

Susan Byrne. *Ficino in Spain*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015. 364 pp. ISBN: 978-1-4426-5056-5. €75.77.

Susan Byrne is currently a professor of Hispanic Studies at the University of Nevada. She worked at Yale University (2008–2016), the State University of New York (2006–2008), and Fordham University (2004–2006). She published *Law and History in Cervantes' Don Quixote* (University of Toronto Press, 2012) and *The Corpus Hermeticum and Three Spanish Poets* (Juan de la Cuesta, 2007).

In her most recent monograph, *Ficino in Spain*, Byrne, interested in the history of ideas, literature, and the Italo-Hispanic cultural exchanges in early modernity, is invested in a precise historiographic debate. Byrne recalls it was Jacob Burckhardt who, in his vision of the artistic and intellectual developments of the Renaissance, excluded Spain from the general process (he did so based on the long tradition of the “Black Legend”),<sup>1</sup> and argues that subsequent Spanish scholarship that addressed the Hispanic letters of the period continued this idea. Subsequently intellectuals emphasized that Spanish culture developed in isolation in relation to the developments deployed in Western Europe, thereby defending a “purist” vision of the Hispanic world. In this process, the influence of the ideas of Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499) in early modern Spain was minimized, or directly denied.

Relying primarily on the extensive scholarship of Michael J.B. Allen on the “profound impact” of Ficino’s work on European Renaissance culture as well as on the studies of Christopher Celenza and Brian P. Copenhaver on the history of Renaissance philosophy, but going deeper into the specific case of Spain, Byrne’s central objective is to demonstrate the imprint of Ficinian thought (expressed in its translations, books, letters and treatises) among the most important referents of the Spanish letters of the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries.

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1. Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860) (New York: Oxford University Press, 1938).

Byrne focusses particularly on the sixteenth century, where she states that Ficino's influence was significant among Spanish scholars who considered him, along with Plato and Hermes Trismegistus, as an "orthodox" author in the context of the Counter-Reformation and the Inquisition. Since the Ficinian *corpus* was not challenged in terms of heresy, the authors of the Spanish letters adopted and adapted his thoughts to use as a starting point for their own representations of the culture of Spain. This influence was long-lasting and can also be traced in the next two centuries. Thus, Byrne emphasizes that her analysis of Spanish contribution (based on the influence of Ficino's hermeticism and neoplatonism) to the early modern European general culture, contradicts and challenges the current dominant interpretation of the Renaissance.

To make this argument, Byrne meticulously discusses a heterogeneous spectrum of Hispanic sources (dialogues, stories, poetry, legal and miscellaneous compilations), structuring her book with an introduction, six chapters, and conclusions, followed by indexes of notes and bibliography (the book also contains 20 images with very representative reproductions of vintage texts by way of illustration).

In chapter 1, "Ficino in Spanish Libraries," the existing volumes of Ficino's works in the most important libraries and documentary reservoirs of present-day Spain are listed (Historical Library of the Complutense University, Columbine Chapter Library of Seville, Royal Library of the Monastery of *El Escorial*, Historical General Library of the University of Salamanca). In this highly detailed chapter, each of the texts, the number of preserved specimens, and their precise registration is indicated. Here Byrne demonstrates the presence of not only Ficino's famous *De triplici Vita* (1489), but also his short treatise on the plague (*Epidemiarum antidotus*) in Latin, together with his translations into Spanish from 1553, 1564 and 1598; his *De Christiana religione* (1476) as well as his annotated translation of Plato's works, *Platonis Opera omnia* (1484), which circulated extensively in Spain since the end of the fifteenth century and throughout the sixteenth, both in copies and in

printed manuscripts; and lastly, *Opera omnia* of Ficino itself (published in 1561 for the first time), appears referenced as well as its *epistolae* which the Florentine began to compile in the 1470s (and were published in 1495).

In chapter 2, “Ficino as Authority in Sixteenth-Century Spanish Letters,” Byrne exhaustively identifies references to the authority of Ficino that were made by Spanish scholars in diverse areas of knowledge, thereby demonstrating his importance in and for Spanish letters. Among the many examples highlighted are the representations of the *De triplici vita* on the magical stones that were expressly consigned by the imperial chronicler Pedro Mexia in his *Silva de varia lección* (1540) and also in the *Diálogos familiares de la agricultura cristiana* (1589) of Juan de Pineda, while the medical-astrological-curative conceptions of the *De Vita* are mentioned, albeit critically, in *La conservación de la salud del cuerpo y del alma...* (1597) by the doctor Blas A. Miraval.

