale il Chaos & ogni parte sua partecipa forma, & d'ambi si fece il Mondo formato, & ogni parte sua formata, il padre de quali è quella divina formalità, & la Madre è il Chaos ambo ab eterno, ma il perfetto padre produsse da se la sola sustantia imperfetta madre, e d'ambi son' fatti e formati di nuovo tutti li mondani figliuoli, quali hanno con la materia la formalità paterna, [...] Che *la materia tenga priorità naturale a la forma*, come è il soggetto a la cosa, di chi è soggetto, questo è manifesto, [...] la materia bisogna che prima in tempo sia in potentia à qual si voglia forma coeterna in materia." (italics added)

³⁹ *Dialoghi* III, 53v-54r: "S.: Come possono tirare Moises à la sua oppinione, il quale chiaro dice, che in principio creò Dio il Cielo, & la Terra, che pare porre insieme la creatione del Chaos, con tutto il resto. F.: Leggiamo nel testo altrimenti, questo vocabulo *in principio* in Hebraico puo significare *innanzi* dirai dunque *innanzi che Dio creasse, & separasse dal Chaos il Cielo, et la Terra*, cioè il mondo terrestre, et celeste, la terra, cioè il Chaos era inane e vacua, & piu propriamente dice, perche dice era confusa, et roza, cioè occulta, & era come un'abisso di molte acque tenebroso, spora il quale soffiando il spirito divino,

created forms stands, of course, in sharp contrast to the Neoplatonic doctrine that matter is a by-product or lower manifestation of intelligence or soul.⁴⁰ If we take the universal and even primordial presence of matter in the *Dialoghi* for granted, it is only coherent that Filone also mentions the possibility that not only the stars, but even angels and other celestial intelligences are composed of matter and form. (In a Christian context, such ideas are normally associated with the philosophy of Solomon Ibn Gabirol, about whom I will speak in a moment.)⁴¹

The idea that not only things on earth, but the stars, too, are subject to the process of generation and corruption is conducive to a cyclical cosmology in which the heavens dissolve and recompose over the course of large temporal periods. This again means that in Leone Ebreo's philosophy time

come fa un' vento grande spora un' pelago, [...]. Così fece il spirito divino, che è il sommo intelletto pieno de Idee." (italics added)

⁴⁰ For a typical passage, see for instance Ficino's *In Timaeum* ch. 40, OO 1464/463: "Preterea quod materiam & supra secrevit à mente, & hic à mentis secrevit simulacro, coniectare possumus, *materiam* non tam per ideam propriam, quam per ideam formae à Deo procedere, neque antecedenti proposito, sed quodammodo consequenti, *ab intelligentia*, ut ita dixerim, *adinventam*." (italics added)

⁴¹ *Dialoghi* III, 49r-v: "F.: À Platone pare impossibile che corpo formato non sia fatto di materia informe; Onde il Cielo, il Sole, & le Stelle, che son' bellamente formati, afferma esser' fatti di materia informe, come tutti li corpi inferiori. [...] che la materia prima [...] bisogna che sia una medesima in tutte le cose composte di materia, [...]. Già fu alcuno de gli Platonici che disseno chel chaos ha la parte sua ne gl'Angeli, & altri spirituali però che da in loro la sustantia, qual si forma da Dio intellettualmente senza corporeità in modo che gl'Angeli han' materia incorporea, & intellettuale, & li Cieli han' materia corporea incorruttibile successivamente, & gl'inferiori han' materia generabile, & corruttibile, ma quelli che tengano che l'intelletti sieno anime, & forme del corpo celeste, gli basta la materia in compositione de gli corpi celesti, & non de l'intelletti che sonno loro anime." See also *Dialoghi* III, 50v-51r: "F.: [Speaking of angels and pure intellects]: Se non sonno composti di materia & forma, ne hanno parte nel chaos, si trovano separati da' corpi ne le loro proprie essentie, contemplando la divinità, & se ancora sonno composti di materia e forma, così come partecipano le sue forme nel sommo Dio padre comune, così ancora partecipano substantia et materia incorporea dal chaos madre comune, come pone il nostro Albenzbron' nel suo libro *de fonte vitae*, che ancora loro renderanno la sua parte à ciascuno de li due parenti nel quinquagesimo mill[e]simo anno, cioè la sustanzia & materia al chaos, il quale all' hora di tutti li figliuoli le sue porzioni in se raccoglie, & l'intellettuale formalità al sommo Dio padre et datore di quella, le quali lucidissimamente sonno conservate ne le altissime Idee del divino intelletto fino al nuovo ritorno loro, ne la universal' creatione, & generatione de l'universo. [...] Avvenga che nel fin' del secolo tutti si dissolvino, ritornando a primi parenti." (italics added)

becomes an important factor, for only the temporal location of an object is decisive for its position in the hierarchy of being. Even more amazingly, in some passages it seems as if matter is not only everywhere in creation, but also *coeternal* with God:

PHI.: And [the poets] name Chaos too as His eternal companion — Chaos which is, as Ovid explains, the indeterminate matter of all things promiscuously commingled, which the ancients held coeternal with God. And from this He generated at His pleasure all created things, being their true father, as matter is the common mother of all things born.⁴²

Although these passages toy with the idea that matter is actually coeternal with its Creator, in many other instances Leone seems (though somewhat reluctantly) to incline to the explanation that the primordial chaos was generated by God.⁴³ Because matter figures here as the first love of the Godhead, the sexual relationship between matter and form becomes an erotic theological issue:

PHI.: [...] the poets held the father to be the main cause and the mother the accessory and concomitant cause; [...] And being the Creator's Companion in the creation and production of all things, and His consort in engendering them [...], this chaos may with reason be called God's companion. Nevertheless it was created of

⁴² Trans. Leone Ebreo (1937) 123: *Dialoghi* II, 34r: "E: [...] gli [poeti] danno ancora per compagna eterna il Chaos, che è (secondo dichiara Ovidio) la materia commune mista, & confusa in tutte le cose, la quale gl'antichi ponevono coeterna con Dio, de la quale esso (quando gli piacque) generò tutte le cose create, come vero padre di tutte, e la materia, è la madre commune a' ogni generato."

⁴³ "PHI.: [...] the faithful [...] hold that up to the time of the Creation God alone existed without the world and without chaos, and that the omnipotence of God created all things out of nothing in the beginning of time. And indeed Moses nowhere gives any clear indication that he held matter to be coeternal with God." Trans. Leone Ebreo (1937) 278; *Dialoghi* III, 44v: "F:[...] li fedeli [...] tengono che fino a l'hora de la creatione solo Dio fosse in essere senza mondo, & senza chaos, & che l'omnipotentia di Dio di nulla tutte le cose in principio di tempo habbi prodotto che in effetto non par' gia chiaramente in Moises ch'el ponga materia coeterna à Dio." On the doctrine of matter in Plato and Moses, see also *Dialoghi* III, 47r-v.

God from all eternity, even as Eve, created of Adam, became his companion and consort and from these two all men sprang.⁴⁴

The way in which Leone describes primordial chaos is highly reminiscent of the concept of divine wisdom in a quite original way — nobody seems to have noticed that this idea has a Scriptural precedent, namely Proverbs (8: 22–27):

The Lord brought me forth at the beginning of his work, before his deeds of old;
I was appointed from eternity from the beginning, before the world began.
When there were no oceans, I was given birth, when there were no springs abounding with water
before the mountains were settled in place before the hills I was given birth
before he made the earth or its fields or any of the dust of the world
I was there when he set the heavens in place, when he marked out the horizon on the face of the deep [...]
then I was the craftsman at his side.⁴⁵

The identification of divine Wisdom, Sofia, with primordial chaos is confirmed by another passage in the *Dialoghi*:

PHI.: The first words which Moses wrote were: ‘in the beginning God created heaven and the earth’. And where we say ‘in the beginning’ the ancient Chaldeans gave the interpretation, ‘with wisdom God created the heaven and the earth’, because wisdom in Hebrew is called the beginning, as Solomon says, ‘the beginning is wisdom,’

⁴⁴ Trans. Leone Ebreo (1937) 123–124; *Dialoghi* II, 34r–v: “F: [... gli poeti] ponevono il padre causa principale, & il Chaos accessoria, et accompagnatrice, [... Il caos è] compagna del creatore ne la creatione, et productione di tutte le cose, & sua consorte ne la loro generatione; [...] ma per questo non manca che essa non sia ab eterno prodotta da Dio si come Eva essendo prodotta da Adam gli fu compagna, & consorte, & tutti gl'altri uomini nati di tutti due.” But one could read this passage also as follows: if Eve is part of Adam, created from his side, not from his rib, then they are both coeternal.

⁴⁵ The above passage bears resemblance to the story of the Demiurge in Plato and may well be read as a good example for the conflation of Platonism and Judaism.

and for the word 'in' we can say 'with.' Thus the very first words show the world to have been created by wisdom, and that wisdom was the first creative force, although it was the most high God, the creator, Who through His supreme wisdom first created beauty and made the whole created universe beautiful.⁴⁶

It is striking that Leone uses the *bereshit* passage a second time. Before, the opening passage of the Torah served to emphasize that matter preceded the created forms; now matter becomes identified with divine wisdom; it is not only beautiful but also God's first love. The relationship in this passage between divine Wisdom and primordial Chaos, matter, allows us to answer the question of whom Sofia in the *Dialoghi* actually represents. She acts partly as a woman, partly as a figuration of divine Wisdom: Sofia is matter, is feminine, she has a body; intellectual beings are on the same scale as material Creation, that even precedes the former. Contrary to the Christian Neoplatonists' analysis, matter is a positive principle independent of form. As matter permeates the entire Creation, it may assume contradictory or paradoxical qualities: it may be, for instance, identified with divine wisdom and at time with the debris of the universe. By projecting sexual relationships between men and women onto the cosmological scale, the bond between matter and form, creator and creation becomes as dialectical and as charged with tension as in their human counterparts. Leone Ebreo should be credited with having investigated the genealogy of such a cosmological dynamism with extraordinary aptness and originality, namely with acknowledging the possibility of friction, discord, or strife between the separate and, to a certain extent, independent masculine and feminine principles. Leone Ebreo is struggling from a particularly Jewish perspective with a set of problems that are intrinsic to body discourses in general. After what has been said so far about the relationship between Filone and Sofia, it becomes clear that Leone Ebreo's philosophy in general cannot simply

⁴⁶ Trans. Leone Ebreo (1937) 419–420; *Dialoghi* III, 126r: "F: Le prime parole che Moysse scrisse furono *in principio creò Dio il Cielo, et la Terra*, & l'antica interpretatione Caldea, disse onde noi diciamo in principio, *con sapientia creò Dio il Cielo, & la Terra*, & perché la sapientia si dice in Hebraico *principio* (come disse Salomone) principio è sapientia, & la ditione *in* può dire *cum*. Mira come la prima cosa ne mostra chel Mondo fu creato per sapientia, et che la sapientia fu il primo principio creante, ma chel sommo Dio Creatore mediante la sua somma sapientia prima bellezza creò, & fece bello tutto l'universo creato." (italics added)

be deduced by quoting the different theories (most of them quite conventional) that Filone expounds in the course of the dialogue. Instead, only by carefully contextualising the dynamic relationship between Filone and Sofia one can arrive at the full picture of Leone Ebreo's intentions, essentially a dynamic vision of the universe, that is a fusion of Greek dialectics and the Rabbinic tradition of heteroglossy.⁴⁷

As we have seen in chapter two, there is a characteristically ambivalent attitude towards embodiment in the entire Platonic tradition: for the individual soul, matter is a prison, but from the perspective of Creation as a whole, matter is a necessary constituent of the cosmos. (This solution is as ingenious or as trivial as to say that there is actually no evil in Creation, only some kind of *privatio boni*.) This unresolved tension or equivocity, structural to Platonic philosophy (and to gender discourses in general) indicates that abstract philosophical discourse is inextricably tied to a metaphorical substructure, which links matter to ideas and anxieties about origin, procreation, bodies, and to everything which men label as the female aspect in creation. Viewed from this perspective, Leone's account effectively subverts the traditional significance of the existing dichotomies of matter and form, and yet leaves the conceptual framework, the terminology intact.

In that context, the synthesis of the *Dialoghi* was greatly indebted to the work of another Jewish author, Solomon ibn Gabirol (c. 1021–c. 1057, *il nostro Albenzubron*, as Leone Ebreo calls him (III 51r). In ibn Gabirol's *Fons vitae*, matter occupies the most elevated position in the hierarchy of being, thus inverting the traditional order.⁴⁸ Among Jewish texts, the *Dialoghi*

⁴⁷ On that tradition, which entails a significant unwillingness to decide between competing evidences, see Boyarin (1993) 27.

⁴⁸ A source for Gabirol's doctrine that matter comes first in the process of creation is pseudo-Empedocles, *On the Five Substances*, a text already mentioned by Shem Tov Ibn Falaquera (c. 1225–c. 1295) in connection with ibn Gabirol (fragments of the Hebrew text are printed in Kaufmann (1899) 17–51. Johanan Alemanno, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's teacher, still knew that treatise, perhaps in a less mutilated form (Kaufmann, 15, 52): "Unmittelbar auf den Schöpfer folgt in der Rangstufe der Wirklichkeit und für die denkende Betrachtung, die Materie, das Urelement, wie Pseudo-Empedokles und ibn Gabirol mit dem gleichen arabischen Wort es bezeichnen, die große Grundlage alles Geschaffenen in Geister- und Körperwelt, der "Thron der Herrlichkeit", der Träger aller Existenz." (Kaufmann, 53).

were the first to mention and discuss the *Fons vitae*,⁴⁹ which nevertheless was relatively well known though by no means always accepted in Christian philosophy.⁵⁰ According to Gabirol, matter contains everything, hence sustains everything, and is the place of all things.⁵¹ Matter is responsible for the unity of the cosmos and it desires the forms, whereas form functions as the principle of diversification.⁵² “In its relationship to form, matter is the invisible and hidden reality. Self-subsisting matter is the essence and the substance of all things.”⁵³ Matter therefore becomes the support and universal essence of all beings and, at the same time, the most spiritual of all things.⁵⁴ Of particular interest for the context of the *Dialoghi* is that, according to Gabirol, “the hidden nature of matter may receive a distinct meaning insofar as the unknowable support of form may become an appropriate symbol for God.”⁵⁵ Yet, as in the *Dialoghi*, in other passages of the *Fons Vitae* the relationship between matter and form becomes more

⁴⁹ I wish to thank professor Moshe Idel for the information on ibn Gabirol's role in Judaism.

⁵⁰ Thomas Aquinas attacks ibn Gabirol's doctrines in a number of his writings, especially in *De substantiis separatis* (chs. 5–8). On this work, see Brunner (1963) 40–42, and Wittmann (1900) 40–66. The *De ente et essentia* is reacting at hylemorphic doctrines held by members of the Franciscan school; see Wittmann (1900) 14–32; 67–72. In the Christian context, the idea of universal matter can be traced back to some passages in Augustine, *De gen. c. Manich* I, 5–7; *De gen. ad litteram* I, 15; *Confessiones* XIII, 2–3 that influenced Peter Lombard and Hugo of St. Victor. Later, ibn Gabirol's *Fons Vitae* was responsible for the remarkable persistence of the concept of universal hylemorphism in Franciscan theology, which was traditionally opposed to Dominican (and hence Thomist) theology. Wittmann (1900) 35–36: “Darnach wurde die Lehre, daß die Materie ein Bestandteil aller erschaffenen Wesen sei, den Scholastikern zunächst nicht durch Avencebrol, sondern durch Augustin zugeführt. [...] daß dieselbe jedoch in der Scholastik festen Boden gewann und sich lange Zeit hindurch speziell in der Franziskanerschule behauptete, ist dem Einflusse Avencebrols zuzuschreiben.” Universal hylemorphism was accepted by Christian philosophers such as Dominicus Gundissalvus (fl. c. 1150), Roger Bacon (c.1220–92), and Bonaventure (1221–74) who view matter as “principle of receptivity” and who believe in the existence of a kind of “spiritual matter”.

⁵¹ Ibn Gabirol (1895) V, 4: 262; Brunner (1953) 31.

⁵² Ibn Gabirol (1895) V, 29: 310.

⁵³ Ibn Gabirol (1895) V, 22–23: 298–299.

⁵⁴ Brunner (1953) 37–38. The idea that matter actually *desires* forms is very important in Gabirol (1895) V, 29: 310.

⁵⁵ According to Brunner (1953) 36 Jewish scholasticism maintains that God is the locus (maqom) (Ecclesiastes 3:20) of the world. See ibn Gabirol (1895) III, 8: 95.

dialectical. Here form comes first, whereas matter moves to receive form.⁵⁶ As a result, both aspects of the cosmos share active and passive principles — matter is receiving and carrying, whereas form is determining and carried. Gabirol's originality lies in his emphasis on the substantiality of matter, an idea which is prominent in Leone Ebreo, too; after being actualised by form, matter takes over the active part and becomes the substance and essence of a thing.⁵⁷ Again in tune with the *Dialoghi*, an important result of this doctrine is that matter and form can be distinguished only by their relation.⁵⁸ This idea is explained by Leone Ebreo in his staging of the intricate relationship between Filone and Sofia.

Leone Ebreo's philosophy develops in two important steps: (1) an abolition of the hierarchical order of Creation in which (2) matter and form become distinguishable only by their relation to each other. In that relationship between matter and form, time plays a crucial role because the superiority of one principle over the other is no longer eternal or fixed. We may for instance imagine that Sofia is not in love with Filone and this would endow her for the moment with considerable power over the male; yet, the situation may eventually change, thus reversing the power structure. Similarly, before the creation of the world matter was on top, but this situation changed radically with the advent of forms, at least for some time.⁵⁹ The key role of time in the *Dialoghi* is perhaps best documented in the following passage:

PHI.: [...] With regard to the end of His work, we believe that although His purpose in the Creation was to do good, and according

⁵⁶ Brunner (1953) 35. This dialectics becomes most obvious in the third book of the *Fons Vitae*, see for example ibn Gabirol (1985) III, 13: 107.

⁵⁷ Brunner (1953) 35.

⁵⁸ Ibn Gabirol (1895) V, 7: 269: "Substantia non est separata a sua essentia. Unde non est possibile ut sit forma eius, quia essentia substantiae ipsa est essentia materiae; et non dividuntur nomina nisi relatione. Ergo tunc dicitur materia, cum refertur ad formam; et tunc dicitur substantia, cum per se stat."

⁵⁹ A passage from Pflaum's classical study on the *Dialoghi* is in point: "Leone Ebreo übernimmt das physikalische Weltbild des Mittelalters [...], die Vorstellung von einer strengen Hierarchie des Seins. Aber seine Liebesidee gibt diesem Weltbild einen neuen Sinn. An die Stelle eines starren Gebäudes tritt ein durch die Liebe bewegtes, also lebendiges Gebilde; die mittelalterliche Substantialität setzt sich in Funktionalität um." Pflaum (1926) 52. See also Melzer (1976) 299–300.

to our reasoning eternal good is better than temporal, yet since we cannot attain to an understanding of His peculiar wisdom, so we cannot attain to a knowledge of its true purpose in His works. And perhaps in His sight the temporal good in the world's creation precedes the eternal: for the omnipotence of God and His free will is sooner recognized in having created all things from nothing than from eternity.⁶⁰

This is, of course, a fundamentally anti-Platonic statement, the essence of a doctrine which refuses to reduce the importance and reality of the material world or to oppose it in favour of a spiritual realm severed from it. It is thus not possible to answer the question posed as the title of this chapter: who is on top? Even so, in Leone Ebreo matter is sometime identified with Sofia, the divine presence in the world, rather than with Lilith, the demonic figure from Jewish mythology who wanted to be on top, or with the vampiristic mirrors we encountered in chapters two and three.⁶¹ Lastly, Leone's originality may be detected in how far he transfers the emotional drama of a relationship between a man and a woman onto a cosmological context, each contributing to the other, thereby expanding the idea that the resistance of matter to be informed and transformed by the male principle is a sign of the *divine* origin of matter, not a sign of its demonic character. For Leone Ebreo, creation on every level of being is beautiful though conflictual. Philosophy comes about by the encounter between persons who relate on an intellectual as well as on a physical level. In fact, there is no difference between the two — the arguing of the couple or (if you prefer) the conversation between Filone and Sofia, never reaches an end, never comes to a final conclusion.

PHI.: [...] However Man, as indeed all the perfect animals, includes male and female, for the species is continued through both, not

⁶⁰ *Dialoghi* III, 46v: "E: [...] & quanto al fin de l'opera sua diciamo che se ben' il fin' suo ne la creazione fu far' bene, et appresso di noi il bene è eterno, & più degno ch'el temporale noi così come non arriviamo a conoscere sua propria sapientia non possiamo arrivare a conoscere il proprio fine di quella ne le sue opere, & forse che appresso di lui il ben' temporale ne la creatione del mondo precede il ben' eterno, però che si conosce piu l'omnipotentia di Dio, & sua libera volontà in creare ogni cosa di nulla, che in haverle prodotte ab eterno."

⁶¹ On Lilith, see, *Encyclopedia Judaica* vol. 11; cols. 245–249; Boyarin (1993) 95, with references.

through either by itself. [...] in the Hebrew tongue, which is the mother and source of all other languages, Adam, which means man, connotes both male and female, and its proper meaning covers both alike.⁶²

In the following chapter, these differences pertaining to philosophical anthropology and to natural philosophy alike will be discussed further in Renaissance readings of Aristophanes' speech.

⁶² Trans. Leone Ebreo (1937) 95–96; *Dialoghi* II 17v: “F: [...] niente di manco l’huomo, & così ogni altro animale perfetto contiene in se maschio, & femina, perche la sua spetie si salva in amendue, & non in un sol di loro. [...] ne la lingua hebrea, antichissima madre, & origine di tutte le lingue, Adam che vuol dire huomo, significa maschio, & femina, & nel suo proprio significato contiene ambi dui insieme.” This is a reference to *Genesis Rabba* Theodor and Albeck (1965) 152, cited from Boyarin (1993) 46. The above passage appears in the context of Leone Ebreo’s interpretation of the myth of the androgyne from Plato’s *Symposium*; see Yavneh (1991). Kushner (1984) 66 gives a good summary of that situation: “Ainsi, forme première et matière première, intellect et chaos, apparaissent alternativement comme principe mâle et principe femelle, parents premiers de la création dont l’amour donne lieu, dorénavant, à tout autre génération. L’originalité de cette conception consiste en ce que principe masculin et féminin, inférieur et supérieur perdent leurs connotations hiérarchisées; il ne reste qu’un passage graduel de l’intelligible au sensible; il y a séquence plutôt que chute.”

CHAPTER 7

RENAISSANCE READINGS OF ARISTOPHANES' MYTH FROM PLATO'S *SYMPOSIUM* (189C–193D)¹

How have you made division of yourself?
An apple cleft in two is not more twin
than these two creatures.

(*Twelfth Night* V, I, 233–234)

This chapter seeks to compare different possible body discourses in the period under consideration by examining the divergent readings of three Renaissance authors we have already encountered in the preceding chapters. As we have seen, for more than a century Ficino's commentary on the *Symposium* (1469) was imitated by several authors writing philosophical treatises on love that circulated widely among European readers. It is curious and interesting for the transmission of works and their interpretation that Plato's text on love, filled as it was with implicit and explicit homoeroticism, should have had such a profound impact on sixteenth-century Italian culture. Indeed, the transformation of Platonic erotic doctrines into something compatible with the moral standards of both Christianity and Judaism is a fascinating chapter in the history of the domestication of pagan discourse and a textbook case of deliberate misreading. This chapter will examine three different Renaissance philosophers — Marsilio Ficino, Leone Ebreo, and Giordano Bruno — and discusses their respective interpretations of a crucial speech in the *Symposium*: Aristophanes' account of the myth of the birth of love, the myth of primordial beings.

It is perhaps no coincidence that the Paduan philosopher Marcantonio Genua (or Passeri, 1490/91–1563) had a well-known medal cast with two engraved humans who are welded together at their backs struggling to make their way. The inscription reads “Philosophia duce regredimur” (With phi-

¹ This material was originally published as “Renaissance Readings of the Myth of Aristophanes from Plato's *Symposium* (189C–193D) Marsilio Ficino, Leone Ebreo, Giordano Bruno” in *Quaderni d'italianistica* 26 (2005) 21–58.

losophy taking the lead we will get back),² thus testifying to the popularity of the myth across intellectual circles. Even so, assimilating this part of the *Symposium* was especially difficult for Christian and Jewish traditions because Plato has Aristophanes speak approvingly of homosexuality and lesbianism, thus outlining a Greek anthropology relating to the Athenian city state vastly different from that of later societies.³ In commenting on, and attempting to integrate into their own cultural environment such passages from an otherwise welcomed pagan authority, the authors under consideration felt obliged to spell out their own ideas about the relationships between the sexes, as well as the links between bodies and minds. In that context, Jews and Christians alike fell back on philosophical anthropologies that were more akin to their own respective discursive formations.

Let us start with some well-known, but fundamental facts about the transmission of Plato's works. During the Middle Ages, few genuine texts from Plato were accessible in Latin, with the notable exception of parts of the *Timaeus*, in the versions of Cicero and Calcidius. Nevertheless, Platonic philosophy had a very fine reputation among Christians, thanks to a great extent to the praise that Augustine, perhaps the most influential church authority, had given to this pagan philosopher. In the *City of God*, Augustine had written that Plato was "nearer to the truth than the whole ancient troop of philosophers."⁴ This positive assessment must have contributed significantly to the high esteem in which Plato was held at the beginning of the fourteenth century (and indeed before). One prominent example is Petrarch (1304–74), who is reported to have obtained from Byzantium a Greek manuscript of

² On this medal, see Wind (1968) 201–2 with n. 40 and figs. 67, 68.

