

IN MEMORIAM
MICHAEL J.B. ALLEN
(1.IV.1941–25.II.2023)

VALERY REES
SCHOOL OF PHILOSOPHY AND ECONOMIC SCIENCE, LONDON

WITH AN APPENDIX BY

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When a great scholar dies there is an outpouring of appreciation as well as grief on his passing. When a man of truly great stature dies, people feel utterly bereft. This was certainly the mood last spring among those who had worked with Michael Allen over the years, who had come close to his genius and his geniality. At his funeral, which was widely shared online, colleagues and friends all spoke of his great gifts of friendship and warmth as well as his immense erudition. Michael brought joy to every occasion, not just through his sparkling wit, his empathy, and a certain playfulness of nature, but because those very qualities rested on a bedrock of humility, integrity and faith in human nature.

Over the course of his long life, many honours were bestowed on him. Amongst these were a Guggenheim Fellowship early in his career; the Eby Award for Undergraduate Teaching (UCLA's top teaching honour); UCLA's Faculty Research Lectureship and guest professorships at the universities of Munich, Toronto, and Tempe. In 2007 he received the Commendatore decoration from the Italian Republic, an Order of Merit with the rank of Commander. Another highly prized honour from Italy was the International Galileo Galilei Prize (2008) for his work on Florentine Platonism. In 2012 the British Academy in London welcomed him to the rank of Corresponding Fellow; in 2013, he was Scholar in Residence at the American Academy in Rome; and in 2015, the full significance of his contribution to scholarship was recognised by presentation of the Renaissance Society of

America's Paul Oskar Kristeller Lifetime Achievement Award. He also prized highly the D. Litt *honoris causa* granted to him by Oxford in 1987 for his exceptional academic and scholarly work.

Michael Allen was born in England, and his training in literature and languages began at Lewes Grammar School in Sussex. Lewes is situated on the edge of the South Downs, where Simon de Montfort and the rebel barons defeated King Henry III. This provided a perfect place to develop a deep sense of history, as well as a pervasive love of botany and ecology, while roaming the downs on long walks, whether alone or as a Boy Scout, as they were then called. (Michael reached the highest rank of Queen's Scout before leaving Lewes. He never let the disability left by his encounter with polio earlier in childhood hold him back.) In Lewes too, he learned Latin and Greek, and developed a love of the music and liturgy of the English church, which was to serve him well when he came to pursue religious questions related to the authors in whom he specialised. From Lewes, he won a place to read English at Wadham College, Oxford, graduating in 1964, and earning a Master's degree in 1966. After that, adventure called, and he went to teach in Ohio, moving on to the vibrant university town of Ann Arbor in Michigan to study for a doctorate, which he was awarded in 1970. It was also there that he met his future wife, Elena, who was engaged in Theatre Studies and Art. A position in the English Faculty at UCLA was offered soon after and they took up residence in nearby Santa Monica.

At UCLA he soon made a reputation for himself as his lectures conveyed to his students an immediacy of engagement with the worlds of the past, from Beowulf and the Anglo-Saxons to Chaucer, Milton, Donne and Shakespeare. A combination of brilliant imagination and true erudition always shone out from Allen's writings and his talks. He was as deeply versed in English literature as he was in the philosophy of the ancients, Greeks and Latins, having mastered even the most difficult texts of the Platonic tradition to support his exploration of the works of Marsilio Ficino. Renowned among his undergraduate students at UCLA as the professor who brought Shakespeare to life with sparkling wit and boundless enthusiasm, it was nevertheless chiefly as a translator and expounder of Ficino that he made his mark on the academic world.

He also led parties from UCLA to various parts of the world, lecturing with his customary vivacity and style, linking the history of the places visited to philosophy and literature. For many years he gave seminars on the plays being performed each season at the Stratford-upon-Avon Shakespeare summer school, and later at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival.

From 1988 to 1993 he served as Director of UCLA's Center for Medieval & Renaissance Studies (CMRS). This led him deeper into the world of Renaissance studies, and from 1993 he was elected Senior Editor of the prestigious *Renaissance Quarterly*, serving in that post until 2001 and, after five more years of engagement

on the Society's higher Councils, he was elected President of the Renaissance Society of America (RSA), serving with great distinction from 2006 to 2008. In 2007–8 he was also National Visiting Scholar for the Phi Beta Kappa association, the oldest academic honour society in the United States. Always popular as a lecturer and invited speaker, he additionally gave a great deal of his time to attending academic conferences, where he never failed to encourage young scholars, even as he probed their work with searching questions. He had developed the gift of real listening, with the result that when he engaged in discussion it was always supportive, allowing new understandings to arise and new connections to be appreciated.

