



10-2022

Luigi Pulci's Fifteenth-Century Verse Parody of Moses: A Denunciation of Marsilio Ficino's Neoplatonic Christianity

Michael J. Maher
College of Charleston

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/rmmra>



Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [History Commons](#), [Philosophy Commons](#), and the [Renaissance Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Maher, Michael J. (2022) "Luigi Pulci's Fifteenth-Century Verse Parody of Moses: A Denunciation of Marsilio Ficino's Neoplatonic Christianity," *Quidditas*: Vol. 43, Article 6.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/rmmra/vol43/iss1/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Quidditas by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

Luigi Pulci's Fifteenth-Century Verse Parody of Moses: A Denunciation of Marsilio Ficino's Neoplatonic Christianity

*Michael J. Maher
College of Charleston*

In early 1470s Florence, popular poet Luigi Pulci, author of the celebrated epic poem Morgante, wrote a sonnet of religious parody. In Poi ch'io parti' da voi, Pulci satirizes biblical miracles, immediately earning himself the label of heretic, still attached to his name to this day. A close examination of Pulci's sonnet, with specific attention given to his treatment of Moses, reveals Pulci's motivation and the circumstances surrounding composition. Pulci's scandalous sonnet was in fact an attempt at underscoring the maltreatment of biblical miracles in a first-century Greek text by the Romano-Jewish historian Josephus. Renowned philosopher Marsilio Ficino, with whom Pulci was embroiled in a bitter polemic, repeatedly cited Josephus's Jewish Antiquities. Josephus's Antiquities along with his depiction of Moses played no small role in Ficino's fifteenth-century reconciliation of Platonism and Christianity. Pulci mocks the Antiquities to condemn Ficino's employ of the text in his innovative religious philosophy. This specific case is telling of a larger cultural-philosophical contention between a vernacular culture rooted in medieval traditions and the innovative program of Renaissance Humanism.

Lorenzo de' Medici was the personification of the Italian Renaissance's Golden Age. The Magnificent was the first among equals as the de facto ruler of the Florentine Republic. The Medici family's patronage of the arts and humanism rendered Florence a cultural center that became known as the cradle of the Renaissance. Grandson to Cosimo the Elder, Lorenzo grew into his role as Medici family patriarch while his mother Lucrezia Tornabuoni shouldered much of Florence's affairs as Lorenzo's father Piero's health faltered.

Lorenzo's cultural formation began as a youth studying popular vernacular traditions under the guidance of his mother Lucrezia and the tutelage of popular poet Luigi Pulci, author of the celebrated epic poem *Morgante*. Pulci's teachings balanced Lorenzo's humanistic studies promoted by Cosimo.

As Lorenzo matured, his interests shifted toward a philosophical program championed by esteemed philosopher Marsilio Ficino, founder of Florence's Neoplatonic Academy. The biennium of 1473-'74 was vital to Lorenzo's changing interests.¹ James Hankins describes this period as the "Laurentian shift";² likewise, Riccardo Bruscagli identifies Lorenzo's "conversione ficiniana."³ Neoplatonic philosophy increasingly informed official Medici cultural politics as Lorenzo moved toward Neoplatonic studies.

The changing cultural tide generated friction between proponents of the vernacular-popular and humanist-philosophical programs respectively. This cultural contention is the fundamental backdrop for this study that situates Luigi Pulci's sonnet *Poi ch'io parti'da voi*, a parody of biblical miracles with an emphasis on Moses, within the complex cultural landscape of Florence's pivotal Laurentian era.

Cultural-Philosophical Differences in Medicean Florence

The cultural factions represented by Pulci and Ficino respectively had defined characteristics. Pulci embodied a vernacular culture that was a continuation of medieval traditions. The patrons of these writers were from the rooted Florentine nobility making up a large segment of Laurentian Florence's oligarchy. This culture's preferred form of expression was vernacular poetry. Chivalric epic *cantari* were sung in the piazza, reworked from Arthurian and Carolingian medieval literary cycles. This vernacular culture included other forms of poetic entertainment such as *canti carnascialeschi*. In many ways Pulci was a descendent of the anarchic and at times crass tradition of poetry *alla burchia*, originating in Burchiello's barber shop in the first half of the Quattrocento.

Bernardo Bellincioni's occasional verse is representative of vernacular poetry's multifaceted employ. Even though religious parody was

1 See Orvieto, *Pulci medievale*, 273.

2 Hankins, *Humanism and Platonism in the Italian Renaissance*, 345.

3 Bruscagli, *Il Quattrocento e il Cinquecento*, 34-35.

permitted in these circles, serious subversions of Christianity were far less tolerated. The underlying religious sentiment was conservative: literal interpretations of the Bible prevailed in Feo Belcari's *sacre rappresentazioni* along with Lucrezia Tornabuoni's *storie sacre*.

Pulci became a mainstay in Medici circles as an active participant in a culturally rich atmosphere that included the most well-known artistic, philosophical, and political figures of the time. Pulci's influence on Lorenzo's literary production is evident in Lorenzo's early works. Lorenzo's *Caccia col falcone* describes a typical day of falconry by Lorenzo and his closest friends; verses from this poem evidence Pulci's role as master of poetic ceremonies in Lorenzo's *brigata*.⁴

Pulci undoubtedly influenced Lorenzo's *Nencia da Barberino*, one of Lorenzo's most polished poems. The pastoral follows the amorous thoughts of the shepherd Vallera for his lovely Nencia. The *Nencia* gave way to a cycle of idyllic pastoral *Nenciali* texts, including Pulci's *Beca da Dicomano*. Many *Nenciali* works are believed to be the product of collaboration between multiple authors.

