

: IX :

Girolamo Donà¹ to Giovanni Pico della Mirandola

Most learned Pico, you have taken for yourself the entire role that 1
 should be mine, for you accuse yourself of negligence in my regard
 and seek forgiveness on the very charge of which I myself am
 enormously guilty regarding you. To you it seems too little to sur-
 pass others in genius and learning unless you outdo not just others
 but even yourself in modesty and kindness. But I beg you to em-
 brace the duties connected with these virtues in such a way that
 you leave us too some possibility of fulfilling our obligations, lest,
 while you claim for yourself all aspects of said virtues, we be re-
 garded as rude and unkind. On which score, such is my impu-
 dence that I no longer excuse my own negligence but, rather, ac-
 cuse your kindness.

As for the fact that you write that you have established with me 2
 not a temporary friendship, but a permanent one, not only do I re-
 alize that I owe you a very great deal on this account, but you also
 seem to me to have properly defined friendship, which, when it is
 temporary, can no longer be friendship. Know this: I have reserved
 friendship for the choicest category of my badges of honor. For
 what more glorious thing can happen to me than by so great a man
 not only to be praised, but to be loved?

Our friend Ermolao fosters an unbelievable detachment for 3
 learning and industriousness for study, to the great profit of the er-
 udite. I see that there is something lofty and rare for which litera-
 ture can hope, as long as he is around. I store his intimacy in the
 same inner chamber in which I keep your friendship. Further-
 more, I consider nothing to be so astonishing that you cannot
 achieve it by your genius and learning, especially since I hear that
 you have left home to go there for the sake of a Greek education. I
 so commend this decision that I cannot commend it any higher.
 For “nothing is sweeter than knowing everything.”²

I envy you Poliziano, a man of most fertile and fluent genius, 4
 whose *Rusticus*³ I recently read. He struck me as being a shining
 light of our age and “a tender shoot all shaped by Zeus in line
 with truth.”⁴ I ask you, on my behalf, to pledge to him from me
 those things he can expect from a very friendly person. I shall use
 you as intermediary in inaugurating friendly relations with him for
 me, not only relying on your kindness, but also because, since you
 are most erudite, it is only fitting that I be commended to “the
 clear-sounding voice of the Muses”⁵ through you.

Farewell, and calculate that nothing is more delightful to me 5
 than a letter from you. I shall write you more things when I have a
 more extensive break.

Venice, December 16, 1484

: X :

Angelo Poliziano to his dear Girolamo Donà

Although numerous things in a recent letter of yours to our friend 1
Pico caused me pleasure, it was the opinion you offer of my
Rusticus that gave me the nudge to write to you.¹ If only it were as
true as it is flattering! I understand it, however, not so much as an
opinion about me as, instead, support for me, and a favor. I am
not such a stranger to myself as to decide that, on the subject of
myself, more than I trust myself I should trust you, who, being a
very friendly person, are for this reason a less impartial judge. Un-
less by chance, to use Horace's words, that "gentle madness" of the
poets so "makes sport of me" that I never come to grips with my-
self and never return the knapsack from my back to my chest.² But
if, like a shadow after a body, that "blind self-love" (which is called
philautia and which makes a fool of many a person) "and vainglory
lifting its empty head beyond excess"³ follow poetic art as its con-
sequence, then—let me say for the record—I'm vexed to be con-
sidered poetry's nominee, so thankless is the office, so depressing
and regrettable the reward. If I were not, then not even that
Lycian who traded "gold for bronze, a hundred oxen's worth for
that of nine"⁴ would be stupider than me.

However, my debt to you is no smaller because you hold opin- 2
ions about me (or ask that they be held by others) which neither
my conscience can acknowledge nor my sense of propriety bear.
Whether, in order to fool others, you do not grudge to see me
decked out in your own equipment (i.e., that of your accomplish-
ments), or, alternatively, you yourself are fooled and admire even
my defects, both are attributable to love—indeed, no common
love, since Achilles too dressed Patroclus in his own armor, and
Alcaeus admired even a mole on his boyfriend's knee.⁵ And so, if
you love me, as I know you do, then you surely can no longer
doubt that I love you back. For love, they say, costs nothing more
than—itself. Nevertheless, though I in turn love you loving me, I
do not in the same way reciprocally praise you praising me. My
reason? In repaying favors, one must maintain observance of that
law of Hesiod, according to which you should give back in equal
measure, or even, if you can, in more abundant measure.⁶ But
since you, given the wealth of expression you have, since you, I say,
a man in possession of that genius and that learning of yours, have
heaped upon me, a single insignificant person from the crowd, so
much praise—a whole barn-full, as they say⁷—how can I measure
back even just an equal amount, to say nothing of something ex-
tra, from the yield of my barren and uncultivated soil, unless, in
spite of it all, I reflect your words and send them flowing back to
you, like Echo?⁸ But I worry that, if I forfeit whatever you have
given me and send you back those words of praise which I possess
by your permission, I shall put my naked self on display and, like
that crow of Aesop stripped of its feathers, shall make people
laugh.⁹