It was in the context of just such a conference that I first met Michael, in the wooded hills north of Budapest, at Piliscaba, in 1998. I was already familiar with his work, and was thrilled when he agreed to be the lead speaker at a Ficino conference I was organizing in London for the quincentenary of Ficino's death the following year. At the concluding dinner of the London conference he persuaded me to take on the task of editing the conference papers, promising to support and guide me in this, as I had never undertaken such work before. It proved to be a magnificent learning experience, conducted though it was at a distance of 5,500 miles, and often through late night telephone calls. The volume we produced together, *Marsilio Ficino: his Theology, his Philosophy, his Legacy* (2002), turned out to be immensely successful, like all his publications; for me, it certainly assisted the development of my subsequent career. With characteristic forethought, he also persuaded me to take an active role in running Ficino sessions at RSA, which I did for the following twenty years, his presence always guaranteeing a full room and a great sense of occasion. On his visits to London he was always generous with his time for the Ficino Letters group, helping us to appreciate the context of the material we were working with, giving inspiring talks, offering wisdom and guidance to individual members, and celebrating all the interests we had in common. To be counted among his *complatonicis* was a truly happy attainment.

On his eventual retirement from UCLA in 2012 his official title was Distinguished Research Professor of English and Italian Renaissance Studies and it was his work in this latter field, Italian Renaissance Studies, that formed the basis of nearly all his research and publications. His first undertaking was a revised version of his doctoral thesis, an edition and translation of Ficino's commentary on Plato's *Philebus*. This appeared from the University of California Press in 1975, and was reissued by ACMRS in 2000. It set the path for making truly significant works available to a much wider public by rendering them into English. The rather relaxed style of English in this first work was something he refined in later works, but what is important is how he grappled with and made sense of its complex arguments and diverse themes, many of which required a thorough acquaintance with Ficino's sources – a truly impressive undertaking in itself.

There followed a series of books which combine explanatory essays with translation of the relevant texts. In those essays the reader can rely with confidence on his sure guidance through complex matters, even if on occasion he later refined some of his views. For example, *Marsilio Ficino and the Phaedran Charioteer* (UCP, 1981) was followed by *The Platonism of Marsilio Ficino* (UCP, 1984), and both together were revised and represented in the I Tatti Renaissance Library issue of *Marsilio Ficino: Commentaries on Plato: Volume I: Phaedrus and Ion* (HUP, 2008). Other Plato commentaries singled out for similar treatment were *Icastes: Marsilio Ficino's Interpretation of Plato's 'Sophist'* (UCP, 1989 and ACMRS, 2016) and a particularly challenging section of Book VIII of the *Republic: Nuptial Arithmetic: Marsilio Ficino's Commentary on the Fatal Number in Book VIII of Plato's 'Republic'* (UCP, 1994).

In 1998 he brought out a volume under the title of *Synoptic Art* (Olschki, 1998) which paints a broad canvas of the history of Platonic Interpretation, and then focuses in through the lens of Ficino's place in that tradition, noting the several different types of opposition Ficino encountered among his contemporaries. This volume encompasses a huge range of learning. It was published before an index had been compiled, which was a great shame given the encyclopaedic nature of the material presented. That deficiency has now been remedied in an appendix to this obituary by John Monfasani on pages 299–307 and Renaissance scholars the world over will be duly grateful.

Over a period of many years, Ficino's texts caused Allen to delve deeply into astronomy, numerology, theology, magic, and myth, the last of these giving rise to substantial articles on Saturn, Orpheus, Prometheus and other themes. Many of these essays were gathered together into two Variorum volumes, *Plato's Third Eye: Studies in Marsilio Ficino's Metaphysics and its Sources* (1995), to which I find myself returning again and again, and the equally valuable *Studies in the Platonism of Marsilio Ficino and Giovanni Pico* (Routledge, 2017).

Perhaps it was through his immersion in the finest literature of the English language, and his determined mastery of the philosophy and literature of ancient Greece and Rome, that he was able to write compellingly in a variety of styles, and with a dazzling command of vocabulary, prosody and intonation. From epic to lyric poetry, from narrative and history to rhetoric and philosophic argumentation, he appreciated and was at home in every genre, perhaps even more so than Ficino who consciously modelled himself on Plato whom he famously described (in *Letters*, vol. II, p. 9) as writing in a style « that flows midway between prose and poetry ».¹ Perhaps the scholastic style was the one that least attracted

¹ Allen characteristically traced this phrase back beyond Ciceronian provenance to its ironic use by Aristotle. MICHAEL ALLEN, *Marsilio Ficino and the Phaedran Charioteer*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1981, p. 40, n. 49.

Allen, though he dealt with it most competently when required, as it was, in some of his later translations. His expositions of material that was difficult or complex are always accessible, suffused with elegance and clarity. It delighted him to help others extend their mastery of language and develop their powers of independent critical thought, and his wit is reflected in some of the imaginative titles he gave to some of his papers: to quote just a few, « Ocean Blue » (2003) for discussion of his Plotinus commentary of 1492; « Life as a Dead Platonist » (2002), « Ficino's Magical Mousing Cat » (2007) and the well-known « Ficino, smoke, and the strangled chickens » (1992).

The two works which gave him most satisfaction, however, were Ficino's own magnum opus, the *Platonic Theology*, which came out as six volumes in the I Tatti series (HUP, 2001–2006), an undertaking shared with James Hankins, and his two volumes on Ficino's commentary on two works of Dionysius the Areopagite: vol. I: *On Mystical Theology & The Divine Names*, part I; vol. II: *On The Divine Names*, part II (HUP, 2015). Here he was able to follow his highly developed interest in what he had come to believe mattered more than anything to Ficino: the pursuit of divine wisdom for the soul, and its return to a state in which its divine essence could be fully realized. This fully united the Platonic and the Christian, in his view. This pursuit mattered also to Allen, and, as with Ficino, in no way conflicted with the responsibilities and benefits of living with and for his fellow human beings.