In the 1460s Lorenzo was composing jocular poetry alongside Pulci, even versifying a parody of Ficino's thought in his 1469 *Simposio*, mocking Ficino's philosophy on love.⁵ In a *canzone a ballo* entitled *Ragionavasi di sodo*, Lorenzo employs an allegory equating the relationship between God and the soul to that of a husband sodomizing his wife.⁶ After Piero's death in 1469 all eyes turned toward Lorenzo; the twenty-year-old was criticized for the damage he had done to his public image. Florentine political figures with Medici interests in mind, pleaded with Lorenzo to resume serious study and to leave behind empty past times.⁷

4 "Luigi Pulci anco rimaso fia: / e' se n'andò là oggi in un boschetto, / ch'aveva il capo pien di fantasia: / vorrà fantasticar qualche sonetto [Luigi Pulci remained behind: / maybe he went in the woods today, / his head was full of fantasy: / he will probably dream up some sonnets]" (de' Medici, *Tutte le opere*, 40.1-4). All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

5 See Gentile, "Ficino e il platonismo di Lorenzo," 25.

6 See Martelli, "Un caso di amphibolatio."

7 See Gentile, "Ficino e il platonismo di Lorenzo," 25.

The Neoplatonism championed by Ficino was revolutionary and defined the Renaissance. Ficino's aim was an innovative union of Platonism and Christianity. Ficino's religious mission intensified as he became a priest in late 1473 and, shortly thereafter, completed his *De Christiana religione* in the vernacular. Germane discussions and lectures took place in Medici villas for the elite and erudite. Family name and history meant less in these circles than proficiency and formal training in Greek and Latin. Patrons to these activities were less rooted in nobility and included families that enjoyed newly found upward mobility.

The literary exploits of Lorenzo's early *brigata* years gave way to a philosophical literature seen in his Ficinian *De summo bono* written between the second half of 1473 and the first half of 1474.⁸ This work takes the form of a philosophical debate between the protagonist Lauro and the shepherd Alfeo. The two encounter Marsilio who enlightens them with regard to the question of the Supreme Good. In addressing this question, Lauro, representative of Lorenzo, supports the Neoplatonic position.

Lorenzo was praised for his resumption of study by Florence's elite.⁹ Lorenzo's change in interests extended beyond the literary sphere. It was during this same time that new laws were enacted that maintained modesty in funerals and banquets, and imposed regulations on gambling.¹⁰

The tension between vernacular-popular and humanist-philosophical programs is on full display in the well-documented polemic between Pulci and Ficino. The polemic comprised letters by Ficino lamenting Pulci's irreverent sonnets and his aggressive nature. Pulci's sonnets

8 See Brusciagli, *Il Quattrocento e il Cinquecento*, 33-38; Gentile, "Ficino e il platonismo di Lorenzo," 23-48; Hankins, *Humanism and Platonism in the Italian Renaissance*, 319-49.

9 See Gentile, "Ficino e il platonismo di Lorenzo," 26.

10 See Jordan, *Pulci's Morgante*, 32.

parodied topics fundamental to Ficino's Neoplatonic Christian thought. In stark contrast to Pulci's previous literary attacks on Bartolomeo Scala and Matteo Franco, those targeting Ficino surpassed personal insults and included a refined indictment of Ficino's philosophy.

Pulci's controversial sonnet *Poi ch'io parti' da voi* rationalizes biblical miracles to mock the same operation found in one of Ficino's primary sources: first century Romano-Jewish historian Flavius Josephus's *Jewish Antiquities*.¹¹ Pulci's provocative sonnet contains more verses on Moses's Crossing of the Red Sea than any of the other biblical miracles parodied. Moses's prominent role in Ficino's philosophy, explains the biblical protagonist's beleaguered distinction in Pulci's sonnetic slander.

Poi ch'io parti' da voi is addressed to a certain Bartolomeo, identified by Alessio Decaria as Bartolomeo dell'Avveduto.¹² Therefore, the death of Bartolomeo in August of 1473 serves as a *terminus ante quem* for Pulci's sonnet, making it one of the earliest writings pertaining to the Ficino-Pulci polemic. The sonnet is more than likely the one referenced in Pulci's *Sempre la pulcia muor*, another sonnet dated generally to 1473:

E' ci è tanto romor per un sonetto,
che pare ch'i' abbia morto colla spada
color che gridan sol per mie dispetto

[This is too much noise for a sonnet,
it appears I have died by the sword
of those who yell just for my contempt]¹³
(48.9-11)

11 This study supplements an earlier publication situating Pulci's sonnet in the poet's discord with Ficino (Maher, "Luigi Pulci's Parody of Josephus"). The study at hand's novelty is the focus on the Moses.

12 Decaria, ed., *Sonetti extravaganti*, 72.

13 The citation here indicates sonnet number from the collection and verse(s). Lines from Pulci's sonnets are from Decaria's edition: Pulci, *Sonetti extravaganti*.

Luigi Pulci's *Poi ch'io parti' da voi*

Poi ch'io parti' da voi, Bartolomeo
de' vostri buon' precepti admaestrato,
un certo caso strano m'è incontrato
da ffar trasecolare un gabbadeo:
i'truovo in su 'un libro d'un giudeo
che Pietro corse sopra il mar ghiacciato
e ch'egli spuntellò certo un frascato,
il mie Sanson, del popol Philisteo;
e Moysè passò con la suo tresca
dove teneva il collo una pescaia
d'un certo luogo là dove si pesca:
a Pharaon fu aperta la callaia,
sì che, levata la saracinesca,
affogò forse venti, e non migliaia.
Dunque la Bibbia abbaia:
Lazero, e gli altri già risuscitati,
chi ebri, chi epilenti, e chi alloppiati,
degl'infermi sanati.
Del pan che n'avanzò le sporte piene
dicon non sanno la grandeza bene
e ' pesci fur balene.
E' si dicea così di fra Christofano
Sì che un quartuccio non ritorna il cofano.

