

Date: 12 October 1990
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Subject: new Guide to Ficino

Following is an updated copy of the Guide to Ficino. Please toss your old one and put this in its stead.

Yours, Willard McCarty

A Guide to Ficino

(October 1990)

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I. Nature and aims

'The convivium alone ... rebuilds limbs, revives humours, restores spirit, delights senses, fosters and awakens reason. The convivium is rest from labours, release from cares and nourishment of genius; it is the demonstration of love and splendour, the food of good will, the seasoning of friendship, the leavening of grace and the solace of life.'

Letter 42 to Bernardo Bembo, in

<<The Letters of Marsilio Ficino>>,
vol. 2 (London: Shephard-Walwyn,
1978), pp. 51f.

Ficino is an international electronic seminar and bulletin-board devoted to all aspects of the Renaissance and Reformation. Although the application of computers to the texts and other cultural artifacts of these periods is a relevant topic, the primary aim of Ficino is discussion of an historical culture in its widest sense and exchange of information amongst members.

Ficino is intended to be radically inclusive. Students of Desiderius Erasmus or John Milton are as welcome as experts in the writings of Marsilio Ficino himself, as are those in distant or adjacent periods who wish to bring their knowledge and skills to bear on its subject matter. All approaches and disciplines are equally relevant, but Ficino particularly encourages the interdisciplinary breadth of learning appropriate to Renaissance humanism.

Technically speaking, Ficino is a list of e-mail addresses maintained by ListServ, a mainframe software package running under the IBM VM/CMS operating system. For each such group, ListServ redistributes e-mail amongst its members and provides them with a central file-server or bulletin board for shared information. Ficino is a 'moderated' list: all contributions are first sent to the Editor, who reviews and formats them, then returns the results to ListServ for distribution. Gaining membership in Ficino is not at all difficult but (unlike the practice of many ListServ lists) cannot be accomplished except through the Editor.

Ficino is located at the University of Toronto, in Canada. It makes use of NetNorth, the Canadian equivalent of Bitnet in the United States and EARN in Europe, and is known as Ficino@UToronto. It is accessible to anyone with a connection to Bitnet/NetNorth/EARN or to an associated network, such as uucp, Internet, or JANET, no matter what his or her mainframe operating system may be.

Ficino has two major functions: what may be called an 'electronic seminar' of ongoing discussions, and a 'bulletin board' for items of lasting interest. In the following these functions of Ficino are briefly described.

A. The 'electronic seminar'

Philosophically, Ficino operates under the assumption that knowledge is realised in dialogue. Thus it employs the new medium of e-mail to stimulate discovery through exploratory discussion.

Such exploration requires a much higher degree of freedom than is usual for academic gatherings or publications. Free play of the imagination is essential, so that ideas may be advanced without need for the rigorous documentation or proof appropriate elsewhere. Thus Ficino does not aim to be an 'electronic journal' of carefully vetted contributions, rather a free-wheeling 'seminar' convened for the purpose of argumentation, in the etymological sense of 'making bright or clear'. Like any good seminar, its purpose is not so much to convey facts as to further understanding of its subject, to train the minds of its participants, and so to help create a community of scholars. It is a pedagogical structure in which every member is both teacher and student.

At the same time, freedom of discussion is not meant to suggest that the standards of good scholarship do not apply. Whenever possible contributions to Ficino should be characterized by accurate statements, clear attributions, delimited opinions, and skillfully used language. Above all, they should be acts of communication, intended to be understood.

All subjects are appropriate to Ficino so long as they have some connection with the Renaissance or Reformation. Normally the Editor publishes submissions without alteration, but when in his judgment a contribution is incompetent, offensive, or clearly outside the scope of Ficino, he reserves the right not to publish it.

Contributions are normally combined into groups by subject. Each group constitutes a numbered 'issue' of Ficino; the number of issues varies each day depending on the range of subjects addressed that day. Subject areas are determined afresh from the submissions, not imposed from any predetermined set of categories. In this way, particular discussions are free to arise, go dormant, or disappear altogether at any time.