³ The terms homoerotic and heterosexual are no doubt anachronistic; in the present context, they are used only to denote sexual relationships between males or between men and women and not the constitution of subjective identities. Rocke (1996) 124, in his ground-breaking study on homosexuality and male culture in Renaissance Florence characterizes the situation as follows: "Some scholars, if they have not simply assumed that males who had sex with other males in this period were exclusively 'homosexual', have adopted the seemingly more appropriate word 'bisexuality' to characterize men's interest in both sexes. But this anachronistic term is only a hybrid product of the sharply drawn contemporary categories 'homosexual' and 'heterosexual', which were lacking in this society, and it probably misrepresents the cultural specificity of Late Medieval and Early Modern understandings of erotic experience and sentiment." See also below.

⁴ *City of God* VIII, 5–11. For a more ambivalent assessment of Platonism by Augustine see *Confessions* VII, 9. The story of the reception of Platonic texts during the Renaissance has been told in great detail by Hankins (1990).

Plato's dialogues and he considered it one of his most treasured belongings. Unfortunately, Petrarch had no Greek and was unable to find a translator for the text during his lifetime.⁵

It was only with Leonardo Bruni (ca. 1369–1444), chancellor of the Republic of Florence and one of the foremost humanists of his day, that the Renaissance translation of Platonic works began. Bruni modelled Plato into the foremost theoretician of *vita activa*, or active life, a kind of cultural hero of the Ciceronian brand characteristic of much of fifteenth-century humanism. However, Bruni only paraphrased parts of the *Symposium*.

What was actually so difficult about Aristophanes' speech in the *Symposium*? Briefly put, his speech recounts a story about the origin of love and sexual desire. In the old days, he says, there were *three* species of human beings, not just two: double males, double females and a sort of mixed species. They had four hands and legs, two sets of genitals with a single head with two faces (189 DE); their shape was round, complete, and formed a circle. The males descended from the sun, the females from the earth, and the mixed, androgynous sex was under the patronage of the moon. These people were twice as strong as ordinary people and they were able to move effortlessly because they supported themselves with their eight limbs, moving rapidly around and around in circles (190A). In this state of frightful power, the primordial double humans decided to assault the Olympians who, after some deliberation, decided not to kill their attackers, because otherwise there would have been no one left to worship the gods anymore, but to punish them, instead, by cutting them in half (190B–D). The effects of the halving humans beings were disastrous: "It was their very essence that had been spliced into two; so each half missed its other half and tried to be with it; they threw their arms around each other and longed to be grafted together. As a result, [...] they died of starvation and general apathy." (191A)⁶ To remedy this situation (and to prevent humans from dying out) Zeus ordered Mercury to move the genitals of the sliced halves to their front, thus enabling them to have sex and beget children or, in the case of homosexual relationships, at

⁵ Copenhagen (1992) 127–129; Hankins (1990) 1:25–27; Kristeller (1964) 11.

⁶ Translations from the following passages are all from Plato (1994). Ficino translates this and the following passages in Plato (1602) 1186B: "Postquam natura hominum ita divisa fuit, cum quisque dimidum sui agnitum cuperet, inter se concurrebant, circumactisque brachiis se invicem complectebantur, conflari unum affectantes. Unde fame et torpore deficiebant."

least to relax and to continue living in a more balanced emotional state.⁷ The desire for sexual union functions here as a substitute for a primordial unity which remains, however, unrecoverable. Men and women descending from the mixed race are heterosexual, producing the highest quantity of adulterers (male and female) respectively, whereas “Any women who are offcuts from the female gender aren’t particularly interested in men. They incline more towards women and therefore lesbians come from this group.” (191E)⁸ The text continues:

And any men who are offcuts from the male gender go for the males. While they’re boys, because they’re slices from the male gender, they fall in love with men, they enjoy sex with them, and they like to be embraced by them. These boys are the ones who are outstanding in their childhood and youth, because they are inherently more manly than others. I know they sometimes get called immoral, but that’s wrong: their actions aren’t prompted by immorality, but by courage, manliness, and masculinity. [...] there’s good evidence for their quality: as adults, they’re the only men who end up in government. (192A)⁹

In an important shift, Plato here links the sexual orientation to the political structure of classical Athens, a city governed by a small number of

⁷ “Male female relationships leading to procreation and offspring, male relationships would at least involve sexual satisfaction, so that people would relax, get on with their work, and take care of other aspects in life.” (191D) Plato (1602) 1186CD: “per masculum quidem in foemina, hac de causa, ut si in amplexu vir foeminae commisceretur, genita prole speciem hominum propagarent. Sinautem masculo masculus, satietate ab amplexu amoverentur, et ad res gerendas conversi victum, curarent.”

⁸ Plato (1602) 1186E: “Quae vero mulieres mulieris pars existunt, haud multum viros desiderant, sed foeminas magis affectant, atque hinc foeminae quae foeminas cupiunt nascuntur.”

⁹ Plato (1602) 1186E–1187A: “At vero qui maris portio sunt, mares sequuntur. At dum pueri sunt, utpote qui maris particula sunt, viros diligunt, virorumque familiaritate assidua congressuque gaudent: hique sunt puerorum adolescentulorumque omnium generosissimi, quippe qui natura prae ceteris omnibus sunt viriles. Hos quidem impudicos falso appellant. Neque enim imprudentia ulla, sed generositate, & fortitudine quadam mascula virilique natura hoc agunt [...]. Huius evidens argumentum est, quod cum adoleverint, soli ad civilem administrationem conversi viri praestantes evadunt.”

men who practiced a sort of ritualised homosexuality that was intimately related to the maintenance of power.¹⁰ There is probably no need to highlight what sort of feelings this apology of male homosexuality, as well as the acknowledgement of lesbianism, might have induced in Renaissance Christians and Jews alike. The value of heterosexuality, the only possible form of intercourse (and only with procreative intentions),¹¹ on the other hand, is parodied in Aristophanes' speech.

Renaissance readers had to domesticate the text if they wanted to continue to study Plato or to use his works as a support for their own ideas. How could they assimilate such passages into their own cultural background without discrediting Plato forever, let alone endorse him as the most Christian of all pagan philosophers? In fact, even for modern readers it has been notoriously difficult to assess the tone of Aristophanes' speech, or even to give a consistent and convincing interpretation of the story: is it intended as mere parody or is it rather an Aesopian fable and, if so, what sort of morals are to be construed from the narration? To what extent are genuine Platonic concepts about Eros embedded in the narration? What are we to think of the idea that sexuality is inborn and hereditary?¹² It is of course far beyond the scope of this chapter to treat these issues. One aspect of Aristophanes' myth — as attractive as it was mysterious to Renaissance readers and moderns alike — was the idea that sexuality is actually a substitute, *ersatz*, for a primordial unity of some sort which had been lost for good, a kind of emotional sensation. According to Plato, lovers "obviously have some other objective, which their minds can't formulate; they only glimpse what it is and articulate it in vague terms." (192CD)¹³ Here Eros becomes a signifier for the pursuit of lost

¹⁰ Waterfield in Plato (1994) xv-xvi; Halperin (1990) *passim*.

¹¹ See for example *De amore* VI, 14: 229–230. See also below.

¹² See Guthrie (1962–81) IV: 384; Waterfield in Plato (1994) xxiii-xxiv; Nehamas (1999) 307, provides a good example of a contemporary assessment of this text: "Aristophanes' speech is stunning in its originality. Although it contains parody in its use of myth, it is on the whole a highly serious work, and its view of love has no parallel in earlier Greek literature. It actually anticipates more romantic versions of love, particularly the idea that love draws together two unique individuals to join as one person. For all its comic elements, a sad note sounds frequently in the speech: the goal of loving, the forging of one person out of two, is not to be achieved. What we have instead is the temporary satisfaction of sexual relationships, and these are at the best a promise of a more permanent happiness and a closer union."

¹³ Plato (1602) 1187B: "Aliud quiddam est profecto, quod animus utriusque cupit, nec exprimere valet, sed vaticinatur potius conjicitque & affectum insitum vestigiis signat

primordial wholeness that allows the matching halves to desire such close proximity that they would even gladly let Hephaestus, the divine blacksmith, bind and fasten them together for eternity.¹⁴ According to the *Symposium*, this longing cannot be induced by sex or physical attraction alone, but by some sort of desire for an ontologically higher unity (192DE). Yet, these noble and high-flying ideas in the truest sense of the word are counterbalanced by the satirical mood which is characteristic of Aristophanes' tale: quite humorous (to modern readers, at least) is, for instance, the divine threat to the halved humans that if they continue to misbehave they would be divided once more, "and in that mode of existence we'd be no different from those profiles on tombstone, sawn in two down the line of our noses." (193A)¹⁵

In Ficino's commentary on the *Symposium*, one of his most successful works, this threat is an integral part of the divine mysteries hidden behind the profane text.¹⁶ Ficino devotes the fourth book of the commentary to Aristophanes' speech. From the very beginning Ficino emphasizes the difficulty and alleged obscurity of this passage, which calls for special interpretative methods in order to read the story of the primordial humans. Unlike in his commentaries on the other speeches of the *Symposium*, in this case Ficino retells the myth in its entirety. This allows him to omit some of the most inassimilable passages: the encomium of homosexual men, Zeus moving the sexual organs of the halved humans to their front side; only a half sentence alludes to divergent sexual orientations: "Everyone therefore is looking for his other half, no matter to which sex he feels attracted, and gets very excited when he meets it."¹⁷

Ficino then takes another step which provides him with a theoretical basis to domesticate the pagan text in its entirety: referring to the authority of Augustine, he claims that it is indispensable to read the myth as an allegory in order to discover the divine mysteries that lie under the veil of the figments

obscuris." See also Halperin (1999) 67–69.

¹⁴ This is, of course, an ironic allusion to the way in which Hephaestus strung together his unfaithful wife Aphrodite and her lover Ares using a hunting net so as to expose the adulterous couple to the derision of the gods (*Odyssey* VIII, 266–367).

¹⁵ Plato (1602) 1187D: "talesque efficiamur, quales qui in columnis figurantur, mares secti evadamus similes."

¹⁶ See Hankins (1990) 2:484 on editions and dates of composing of that work.

¹⁷ *De amore* IV, 2:167–8: "Quotiens itaque dimidium suum alicui cuiuscumque sexus avidus sit occurrit, vehementissime concitatur." (*Symposium* 191A)

of the text.¹⁸ In that process it is possible to avoid interpreting *all* the items reported in the story, because many details are introduced only to allow for order and the connection of disparate and difficult, and hence divine, truths. Even obscenity may turn out to be a safeguard against profanation. In that context, Ficino links allegorical reading metaphorically to a tool, the iron part of the plough, which is used to turn the earth and therefore is the essential element to which other (non-essential) parts are added.¹⁹

Allegorical exegesis is not, however, the sole strategy for avoiding some of the more difficult passages in Aristophanes' speech. Ficino also makes the reader believe that his own synopsis of the myth is actually the genuine and complete Platonic text, on which he subsequently comments *verbatim*.

Men formerly had three sexes: masculine, feminine, and mixed, the sons of the sun, the earth, and the moon. And they were whole. But on account of pride, when they wished to equal God, they were cut in two; if they are proud again, they are to be split in two parts again. The division having been made, half is drawn to half by love, in order that the restitution of wholeness may be effected. This achieved, the race of men will be blessed.²⁰

¹⁸ On Ficino and allegorical reading, see, for instance, Copenhaver (1992) 155–156; Hankins, (1990) 1:343–347.

¹⁹ "For it was the custom of the ancient theologians to conceal their holy and pure mysteries in the shadows of metaphors, lest they be defiled by the profane and impure. [...] For even Aurelius Augustine says that not all the things that are represented in figures must be thought to mean something. For many things are added for the sake of order and connection, on account of the parts that do mean something. Only by the ploughshare is the earth turned, but in order that this can be done, other parts too are joined to the plough." Trans. Ficino (1985) 72–73; *De amore* IV, 2:169: "Mos enim erat veterum theologorum sacra ipsorum puraque arcana ne a prophanis et impuris polluerentur, figuram umbraculis tegere. [...] Nam et Aurelius Augustinus non omnia inquit, que in figuris finguntur, significare aliquid putanda sunt. Multa enim propter illa que significant ordinis et connexionis gratia sunt adiuncta. Solo vomere terra proscinditur sed, ut hoc fieri possit, cetera quoque huic aratri membra iunguntur."

²⁰ Trans. Ficino (1985) 73; *De amore* IV, 2:168–9: "Homines quondam tres sexus habebant, masculinum, femininum, promiscuum, solis terrae, lunaeque filios. Erant et integri. Sed propter superbiam, cum deo equare se vellent, scissi in duo sunt, iterum si

This stratagem, not uncommon in Ficino's allegorical interpretations, allows for a reading of the physical details of Aristophanes' speech as allegories for the fate of the human soul:²¹

Men, that is, the souls of men, *formerly*, that is, when they are created by God, *are whole*, they are provided with two lights, one innate and the other infused, in order that by the innate light they may perceive inferior or equal things, and by the infused, superior things. *They wished to equal God*. They turned themselves toward the innate light alone. *Hence they were divided*. They lost the infused splendour when they were turned toward the innate light alone, and they fell immediately into bodies. *If they become more proud, they will be divided again*, that is, if they trust too much to the natural power, that innate and natural light which remains will be extinguished in some measure.²²

According to Ficino, Aristophanes' myth is an allegory for a condition of the soul, pointing to a mental process. The split of the primordial humans signifies the loss of the divine ray of light, the supernatural intellect. Equipped solely with their other half, natural reason, humans are confronted with the task of regaining their connection with the numinous. In these circumstances, Aristophanes' speech becomes an allegory for the soul's descent into matter and its subsequent regaining of the beatific vision through ascent to the divine. The way back, upwards, so to say, is powered by Eros. (Here Ficino's

superbiant, bifariam discindendi. Sectione facta, dimidium amore ad dimidium trahitur, ut integritatis restituendo fiat. Qua completa, beatum genus hominum est futurum."

²¹ Hankins (1990) 1: 355 accordingly says that "when Plato seems to be praising something we abhor, he is in fact praising a purified and heavenly form of it which we, with our earthly vision, are not able to see."

²² Trans. Ficino (1985) 73; *De amore* IV, 2:169: "*Homines*, id est hominum animae. *Quondam*, id est, quando a deo creantur. *Integrae sunt*, duobus sunt exornate luminibus, ingenito et infuso. Ut ingenito equalia et inferiora, infuso superiora conspicerent. *Deo equare se voluerunt*. Ad unicum lumen ingenitum se reflexerunt. *Hinc divise sunt*. Splendorem infusum amiserunt, quando ad solum ingenitum sunt converse statimque in corpora cecidere. *Superbiores facte iterum dividuntur*, id est, si naturali nimium confidunt ingenio, lumen illud ingenitum et naturale quod restitit quodammodo extinguetur." For an interesting parallel in Giovanni Pico della Mirandola see his *Commento* in Pico (1942) 2. 4: II, 527–529, together with Wind (1968) 200–202.

reading of Aristophanes' tale refers to the divine cavalcade in Plato's *Phaedrus*, a central myth for Ficino's theory of love.)²³

*The division having been made, half is drawn to half by love. When souls, already divided and immersed in bodies, first come to the years of adolescence, they are aroused by the natural and innate light which they retained (as if by a certain half of themselves) to recover, through the study of truth, that infused and divine light, once half of themselves, which they lost in falling. Once this is recovered, they will be whole and blessed with a vision of God.*²⁴

The main thrust of Ficino's reading therefore rests on the claim that the myth of the double humans does not refer to the entire physical human being, but rather exclusively to soul, which in the Neoplatonic hierarchy of being is clearly superior to bodies. "When Aristophanes said *men*, he meant our souls, in the Platonic way."²⁵ This reading has important consequences for Ficino's philosophical anthropology. Severing bodies from souls, Ficino's sweeping (and even for him rather unusual) claim that Aristophanes' myth refers exclusively to souls lends his anthropology an almost Cartesian quality.

Hence, Man is said to procreate, nourish, grow, run, stand, sit, speak, make works of art, feel and understand. But all these things the soul itself does. And for this reason the soul will be Man. [...] the soul, as father and creator of the body, begets, feeds, and nourishes.²⁶

²³ Allen (1984) 88–111, esp. 105, 111, 166. On the interpretation of the myth of the divine cavalcade see also *De amore* VII, 14: 259–260.

²⁴ Trans. Ficino (1985) 73; Ficino (1956) IV, 2:169: "*Sectione facta, dimidium amore ad dimidium trahitur. Animae iam divisae et immersae corporibus, cum primum ad annos adolescentiae venerint, naturali et ingenito lumine quod servarunt, ceu sui quodam dimidio excitantur ad infusum illum divinumque lumen olim ipsarum dimidium, quod cadentes amisere, studio veritatis recipiendum. Quo recepto iam integre erunt et dei visione beate.*"

²⁵ Trans. Ficino (1985) 75; *De amore* IV, 3:171: "Cum homines Aristophanes nominavit, more platonico animas nostras significavisse."

²⁶ Trans. Ficino (1985) 74; *De amore* IV, 3: 170–171: "Hinc generare, nutrire, augere, currere, stare, sedere, loqui, artis opera fabricare, sentire, intelligere homo asseritur. Omnia vero haec anima ipsa facit. Ideoque anima erit homo. [...] anima tamquam pater et artifex

Ficino maintains that the soul is the essence of the human being, whereas the body becomes a mere (and thus) dispensable attachment, generated by soul itself. In that case, Ficino argues, the content of Aristophanes' myth could not refer to bodies; instead of physiology, the story is about psychology. In this reading, the soul instrumentalises the body in its entirety, an interpretation which is in blatant contradiction to Aristophanes' description of erotic physical desire as something that leads towards the spiritual realm and thus reunites the torn soul. Moreover, and as a corollary, according to Ficino, the drama of the splitting in half of the primordial humans signifies the descent of soul into the physical world: here the lower part of the soul thinks of itself as sovereign, which only the Creator himself can be, and hence is punished by losing its higher light. This is the meaning of the revolt of the primordial beings against the Olympians in Aristophanes' speech.

But our soul fell into the body when, neglecting the divine light, it used its own light alone and began to be content with itself. Only God, to whom nothing is lacking, above whom there is nothing, remains content with Himself, sufficient to Himself. Therefore the soul made itself equal to God when it wished to be content with itself alone, as if it could be sufficient to itself no less than God.

Aristophanes says that this pride was clearly the cause of the soul, which was born whole, being *split*, that is, with regard to its twin lights; after this it used one but neglected the other. Plunged into the abyss of the body as though into the river Lethe, and forgetting itself for a time, it is seized by the senses and lust, as though by police and a tyrant. But when the body has matured and the instruments of the senses have been purged, with learning contributing, the soul wakes up a little. Here the natural light shines forth and searches out the order of natural things. By this investigation the soul perceives that there is some architect of this huge machine. And it desires to see and possess Him, [...]. But this instigation and appetite is true love.²⁷

corporis ipsum gignit, auget atque nutrit." See also Ficino's excerpts from Proclus, OO 1927, on body as instrument of the soul.

²⁷ Trans. Ficino (1985) 76; *De amore* IV, 4:172–173: "Cecidit autem animus noster in corpus, cum, pretermisso divino, solo suo usus est lumine ac se ipso cepit esse contentus.

Aristophanes' narration explains why we feel erotic desire, a drive that is physical but nevertheless *transcends* the body, and hence underscores the intimate connection between bodies and souls. Ficino is unable to deal with this idea because in his conceptual framework there is no place for a positive assessment of physical desire, let alone for non-reproductive forms of sex as vehicles to discover the transcendent. In this interpretation of Aristophanes' myth, the body is, from the very beginning, excluded and discarded as an impediment to spiritual fulfillment.

Ficino's reading is propelled by his urgent need to eradicate the pagan anthropology expressed in Plato's text. In that process, Ficino transposes the splitting in half of the primordial humans from the level of the body, as in Aristophanes' narration, to a phenomenon relating to higher and lower parts of the soul. Ficino therefore translates the violence of the original separation of two bodies into a psychological process. An important corollary to this formulation is that the human being is now defined in terms of its soul, which entails a radical separation between bodies and minds. Such a clear division stands not only in sharp contradiction to contemporary Aristotelianism,²⁸ but even to ideas Ficino himself expresses in other writings, where the emphasis is on a gradual transition from the bright intellectual forms to the darkness of matter, with soul in the centre of Creation.²⁹

The price of domesticating the pagan myth is high indeed: it amounts to nothing less than the complete substitution of Plato's anthropology with a construct which is seemingly more compatible with Ficino's own discursive formation. His reading emphasizes, even exaggerates, the difficulties of many Christian writers to assess the position of the sexual body in Creation.

Solus deus cui deest nihil, supra quidem nihil est, se ipso contentus, permanet, sibi sufficiens. Quapropter deo se parem fecit tunc animus cum se solo voluit esse contentus, quasi non minus quam deus sibi ipsi sufficeret." Trans. Ficino (1985) 76–77; *De amore* IV, 5: 173 : "Hanc plane superbiam, causam fuisse Aristophanes inquit, ut animus qui natus est integre secaretur, id est ex geminibus luminibus, altero post hac uteretur alterum vero negligeret. Hic in corporis barathrum ceu Letheum flumen immersus suiquemet ad tempus oblitus sensibus et libidine, quasi satellitibus et tyranno, raptatur. Verum adulto corpore, purgatis sensuum instrumentis, conferente doctrina, paulum respiscit. Ubi naturalis emicat fulgor, naturaliumque rerum ordinem indagat. Qua investigatione architectum ingentis huius machine aliquem esse persentit. Eum et videre cupit et possidere. [...] Instigatio vero appetitoe quoe huiusmodi verus est amor [...]"

²⁸ On which, see for example Kessler (2001) *passim*.

²⁹ For the author's doctrine of *spiritus*, more or less embodied garments of the soul, see chapters three and four.

By constructing an affinity to the myth of the ascent of the soul in Plato's *Phaedrus*, Ficino's interpretation completely neglects the catch-line of Aristophanes' speech, namely that our longing to be united with our original halves will *never* be gratified and that sex is just a pale imitation of our original unity. However, since Ficino cannot retell the myth in its full physical detail, he is consequently unable to adapt this line of thought, which might in fact have been very appealing to him and to other Christian readers of the *Symposium*. So, it is no wonder that Ficino assumes that Eros acts as a leveller of desire, who even has the ability to appease or fulfill all wishes. By confounding Eros with *philia*, Ficino identifies both terms with spiritual redemption.

Therefore by the beneficence of Love it is brought about that among the various degrees of bliss each is content with his own portion without any envy. It also happens that souls enjoy the same feasts eternally without any satiety. [...] Therefore, to sum up briefly, we shall praise three benefits of Love: that by restoring us, formerly divided, to a whole, he leads us back to heaven; that he assigns each to his own seat, and makes all content in that distribution; that, all distaste removed, by a certain love of his own he perpetually kindles the pleasure as if new in the soul and renders it blessed with enticing and sweet fruition.³⁰

This reading allows Ficino to eclipse all gendered aspects of the myth: it is not men, women, or androgynes, longing for each other's halves any more; instead, all sorts of non sexual (and hence, male) disembodied souls are desirous of immaterial divine virtues which enable them to regain divine unity on their way back to the Godhead. As a consequence, Ficino aims at merely spiritual relationships between souls, non-sexual friendships which reflect Aristophanes' encomium of homosexual men to a limited extent

³⁰ Trans. Ficino (1985) 80; *De amore* IV, 6: 177: "Quapropter amoris beneficio factum est ut in diversis felicitatis gradibus portione sua quilibet sine ulla invidia sit contentus. Fit etiam ut sine ulla sacietate animi iisdem vescantur dapibus in eternum. [...] Tria igitur ut brevi complectar amoris beneficia collaudabimus: quod nos olim divisos in integrum restituendo reducit in celum, quod suis quemque collocat sedibus facitque omnes in illa distributione quietos, quod omni expulso fastidio, suo quodam ardore oblectamentum quasi novum iugiter accendit in animo redditque illum blanda et dulci fruitione beatum."

only. Love for young men is engendered by an inborn or acquired desire for immortal and higher learning, which is aptly directed toward male friends, simply because they are more intelligent than women. Again we see how Ficino's text, although seemingly far removed from the body and its physical aspects, nevertheless very stringently argues for a body politics that marginalizes women and reduces any connexion with them to the comparatively inferior level of the generation of offspring.

But some, either by nature or by education, are better fitted for progeny of the soul than of the body, and others, certainly the majority, the opposite. The former follow heavenly love, the latter, vulgar. For this reason the former naturally love males and certainly those already almost adult rather than women or boys, since in them sharpness of intellect flourishes more completely, which on account of its more excellent beauty, is most suitable for receiving the leaning which they wish to procreate. The others the opposite, motivated by the pleasure of sexual intercourse, and the achievement of corporeal reproduction.³¹

After what has been said, it is obvious that although Ficino's reading displays a tendency to disembodiment humans, at the same time it enacts the hierarchical relationships between men and women that were normative in his day. The careful avoidance of physical aspects in Aristophanes' myth does not prevent Ficino from introducing a theoretical framework in which the bodies of women are inferior to those of men. This becomes obvious on the occasion of a remark (made in passing) by Aristophanes that male homosexuals, as descendants of the sun, are especially brave.³²

³¹ Trans. Ficino (1985) 135; *De amore* VI, 14: 229: "Ceterum alii vel propter naturam vel educationem ad animi fetus sunt quam corporis aptiores, alii, et quidem plurimi, contra. Illi celestem secuntur amorem, isti vulgarem. Illi natura idcirco mares et illos quidam iam pene adultos potius quam feminas aut pueros amant quoniam in eis magis admodum viget mentis acumen, quod ad disciplinam, quam illi generaturi sunt, propter excellentiorem sui pulchritudinem est altissimum. Alii contra, propter congressus venerei voluptatem et generationis effectum."