[Since I left you, Bartolomeo,
of your good precepts they teach,
I encountered a strange case
that would fascinate a hypocrite:
I find in a book of a Jew,
that Peter ran across a frozen sea,
and that Samson pulled one of the twigs
in support of the tent over the Philistines;
and Moses's affair passed
a weir near a river embankment
from which people fish.
For Pharaoh, a canal was opened,
so that, raising the portcullis,
twenty or so drowned, not thousands.
Therefore, the Bible barks:
Lazzarus, and others resurrected,
were drunkards, drugged, and sick

all cured.

Some bread became overflowing sacks
They say they do not understand proportion
and fish were whales.
And as for brother Christopher
a fourth of a bushel could never be a barrel.] (37)

Pulci parodies the most recognizable biblical miracles in his sonnet. Instead of walking on water, Peter followed Christ's example by running across a frozen sea (6).¹⁴ Pulci's sonnet declares that the Philistine temple of Dagon was actually a stick hut Samson razes by pulling a stick (7). Pulci's version of the Raising of Lazarus details the mundane sobering up of drunkards and opium users. The sonnet's closing lines ridicule the Feeding of the Multitude (23). Pulci's treatment of biblical miracles, reducing the sacred to the mundane, falls squarely within the religious parody topoi of the vernacular tradition.

Fundamental to this study, as well as the sonnet itself, Pulci reserves six verses for the Moses miracles (9-14). According to Pulci's sonnet, the Crossing of the Sea of Reeds actually occurred at a spot in the river where fishermen kept a weir (9-11). After having passed through, Moses raised the gate and water engulfed perhaps twenty and not thousands (13-14). Pulci dedicates considerably more verses to Moses than the other miracles. The verses in parody of Moses are central to Pulci's sonnet thematically as well as their ordinal placement.

Pulci's opponents decried him a heretic because of this sonnet. Pulci's *Confessione*, written in *terza rima* in his final days, verifies the gravity of the scandal. In Pulci's *Confessione*, the poet attempts to neutralize critics by affirming the veracity of the biblical miracles parodied a decade earlier. Pulci declares to have erred in excess:

S'io ho della ragion passati segni,
m'accordo colla Bibbia e col Vangelo

¹⁴ Henceforth, only verse(s) will be indicated internally when referencing Pulci's *Poi ch'io parti' da voi*.

[Even if I once exceeded reason,
I agree with the Bible and the Gospel]¹⁵
(61-62)

Also in Pulci's *Confessione*, he rewrites the Crossing of the Sea of Reeds:

E come il mar pe' sua meriti aprì,
per salvar la sua gente e Faraone
annegassi e 'l suo popol, fu così
come appunto la Bibbia scrive e pone

[And how the sea opened before him
to save his people, and Pharaoh
with his people drowned, it was
exactly as the Bible suggests and states]
(88-91)

In the last canto of the *Morgante*, Pulci maintains an exculpable tone and calls his detractors hypocrites:

se pur vane cose un tempo scrissi,
contra hypocritas tantum, pater, dissi

[if once I wrote vain things,
against hypocrites only, father, I wrote]¹⁶
(28.43.7-8)

Those who took Pulci to task for religious irreverence were, in Pulci's estimation, guilty of the same charge.

Josephus in Pulci's Verse

In the opening to *Poi ch'io parti' da voi*, Pulci attributes the content found in his sonnet to another: "i' truovo in su 'un libro d'un giudeo [I find in a book of a Jew]" (5). This seemingly simple verse is teeming with indicators of the content to follow, especially for a fifteenth-century reader. Pulci scholar Alessandro Polcri declares

15 These verses from Pulci's *Confessione* and those that immediately follow are from Greco's edition and are made internally by verse(s).

16 This quotation and any to follow from Pulci's *Morgante* are from Greco's edition and will be made internally by canto, stanza, and verse(s). Edoardo Lèbano notes: "Also in this particular instance, the use of Latin emphasizes the confessional tone of the poet's words" (*Morgante: The Epic Adventures of Orlando and His Giant Friend Morgante*, 951).

that speaking as a Jew was the equivalent of misrepresenting the truth.¹⁷ Another renowned Pulci scholar Alessio Decaria states that the verb *trovare* is an indicator of parody rooted in the poetry *alla burchia*:¹⁸ an earlier Quattrocento popular poetic genre, predecessor and influence to Pulci. In the same opening verses, Pulci describes the content in his source to be so scandalous, it would seem other worldly even to religious hypocrites of sacrilegious disposition (4).¹⁹ Verse fifteen sarcastically reiterates the essence of the *libro d'un giudeo*: “Dunque la Bibbia abbaia [Furthermore, the Bible barks]” (15).

Scholars agree that Pulci is referring to Romano-Jewish historian Flavius Josephus's *Jewish Antiquities* written in the first century CE.²⁰ The Ancient Greek text was considered an historical account of the Jewish people from the Creation to the First Jewish-Roman War. The *Testimonium Flavianum* is a famous passage in the *Antiquities* considered extra-biblical evidence of Jesus Christ. Medieval and Renaissance readers read the *Antiquities* alongside the Bible as supplementary material.²¹

Josephus in Marsilio Ficino's Philosophy

Ficino was ordained a priest in the autumn of 1473. Ficino completes the *De Christiana religione* in the spring of 1474, reaffirming

17 Polcri, *Luigi Pulci e la Chimera*, 63 n68.

18 Decaria, *Luigi Pulci e Matteo di Francesco Castellani*, 129.

19 The verse referenced is the following: “da ffar trasecolare un gabbadeo [that would fascinate a hypocrite]” (4). For more on *gabbanti* see Decaria, *Luigi Pulci e Matteo di Francesco Castellani*, 84; Orvieto, *Opere minori*, 198 n2. *Vocabolario Etimologico della Lingua Italiana di Ottorino Pianigiani* defines *trasecolare*: “*intr.* Meravigliarsi oltremodo, quasi uscendo dal secolo e trovandosi in un altro mondo; *tran.* Porre in grande confusione. [To amaze exceedingly, almost leaving current times and finding oneself in another world; *tran.* To cause great confusion].”