His greatest academic achievement was surely the opening up of the study of Ficino to a far wider circle than had previously been possible. But over and above all his academic achievements and honours, and the high standards he set in academic writing and research, let us not forget how highly he valued being a family man. With his wife, Elena, always at his side, he was a constant and stalwart support, first as son, revisiting his place of birth at least annually, then as husband, father, and grandfather to a growing tribe of whom he was immensely and justifiably proud. It was his delight to share with them – and with so many friends whom he welcomed into that family circle – his unquenchable sense of curiosity, his love of the outdoors, and of art and literature, poetry and theatre.

Being with him was always a joy, and conversation never lagged. One teenage family friend who had arrived early for dinner had with him what she later called the conversation of a lifetime while I was preparing the food. Memorable moments of this kind were frequent because he had developed the art of welcoming and valuing everyone he met. Even from his hospital bed in later times he was keen to hear about other people's progress and to probe the sometimes unfathomable aspects of British politics. His sunny disposition never left him, allowing him to make light of difficulties even as they multiplied, and he was always prompt to show his appreciation for anything done for him. Whether as mentor, as family, or friend, it was noticeable that advice he proffered was not only wise but always readily actionable.

John Monfasani, in an earlier edition of this journal, summarised Allen's career as « one of the most productive and consequential scholarly careers in the last half century ». ² To his numerous publications, of which the database *Regesta Imperii* lists no less than 107, one must add the enormous influence he has had on three generations of scholars who have been inspired by him, and who have benefitted in so many ways from his friendship, his kindness and his generosity.

Since Michael was renowned for his hiking expeditions, it is utterly fitting that portions of his ashes have come to rest in the Santa Monica hills, and on the Sussex Downs, on the escarpment just below the beacon on Mount Harry, an old Norse holy place. Both these locations were very dear to him. But his memory lives on among so many of us, as a guiding star or Ficinian *daimon*.

² JOHN MONFASANI, Review of: MICHAEL J. B. ALLEN, *Studies in the Platonism of Marsilio Ficino and Giovanni Pico*, Routledge, London – New York 2017 (Variorum Collected Studies Series, 1063). *Mediterranea. International Journal on the Transfer of Knowledge*, 7 (2022), p. 583–587.

Appendix

Michael J.B. Allen, *Synoptic Art: Marsilio Ficino on the History of Platonic Interpretation*, L. S. Olschki, Florence 1998 (Istituto Nazionale di Studi sul Rinascimento. Studi e Testi, 40)

INDEX NOMINUM

JOHN MONFASANI

Synoptic Art is Michael Allen's most historically oriented book as he delved deeply into Ficino's understanding of the history of the Platonic tradition and sundry aspects of this tradition, such as demons, dialectics, and poetry. When I asked why it had no index, Michael told me that to his surprise the book was published before he had a chance to prepare the index. The text below is an attempt to satisfy this *desideratum*. It is an index of names rather than of topics because in such a dense book only Michael would have been able to tease out all the allusions here and there to all possible topics. Themes such as Aristotelianism, Hermeticism, and Orphism, however, can be found in the *Index Nominum*. Because of their ubiquity, Marsilio Ficino and Plato are not indexed. References to Plato's various dialogues are indexed under *Platonic Dialogues* and to books of the Bible under *Scripture*. If a name is cited in the main text and also in the notes on the same page, the page is only listed once, e.g., (page) 19 and not (page) 19, 19n.

- | | |
|---|-----------------------------------|
| Abraham 26, 33n., 39–40 | Agricola, Rudolph 149, 191 |
| Acciaiuoli, Donato 3n. | Ahriman 35 |
| Acciaiuoli, Zenobio 3 | Ahura-mazda 35 |
| Achilles 108 | Alberti, Leon Battista 119n. |
| Adam 31n. | Albertus Magnus 11n., 22 |
| Aeacus 96 | Albumasar 11n. |
| Aeneas 15, 17n., 119n. | Alcestis 120–121 |
| Aeneas of Gaza 66n., 71n., 119n. | Alcibiades 126n., 212n. |
| Aeschylus 160 n. | Alexander of Aphrodisias 14, 16n. |
| Aesculapius 212n. | Alexis 115–116 |
| Aesop 136n. | Alfarabi 85 |
| Africa and Africans 42 | Allen Elena v |
| Agamemnon 108 | Allen, Claudia xiv |
| Aglaophemus 14, 16n., 24, 25n., 26, 42n.,
70 | Allen, Will xiv |
| Agli, Pellegrino degli 4n., 213–214 | Ambrose, St. 19, 42n., 51, 65 |
| | Amelius 65, 81 |