Every member necessarily receives all issues of Ficino. No automatic selection by subject is possible -- nor, in fact, even desirable. In a broadly defined seminar such as Ficino, irrelevance is very difficult if not impossible to determine

beforehand, especially when the aim of discussion is to seek out and explore the interconnections among traditional disciplines and subjects. Since all contributions are automatically saved in an accessible archive, members can use the `delete key' fearlessly and are encouraged to do so.

If any single word can express the manner that Ficino aims for, it might be `mindfulness' -- not anxious care against error but an awareness that combines courtesy with courageous imaginative play.

B. The bulletin-board or file-server

For static items -- such as bibliographies, conference announcements, lists of names and addresses, job postings, and so forth -- Ficino provides a simple electronic bulletin-board or file-server. By means of a specific command sent to the server, members may at any time request one or more items from it; these are sent automatically via the network. Depending on network load and distance, such items may take from a few minutes to several days to arrive.

Only the Editor is able to add items to the server, but members are warmly encouraged to submit appropriate items to him for posting. Any editor of a newsletter in Renaissance or Reformation studies, for example, is welcome to use Ficino as a supplementary means of distribution.

A table of contents for the server may be ordered at any time. By convention the Editor will announce new items to members by publishing a summary or extract. Old items, such as announcements for past conferences, are periodically purged. At least the last year's worth of logbooks, containing all issues of Ficino, will be kept on the server at all times. See below for more details.

Members are responsible for getting what they want from the server themselves. (The Editor must go through exactly the same operations as any member to fetch an item.) Anyone experiencing unusual difficulties with the server should, however, contact the Editor for help.

C. Membership

The sole requirement for joining Ficino is a statement of

background and interests, more a brief biography than a c.v. (An electronic form for the purpose is available from the Editor.) Collected biographies are circulated periodically to the membership, and a complete collection is always be available on the file-server. These biographies serve the purpose of introducing members to each other, furthering direct personal contacts, and so strengthening the world-wide community of scholars.

In some cases, membership may be for an entire research institute, university, or other body. Where possible, a description of the institution should be submitted in the format of the <<International Directory of Renaissance and Reformation Associations and Institutes>> (Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 1990), unless one is already in that Directory. See the electronic copy of the <<Directory>>, kept on the file-server. Biographies of individuals in such institutions are welcome as well.

In other cases, membership may be established for a 'redistribution point' or other means of forwarding the conversations. Contact the Editor for details.

D. Borrowing, republishing, and use of the membership list

Material that appears on Ficino may freely be republished elsewhere as long as the author, place, and date of first appearance are clearly stated. All contributors to Ficino implicitly agree to such borrowing unless a note to the contrary is appended to each contribution.

Members are themselves responsible for the accuracy of the material they cite and for conformity to the conventions of the sources they use.

The membership list of Ficino as well as the biographies should be regarded as private to the group, not for publication beyond the membership itself. Any such publication or other use without the consent of the Editor will be regarded as an abuse.

E. Sponsorship and Staff

Ficino is an official 'publication' of the Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies (CRRS), Victoria University in the

University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada M5S 1K7; voice: (416) 585-4484 or -4468, fax: (416) 585-4584. The Director of the CRRS is Prof. Konrad Eisenbichler; Prof. William Bowen chairs the Publication Committee, and Dr. David Galbraith is the Curator.

The Editor of Ficino is Dr. Willard McCarty, a Senior Fellow of the CRRS; the Associate Editor is Prof. Bowen. The Editor is responsible for the daily operations of the seminar and for maintaining the file-server and the documentation. The Associate Editor assists with longer term editing projects (such as the biographies), takes over in the Editor's absence, and represents Ficino to the Publication Committee.

Ficino also has an international board of scholars who advise the Editor and help to maintain the international scope of discussion.

II. Manner

A. Social Dynamics

Because it is relatively new, the social aspects of electronic communication need to be explicitly considered. The following is an attempt to summarize current thinking on the subject.