20 See Decaria, *Luigi Pulci e Matteo di Francesco Castellani*, 67; Polcri, *Luigi Pulci e la Chimera*, 63; Orvieto, *Opere minori*, 200-01; Orvieto, *Pulci*, 162.

21 For Josephus's writings in Renaissance Italy see Castelli, “Josephus in Renaissance Italy.”

his religious philosophical mission.²² Amos Edelheit describes Ficino's religious treatise as, "a 'manifesto' on the new humanist theology."²³

Ficino was aware of the perception of his religious-philosophical program that combined the seemingly incompatible. In chapter ten of Ficino's religious exposition, he speaks directly to Lorenzo de' Medici in admitting the unlikely union of philosophy and biblical miracles: "non ti meravigliare, Lorenzo, che Marsilio Ficino, amante della filosofia, parli di miracoli [don't be surprised Lorenzo that Marsilio Ficino, lover of philosophy, speaks of miracles]."²⁴

In "The Josephan Renaissance," Daniel Stein Kokin presents the first study of Josephus's reception in Renaissance Italy. Stein Kokin's research establishes the 1470s as the period in which humanists began to cite Josephus's *Testimonium*.²⁵ Ficino was the first Renaissance author to cite the *Testimonium*. Regarding Ficino's *De Christiana religione*, Stein Kokin observes: "In fact, Ficino mentions Josephus repeatedly throughout the approximate first three-fifths of the work, more than any other Renaissance text of which I am aware up to this point."²⁶

In chapter thirty of the *De Christiana religione*, titled "Conferma delle nostre credenze in base a quelle giudaiche [Confirmation of Our Beliefs Based on Jewish Ones]," Ficino speaks directly to the Jews while sustaining Josephus's authority: "Infine ascoltate che cosa il vostro Giuseppe dice di Cristo nei libri sulle *Antichità giudaiche*

22 Upon completion of his religious treatise Ficino declares: "el tuo Marsilio Ficino . . . ha in questo anno composto coll'aiuto divino un libro in confirmatione et difensione della vera religione, quale è la cristiana [your Marsilio Ficino . . . completed in this year, with divine help, a book in confirmation and defense of the true religion, that is to say Christianity]" qtd. in Tanturli, "Marsilio Ficino e il volgare," 190.

23 Edelheit, *Ficino, Pico and Savonarola*, 210.

24 Ficino, *De Christiana religione*, 69.

25 Stein Kokin, "The Josephan Renaissance," 206.

26 Stein Kokin, "The Josephan Renaissance," 223.

[Finally, listen to that which your Josephus says about Christ in his books on the *Jewish Antiquities*].”²⁷ Ficino’s erudite lectures in Florence’s intellectual circles undoubtedly included Josephus’s *Testimonium* and other material from the *Antiquities*. Josephus’s resurgence and prominence in 1470s Florence was in large part, if not entirely, thanks to Ficino.

Josephus and Ficino’s Treatment of Miracles

Miracles are central to Ficino’s religious philosophy. Cesare Vasoli speaks of the miracle’s fundamental role in Ficino’s *De Christiana religione*:

si può quindi rivelare che, per lui, il cristianesimo è, in primo luogo, una religione la cui verità è indicata dalla profezia e dal miracolo, eventi sovranaturali che sono il segno di un diretto intervento divino e del suo manifestarsi nell’ordine delle cose e nella mente umana. [one may suppose that, for him, Christianity is first and foremost a religion in which the truth is substantiated by prophecy and miracles, supernatural events that are the sign of a direct divine intervention and its manifestation in the order of things and the human mind.] 167.

Ficino titles chapter ten of the *De Christiana religione* “L’ autorità di Cristo non vi fu senza i miracoli [The Authority of Christ Was Not Without Miracles].” Ficino unequivocally states:

il fine santissimo di questa religione dimostra con chiarezza che Cristo e i suoi discepoli effettuarono i miracoli non per magia, ma per opera divina [the holy scope of this religion clearly demonstrates that Christ and his disciples enacted miracles not by magic, but by divine work]²⁸

Josephus’s *Antiquities* was and is known for rationalizing biblical miracles, seemingly incompatible with Ficino’s program. Josephus knew what and for whom he was writing: a Jewish point of view for pagan readers. Josephus suppresses God’s role in the heroes’ achievements. In some instances, Josephus completely excludes miracles deemed inappropriate for his non-Jewish audience.²⁹ Often,

²⁷ Ficino, *De Christiana religione*, 178.

²⁸ Ficino, *De Christiana religione*, 177.

²⁹ For more on Josephus’s point of view see Feldman, *Josephus’s Interpretation of the Bible*, 38-39.

Josephus's miracle narratives lack details, resulting in rationalized occurrences. For example, Josephus's Samson simply refrains from praying to God for strength prior to destroying the temple of Dagon.³⁰ Pulci rationalized biblical miracles in his sonnet to derisively mock Josephus; ultimately, in order to underscore the irreconcilability of Ficino's philosophy and one of Ficino's fundamental fons.