- Americas 42
 Ammonius Saccas 65–66, 68–69, 72,
 74–77, 81–83
 Anaxagoras 110
 Ancient theologians 131–132
 Antiochus of Ascalon 62
 Antiquario, Iacopo 13n.
 Antonino, St. See Pierozzi, Antonino
 Antonio di Guido 213
 Anytus 128
 Apasia 126n.
 Apollo xiv, 98, 127, 138–139, 171n., 180,
 192, 198, 209, 211
 Apollodorus 212n.
 Apollonius 192n.
 Apuleius 27–28, 44, 85–86, 130
 Aquarius x, 15, 16n.
 Aquinas, Thomas. See Thomas Aquinas
 Arcesilas 58–62, 69, 71, 75, 93
 Archelaus 110
 Archytas of Tarentum 29, 43
 Ares 107
 Argyropoulos, John 4n.
 Ariel 141
 Aristippus of Cyrene 115n.
 Aristobulus 33n., 98n.
 Aristophanes 115–116, 128
 Aristotle, Aristotelianism, and
 Aristotelians x, xiii, 2n., 7, 14,
 15, 16n., 17, 19, 22n., 34n., 51n.,
 93, 95, 128n., 138n., 140, 149,
 156, 161, 164, 166, 171, 176n.,
 186n., 190–191
 Arius and Arianism 65, 77
 Arpocrates 192n
 Artapanus 31n.
 Athanasius, St., of Alexandria 66
 Athene 159, 183
 Athenian Stranger in Plato's *Laws* 45n.
 Athens 41, 75, 89–90
 Atlas 30n., 39n.
 Augustine, St. xii, 3, 18, 19, 21, 24, 25n.,
 26n., 27–29, 30n., 31, 42n.,
 51–52, 56, 58, 60–62, 65, 68,
 72–74, 82, 86–87, 91–93, 118,
 119n., 132, 133n., 179n., 216
 Augurelli, Giovanni Aurelio 213–214
 Averroes, Averroists, Averroism x, 14,
 16n., 21, 22n.
 Avicbron 85
 Avicenna 85, 141, 204
 Balaam 31n., 32–33, 37
 Balbi, Pietro 68n., 168n.
 Bandini, Francesco 5–6, 36n., 55
 Baruch the scribe 31n.
 Basil the Great 22, 93
 Bembo, Bernardo 54
 Benci, Tommaso 28
 Benivieni, Girolamo 20, 121
 Bernardino de' Cori 195
 Bessarion, Cardinal 53n., 85, 188
 Bluck, R. S. 191n.
 Boethius 27, 85, 108n., 216
 Bonaventura, St. 22
 Botticelli, Sandro 141n.
 Brahmins 42
 Bracessi, Alessandro 95, 213–214
 Browne, Thomas 185
 Bunyan, John 141
 Buonincontri, Lorenzo 213
 Calcidius 27, 85–86, 108n., 135
 Callias, Sophist 128–129n.
 Callices 128–129n.
 Calypso 108
 Cameron, Alan 83n.
 Campano, Giovanni Antonio 214
 Canaan 33–34
 Cancer, house of in the zodiac 137
 Capcasa, Matteo 195
 Cappadocian Fathers 87
 Cardano, Gerolamo 11n.
 Carneades 58–62, 75, 93
 Cassarino, Antonio 119n.
 Cavalcanti, Giovanni 43n., 45n., 47n., 59,
 94, 100n., 192n., 217n.
 Ceccarelli, Patrizia 31–32
 Celsus 80–81, 84
 Celtics 42

- Cerberus 101
 Chaldeans and Chaldean Oracles 23, 26n.,
 32, 33n., 34, 35n.–36n., 39–40
 Cham. See Ham
 Champier, Symphorien 28
 Chastel, André 90n., 120n.
 Chous 31n., 33n.
 Cicero, Marcus Tullius 30, 56, 59n., 60–61,
 125, 149
 Ciliberto, Michele xv
 Circe 108
 Claudian 215
 Cleanthes 60
 Clement of Alexandria 22, 24, 31n., 34,
 66–67, 70, 72n., 82, 87, 91, 93,
 98n., 120n.
 Coleridge, Samuel Taylor 88
 Colotes 34n.
 Coluccio, Benedetto 213
 Commando di Simone Comandi 4n.
 Constantine, the Great 82, 89
 Copenhagen, Brian xiv
 Cornford, Francis M. 152
 Cortona 54
 Corvinus, Matthias. See Matthias
 Corvinus
 Covilhan, Pedro de 42
 Cratinus 115–116
 Cratylus 43
 Cresci, Migliore 213
 Cretans 100
 Crito 212n.
 Critobulus 212n.
 Cro, Stelio 127n., 145
 Cronius 34n., 69
 Cronus 25n., 102, 142
 Cupid 127n.
 Cush. See Chous
 Cyril, St., of Alexandria 66, 98n.
 Cyrus the Great 32n., 41n.
 D'Ailly, Pierre, Cardinal 11n.
 Da Gama, Vasco 42
 Damascius 78–79, 157n.
 Daniel, prophet 32n., 36n.
 Dante x, 63n., 94, 109n., 119, 127n., 215,
 217
 Darius the Great 41n.
 David Platonicus 66n.
 David, rex Hebraicus 120, 122
 Decembrio, Pier Candido 119n.
 Decembrio, Uberto 119n.
 Della Torre, Arnaldo 4n.
 Democritus 29n., 110, 112
 Demons XII–XIII, 125–147, 197–210
 Descartes, René 191
 Dialectic XIII, 149–193
 Dias, Bartolomeu 42
 Didymus Exiguus, the Blind 33, 33n.–34n.
 Diocletian, Emperor 82
 Diodorus Siculus 30n.
 Diogenes Laertius 32, 36nn., 40n., 43n.,
 44n., 58, 59n., 60, 96n., 110n., 116
 Dionysius the Areopagite, Pseudo XIII, 20,
 21, 52–53, 67–69, 71–74, 82, 84,
 91–92, 103n., 108n., 132,
 187–190
 Dionysus 25n., 139
 Diotima 184
 Dodds, E. R. 152
 Druids 26n., 42
 Duccio di Buonisegna 48
 Eberhard, Count of Württemberg 12n.,
 117n.
 Edict of Milan 82
 Egypt and Egyptians 14, 16n., 26, 28–30,
 31n., 39–41, 44, 49, 75–76, 85,
 200, 205–206
 Eleatic Stranger in Plato's *Sophist* and
 Statesman 45
 Eleatics 44
 Elias, Platonist 66n.
 Elijah 146
 Empedocles 25, 26, 29n., 37, 75, 112, 217
 Enoch 30n., 33n. 39, 84
 Epicharmus 112
 Epicurus and Epicurians 8, 80, 112, 114,
 201, 208
 Epimetheus 157–158, 204n.

