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FICINO, LUCRETIUS AND « SEMEN »*

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In the perspective of a critical edition of Ficino's *De amore*, an unexpected question is the origin of Ficino's extravagant *lectio* of one verse of Lucretius. In his *De amore* VII, 11 Ficino¹ quotes *De rerum natura* IV, 1066 as follows: « Nec retinere semen » meaning « Do not withhold your sperm ».

Indeed premodern as well as modern editions of Lucretius always give the following hemistich: « Nec retinere semel » meaning « Do not withhold once », in other words, do not « reserve » yourself exclusively for one single unhappy love, while you could purge your soul from amorous despair with somebody else.

This particular rendering has gone unspotted so far, for in reading « semen » and not « semel » Ficino altered the Lucretian verse. The question is: was the alteration deliberate or accidental? Moreover it has gone unnoticed how such particular might be essential, since so much has been written about Ficino, love and Lucretius, without a more precise assessment of how Ficino transcribed *De rerum natura* IV, 1066.

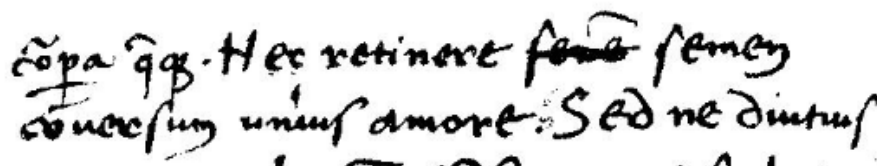
In fact, both modern editions of Ficino's *De amore* in the Latin version, the one by Raymond Marcel and the other by Pierre Laurens, equally ignore the reading « semen », which neither appears in the critical apparatus nor in the text reproducing the adverb « semel » as usual.² This singular omission depends on

* *Nuptialia* for Ellen De Doncker and Andrea Aldo Robiglio.

¹ Ficino's *De amore* is edited in MARSILE FICIN, *Commentaire sur le Banquet de Platon*, ed. RAYMOND MARCEL, Les Belles Lettres, Paris 1956; MARSILE FICIN, *Commentaire sur le Banquet de Platon, Commentarium in Convivium Platonis*, ed. PIERRE LAURENS, Les Belles Lettres, Paris 2002. Hereafter, I examine the possible reasons why the editors did not acknowledge Ficino's transcription of « semen » rather than « semel ». I wish to thank the anonymous referees who discussed and corrected my text.

² MARSILE FICIN, *Commentaire sur le Banquet*, ed. MARCEL, p. 256; MARSILE FICIN, *Commentaire sur le Banquet*, ed. LAURENS, p. 237. As a reminder, in their edition Marcel and successively Laurens transcribed the text only from MS Vat. Lat. 7705. Considering the extant twenty manuscripts of the *De amore*, we still need a true critical edition based on more than a single codex, see SEBASTIANO GENTILE, « Per la storia del testo del *Commentarium in Convivium di Marsilio Ficino* », *Rinascimento*, n.s. 21 (1981), p. 3–27; ID., « *Commentarium in Convivium de amore / El libro dell'Amore di Marsilio*

Marcel's inadvertance in reviewing the text on folio 119v of the codex Città del Vaticano, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat. Lat. 7705, entirely autograph, where Ficino wrote obviously « nec retinere semen » after a deleted word, perhaps « senem » as if it happened by *lapsus calami*.



The image shows a close-up of a handwritten Latin manuscript. The text is written in a cursive hand. The first line reads "cōpa q̄q. Nec retinere ~~senem~~ semen". The second line reads "concessum unius amore. Sed ne diutius". The correction from "senem" to "semen" is clearly visible.

MS Città del Vaticano, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat. Lat. 7705, fol. 119v

Should we jump to the hazardous conclusion that we find here some strange spelling error corrected by Ficino in his own handwriting, yet with another new error?