Moses in Josephus's *Jewish Antiquities*

Pulci had a rudimentary knowledge of Latin and was even less competent in Greek. Pulci required vernacular translations to formally discuss classical texts. In 1459, Pulci borrowed a vernacular edition of Virgil from Francesco di Matteo Castellani, "scripta di lettera moderna," in preparation for attending lectures by Bartolomeo Scala.³¹ Furthermore, Pulci's sonnets and verses from the *Morgante* contain errors in Latin.³²

The *Antiquities* was a novel text in Ficino's Academy, only accessible to those capable of reading the original Greek or Old Latin translations.³³ Pulci was unable to read the *Antiquities* firsthand. Pulci's *Poi ch'io parti' da voi* was written no later than the summer of 1473. It is unlikely Pulci had access to the first Italian translation of the *Antiquities*, commissioned in Ferrara in late 1472.³⁴

If Pulci could have read Josephus firsthand, he may not have called attention to Josephus's treatment of the Moses stories. Pulci must have been aware of Josephus's overall avoidance of biblical miracles, but not familiar enough with the *Antiquities*' nuances to realize that the Moses stories were an exception. In fact, instead of rationalizing

30 Notably, this was also one of the stories Pulci parodies in *Poi ch'io parti' da voi* (7-8), aptly retracted in his *Confessione (Morgante e opere minori)*, 97-99.1434).

31 Carnesecchi, *Per la biografia di Luigi Pulci*, 378.

32 For Pulci's errors in Latin see Orvieto, *Pulci medievale*, 213.

33 For the circulation of Old Latin translations see Whealey, *Josephus on Jesus*, 73-76.

34 Castelli, "Josephus in Renaissance Italy," 403.

or avoiding the Moses miracles, Josephus heightens both Moses and God's role, and dramatizes the circumstances surrounding the stories.³⁵

In the case of baby Moses on the Nile, the biblical account does not acknowledge the peril of the situation. Moses's river voyage in the basket is quickly resolved when Pharaoh's daughter finds the child among the reeds. Furthermore, God is not mentioned (Exod. 2.2-6).³⁶ Josephus's treatment of baby Moses on the Nile is much more dramatic. In Josephus's rendition, Moses's sister frantically runs alongside the basket as opposed to watching immobile from a distance: "The river received its charge and bore it on, while Mariam(e), the sister of the child, at her mother's bidding, kept pace with it along the bank to see whither the basket would go" (2.221).³⁷ Josephus emphasizes Moses's family's faith in God to protect the child: "they placed the young child within and, launching it on the river, committed his salvation to God" (2.222). Josephus's narrative voice underscores God's miraculous salvific powers in the case of baby Moses:

Then once again did God plainly show that human intelligence is nothing worth, but that all that He wills to accomplish reaches its perfect end, and that they who, to save themselves, condemn others to destruction utterly fail, whatever diligence they may employ, while those are saved by a miracle and attain success almost from the very jaws of disaster, who hazard all by divine decree. Even so did the fate that befell this child display the power of God. (2.223)

The biblical version of the Crossing of the Sea of Reeds is almost

35 Renowned Josephus scholar Louis H. Feldman's tome *Josephus's Interpretation of the Bible* is authoritative in studying Josephus's treatment of biblical narratives. Most relevant for this study is Feldman's tenth chapter titled "Moses," in which Feldman establishes, "what factors governed Josephus's modification of the biblical narrative," 377. Feldman states: "Josephus's de-emphasis on G-d may be seen in a number of passages. And yet his treatment of the role of G-d vis-à-vis Moses would seem to contradict this tendency to de-emphasize the Divine," 425.

36 The version of the Bible referenced here and moving forward is New Oxford Annotated Version, 4th edition. This and subsequent quotes are made internally by book, chapter, and verse.

37 This and subsequent quotes from Josephus's *Antiquities* will be made internally by book and verse(s).

matter-of-fact when compared to Josephus's account:

So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at dawn the sea returned to its normal depth. As the Egyptians fled before it, the Lord tossed the Egyptians into the sea. The waters returned and covered the chariots and the chariot drivers, the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea; not one of them remained. (Exod. 14.27-28)

Josephus's version of the Crossing of the Sea of Reeds emphasizes God's role and increases the dramatic effect. Josephus's description of the water's return and drowning of Pharaoh's soldiers is preternatural, especially when augmented by God's wrath:

When, therefore, the entire army of the Egyptians was once within it, back poured the sea, enveloping and with swelling wind-swept billows descending upon the Egyptians: rain fell in torrents from heaven, crashing thunder accompanied the flash of lightning, aye and thunderbolts were hurled. In short, there was not one of those destructive forces which in token of God's wrath combine to smite mankind that failed to assemble then; for withal a night of gloom and darkness overwhelmed them. (2.343-44)

In the Bible, God commands the parting of the Sea of Reeds: "Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Why do you cry out to me? Tell the Israelites to go forward. But you lift up your staff, and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, that the Israelites may go into the sea on dry ground'" (Exod. 14.15-16). Feldman characterizes God's voice as particularly pitiless to Moses.³⁸

In Josephus's account of the Crossing of the Sea of Reeds, God's divine intervention is mentioned repeatedly. Moses addresses God through a supplication, including a declaration of faith, then the scene unfolds:

Moses, beholding this clear manifestation of God and the sea withdrawn from its own bed to give them place, set the first foot upon it and bade the Hebrews follow him and pursue their way by this God-sent road, rejoicing at the peril awaiting their advancing foes and rendering thanks to God for the salvation thus miraculously brought by Him to light. They, without more ado, sped forth with zest, destruction of the Egyptians assured of God's attendant presence. (2.339)

During the Crossing at the Sea of Reeds, Josephus shifts God's

³⁸ Feldman, *Josephus's Interpretation of the Bible*, 407.

participation in a way that heightens Moses's role as intermediary between man and God.

A Theocratic Laurentian Florence

Josephus's depiction of Moses as intercessor between the earthly and the divine was compatible with Ficino's aims. By incorporating Moses in his *prisca theologia*, particularly Josephus's Moses, Ficino was cultivating a direct link from Plato to God. This equation filled the lacuna between pre-Christian thought and Christianity.