³² The celestial origin of the different sorts of primordial human beings fitted well into the more general theory that love between individuals actually was engendered by their analogous celestial origin and was hence due to cosmic causes: see *De amore* IV, 5: 174.

Ficino claims that all three different kinds of primordial humans actually symbolically reflect these divine virtues which were instilled by God into the soul: the male virtue of courage, which is akin to the sun, the female virtue of temperance, and the androgynous one of justice. In that context, Ficino establishes a hierarchy of the sexes, by stating that the male element is active, the androgynous active and passive, whereas the female element is entirely passive. This is, of course, once again only very distantly related to the original text, where homosexual males were the best pairings while mixed ones belonged to adulterers.

The Courage of men we call masculine because of its hardness and boldness. Temperance we call feminine because of a certain restrained and cooler habit of desire and its soft nature. Justice we call mixed. Feminine certainly inasmuch as because of its innocence it brings harm to no one. But masculine inasmuch as it does not permit harm to be done to others, and with very severe judgment levies punishments upon wicked men. But because it is proper to the male to give and to the female to receive, for that reason we call the sun male, since it receives light from none and gives to all. The moon giving and receiving —receiving from the sun it gives to the elements — we call mixed. And the earth, since it certainly receives from all and gives to none, we call female.³³

It is rather amusing to learn that the female, procreative element in this account “gives” to none; this seems to be so extravagant an idea that it can only be read as an unintentional allusion to the lesbians in Aristophanes’ myth. It is only in the sixth book of his commentary on the *Symposium* (that is, in a place far removed from Aristophanes’ speech), that

³³ Trans. Ficino (1985) 77–78; *De amore* IV, 5: 174 : “Fortitudinem hominum masculam propter robur et audaciam nuncupamus. Temperantiam, feminam, propter remissum quemdam et frigidiorem desiderii habitum miteque ingenium. Iustitiam, promiscuam. Feminam quidam prout innocentia sua iniuriam infert nemini. Masculam vero prout aliis inferri non sinit et severiori censura in homines iniquos animadvertit. Quia vero maris dare, femine suscipere proprium est, iccirco solem qui lumen a nullo accipiens exhibet omnibus, marem vocamus. Lunam, quae accipiens a sole, dat elementis, a dando et accipiendo, promiscuam. Terram, cum accipiat quidem ab omnibus, tributa nulli, feminam nuncupamus.” For a parallel passage, see Pico (1942) 530.

Ficino speaks about physical love between men — and only to reject it (in agreement with Plato) as an entirely bestial waste of sperm, a crime that is equivalent to murder.

But since the reproductive drive of the soul, being without cognition, makes no distinction between the sexes, nevertheless, it is naturally aroused for copulation whenever we judge any body to be beautiful; and it often happens that those who associate with males, in order to satisfy the demands of the genital part, copulate with them. [...] But it should have been noticed that the purpose of erections of the genital part is not the useless act of ejaculation, but the function of fertilizing and procreating; the part should have been redirected from males to females. We think that it was by some error of this kind that that wicked crime arose which Plato in his *Laws* roundly curses as a form of murder.³⁴

Ficino's determined rejection of the pagan anthropology outlined in Aristophanes' speech caused him to re-write the entire story. His opposition to the physical forms of same-sex love as articulated by the reference to Plato's *Laws* may well be related to a broad sociological context of fifteenth-century Florence. According to a recent study, the number of individuals involved in homosexual activities must have been considerable.³⁵ Given the implicit misogyny of Ficino's anthropology, it comes as no surprise that he

³⁴ Trans. Ficino (1985) 135; De amore VI, 14: 229–230: “Quoniam vero genitalis illa vis animae, utpote cognitionis expers, sexu[u]m nullum habet discrimen, natura tamen sua totiens incitatur ad generandum, quotiens formosum, corpus aliquod iudicamus, contingit plerumque ut qui cum masculis conversantur, quo genitalis partis stimulus sedent illis se misceant. [...] Oportebat autem animadvertere partis illius incitamenta non irritum hoc iacture opus, sed serendi et procreandi officium affectare atque a masculis ad feminas eam traducere. Huiusmodi quodam errore nepharium scelus illud exortum putamus quod in *Legibus* suis Plato tamquam homicidii spetiem acerrime detestatur.”

³⁵ Roche (1996) 175, estimates that of up to one-third of the fifteenth-century Florentine male population was accused of sodomy. He writes: “As an accusation from 1512 suggests, Florentines found nothing at all unusual in the fact that men might desire and have sexual intercourse with both boys and women.” (125)

considers virile women to be the most attractive because their blood (and by consequence, their spirits) are of a better, more virile quality.³⁶

On the other hand, and in pointed contrast to Leone Ebreo, whom we will consider in the following section, Ficino is able to open a philosophical perspective on a type of sublimated sexuality that is expressed in intellectual friendships between men — one's own mirror images, as we had occasion to notice in chapter two.³⁷ Drawing on Ficino's translation of and commentary on the *Symposium*, Aristophanes' speech became a pretext for Leone Ebreo to develop an anthropological approach that was not only antagonistic to Christian Neoplatonism but also more akin to his Jewish discursive formation. As Ficino before him and in order to arrive at his own synthesis, Leone felt obliged to suppress some important aspects of the story, even though he recounts Aristophanes' speech in greater detail than Ficino. This is especially true of the physical details of the primordial humans: in the *Dialoghi*, one finds a description of the double genitals, the progeny of the male and female halves from sun and earth respectively, and as the relationship of the mixed parts to the moon. Leone also reports that the gods refrain from killing the rebellious creatures for fear that no one would worship them anymore, as well as the moving of their genitals by Zeus, which is done to avoid the waste of sperm when ejaculate fell on the earth. Here, there is an interpolation in the *Dialoghi* that states that out of the semen grew the mandrake, a plant notorious for its connections with magic.³⁸ One gets the impression that the Jewish physician was deeply intrigued by Plato's description of surgery to separate

³⁶ "Women, of course, catch men easily, and even more easily women who display a certain masculine character. Men catch men still more easily, since they are more like men than women are, and they have blood and spirit which is clearer, warmer, and thinner, which is the basis of erotic entrapment." Trans. Ficino (1985) 165; *De amore* VII, 9: 253: "Feminae profecto viros facile capiunt, facilius autem ille quae masculam quandam indolem prae se ferunt. Et tanto facilius masculi quanto similiores sunt quam feminae et sanguinem spiritumque habent lucidiorem, calidiorem, subtiliorem, qua in re amatoria consistit illaqueatio." In that context it is interesting to note that early sixteenth century prostitutes in Venice and Florence cut their hair in order to look more masculine and thus to attract a greater number of customers; see Rossiaud (1988) 133.

³⁷ On this kind of friendship which became famous as "Platonic love," see *De amore* II, 8–9; Nelson (1958) 75; Field (1988) 195–196; Hankins (1990) 1:355.

³⁸ On the mandrake and its uses in magic, notably as a love-potion, see, for example, Bächtold-Stäubli (1927–42) 1:318 (entry: "*Alraun*"), who reports the belief that this plant grows out of the sperm of hanged men. It could be important for the textual history of the *Dialoghi* to find a source for this interpolation, because the original speaks of cicadas, and

the Siamese twins. (Ficino by contrast, who was a doctor too, seems to have been much less enthusiastic about the anatomic details in Aristophanes' account.) The *Dialoghi* render Aristophanes' speech as follows:

Swollen with pride at their own strength, they dared to give battle to the gods, to do them hurt and injury. Jupiter, therefore, taking counsel with the other gods, after much deliberation decided that the androgynes should not be destroyed, for in the absence of the human race there would be none to pay honour to the gods; nor yet should their arrogance be left unrebuked, because tolerance would bring insult upon the gods. Therefore he determined to divide them in twain, and he sent Apollo to cut them in half lengthwise and to make of one two, so that they could only walk upright on two feet; and in this way the number of divine worshippers would be doubled. Moreover, Apollo was to warn the androgynes that if they sinned further against the gods, he would return and divide each half into two. And they would be left with one eye and one ear, half a head and face, one hand and one foot, on which they would have to hop along as if lame, and thus would be like figures sculptured on columns in *basso-rilievo*. Apollo then cut the androgynes in half through the breast and the belly, and turned the faces round towards the side which was cut so that, seeing the incision, man might be reminded of his evil ways and the better observe the section cut off from himself. Over the breast-bone he placed skin, and drew together all parts of the skin which had been cut over the belly and tied them together at the centre, and this knot is called the navel. And he left a few winkles round it made by the scars of incision, that seeing them man might remember his sin and punishment. When each part saw that it lacked the other it became desirous of reintegration, and the two came together and were united in close embrace; and thus they stayed, taking neither food nor drink until they perished. For their parts of generation were behind, facing the same way

Ficino's translation accordingly reads: "sed in terram spargentes semina cicadarum instar concepiebant, atque generabant." Quoted from: Plato (1602) 1186C.

as their shoulders, which before had been the front of man, so that they cast their sperm upon the ground, where it bred mandrakes. Jupiter, therefore, seeing that the human race was completely dying out, sent Apollo to turn their genitals to the front of the belly, so that in mutual embrace they might beget their own kind and be satisfied and return to seek what is needful for the preservation of life.³⁹

In contrast to Ficino's reading, Leone's account of Aristophanes' speech does not suppress the physical content of the myth: sexual intercourse is indispensable for a normal and happy life, therefore sex is valuable and, as we shall see, it is the (partial) remedy for division created through original sin. Also in contrast to Ficino, this reading of the Platonic myth allows Leone to repeat Plato's original idea that physical desire is a longing for integration or for a sort of primordial unity.

³⁹ Trans. Leone Ebreo (1937) 343–344; Leone Ebreo (1535) III, 81v–82r: “Insuperbito delle forze sue prese audacia di contendere con gli Dei, & d’esserli contrario e molesto, onde Giove consigliandosi sopra ciò con gl’altri Dei, poi diverse sententie gli parve non doverli ruinare, per che mancando il genere humano. Non saria chi onorasse gli dei, ne manco gli parve di lasciarli in la sua arrogantia, perche tollerarla sarebbe vitupero alli divini, onde determinò che si dividessero, et mandò Apolline che gli dividesse per mezzo a lungo, & ne facesse di uno due, perche potessimo solamente andare dritti per una banda sopra due piedi, & saria doppio il numero de li divini cultori, ammonendogli che se piu peccassero contra gli dei, che tornaria à dividere ogni mezzo in due, & restariano con uno occhio, & una orecchia, mezza testa & viso, con una mano, & un piè, col quale caminariano come li zoppi, et restarebbero come gl’huomini dipinti ne le colonne à mezzo viso. Il quale Apolline in questo modo li divise, dalla parte del petto, & del ventre, & toglie il viso alla parte tagliata, acciò che vedendo l’incisione si ricordassero del suo errore, & ancora perche potessero meglio guardare la parte tagliata, & offesa, sopra l’oso del petto mise cuoio, & pigliò tutte le bande tagliate del ventre, & le raccolse insieme, legolle in mezzo di quello, il quale ligame si chiama ombelico; circa del quale lasciò alcune rughe fatte dalle cicatrici de l’incisione, acciò che vedendole l’huomo si ricordasse del peccato, & de la pena. Vedendo ciascuno de li mezzi mancare del suo resto desiderando reintegrarse s’approssimava a l’altro suo mezzo & abbracciandosi s’univano strettamente, & senza mangiare ne bere, si stavano cosi fin’ che perivano. Erano i genitali loro alla parte posteriore de le spalle, che prima era anteriore, onde gittando il sperma fuori cadeva in terra, e generava mandragore. Vedendo adunque Giove che il genere humano totalmente periva, mandò Apolline che gli tornasse [i] genitali a la parte anteriore del ventre, mediante li quali unendosi generavano suo simile, restando satisfatti cercavano le cose necessarie a la conservatione de la vita.”

From that time forth, love, which heals man's wounds and restores the unity of his primeval nature, was engendered amongst men; and by its restoration of two into one it is the remedy of the sin which led to one being made into two. Love in every man is, therefore, male and female, for each of them is but a half and not a whole man, and therefore desires to be made whole in its other half.⁴⁰

Importantly, physical attraction is strictly confined to the perspective of intercourse between men and women, whereas the other kinds of sexual orientations are not mentioned. In what is characteristic for his cultural and intellectual background, Leone Ebreo thus describes the primordial humans as exclusively heterosexual pairs, thereby (and even more unambiguously than Ficino) eclipsing any reference to the homosexual or lesbian pairings in Aristophanes' original account. The strategy of avoiding the difficult parts of the speech is simple: according to Leone's reading, the primordial human being was male and female, androgynous, and seems to have existed *apart* from "single" men and women as we know them.

And as man derives from the sun and woman from the earth, so that kind derived from the moon, which is made up of the sun and earth. An androgyne was thus great, mighty and terrible, having two human bodies joined together at the breast, and two heads on one neck with two faces.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Trans. Leone Ebreo (1937) 344–345; Leone Ebreo (1535) III, 82r-v: "Da questo tempo in qua fu generato l'amor' fra gli huomini reconciliatore, e reintegratore de l'antica natura, e quello che torna à fare di due uno remedio del peccato, che fece quando de l'uno fu fatto due, è adunque l'amor' in ciascuno de gl'huomini maschio, & femmina, però che ogn' uno di loro è mezzo huomo & non huomo intero, onde ogni mezzo desia la reintegrazione sua con l'altro mezzo."

⁴¹ Trans. Leone Ebreo (1937) 343; Leone Ebreo (1535) III, 81r-v: "e così come l'huomo dipende dal Sole, e la donna da la terra, così quello dipendeva da la Luna partecipante di Sole, e di Terra, era dunque quello Androgeno grande, forte, e terribile, però che haveva due corpi umani legati ne la parte del petto e due teste colligate nel collo, un' viso à una parte de le spalle e l'altro a l'altra"; "In the Symposium, in the name of Aristophanes, Plato declares that the beginning of love was on this wise. At the beginning of all things, the human race embraced a third species which was not mere man or woman, but was called androgynous, being at once both male and female." Trans. Leone Ebreo (1937) 343; Leone Ebreo (1535) III, 81r: "Platone dice nel convivio in nome d'Aristofane, che l'origine del'

Leone's interpretation does not, however, stop here. According to him, the male and female halves of the primordial being refer to body and intelligence respectively. As will soon become clear, Aristophanes' original tale of double humans is discreetly replaced by an account of androgynous unity containing male and female aspects alike. Hence, while Plato's original story referred to the relationship between bodies, in the perspective of the *Dialoghi* Aristophanes' speech explains how intellect and body are related to each other — they are actually matching, or in need of harmonization, which is again in strong contradistinction to Ficino's Christian reading whereby the soul is imprisoned or exiled in the body, at least to a certain degree.⁴² What is at stake here is the model of a blissful separation of the body from soul (Ficino) as opposed to a vision where the goal is a peaceful and harmonious coexistence of both principles (Leone Ebreo). According to the latter, sexual intercourse is a means of achieving unity between bodies and minds because it was God's intention that the intellect and body should take care of each other *jointly*.

Plato says that from this division love was born, because each half desires and loves reintegration with its other half; in other words, the intellect would take no heed of the body save for the love which it bears its consort and female half, nor would the body be governed by the intellect were it not for the love and affection which it bears for its husband and masculine half. Moreover, the story tells us that even when the two halves came together in love they did not seek those things which were necessary for their sustenance, and they perished; wherefore the god Jupiter caused their members of generation to be turned facing each other, and so they

amore fu in questo modo, che essendo nel principio de gli uomini un'altro terzo genere di uomini, cioè non solamente uomini, & non solamente donne, ma quello che chiamavano Androgeno, il quale era maschio e femmina insieme."

⁴² This figure derives from Plato (*Phaedo* 81–83) so its entry into theological writings of the sixteenth century can probably be attributed to Ficino (*Theologia* I, 1 and XVIII, 5; *Letters* I, 7 and VI, 48; and many places *passim*), though it can also be found in Virgil *Aeneid* VI, 734 (*clausae tenebris et carcere caeco*) and was thus always available. I wish to thank Valery Rees for this summary.

remained satisfied and in union and in procreation of their kind their division was healed.⁴³

In a characteristic move, Leone here exploits and at the same time significantly alters or subverts the language of traditional Hellenistic as well as Christian body-discourses: according to the Peripatetic tradition, it was female matter that loved male intellectual forms, but this affection was not reciprocal, as Aristotle says (see chapter one).⁴⁴ According to Ficino's account Aristophanes' tale is a purely psychological drama between the higher and lower parts of the soul, the body remaining completely left out, whereas Leone's *Dialoghi* relate the story to a reciprocal relationship between bodies and minds within a single human being. Like Ficino before him, Leone Ebreo concludes by saying that his interpretation of Aristophanes' tale is exhaustive and that the rest of the Platonic story is merely ornament.⁴⁵ We may thus conclude that Leone was well aware that he had left out certain important details: that is, the part where Aristophanes says that heterosexual men and women descending from the mixed race of androgynes are producing the highest quantity of male and female adulterers (191E).⁴⁶

⁴³ Trans. Leone Ebreo (1937) 363; Leone Ebreo (1535) III, 93r: "dice [Platone] che da questa divisione nacque l'amore, però che ogni mezzo desia & ama la reintegrazione del suo mezzo restante, cioè che in effetto l'intelletto non haveria mai cura del corpo, se non fusse per l'amore che ha al suo consorte mezzo corpore femminino, che nel copro si governa per l'intelletto se non per l'amore & affettione che ha al suo consorte & mezzo mascolino, & in quello che dice uniendosi l'un' mezzo con l'altro, per l'amore non cercavano le cose necessarie per il sostenimento loro & perivano; onde per rimedio Iuppiter li fece tornare li genitali de l'uno verso de l'altro, & satisfatti per il coito & generatione del simile si reintegrò la loro divisione."

⁴⁴ In a similar vein, Ficino had regarded the body as a well designed trap luring souls down from heaven: see chapter three.

⁴⁵ "This is the allegorical meaning of the Platonic myth, and the other details concerning the actual incision, the council of the gods and such like, are but ornaments of the story to make it more pleasing and lifelike in its form." Trans. Leone Ebreo (1937) 364; Leone Ebreo (1535) III, 93 v: "questo è quello che significa la favola Platonica allegoricamente, & l'altre particolarità che scrive nel modo del dividere, e del consultare & simili sonno ornamenti de la favola, per farla piu bella & verisimile."

⁴⁶ Plato (1602) 1186D: "quamobrem quicumque ex viris promiscui generis portio sunt, quod olim androgynum vocabatur, mulierosi sunt, adulterique, ut plurimum ex his reperiantur. Ex hoc sane genere moechi ducunt originem."

In what has been said so far, Leone's reading of Aristophanes' story differs from that of Ficino on several crucial issues: the positive assessment of heterosexual relationships rather than its derision, as well as the appraisal of the mutual love between intellect and body, which should strive for union rather than for separation in order to be saved. In that context, Leone Ebreo claims the textual authority of the Jewish tradition by maintaining that Plato is in fact repeating a key story from Genesis and that the philosopher presented Moses' words in the loquacious and disorderly way characteristic of the Greeks.

Moses did not tell the story so plainly, nor in such detail, but the substance of the story he told briefly; it was from him that Plato took his myth, amplifying and polishing it after the manner of Greek oratory, thus giving a new and confused account of the Hebrew version.⁴⁷

This stratagem allows Leone to wrestle with the authority of the Greek as well as the Christian tradition. What follows is a (Talmudic) reading of Genesis 1: 26–27.⁴⁸ In the ensuing comparison of Aristophanes to the Biblical text (but also in many other instances), Leone stresses that even God has male and female aspects and that Adam, the first man, was created in his likeness, male and female, that is, androgynous, an idea that is repeated several times in the *Dialoghi*. “The first man, and indeed every other human being in the whole wide world, is made, as Scripture testifies, in the image and likeness of God, both male and female at once.”⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Trans. Leone Ebreo (1937) 345; Leone Ebreo (1535) III, 82v: “Non l' ha già favoleggiata [Moise] con questa particolarità e chiarezza, ma ha posta la sustantia de la favola sotto brevità, e Platone la prese da lui, & l'ampliò, & ornò secondo l'oratoria grecale, facendo in questo una mescolanza inordinata de le cose hebraic[h]e.” The Greek style was detested for its narrow-minded, unworldly and pedantic style in many of the Latin rhetoric textbooks that were formative for Renaissance humanists; see, for instance, Cicero, *De oratore* II, 4–5, and I, 24; Cicero (1969) 110–111: “tamquam alicui Graeculo otioso et loquaci et fortasse docto atque erudito quaestiunculam, de qua meo arbitratu loquar.”

⁴⁸ See also Yavneh (1991) 88, for a reference to the *Zohar*.

⁴⁹ Trans. Leone Ebreo (1937) 354; Leone Ebreo (1535) III, 87v: “PHI.: Il primo huomo, & ogn' altro huomo di quanti ne vedi è fatto come dice la scrittura, a immagine; & similitudine di Dio, maschio e femmina.” “God created Adam (that is man) in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.” Trans. Leone

The idea that the primordial human was androgynous allows Leone to maintain that the separation of the double humans in the Platonic story actually refers to the creation of Eve in Genesis, from Adam's side, and not merely from his rib. Leone concludes that

taking one of Adam's ribs from him in sleep. The woman, therefore, was not made in the beginning, as was first said. Again, at the end of the narrative, speaking of the offspring of Adam (as you have seen), we read that God created man in the likeness of God, male and female created He them, and He called their name Adam in the day that they were created. It would appear, therefore, that there was at once both male and female at the beginning of the Creation, and that (the woman) was not made subsequently by the withdrawal of the side or rib as is narrated.

... took one of his sides, the word in Hebrew being equivalent to rib, but here and elsewhere it stands for side, that is, the side or feminine person.⁵⁰

Leone Ebreo's wording is remarkable when he says that Eve is the "persona femminile" of Adam. This corroborates the idea that the primordial woman is just another "mask" or outward appearance of the Adamitic body. Even

Ebreo (1937) 346; Leone Ebreo (1535) III, 82v: "Creo Adam cioè l'huomo in sua forma, in forma di Dio, creò esso maschio e femmina, creo essi." "This is the book of the generation of Adam. In the day that God created man, in the likeness of God made he him; male and female created he them; and blessed them, and called their name Adam (that is man), in the day when they were created." Trans. Leone Ebreo (1937) 346–347; Leone Ebreo (1535) III, 83r-v: "questo è il libro de la generatione di Adam nel di che Dio creò l'huomo in somiglianza di Dio, fece esso maschio e femmina, gli creò & gli benedisse, & chiamò il nome loro Adam, cioè huomo nel di che furono creati."

⁵⁰ Trans. Leone Ebreo (1937) 347; Leone Ebreo (1535) III, 83v: "fece dormendo [...] Adam] d'uno dei suoi lati, non era adunque fatta nel principio come haveva detto ancora nel fine volendo narrare la progenie di Adam dice (come hai veduto) che Dio gli creò in somiglianza di Dio maschio, e femmina, creò quegli, & chiama il nome loro Adam, nel di che furono creati; Adunque pare che nel principio de la creatione sua di continente fussero maschio, & femmina, & non di poi per sottrazione del lato, o costa, come ha detto." Trans. Leone Ebreo (1937) 349; Leone Ebreo (1535) III, 85r: "pigliò uno dei suoi lati, il quale in hebraico è vocabolo equivoco a costella, ma qui et in altre parti ancora sta per lato, cioè il lato, o persona femminile."

though I do not wish to overemphasize the significance of the many different meaning of the word *persona*, I perceive an amazingly close relationship to today's the conception of gendered (rather than of sexual) bodies. Leone's claim is further highlighted by his characteristic textual exegesis: the contradiction in the sacred text — Moses first speaks of Adam in the singular and then in the plural — encourages the thoughtful readers to realize that here divine mysteries are hidden in the text.⁵¹ The evidence that primordial man was androgynous is further substantiated by Hebraic commentary traditions:

[Moses] wants to say that Adam, that is the first man, whom God created on the sixth day of the Creation, being a human individual, combined in himself male and female without division; and therefore the text says that God created Adam in his Own likeness, [...]. Wherefore the ancient Hebrew commentators in their Chaldean commentary here say, 'Adam was created of two persons, the one part male the other female.'⁵²

By referring rather casually to linguistic details that were difficult for non-Jews to grasp, as well as to a body of commentaries inaccessible to Christians, Leone establishes Mosaic authority over the Biblical text and over the Platonic tradition.⁵³ No wonder he has Sofia saying approvingly: "It is indeed pleasing to learn that Plato drank of the waters of the sacred font."⁵⁴ This appropri-

⁵¹ "It is inconceivable that the divine Moses should contradict himself so obviously as to seem deliberately. Hence it is credible that he wished to imply a hidden mystery beneath these obvious discrepancies." Trans. Leone Ebreo (1937) 348; Leone Ebreo (1535) III, 84r: "non è da credere che el Santo Moise si contradicia cosi manifestamente che par' che egli procuri contraddirsi. Onde è da credere che vogli inferire qualche occulto misterio sotto la manifesta contraditione."

⁵² Trans. Leone Ebreo (1937) 348–349; Leone Ebreo (1535) III, 84v: "Vuol dire che Adam cioè huomo primo, il qual Dio creò nel di sesto de la creatione essendo un' supposto humano conteneva in se maschio, & femina senza divisione, & però dice che Dio creò Adam ad immagine di Dio [...] però commentano qui li commentarij Hebraici antichi in lingua caldea dicendo, Adam di due persone fu creato d'una parte maschio, da l'altra femmina."