Sociologists of communication speak of the 'social context cues' given us by various media; these communicate paralinguistic information about the speaker, such as social status, age, sex, and physical handicaps -- in brief, his or her 'social context'. E-mail has few or none of these cues. Many people have argued that their absence removes ordinary social constraints, so that users of e-mail tend to behave in a freer way than they would otherwise, say in face-to-face communication. 'Flaming' -- the highly emotional, uncontrolled outbursts for which e-mail is infamous -- is said to be a result. In the positive sense, however, the absence of cues allows individuals the freedom to create their online personae exclusively through what they say. If the medium is properly managed, social structures and conventions can thus be reformed along more intellectual lines than most of us are accustomed to.

The intense focus on language alone occasionally leads to misunderstanding. It can, for example, obscure the cultural proprieties of certain habits of thought and argument; it can block intended humor or irony, or altogether prevent a

contributor from detecting the impatience of others. Thus it is especially important for members of an electronic seminar to pay attention to language, to take loving care with it, and above all to step outside the narrow confines of their own ways and opinions, i.e. to communicate.

One of the most frequently identified problems with e-mail is 'information overload', the perceived inability to cope with volumes of information. Experience suggests that overload may not be related to volume directly, rather that it has much more to do with our ignorance of how to use the new medium as something new, rather than as a substitute for something old. Ficino is thus an experiment in a very basic sense: an attempt to understand what the new medium is as well as how it might be applied to some very old, indeed timeless concerns. Again, members are encouraged to use their 'delete key' freely, without remorse. At the same time, they are asked to temper their impatience and frustration with the knowledge that explorers seldom enjoy the comforts of the familiar.

B. Etiquette and Conventions

The following set of conventions may provide some basic guidance.

Active Language.

The adoption of a lingua franca is obviously a good idea, but communication may be impeded for some if it is imposed absolutely. On Ficino, therefore, contributors may assume that if English presents insuperable difficulties, any of the standard Western European languages may freely be used. Members should realize, however, that idiomatic mastery of the lingua franca is not required; able newcomers to a language often use it in surprisingly fresh and imaginative ways. Members also need to recognize that, alas, not everyone reads all the standard languages; this is especially true in North America. English, then, is to be preferred whenever possible.

Subject.

If you can, state the subject of your contributions explicitly in the 'Subject'-line supplied by the mail software. In a diverse, international readership of busy people, a well-devised, communicative subject-line will be greatly appreciated. Be aware that some will read no more than the subject-line, so make it

accurate and comprehensive as well as brief.

Replies.

Always remind the reader of the topic or specific contribution to which you are responding. An electronic seminar normally entertains several topics simultaneously; it may not be obvious to which one you are replying, or your readers may have forgotten what provoked you to comment.

Private vs. public responses.

Experience has shown that it is often better to direct all replies to the group rather than to begin a private conversation. A member may volunteer to summarize private messages for publication, but this is usually more work than first appears. Furthermore, a steady stream of contributions is necessary to keep a topic active. It is almost impossible to predict what members will find relevant.

Length.

Use your judgment about the length of your messages. If you find yourself writing an essay or have a substantial amount of information to offer, it may be better to have the contribution published via the file-server, with a summary circulated to all members. If in doubt, consult the Editor.

Attribution.

All contributions should be signed with the member's name and institutional affiliation. Elaborate signatures, occupying several lines, are often more obnoxious than helpful or amusing. Confine signatures to a maximum of 2 lines whenever possible.

Repetition.

Members are asked to be more than usually tolerant of repetition. Anyone may, of course, download and search the collected logbooks of conversations to discover if a certain issue or question has been raised before, but in practice this seldom happens. As in oral cultures, repetition in the electronic seminar can serve as a mnemonic device, a way of holding a problem or issue up for continued attention. Some reluctance to bother one's fellows with a simply answered or silly question is admirable, however.

III. Instructions and Technical Details

A. Sending and receiving messages

Submissions to Ficino are made by sending electronic mail as if to a person with the user-id 'Ficino' and the node-name 'UToronto' (or its equivalent in the newer system of addressing, 'VM.UTCS.UToronto.CA'). Mail may also be sent directly to the Editor, McCarty@UTorepas (or McCarty@VM.EPAS.UToronto.CA), but should be marked as intended for distribution to Ficino. Mail sent to the Editor privately and not intended for distribution should clearly be marked as such if there is any possibility of confusion.