Anthony Levi underscores Moses's privileged role in Ficino's "sacralizing neoplatonist forms of thought and expression."³⁹ In "Marsilio Ficino on power, on wisdom, on Moses" Allen explains Moses's compatibility with Ficino's thought:

One can wholly understand Ficino's attraction to the ancient observation ascribed to the second century Pythagorean, Numenius of Apamea, that Plato 'was nothing other than a second Moses speaking Attic Greek.' Indeed, in a letter written towards the very end of his life to Jacopo Rondini, bishop of Rimini, Ficino boldly calls Plato a 'follower' (sectator) of Moses. And in a letter to Braccio Martelli, he writes that Plato's thought was in derivative accord (concordia) with that of Moses.⁴⁰

Further along in Allen's study, he affirms:

The spiritual account in Exodus of Moses's ascent of Sinai and his encounter with God in a mystical darkness of unknowing, was for Ficino the model of all Platonic ascents to a One beyond being. And it was the more so for Ficino in that the events on Sinai were a prefiguring of the transfiguration of Jesus.⁴¹

Moses was the glue that held Ficino's religious-philosophical amalgam together.

An examination of the religious politics of Laurentian Florence reveals a deeper and complex motivation behind Pulci's particular parody of Moses at the heart of the Ficinian mission. Ficino's innovative religious-philosophical mission became the official

³⁹ Levi, *Renaissance and Reformation*, 125-26. See also Foster, "Types and Shadows," 390.

⁴⁰ Allen, "Marsilio Ficino on Power, on Wisdom, and on Moses," 298.

⁴¹ Allen, "Marsilio Ficino on Power, on Wisdom, and on Moses," 310.

religious politics of Medici power. Orvieto contextualizes this new religious landscape:

a new religion was brought into being in Florence, de facto autochthonous and self-referential—one that excluded the mediation of the Roman Church and attributed to the city's ruler the charisma of a high priest, indeed a pontifex of sorts, and apostle of a new cult.⁴²

Orvieto precisely characterizes the cohesion of Ficinian philosophy and Medici rule: “above all, a theocracy, with Lorenzo as its high priest.”⁴³ In 1473 Ficino wrote his *De Christiana religione* in the vernacular, modifying his formerly elitist religious philosophy to popularize and diffuse this religion to the masses. The Medici were increasingly depicted by biblical representations and often likened to the biblical Magi.⁴⁴

Moses and Ficino's Philosopher-Ruler Mission

Ficino sought to cast Lorenzo in the mold of the political philosophy that justified his rule while Medici power was beginning to eclipse the republicanism in place. Ficino guided Lorenzo along the path of philosopher-ruler, described in Plato's *Republic*, emphasized in Ficino's commentary of the work dedicated to Lorenzo. Ficino inserts Moses in his commentary persuading Lorenzo to achieve ultimate public authority through *potentia* augmented by *sapientia*. To cite Allen again: “Ficino was led to embrace Moses as the determinative example of the philosopher-ruler in his creation of a pre-Christian Christian Platonism.”⁴⁵

In his commentary to the seventh book of Plato's *Republic*, Ficino asserts: “But only after the philosopher has contemplated God, who
42 Orvieto, “Religion and literature,” 195.

43 Orvieto, “Religion and literature,” 199.

44 See Orvieto, “Religion and literature,” 198.

45 Allen, “Marsilio Ficino on Power, on Wisdom, and on Moses,” 312. Allen believes that Moses is exclusive in this regard: “While Hercules and Moses are both icons of power and godliness, and arguably of apotheosis itself, nonetheless for a Renaissance Platonist only Moses could be fully accommodated, I would argue, to the Platonic notion of the philosopher-king, the guardian who unites wisdom with power, *virtus* with *virtù*,” 309.

rules the heavens, will he, and he alone, be able to rule the earth in god-like fashion” (7.31).⁴⁶ Ficino lists leaders on earth who rule through divine directive. Ficino notes Minos who obtained laws from Jupiter through contemplation. Scipio Africanus who visited the temple of Jupiter and was rumored to be able to communicate with the gods. Next, Ficino mentions the second king of Rome Numa Pompilius, “who governed the State with religious laws” (7.31). Pompilius was thought to have personal relationships with deities transcribing their teachings in his sacred books. Ficino incorporates Moses to the discussion through a rhetorical question to his dedicatee: “And did not the Mosaic laws, by which the people of God were divinely governed, reach men through the instruction of God himself?” (7.31-32).⁴⁷

Lorenzo’s *De summo bono*

In the second book of Ficino’s Commentary on Plato’s *Republic*, Ficino reinforces a theme that repeatedly emerges as fundamental to the disconnect between the Neoplatonism and the vernacular ethos of the epoch:

Drunkenness is thus of two kinds. The first kind is under the influence of the Moon and is caused by drinking the waters of Lethe, so that the mind, being put outside itself and beneath itself, forgets things divine and staggers about in the trammels of earthly things. (2.9)

Later in his commentary Ficino opens book seven:

The wise, being endowed with divine qualities, make every effort to turn the whole focus of their mind from the earthly to the celestial, from the moving to the still, and from what is perceived through the senses to that which transcends the senses. (7.30)

James Hankins contextualizes the Ficino-Pulci polemic within Lorenzo’s Neoplatonic poem the *De summo bono*:

46 Selections from Ficino’s commentary are from Farndell’s translation found in Plato, *When Philosophers Rule*. Henceforth, references to this work will be made internally by chapter and page number. Each of Ficino’s chapters corresponds with a book from Plato’s *Republic*.

47 In Ficino’s commentary on Plato’s *Laws*, Ficino inserts Moses as a lawgiver for Plato in the fourth book: “But because he says that these mysteries are made evident by words uttered long ago, we can understand him to mean the words of Moses.” *When Philosophers Rule*, 4.99.