The only serious philological hypothesis leads us to suppose that Ficino wrote intentionally « semen » and not « semel ». To put it differently, he certainly made a seemingly spelling error (« senê ») but unmistakably corrected it into « semen ». The study of his autograph tells probably the truth.

Interestingly, the vernacular version and self-translation of Ficino's *De amore* under the title *El libro dello amore*, confirms this view, since it repeats: « in nessun modo ritenere el seme ». ³ Yet here again the publisher, who refers correctly to the Lucretian source *De rerum natura* IV 1063–1066 albeit without quoting it, did not notice Ficino's intervention, so that the anomalous « seme » for *semen* got once more unmentioned. As a matter of fact, in no way the modern reader of the *De amore* who relies exclusively on those editions, can guess Ficino's peculiar mode of quoting Lucretius.

But « semen » also occurs in other codices of the *De amore* checked for the purpose of this note, first and foremost the MS Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Plut. 82.06, fol. 296r, which is well known to be the official and highly reliable codex prepared for Lorenzo il Magnifico.

In brief, the variant « semen » in the MS Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat. Lat. 7705 reflects the will to boldly elucidate a suggestive Lucretian verse that Ficino found probably insufficiently clear for his own philosophical purpose. In truth, at this stage, it is impossible to say whether Marsilio believed he was returning to the authentic meaning or was simply playing on the signification

Ficino, in ALBERTO ASOR ROSA (ed.), *Letteratura italiana. Le opere*, vol. I: *Dalle origini al Cinquecento*, Einaudi, Torino 1992, p. 743–767.

³ MARSILIO FICINO, *El libro dell'Amore*, ed. SANDRA NICCOLI, Leo S. Olschki, Firenze 1987 (INSR Studi e Testi, 16), p. 209.

of the verse in one of the so-called manuscripts « Itali » of Lucretius at his disposal.⁴

In the future one should check if all the manuscripts of the *De amore* bear similitude on this variant. Interestingly enough, I have found two other telling samples among the codices of the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana: MS Plut. 35.32, fol. 88r, by an anonymous editor defined as *doctus* by Bandini, and Plut. 35.28, fol. 85v, the latter bearing a red *n* above the *l* of « semel », as to suggest Ficino's alternative option. At least one element militates in favour of the above hypothesis concerning MS Plut. 35.28, for it was penned by Bartolomeo Fonizio, a skillful humanist and Ficino's friend. Fonizio's codex also shows in the margin an explanatory note *Remedia contra amorem* appearing very close to *Modus solvendi ab amore*, which is the title of chapter VII, 11 in *De amore*. It also recalls the alternative *Curatio amoris* in the aforementioned MS Plut. 82.06 dedicated to the Magnifico, fol. 95v. Meanwhile the other codex Plut. 35.32, in a sixteenth-century handwriting, suggests some link with Poliziano's milieu and the *Miscellanea*. We remain in the Ficinian circle.

One has to wonder why the slight but significant change introduced by Ficino was overlooked by scholars. I presume that few of them could imagine the reputedly prudish Ficino otherwise than troubled by the avowedly sexual