- Er 34, 123n., 137
 Erasmus of Rotterdam x, 68n., 126, 128
 Essenes 42
 Ethiopians 42
 Eumolpus 42n.
 Eurytus 29, 43
 Eusebius of Caesarea 24, 33, 34, 65–66,
 69–70, 83, 86–87, 91, 98n., 99n.
 Europa 107
 Eurydice 121–123
 Ezechiel 31n., 146
 Federico of Montefeltro, Duke 12, 32n.,
 37n.
 Ferobanti, Paolo 61, 117n., 125, 126n.,
 129, 195–196, 209–212
 Ficino, Anselmo 215
 Field, Arthur 4n.
 Fonzio, Bartolomeo 213
 Foresi, Sebastiano 213
 Francesco da Castiglione 4n.
 Francis of Assisi, St. 127n.
 Franco, Matteo 116n., 213–214
 Fulgentius 119n.
Furor, furores XIII,
 Gabriel, angel 37, 142
 Gamaliel 81–82
 Ganay, Germain de 99
 Garfagnini, Gian Carlo XIV
 Gaza, Theodore 68n.
 Gentile, Sebastiano 1n.
 George of Trebizond x, 2, 33n.
 Geraldini, Antonio 214
 Giovanni da Correggio 28n.
 Giovanni di Virgilio 215
 Giovanni Piero da Padova 176n.
 Gnostics 79, 184
 Gordian, Emperor 41n.
 Gould, S. J. 162n.
 Gregory Nazianzenus 22
 Gregory Nyssenus 22
 Grocyn, William 68n.
 Guthrie, W. K. C. 151–153
 Gymnosophists 26n., 42
 Ham 31n., 33–34
 Hankins, James XIV, 2–3n., 86n., 116n.,
 125n., 126n.
 Haran 39n.
 Hebrews. See Israel
 Hegesinus 59n.
 Henry of Ghent 85
 Henry, Paul 53n.
 Hephaestus 107, 159, 183
 Hera 107
 Heracles 158
 Heraclitus 25, 43–44, 75
 Hercules 65n., 108, 216
 Hermaphrodite 192
 Hermathena 192
 Hermes Trismegistus, *Hermetica*,
 Hermeticism IX, 5, 10, 23–24,
 26–31, 33, 35, 39–41, 42n., 49,
 70, 90–91, 99, 105, 120, 142, 190,
 192, 199, 205
 Hermias 78–79, 104n., 108, 190, 217
 Hermogenes, pupil of Parmenides 43n.,
 128n.
 Heroclitus 112
 Herod 29, 94
 Hesiod XII, 25, 94–96, 98, 102–105, 108,
 111, 216
 Hierotheus 67n., 72–73
 Homer XII, 25nn., 93–96, 98, 103, 104n.,
 107–108, 112, 117, 119, 216
 Horace 109n., 215
 Horomazes 40
 Horus 30
 Hypatia of Alexandria 66n.
 Iamblichus 26n., 67, 72, 76n., 77–78, 81,
 85, 108n., 131, 192n.
 India and Indians 41n., 42
 Innocent VIII, Pope 4
 Ion 104n., 105n.
 Isaac 33n.
 Islam 29n.
 Israel and Israelites XIV, 26, 29, 30n., 33,
 36n., 38, 39n.–40n., 41n., 42,
 47n., 84, 116, 127n.
 Jacob, Star of 32