The volume of mail on Ficino varies with the state of the membership and the nature of the dominant topic, if any. Members are advised to pay regular attention to their e-mail to prevent serious overload. A member planning on being away from regular contact should advise the Editor and ask for mail to be temporarily suspended -- or directly order ListServ to do this by setting the 'NOMAIL' option (see below for details). If the Editor is requested to suspend mail, he must also be reminded when active membership is to be resumed.

Members should be careful to specify reliable addresses. In some cases the advice of local experts may help. Any member who changes his or her userid or nodename should first give ample warning to the Editor and should verify the new address. If you know your system is going to be turned off or otherwise adjusted in a major way, find out when it will be out of service and inform the Editor. Missed mail can be retrieved, but undelivered e-mail will litter the Editor's mailbox. Be aware that an automatic reply function, used by some to alert senders that they are away, can prove exasperating to the Editor of an electronic seminar.

B. Using the File-Server

Using the file-server means issuing commands that ListServ will recognize. This may be done either interactively, by a direct command, or in 'batch-mode'. Only the latter method will be described here, since the former is far more subject to the variations in mainframe operating systems and to the condition of the network at the time the command is issued.

The basic idea is to send the intended command as the first and only line in an ordinary mail-message or any other kind of file addressed to ListServ@Utoronto. ListServ will reliably receive your message, extract the command, and act on it.

Note that ListServ imposes a limit on how much you may order during any given period. Once you have requested material in excess of the limit (ca. 250K), ListServ will send you a message to that effect and tell you when you can submit another request.

To use the file-server, then, two separate but very similar operations will usually be required: (1) to discover what files the server has to offer; and (2) to request one or more of these. Please note that all files have a two-part name, and that each part may contain no more than 8 characters.

(1) The files currently on the server are listed in a file named FICINO FILELIST. To order this file, send the following command:

```
GET FICINO FILELIST FICINO
```

which you may read as `Get me the file "FICINO FILELIST" from the seminar named "FICINO"'.

The filelist will look something like the following. For the sake of simplicity, the explanatory header has been removed from what follows.

-----beginning of filelist-----

* On Ficino itself

*

```
FICINO GUIDE ALL OWN V 65 508 90/10/02 13:59:21
```

*

* Biographies of the members

*

```
BIOGRAFY 1 ALL OWN V 65 488 90/10/07 19:49:12
```

*

* From the Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies

*

```
CRRS BROCHURE ALL OWN V 76 391 90/10/07 12:29:19
```

```
CRRSNEWS 36_C ALL OWN V 65 317 90/10/07 12:28:12
```

```
REN_REF DIRECTRY ALL OWN V 65 1024 90/10/12 12:17:01
```

*

* Conference announcements and calls for papers

*

```

ACH_ALLC CONFRNCE  ALL OWN V   75  61 90/10/07 13:24:26
*
* Descriptions of software
*
TACT  SOFTWARE  ALL OWN V   65  87 90/10/10 00:43:44
*
* Bibliographies and booklists
*
MQ    BOOKLIST  ALL OWN V   65  680 90/10/10 19:31:51
*
* NOTEBOOK archives for the list
* (Monthly notebook)
*           rec           last - change
* filename filetype  GET PUT -fm lrecl nrecs  date   time
*
FICINO LOG9010  PRV OWN V   76  1904 90/10/09 19:59:49
-----end of filelist-----

```

These files are as follows:

```

FICINO  GUIDE      Guide to Ficino (this document)
BIOGRAFY 1        Biographies of members, volume 1
                (see below, section D)
CRRS  BROCHURE    Information about the CRRS
CRRSNEWS 36_C     CRRS Newsletter No. 36
REN_REF DIRECTRY  <<International Directory of Renaissance and
                Reformation Associations and Institutes>>
ACH_ALLC CONFRNCE  Call for papers, 1991 conference
TACT  SOFTWARE    Description of text-retrieval software
MQ    BOOKLIST    Books received, <<Milton Quarterly>>
FICINO LOG9010    Logbook of all contributions to Ficino
                (see below, section D)

```

By the time you read this document, other files have likely been put on the server, so be sure to order your own copy of FICINO FILELIST.