⁴ In 1417 Poggio Bracciolini sent to Niccolò Niccoli his apograph of a now lost antique codex from Murbach or Fulda. After Bracciolini's apograph, other copies were made during the Quattrocento, see at least MICHAEL D. REEVE, « The Italian Tradition of Lucretius », *Italia medioevale e umanistica* 23 (1980), p. 27–48; ID., « The Italian Tradition of Lucretius Revisited », *Aevum* 79 (2005), p. 115–164. We do not know which copy of Lucretius was perused by Ficino, but on Ficino and Lucretius see: GIUSEPPINA BOCCUTO, « La presenza di Lucrezio negli scritti filosofici di Marsilio Ficino », *Atene e Roma* 32 (1987), p. 152–166; JAMES G. SNYDER, « Marsilio Ficino's Critique of the Lucretian Alternative », *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 72 (2011), p. 165–181; SEBASTIANO GENTILE, « Ficino, Epicuro e Lucrezio », in JAMES HANKINS, FABRIZIO MEROI (eds.), *Rebirth of Platonic Theology*, Leo S. Olschki, Firenze 2013 (INSR Atti di convegni, 27), p. 119–135: 122 on Ficino and « il poema di Lucrezio »; JAMES HANKINS, « Ficino's Critique of Lucretius », in HANKINS, MEROI (eds.), *Rebirth of Platonic Theology*, p. 137–154; LAURENCE BOULÈGUE, « *Voluptas et beatitudo* chez Marsile Ficin et Agostino Nifo. Théories du plaisir et détours du discours », in LAURENCE BOULÈGUE, CARLOS LÉVY (eds.), *Hédonismes. Penser et dire le plaisir dans l'Antiquité et à la Renaissance*, Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, Villeneuve d'Ascq 2007, p. 233–253; THOMAS LEINKAUF, « Die voluptas-Ethik », in ID., *Grundriss Philosophie des Humanismus und der Renaissance (1350–1600)*, Meiner, Hamburg 2017, vol. I, p. 706–724; VALENTINA PROSPERI, « *Di soave liquore gli orli del vaso* ». *La fortuna di Lucrezio dall'Umanesimo alla Controriforma*, Nino Aragno, Torino 2004, p. 159–165 e 169–170; GERARD PASSANNANTE, « Burning Lucretius: On Ficino's Lost Commentary », *Studies in Philology* 115/2 (2018), p. 267–285; ELENA NICOLI, « Ficino, Lucretius and Atomism », *Early Science and Medicine* 23 (2018), p. 330–361; RAPHAEL EBGI, *Voluptas. La filosofia del piacere nel giovane Marsilio Ficino (1457–1969)*, Edizioni della Normale, Pisa 2019; ID., « I filosofi della voluptas. Riflessioni sul pensiero del primo Marsilio Ficino », *Rinascimento*, n.s. 62 (2022), p. 203–222.

arguments of *De rerum natura* IV.⁵ Rather a better look at the manuscripts leads me to concord with Armando Maggi about the bold physical quality and the « esplicita sensualità » of Marsilio's platonism: « si dovrà ricordare come il rapporto tra corpo e anima sia trattato nel commento ficiniano al *Banchetto*, con una franchezza ed apertura pressoché sconcertanti [...] ».⁶ The whole question is reexamined here.

Whether some precedent of « semen » is present or not in the medieval tradition of *De rerum natura* prior to Ficino, is another intriguing query. According to the eminent editor of Lucretius in the Teubner series of classics, Marcus Deufert, whom I thank for his highly valuable information,⁷ the medieval manuscripts fully ignore the variant introduced by Ficino in 1469, which by no means seems a lapsus. That being so, I suppose Marsilio decided to change *this* precise word on the ground of quite good reasons.

On one side, the Lucretian passage in Book IV verges on lovesickness and its remedies, among which therapeutic intercourse was usually prescribed against addictive but unhappy love. On the other side, from Rufus of Ephesus (b. 70 AD) to al-Rāzī (b. 865 AD), al-Majūsi (b. 930 AD) and Avicenna (b. 980 AD), then to Constantinus Africanus (b. 1220 AD) and the Latin medieval physicians like Arnaldo de Villanova, coitus came to be considered an adequate remedy for the dangerous melancholy of love called *'ishq* in Arabic and *illisci* or *amor hereos* in Latin.⁸ But what had struck Ficino was the following more explicit than priggish recommendation: « Lucretius also highly recommends frequent carnal union as a

⁵ For instance: « Nell'affrontare le parti più esplicite del IV libro Ficino mostra imbarazzo... » in PROSPERI, *Di soave liquore gli orli del vaso*, p. 159–165 and 169–170 on Ficino.

⁶ ARMANDO MAGGI, « L'immagine del concetto d'amore: una lettura del frammento michelangiolesco "Ben fu, temprando il ciel tuo vivo raggio" », *Revue d'Études Italiennes* 46/3–4 (2000), p. 259–268: 260.