⁵³ On the nature of these sources, see Pescatori (2005) 10–14.

⁵⁴ Trans. Leone Ebreo (1937) 350; Leone Ebreo (1535) III, 85v: "Mi piace vedere che Platone habbi bevuto de l'acqua del sacro fonte." Celenza (2001) 29–30, says that Ambrose thought that Pythagoras was Jewish.

tion of Aristophanes' myth in the *Dialoghi* has an important consequence: in contrast to Ficino, for whom Diotima's speech was of key importance while the story of the double humans was somewhat secondary, Leone emphasizes its fundamental role in the understanding of what humans are because it outlines the entire story of the human race.

All these things the first man really suffered in his body; and they are symbolic of the life and works of every man, his ultimate happiness, the demands of his corporeal nature, and the consequences of excessive sin together with its punishment and the possibility of eventual salvation. If you look into the story, you will behold as in a mirror the life of every man with his good and his evil, and you will recognize the way which must be shunned and the way which must be followed to attain to eternal happiness where there is no death.⁵⁵

As a result, Aristophanes' myth serves Leone as a pretext to develop a type of anthropology that reflects his Jewish background. The androgynous primordial human, Adam, was a harmonious unity of body and mind who did not feel any inclination to sin. Leone concludes that the intentions of Plato and Moses were therefore the same, even if their ways of telling the story were different. In the anthropology of the *Dialoghi* the original double humans are first reduced to a heterosexual pairing which then becomes related to a division in body and mind in the first human being. Notably, Plato does not speak of a hermaphrodite, but rather of double humans: "man and woman, [...] come together again as one body and individual in marriage and sexual intercourse."⁵⁶ Contrary to Ficino's position, sexual intercourse and procreation is here seen as a *remedy* for sin: it is a sacred union that is performed by humans in order

⁵⁵ Trans. Leone Ebreo (1937) 361–362; Leone Ebreo (1535) III, 92r: "le quali cose intervenne in effetto corporalmente al primo huomo, denotano (secondo l'allegorico) le vite, & successi di ciascuno de gl'huomini; Qual' sia il fine loro beato, ciò che richiede la necessità de l'humanità, & il successo del eccessivo peccato, & la pena de l'accidente di quello, con l'ultima possibilità del rimedio, se ben'l intenderai in uno specchio vedrai la vita di tutti gl'huomini, il loro bene & male, conoscerai la via che si debbe fuggire, & quelle che si debbe seguire per venire a eterna beatitudine senza mai morire."

⁵⁶ Trans. Leone Ebreo (1937) 350; Leone Ebreo (1535) III, 85r: "L'huomo e la donna si tornano à reintegrare nel matrimonio, & coito in uno medesimo supposto carnale, & individuale."

to temporarily regain their divine unity. According to Leone, to sin means to turn *away* from the body and neglect the duties that bodies and minds owe each other. (Moreover, after the Fall, sex is the only means to perpetuate the species.)⁵⁷ By interpreting a quotation from Aristotle, Leone Ebreo again discreetly subverts the original myth where sexuality is not viewed primarily as a means to create offspring but rather as an urge to re-establish a primordial unity (at least temporarily) in order to maintain one's own psycho-physical equilibrium. As in Ficino, there is a connection between sin and separation, yet in the perspective of the *Dialoghi* that nexus does not result in a division between higher and lower parts of the soul, but instead in the separation of male minds and female bodies in one and the same individual.

Sin is truly that which causes division in man and cuts his nature in twain, just as righteousness makes a man to be single and preserves the unity of his nature. Again, we can truly say that division in man produces sin, for in so far as he is single, he has no inclination to do evil nor to impair his union. Therefore since sin and division in man are almost the same thing, or at least two inseparable things, the one always implying the other, sin may be said to spring from division — according to the version of the Scriptures — and division from sin — according to Plato.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ “Generation, as Aristotle says, was a remedy for mortality. Therefore man, as long as immortal, did not procreate his kind; but when through sin he was made mortal, he came to his own aid by raising up his like, which power God had bestowed potentially upon him, so that by one means or another the human race should not perish.” Trans. Leone Ebreo (1937) 354; Leone Ebreo (1535) III, 87v: “La generatione (come dice Aristotile) fu per remedio de la mortalità, & però l’huomo in quanto fu immortale non generò, quando già per il peccato fu fatto mortale si soccorse con la generatione del simile, alla quale Dio li diede potentia accioche o a un’ modo, o a un altro non perisca l’humana spetie.”

⁵⁸ Trans. Leone Ebreo (1937) 351; Leone Ebreo (1535) III, 85v: “In effetto il peccato è quello che incide l’huomo e causa in lui divisione, così come la giusta drittezza il fa uno, & conserva la sua unione, & anchora possiamo dire con verità, che essere l’huomo diviso il fa peccare, che in quanto è unito non ha inclinatione a peccare, ne à divertirsi da la sua unione, di modo che per essere il peccato, e la divisione de l’huomo quasi una medesima cosa, o in due separabili e convertibili, si puo dire che da la divisione viene il peccato (come dice la sacra scrittura) e dal peccato viene la divisione (come dice Platone).”

The identification of sin and division is here tied to the Biblical story of the Fall, that is, it is related to a theological context in a rather arbitrary way. According to the *Symposium*, the separation of the primordial human beings comes about in order to weaken and to prevent humans from sinning (that is, plotting) against the gods. (If one cannot speak of the concept of sin in Aristophanes' perspective, one can view it in the political context of a *coup d'état* against the gods.) In the *Dialoghi*, on the other hand, the connection of the myth of the androgyne with theology is much closer than in Ficino's commentary, which perhaps deliberately sought to avoid too close an association of Aristophanes' speech with Christian doctrine. Leone also briefly discusses the idea that the story in itself is only allegorical, that is, that the primordial hermaphrodite never existed in flesh and blood. Hence, the myth indicates that men and women before the Fall did not feel the urge to have sex because they were busy contemplating the divinity, which is man's true end in life that is brought about by a harmonious proportion between the male and female aspects of the individual.

SO.: [...] For I do not believe that man and woman were at any time other than divided into two bodies [...].

PHI.: [...] to denote union not of the flesh, but of human essence and intellectual inclination, that is, they were united in blessed contemplation of the Divinity, not in sexual intercourse and carnal delights, but in order that they might be of greater assistance to one another.⁵⁹

Finally, the idea of a merely allegorical reading of that passage is dismissed because God created the first humans (even while they were in paradise) in a way that they did not exclusively worship the intellectual aspects of the divinity, but also looked after their bodies (obviously, then, desire did not cause the Fall and so sex is not bad). God created their intellect in such a form that it felt inclined towards the necessary physical desires.

⁵⁹ Trans. Leone Ebreo (1937) 352–353; Leone Ebreo (1535) III, 86v–87r: “SO.: [...] che non crede già che l’uomo e la donna in alcun’ tempo fussero che in due corpi divisi, [...]. PHI.: [...] non che fussero uniti corporalmente, ma uniti in essentia humana, et inclinatione mentale, cioè tutti due alla beata contemplatione divina, & non l’uno a l’altro per diletto e coito carnale, ma perche meglio l’uno a l’altro si potessi aiutare.”

And the Divinity could foresee that this life of union of the two parts of man, and of the obedience of the feminine body to the masculine intellect, although it brought happiness to the man and immortality to his essence, which is his intellect, it rather corrupted his bodily and feminine part. And not only is this true of the individual, for when the intellect is inflamed with the knowledge and love of the eternal and divine it abandons all care of the body and leaves it to perish before its time, but also of the preservation of the human race; for those who are wedded to a life of intellectual contemplation despise corporeal love and flee from the lascivious act of generation, and this intellectual perfection would cause the human race to become extinct. Therefore God determined to establish some division or means between the feminine sensual part and the masculine intellectual part, turning the senses and the intellect to certain corporeal desires and activities necessary for the sustenance of the individual man for the preservation of the species.⁶⁰

It is interesting to note in passing that Giovanni Pico della Mirandola in his famous *Commento* endorses a totally different interpretation with almost the same words, for he conceptualizes the body as a temporary prison for soul, not as its necessary complement.⁶¹ In the *Dialoghi*, instead, the human intellect

⁶⁰ Trans. Leone Ebreo (1937) 356; Leone Ebreo (1535) III, 88v–89r: “pur’ preconoscendo la divinità che questa via d’unione de le parti de l’houmo e dell’ obedientia de la corporea femminia alla intellettuale mascolina, se bene felicitava l’houmo, & faceva immortale, l’essentia sua che è sua anima intellettiva faceva piu presto corrompere la parte sua corporea e femminina, cosi nel individuo, però che quando l’intelletto s’infiamma ne la cognizione, e amore de le cose eterne e divine abbandona la cura del corpo, & lasciala anzitempo perire, come ancora ne la successione de la spetie humana, perche quelli che sono ardenti alle contemplationi intellettuali sprezzano gl’amori corporei, & fuggono il lascivo atto de la generatione. Onde questa intellettual’ perfettione causaria perdizione de la spetie humana; Per tanto Dio deliberò porre qualche divisione temperata frà la parte femminina sensuale, e la parte mascolina intellettuale, tirando la sensualità, l’intelletto a alcuni desirerij, & atti corporei necessarij per la sostentatione corporea individuale, & per la successione de la spetie.”

⁶¹ Pico (1942) III, 4: 528: “Similmente, se convertono gli occhi verso l’intelletto, non possono provvedere più al corpo ed è necessario che lascino la cura di quello; e per questa ragione queste anime, alle quali è forza per la cura del corpo lasciare el bene dello intelletto, la provvidenza divina la ha legate a corpi caduci e corruttibili, da’ quali solute in breve tempo possono, [...] alla loro intellettuale felicità ritornare.”

enters into a relationship with body even when it is in its purest state. Leone Ebreo speaks of the possible dangers of exaggerated intellectual contemplation that runs counter to the divine plan for Creation, a topic not uncommon to Jewish discursive formations.⁶² If the above passage does not imply that matter is ontologically higher than form, it at least demonstrates that from the perspective of humans both aspects of creation are on a par. Neither body nor mind should be neglected, just as ascent to the divine forms, even if desirable to men, has to be held in check. It is interesting to note that this idea is repeated in a different context when the *Dialoghi* say that the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle were complementary, as the former was primarily concerned with the soul, whereas the latter was more interested in the body. Both philosophers actually addressed contemporary ethical problems, as Plato was attacking his materialist predecessors so successfully that people stopped caring for the body, a negligence that required Aristotle's natural philosophy as an antidote.⁶³ The idea that love is born from the division of the body from the intellect is, of course, in sharp contrast to Neoplatonic concepts as well as, to a certain extent, to Plato's philosophy because the love for corporeal beauty induces the viewer to separate the body from the form of beauty:

all human love and desire is born of the coalternate division of the human intellect and body, because the intellect inclined to its body, like the male to the female, desires and loves the things which belong to it, and if these objects are requisite and temperate, virtuously, on account of their moderation and restraint, and if they are excessive, then with lascivious and corrupt affections leading to sinful actions. Again the body, loving the soul as the woman the husband and male, rouses herself to desire his perfection, striving with sense, eyes and ears, and with the [inner] sense of imagination and memory, to obtain what is necessary for right thinking and eternal intellectual treasure in which the mind of man is blessed. And this desire and love is absolutely virtuous, and the more ardent it is, the more praiseworthy and perfect.⁶⁴

⁶² Boyarin (1993) 134–166.

⁶³ Leone Ebreo (1535) III, 116v–117r.

⁶⁴ Trans. Leone Ebreo (1937) 364–365; Leone Ebreo (1535) III, 93v–94r: “che tutti gl'amori e desiderij umani nascono da la coalternata divisione dell'intelletto, e corpo hu-

Here again, the trouble does not arise from soul or intellect becoming too close to the corporeal natural world, but from the separation of bodies and minds. Thus, by presenting these ideas in the guise of a typically pre-modern praise for moderation, Leone completely subverts Ficino's anthropology.

It is interesting to ask to what extent the *Dialoghi* were in a direct polemic with the *De amore*. There is at least some internal textual evidence that Leone was aware of and not very sympathetic to Ficino's commentary. Although he does not mention the *De amore* directly, he refers in great detail to a passage in Ficino's commentary. In this case Leone makes decidedly critical remarks about the exaggerated allegorical reading of Diotima's myth of the birth of love, a criticism that could equally apply to Ficino's elaborate psychological interpretation of Aristophanes' primordial humans.⁶⁵

Some there are who understand by the birth of Venus the influence of the intelligence, first in the angelic world and then in the soul of the world, life already having been imparted by Jupiter, essence by Saturn, and first being by Caelus, who were the three Gods at the feast before the birth of the greater Venus in the angelic and lower world and in the world soul. But we take no heed of such abstract and endless, disproportionate allegories which do not correspond to the letter of the story.⁶⁶

mano, però che l'intelletto inclinato al corpo suo (come il maschio alla femmina) desia & ama le cose pertinenti à quello, & se sonno necessarie & moderate, sonno desiderij, & amori honesti per la loro moderatione & temperamento, & se sonno superflui, & dishoneste inclinationi e atti peccatorij; Ancora il corpo amando l'intelletto (come don[n]a il marito maschio) si solleva in desiare le perfettioni di quello sollecitando con li sentimenti, con li occhi, con le orecchie, & col senso, fantasia et memoria, d'acquistare il necessario per le rette cognitioni, & eterne abiti intellettuali, con che si felicità l'intelletto humano, & questi sonno desiderij, et amori assolutamente honesti, et quanto piu ardenti tanto piu laudabili."

⁶⁵ See Boyarin (1993) 8 on the connections between anthropology and hermeneutics in both Christian and Jewish formations.

⁶⁶ Trans. Leone Ebreo (1937) 368–369; Leone Ebreo (1535) III, 95v: "Sonno alcuni che dicono intendersi per la natività di Venere l'influentia dell'intelligentia dell'Angelo prima, & poi nell'anima del' Mondo, avendo già partecipato la vita di Giove l'essentia di Saturno, & primo essere di Celio, che erano li tre Dei del convito precedente a la natività di venere magna, ne l'angelo, & ne la mondana, & nell Anima del' Mondo. Ma noi non curaremo d'allegorie si astratte, & interminate, & improporzionate al letterale fabuloso."

Compare this to the following passage in Ficino's *Symposium* commentary:

On the birthday of Venus, that is, when the Angelic Mind and the World Soul (which we call Venuses, for the reason which we have given elsewhere) were born from the supreme majesty of God. *While the gods were feasting*, that is, while Caelus, Saturn, and Jupiter were enjoying their respective powers. For at the time when the intelligence in the Angel and the power of procreating on the World Soul, powers which we rightly call twin Venuses, first came into being, the supreme God, whom they call Uranus, was already in existence; moreover, existence and life, which we call Saturn and Jupiter, already existed in the Angelic Mind, and also in the World soul there already existed the knowledge of the superior things and the moving of the celestial bodies, which powers, again, we call Saturn and Jupiter.⁶⁷

There is more to this controversy than the (fairly obvious) observation that Leone is making a critical remark against Ficino's interpretation and that he therefore must have had read at least parts of the commentary on the *Symposium*. Leone's refutation of "abstract and endless, disproportionate allegories" refers to a deep rift between rabbinic Judaism and Christianity that has recently been brilliantly discussed by Boyarin. In his *Tractatus adversus Iudaeos* Augustine had accused the Jewish people of being the representatives of "Israel in the flesh" as opposed to the Pauline "spiritual Israel" consisting of believers in Christ (Jews and non-Jews alike). Related to this initial and fundamental distinction, Augustine accused the Jewish tradition of being un-

⁶⁷ Trans. Ficino (1985) 116; *De amore* VI, 7: 208–209: "*In Veneris natalibus*, id est, quando mens angeli et mundi anima, quas veneres ea ratione quam alias diximus nominamus, ex summa dei maiestate oriebantur. *Diis discumbebant*, id est, Celus, Saturnus, Iupiter bonis propriis vescebantur. Nam cum in angelo intelligentia et in mundi anima vis generandi, quas proprie Veneres geminas apellamus, prodibant in lucem, iam erat summus ille deus quem vocant Celum; essentia preterea et vita in angelo, quos Saturnum vocamus et Iovem, atque etiam in mundi anima inerat supernorum cognitio et celestium corporum agitatio, quos iterum Saturnum Iovemque vocamus." It is interesting to compare this passage again to Pico (1942) III, 1: 521–522, in which he repeats Ficino's text and hence also may have been a target for Leone Ebreo's criticisms. See also II, 13: 501–504.

able to acknowledge the spiritual significance of physical reality and therefore of misunderstanding the real meaning of Scripture. Boyarin points out that:

whereas Augustine consigns the Jews to eternal carnality, he draws a direct connection between anthropology and hermeneutics. Because the Jews reject reading ‘in the spirit’, therefore they are condemned to remain ‘Israel in the flesh.’ Allegory is thus, in his theory, a mode of relating to the body.”⁶⁸

Much more than just accusing a Christian philosopher of using the wrong interpretative strategies, Leone’s brief remark refers to the core of the deep antagonism separating the two cultures, rifts which become obvious in the different discourses which are transformed into conflicting interpretative strategies regarding the body. From Leone’s point of view, it is wrong to overly allegorise the myth of the birth of Eros because it is foreign to an important part of his own interpretative tradition. Midrash, the hermeneutic system of rabbinic Judaism, refutes the Platonic-Christian dualism of body and soul thus “eschewing the inner-outer, visible-invisible body-soul dichotomies of allegorical reading. Midrash and Platonic allegory are alternate techniques of the body.”⁶⁹

Leone Ebreo’s reading therefore differs in many important respects from Ficino’s interpretation of Aristophanes’ speech. In contrast to Ficino’s reading, Leone’s reading in the *Dialoghi* does not eclipse the body and the female aspect of creation. As in Plato, desire is fulfilled in the sexual act, at least temporarily. Physical love (seen as a yearning for original unity) incorporates in the *Dialoghi* a kind of redemptive power. The desire for the reintegration of male and female fits well into Leone’s theology, in which the entire creation is to be united to the Godhead.⁷⁰ In fact, “physical union

⁶⁸ Boyarin (1993) 8; for a discussion of this entire complex of ideas, relating to Paul, Augustine, Origen and Philo, see 1–10.

⁶⁹ Boyarin (1993) 9.

⁷⁰ Leone Ebreo (1535) III, 129v: “SO.: E’ adunque l’amoroso matrimonio de l’huomo, e de la donna simulacro del sacro & divino matrimonio del sommo bello, & la somma bellezza, di che tutto l’universo proviene, se non che è differenza ne la somma bellezza, che non solamente è moglie del sommo bello, ma prima figliuola prodotta da lui. PHI.: Ancora in questo vedrai il simulacro nel primo matrimonio humano, che Eva prima fu cavata di Adam come padre, & figlia sua, & poi gli fu moglie in matrimonio, di tutto questo discorso credo che debbi sufficientemente conoscere l’amore de l’universo nacque

is presented as a manifestation of a higher spiritual union; as such, it is not to be denied, but rather celebrated.⁷¹ Whereas Ficino's reading precludes the amorous conversation between men and women, the *Dialoghi* are entirely dedicated to that topic. In that sense Leone's interpretation is perhaps more appealing to modern readers than Ficino's version of a merely spiritual friendship between men, though with one important qualification: it remains impossible for Leone to acknowledge even the existence of any sort of homosexual love, as Ficino did. Leone Ebreo's structural difficulties become apparent when he tries to read one myth (Aristophanes) through another (Moses on Creation) or wants both myths in their more or less allegorical interpretations to coincide: hence the argument of the *Dialoghi* does not rest so much on reasoned arguments as on the superiority of the Mosaic tradition. Ficino, on the other hand, sought to apply another sort of hermeneutics to his Neoplatonising psychological interpretation and tried to avoid any references to Biblical texts.

In that respect, the price of Leone's assimilation of Aristophanes' myth to the Jewish discursive formation is high indeed: Plato is not an ancient author to be studied for his own value, but merely the more or less confusing imitator of the source of sources, the *Torah*. In that sense, Ficino's approach is more open to the study of the Classical heritage, which he tends to see as texts on an equal level with other sources of revelation. What is common to both philosophical anthropologies, that of Leone Ebreo and that of Marsilio Ficino, is that they are to a notable extent rooted in their respective theologies, a conceptualisation which remains highly debatable in the case of the original setting of Aristophanes' story. Far from aiming at divine allegories of higher truths, Aristophanes had of course been referring (however satirically) to the social and political context of the Athenian state, to the political bodies and sexual inclinations of real men and women, and not to obscure divine mysteries. It seems that Giordano Bruno considered and understood this aspect of the story of the double humans.

The third and last work under consideration is not a philosophical treatise in the proper sense, but a play. Giordano Bruno's comedy *Il Candelaio* (*The Candlebearer*, 1582) can be read as a concise account of the ubiquitous metamorphoses of sexual desire and its convertibility into

de la prima bellezza come di padre, & de la cognitione che ha di lei la prima intelligentia creata motrice del sommo orbe che tutto l'universo contiene."

⁷¹ Yavneh (1991) 87.

money.⁷² As a result, the play is populated by lechers of all sorts, paedophiles, homosexuals, and luckless alchemists, all of whom are examples of the universal drive for physical fulfillment. In this satire on the Renaissance Neoplatonic philosophy of love, the candle functions as obscene metaphor for the penis and at the same time as an allegory for the illumination of the mind. In a play that Moliterno has aptly described as “a microcosm of the degraded ideals of Renaissance culture as a whole,”⁷³ we find a final, distant, but nevertheless very comical, echo of Aristophanes’ myth, the significance of which was completely reversed by Bruno.

The context of the appearance of the double humans is as follows. Bartolomeo’s sexual life is misled by his hunger for money, which is why he has started to neglect his wife and instead spends his time in an alchemical laboratory. He entrusts all his funds to an impostor who, before disappearing with the money, collaborates with a corrupt apothecary, Consalvo. When the Consalvo meets Bartolomeo, the two men instantly engage in a vicious debate:

Consalvo: I had words with him and we came to blows. Certain scoundrels dressed up as the night watch came running at the noise and tied us up [...]. they changed us around and tied us, hands behind our backs and bum to bum as you see us. First they took our purses and went off; then, remembering something, two of them returned and took our mantles and our berets and they sliced our shirt open with a razor. Then we wandered about and argued [...] as I tried to pull this good fellow along.⁷⁴

This strange couple is, of course, a perfect caricature of Aristophanes’ primordial humans: both are united by the same desire (though not for sexual union, but rather for money) and instead of loving each other they “came

⁷² On the *Candelaio*, see for instance, Ordine (2003) Kodera (2003); Moliterno in Bruno (2000a).

⁷³ Moliterno in Bruno (2000a) 29.

⁷⁴ Trans. Bruno (2000a) 161; Bruno (1582) V, 13: 107r-v: “Consalvo: Io avevo paroli con costui: siamo venuti a pugni. Corsero certi marioli in fazione di birri, al rumore; ne legorno [...] ne svoltorno l’altre mani a dietro, in questa forma che vedete, a culo a culo; e per la prima, ne levorno le borse e si partirno; poi, ricordatosi meglio, ritornorno dui di essi, e ne levorno i mantelli e le berrette, e ne hanno scuciti gli panni di sopra con un rasoio. Dopo’ siamo noi partiti, ed abbiamo discorso [...] ed al tirar che feci di questo buon omo, [...]”

to blows.” Being tied together, they are not at all strong or frightening, but instead deprived of all their belongings and hardly able to move:

Consalvo: Let’s get up. May you never get up again, either now nor ever! [...]

Bartolomeo: You peasant cuckold.

Consalvo: You are biting now, are you? I swear by Saint Cuckoofat that if you want to play at biting, I’ll rip your nose from your face and wrench your ears from your head.⁷⁵

Aristophanes had assigned the double males the most important role in public life, whereas the luckless couple in the *Candelaio* perceive their vulnerable state as a source of embarrassment and public shame: “Let’s get up, pig; it will be even more embarrassing if they find us like this.”⁷⁶ Also, there is no trace left of the ability to move (let alone to conquer Mount Olympus). One can hardly imagine that the two men would wish that Hephaestus would join them together.

Consalvo: [...] Don’t you want to get up?

Bartolomeo: I told you that I want to remain here like this for the whole night. [...]

Consalvo: [...] as I tried to pull, he fell like an overloaded donkey and he brought me down with him; and then, out of spite, he wouldn’t get up.⁷⁷

To a passer-by, these double humans seem at first sight to be just drunkards (“Hey, there, you drunkards. What’s the matter?”)⁷⁸ who have to

⁷⁵ Trans. Bruno (2000a) 160; Bruno (1582) V, 12: 106r: “Consalvo: Alziamoci. Che non possi alzarti né mo’ ne mai. [...] Bartolomeo: Cornuto coteconaccio, fuuuh! Consalvo: Oimè, mi mordi, anh? Giuro per S. Cuccufatto, che si tu vuoi giocare a mordere, ti strepparrò il naso di faccia, o ver un’orecchia di testa.”

⁷⁶ Trans. Bruno (2000a) 160; Bruno (1582) V, 13: 106v: “Consalvo: Alziamoci, porco: sarremo peggio svergognati, si sarremo trovati cossi.”

⁷⁷ Trans. Bruno (2000a) 161; Bruno (1582) V, 13: 107v: “Consalvo: [...] Non ti voi alzare? Bartolomeo: Io ti ho detto che voglio dimorar tutta questa notte cossi. [...] Consalvo: [...] al tirar che fece costui, cascò come un asino che porta troppo gran soma, ed ha fatto cascar ancora me; e per perfidia non si vuole alzare.”

