In the spring of 1485, Ficino wrote a letter to Ermolao Barbaro, the Venetian humanist scholar with whom he had been having an intermittent correspondence on love and friendship. He gave to this letter the title *Charitatis Laus*, the praise of Love.¹ In Ficino’s writings we cannot consider praise without also considering love, as the two are intertwined: his praise is an expression of his love and, for him, love is best expressed through praise. Through the four decades spanned by his correspondence it seems that the element of praise sounds ever more clearly as the years advance, while the engagement with love deepens and intensifies.² This paper will examine three particular aspects of praise in Ficino’s writings that have some bearing on this: first, his use of praise as encouragement at the personal level; secondly, how he negotiates the dangerously fluid boundary between praise and outright flattery; and thirdly, his use of a blend of love and praise of the divine that becomes a potent source of creative energy.

¹ *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino*, translated by members of the Language Department of the School of Economic Science, London, 8 vols. to date (London: Shepheard–Walwyn, 1975–), vol. 7, 12. All English quotations of Ficino’s letters in this paper are taken from this edition, which will be referred to hereafter as *Letters*, citing volume and letter number. Page numbers will only be given in citations from longer letters. Quotations from letters not yet published in translation will be cited from the *Epistolae* in *Opera Omnia* (see fn. 2 below). For the dating of this particular letter, see Paul Oskar Kristeller, ‘Marsilio Ficino e Venezia’, in *Studies in Renaissance Thought and Letters*, 4 vols. (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1996), vol. 4, p. 255.

² The earliest dated letter in the collection of twelve books that he published is from December 1457; the last is from December 1494. Some further extant letters from the last five years of his life postdate the edited collection. Ficino circulated sections of his letter collection in manuscript before the first printed edition of 1495 (Venice: Mattheus Capcasa). The collection was reprinted in 1497 by Antonio Koberger, in Nuremberg, and is more readily found in Ficino’s *Opera Omnia*, 2 vols. (Basel, 1561 and 1576, repr. Turin: Bottega d’Erasmo, 1959, 1962, 1979, 1983; Paris: Phénix Editions, 2000), vol. 1, pp. 607–964. There was also a Paris edition of the *Opera Omnia* in 1641. A critical edition of Book 1 is found in Sebastiano Gentile, *Marsilio Ficino: Lettere* (Florence: Leo S. Olschki Editore, 1990), and Book 2 (2010). For textual emendations of subsequent volumes, see the respective volumes of *Letters*. 
Many of the examples considered will be drawn from Ficino’s letters because they provide concise statements, honed to a specific purpose, in a particular context of time and place. In other words, they are examples of praise in practice, not just discussions in theory. As Ficino says, to his long-time friend Antonio Calderini,

> You often ask me, Antonio, to define the virtues for you, expecting from me perhaps those very detailed analyses of the Aristotelians and Stoics. Calderini, this is not the way of our school of Plato [...]. I shall be very brief in my definition, [...] as it is better to practise the virtues than to know about them.³

However, comments on praise also abound in Ficino’s other works, some of which will be cited.⁴ Among the letters, there are some twenty-five to which Ficino annexed the title ‘Praise’ of one sort or another. But mere titles can be misleading: some of these are orations in praise of philosophy or medicine or matrimony, which, though they might usefully be compared with Ciceronian norms of oratory, are not of primary concern here, as our focus is on praise of individuals. As Peter Godman points out, a letter is ‘more personal than an oration’⁵ and it is to these more personal statements that we should turn.

Praise as encouragement

The *Praise of Love* of 1485, despite its rather grandiose title, is not an oration but a personal letter, expressing praise of Barbaro. Ficino starts with the words of St Paul to the Corinthians and of St John the Divine, selecting those phrases which exactly fit the uncertainties expressed in Barbaro’s letter to which this is a reply:

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⁴ Besides the letters, I have drawn upon Ficino’s translation of Hermes, completed in 1463, printed in 1471, his commentary on Plato’s *Symposium* (*De Amore*) published in manuscript in 1469, *On the Christian Religion* (1474–6), the *Platonic Theology* (published 1482), the *Three Books on Life* (1489) and his Commentary on the Epistles of St Paul (unfinished in 1499).