(Ficino) would turn Lorenzo away from the earthy, realistic and satirical poetry that he had been composing under the influence of the Pulci brothers and . . . show Lorenzo the difference between “earthly” and “heavenly” poetry . . . the DSB is about conversion. As always in the Neoplatonic tradition, conversion implies purification, turning away from the external world of nature and the senses, turning within and upwards towards the source of Being.⁴⁸

Lorenzo’s *De summo bono* was not proof that Lorenzo had completed a ficinian conversion; it signaled a moment in which Lorenzo was drawing closer to Ficino encouraged by humanists in Florence and beyond.⁴⁹ The two camps, represented by Pulci and Ficino respectively, jockeyed for Lorenzo’s favor.

Pulci’s reduction of the sacred to the mundane ran entirely counter to Ficino’s influence on display in Lorenzo’s *De summo bono*. Pulci’s focus on Moses in *Poi ch’io partii da voi* was a precise attack on Ficino’s tenets in which Moses assumed a fundamental role. As Lorenzo matured and his interests shifted, Pulci was trying to keep his *cucco* from moving on to other, more philosophical studies.⁵⁰

Ficino and another humanist Bartolomeo Scala immediately sent praise to Lorenzo for his *De summo bono*. At the same time, Scala encouraged Lorenzo to pay close attention to the moral seriousness of Platina’s *De optimo cive*, a work sent to Lorenzo from beyond Florence encouraging Lorenzo to continue along the path of philosopher-ruler, an itinerary begun by Cosimo the elder.⁵¹ Interestingly, Alison Brown describes the novelty of Platina’s work: “it is original in subtly equating the Medici with rulers like Moses and David the king, along with republican heroes, great legislators like Lycurgus and Solon, and Caesar Augustus.”⁵² Furthermore, Pulci

48 Hankins, *Humanism and Platonism*, 325, 337.

49 In this regard I agree with Polcri, *Luigi Pulci e la Chimera*, 10-11.

50 *Cucco* and *compagnuzzo* are some of the terms of endearment used by Pulci when referring to Lorenzo. See Villoresi, *La letteratura cavalleresca*, 118.

51 For more on Platina’s *De optimo cive* see Brown, “Scala, Platina, and Lorenzo de’ Medici in 1474,” and more recently, Bausi, “The Medici Defenders.”

52 Brown, *The Medici in Florence*, 225.

may fall under those “domestic tyrants” of whom Platina cautions Lorenzo.⁵³

Conclusion

Back to Ficino’s commentary on Plato’s Republic. Shortly after mentioning the drunkenness from drinking from the River Lethe, Ficino highlights Plato’s disdain for impious verse, undoubtedly with Pulci in mind: “He then expresses his abhorrence of poetical impiety, which fabricates disgraceful stories about the gods, and he forbids tales of this type to be heard” (2.11).

In the last five cantos of the *Morgante*, Pulci elevated his literary mission to prove the worth of the literary culture that he represented. Pulci continued to attack Ficino through a heightened allegory. In Canto 27 of the *Morgante* the narrator addresses the reader, accepting defeat in the polemic with Ficino and philosophy’s victory:

venuto è il tempo da filosofare;
non passerà la mia barchetta Lete,
che forse su Misen vi sentirete.

[the time for philosophy has come;
my boat will not pass Lethe,
instead on Misenus you’ll hear]
(27.40.6-8)

Even though Pulci concedes that philosophy’s time is here, he states that his boat will not pass the river Lethe, Ficino’s source for those intoxicated from excessively imbibing the terrestrial and engaging in maltreatment of the divine. Dante writes in *Inferno* 14: Letè vedrai, ma fuor di questa fossa / là dove vanno l’anime a lavarsi / quando la colpa pentuta è rimossa [Lethe you will see, but outside this ditch, there / where the souls go to be washed once their repented / guilt has been removed]” (14.136-38).⁵⁴ Pulci does not want his reader to mistake his change in style for an admission of previous guilt and

53 Bausi, “The Medici Defenders,” 245.

54 This translation is from Durling’s edition of Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*.

wrongdoing, especially with regard to his treatment of the sacred.

Pulci likens his lost battle with Ficino to a scene from the *Aeneid*. Instead of the river Lethe, you may find Pulci's boat near Cape Misenus. Misenus thought he was better than Triton and challenged him to a horn-blowing contest; he was defeated by way of his impertinence and killed (*Aen.* 6.149-235). Misenus's fatal end is a fitting analogy for Pulci's outcome in his polemic with Ficino. By way of Pulci's insolence for Ficino's philosophy and its ever-increasing function in medicean Florence, Pulci was pushed to the margins of a culture in which he had previously been at the center. For the boisterous popular versifier gripped by Medici favor, Pulci's exclusion from Medici circles might as well have been death.

Michael Maher has a PhD from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He is an Assistant Professor and Director of the Italian Studies Program at the College of Charleston in South Carolina. Dr. Maher's primary research interests focus on the vernacular culture of Renaissance Florence, particularly religious and Italian epic poetry.

