

APPENDIX II

THE DEATHS OF POLITIAN AND PICO DELLA MIRANDOLA

The circumstances of Politian's death rouse suspicion, if only by comparison, with the death two months later on 17th November, 1494, of Pico della Mirandola, as related by his nephew and biographer, Gian Francesco² (murdered 1533). In both cases the symptoms were: two weeks of illness (15 days Politian, 13 days Pico), sudden and violent fever (after drinking a philtre in the case of Politian, not necessarily a love philtre!) delirium and hallucination; violent and religious in the case of Politian, peaceful and religious in the case of Pico, and in any case not surprising in view of Savonarola's sermons. (Pico was present on 21st September at the third sermon on the Deluge, *Ecce ego adducem aquam*, and was so terrified that his hair stood on end. Villari, I, p. 174).

Pico was poisoned, probably by arsenic, by his secretary Cristoforo, one of the Casalmaggiore brothers, who owed him money, and with his brother Martino was to benefit by his will (Dorez, 'La Mort de P. de la Mirandole' p. 362). In 1940 his body, clad in a yellow brocade robe and a hat, was found well preserved and intact. At the same time Politian's body was found disintegrated, just a few bones identified officially by the skull formation. (Cf. Lorenzo de' Medici's bones which when examined by Villari himself on 2nd October, 1895, were badly decomposed and identified chiefly by the skull. Armstrong, p. 313 note *).

These facts about Politian's death are deduced from the accounts, mostly slanderous and some muddled over the actual year of his death, collected by Del Lungo, *Florentia*, pp. 255-79. Cf. The date 1498 round the portrait in the seventeenth century Bodleian frieze, (Fig. II) and accepted by Thomas Hearn (See my 'Iconografia di A. Poliziano', *Rinascimento*, Dec. 1951, p. 282, note 3). Both Politian and Pico are said to have been buried in Dominican habits. It was frequently then a pious custom to shroud bodies in religious robes (Cf. Del Lungo's suggestion with regard to Albiera, *La donna fiorentina*, p. 187). Politian's body, was thus vested at his request by Fra Roberto (Chiaroni, p. 480) while Pico's body was robed by Savonarola himself, Greswell, p. 355; J. M. Rigg, *G. Pico della Mirandola His Life . . .*, 1890, p. xxxviii. On 7th August, 1542, 48 years after his death, according to a later note added to Ubaldini's account Pico was reburied with Girolamo Benivieni. Perhaps on this occasion the habit was replaced by the yellow brocade robe. According to another sermon Savonarola declared that Pico was in Purgatory for delay in accepting the religious life (Dorez, p. 361 note 5. I think the reading here should be *spirato*, not *sperato*).

The dying Politian is said to have imagined that Pico who came to see him was St. Peter. When Piero de' Medici came, he tried to throttle him and almost killed him. Even in delirium he was able to distinguish between friend and foe. A further suggestion, that Piero was directly involved in Politian's death, may be implied in the account given by Piero di Marco Parenti (1450-1519) who said that the vituperation heaped upon Politian was due not so much to his vices as to the general hatred of Piero which had turned public opinion against him and even more boldly against friends. In other words Politian was a scapegoat.

Likewise Dorez, p. 364, suggests that the reasons for Pico's death were political rather than personal and that Casalmaggiore was Piero's tool.

The statement that Politian was buried *ad radices lauri*, repeated in two separate accounts and discussed in *Florentia*, p. 271, may imply the fall of the Medici House. Cf. however *ad radices Fesulani montis*, by which in 1480 Politian describes his sojourn at Fiesole (*Florentia*, p. 176).

The mention of a philtre in the case of Politian suggests that he may have been given poisoned wine. One is reminded of the friendly rivalry over the merits of his and Pico's wine mentioned by Politian in his last letter to Ficino (IX. 13 [1494]), perhaps the last letter he ever wrote. This provides yet another clue. No doubt Cristofano Casalmaggiore was present on some of the occasions when Pico suddenly descended upon Politian, interrupted his studies and dragged him off to Querceto to supper. Cristofano Casale (Casalmaggiore) is mentioned by name in a letter from Politian to Pico, 20th May, 1494: *Ostendit mihi nuper Christophorus Casalis eam partem literarum tuarum qua tu illi mandas ut Petro Medici nostro gratuletur tuo nomine quod is egregium superioribus diebus prudentiae virtutis probitatisque suae specimen publice dederit* (Cod. Vaticanus Capponianus, 235) with reference to the plot of Giovanni and Lorenzo di Pier Francesco de' Medici. This letter not included in the Aldine edition escaped the censorship which substituted the name of Sarzi for that of Casalmaggiore. M. Santoro, 'L'epistola grande del Poliziano a Pico su Piero de' Medici', *Giorn. ital. di filol.* III, 1950, pp. 363-67 has reprinted the letter without noticing this point.

