CHAPTER 10

Marsilio Ficino as a Reader of Proclus and Most Notably of Proclus’ *In Parmenidem*

*Michael J.B. Allen*

To understand the depth of Ficino’s encounter with Proclus’ works and particularly with his *In Parmenidem*, we must begin with the Proclian works that had been rendered into Latin *ad litteram* in the thirteenth century by the Flemish Dominican, William of Moerbeke. In May 1268 Moerbeke finished rendering Proclus’ *Elements of Theology*, which survives in at least 27 manuscripts and was the most widely diffused of his translations.¹ It was cited by Thomas Aquinas, Henry of Ghent, and others, and was the object of several commentaries. Ficino too cited this translation in one of his earliest writings, and made excerpts from the Greek text along with a new Latin translation of the work which is now lost.² In the twelfth century Nicolaus of Methone had written a *Refutatio* attacking the *Elements*, and in a manuscript of this *Refutatio* which Ficino owned (Ms Paris BnF Gr. 1256), we have Ficino’s brief notes on Proclus’ first six propositions.³

Moerbeke also translated the three influential short treatises of Proclus on providence, fate, and the existence of evil, completing the task in Corinth in

---


² Ibid. 198.

February 1280. These survive in at least thirteen manuscripts; and the Greek original, long considered lost, has been partially excavated from an attack on Proclus compiled by Isaac Sebastocrator. Ficino made explicit references to these treatises in his commentary on the Areopagite’s great work, On the Divine Names, a work which we now realise was indebted to the treatises and not vice versa.

Moerbeke’s Latin rendering of Proclus’ In Timaeum appears to be fragmentary and exists in only two manuscripts; whether he translated more than the surviving excerpts is unknown. Kristeller suggests that the work remained eclipsed by the continuing impact of Calcidius’ Middle Platonic In Timaeum, widely consulted and repeatedly copied in the Middle Ages and printed several times in the 16th century. Nonetheless, the Greek text of Proclus’ In Timaeum also circulated in the Renaissance, and we still have copies owned by Bessarion and Ficino and excerpts by Patrizi. Ficino had access in fact to two manuscript copies: the one he owned is partial in that it is missing the second half of the third book, the other, only recently identified, is complete. Gentile’s recent edition of the second book of Ficino’s letters has a number of references to Proclus’ In Timaeum and this suggests an indebtedness that needs further exploration in other Ficino texts, including of course Ficino’s own In Timaeum. Interestingly, Pico quoted extensively from Proclus’ In Timaeum in the Conclusiones he attributed to Porphyry and Iamblichus, and he was clearly using the commentary as a doxographical resource.

The last of Moerbeke’s Proclus translations was that of the massive In Parmenidem which comments on everything in Plato’s dialogue up to the

4 Procli Diadochi tria opuscula (De providentia, libertate, malo) latine Guillelmo de Moerbeke vertente et Graece ex Isaacii Sebastocratoris aliorumque scriptis collecta, ed. Helmut Boese (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1960).
5 Kristeller, “Proclus as a Reader,” 199.
6 Ibid.