In chapter 3, “Ficino as Hermes Trismegistus: The Corpus Hermeticum or Pimander,” Byrne focuses on Spanish literature that cited Ficino’s translation into Latin of the *Corpus Herméticum* (1463), which was published under the title of *Pimander* (1471). She also discusses the Ficinian translation itself, thereby noting that it was in turn translated into Spanish by Diego Guillén de Ávila (1485). Perhaps one of the most critical points of the analysis is reached when the Latin text of Ficino is carefully compared with that Castilian translation (120-29), finding important similarities and differences for further academic research.

In chapter 4, “Persistence and Adaptation of Hermetic-Neoplatonic Imagery,” Byrne elaborates on the resonances of Hermetic-Neoplatonic imagery in the Spanish letters of the sixteenth-seventeenth centuries, regardless of whether Ficino or Hermes Trismegistus is explicitly mentioned. Byrne believes she finds echoes of Florentine thought expressed in his *De Sole* in *Don Quijote* by Miguel de Cervantes (152-54). Although this argument about Ficinian influence in *Don Quijote* is not convincing (Cervantes wrote his famous text in a ridiculous sense), her analysis of the case of Lope de Vega is more acceptable. Here Byrne shows that the represen-

tations of fire understood as the end of mortal life, as expressed in the *Pimander*, are found in some verses of Lope de Vega's *La Dama Boba* (1613); furthermore, Ficino is explicitly quoted in a letter written in 1624 as a source of authority for his own sonnets to Pico de la Mirándola's *Heptaplus*. Finally, when Lope de Vega represented the "Divine Mind" in his *La calidad elemental resiste*, Ficino is specifically quoted in "*Marsilio Ficino*" and "*Mercurio en el Pimandro*" (156–59).

In chapter 5, "Ficino as Plato," and chapter 6, "Persistence of Political-Economic Platonism," the influences of the Ficinian translations of Plato's dialogues in Hispanic literature are studied. Here Byrne points out similarities between the Platonic thought commented by the Florentine and the verses of the mystic San Juan de la Cruz (180–84), as well as in the production of the real chronicler Antonio de Guevara, the jurist Arce de Otálora, the political philosopher Fox Morcillo (192–98), *Don Quixote* by Cervantes (206–8), and Jesuit Juan Eusebio Nieremberg, among others (209–10).

During the last decade, I repeatedly demonstrated that: 1) in the *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*—published in 2005, but still the richest record in the history of Western esotericism to date<sup>2</sup>—the treatment of esotericism in early-modern Spain is marginal or absent, and, 2) specialized international scholarship on this same period that was published in the last twenty years focused on the German, English, French, Italian, Scandinavian and Eastern European cases, thus likewise generally excluding the Spaniards or addressing them only tangentially.<sup>3</sup>

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2. Wouter J. Hanegraaff, et al., *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism* (Leiden, Brill, 2005).

3. "Esoterismo y religión en la España del Siglo XVI. Stanihurst, de Santiago y la defensa de la alquimia," *Reflexão* 42, no. 2 (2017): 199–211; "Apologética de la alquimia en la corte de Felipe II. Richard Stanihurst y su 'El Toque de Alquimia' (1593)," *Magallánica. Revista de Historia Moderna* 2, no. 4 (2016): 95–117; "Arte separatoria e hijos del arte en las prácticas y representaciones de Diego de Santiago (Sevilla, 1598) y el lugar de España en el Esoterismo Occidental," *Annales de Historia Antigua, Medieval y Moderna* 49 (2015): 79–103; "Magia y polémicas antimágicas en la España bajo medieval. Enrique de Villena, su Tratado de fascinación o de aojamiento y los límites de la ortodoxia cristiana," *Revista Prohistoria* 17, no. XV (2012): 1–24; "Esoterismo y política de Felipe II en la España del Siglo de Oro. Reinterpretando al círculo esotérico filipino en El Escorial: Juan de Herrera, Giovanni Vincenzo Forte, Diego de Santiago, Richard Stanihurst," *Veredas da História* III, no. 2 (2010).

In this current state of the field, Byrne's book is thus significant, particularly in two of its chapters. Chapter 1 is an important reference to find texts, manuscripts, and books linked to esotericism that are preserved in Spanish repositories. The third chapter is an excellent platform to continue expanding the appropriations of Ficinian representations and the tradition of "*Hermes Trismegisto*" in Renaissance Spain. Therefore Byrne's book, with its own methodology that draws from the history of ideas, literary studies, and comparative literature, emerges as an important contribution for those who are interested in the cultural history of esotericism in Spain, and indeed in Western Europe between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries more generally.

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