⁷⁸ Trans. Bruno (2000a) 161; Bruno (1582) V, 13: 107r: “Scaramurè: [...] Olà, imbrachi? che avete, che fate cossi llà?”

be separated and are subsequently sent in opposite directions so that they will not to start quarrelling again (“Don’t start beating each other again because the first one to move will have two against him”).⁷⁹ Their manner of saying goodbye again emphasizes the complete reversal of Aristophanes’ tale: instead of longing to be united again, they simply hate each other (“Hope to see you again in a hundred years”).⁸⁰ Though Bruno admittedly does not give any direct evidence that he is referring to Aristophanes’ tale, it nevertheless has to be emphasized that unacknowledged parody and irreverent travesty of Plato’s venerable dialogues are a common feature of Bruno’s writings.⁸¹ Moreover, it is crucial to observe that the *Candelaio* realigns the myth of the primordial human beings with the politics of power that is certainly at least implicit in Aristophanes’ original speech, which emphasizes that homosexual men would become the best leaders of the state. In a similar way, neither Consalvo nor Bartolomeo are seeking hidden truths, but are both rather (dis-)united by their greed for money. Thus, although for Bruno the *Symposium* has lost its authority as a source of divine revelation (so assiduously elaborated and contested by generations of Renaissance intellectuals), the *Candelaio* nevertheless brings back some of the original irony and the political background of Aristophanes’ speech.⁸² Bruno is not only aware of the satirical and comical mood of the original text; by overturning the content of the myth, he also forges a new work that is perhaps intentionally a distant echo of the original text.⁸³ In that sense, the *Candelaio* opens new perspectives for future genera-

⁷⁹ Trans. Bruno (2000) 162; Bruno (1582) V, 13: 108r: “Scaramurè: Guardate di battervi, perché il primo di voi che si mouerà, ne harrà dui contra.”

⁸⁰ Trans. Bruno (2000a) 162; Bruno (1582) V, 13: 108r: “Consalvo: Arrivederci da ora a cent’anni.”

⁸¹ See for example Bruno (1582) V, 9–10: 98r–101r with *Cratylus* 430C–431A.

⁸² Moreover, Bruno does not seem to regard homosexuality as repulsive or against nature: this becomes obvious as the main character of the play, Bonifacio (‘the *candelaio*’ or candlebearer) is originally homosexual and becomes, much to his detriment, a womanizer.

⁸³ A passage from Cavell (1987) 24–25, concerning the relationship between texts, is to the point: “Whatever an earlier play called something like *King Lear* contains, its translation into Shakespeare’s medium is inherently predictable; and however interesting the comparison may be in certain cases, it cannot determine what is going on in the Shakespeare. A complementary relation is that between a work of Shakespeare and certain spectaculars or panoramas “based upon” that work. In that case you might call Shakespeare’s text not a treasure but a sea, from which various items - treasures, corpses, shells, weeds, more or less at will — were lifted and heaped on the shore of big entertainment.”

tions inviting them to read the *Symposium* as a literary resource, directing their attention away from the more or less linear commentaries that sought to elucidate esoteric truths and back to the literary and dramatic setting of a text, the *mise en scène* of supposedly abstract thought. As we saw in chapter one, this is an objective for which Bruno has often been credited.⁸⁴

⁸⁴ Over the past decades growing attention has been paid to the literary setting of Plato's works. See, for example, Nussbaum (1986) 227: "Plato tells us that we cannot throw away the images and the drama as delightful decorations, or lift out his arguments from the "literary" context for isolated dissection. Still less we can abandon the arguments or relax the demands of our critical faculties. The whole thing is a music discourse, which asks us the full participation of all parts of our souls." And Nussbaum (1990) 15: "Forms of writing were not seen as vessels into which different contents could be indifferently poured; form was itself a statement, a content."

CHAPTER 8

MERETRICIOUS ARTS: THE ASTROLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF SURGICAL INTERVENTIONS INTO THE BODY IN GIAMBATTISTA DELLA PORTA

I have great comfort from this fellow. Methinks he hath no drowning mark upon him; his complexion is perfect gallows. Stand fast, good Fate, to his hanging! Make the rope of his destiny our cable, for our own doth little advantage.

(*The Tempest* I, 1)

Turning to the second half of the sixteenth century, the following section will show to which extent the body discourses outlined in the previous chapters continued to be influential and how their theoretical underpinnings were used to transform ideas about the physical body.¹ We will look at an intellectual current which became exemplary in the south of Italy, where writers such as Bernardino Telesio, Giambattista Della Porta, Giordano Bruno (in exile and before his imprisonment), and Tommaso Campanella audaciously developed naturalistic explanations for all physiological and psychological phenomena. This loosely acquainted group of intellectuals paved the way for novel concepts of nature, and thus for the science of the centuries to follow. Even so, and despite their obvious merits in the success story of the scientific revolution, their body discourses were (obviously) more or less conscious comments on contemporary issues and, therefore, on the theoretical constructs of earlier generations of Renaissance Peripatetic and Neoplatonic natural philosophy. Here — and no less importantly than the perspective from the future modern science — alterations and subversions of the body discourse are discreet, yet

¹ This is the revised and enlarged version of my article “Meretricious Arts: Cosmetic Surgery, the Astrological Significance of Birthmarks and their Manipulation in Giambattista Della Porta’s *Metoposcopia*, *Physionomia* and *Magia naturalis*” published in *Zeitsprünge* 9 (2005) 204–223

remarkable. They become visible in the many new practical applications, often popular magical medical drugs, and in the surgical interventions that are assimilated into the learned discourses of the late Renaissance. In particular, this chapter addresses the question as to which extent human bodies came to be perceived as being alterable by artificial means. In particular, it will look into Giambattista Della Porta's (1535–1615) interventional strategies into the body, cosmetic surgery (a “meretricious art”), and the connections of this art to astrology, folklore, and medicine.² Amongst a plethora of other topics Della Porta's famous and popular *Magia naturalis* describes techniques for the artificial embellishment of the body (needless to say, the female body is Della Porta's main subject.)³

The medical context and the specific intellectual underpinnings of such procedures lead us to wonder whether instructions on how to change the colour of one's hair, make the skin white, enlarge breasts, tighten the vulva after giving birth, remove birthmarks (to name but a few) could be given a specific meaning in the context of Della Porta's theories on physiognomy. In other words, can such recipes be conceptualised in a specific perception of the function and role of the body within the framework of Renaissance Neoplatonism and the emerging natural sciences? Obviously, there are parallels in Della Porta to the recipes for the prolongation of life in Ficino, which we discussed in chapter three, but one important difference, at least, is that Della Porta does not seek so much his own rejuvenation as that of other bodies, especially those of women. One could then say that Della Porta's approach is totally different from Ficino's, given that the *Magia naturalis* discusses some risky interventions associated with the body practices that prostitutes or disreputable women had to undergo in order to ply their trade. However, Della Porta's primary intention was not to write a manual for pimps, go-betweens, and sex workers, nor would that have been a fashionable undertaking for a Neapolitan nobleman. As in the case of Ficino's interest in medical vampirism, the illicit techniques practised by his social inferiors did have an intellectual attraction for Della Porta. Another difference is that in contrast to Ficino, whose interest is on a regimen of health designed to prolong the lives

² That similar interventions were commonly practised is evident in an anecdote reported by Giordano Bruno who says that transplanted noses begin to rot when the donator dies; Bruno, (1879–91) III: 409.

³ On Della Porta, see Eamon (1994) especially ch. 6; as a contextualisation of Della Porta's scientific work, see 221–223. See also Schiesari (1994) 55–70.

and mental capacities of elderly scholars, Della Porta is not that interested in recipes to change one's own body, health, and mental powers. Instead, he provides instructions on how to change the physical shapes of others and of the world surrounding the magus. As the preceding chapters indicated, within a patriarchal discourse this "other" is firstly associated with "women", and not just with ordinary women, but with those who, for various reasons, seemingly pose a formidable threat to male integrity — prostitutes (chapter one), menstruating women (chapter two), or vampires (chapter three). Viewed from this perspective, Della Porta is thus merely continuing a familiar body discourse.

The Magia naturalis

Apart from several plays that were very successful in his time, a treatise on distillation, and an extensive work on ciphers, Giambattista Della Porta also published a long and often reprinted and translated compendium of natural magic. This text is related to the tradition of books of secrets,⁴ albeit with a distinctly naturalist tendency that includes discussions of a wide variety of topics ranging from firearms to optics, from the lodestone to perfumes, metallurgy, and miraculous medicines.⁵

Della Porta presents his collection within the more or less stringently expressed conceptual framework of Renaissance Neoplatonism, characteristic, ever since the publication of Marsilio Ficino's *De vita*, of the erudite magical works of that period.⁶ Unlike his equally famous predecessor, however, Della Porta's focus is not so much on the well-being of the immortal soul and thence on the theoretical underpinnings of the magical correspondences that constitute and bind together the entire creation, but on the practical instructions, recipes, remedies, devices of various kinds, some of which are more or

⁴ Eamon (1994) 197–198 and 136 on Della Porta's biography and the general historical context. Orsi (1997) 101–103 discusses Della Porta's predecessors and emphasizes that books 8–11 of the *Magia* are in the tradition of the *secreta* literature proper.

⁵ The *Magia naturalis* saw more than twenty editions and was translated into Italian, French, German, English, and Dutch, totalling more than fifty editions. There were two editions of the *Magia*, the first in four books appearing in 1558, and the second in 1589 comprising twenty books. On the *Thaumaturgia*, a late work that remained unfinished, see Muraro Vaiani (1978) 187–189.

⁶ See *De vita* in general, see the introduction, 3–90; see also Copenhaver (1992) 159–161, with references.

less obscure to the modern reader.⁷ Della Porta's recipes often come with the remark that the author himself has tried a certain cure or drug, sometimes referring to ancient authorities, yet most of the time the author copies from other and more contemporary sources which were describing phenomenal interventions into the regular course of nature.⁸ Concomitant with his classical and humanist erudition, Della Porta adopts folkloristic magical traditions to a broader Neoplatonic conceptual framework that emphasizes universal animation.

In the *Magia naturalis*, Della Porta claims that techniques for intervention into the female body are primarily intended to foster the generation of legitimate offspring. In this way Della Porta obviously seeks to defend himself against possible allegations that he is teaching meretricious arts which lead to fornication: at the same time, however, these topics are indicative of a social environment in which such techniques were practised.⁹ In a recipe

⁷ In a chapter of the *Magia naturalis* entitled "How to pretend to be a powerful magician" Della Porta says that women will strip off their clothing in the light of a lamp which has been inscribed with certain characters and filled with the fat of rabbits. Della Porta (1611) XX, 8: 721: "Ho giudicato che l'effetto non può venire da altro, che da quel grasso di lepore, di cui è la forza mortifera che penetra nel cervello, e che le inviti e muova a quelle pazzie." On the magician as artisan, see Eamon (1994) 217; on Della Porta's recipes see 219–221. Ficino is reluctant to discuss philtres, that is instructions for love magic. See, for example, *De vita* III, 21: 354–355: "non enim philtre docemus, sed medicinas." On the connections between the erotic arts and magic, see the epilogue.

⁸ Della Porta (1611) *Proemio* to IX: 388: "Noi habbiamo raccolte alcune cose raccolte da' i scritti de gli antichi migliori, che ci parevano, l'habbiamo sperimentate, e le buone l'habbiamo portate qui, ma assai sono migliori quelle della nostra inventione, e de' i più moderni [...] che anchora non sono state stampate [...]." See Eamon (1994) 194–253, esp. 195–196.

⁹ Della Porta (1611) *Proemio* to IX: 387: "ragionaremo de gli ornamenti delle donne, dalla testa infin a piedi, e n' insegnaremo molti. [...] che noi non habbiamo scritto questi secreti, che i giovani per questo attendessero a i vani, e dishonesti piaceri, ma che Iddio autor' dell universo, ha dato alla natura delle cose, che tutte in sè havessero perpetuità, creò il maschio, e la femmina, accioche con seconda generatione non havesse giammai a mancar la spetie, e che il maschio fusse chiamato alla generatione, allettato da questa bellezza, e creò la donna molle, delicata, e bella, accioche allettato da questa, quasi costretto fusse sollecitato. Noi dunque accioche la moglie piacesse al suo marito, ne offesi dalla loro brutezza andassero infestare, e macchiare gli altrui letti, habbiamo havuto pensiero di provvedere alle donne, come con il ruffianesimo della bellezza, & allettamento de' colori, se fussero nere, ruvide, macchiate, e brutte, e se vergognassero della loro brutezza, diventassero bianche, lisce, bionde & bellissime."

against sagging breasts and facial wrinkles author recommends a sticky ointment containing linseed oil, gum Arabic, mastic, and camphor.¹⁰

As we shall see, these interventions into the body are not merely useful in making the (preferably female) body sexually more attractive to desirous men, but also in changing the entire psychophysical being that is subjected to these procedures of embellishment. This set of assumptions is linked to another art Della Porta was a master of: physionomics, a proto- or pseudo-science on the rise in the sixteenth century, sought to identify the visible affinities of all created things. Physiognomists such as Della Porta detected such likenesses everywhere, from plants and animals to the bodies and faces of humans, and even further up the ontological scale to the appearance of the planets.¹¹ Because of the new medium of printing, new books on this ancient art were filled with illustrations. Sometimes bearing extraordinarily leaned titles such as *Phytognomica* (signs of plants), *De humana physiognomia*, or *De coelestis physiognomia* these were veritable best-sellers that underwent many editions. However, because of their connexion with the suspect magical arts of divination, some of these works could circulate only in manuscript and were printed only centuries later — for example, Della Porta's *Metoposcopia*, a treatise on the art of reading the signs in the human face.¹² Other works were published only long after their author's death, as was the case with the *Chiroscopia* or the art of reading the lines on the hands.¹³

Della Porta's physionomics provides cartographies of the outward appearance of physical bodies with the aim not only of curing all kinds of physical diseases, but also of predicting the hidden inclinations or dispositions of the soul (past, present or future). The massive effort by Della Porta to map the exterior appearances of all animated bodies goes in tandem with

¹⁰ Della Porta (1611) IX, 24: 418: "Soglion le rughe far sconcie alcune parti del corpo, cioè la faccia, le mani, & il ventre dopo il parto, e simili luoghi, per allisciar dunque la pelle, serviti di queste: La faccia del olio di lino, overo la morchia, aggiungendovi, gomma arabica, draganti, mastice, & un poco di canfora. Vale anchora alle mammelle cadenti."

¹¹ The vogue was perhaps also due to increased interest in the short (and probably spurious) Aristotelian treatise entitled *Physiognomics*, as well as to the new possibility to reproduce images in the new medium of printing. See Cancik (2000) cols. 997–998, and Aristoteles (1999).

¹² Della Porta (1990).

¹³ Caroli (1995) gives a sound historical introduction; Schmölders (1995) has a stimulating philosophical approach to the topic; on Della Porta's physiognomics, see Reisser (1997) 89–93.

what we know today to be a more scientific approach towards cartographies of human bodies (as well as landscapes) carried out, most notably, by Andreas Vesalius (1514–64) in his revolutionary anatomical studies.¹⁴ One characteristic passage is sufficient to illustrate Della Porta's method:

Through this art, we have helped many friends avoid dangers and ascend to honours. Shortly before I wrote these things, I counselled a friend of mine to avoid the company of a certain ugly and unlucky man, an advice he did not want to hear, as his acquaintance had promised him riches; at the end of the day, they were caught by the governor producing counterfeit money in a hide-out and shortly afterwards both ended on the gallows.¹⁵

In this short edifying tale Della Porta emphasizes not only the accuracy of the art of physiognomics, but also the idea that ugly people are bad. As the *De coelestis physiognomia* emphasizes, a general law of nature seems to be that one can foresee, in a single glance (*all'improvviso*), a person's future.¹⁶ Viewed from inside, physiognomic is a rational science as good as, or perhaps even better than the new anatomists because it can be used as a universal descriptor.¹⁷ The *Chirofisionomia* emphasizes this all-encompassing aspect of the art:

¹⁴ The literature on Vesalius is vast, but see Stafford (1992) for a stimulating attempt to relate these cartographies to novel techniques of the reproduction of images, such as etchings, and for efforts to apply this methodology to other sciences, such as in Ramism. For a biography of Vesalius see O'Malley (1964). On the topic of variation in individual and standardized human anatomies in the new atlas see Siraisi (1994) 60–88.

¹⁵ Della Porta (1996) I, 2: 192: "Con questa arte abbiamo giovato a molti amici, acciò schifassero i perigli se salissero alle dignità. Poco prima che io scrivessi queste cose avisai un amico che si guardasse dalla compagnia d'un certo uomo infelice e brutto, il che egli non volle fare, essendogli da quello stato promesso che l'avrebbe arricchito; onde accasò che, essendo stati trovati dal Governatore in una spelonca, che falsificavano la moneta, poco dopo furono tutti due appiccati."

¹⁶ Della Porta (1996) I, 2: 191: "in questa arte che dal solo aspetto, all'improvviso, tanto veracemente predicava le morti, i pericoli della vita e i tempi di gli eventi."

¹⁷ For a good commentary on the circularity of this kind of reasoning, see: Simon (1980) 101–102: "C'est là où on touche la zone aveugle de cette pensée fondée sur les similitudes. En apparence — pour elle-même elle est remarquablement vigilante, à l'affût du moindre indice. En réalité, elle se trouve toujours en position de redoublement du déjà dit, du déjà écrit, du déjà vu. Car elle ne fait que thématiser, que porter à l'explicite, une

The hand of unlucky Saturn is bony, skinny, short, hard, dark, bent and distorted, an ugly terrible and horrible appearance accompanies it. The complexion is black [...], small and spotted eyes, black hair [...] the habits are bad [...] traitor of friends, who hates human beings [...] disloyal, suspicious, of perverse convictions. The Saturnine animals are black and live in hide-outs during the winter, in tree holes and caves, prisons, as it were, therefore Saturnine [humans] are very likely to end up incarcerated.¹⁸

The Saturnine complexion renders a negative example of that tenet: dark, ugly, dangerous animals are representative of repulsive outward appearance of suspicious men, who are therefore very likely to go to prison. This passage — dense as usual — highlights the aesthetics that structure Della Porta's physiognomics: it points to the tenet that beautiful bodies are also morally good. Admittedly, there may be exceptions to the rule as, indeed, some beauties are deceiving or attractive in the wrong way. In what is reminiscent of Ficino's master-vampire (chapter three), Della Porta says that Venus is attractive but lustful whereas Jupiter seems to be handsome in the right way. It is, nevertheless, clear that according to Della Porta there is a direct association between beauty, virtue, and success as well as health, as these traits all originate from a good temperament, that is, from the harmonious mixture of the elements. A monstrous body, on the other hand, is an indication of ill health, bad luck, and dubious moral inclinations.¹⁹

A truly universal and redemptive science, physiognomy provides its master not only with a key to decode the ciphers written into the faces of humans (by relating them to the shapes of animals) or a manual for reading

pratique partiellement ignorante d'elle-même et qui fondait spontanément ses inférences sur les qualités sensibles et leur patiente comparaison. Que l'on songe ici à la description qu'a donnée Lévi-Strauss de la pensée sauvage, et qui s'applique de si près à la connaissance que prenait des simples l'Europe paysanne."

¹⁸ Della Porta (1677), 12: 70–71: "La mano del infelice Saturno è ossuta, nervosa, breve, dura, negra, contorta, e malformata, l'accompagna un' aspetto brutto, e terribile, & horribile; il colore negro, che vā al croceo, occhi piccoli, e macchiati, capello negro, & ispido. I costumi, vili, [...] traditore de gli amici, che ha in odio gli huomini; [...] perfido, sospettoso, di perversa opinione. Gli Animali Saturnini sono negri, e d'inverno vivino ne' nascondigli, cavi d' arbori e spelonche quasi prigionj, e però i Saturnini stanno molto soggetti ad essere carcerati." See also the introduction to *De vita* 48–49.

¹⁹ Della Porta (1996) I, 8: 201, VI, 1–3: 327–330, VI, 4: 333.

the lines engraved into the palms of our hands, but also, as Della Porta suggests, with diagnostic methods for understanding all Creation, from plants to stars. In this manner, physiognomy may be succinctly described as the art that establishes a metonymic relationship between inorganic bodies and psychological qualities. Della Porta says: "It is therefore a science that learns from the signs which are fixed in the body, as well as by the accidents which transmute these signs, how to investigate the natural habits of the mind."²⁰ Another important aspect of physiognomy comes to the fore in this statement: bodies may be mapped and their future may be predicted, but even so they are in a constant state of flux, transition, or mutability. Their essences are no longer exclusively determined by an invisible substantial form (soul) derivative of the unchangeable forms and, in the case of human beings, immortal, but (more than ever) by external circumstances. These environmental influences are decisive for the fate of individual beings who find their temporal expression in an unstable *visible* shape, as opposed to the invisible and substantial form advanced by theological discourses.²¹ In such a way, it has often been noted that Della Porta opens the perspective on the sinister tradition of eugenics, not uncommon to European intellectual culture at least since its articulation in Plato's *Timaeus*, according to which a handsome body is the abode of a beautiful soul.²² Apart from the elemental influences altering body and mind, which are reducible to qualities perceived by touch (such as hot/cold, dry/moist),²³ Della Porta mentions nutrition, climate, and age as determinants of the mental and physical shape of an individual. Disease, also, may alter an individual's mental disposition: Della Porta mentions, for

²⁰ Della Porta (1613) I, 29, fol. 39v: "È dunque una scienza, che impara da segni, che sono fissi nel corpo, & accidenti che trasmutano i segni, investigar i costumi naturali dell'animo." On the classical origins of this idea see Aristotle, *Prior analytics*, II; 70b 5–20 together with the comments in Caputo (1982) 63–70.

²¹ Della Porta (1613) I, XX[V]III, fol. 38r: "Cosi i temperamenti de corpi di quei paesani si mutano, e dal nutrimento di tante qualità, si muta il cervello, e la volontà." On Neoplatonic magic and its reduction of *forma substantialis* to *figura* see Copenhaver (1984) 523–584. On complexion as a universal descriptor in sixteenth-century Neapolitan Aristotelianism see Keßler (2001) 93 with note 46. Keßler says that according to Simone Porzio, who also wrote on physiognomy: "The specific nature and virtue of the entities examined can be explained in terms of accidental qualities, their mixtures temperaments and complexions that no such thing as a substantial form is necessary."

²² *Timaeus* 90; *De amore* VI, 11: 225.

²³ See also Eamon (1994) 211.

instance, fevers — because they dry up the brain, they may let the patient become more intelligent. Disease may even instil the capacity for divination in a person.²⁴ Excess of coldness, on the other hand, is bad, as can be observed in the complexions of those people who live in the northern regions. Because of low temperatures, their complexion is white; their blonde hair is indicative of sexual slackness which Della Porta associates with the opposite of heat as well as with an uncouth and exceptional (ugly) appearance. All these traits are due to the excess of cold, which debilitates not only bodies but also faces and consequently is indicative of a mental disposition that is caused by a lack of (presumably Italian?) sunshine.²⁵ It is the very “excessive coldness” of women, so a characteristic of Della Porta’s discourse, that irredeemably turns them into man’s inferiors. Drawing on ancient rhetorical theory, Della Porta says that all characteristics are dependent on the mixture of our temperaments: there is no such thing as a permanent essence.²⁶ Instead, the body and, with it, the mind are always in flux, always in danger of being corrupted.

The story of a cross-dresser whom Della Porta met in Naples is a case in point. The man, originally from Sicily, had assumed all the habits of a woman — dressing, speaking, and behaving as one. He loved to stay at home, preferred to pass his time gossiping in the kitchen, and he was even sharing beds with his female companions. Needless to say, that the man was even more promiscuous than women.²⁷ From Della Porta’s perspective, the story

²⁴ Della Porta (1613) VI, 1: fol. 229r: “Ma essendo l’huomo nella vecchiaia, all’hor diuven savio, e prudentissimo; chè è fredda, e secca, dunque la Prudenza sta nella fredda, e secca complessione del cervello. Vedesi un’altra esperienza esser accaduto huomini humidissimi, esser ignorantissimi, rozzi, & indocili, doppio che le calde febrì, & adurenti gli hanno assalito il cervello, son divenuti dotti, han discorso di varie scienze, e vaticinato delle cose future.” On the influence of the environment on the character and fortunes of the individual, see Ficino, (1927) II: 28, 31, 70–71.

²⁵ Della Porta (1613) I, 16: fol. 22r-v: “Sono di color biondo per lo gran freddo, e perché dal soverchio freddo nasce la bianchezza, dal soverchio freddo vien la biondezza, l’humido molto toglie il poter usar il coito. Aristotele dice ne’ Problemi che sono d’aspetto selvaggio, e stravagante, così anchora di costumi; la cagion esser l’eccesso del freddo, che corrompe, e distrugge il temperamento, e così i volti e gli animi [...]”

²⁶ Della Porta (1613) I, XX[V]III: fol. 38r: “I Rettorici dicono, che dall’età vengono i costumi, e nelle varie età son varij temperamenti.” On the mutability of the body in Ficino, see *De amore* VI, 11: 224.

²⁷ Della Porta (1613) V: fol. 204 r-v: “[...] volentieri stava in casa, e sempre con una faldiglia, come donna attendeva la cucina, & alla conocchia, fuggiva gli huomini, conversava con le femine volentieri, e giacendo con loro, era più femina che l’istesse femine ra-

points to a real threat to male identities. The report of the cross dresser goes hand in hand with another hotly debated issue during the sixteenth century: the spectacular criminal cases involving alleged wolf-men or lycanthropes.