At least, however, there's one thing you cannot do—prosecute 3
me for ingratitude—since this divine Pico (or should I say Phoe-
nix?¹⁰), on whose lips you always are and who is full of Muses and
Graces, undertook payment on my behalf, of his own free will,
and lightened my share of the load. Needless to say, it is by his in-
spiration that I too am driven to extol you even beyond my capac-
ity, though still less than I would like. For he is the only person
equal to the task of carrying this heavy responsibility. I am as de-
pendent on him as Plato's iron rings are on the magnet.¹¹ And he
in turn rains down into me a certain secret power, a kind of divine
possession that forces me to have capabilities in addition to those I
have on my own.¹² Like a boatswain, he marks time and spurs me
on, showing me how to praise you¹³ and, along with you, Ermolao
Barbaro, one of those people (it seems to me) left over from the
Golden Age,¹⁴ although he is more learned by far, and they were
no more virtuous. But often, having set out to rhapsodize some-
thing about the three of you, so much of a breeze lifts me toward
heaven that I fear sooner or later an Icarian fall.¹⁵ Even now, you
see that I, more or less under a spell even in a letter, am producing
something rather dithyrambic.¹⁶ Why then are you frowning?
Could it possibly escape you that I must be indulged in whatever
kind of frenzy¹⁷ this is, either because I am equally in love with ev-
eryone who is a little more than minimally civilized and am, as
they say, an “unmarked ruler,”¹⁸ or because I do not seem hid-
eously incompatible with the Muses from your point of view ei-
ther, just as I do not seem so to Pico or (I hope) Ermolao—in
other words, to the Triumvirs of Letters. If you three are showing
me even a modicum of approval, then I am already giving the
finger not only to the rabble and the schoolmasters, but even to
the philosophers. Not even Plato is spared—unless he be the Flor-
entine one.¹⁹

Farewell.

: XI :

Girolamo Donà to his dear Angelo Poliziano

I am truly aware, most learned Poliziano, that I have gathered 1
fruits of your love for me that are most welcome and delicious,
and I do not expect more copious harvests, or ones which do me
more honor, from any other source. For I see that, even with re-
spect to friendship, you respond “with the same amount, and even
more.”¹ And I recognize that which I have never doubted, namely,
that you are not only Poliziano, but also pure Politeness, since
such rare and perfect eloquence has been united with almost
boundless kindness and forbearance. Indeed, if I scrutinize the
ledger of my transactions and record each value in turn, I shall dis-
cover that, since that day on which I most recently wrote to Pico, I
have received as profit nothing more impressive than this letter of
yours. Dear gods, how Attic,² elevated, refined, and, finally, how

affectionate! To the point that, in it, supreme love seems to contend with supreme erudition, nor is it easy to tell which is winning. It is a very simple matter to deduce the reasons for each of these, since they are extremely obvious. Given your divine intellect and tireless study, your erudition is supreme entirely as a consequence of you yourself. On the other hand, the friendly feeling with which you have embraced me cannot fail to be huge—since Pico is responsible for it. Mind you, I had already begun to love you, but that “communion fusing into one”³ was missing, which, however, we shall not lack from now on, thanks to letters.

Yet I suppose you remember—to be sure, nearly five years have passed since you stayed with me—that you read to Ermolao and me, when I was dressed in black and filthy over the deaths of my parent and uncle, that golden poem about the sacrilegious and bloody murder of Giuliano.⁴ From that point on, no reference to “erudite men” was made in my presence but that you first of all sprang to mind. Soon thereafter, having always been considered great by me, you were found to be greater in your very elegant *Rusticus*. Please, therefore, rest assured that you have laid such foundations of love and obligation with me that they cannot crumble from any calamity, cannot be uprooted by any violent power. I await their fairest fruit, for me by far the most welcome of all—namely, letters from you. And not just letters, but, now and then, those most delightful poems too. Especially then, after these have reached me, I shall sing that most gentle song of Theocritus:

Of this may all my house be full. Not sleep
nor spring's surprise more sweet, nor blooms to bees,
than dear to me is poesy—Poliziano's.⁵

Farewell, and love me, by whom you are loved best.
Venice, June 8, 1485

: XII :