⁷ In his mail dated 07/07/2023 Prof. Dr. Deufert courteously answered my query: « Die mittelalterlichen Handschriften haben keine Variante 'semen' zu dieser Stelle, und aus der Spätantike sind keine erhalten ».

⁸ There is a vast bibliography on this topic, which I shall not discuss here but in my forthcoming italian edition of Ficino's *De amore* for Giunti – Bompiani. On the arabic sources *de coitu* see at least DANIELLE JACQUART, CLAUDE THOMASSET, *Sexualité et savoir médical au Moyen Age*, Puf, Paris 1985, passim [English edition: *Sexuality and Medecine in the Middle Ages*, trans. MATTHEW ADAMSON, Polity Press, Oxford 1988]. About therapeutic intercourse and on *amor hereos*, see at least MARY F. WACK, *Lovesickness in the Middle Ages. The Viaticum and Its Commentaries*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia 1990, p. 10–12, 66–70; MICHAEL W. DOLS, *Majnūn: The Madman in Medieval Islamic Society*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1992, p. 69, 85, 90; MASSIMO CIAVOLELLA, « Eros and the Phantasm of Heroes », in MASSIMO CIAVOLELLA, DONALD BEECHER (eds.), *Eros and Anteros. The Medical Tradition of Love in the Renaissance*, Dovehouse, Ottawa 1992, p. 75–85; LANZ EUKENE LACARRA, « El "amor que dicen hereos" o *aegritudo amoris* », *Cahiers d'études hispaniques médiévales* 38 (2015), p. 34–41. See also ARNALDI DE VILLANOVA *Opera Medica Omnia*, vol. III: *Tractatus de Amore Heroico* [...], ed. MICHAEL R. MCVAUGH, Publicacions i Edicions de la Universitat de Barcelona, Barcelona 1985, p. 53: « ... quantum est ex arte coitus », and JACQUART, THOMASSET (eds.), *Sexualité et savoir médical*, p. 117.

remedy for love ».⁹ In other words, perfectly well trained in medicine as he was through al-Rāzī, Avicenna, Constantinus, Arnaldo and their teaching *de coitu*, Marsilio Ficino thought that Lucretius had anticipated the whole Arabic tradition of various types of books on coitus or *Kitāb al-bāh*.¹⁰ This is why in his *De amore* VI, 9 just after the evocation of Lucretius and his unfortunate love, Ficino quotes al-Rāzī *de coitu* recommending intercourse as a universal therapy.¹¹

Coitus therapy has been known for a long time, yet Ficino was among the first authors to consider it in the perspective of Lucretius and thus of Epicurus. On this very point and unlike modern critics, Ficino does evidently not distinguish between Epicurean philosophy and Arabic medicine: therefore in his mind Lucretius interacts with al-Rāzī, al-Majūsi and Avicenna. The eroticism of the antique goddess Venus meets the sexology of medieval physicians, as far as melancholy is concerned. Most of the admonitions to chastity that Ficino lavishes in his *De vita sana* and earlier his *De amore* are preferably addressed to elderly scholars, whose intellectual energy must be preserved, rather than to young people tormented by lovesickness.

After all Ficino corrected *ope ingenii* a Latin syntagma to which he conferred a meaning closely aligned with his own view. If Lucretius wrote « Et iacere humorem coniectum in corpora quaque / Nec retinere semel conversum unius amore » i.e. « You must spread your accumulated humor in any body / and not retain it for a single moment for a single love », then Ficino rewrote « Nec retinere semen conversum unius amore » i.e. « Do not retain the spoilt seed for a single love », where « conversum » conveys a quite different meaning. Thus what did exactly change? Nothing in the overall Lucretian idea that exclusive love could produce lethal consequences and should be contrasted by any means, including sexual pleasure with prostitutes. Yet introducing explicitly the physiological « semen »

⁹ MARSILIO FICINO, *El libro dell'Amore*, p. 209: « Ancora el coito universale accade nella cura d'amore, al quale remedio molto acconsentì Lucretio ». On this particular quotation of the *De amore* see PROSPERI, *Di soave liquore gli orli del vaso*, p. 164.