(2) Once you have identified a file as something you want, then you order it in exactly the same way. Let us say, for example, that you want REN_REF DIRECTRY; thus you issue the command

```
GET REN_REF DIRECTRY FICINO
```

Remember: in all cases, the command is the first and only line of an ordinary mail-message to ListServ@UToronto.

C. Encoding scheme for files

Since accented characters and common formatting effects cannot be represented as themselves on the mainframe systems used by Ficino, an encoding scheme is required for all files stored on the server. This scheme must (a) survive into all systems used by members of Ficino, (b) be completely unambiguous, (c) be as visually unobtrusive as possible, and (d) be mnemonically efficient. Unfortunately, several of the ASCII characters that resemble accent marks (such as the opening and closing single quotation marks) do not survive.

1. Accented and special characters

The scheme adopted for Ficino satisfies criteria (a) and (b) absolutely, and (c) and (d) relatively well. It is based on the scheme specified in the <<Chicago Guide to Preparing Electronic Manuscripts for Authors and Publishers>> (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1987): 73f. It was suggested for Ficino by Judy Drotleff.

In this scheme an alphabetic code enclosed in angle-brackets precedes the letter to be affected, thus: <cod>x, where cod = the code and x = the affected letter. The codes are as follows:

ac	acute
bre	breve
ced	cedilla
cir	circumflex
gv	grave
hac	hacek
mac	macron
oc	overcircle
swe	Swedish slash
tid	tilde
uc	undercircle
ud	underdot
um	umlaut

In addition we may add

ae	ae diphthong, minuscule
Ae	Ae diphthong, majuscule
gds	German double-s

Thus, Soci<ac>et<ac>e Internationale pour l'Etude du
Th<ac>e<cir>atre M<ac>edi<ac>eval; R<um>omisches Jahrbuch f<um>ur
Kunstgeschichte; Universit<gv>a degli Studi di Milano.

2. Formatting effects

So far the only formatting effect required has been italics, for the titles of books. Italics are indicated by matched pairs of doubled angle-brackets, thus: <<The Letters of Marsilio Ficino>>.

D. Logbooks and biographies

As shown above, the fileserver contains the monthly logbooks in which all contributions to Ficino are automatically stored. These are named FICINO LOGyy^{mm}, where "yy" represents the last two digits of the year and "mm" the number of the month. The log for November 1990, for example, is named FICINO LOG9001. The GET command, described above, is used to fetch the logbooks. If you fail to receive some contributions or lose ones to which you want to refer, please do not ask the editor to fetch them for you, since to do so is more work for him than for you.

The files of the biographies are also stored on the server. These are named BIOGRAFY x, where x ranges from 1 to the number of the latest volume.

E. Other Commands and Facilities

More information.

For a general introduction to ListServ, you will want to have the document named LISTSERV MEMO, which is available from any ListServ node by the command

```
GET LISTSERV MEMO
```

A number of commands are described there, all of which are issued in the same way as above. A few of these are given below.

Getting a membership list :

```
REVIEW FICINO
```

Suspending mail temporarily (without removal from the seminar):

SET FICINO NOMAIL

Restoring active status after the above command:

SET FICINO MAIL

(Please do not ask the editor to forward the mail you have missed. Simply request the appropriate logbook(s) from the fileserver, as described above.)

Removing yourself from the group altogether,

UNSUB FICINO yourfirstname yourlastname.

F. Suggestions and Complaints

Suggestions about the running of Ficino are very welcome. So are complaints, particularly if they are constructive. Experience has shown that an electronic discussion group can be either beneficial or burdensome to its members. Much depends on what the group as a whole wants and does not want. Please make your views known, to everyone or to me directly, as appropriate.

Willard McCarty, Editor
Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies
Toronto
Editor@VM.EPAS.UToronto.CA

*****END*****