Girolamo Donà to his dear Angelo Poliziano

Hello, my dear Poliziano. I have put off for such a long time responding to your very kind letter that I suppose that, rather than writing you back, I'm now just writing you, period. Please ascribe this either to public responsibilities or to private laziness, as long as you forswear any suspicion of either forgetfulness or disrespect. For my part, my dear Poliziano, I think one should compare no treasure to a friend who is a man of integrity and learning. Nor does a richer supply of good fortune accrue to a person from any other source than genuine, unadulterated friendship which virtue and integrity have secured. Thus it happens that I, from afar, have the constant habit of admiring and loving, to the greatest possible extent, that Academy you have under Lorenzo, father of his country, in which the magnificent rewards of the finest arts and the

finest morals act together in harmony against the most stubborn stains of the mind: vice and ignorance. In short, I am hoping that you will easily convince yourself that, although I have been rather late in writing back, I nevertheless took tremendous pleasure in your most kind and erudite letter. In it one could observe that magnificently tranquil existence you all share and envy you the serene setting of your studies. Here, both public and private matters pull us in every direction, and what we have are basically stolen moments, not studies. I congratulate you all for your most delightful poetry and most literary leisure, which, from afar but without restraint, I support, endorse, and lend my best hopes, not only for your sake, but also for that of the liberal arts. But enough about this.

I know that, in your house, there are numerous volumes of Alexander of Aphrodisias,¹ on various kinds of learned subjects, but especially on natural philosophy. Here where I am² there are several works of his which are wonderfully erudite and substantial. Among these are two volumes *On the Soul* which I read through over the course of the past few days. One of these volumes begins like this: “Regarding the soul, what it is, and what is its essence...”³ This booklet, the one I have here, breaks off practically just after the beginning. I want you to let me know whether you have there at home, in that very choice library of the Medici, something more complete and undamaged. But if, as I hope, it is inviolate and intact, you will do me an enormous favor if you will have the first chapter of this book copied and see to it that it is sent to me. If you entrust the job to a professional copyist, even a relatively slow one, it will take him scarcely an hour.

Farewell. Tell my friend Pico to take care. When I say “Pico,” I mean, in addition, *all* learned men. Again, farewell.

Milan, March 31, 1490

: XIII :

Angelo Poliziano to his dear Girolamo Donà

Although I am under the constant power of incredible longing for your letters, for the reason that I am granted fruit from their erudition, pleasure from their elegance, supreme honor from their author’s prestige, nevertheless I easily tolerate occasional deferral, either because I do not want to distract you from more important pursuits, or because I doubtless want to use your example as an excuse for myself, since by now I too owe people a thousand letters. You may ask what the causes are of such a large debt. I shall not deny that the first of these is laziness, which in one way or another has always been one of my favorite things. Nevertheless, it is also the case that tiny responsibilities—or better still, inane and very irritating bits of nonsense—divide up my free time piecemeal.

For if anyone wants a motto fit to be read on the hilt of a sword 2
 or the signet of a ring, if anyone wants a line of verse for a bed or a
 bedroom, if anyone wants something distinctive (not for silver,
 mind you, but for pottery pure and simple!), then straightaway he
 dashes over to Poliziano. And already you can see that every wall
 has been smeared by me (as if by a snail) with diverse themes and
 inscriptions. Someone, for example, pesters me for some clever
 turns of Fescennine verse to use at a Bacchanal,¹ another, for a pi-
 ous script to use at meetings, another, for some tear-jerking dirges
 for the cithara, another, for some dirty little tunes for an all-night
 party. One fool (but I'm a bigger one) tells me all about his own
 love affairs; another requests a cypher which will reveal itself only
 to his girlfriend and keep others busy conjecturing in vain. I omit
 the ill-timed chatter of the rhetoricians and the nonsense of the
 versifiers—in awe of themselves and their own work, as is typi-
 cal—all of which I put up with every day, my ears drooping.²
 Why mention the rabble (from the city or the country, take your
 pick), which throughout the city drags me over to its own prob-
 lems, like a buffalo by the nose.³ Thus, as long as I do not dare
 deny anything to the people aggressively pressuring me, I am
 forced both to bother my other friends and in particular (this is
 the really annoying thing) to take advantage of my dear Lorenzo
 de' Medici's good nature. As a result, so little space among all
 these things is left to me for writing or commenting that even my
 hourly priestly office is pared away practically bit by bit—some-
 thing scarcely forgivable, I think.⁴ In short, although I am doing
 nothing, all the same I am never at leisure. On the contrary, as
 long as I am compelled to belong to everybody, I can never really
 belong to myself—or to anyone.⁵ So then, if at any point in the
 future I put off or skip altogether a response to you, know that, as
 usual, I was immediately kept busy doing nonsense.