- James, of New Testament epistle 62, 63n.
Janus Pannonius xi, 1, 47–48, 95n.
Jardine, Lisa 149
Jerome, St. 216–217
Jesus Christ x, xi, 11, 14, 16n., 37–40, 62,
64, 66, 115, 123, 125, 127–128,
131, 135, 140n., 145–146, 199,
205, 209, 211
Jews. See Israel and Israelites
Joachimism 24n.
Job 125, 135, 209, 211
Johannes Pannonius (see Váradi, Janos)
xi, 1n., 5–13, 20, 31, 91, 95, 214
John Chrysostom 38
John the Baptist 71, 125, 209, 211
John the Evangelist 62, 63n., 65n., 66n.,
68n., 72, 81
Jove. See Jupiter
Judah 41n.
Jude, of New Testament epistle 62
Julian, Emperor 80–81, 84, 91, 98, 217
Julianus (Orphean), father and son 10, 98
Juno 133
Jupiter xiv, 13n., 15, 24, 25, 103, 107–108,
115, 122, 123n., 133, 137, 157,
159, 160n., 172, 200, 202–203,
206–207
Justin Martyr and Ps.-Justin 98n.
Justinian I, Emperor 78, 85
Juvenal 94, 215
Klibansky, Raymond 165n.
Koberger, Anton 195
Kristeller, Paul Oskar xii, xiv, 4n., 18n.,
19n., 66n., 84n., 98n., 129n., 169,
191n., 215, 217
Labeo 65n.
Lactantius 27, 29n., 40n., 216
Lacydes 59n.
Lamberton, R. 102–104n., 106n., 108n.
Landino, Cristoforo 119
Lascaris, Ianus 34n., 109n.
Lazzarelli, Lodovico 28n.
Leda 107
Lefèvre, Jacques, d'Étaples 28, 73n.
Leoni, Pier 67–68
Linus 26n., 42n.
Llyod, Antony C. 163n.
Longinus 69
Lorenzo d'Alopa 195
Luca di Antonio Bernardi da San
Gemignano 4n.
Lucan 94, 109n.
Lucian 126–128, 209–212, 215
Lucretius 8, 113–115
Lycia and Lycian Academy 74–75, 78
Lyco 128
Lycurgus 60n.
Macrobius 27, 70n., 85–86, 108, 137n.
Maeander 76
Magi 15, 16n., 32, 35n.–36n., 37–40, 41n.,
49
Magi and Compagnia de' Magi 37, 90
Maia 30n.
Manicheans and Manicheanism 19, 184
Marcel, Raymond 19n., 26, 31n., 76n.,
79n.
Mars 133, 137, 158–159, 198, 204
Marsuppini, Carlo 213
Martelli, Braccio 70n., 71n., 121, 123n.
Martial 215
Martianus Capella 59n.
Martinus Uranius 9, 85
Mary, mother of Christ 11n.
Matthias Corvinus, King 5
Maxentius 89
Medici family 37, 215
Medici, Cosimo de' 1–2, 28, 31, 35n., 92,
98, 132n., 177n.
Medici, Lorenzo de' x, 34n., 70n., 92, 94,
100n., 109n., 115, 116n., 118–119,
121, 137n., 213–214, 217
Melampus 42n.
Meletus 128
Melissus 25, 43, 112
Mercury xiv, 6n., 11n., 13n., 14, 15, 16n.,
30, 63, 158, 192, 199
Metempsychosis 76–77, 82
Metensomatosis 76

- Michelangelo Buonarroti 94, 217
Milton, John 30
Minos, King 96, 100
Mistra in the Peloponnesus 2
Mithra 35
Mithridates, King of Persia 41n.
Mizraim 31n.
Mnemosyne 49
Moderatus 69
Monfasani, John 68n.
Moon 87–88, 91, 133, 158
Moses 30–31, 33, 39, 45, 47n., 69, 73, 84
Musaeus 26n., 42n., 96, 98
Muses 41n., 180
Nachor 39n.
Naldi, Naldo 213–214
Nebuchadnezzar 32n., 36n.
Nemesius of Emesa 69
Neptune 123n., 133
Niccolini, Angelo 37n., 73n., 87
Niccolini, Giovanni 17–18, 69
Niccolini, Ottone 100n.
Nicholas of Lyra 38n.
Nicolaus Cusanus 85, 168n.
Night 25n.
Nimrod 31n.
Nizolio, Mario 191
Noah 33–34, 39–40, 84
Numa Pomilius 42n.
Numenius 56n., 68–72, 81
Oceanus 112
Ochema XIII
Odysseus 108
Olympiodorus 36n., 78–79, 157, 158n.,
159n., 160n., 161, 163n.
Ophioneus 200, 206
Origen 22, 38, 66, 69–70, 72, 76–77, 82, 93,
146n.
Orpheus and Orphism 5, 6n., 10, 12, 14,
16n., 23–24, 25n., 26n., 29n.,
33n., 41, 42n., 68–70, 96, 98–99,
104n., 120–123, 147, 189n., 190,
215–217
Orsini, Clarice 217
Orsi, Roberto 214
Ovid 109n., 113, 215
Pallas Athena 12
Palmieri, Matteo 213
Pandora 158
Parcae 123n.
Parmenides of Elea 25, 26, 43, 112, 113n.,
129, 155, 173, 177–181, 185–186,
188, 217
Pastor Novus 24
Patrizi, Francesco 10
Paul, St. 4, 19, 29, 52, 62–63, 66n., 67, 72,
81, 126n., 192n., 215n.
Paul of Middelburg 11
Paul of Venice 149, 191
Pazzi Conspiracy 119
Pelagianism 146
Pelotti, Antonio 104n., 105n., 114
Persia and Persians 14, 16n., 39–41, 85
Perugino, Pier Filippo 100n.
Peter, Apostle 62, 63n.
Peter of Spain 191
Petraean tradition 217
Phanes 25n.
Pherecydes Syrus 200, 206
Philebus 174–177
Philippus of Onus 41n.
Philo of Alexandria 66, 69, 71–72
Philolaus 25n., 29, 31n., 41, 43
Philoponus (John) 66n., 83n.
Phoenicians 39n.–40n.
Pico della Mirandola, Giovanni x, 19, 20,
29n., 54, 107, 121, 133, 178, 184
Piero, Giovanni, of Padua 22n.
Pierozzi, Antonino (St. Antonino) 3–4
Platonic Dialogues. *Alcibiades*, First 83,
130n., 139 – *Alcibiades*, Second
104, 108, 129, 132 – *Apology* 96,
101n., 108 115, 130n., 131, 134,
138–39, 195, 197–210 – *Cratylus*
44, 83, 121, 136n., 171n. – *Critias*
142n., 199, 204 – *Crito* 130n., 192
– *Epinomis* 45, 135 – *Euthydemus*
130n. – *Euthyphro* 130n. – *Gorgias*

