FLIGHT IN THE RENAISSANCE

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The air is female. Or so the ancients thought. We have it on the best of authority: alluding to the idea that the region of the third element is the domain of Hera, Plato points out in passing that the Greek word aer anagrams her name.¹ Empedocles, credited with the full formulation of the four-element system, put Hera’s dominance of the air into the context of the whole cosmos:

Hear first the four roots of all things, bright Zeus and life-bearing Hera and Aidoneus, and Nestis, who moistens the springs of men with their tears. Now by Zeus [his commentator goes on to explain] he means the seething and the aether, by life-bearing Hera the moist air, and by Aidoneus the earth; and by Nestis, spring of men, he means as it were moist seed and water.²

The feminine character of the air was adopted by Cicero, through whose De natura deorum it was most particularly transmitted to Renaissance scholarship:

The air, lying between the sea and the sky, is according to the Stoic theory deified under the name belonging to Juno, sister and wife of Jove, because it resembles and is closely connected with the aether; they made it female and assigned it to Juno because of its extreme softness.³

In slightly modified form, the idea is attributed to the Egyptians by Diodorus Siculus:

The air, they say, they called Athena, as the name is translated, and they considered her to be the daughter of Zeus and conceived of her as a virgin, because of the fact that the air is by its nature uncorrupted and occupies the highest part of the entire universe; for the latter reason also the myth arose that she was born from the head of Zeus.⁴

Softness and virginity were not the only attributes of
femininity to become associated with the air. In post-
classical times Juno was established in myth as the presiding
goddess of the air for somewhat less attractive
reasons: unpredictability, sudden changes of mood, and
liability to storms seemed especially female, while the mixed
nature of the atmosphere suggested analogies with the
troubling duality of virgin and whore.\(^5\) Fallen man’s
necessary involvement with woman found a parallel in his
inescapable dependence on the air.

For mediaeval and Renaissance scientists the air was in
many respects the most interesting of the elements. Often
identified, or closely associated, with the idea of the soul, it
was the medium connecting earthbound humanity with the
heavens. All Renaissance cosmologists were familiar with the
classical idea that it was divided into three main
regions: the lowest, in which we live, was warm, moist, and
often polluted; the middle region, in which most weather
phenomena originated, was cold and turbulent; the upper-
most, close to the problematical region of fire, was warm,
clear, immaculate, and totally calm.\(^6\) The air thus partook
both of divine and of human nature, its uppermost part
sharing something of the purity of the heavens, while the
lowest was not only changeable but also often sullied and
corrupted by smoke, fog, bad odours, and various
“miasmas.” In addition to being subject to change, the air
could be highly dangerous and destructive since, according
to Aristotelian meteorology, it was responsible, in the form
of exhalations, not only for storms but also for earth-
quakes.\(^7\)

The ethical implications of this anthropomorphic ap-
proach to the atmosphere are several times explicitly taken
up in Renaissance philosophy. In what must rank as the most
comprehensive Renaissance treatise on the air, Erasmus
Francisci’s *Der Wunder = reiche Uberzug unserer
Nider = Welt, oder Erd = umgebende Luft = Kreys,*\(^8\) we are
offered a direct comparison between the observable changes
in the lower region of the atmosphere and the mutability of
fallen human nature. When properly considered, Francisci
asserted, the air may be seen to show characteristics
analogous to man’s capacity to be good or bad, industrious