If the human soul ends up in the body of a dog, even if the intellect will remain with it, its habits will not be different from those of a dog. In the same way, if in a wolf's body, it would have the habits of a wolf, because these habits would be determined by the temperaments, and it is true that in the disease of cynanthropy [the mental delusion in which one believes oneself to be a dog] and lycanthrophy [the mental delusion in which one believes oneself to be a wolf], which is burned into a human temperament by [the overabundance of black bile, this is] melancholy, that person assumes the temperament of a dog and barks and howls like a dog or a wolf, roams around the graves of the dead at night, and eventually behaves like a dog or wolf in every respect; even his face becomes similar to that of a wolf or a dog.²⁸

As with the gift of divination, which may be induced by fevers, Della Porta conceptualises lycanthropy as a physiological disease, rather than as a defect of the soul perpetrated by evil spirits.²⁹ What becomes obvious from this reference to *praeter* natural occurrences is that if the outward appearance of an object is changed, its qualities and habits change in tandem with it. As a

gionava come femina, e si dava l'articolo feminino sempre trista me amara me, & il peggio era, che peggior d'una femina, sopportava la nefanda Venere."

²⁸ Della Porta (1613) I, 20: fol. 29v: "E se l'anima umana venisse in un corpo di Cane, restandogli però l'intelletto, non avrebbe costumi se non di Cane; così in un corpo di Lupo avrebbe costumi di Lupo, perche tai costumi le dà il suo temperamento, E che sia vero, nella infermità Cinantropia, e Licanthropia, in un umano temperamento per la malinconia bruciato, si fa simile da un temperamento di Cane, ulula, e latra, come un Cane o Lupo, va la notte vagando per le sepolture di morti, e finalmente fa tutte l'attioni di Cane ò Lupo, anzi divien di volto simile al Lupo, & al Cane." On lycanthropy in the sixteenth century, see the case study by Oates (1989) 305–363. On the topic of Werewolves in Medieval Culture, see Bynum (2001) 15–17; 92–98; 105–109; 166–180. For discussions of that passage from other perspectives, see Schiesari (1994) 66–67 (on mutability), and Bolzoni (1992) 113–114 (on the role of the imagination).

²⁹ On the naturalisation of magic in Della Porta's *Criptologia*, see Eamon (1994) 206–210.

result, what an individual actually is will be determined by the (changing and changeable) sensible qualities of his or her body (about which, according to Peripatetic epistemology, there can be no true science).³⁰

At least two essential tenets can be deduced from Della Porta's tales: (a) the shape of bodies is mutable in amazing ways, and (b) such changes in the outward appearance have significant consequences for the behaviour and the habits of the individual being. From the perspective of religious orthodoxy, the crucial question Della Porta (wisely) only hesitatingly addresses is whether a change in the exterior form can also cause alterations in soul, that is, in the substantial and indelible form of humans. Della Porta seems to go very far in that respect and to take a position not uncommon to medical physiologists,³¹ pointing out that: "We can see how our soul suffers with the body, [...] (as) Plato says that soul is in tandem with the diseases that befall the body, it falls ill [...] nor does the body suffer less when the soul is in distress, as it happens when the later is in love and burning, and in such ways alters the body into another form, nay, even kills the body."³² Della Porta's physiognomy of plants, the *Phytognomica*, again accentuates the links of this theory to medicine and psychology:

In our books on the signs of habits that can be gathered from the shape of the bodies [...] we explain that body and soul establish reciprocal links between each other. As examples we mentioned that in severe diseases which are defects of the body the soul is speaking deliriously, as in love-sickness and in frenzies, or when the soul feels envy the body starts to waste away, and from these reciprocal affectations of soul and the body, and in part from the habits of the body, one can predict the habits of the soul. [...] Therefore, once the body's form is altered, the soul of the plant is also changed, the body changes, and the parts of the body correspond to the power of the soul, and vice versa, the virtues, and the causes of the forms, because there has never been a plant that in one form renders the virtues of another. The myrrh lacks the virtues of

³⁰ *Posterior Analytics*, I, 8, 75b 22–24.; see chapter one of the present study.

³¹ Siraisi (1990) 106.

³² *Fisionomia* (1996) 21.

the aloe [...] and therefore, of necessity, we have to conclude that a certain form converges with a certain virtue.”³³

Della Porta emphasizes that, in tandem with an alteration of a specific form, the virtue of a thing is also changed. Soul becomes tied to body to such an extent that, rather than by spiritual contemplation, it is first and foremost changed by physical intervention. Given the universal role of the mixtures of the body fluids, it comes as no surprise that Della Porta compares magic with medicine, “because that art teaches us how to mix, to temper and in a similar way the composition and application.”³⁴

Sensual love is the key witness and master example that structures Della Porta’s discourse on the intimate interrelation between body and soul (see also the epilogue).³⁵ Ever since Antiquity, love sickness was not only conceived as a spiritual experience possibly leading to the gift of prophecy and to knowledge of things divine, but infatuation was also a topic for physicians, who describe the state of mind as a disease to be cured by medicines.³⁶ In a further step, Della Porta links the medical and the physiognomic traditions in order to transform the body or to intervene into it, as the physician does, or in the ways the magician tries to change the course of nature. Physiognomics functions here as a diagnostic tool in a medicine aiming at moral improvement through healthy and beautiful bodies.

³³ Della Porta (1588) I, 1: 9–10: “In libris nostris de morum iudiciis à corporibus delineamentis desumptis, summi philosophi [...] exposuimus, corpus, & animam mutuis coniunctionibus inter sese consequi. Exempla erant, in acutis aegritudinibus, quae corporis morbi sunt, animam delirare, sic in amoribus, furoribus, & invidijs animi morbis corpus tabescere, unde ex his mutuis animi, & corporis affectibus, & partium corporis habitu animi mores posse praesagiri. [...] Igitur mutata corporis forma, mutatur & plantae anima, mutatisque viribus, mutatur corporatura, & corporis partibus vis animae correspondet, ut invicem virium, & formae causae fiant, neque unquam planta visa fuit, quae formam unius, dotes vero alterius referret. Myrthus aloes vires non habet, [...] necessario consequi par est, ut tal formae tali vires conveniant.” On the similarities between men and plants, see also I, 2: 10–11.

³⁴ *Magia* (1611) I, 3, 5: “Perché ci insenga il meschiare, il temperare, e somigliamente il comporre e l’applicare.”

³⁵ On love as the key affinity in Della Porta’s (and indeed, all Renaissance) magic, see for instance Eamon (1994) 213.

³⁶ *Phaedrus* 244A–245C. Ficino, too, recommended medical remedies to cure love sickness, the emblematic and pattern for all psychophysical diseases; see his *De amore* VII, 11: 255–226.

Now it remains as our most noble cause, that once you have made out your own vices or those of others, you can do away with them once and for all. For what else would be the benefit of this art if, when you have made out your faults, you would then be unable to convert them into virtues? But this is accomplished not by thoughts, imaginations, or the arguments of moral philosophers, (who for the most part remain unsuccessful anyway) but with purges, local remedies, and the natural virtues of herbs, stones, animals, and occult properties. [...] As obviously habits of mind can be changed with diligence, the temperament can be changed for the better through food, drink, and exercise.³⁷

Note the aggressive tone of Della Porta's claim: it is not moral philosophy any more, but the interventions made by physicians that cure our bodies and minds. This is a formidably heterodox claim.³⁸ In such a way, the body becomes a site for surgical intervention into the realm of mind.

According to Classical medicine, diseases are caused by an imbalance of the body fluids, the temperaments. Originally, the concept of the temperaments or mixtures of the humours in the human body was developed in Classical medicine to describe physiological states of the body, "The four

³⁷ *Fisionomia* (1996) *Proemio* to VI: fol. 228v: "Gia nei libri passati s'è abondevolmente dimostrato, come da segni del corpo si possono costumi riposti ne' più segreti luoghi dell'animo investigare veramente cosa assai degna, & ammirabile, resta che [...] si tratti di cosa più mirabilissima, [...] cioè che conosciuti i tuoi, ò gli altrui vitij, possi levarli via, e scancellarli del tutto. A che dunque ci gioveria questa arte, se conosciuti i tuoi difetti, non potessi quegli convertirli in virtudi? Ma ciò non con pensieri, imaginationi, ò persuasioni di morali Filosofi, che per lo più vane riescono, ma con purgationi, locali rimedij, e natural virtù di herbe, pietre, & animali & occulte proprietadi. [...] Perciochè l'habito dell'anima potersi mutar con diligentia dice esser cosa chiara, con cibi, con bere, & con essercitij mutar il temperamento in meglio." This passage bears distinct echoes from Galenus (1952) 178–179. See also the discussion of the above passage in the context of the art of memory by Bolzoni (1992) 106–107. In *verbis herbis, lapidibus* is a traditional magical formula, used to denote all the instruments of that art, see Agrippa (1991) I, 13: 111. Ficino's *Disputatio* (1927) 49 also relates medicine to physiognomy whereas according to this author astrology has an affinity to divination by natural signs and all four arts pertaining to the magical faculty.

³⁸ The idea that such intercessions into the body were useful and possible is of course not new.

humours were real body fluids, to which largely hypothetical origins, sites and functions were ascribed.”³⁹ In late Antiquity and in the Middle Ages, the temperaments were understood to be under the reign of the stars, which influence the generation and corruption of bodies in the sphere below the moon. In an important conceptual step, Della Porta now turns the tables and says that, rather than being controlled by the stars, the medical humours are really universal descriptors that structure the entire Cosmos.⁴⁰

But whereas the Astrologers say that form comes from the stars, we are saying that it does not derive from anything else but from the particular individual temperament, and that this character and temperament is not governed by any other cause than by the temperate quality of the elements and by their disposition in the best possible way, and this is done by the proper mixture of the blood.⁴¹

With this move into a naturalistic direction, Della Porta strives to eclipse the astrological elements of his theory. Even though in the *Coelestis physiognomia* he had declared astrology a vain discipline, Della Porta added an important corollary to the ban: an erroneous art, but only as long as divination from the stars is not based on the perceptible features of the heavenly bodies. Hence, a fine physiognomist will speedily detect the relevant tem-

³⁹ Siraisi (1990) 105. On the connexion between the four elements and the temperaments, see Claudius Galenus, *De elementis* transl. by Niccolo Leonicensio II, 1:16–18, and Galenus’ *De temperamentis* trans. by Thomas Linacre (*passim*), both works in Galenus (1562). On the history of the visual representations of the temperaments, see Reisser (1997) illustr. 22–29, 3–36, 43, 48–52, 165. On the idea that the individual complexion is decisive for falling in love with a person, see *De amore* V, 6: 189.

⁴⁰ See for example Galenus (1952) II, 8: 114; see I, 12: 29–39 for the role of astrology in that medical theory. See Schöner (1964) 96–100 on the connections between astrology and the medical temperaments, and 100–103 on the identification of the temperaments with the elements in Galenus.

⁴¹ *Fisionomia* (1996) I, 6: 12: “Ma la forma, che gli Astrologi dicono avvenir delle stelle, noi diciamo, che non d'altronde avvenga che dal particular temperamento di ciascuno; & quel carattere, & indole regia non d'altra causa, che dalla qualità temperata de gl'elementi, & alla loro ottima proporzione, & che principalmente nella temperie del sangue [...]” For a similar position, see Ficino (1927) 28: “Complexio hominis non solum ex celo est, sed etiam a parentibus, alimentis, exercitationibus et loco.”

peramental features in the visible appearance of the planets.⁴² In this way, all natural bodies remained *substantiae signatae*, cosmically predisposed substances that are bearing inscriptions of universal signs.⁴³ The astrological system of categorization was curtailed to the medical temperaments, thus associating the celestial bodies to a system of signs that pertained to medicine and hence to a lower level in the hierarchy of being. Instead of governing the lower bodies, the stars become subject to the same laws as earthly bodies. The concomitant levelling of the celestial hierarchies marks not only a break with Peripatetic cosmologies; at least to a certain extent, it also follows a Renaissance Neoplatonic cosmology (see chapter three). Yet, when viewed Ficino's perspective, Della Porta gets it all wrong, because he tells the story upside down, for in the Neoplatonic hierarchy of being the elements and the human temperaments were governed or even products of the celestial bodies.⁴⁴

As we have seen, Della Porta maintains that the more attractive a body is, the better is the soul inhabiting the body, hence beauty brought about by artificial means (and preferably under the guidance of an experienced magus/physician) becomes a rational means to improve one's moral dispositions, a way to become a better human being. It is precisely at this point that Della Porta's *Magia naturalis* and his physiognomics interlock: the former describing artful interventions into the body, with the aim to make it more beautiful and hence morally better, the latter explaining the universal significance of beautiful and well ordered bodies. In such ways, cosmetic surgery may become a major regulative to influence the individual's fate and his

⁴² Della Porta (1996) *Proemio*, 190: "Abbiamo aggiunto di più una dottrina non inutile: in che modo gli astrologi potevano in una occhiata, alzando gli occhi al cielo, e contemplando le stelle appare quello che in lungo spazio di tempo, e con varie sperienze, hanno apparato poichè dalla loro fisionomia, colore, moto, qualità, bellezza e bruttezza chiaramente si conosce. [...] e che tutte queste cose non derivano dall'influsso delle stelle ma dalle stesse qualità de gli elementi."

⁴³ On the doctrine of *substantia signata*, see Bianchi (1987) 15–22, especially with regard to medicine, and the classical sources in Pliny. See also Eamon (1994) 214.

⁴⁴ Della Porta (1996) *Proemio*, 190: "La stella di Giove e di Venere, rilucente d'un amenissimo e giocondissimo splendore, in modo l'avanza di chiarezza celeste che dinota una certa maestà di natura e promette somiglianti effetti; fa gli uomini graziosi e magnanimi, dona vita gloriosa, splendore e ricchezze, e perciò viene detta Stella salutifera. All'incontro, la stella di Saturno perochè è quasi livida d'un brutto e sozzo pallore, e in certo modo offendendo gli occhi, fa gli homini melanconici e soggetti a simili infirmità. La stella di Marte, orribile e minacciosa, fa gli uomini rossi, iracondi, sanguigni e promette guerre, lepra e cose fiere e avverse, prole infelici." See also VI, 1: 326.

mental and physical disposition. This is especially true of the most important part of the human body, the face,⁴⁵ which is given particular attention in the *Metoposcopia* (the text was probably written in 1590–94). The manuscript comprises about 400 images depicting a choice of irregularities in the human face, eighty-four of them presenting different facial birthmarks.

The inscription on the first illustration in the *Metoposcopia* says that a birthmark on the right side of the forehead causes fortune in marriage and engenders the acquisition of riches from powerful people abroad. In men and women alike one will find a corresponding mark on the right side of the breast or on the right side of the body. Illustration two in the text shows a head carrying a birthmark on the left side of the face, which shames women, destroys health, and foretells wounds. For women it is a sign of long illness. Men and women with this birthmark will have a corresponding birthmark on their left breast.⁴⁶ Leaving aside the many other images and the strictly gendered semantics of the work, these facial signs seem to *cause* the described effects, rather than just to *denote* them. The facial birthmarks thus have a decisive influence on future events which are inscribed into bodies. If one follows this line of reasoning, the removal of moles is, by conjecture, more than just a superficial cosmetic intervention.

One could propose that the *Metoposcopia* was simply a pastime of the author and for that reason it was deliberately left unpublished. However, there is evidence to the contrary, for Della Porta and Girolamo Cardano (1501–76), whose homonymous work was published in 1658, were ahead of their times — the seventeenth-century vogue for the *Metoposcopia* was still to come.⁴⁷ Even more significantly for Della Porta's intentions, the frequently published *Fisionomia humana* has a brief, but allusive chapter to the topic

⁴⁵ *Fisionomia* (1613) *Proemio* to III: fol. 129v. On the eyes as the most important part of the human body, see *De amore* VII, 10: 255, where the harmony of the other parts of the body is not so important as the beauty of the eyes, because fascination happens through the exchange of visual rays, that are material images of the beloved person; see also chapter one.

⁴⁶ Della Porta (1990) fol. 10r: “Un neo nella parte sinistra della fronte fa fortuna in matrimonio, et in questo dà beni da Signori fuor di patria, e tanto all’omo quanto alla donna dà un altro neo corrispondente o nella parte destra del petto o nel fianco destro. 2. Un neo come di sopra fa partir disonor alla moglie, danno nella robba, ferite per donne. Alla donna dà longa infermità et ambidue avranno un altro nella spalla sinistra.”

⁴⁷ Cardano (1658); Aquilecchia's introduction to *Metoposcopia* (1990) ix–xi, lists many relevant texts from the seventeenth century.

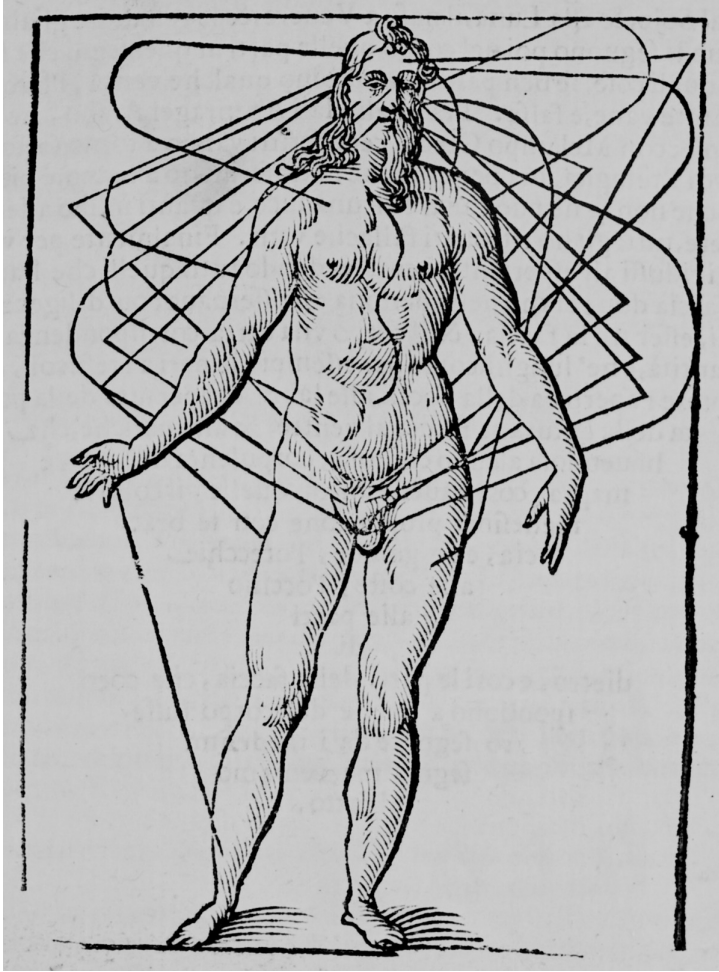


Figure 1.

with an impressive illustration of the correspondences of birthmarks between the face and the remaining parts of the body (fig. 1). In it, the author says that a birthmark on the nose, the realm of Venus, will point towards a corresponding spot on the sexual organs and (not surprisingly) is indicative of sexual wantonness.⁴⁸ In the final analysis, the *Metoposcopia* is nothing more

⁴⁸ Della Porta (1613) V, XLIII (46): fol. 227v–228r: “Dice Melampo: se nell’occhio, ò nell’naso sarà un nevo, sarà più del dovere inchinato a Venere. Che se sarà nel naso obli-



Figure 2.

than a simple atlas of these marks and the corresponding fates — it does not offer any further theoretical explanations. The published (and self-censored) *Coelestis physiognomia* does, however, allow us to reconstruct Della Porta's theory. As was the case with physiognomics in general, divination by birth-

quamente di una femina, n'haverà un'altro nelle parti vergognose, e sarà di coito insaziabile. Dice Hali: nella barba un nevo, l'altro dimostra nella milza, ma chi ha un nevo nella milza, e sotto il ventre, sarà sempre infermo. [...] Nel ginocchio destro della femina è buon segno, nel sinistro di fecondità. [...] Sappi oltre questo, che nella parte destra significano felice sorte, il contrario nella sinistra." For later examples (for instance Lavater), see Jaberg (1956/7) 312, n. 14.

marks had precedents in Classical Antiquity. A certain Melampus had written a very short treatise entitled *Divinatio ex naevis corporis* that, under the system of *melothesia*, the idea that different planets govern different parts of the human body, taught how to foretell an individual's future from an examination of his birthmarks.⁴⁹ Furthermore, Suetonius' widely read *Lives of the Roman Emperors* reports that Augustus carried a set of birthmarks on his breast and belly in the shape of the constellation of *Ursa Major*.⁵⁰ Both texts were known to Della Porta; the fifth book of the *Coelestis physiognomia* starts with the relevant quote from Suetonius,⁵¹ while the following chapters are mostly line-to-line commentaries on Melampus.⁵² The divinatory relevance of birthmarks seems here to derive from the idea that these spots on the body reproduce the shape of celestial constellations. Like a magical talisman and by dint of their analogous shape, the moles channel the influence of the astrological signs. In the preface to book five Della Porta admits that spots on the body were used for divinatory purposes and emphasizes that the signs of the heavenly constellations found on the skin have to be clear, beautiful, and "well made". If so, they are signs of great glory; if not (for example, if they are blurred) they are portents of misfortune.⁵³ According to this account, the distinction between such marks on the body as signs of a certain predisposition, as opposed to being its cause, is constantly blurred. We remember that Della Porta had consciously avoided an explanation of these phenomena by *causae occultae* that were transmitted by some unknown and possibly demonic force. In the *Coelestis physiognomia* he had maintained that birthmarks were the sign of an excess of one of the bodily humours and that the same physical disposition was found in the stars.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ *Scriptores Physiognomiae Veteres*, 501–508.

⁵⁰ Suetonius (1958) 94 (= *Divus Augustus* 80)

⁵¹ Coel V, Proem: "Suetonius de Augusto memorat, fuisse corpore maculoso, dispersis per pectus, atque alvum genitivis notis in modum et ordinem, ac numerum stellarum coelestis ursae."

⁵² See for instance, Coel V, 10, 11.

⁵³ Coel V, proem 309, 23–30: "Ma bisogna che le macchie, che somigliano alle costellazioni delle stelle, corrispondano co'l numero ad esse stelle le quali, quando saranno chiare, belle e ben fatte, significaranno gloria grande, non interrotta e con felice esito; ma se v'appariranno piccoli vestigii, sarà tanto minore; se non saranno belle, significaranno una certa inequalità di fortuna e molte cose averse e non di pari successo e secondo le parti del corpo, hanno gli effetti più evidenti."

⁵⁴ Coel I, 6, 199 17–19.

The ancient astrologers called these spots ‘second stars’ that are impressed by [their] superiors, and that they teach us how they can be held in check by our reasoning and by our prudence; even so, they cannot inexorably impose themselves upon our morals, but [can do so] only with our consent and more out of a propensity [of ours] to evil that arises out of [our] blood and physical spirits.⁵⁵

Della Porta was all too well aware that when he was trying to establish a link between celestial signs and the birthmarks inscribed onto the human body he was skating on thin ice. In the passage cited above, he admits that there is a connection between the two systems, but he hastens to downplay the significance of these influences by limiting them to the physical plane, thus overtly adhering to the more orthodox claim that the stars influence but do not direct a person’s freedom of choice, because they are able to influence only the body not the mind. It is interesting to observe that the ecclesiastical ban on astrology indirectly contributed to the development of physical explanations for mental phenomena. Again Della Porta’s wording is characteristic: he calls the birthmarks *stellas secundas* (second stars); a term that was used for people with prophetic and other supernatural skills.⁵⁶

The idea that one could use moles for divination because they reproduce astrological signs is perhaps less perplexing for modern readers when we consider the representations of the zodiac during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance (fig. 2). In short, the idea that birthmarks are related to celestial signs was deeply rooted in the European tradition. Engraved into the human body, the moles were thus seen to *indicate* and, at the same time, to *cause* a certain mental and habitual predisposition in an individual. Ficino had also,

⁵⁵ Coel V, Proem 153: “Veteres Astrologi has maculas secundas stellas vocabant, à superioribus impressas, praemonstrantes, qua ratione, prudentiaque reprimi queant, nulla tamen iniuncta nostris moribus necessitate, sed lubentia potius quaedam et proclivitate ex sanguine et spiritibus physicis.”

⁵⁶ See Pomponazzi (1556) 163–164: “Veluti enim corpora coelestia in quiete sive somno infigere possunt in humana anima haec simulacra, sic et in vigilia: et maxime si tales homines sint a curis humanis absoluti et a perturbationibus mentis: et tunc prophetare multa possunt vera: sunt enim tales homines valde similes animalibus quae praesentunt futura, ut gallus dicit mutationes temporum, corvus clades futuras [...] dicuntur enim talia stellae secundae, per quas certius possumus iudicare quam per stellas coeli: sunt enim haec magis proxima effectibus futuris.”

albeit reluctantly, acknowledged the healing astrological power of gemstones that carried the corresponding signs of planetary gods. Even if Della Porta's (published) *Physiognomia humana* apparently tends to belittle the significance of these images, most probably in the face of ecclesiastical persecution, we nevertheless find in the text references to Melampus and to other relevant works accompanying the illustration shown above. The publication of Della Porta's atlas of birthmarks, the *Metoposcopia*, was thus blocked by the same bans.⁵⁷

Moreover, divination by signs in the face was not restricted to scattered and obscure scholarly treatises. As late as the twentieth century it used to be a popular folk belief in many parts of Europe that birthmarks were remnants or traces of the mother's unfulfilled cravings while pregnant. A mark of desire was thus impressed upon the foetus sealing its future destiny,⁵⁸ a concise reference to a discourse on the powers of sensual female yearning that neatly interlocks with the seemingly more advanced theories on universal love in Renaissance Neoplatonism.⁵⁹ In his penetrating etymological analysis, Jaberg has shown that the term *naevis* refers to the root *gignere*, "to give birth", and has explored the semantic field of the term birthmark, gravitating on the notion of "irremovable sign."⁶⁰ A tenacious credence, indeed, since in one of his many accounts on German folk beliefs Bächthold-Stäubli tells us that to his day (1935) persons with a birthmark on the eyebrow were believed to be in danger of finishing their lives on the gallows whereas people with a mole on their ear were thought likely to die by drowning. Since these marks were seen not only as omens, but also as causes, midwives sought (not surprisingly) to remedy the situation by removing the signs by various means, such as smearing bits of the placenta on them, or putting some drops of menstrual blood on the affected parts of the baby's skin, or by placing a dead man's hand on them. It goes without saying that these practices and substances were intimately connected with illicit magic.⁶¹ By proposing in his *Magia naturalis* the application of acid or similar substances to the affected

⁵⁷ On Ficino, see Copenhaver (1984); for Della Porta's (difficult) relationship with church authorities and the general context, see Eamon (1994) 201–210.