- 96, 100–101, 106, 111, 160n. – *Ion* 108, 138 – *Laws* 45, 93, 96, 98, 100n., 101, 105, 110, 117, 123, 129, 142n., 152, 175, 198, 204, 217 – *Parmenides* xi, 47n., 48, 57, 78–79, 83, 153n., 165–166, 169, 173–175, 177–182, 185–186, 187n., 188, 190 – *Phaedo* 79, 98, 125n., 130n., 152, 195 – *Phaedrus* xiii, 44, 59n., 61, 94n., 117, 122, 123n., 127n., 130n., 133, 136–139, 145, 151, 152n., 1562n., 170n., 171–172, 181–182, 189, 192, 195, 198, 201, 203, 208 – *Philebus* 44, 57, 79, 113–115, 152n., 153n., 154–161, 166, 173–174, 175n., 177, 179–180, 182, 183n., 185–186, 191–192 – *Protagoras* 98, 157, 159, 161, 165, 198 – *Republic* xiii, 83, 94–98, 100–103, 106–109, 113, 119, 130n., 137, 139, 150–152, 154–155, 164, 170–171, 173, 175, 177, 185–187, 189, 191, 201, 207 – *Sophist* 44, 57, 64, 152–153, 155–156, 166, 175n., 191 – *Statesman* 142, 152, 153n., 154, 159, 161, 166, 175, 191, 198, 204 – *Symposium* 54, 120–121, 127n., 130n., 142, 175n., 184, 198, 204 – *Theages* 130n., 199, 204 – *Theatetus* 96, 106, 112, 130n., 152n., 153, 175n. – *Timaeus* xi, 44–45, 54, 59n., 83, 86, 111, 117, 131n., 135, 138, 143, 161, 166n., 173, 175, 198, 203–204
- Platonici Syriani* 78–80, 84
- Pletho, George Gemistus 1–3, 10, 25, 29n., 31n., 32n., 34, 35n., 36n.
- Pliny the Elder 40n.
- Plotinus ix, 1, 2 n., 5, 6n., 8, 14, 15, 16n., 17n., 21, 27, 35, 37, 41n., 51–92, 107–108, 120, 122–123, 129, 131, 143n., 156, 158–159, 161n., 172, 184, 188, 190–191, 192n.
- Plutarch of Chaeronea 32, 40, 65, 78–79, 136
- Pluto 123n., 133
- Polemo, head of the Academy 61
- Poliziano, Angelo 94, 213–214
- Polus 128
- Porphyry 14, 16n., 24, 36n., 51n., 55, 56n., 66, 69, 74, 76–77, 80–82, 83n., 84–85, 108, 131
- Portuguese 42
- Potone, Plato's sister 57
- Prenninger, Martin 33n., 34n., 99, 109n., 111n., 192n.
- Prisca theologia, prisci theologi* 24–25
- Proclus 2n., 14, 16n., 24–25, 26n, 29n., 40, 55, 68, 72, 74–76, 78–81, 82–84, 86, 98–99, 104n., 108–109, 130–131, 139, 140n., 141n., 142, 155n., 157, 160n., 161, 162n., 165–168, 170, 171n., 178, 186n., 187, 190, 192, 216
- Prometheus 30n., 157–159, 160n., 161, 172, 183, 188, 204n.
- Protarchus 174, 177
- Protagoras 112
- Proteus 109n.
- Psellus 35n., 131
- Ptolemy, astronomer 137
- Pulci, Bernardo 115
- Pulci, Luigi x, xi, 115–116, 213, 215
- Pythagoras and Pythagoreans ix, x, 5, 6n., 10, 14, 16n., 25n., 26n., 27, 29, 40n., 41, 42n., 43–45, 47n., 48, 57, 61, 70, 90–91, 95, 113, 146n., 158n., 166n., 179, 192n., 217
- Quarquagli, Cherubino 213
- Radamanthus 96
- Ramus, Peter 191
- Raphael, angel 142
- Raphael (Raffaello Sanzio) 141n.
- Reformation and the Reformers 23
- Riario, Cardinal Girolamo 119n.