¹⁰ For sex and Venus in *De rerum natura*, IV, 1030–1287 see: ROBERT D. BROWN, *Lucretius on Love and Sex. A Commentary on De rerum natura IV, 1030–1287*, Brill, Leiden 1987. On arabic medicine and sex: GIUSEPPE CELENTANO, *Due scritti medici di Al-Kindī*, Supplemento n. 18 agli *Annali* 39/1, Istituto Orientale di Napoli, Napoli 1979, p. 1–75: 11–36; AYMAN MURAD, « Le mal d'amour dans la médecine arabomusulmane », *Annales Médico-psychologiques, revue psychiatrique*, 159 (2001), p. 511–514; MARY F. WACK, « Alī ibn al-'Abbās al-Mağūsī and Constantine on Love, and the Evolution of the *Practica Pantegni* », in CHARLES BURNETT, DANIELLE JACQUART (eds.), *Constantine the African and 'Alī ibn al-'Abbās al-Mağūsī: The 'Pantegni' and Related Texts*, Brill, Leiden 1994, p. 161–202.

¹¹ MARSILIO FICINO, *El libro dell'Amore*, p. 137: « ...l'amore essere una spetie d'omere malinconico e di pazzia, e Rasis medico comandò che e' si curassi pe 'l coito, digiuno, ebrietà e exercitio ». This specific quotation is actually found in *Divisiones* IX, « De amore. Cura eius est assiduatio coytus et ieiunium et deambulatio et ebrietas plurima assidue », in *Divisiones Rasis filii Zacharie. Viaticum Constantini monachi*, here quoted in the translation of Gerardo da Cremona edited in Lyon, Gilbert Villiers, 1510, fol. VIv.

Ficino transformed also the meaning of « *conversum* » which always represented a philological *crux* as evidenced later by Denis Lambin, the sixteenth-century editor of Lucretius read by Montaigne.¹² In the first case the participle *conversum* was to be understood as « directed towards the one beloved woman », in the second case Ficino read « altered only by (or for) the love of a single one » since *unius* matched equally the two solutions. In fact, *convertere* fits with the first meaning, i.e. *directed toward*, as well as with the second one, i.e. *altered by or spoilt*.

How was it that intercourse could cure lethal lovesickness? The answer lies in the morbid passion called by Marsilio « *amor simplex* » or unanswered eros. According to Ficino, loving without being loved in return meant annihilating oneself and losing all hope of revival. If he was not re-loved back then the lover could deperish in his isolation, became ill, went mad and most often died as Ficino explained in his *De amore*.

Of course, Ficino had not invented lovesickness and before him the madness of love leading to death was a stereotype in much of the Hippocratic or Pseudo-Hippocratic literature conveyed through the Arabs in Latin medieval medicine. For instance, in a late antique text from the 6th century AD called *Perdica*, a young prince punished by Venus is consumed by a guilty and secret passion for his own mother. Only Hippocrates understands the incurable disease by examining the pulse of the poor boy who dies however from starvation and melancholy. In another well known story of the Arabic lore, *Majnūn and Laylā*, the unfortunate lover suffers infinite pain and severe madness before dying on the tomb of his beloved.¹³

Physically speaking, the humoral harm caused by corrupted seed, genital vapours and excessive fire, is at the core of Ficino's sexology. For most of the Galenic tradition inherited by Arabic medicine, the fiery sperm originated from blood and proceeded from the marrow and the brain.¹⁴ Because of its excessive warmth, the spermatic superfluity could unbalance the mind. Hence insanity was naturally and mutually connected with love. As a keen reader of love poetry, Ficino knew too well the diagnosis of fantasmatic deception provoked by excessive desire, quite common among medieval poets and physicians from Dante and Cavalcanti to Dino del Garbo. We should remember here the sarcastical diagnosis addressed by Dante da Maiano to Alighieri, the author of the *Vita Nova*. Da Maiano coarsely advised the poet to cool his « *coglia* » or testicles in order to extinguish

¹² T. LUCRETII CARI *De rerum natura libri VI*, Jean Bienné, Lutetiae 1570, p. 387 on variants like: *conceptum, congestum, concertum, consertum*.