⁵⁸ See Jaberg (1956/7) 311–313.

⁵⁹ On this topic in general see Pancino (1996) *passim*, esp. pp. 20–21; 53 and 80, for a description of the importance of Ficino's accounts for sixteenth-century physicians.

⁶⁰ Jaberg (1956/7) 317–318.

⁶¹ See Bächthold Stäubli (1935) cols. 703–704.

parts of the skin, Della Porta is seemingly more rational and offers apparently more effective cures for the removal of birthmarks. In this manner the erudite male Renaissance *magus* transfers the age-old superstitious practices of midwives onto an outwardly more rational technique of surgical intervention.⁶² The marks described by Della Porta to assess the social, moral, and biological inclinations of his contemporaries can be removed at random with aggressive chemical substances such as *aqua fortis* or nitric acid, described in the *Magia naturalis*.⁶³ There is some irony in the situation, however, since it was commonly known that birthmarks were generally irremovable, which obviously enhanced their semantic importance.⁶⁴ The ability to do the unlikely, that is, to remove the fatal stains, reinforces the image of the male magus who arrogates to himself power over the body and thereby enacts and commands a fantasy of self determination or human autonomy that went well beyond a merely skin-deep, cosmetic technique.

In this manner, birthmarks were believed to be removable, an idea that, on a very popular level, allowed for a new definition of the transient borders of the human individual. This idea finds a strange but characteristic reverberation in the seventeenth-century vogue for beauty spots. These *nei artificiali* or “artificial birthmarks” were used to communicate temporal emotional conditions, such as lust, love, but also a tooth ache.⁶⁵ Temporary marks on the face that served as fashionable talismans, these artificial moles referred back to irremovable signs of divine election or damnation; the signs on the human body were perceived as fragments of a universal language governing all of creation. Della Porta’s ideas about the significance of, and cures for unwanted birthmarks can thus be seen as an illustration of the idea that

⁶² For Della Porta’s claims about the rationality of magic, see Eamon (1994) 206–209. For a similar practice, snatched from witches, the drinking of blood, see *De vita* II, 11, 196–99 and chapter one.

⁶³ *Magia* (1611) IX, 20: 413.

⁶⁴ Jaberg (1956/7) 307: “Folk medicine knows numerous remedies against freckles, yet only a few (for the most part of very bizarre kind) against birthmarks, whose removal causes no small difficulty even to modern surgeons. Its very durability confers a mysterious character on the birthmark and (along with its individuality conditioned shape, colour, and location) contributes in large measure to the role which it plays in popular belief.”

⁶⁵ Jaberg (1956/7) 332–338. On the meaning of individual beauty spots, see 334. In her interesting analysis of the function of make-up in Seventeenth century English drama Pollard (2001) 189 and 192, shows how facial cosmetics were depicted on stage not only as invasive poisons, but also as a permanent paint, a kind of tattoo.

surgical intervention into the body could alter a person's mental predispositions, inclinations, and habits.

When viewed from the perspective of Della Porta's physiognomics, we can see how a particular intervention into the human body, that is, the removal of birthmarks, moved away from the domain of popular medicine and entered into the new and systematic realm of scientific inquiry. Conceived as a method for medical diagnosis of physiological as well as of mental defects, this system relied on reading the universal signs inscribed into the external appearances of all bodies, whether human, animal, plant, or even celestial. This art also emphasised the changing and changeable nature of bodies, which were deemed to be susceptible to substantial alteration through surgical interventions. Altering the shape of the body thus became a substantial tool for skilfully changing not only the surface but the essence of a human being. Aristotelian philosophers of the Renaissance had precluded the possibility of such a substantial change wrought in an object by human art, limiting it strictly to an alteration on the surface:⁶⁶ but Neoplatonic magic allowed the phantasm of such omnipotence to become thinkable and thereby significantly shifted the Early Modern outlook on the human being.

⁶⁶ For a characteristic quote, Vimercato (1596) fols. 137v–138r: “Natura autem totam intrinsecus materiam movet, & format, quamquam figuram & conformationem partibus organicis extrinsecus haec aliter, ac ars stirpibus, & animalibus duntaxat adhibeat [...] Sed [sc. ars] in eam, quam fecit, aut ad opus praeparavit, formam extrinsecus tantum immitit, ac in superficie agit, non in partibus internis. Verum natura per totam materiam sese insinuat, et in eam totam agit, eamque totam informat, ut in carne et ossibus [...]” See also Thomas Aquinas (1961) 3, 104, §2792: 157: “In fabricatione autem alicuius statucae non abiicitur aliqua forma substantialis, sed fit transmutatio solum secundum figuram, quae est accidens; manet enim forma cupri, vel alicuius huiusmodi.” See Copenhaver (1984) 546 and *De vita*, 445.

EPILOGUE

DECONSTRUCTING THE RENAISSANCE MAGUS

Disguise, I see thou art a wickedness
Wherein the pregnant enemy does much.
How easy is it for the proper false
In women's waxen hearts to set their forms!
(*Twelfth Night* II, 27–30)

In this epilogue I shall propose a revised representation of the romanticized magus, the prototype of the universally-learned man many of us have encountered in the writings of Frances Yates or Ioan P. Couliano.¹ One example of such a romanticized figure might well be taken from Yates when she says that:

the dignity of Man as Magus, as operator, having within him the divine creative power, and the magical power of marrying earth to heaven rests on the Gnostic heresy that man was once, and can become again, through his intellect, the reflection of the divine *mens*, a divine being. The final revaluation of the magician in the Renaissance is that he becomes a divine man. Once again one is reminded of a parallel with the creative artist for this was the epithet which their contemporaries awarded to the great, of whom they often speak as the divine Raphael, or the divine Leonardo [...].²

Instead of elaborating this overly positive portrait of the Renaissance magus as here rendered by Frances Yates in her distinctively concise

¹ This epilogue is the revised and expanded version of a paper delivered in June 2003 at the conference “Ritual and Remembrance in the Early Modern World” held at the University of Aberdeen. I wish to thank the *Österreichische Forschungsgemeinschaft* for a travel grant that allowed me to participate at the conference. Some of the material from this presentation was previously published in Kōdera (2009a). Couliano (1987) 89–90 describes the magus as the universal manipulator of the unconscious.

² Yates (1964) 111.

and appealing way, this epilogue will instead describe one hitherto neglected but central aspect of Renaissance magical theory, namely the idea that in “marrying heaven and earth” the magus (as opposed to the sorcerer and the necromancer) was actually acting as a go-between, or panderer.

The Renaissance magus’ central claim to legitimate power was that his magic was non-demonic. He purported to be able to manipulate all of Creation by influencing the natural affinities between superior and inferior aspects of nature which he conceived as being alive and sentient. As we have seen in the preceding chapters, this Neoplatonic universe is imagined as a strictly hierarchical organisation; as the spiritual is superior to the corporeal, so man is superior to woman. Yet, the intellectual and divine realm is connected to the world of bodies by the intermediating agent of a third term, that is, soul or love. As we shall see, this is a place occupied by a particular kind of matchmaker, the Renaissance magus. As we saw in chapters four and five above, go-betweens (as for instance the *spiritus*) serve as agents of communication and are present at every level of the universal hierarchy. Unlike Aristotle’s detached unmoved mover, these agents or messengers mobilize the static hierarchy of the Neoplatonic Universe. As a result, these mediators have paradoxical (and sometimes uncanny) qualities which allow them to bridge the gap between the opposed, static principles. Ficino provides us with an impressive description of the macrocosmic animal where male and female aspects mingle in a harmonious and well coordinated way.

By means of this attraction the wise men of India testify, [that] the world binds itself together; and they say that the world is an animal which is masculine and at the same time feminine throughout and that it links everywhere with itself (*coire*) in the mutual love of its members and holds together; [...]. Because of this, Orpheus calls the very nature of the cosmos and the cosmic Jupiter masculine and feminine. So eager is the world everywhere for the mutual union of its parts, that the masculine sex is truly everywhere mingled with the feminine. The order of signs testifies from up there, where successively in that unending order the preceding one is masculine, the subsequent one, feminine.³

³ *De vita* III, 26: 386/7: “Quo quidem attractu secum ipso devinciri mundum testantur sapientes Indi, dicentes mundum esse animal passim masculum simul atque feminam,

Cosmology, anthropology, and sexual relationships are clearly inextricably bound to each other: each confirming the other, a change in one aspect causing a concomitant alteration in all the other parts of Creation.⁴ In his commentary on Plotinus, Ficino describes these workings of nature: “the procreative life of this world does neither act according to, as it were, practical choices, nor is there any [conscious] notice in its actions; it rather acts as the sun and as fire; in ourselves, the vegetative soul acts in the same way.”⁵

On earth, the magus is able to imitate the virtues of the world soul described in the passage above: by cunningly manipulating the universal affinities between higher and lower things, the magus produces wonderful

mutuoque membrorum suorum amore ubique coire secum, atque ita constare; [...]. Hinc Orpheus naturam ipsam mundi Iovemque mundanum marem appellat et feminam. Usque adeo mutui partium suarum coniugii ubique mundus est avidus. Esse vero masculinum sexum feminino ubique commixtum, declarat illinc quidem ordo signorum, ubi praecedens perpetuo deinceps ordine masculinum est, subsequens femininum.” The entire passage is very influential in sixteenth-century theories on magic and, for instance, is plagiarized in Della Porta (1611) I, 9: 23. See also *De vita*, Introduction 29–30: “whereas in his earlier work, the cosmic love, like the human love was a spiritualised homosexual one of the like-for-like, in the *De vita* he has made the love one of heterosexual opposites which lasciviously attract. [...] A notion which one misses in the *De vita*, if one comes to it fresh from Ficino’s *Commentary* on the *Symposium*, is his famous rediscovery, the doctrine of “platonic love,” the idea that affection between two friends, — a non-orgasmic love of the sort he attributes to Plato [...] can be spiritually uplifting.” On the history of the analogy between microcosm and macrocosm in Ficino, see also the *De vita*, Introduction 40.

⁴For a similar position see, for example, Vasoli (1980) 55: “Par là je n’entends nullement que l’utilisation d’un langage analogique et de ses référents de caractère symbolique appartienne exclusivement à la magie (et en particulier à la magie docte, consciente des fonctions rhétoriques du langage). Car, au contraire, un tel procédé me semble particulier et spécifique à un champ de discours plus vaste, celui qui appartient à toute formulation de type métaphysique. La fin des analogies de caractère animiste et anthropomorphique, lié au primat de la philosophie platonicienne et aristotélicienne et à l’orientation magique des techniques opératoires, n’a pas, en effet, empêché qu’une autre métaphore et un important ensemble d’analogies aient fourni les instruments linguistiques pour construire une nouvelle image du Monde.” Védrine (1986) 253 comes to similar conclusions: “Pour [Della] Porta, la frontière entre la démonstration et l’affirmation reste floue parce que sa pensée joue sur l’analogie, la sur-détermination, la métaphore. [...] Son imagination est dynamique, mobile, aérienne, toujours à cheval entre le cosmos et la terre. Les concepts se chevauchent et se complètent. Curiosité, secret et merveilles s’entrelacent.” See also Ficino (1989) 48–49.

⁵*Enneads*, IV, 4, 36, in Plotinus (1559) 220v: “genitalis haec mundi vita non electione quasi practica, nec actionis suae animadversione in haec; sed ita naturaliter agit, ut Sol & ignis; imo ut & in nobis anima vegetalis.”

things and at the same time has the ability to influence other people's minds. Like *spiritus*, he is a go-between, mediating between heaven and earth. Again in the *De vita*, Ficino says that "the magus will subject earthly things to celestial, lower things everywhere to higher, just as particular women everywhere are subjected to their own men for impregnation, as iron to a magnet to get magnetized."⁶ By drawing on universal cosmic affinities, the magus will act thus as a matchmaker, selecting the appropriate mates that will, in due time and by means of the natural sympathy they experience for each other, produce the appropriate offspring. In this manner Ficino establishes a static and rigid order in which the male and female principle, matter and form, already constitute an androgynous animal. The possibility that these relationships might be terse, difficult, or fictitious seems completely left out in this account of cosmic harmony between the sexes: the female and subordinate aspect of Creation is obediently impregnated and domesticated by its male counterpart. Such phantasms of male omnipotence were of course not new: in her study of early medieval magic, Valery Flint shows that Ham, the Biblical arch-magician who rescued the ante-deluvial arts, was imagined as a frightful mixture of sexual prowess and recondite learning arrogantly put to selfish ends. Ham thus became the anti-type of the ideal Christian priest.⁷

Such exaggerated phantasms of magical power may also be viewed as attempts at covering or concealing deep ruptures in a male discourse. Ficino's description of cosmic order in the passage above actually testifies to a genuine (male) anxiety that the body (and women) remain totally uncontrollable.⁸

⁶ *De vita* III, 26: 386–387: "Subicit Magus terrena coelestibus, immo inferiora passim superioribus, ut proprias ubique feminas suis maribus fecundandas, ut ferrum magneti trahendum."

⁷ Flint (1991) 333–338 esp. 336.

⁸ Butler (1993) 26–27 has the following psychoanalytical commentary on the origins of fantasy that seems to be a meaningful description of the vexed situation of the Renaissance magus: "Significantly, fantasy emerges as a scene in which the recovery installs and distributes the 'subject' in the position of both desire and its object. In this way, fantasy seeks to override the distinctions between a desiring subject and its object by staging an imaginary scene in which both positions are appropriated and inhabited by the subject. [...] The idea of a subject which opposes the object of this desire, which encounters that object in its alterity, is itself the effect of this phantasmatic scene. The subject not only becomes individuated through loss. This loss is never fully encountered precisely because fantasy emerges to take up the position of the lost object, to expand the imaginary circuit of the subject to inhabit and incorporate that loss. The subject thus emerges in its individuation, as a consequence of separation, as a scene, in the mode of displacement. Precisely because that separation is

This fear is openly expressed and acknowledged in the idea that the descent of soul into the physical world is a disastrous event that has to be compensated by an ascent toward the realm of the divine ideas. As we have seen in chapter three, Ficino maintains that the foetus is a well disposed snare for soul.⁹ In such ways, Ficino provides us with a theory of how the body, through some intermediaries, is able to attract soul, even to draw celestial beings down to earth who become trapped by a well shaped, seductive, and treacherous body. It is in such contexts that Ficino explains how bodies get animated and become human, and what happens in the process of procreation. It is significant that childbirth and magic are here addressed on the same level. In this Neoplatonic cosmology, bodies are artful traps for souls distracted from their proper goal, that is, from contemplating the divinity. Construing and setting up physical snares that would catch souls and distract them from their proper goal was exactly the business of the Renaissance magus who thus imitates the allurements of nature.¹⁰

In his *Apologia*, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola maintains that rather than necromancers, the magi who had travelled to adore Christ were in fact wise men.¹¹ By their presence, the magi acknowledged the birth of the man-god Jesus.¹² The connection with surveillance of childbirth does not end here:

a non-thematizable trauma, it initiates a subject in its separateness only through a fantasy which scatters that subject, simultaneously extending the domain of its auto-eroticism. Insofar as fantasy orchestrates the subject's love affair *with itself*, recovering and negating the alterity of the lost object through installing is as a further instance of the subject, fantasy delimits an auto-erotic project of incorporation." Paraphrasing Laplanche (1986), Butler (1993) 266, n. 7 says that: "Fantasy in this sense is to be understood not as an activity of an already formed subject, but the staging and dispersion of the subject into a variety of identificatory positions. The scene of fantasy is derived from the impossibility of a return to primary satisfactions; hence fantasy rehearses that desire and its impossibility, and remains structured by a prohibition upon the possibility of a return to origins."

⁹ *De vita* III, 26: 384–385.

¹⁰ Hence it is no wonder that Ficino's views on the body are seemingly more positive in the *De vita* than in the *De amore*, see Ficino (1989) 29–30.

¹¹ For the medieval precedents of this idea, for instance see for instance Rabanus Maurus, *Commentaria in Matheum*, PL vol. 107: 756. Flint (1991) 367–75, esp. 370, argues that the medieval rehabilitation of the Magi goes in tandem with the recovery of astrology in learned circles. In the popular imaginary, the Magi thus quickly became healers, and their names therefore frequently appear on amulets.

¹² Pico (1557) I: 170: "Quod si hoc nomen Magi ita abhorremus, utique neque Evangelium patienter audiemus dicens: quod Magi venerunt ab oriente, adoraturi Christum.

according Pico, the Magi know how to “marry” the lower world to the higher realm. This is a procedure that is essential to all magic for, in Pico’s words, “natural magic is nothing else but to wed together the world.”¹³ The otherwise rare Latin term *maritari* (used in the post-Augustan era) means “to wed together, to impregnate, to be coupled” and is also used in agriculture in connexion with plants and animals. The term *maritare* thus delineates sexual and procreative activities in a very general way and can therefore be applied meaningfully to the universal scope that the Renaissance magi arrogate for themselves: their wisdom results in the selection of appropriate sexual partners. This kind of male matchmaking has an important textual predecessor in Plotinus:

For many things are drawn and enchanted without anyone else’s magical contrivance: and the true magic is the “Love” and also the “Strife” in the All [see Empedocles, Fr. 17, 19–20]. And this is the primary wizard and enchanter, from observing how men came to use his philtres and spells on each other. Because love is natural to men and because the things that cause love have a force of attraction to each other, there has come into existence the helpful power of a magical art of love used by those who apply by contact to different people different magical substances designed to draw them together and with a love-force implanted in them: they join one soul to another, as if they were training together plants set at intervals. They also use figures with power in them, and by putting themselves into the right postures they quietly bring down powers upon themselves, since they are within one universe and work upon one universe.¹⁴

Non erant illi Magi Necromantes, & cum daemonibus confoedarati, qui hostem daemonum, immo dominum & de eis mox triumphanturum venerunt adorare, sed erant viri sapientes, coelestium & terrenarum scientia edocti, qui ipsam patris sapientiam in humano corpore factam visibilem coluerunt & venerati sunt.” See also *De vita* 396–398 (*Apologia*).

¹³ Pico (1557) I: 171 (= Pico (1942) 152: “Quod magiam operari non est aliud quam *maritare mundum*.” See also Pico (1557) I: 121; *De vita* 396 (*Apologia*): “Quae sane facultas [sc. *magiae naturalis*] videtur ingeniis legitime utentibus, [...] terrenis coelestia copulans.”

¹⁴ *Enneads* IV, 4, 40, trans. Armstrong (1984) IV: 261–263; Ficino’s translation in Plotinus (1559) fol. 222r ab reads: “Et enim nullo alio machinante multa ritu quodam magico attrahuntur: veraque vis *magicae* est amicitia in universo, rursusque discordia. Ac primus *venenificus* (ut ita dixerim) incantator, est eiusmodi: quae homines observantes, eius inter

It has often been observed that this passage contains the basic pre-suppositions on magic that caused Ficino to write the third book of the *De vita* (see chapter three), which was meant to be a commentary on Plotinus. Heterosexual anthropomorphic sexual attraction is here projected onto the entire cosmos, to affective relationships that are imagined as being constitutive for all beings. The magus is here envisioned as an expert in managing these natural affective relationships, just as a gardener trains the growth of plants or graft trees. From the perspective of this formative Plotinian account of magic, Pico was therefore quite precise in choosing the term *maritare* to describe the activity of the magus.

An often quoted passage from Ficino's *De amore* VI, 10 makes the same points about the erotic nature of magic practice — a veritable *ars amatoria* — and the magician's ability to manipulate cosmic affinities like a peasant manipulates plants:¹⁵

But why do we think that Love is a *magician*? Because the whole power of magic consists in love. The work of the magician is the attraction of one thing by another because of a certain affinity of nature. But the parts of this world, like the parts of a single animal, all deriving from a single author, are joined to each other by the communion of a single nature. [...] From this common relationship is born a common love; from love, a common attraction, and this is the true magic. [...] In human affairs also, 'his own pleasure draws each'. Therefore, the works of magic are the works of nature, but art is its handmaiden.¹⁶

se philtris veneficiisque utuntur: nempe ex eo quod pleraque se mutuo naturaliter amare facile possunt, inferuntque amorem rebus inter se reciprocum, nata est efficacia *amatoriae artis*, philtris quiusdam fascinationibusque utentis; dum tangendas adhibent naturas aliis alias conciliatores inisumque habentes amorem; animamque alteri alteram ita *copulant*, quemadmodum qui distantes inter se plantas una coniungunt. Praeterea figuris utuntur, vires certas habentibus: se quoque ipsos ratione quadam propria figurantes clam ad se vires surripiunt, eoque facilius quod in uno sunt, trahuntque in unum." (my italics). For an exposition of these ideas from a slightly different perspective, see Iamblichus (1965) IV, 12: 195–197.

¹⁵ For further discussion of this idea see Zambelli (1991) 43–46, and 313–333. For other passages where *amor* is the *vinculum et nodus mundi*, see for example *De amore*, III, 3 and V, 13.

¹⁶ Trans. Ficino (1985) 127; *De amore*, VI, 10: 220–221. "Sed cur *magum* unum putamus amorem? Quia tota vis magice in amore consistit. Magice opus est attractio rei

The universally learned magus is able to cunningly manipulate the intricate system of universal affinities by the special command he has over sexual attraction and desire. As we saw in chapter three, Ficino is somehow reluctant to teach the more practical aspects of love magic, refusing to teach philtres or love potions. Nevertheless, even in the more practical approaches to that art the *topos* of marriage in magic is remarkably persistent: later in the sixteenth century, Agrippa von Nettesheim's *De occulta philosophia* (1510, enlarged 1533), epitomizes these ideas by maintaining that the faculty of magic "produces such admirable effects by unifying the virtues or powers of things by applying them to each other, and to their universal affinities, by copulating and marrying the lower "which is "the most perfect and highest science and the absolute perfection of the noblest philosophy."¹⁷ In his *Magia naturalis* (1559, 1588) Giambattista Della Porta agrees with that view and emphasizes the magicians' privileged understanding of the arcane mysteries "of the female genital parts of nature" (*naturae gremio*).¹⁸

Agrippa seeks to prove the powers of the magician by saying that he is an expert in trafficking with those mental images, the *phantasmata* that affect the shape of the future child whilst it is still a foetus in the womb. This distinguishing skill of the Renaissance magus consists in his ability to instil love in women, whom Agrippa describes as passive individuals particularly susceptible to those mental images created by the faculty of phantasy, images

unius ab alia ex quadam cognatione naturae. Mundi autem huius partes ceu animalis unius membra, omnes ab uno auctore pendentes, unius naturae communione invicem copulantur. [...] Ex communis cogantione communis innascitur amor, ex amore, communis attractio. Haec autem vera magica est. [...] In rebus etiam humanis etiam *trahit sua quemque voluptas* [Virgil, *Bucolica* II, 65]. Magice igitur opera naturae opera sunt, ars vero ministra." For a similar passage on love as unificatory daemon, see Ficino's excerpts from Proclus, OO 1911.

¹⁷ Agrippa (1991) I, 2: 86: "Magica facultas, [...] quomodo res inter se differunt et quomodo conveniunt nos instruit, hinc mirabiles effectus suos producens, uniendo virtutes rerum per applicationem earum ad invicem et ad sua passa congruentia, inferiora superiorum dotibus ac virtutibus passim copulans atque maritans: haec perfectissima summaque scientia, haec altior sanctorumque philosophia, haec denique totius nobilissimae philosophiae absoluta consummatio."

¹⁸ Della Porta (1650) I, 6: 13: "Haec noscens Magus, ut agricola ulmos vitibus, sic ipse coelo terram vel, ut apertius loquar, inferna haec superiorum dotibus mirificisque virtutibus maritat, & inde arcana Naturae gremio penitus latentia, veluti minister in publicum promit, quaequae assidua exploratione vera noverit, ut omnes cunctorum artificii amore flagrant, sui contentur omnipotentiam laudare & venerari."

that can be cunningly manipulated by the art of the big matchmaker. But that is not all: due to their material qualities, these *phantasmata* also have a decisive influence on the shape of the future child in pregnant women, as one be may become infected by serious diseases through a malignant mental image.¹⁹ (See chapter two on the mirror.)