Our friend Lorenzo de' Medici, as a consequence either of your 3
 letters, which I always read to him in the interest of my own good
 name, or of the testimony of this great man Pico, who regularly at-
 tributes a very great deal to you, so esteems you already that he
 nearly competes with me. He was marvelously pleased, also in the
 name of scholarship, that Ermolao will be sent on an embassy to
 Rome, that is to say, to a place in everyone's eyesight.⁶ We so ear-
 gerly look forward to seeing him that we have practically worn him
 out with our expectation. But if, once he has been given hospital-
 ity along his way, he will be in a hurry to leave us, well, right now I
 declare and decree a bad day for the man's robe, a bad day for his
 hem!⁷

As for the books of Alexander which you say are *On the Soul*, we 4
 ourselves have absolutely none of them here. But I did not even
 think they were extant, which you can observe as well from the
 very list that Seratico sent you.⁸ Pico and I instead ask you, when
 you have returned to Venice (any day now, they tell us), to make it
 available to Lorenzo de' Medici's copyist for duplication. I myself,
 already last year, put a number of very sharp philosophical ques-
 tions by this same Alexander into Latin.⁹ But Seratico reports that
 you too are translating something or other by the same writer.

Furthermore, Grimani,¹⁰ without my asking, has promised to send me, this summer, a second manuscript, one which he had earlier lent to you. From all this I am guessing that it could have happened that, by complete chance, both of us have translated the same book. If my reasoning is not wrong then I am of course thinking already about the sponge, and I ask you to let me know about this as soon as possible, so that I can at least save myself the actual work of the file.¹¹

Farewell, and put in a good word for me with the two Jacopos, 5
the one from Volterra, and Antiquari,¹² twin paragons of humanity and integrity.

Florence, April 22, 1490

: XIV :

Girolamo Donà to his dear Angelo Poliziano

I have received the *Miscellanea*. I raced through it. Very enjoyable reading, in which anyone even of extraordinary learning would be able to find pleasure and profit. But, you will say, judgment is hasty if it comes right away. But when the matter before us is a literary one, we can deliver a judgment about you while still on our feet, courtroom formalities set aside. Indeed, no one worries about engaging Poliziano on matters of learned controversy, even when the contest is in the dark.¹ In that work, however, you ascribe to me more than I either recognize or request. Continue (as you are doing) to foster the liberal arts, and do not worry about the stings of windbags and smatterers. Bold and illustrious undertakings have never been spared envy. "All the same (better envy than pity) neglect not fair deeds, but with a just rudder, steer"² Latin literature. Indeed, those who will derive the most profit from this work may well be those who will turn their noses up at it.³

Farewell.

Milan, October 27, 1489

: XV :

Angelo Poliziano to his dear Girolamo Donà

The strength of my authority is not such that it can endure with- 1
out damage the gale-force exhalations of envious persons, unless, ready to fall on its own account, it be propped up, as if on struts, by the testimonials of a few of you. Since publishing my *Miscellanea*, I have in fact received letters from many people, offering, as is usual, praise and congratulations, but somehow it is as a result of your judgment and that of Barbaro, of Pico, and of very few others of your caliber that I value myself highly enough to seem then, finally, to stand upright, having swept your votes. Another letter

from your parts, however, was recently delivered to me, from Jacobo Antiquari. It was wonderfully substantial and erudite. Although the man was otherwise barely known to me personally, nevertheless my dear Lorenzo de' Medici had often recommended him as a man of letters, a man of character, a man of wisdom. And in that letter one certainly does not look hard for noble talent, or images modeled on antiquity, or that elaborate embroidery that is your shared fashion, or, in short, any ornament of the more refined style, with the result that, unless I am mistaken, he should by all rights be inducted onto the bench of your Court of Appeals. But I leave that up to you.

The same Lorenzo read, not without great interest, the letter you sent me,¹ and when he had finished he so praised it for its very choice wording that I too, being there, was treated to a great eulogy of your fortunate pen. Indeed, although that man has always attributed to me more than I deserve, nevertheless, as he read your letter, he seemed more inclined to support his own judgment about me, and from that day on to rate me somewhat higher than had been his custom previously. Do you, therefore, now understand how much I am in your debt on account of your letter, through which it has come to pass that Lorenzo is now pleased with himself because I do not displease? For this reason, I ask you, when you have a break from affairs of state, to write now and then to your Poliziano, and to consider that you are sending him, not letters, but a salary, and benefices, and marks of honor—in short, all the comforts of human life. Although Lorenzo has always been for him² the one source of these, he seems from now on ready to grant ones that are greater by the same measure by which he understands the same man to find new favor with you, that is, with the most conscientious censors of the liberal arts.

Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, light of all learning, appends his greetings to you, and we both ask that you communicate the same to Merula and to Puteolano.³

Farewell.

Florence, December 1, 1489