¹³ DOLS, *Majnūn*, p. 320–328.

¹⁴ WACK, *Lovesickness in the Middle Ages*, p. 94–97; JACQUART, THOMASSET, *Sexualité et savoir médical*, p. 73–78.

in cold water their genital warmth and hot vapours¹⁵ responsible for his erotic hallucinatory verses on Beatrice.

Now, as bloodletting was currently practised for the purgation of black and thick blood, in case of superfluous or corrupted sperm the coitus with the so-called vulgar Venus obviated further poisoning. A notorious case in Ficino's time was that of the humanist Ugolino Verino's son, the adolescent Michele Verino, born in 1469 exactly when the *De amore* was composed. In 1487 Michele died a virgin at the age of eighteen. Victim of a testicular trauma, the young man had been prescribed therapeutic coitus, the *venereus coitus*, by some Florentine physicians. One would be tempted to include Ficino in the lot. Anyway, because of his inveterate chastity, Michele Verino coyly refused the sexual cure, whereupon he expired deploring that « the physicians promise me health thanks to coitus... ».¹⁶

The *philosophical* influence of Lucretius on Ficino has been a long-running debate among scholars since Raymond Marcel, James Hankins, Sebastiano Gentile until James Snyder and Raphael Ebgi more recently. Actually, the *medical* influence of Lucretius might well be much more decisive than expected. A key topic like spermatic purgation through *venereus coitus* did not escape to Ficino's attention and if anything of the Lucretian Venus lingered in the *De amore*, it was above all the therapeutic function of the *Venus medica* applied to the lovesick. Through Ficino's legacy Lucretius was seen as a physician of love throughout the Renaissance and Valentina Prosperi correctly observed that thanks to Marsilio's mediation the sexual realism of Lucretius was paradoxically becoming quite influent.¹⁷

Therefore, my conclusion must be slightly at variance with most of the unsuspecting critics who have over-idealized Ficinian *castitas* linked to the disembodied Venus. In real life when sanity was endangered by the obscure power of love, Platonic chastity suffered a macroscopic exception perhaps not intended for the rare *studiosi* but for the common lovers. Far from being autocontradictory the Platonist Ficino did fully agree with the Lucretian Ficino according to whom eros was a tremendous dual force leading to the best of *voluptas* or to the worst of *melancholia*, in which extreme case the *Venus vulgaris* might reveal as helpful as the *Venus celestis* was praiseful, despite the preference granted to celestial love.

¹⁵ I am alluding to Dante da Maiano's infamous reply to Dante's sonnet *A ciascun' alma presa e gentil core*: « [...] se san ti truovi e fermo de la mente / che lavi la tua coglia largamente / a ciò che stinga e passi lo vapore / lo qual ti fa favoleggiar loquendo [...] », see BRUNO NARDI, « L'amore e i medici medievali », in *Saggi e note di critica dantesca*, Ricciardi, Milano – Napoli 1966, p. 238–267. On the « calefactio spirituum » due to sexual arousal see ARNALDI DE VILLANOVA *Opera Medica Omnia*, vol. III: *Tractatus de Amore Heroico* [...], p. 49–51.

¹⁶ ALFONSO LAZZARI, *Ugolino e Michele Verino: studi biografici e critici*, Libreria C. Clausen, Torino 1897, p. 117

¹⁷ PROSPERI, *Di soave liquore gli orli del vaso*, p. 170: « Tuttavia, grazie alla mediazione di Ficino, la meccanica sessuale illustrata da Lucrezio ebbe ampio corso anche nel Cinquecento ».