In this way Agrippa, like Ficino before him, establishes a comprehensive discourse that accounts not only for seemingly individual sexual preferences but also for action at a distance, contagion, and the transmission of diseases.²⁰ According to Agrippa, the entire art of magic consists in the establishment of emotional links or snares, to draw one thing to the other (*trahens unum ad aliud*).²¹ The magus' claim to dominate human sexuality legitimises his power over an ordered and sentient universe. Vice versa, the magus is able to insert himself into the universal celestial hierarchy.²²

Far from being a self-determined liberating or alternative outlook on the physical world, the magus is pulling the strings inside a vigorously

¹⁹ Agrippa (1991) I, 64: 224: "Quantum autem ipas imaginatio possit in animam nemo ignorat; est enim substantiae animae vicinior quam sensus, quare etiam plus agit in animam quam sensus: sic mulieres per <introducitas certis magicis artificiis> fortes imaginationes, somnia, suggestiones saepissime ligantur in amorem alicuius arcissimum." Agrippa (1991) I, 65: 225: "Passiones animae quae phantasiam sequuntur, quando vehementissimae sunt, non solum possunt immutare corpus proprium, verumetiam possunt transcendere ad operandum in corpus alienum ita quod admirabiles quaedam impressiones inde producuntur in elementis et rebus extrinsecis atque etiam morbos quosdam animi sive corporis sic possunt auferre vel inferre. [...] Sic praegnantis mulieribus cupiditas in corpus alienum agit, quando inficit foetum in alvo rei desideratae nota [...] sic multae monstrosae generationes prodeunt ex monstrosis praegnantium imaginationibus [...]" See also *Theologia* XIII, 1: II, 196–197 and *De vita* III, 16: 324 and Kodera (2009b).

²⁰ See *De vita* III, 21: 360.

²¹ Agrippa (1991) II, 60: 394.

²² Agrippa (1991) I, 68: 230–231: "Simili modo homo aliquis, cum per sui animi affectiones, tum etiam per rerum naturalium ritas adhibitiones coelestibus dotibus opportune expositus, si in virtute solari fortior evaserit, ligat, et trahit inferiorem in admirationem (et oboedientiam)." See also *De vita* III, 14–15: 309–321. Agrippa (1991) II, 60: 395: "Hinc magus per illas operatur utitur invocatione astuta superiorum, verbis mysteriosis et locutione quadam ingeniosa, trahens unum ad aliud, vi tamen naturali per quandam convenientiam inter illas mutuam, qua res sponte sequuntur sive quandoque trahuntur invite. [...] idcirco magus invocans per verba operatur per vires naturae aptas, quaedam amore unius ad aliam ducendo aut trahendo propter sequelam unius, aut repellendo propter odium unius ad aliam ex rerum contrarietate et differentia virtutumque multitudine, quae licet sint contrariae aut differentes, perficiunt, tamen partem unam."

ordered creation in which the female and passive bodies are irredeemably the male's inferiors. Time and again the power of the magus over the body becomes manifest in his control of (preferably female) sexuality. A passage from Della Porta's *Magia naturalis* shows how predictable these instructions of the supposedly arcane and educated sympathetic magic actually were.

For example, if you would make a woman fruitful, you must consider with yourself the most fertile living creatures, and among the rest a Hare, a Cony, or a Mouse; for a Hare is big even after she has brought forth, she genders every month, and brings not forth all her young all at once, but now and then one upon sundry days, and presently goes to Buck again, and so conceives while she gives suck, and carries in her womb at once, one young that is ripe, another that has no hair, and a third that is but lately conceived. Again, you must consider the parts and Members where that property lies, and minister them to your patient. As, to make a woman fruitful, you must give her the womb and Curd of a Hare, and to the man, the Stones of a Hare.²³

This passage again reveals the nexus between sympathetic magic, fertility, childbirth, and an expert knowledge of embryology on the part of the male magus. It is not without irony that fifteenth and sixteenth-century demonologists could cite Thomas Aquinas' statement that devils and demons were experts in handling the uterus; they, too, obviously perceived themselves as perfect midwives.²⁴ The fact that control over female sexuality is the fundamental motivation for Renaissance magic becomes apparent in one of the

²³ Della Porta (1650) I, 12: 31: "Ut si mulierem foecundam reddere destinaveris, foecundissima animalia considerato, & inter caetera leporem, cuniculum, & murem. Lepus enim superfoetat, dum utero gerit, & singulis mensibus generat, & foetus aedit non universos, interpositis enim diebus, quod res tulerit, peragit, & a partu continuo repetit coitum, & lactans adhuc concipit foetum, & in utero aliud pilis vestitum, aliud implume, aliud inchoatum gerens pariter. Considerabis praeterea eas partes & membra, ubi affectio illa residet, ut ea propinemus indigenti, ob id leporum testiculos, vulvas, coagulum dabis foeminus, & viris, sed foeminis de foemineo, & masculis de masculino ad conceptum in mulieribus excitandum."

²⁴ Stephens (2002) 71, with references.

more graphic examples from Della Porta's *Magia Naturalis* where he demonstrates magical prowess in a naturalistic bent typical for that author:

"Women are made to cast off their clothes and go naked."

To let nothing pass that Jugglers and impostors counterfeit. They set a lamp with characters engraved upon it and filled with Hare's fat. Then they mumble forth some words and light it. When it burns in the middle of women's company, it constrains them all to cast off their clothes, and voluntarily to show themselves naked unto men. They behold all their private parts that otherwise would be covered and the women will never stop dancing as long as the lamp burns. And this was related to me by men of credit. I believe this effect can come from nothing but the Hare's fat, whose force is perhaps venomous and penetrates the brain and moves them to this madness.²⁵

In short, Della Porta tells us that he knows how to make women strip in male company and thus demonstrates the subordination of the female body to a male, divine art. Even if recounted with tongue-in-cheek disapproval, this example epitomizes what Renaissance magic is founded on: a fantasy of complete control over the female body. Again, it is hare's fat that lends a scientific veneer to the recipe and allows Della Porta to distance himself from the uncultured practitioners who wrongly believe in demonic intervention. More importantly, the Renaissance magus' claim to omnipotence may, on the other hand, also be viewed as an indirect acknowledgement of the fear of universal impotence in the double sense of the word: hence the idea of the magus as a figure who embodies a particular preoccupation with order and therefore a concomitant fear of totally losing control, both over women's bodies as well as over the natural world in general.

²⁵ Della Porta (1650) XX, 8: 666–667: "*Ut foeminae vestes abjiciant, & nudentur: Ut nil reliquam, quod a circulatoribus, & necromanticis simulatur. Apponunt lucernam characteribus insculptam, leporino adipe plenam & quibusdam obmurmuratis verbis quum eam incendunt, & medio mulierum ardet, constringit omnes, ut abiectis vestibus omnia viris sponte ostendant, quae operta tegunt, vident, nec saltare desierint, usque donec ardeat lucerna, quod mihi a fide dignis narratum fuit: consideravi non nisi a leporino adipe effectus posse provenire, cuius fortasse vis letalis quaedam cerebrum penetrans ad eiusmodi dementia concitant.*"

This complex of ideas also refers to another important textual resource: Plato's *Theaetetus*. Ficino translated the *Theaetetus* and was therefore at least to a certain extent aware of Plato's views on midwifery, matchmaking, and childbirth. In a well-known passage in this text, Plato uses these topics as metaphoric descriptors for a particular form of Socratic philosophy (149A – 150 E). Socrates claimed to be the son of a midwife and to practice that art himself, albeit in intellectual not in physical matters.²⁶ What Plato has to say about the skills of midwives and matchmakers offers a fresh perspective on the Renaissance magus (I include in parentheses key phrases of Ficino's Latin translation).

For you know that none of [the midwives who] attend other women while she is still capable of conceiving and bearing but only those who do so who have become too old to bear. [...] Now it would seem that [Artemis] did not allow barren women to be midwives, because human nature is too weak to acquire an art which deals with matters of which it has no experience, (*quoniam natura imbecilor est ad artes earum rerum, quas nunquam experta est*) but she gave the office to those who on account of age were not bearing children [...]. Is it not, then also likely and even necessary, that midwives should know better than anyone else who are pregnant and who are not [...]. The midwives, by means of drugs and incantations (*medelis et incantationibus*), are able to arouse the pangs of labour, and, if they wish, to make them milder, and to cause those to bear who have difficulty in bearing; and they cause abortions if they think them desirable. [...] they are the most skilful matchmakers, since they are wise in knowing what union of man and woman will produce the best possible children (*pronubae in conficiendis coniugis aptissimae sunt, quippe qua optimae callent, quam cui iugare ad generosae prolis procreationem oporteat*). [...] be assured that they are prouder of this than of their skill in cutting the umbilical cord. [...] Do you think the knowledge of what soil is best for each plant or seed belongs to the same art as the tending and harvesting of the fruits of the earth, or to another?

²⁶ On this passage in general, see Guthrie (1962–1981) III: 444–445.

[...] And in the case of a woman, [...] there is one art for the sowing and another for the harvesting. [...] But because there is a wrongful and unscientific (*adikon te kai atechnon*) way of bringing men and women together, which is called pandering, the midwives, since they are women of dignity and worth, avoid matchmaking, through fear of falling under the charge of pandering (*sed propter iniustam absurdamque maris et foemine coniunctionem cui lenocinium nomen est, conciliandi matrimonii officium fugiunt obstetrices castae*). And yet, the true midwife is the only proper matchmaker (*siquidem legitimis obstetricibus solis convenit recte mares foeminasque iugare*). [...] but mine differs from theirs in being practised upon men, not women, and in tending their souls in labour, not their bodies.²⁷

Through the character of Socrates who speaks these words, Plato is here making quite a few relevant statements that put the Renaissance magus in a rather uncomfortable position: midwives have to be experienced women who have, themselves, given birth, therefore men are clearly inept obstetricians. Due to their (uncanny) practical hands-on knowledge and because of their own experience in giving birth and in human anatomy, midwives are furthermore the only legitimate experts in matchmaking. They also use drugs and enchantments to foster and alleviate birth or abortion, hence they employ techniques which are later appropriated by the Renaissance magus. Even more devastating for the ego of the Renaissance magus is Plato's idea that illegitimate panders not only act unlawfully but also in an unscientific manner, because their art lacks the necessary experience. Moreover, the passage cited above draws a close parallel between fertility in agricultural contexts and midwifery, hence between biological processes in general and human bodies, an idea that was later picked up by Plotinus and by the Renaissance magi.²⁸ Most importantly, however, according to Plato only midwives are experts in matchmaking but they refuse to

²⁷ 149B–150 B trans. Plato (1921) II: 31–35; Ficino's Translation in Plato (1602) 110–111.

²⁸ Pico (1557) 121; Pico (1942) 152: "in mundi recessibus, in naturae gremio, in promptuariis arcanisque Dei latitantia miracula, quasi ipsa sit artifex, promit in publicum: & sicut, agricola ulmos vitibus, ita Magus terram caelo, id est, inferiora superiorum dotibus virtutibusque maritat, quo fit, ut quam illa prodigiosa & noxia, tam haec divina & salutaris appareat." On this passage, see also Zambelli (1991) 142.

become matchmakers because that profession is linked to ill-reputed pimping. And yet, midwives are the only persons who are able to do this job properly. Viewed from the perspective of the *Theaetetus*, the Renaissance magus appears to be a poorly experienced and therefore unscientific imitator of female obstetricians. And so, already in Plato the male philosopher's effort to appropriate a female art is clearly recognisable: the character of Socrates is, after all, seeking to establish his intellectual authority in a male domain, in both thought and speech, and in so doing he is adopting a female pose. To be sure, the Socrates of the *Theaetetus* emphasizes the metaphorical character of his comparison between the brain children whom he helps to see the light of speech in male company and the physical children that midwives help to bring into the world. However, in keeping these realms of bodies and ideas apart, Socrates/Plato establishes a hierarchical relationship between them whereby his activity is superior to that of the women's art.

Unlike Socrates, who wanted control over the noetic realm and to leave the rest to women practitioners, the Renaissance magus seeks to dominate the physical body as well. The discourse on the lawfulness of the right to practice a profession (be it obstetrics or the birth of concepts) is again adapted by the Renaissance magi, but this time in the opposite direction: Socrates had appropriated a male, abstract discourse that mirrored a female practice, midwifery, with the aim of differentiating between the two activities that were directed alternatively to physical bodies or to the cognition of abstract, but true ideas. In contrast to this and by dint of his alleged expert knowledge of the noetic world, the Renaissance magus claimed the rightful possession of a form knowledge that he used for his invasive control of the physical world. It is significant that, in legitimating their profession, Renaissance magi passed the Socratic charges against illegitimate practitioners — not understanding one's business, being unlawful and unscientific — back to those people who were often suspected of necromancy or sorcery, that is, to the very class of persons that included midwives. Even if magi from Ficino to Della Porta disappropriated the arts of their social inferiors, they joined ecclesiastical authorities in a hunt for all those practitioners who did not have the scholarly background that would have given them access to natural magic. For instance, Pico speaks about common magic in derogative terms.²⁹ His claim that necromancers

²⁹ Pico (1557) 121: "illa denique nec artis nec scientiae sibi potest nomen vindicare, haec altissimis plena mysteriis, profundissimam rerum secretissimarum contemplationem, et demum totius naturae cognitionem complectitur." For other, much later quotes

have only an unscientific and potentially harmful way of looking at nature is opposed by a holistic vision aimed at increasing the reputation of the learned magus. This strategy of defamation was necessary in order to cover up the structural affinities between *magia naturalis* and ordinary sorcery, and its inextricable relationship with matchmaking, abortion, influencing the shape of the future child, love spells — in short, with the entire pandering business so pointedly outlined in the *Theaetetus*.

This is one of the typical instances where, by means of ventriloquism or travesty, that is, by speaking on behalf of women, male voices seek to introduce new material into a male discourse. The arrogation of power over the female procreative forces was concomitant with an expropriation of the very persons — healers, and midwives — that the Renaissance magus considered to be unlearned, unsystematic, and hence always in danger of practising illicit, demonic magic. As Socrates/Plato before him, the Renaissance magician is in a paradoxical position: he pretends to be a woman and a man at the same time. He thus becomes the daemonic go-betweens postulated in Neoplatonic cosmology (see chapter four). By pretending to be a woman, he upholds the difference between the sexes. The theory of Renaissance natural magic is thus a good example of a purportedly “soft” male discourse of expropriation modelled on, and yet different from, classical precedents. In this manner, the Renaissance magus cooperated with ecclesiastical authorities in their attempts to make demonic magic appear to be a serious threat.³⁰

The Renaissance Neoplatonic discourse of power is a male strategy for the appropriation of female skills, a stratagem that seeks to expropriate women and, by means of ventriloquism, to speak on their behalf in order to control the creative faculties of the female body. In the *Symposium*, Plato had conceived similar strategies for the male appropriation of allegedly female capacities when he portrayed Socrates as a disciple of Diotima, a woman. Two comments by David Halperin are relevant to this point:

Diotima is a woman because Socratic Philosophy must borrow her femininity in order to leave nothing out and thereby ensure the success of its own procreative enterprises, the continual

in which the magus practices a purportedly more rational form of magic, than for instance harlots and go-betweens with their love charms see Della Porta's *Criptologia* (1610). See Della Porta (1982) ch. 9: 190–192.

³⁰ See Stephens (2002) 12 and 35–37.

reproduction of its universalising discourse in the male culture of Classical Athens.³¹

“Diotima” in short, is a trope for “Socrates”: “she” is a figure by means of which Plato represents the reciprocal and (pro) creative erotic of (male) philosophical intercourse. [...] “Woman” is always a sign of something else — of a spurious sexual “difference” that men (as they see themselves) at once lack and possess. Nothing in herself, “woman” is that pseudo-other who both makes good what men want and exempts men from wanting anything at all; she is an alternate male identity whose constant accessibility to men lends men a fullness and totality that enables them to dispense with womanhood altogether. [...] “woman” and “men” are figures of male speech.³²

The Renaissance magus, a learned and otherwise distinctly *male* go-between, matchmaker or panderer, cements hierarchic relationships between men and women by arrogating to himself complete control over the female procreative body. In this manner, the phantasm of omnipotence linked to natural magic at once covers and exposes a specific anxiety that the feminine creative powers of the world were in fact out of reach for men. This anxiety is aggravated by the system of Renaissance Neoplatonic magic which postulates universal affinities in the entire physical world. In this discourse, the admission of impotence over the uterus signifies a concomitant loss in power over all of creation. Being unable to dominate the bodies of women is indicative of an incapability to understand the workings of nature.

Apart from being always in danger of being mistaken as necromancers, to which extent were Renaissance intellectuals aware of their precarious and somewhat embarrassing position as universal matchmakers or pimps? The idea of universal learnedness in its connection with control over human and cosmic sexuality, so prominent in the apologetic texts we have encountered, has a highly ironical echo in another of Agrippa's books, the *De vanitate omnium scientiarum artiumque declamatio*, basically a polemic highlighting

³¹ Halperin (1990) 288.

³² Halperin (1990) 297–298.

the uselessness of all human achievements and professions.³³ Here, the panderer, the illicit matchmaker, has to be a master in all arts:

And albeit this Arte hath very many professours of bothe kindes, yet it hath made very few perfect masters: and no marauile. For sithe that there are so many sortes of bawdries, as of artes and disciplines, therefore without the knowledge of al thinges it cannot be brought to perfection. I behoueth the that a perfecte and absolute bawde and bawdresse be skilled in all thinges, and not to looke vpon one dicipline alone, as vpon the North starre, but that he vnderstande all, which he professeth that arte, whereupon all other disciplines do attende and wayte. For all sciences do as it were serue bawdrie.³⁴

Even if polemical and derisory in its intentions, Agrippa's statement nevertheless constitutes an indirect acknowledgement not only of the focal role of matchmaking, but also of the idea that universal learnedness is a prerequisite for an ill-reputed profession. Later in the sixteenth century this idea would be repeated in Tommaso Garzoni's *Piazza universale* (1582)³⁵ and, in a humorous vein, in Giordano Bruno's comedy *Candelaio* (also 1582). Even if he continues to use the predominant terminology, Bruno's attitude towards the physical world is significantly more positive than that of most Renaissance Neoplatonists. Bruno acknowledges the reciprocity of the relationship between male and female aspects of creation and not the rigid hierarchical relationship that subordinated female matter to male form. In his treatise *On magic* (1590) he says that:

³³ On that work, see the introduction to Agrippa (1992).

³⁴ Agrippa (1974) 210–211; Agrippa (1531?) ch. 64, *De lenonia* 127–128: “Cumque haec ars plurimos utriusque sexus habeat professores; tamen paucos admodum consummatus dedit magistros: nec mirum, nam licet tot sint lenocinium genera, quot artium & disciplinarum, idcirco absque omnium cognitione perfici non potest: Oportet ergo perfectum & consummatum lenonem lenamve omniscium esse, nec ad unam solam disciplinam, velut ad Arcticam stellam tantum respicere, sed omnes amplecti, eam artem professus, cui ceterae omnes disciplinae serviunt & famulantur: est enim certa quaedam omnium scientiarum servitus lenocinio famulantium.”

³⁵ Garzoni (1996) II, 75: 969: “ella sola [sc. l' arte de' ruffiani e delle ruffiane] sappia quanto san tutti i dotti e tutti gli artisti del mondo uniti insieme.”

like the proper being sown in the proper field, good and evil spirits and the beginnings of consciousness are born from a proper mixture and combination of specific hearts or brains or animal spirits and, conversely, improper mixtures produce disturbances. These results are mutual, certain souls bring certain bodies into existence, and certain bodies bring certain souls into existence, in accordance with what are called the substantial and the specific difference and subsistence.³⁶

In accordance with this reciprocal construction of sexual difference (which we encountered with Leone Ebreo), Bruno also emphasizes that both sexes are equally attracted to each other. His metaphysics of infinity entails a new attitude towards the body as matter that functions as a positive, even as the divine aspect of an infinite cosmos.³⁷ As we have seen in chapter one, according to Bruno matter cannot be represented as a figuration of the female sex and vice versa. This has important political consequences: women are thus not necessarily and irredeemably man's inferior because anthropocentrism and sexual differences are no longer a valid means to describe the infinite universe. It is not without irony that in Bruno's writings the *ruffiana*, the matchmaker or procurer, reappears not in the guise of a learned magus, but in her original role as a female mastermind who seeks to sell sex. In Bruno's *Candelaio*, his first published work, the female match-maker becomes a highly positive figure: Lucia (patron saint of the eyes and of sight) is the mastermind in a complex intrigue. In the *Proprologo* to that play she is praised in the following terms, echoing Neoplatonic discourses as well as new and attentive reading of the description of midwifery by Socrates/Plato:

She's an angel, an ambadress, secretary, counsellor, referee, reporter, seller, weaver, factotum, go-between and guide; a merchant and second-hand dealer in hearts who buys and sells them by weight, size and market value, who ravel, and

³⁶ Bruno (1998) 140; Bruno (2000) 278: "ita ex certa cordis vel cerebri vel spiritus animalis temperie et complexione, intemperie vel perturbatione, quasi in proprio campo et ex proprio semine, boni vel mali spiritus et principia intentionum enascuntur. Unde mutua quaedam consequentia est, ut talia corpora tales animas, tales animae talia corpora in consistentiam producant, iuxta substantialem, quam apellant, et specificam differentiam atque subsistentiam." See also *De rer. princip.* ch. 40 in Bruno (2000) 634.

³⁷ Bruno (1998) 172–173; Gatti (1999) 186, 189 and *passim*.

unravels, brings joy and loss, wounds and heals, discomforts and recomforts, when she brings you either good news or bad, when she brings you hens, plump or lean: she's advocate, intercessor, cloak, remedy, hope, *mediatrix*, road and portal, she who aims Cupid's bow, bearer of the arrow of the god of love, knot that ties, gum that glues, nail that couples, horizon that conjoins the hemispheres.³⁸

It is in this amusing way, paralleling the parody of the androgynes in Aristophanes' speech in the *Symposium*, that the universal matchmaker is given back her sex and her just role: Lucia, a woman who knows her ways around the world, is here decorated with epithets usually pertaining to the saints, Christ and the Virgin Mary. Viewed from this perspective, Bruno has read his Plato more attentively than his Neoplatonic predecessors, the Renaissance magi, whose futile dealings are the target of scathing humour throughout the *Candelaio*. As the sixteenth century draws to its conclusion, the Renaissance magus finds himself at the crossroads: in the immediate future his dwelling will either be on the magical islands of literature (like Prospero in Shakespeare's *Tempest*, whose most important deed consist in matchmaking, marrying his daughter under auspicious political circumstances) or he will enter into the laboratories, those harbingers of a new science that Francis Bacon would point out in his *Advancement of Learning*.

³⁸ Bruno (2000a) 70: Bruno (1582) *Proprologo* (unpaginated), reprinted in Bruno (1999) I, 26–27: “un angela, un' ambasciadora, secretaria, consiglera, referendaria, novellera. venditrice, tessitrice, fattrice, negoziante, & guida. Mercantessa di cuori, & rigatteria, che le compra & vende à peso, misura, & conto. quella ch'intrica, & strica; fa lieto & gramo; inpiaga, & sana; sco[n]forta, e riconforta, quando ti porta ò buona nova o rià. quando porta de polli magri o grassi. Advocata, intercessora, mantello, rimedio, speranza, mediatrice, via, & porta. quella che volta l'arco di Cupido, conduttrice del stral del dio d'amore. nodo che lega, vischio ch'attaca, chiodo ch' accoppia. orizzonte che gionge gl'hemispheri.” On the central role of Lucia in that play, see also Kodera (2003) xxxii–xxxvi and Kodera (2009c).

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ABBREVIATIONS

OL = Bruno, Giordano. *Opera latine*. Ed. Francesco Fiorentino et al.. Naples: Morano, 1879–91; rpt. Stuttgart-Bad Cannstadt: Frommann Holzboog, 1962. 6 vols.

OO = Ficino, Marsilio. *Opera omnia*. Basel: Heinrich Petri, 1576; rpt. Turin: Bottega d'Erasmus, 1962.

De amore = Ficino, Marsilio. *Commentaire sur le Banquet de Platon Marsile Ficin*. Ed. Raymond Marcel. Paris: Belles Lettres, 1956.

De vita = Ficino, Marsilio. *Three Books on Life. De vita libri tres*. Eds. Carol V. Kaske and John R. Clark. Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 57. Binghamton, NY: CEMERS, 1989.

Theologia = Ficino, Marsilio. *Théologie platonicienne de l'immortalité des âmes*. Ed. and trans. Raymond Marcel. Paris: Belles lettres, 1964–70. 3 vols.

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Through a close reading of rarely studied materials, Sergius Koderá examines the contested position of the body in Renaissance philosophy. He shows how abstract metaphysical ideas evolved in tandem with the creation of new metaphors that shaped the understanding of early modern political, cultural, and scientific practices. In so doing, Koderá offers a new approach to these issues by describing the function and interaction of new technologies (such as optics and distillation) with popular creeds (such as witchcraft and folk medicine), as well as their relationship to the newly discovered texts from Greek and Roman Antiquity that captured the attention of Renaissance intellectuals. Koderá investigates for the first time how some philosophers forged their original syntheses from both newly available and traditional materials. In so doing, they contributed in unexpected ways to the formation of new cultural practices, such as surgical intervention into the human body aimed at a moral improvement of the individual, or medical vampirism — practices that entailed largely unexplored conceptualisations of physical bodies, but were also tied inextricably to the formation of new and striking metaphors for the physical world.

This is a work of startling, refreshing originality, such startling originality that it is certain to spark controversy. Nothing in this book is predictable, from its premises to its marshalling of evidence to its conclusions. As a result it provokes any reader to rethink some of the most basic received ideas about philosophy and belief in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

– Ingrid Rowland (Notre Dame University)

This book is a major contribution to the study of Renaissance Neoplatonic magical theory and discourse, conducted through a profoundly revelatory exploration of the systemic gender bias in philosophical and proto-scientific literature.

– Walter Stephens (Johns Hopkins University)

SERGIUS KODERA teaches philosophy at the University of Vienna (Austria). He has published on Marsilio Ficino, Fernando de Rojas, Leone Ebreo, Matteo Ricci, Girolamo Cardano, Giambattista Della Porta, and Giordano Bruno.

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