Bibliography

- Alighieri, Dante. *Inferno*. Edited and translated by Robert M. Durling. Introduction and notes by Ronald L. Martinez. New York: Oxford UP, 1996.
- Allen, J.B.. "Marsilio Ficino on Power, on Wisdom, and on Moses." In *Et Amicorum: Essays on Renaissance Humanism and Philosophy*, edited by Anthony Ossa-Richardson and Margaret Meserve, 298-312. Leiden: Brill, 2018.
- Bausi, Francesco. "The Medici: Defenders of Liberty in Fifteenth-Century Florence." In *The Medici: Citizens and Masters*, edited by Robert Black and John E. Law, 239-51. Florence: Villa I Tatti, the Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies, 2015.
- Brown, Alison. "Scala, Platina, and Lorenzo de' Medici in 1474." In *Supplemetum Festivum. Studies in Honor of Paul Oskar Kristeller*, edited by James Hankins, John Monfasani, and Frederick Purnell Jr., 327-37. Binghamton: Medieval and Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1987.
- Brown, Alison. *The Medici in Florence: The Exercise and Language of Power*. Firenze: L.S. Olschki, 1993.
- Bruscagli, Riccardo. *Il Quattrocento e il Cinquecento*. Bologna: Mulino, 2005.
- Carnesecchi, Carlo. "Per la biografia di Luigi Pulci." *Archivio Storico Italiano* 17.5s (1896): 371-79.
- Castelli, Silvia. "Josephus in Renaissance Italy." In *A Companion to Josephus*, edited by Honora Howell Chapman and Zuleika Rodgers, 402-13. Malden, MA: John Wiley, 2016.
- de' Medici, Lorenzo. *Tutte le opere*. Edited by Paolo Orvieto. Roma: Salerno, 1992.
- Decaria, Alessio. *Luigi Pulci e Matteo di Francesco Castellani: Novità e testi inediti da uno zibaldone magliabechiano*. Firenze: Società Editrice Fiorentina, 2009.
- Edelheit, Amos. *Ficino, Pico and Savonarola: The Evolution of Humanist Theology 1461/2-1498*. Leiden: Brill, 2008.
- Feldman, Louis H. *Josephus's Interpretation of the Bible*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.
- Ficino, Marsilio. *De Christiana religione*. Edited by Roberto Zanzarri. Roma: Città Nuova, 2005.
- Ficino, Marsilio. *When Philosophers Rule: Ficino on Plato's Republic, Laws & Epinomis*. Translated by Arthur Farndell. London: Shephard-Walwyn, 2009.
- Foster, Brett. "'Types and Shadows': Uses of Moses in the Renaissance." In *Illuminating Moses: A History of Reception from Exodus to the Renaissance*, edited by Jane Beal, 353-406. Leiden: Brill, 2013.
- Gentile, Sebastiano. "Ficino e il platonismo di Lorenzo." In *Lorenzo de' Medici New Perspectives*, edited by Bernard Toscani, 23-48. New York: Peter Lang, 1993.

- Hankins, James. *Humanism and Platonism in the Italian Renaissance*. Rome: Storia e Letteratura, 2003.
- Jordan, Constance. *Pulci's Morgante: Poetry and History in Fifteenth-Century Florence*. Cranbury, NJ: Folger, 1986.
- Josephus. *Jewish Antiquities, Books 4-6*. Translated by H. St. J. Thackeray and Ralph Marcus. Cambridge, MA: Loeb Classical Library / Harvard UP: 1930.
- Lèbano, Edoardo, introduction and notes. *Morgante: The Epic Adventures of Orlando and His Giant Friend Morgante*, by Luigi Pulci. Translated by Joseph Tusiani. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1998.
- Levi, Anthony. *Renaissance and Reformation: The Intellectual Genesis*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2002.
- Maher, Michael. "Luigi Pulci's Parody of Josephus's *Judean Antiquities*: An Indictment of Marsilio Ficino." *Italian Culture* 36, no. 2 (2018): 65-76.
- Martelli, Mario. "Un caso di «amphibolatio». La canzona a ballo «Ragionavasi di sodo»." In *Lorenzo de' Medici Studi*, edited by Gian Carlo Garfagnini, 309-37. Firenze: Olschki, 1992.
- Orvieto, Paolo, ed. and notes. *Opere minori*, by Luigi Pulci. Milano: Mursia, 1986.
- Orvieto, Paolo. *Pulci*. Roma: Salerno Editrice, 2017.
- Orvieto, Paolo. *Pulci medievale. Studio sulla poesia volgare fiorentina del Quattrocento*. Roma: Salerno Editrice, 1978.
- Orvieto, Paolo. "Religion and literature in oligarchic, Medicean, and Savonarolan Florence." In *The Medici: Citizens and Masters*, edited by Robert Black and John E. Law, 239-51. Florence: Villa I Tatti, the Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies, 2015.
- Poleri, Alessandro. *Luigi Pulci e la Chimera: Studi sull'allegoria nel Morgante*. Firenze: Società Editrice Fiorentina, 2010.
- Pulci, Luigi. *Morgante e opere minori*. Edited and notes by Aulo Greco. 2 vols. Torino: UTET, 2006.
- Pulci, Luigi. *Sonetti extravaganti*. Edited and notes by Alessio Decaria. Firenze: Società Editrice Fiorentina, 2013.
- Stein Kokin, Daniel. "The Josephan Renaissance: Flavius and His Writings in Italian Humanist Discourse." *Viator* 47, no.2 (2016): 205-48.
- Tanturli, Giuliano. "Marsilio Ficino e il volgare." In *Marsilio Ficino. Fonti, testi, fortuna*, edited by Sebastiano Gentile and Stephane Toussaint, 183-213. Roma: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2006.
- The Bible*. New Oxford Annotated Version with Apocrypha, 4th edition. Edited by Marc Z. Brettler, Michael David Coogan, Carol Newsom, PHEME PERKINS. New York: Oxford UP, 2010.

“Trasecolare.” *Vocabolario Etimologico della Lingua Italiana di Ottorino Pianigiani*. March 10, 2021.

Vasoli, Cesare. “Ficino e il «De Christiana religione».” *Die Philosophie im 14. Und 15. Jahrhundert* 10.1 (1988): 151-91.

Villoresi, Marco. *La letteratura cavalleresca: dai cicli medievali all’Ariosto*. Roma: Carocci, 2000.

Virgil. *The Aeneid*. Translated by Sarah Ruden. New Haven: Yale UP, 2008.

Whealey, Alice. *Josephus on Jesus: The Testimonium Flavianum Controversy from Late Antiquity to Modern Times*. New York: Peter Lang, 2003.



Luigi Pulci
Fresco by Filippino Lippi