- Rinucius Aretinus 126n.
 Robinson, C. 126n.
 Rodoni, Jacopo 73–74
 Rome and Roman Academy 74–75, 78, 89
 Romulus 65n.
 Ronsard, Pierre de 94, 217
 Rossigliano, Tiberio 11n.
 Rucellai, Bernardo 115, 214
 Saturn x, 13, 15, 16n., 24, 103, 107, 131,
 133, 137, 139–140, 158, 171n.,
 192, 197–198, 202–203
 Savonarola, Girolamo 20, 95, 133,
 146–147
 Scepticism 58n., 59–60, 72, 75, 77, 93
 Scholarius, George Gennadius 2, 25
 Scotus, John Duns 85
 Scripture. *Acts* 5, 34–50: 81 – *I Cor.*
 (beginning) 19 – *Dan.* 38 – *I Esd.*
 4.42–5.3: 41n. – *Gen.* 10.8: 31n.,
Gen. 15.5: 39n. – *James* 1.17: 30 –
Jn. (overall): 18, 67, 73 – *Josh*
 24.2–3: 39n. – *Lc.* 2.2–8: 38. – *Mk.*
 4.11: x. – *Mt.* 2.1–12: 38 – *Mt.*
 2.1–18: 40n. – *Mt.* 2.2: 10 – *Mt.*
 13.11: x – *Num.* 22.21–35: 33 –
Num. 22–24: 32 – *Num.* 24.17: 32
 – *Num.* 31.8–16: 33 – *Rom.* 1.1–2:
 47n. – *Rom.* 2.14: 47n. – *Rom.* 3.4:
 207n.
 Sebastiano del Piombo 141n.
 Sekmet 30
 Seneca 36n., 65, 85–86, 146n.
 Serafico, Antonio 9n., 213
 Servius 119n.
 Seth 31n.
 Sextus Empiricus 93
 Shelley, Percy Bisshe 160n.
 Shumaker, W. 11n.
 Sibyl(s) xiv, 16, 26n., 42n.
 Siena, Duomo 31n.
 Simone da Lovere 195
 Simplicianus 65
 Slavs 14
 Socrates, Socratic x, xii–xiii, 25, 43–45,
 47n., 58, 59n., 60–61, 64, 93, 94n.,
 96, 98–99, 104, 108, 110n.,
 115–116, 117n., 122–123,
 125–147, 150, 152–154, 173–174,
 176–179, 184–185, 191–192,
 197–212
 Sophists 97
 Spenser, Edmund 94, 217
 Speusippus 57–58
 Statius 215
 Stephanus 66n.
 Steuco, Agustino 42
 Stoics and Stoicism 59, 64
 Suda 83n.
 Sun 15, 87–89, 91, 133, 152, 159
 Synesius 66n., 98
 Syrianus 78,
 Terah 39n.
 Tertullian 29n.
 Tethys 112
 Teuth 48–49, 192
 Thales 112
 Thamus 49, 192
 Theodore of Asine 34n.
 Theodorus of Cyrene 44
 Thomas Aquinas 3–4, 17n., 20n., 22, 86n.
 Thrace and Thracians 14, 41
 Thrasyllus 69, 94n.
 Thrasymachus 128
 Timaeus of Locrus 43, 45
 Timon 115–116
 Toth 27, 192n.
 Traversari, Ambrogio 71n.
 Trimpi, W. 100n.
 Trinkaus, Charles xiv
 Trojan War 32
 Trophimus 42n.
 Tynnichus of Chalcis 104n., 105n
 Urberti, Francesco 214
 UCLA xiv
 Ugolini, Baccio 104n., 105n., 114
 Ur 39–40
 Uranius, Martin. See Prenninger

- Uranus 25n., 102–103, 107
Valerius Maximus 59n.
Valerius Soranus, Quintus 42n.
Valla, Lorenzo 68n., 149, 185, 191
Varinus, Johannes Franciscus 214
Varinus, Severus 214
Varro, Marcus 42n.
Vasoli, Cesare 149
Vehicle, spiritual or astral. *See ochema*
Venus xiv, 123n.
Vesta 133
Victorinus, Marius 51n., 65
Virgil xiv, 11n., 15, 17n., 85–86, 94, 109n.,
119, 189, 215
Vittorino da Feltre 4n.
Vulcan 133
Walker, D. P. 24, 26n., 29n., 53n., 71n.,
73n.
Wallis, R. T. 83n.
Westerink, L. G. 79n., 157n., 158n., 160n.
William of Moerbeke 165n., 168n.
Wind, Edgar 92n., 107, 121
Wolters, A. M. 53n., 54n.
Xenocrates 57–58, 71, 75–76, 79
Xenophon 41n., 127, 128n., 130, 150, 209,
211, 212n.
Yeats, William Butler 100
Zeno of Citium 60–61, 70, 93
Zeno of Elea 43, 62, 177–78
Zerubbabel 41n.
Zeus. *See* Jupiter
Zoroaster xii, 1, 5, 6n., 10, 14, 16n., 23–24,
25n., 31–41, 42n., 49, 70, 90–91,
99, 120, 159, 179, 190, 217