² Gian Francesco was not present when Pico died, only his other nephew, Alberto Pio of Carpi (1475-1531), some friends and servants. As he was dying Pico had a vision of the Madonna, who promised him that he 'should not utterly die.' This Pico interpreted temporarily and Savonarola spiritually. Nor will Pico's memory ever fade entirely from this earth for his English biographer is a Saint. The Latin life which Gian Francesco wrote four years after his uncle's death was translated ten years later by Sir Thomas More (1478-1535). Few men have had a more lasting and charming tribute to their memory.

I am not suggesting that Casalmaggiore was responsible for Politian's death, but Politian's last letter to Ficino may have suggested to someone in the pay of Piero a way of getting rid of Politian, one of many victims disposed of at this time. When this proved successful Casalmaggiore taking a tip from the manner of Politian's end, poisoned Pico, but this time more efficiently as he used arsenic.

The Casalmaggiore brothers apparently came from a town, Casalmaggiore, connected with early printing, for the sons of Israel Soncino the Jew had their press there in 1486-7. They may even have had some knowledge of Hebrew or some personal contact with Jews which would have attracted Pico to them in the interests of his Hebrew studies. Pico had a translator, the doctor and philosopher, Leo Abravanel (Leo Hebraeus, 1465-1533), son of Isaac ben Yahuda (1437-1508) living in his house, whom he claimed to have converted to Christianity. Leo Abravanel is mentioned by Politian in *Italian Letter XXXI* to Piero de' Medici at Poggio a Caino from Florence, 30th June, 1492, and earlier in Lorenzo's letter to Giovanni Lanfredini, his ambassador at Rome, 11th August, 1490 (Ross, pp. 318-19). Pico himself had been associated with the early printing efforts of Aldo whose zeal in censoring the letters of Politian and Pico may have been due to some trade rivalry which certainly appears to have had some connexion with the death of Pico and so to some extent with the preceding death of Politian.

Politian's last letter to Ficino, IX. 13 [1494], is in reply to IX. 12, Ficino's letter of 20th August, as Greswell (p. 349) cleverly conjectured. Ficino's letter contains the remark *Interim in terris vive diu*, a sinister remark to make at this time even from Ficino who specialized in forebodings. In the Aldine text this letter of Politian, separated from Ficino's preceding letter, is X 14 ep. ult. In the basle ed. it occupies one full page which, though included in Book IX, is headed Book X. Apparently the printer, suddenly realizing the correct sequence, transposed it and though he changed the signature at the bottom of the page, he forgot to change the heading. In the Aldine text both heading and signature are correct, so Aldo *intended* to separate these two letters.³

In spite of the great heat that summer Politian seems to have been perfectly well. He was in correspondence with Codro Urceo (V. 7 and V. 8, Codro's reply to him dated 5th July, 1494⁴); with Ramberto Malatesta of Sogliano (X. 8, 24th July, 1494) and Pico had borrowed a book for him from Battista Guarino (VII. 33; Guarino's reply to Politian, VII. 34 is dated Ferrara, 5th August, 1494).

APPENDIX III

THE BONES OF POLITIAN AND PICO DELLA MIRANDOLA IN 1940.

'When I was there the sacristy was being renovated as was the north wall of the nave. Benivieni had evidently been untouched, but Pico in his coffin was lying along the south wall of the sacristy, and there was a gap or empty space from which the coffin had been removed. The coffin was on the floor, the head towards the west. The space was perhaps four or five feet above where he was lying at the time. Along the east wall of the sacristy was an *armadio*, in the left-hand lower drawer of which lay the bones of Poliziano, not even in a box, as I recall, just scattered fragments. There were not many of them, perhaps two out of four leg bones, perhaps a part of the thigh bone, a part only of the skull, a few ribs and some of the small bones of the hands and feet, and a few vertebrae. Maybe some of the collar-bone.

Whereas Poliziano was badly disintegrated, Pico was in as perfect condition as an Egyptian mummy. The skin over the face and hands was taut and slightly wrinkled. He had on some sort of hat of brocade and a long gown of yellow brocade to his feet. The hands were crossed over the breast. I was impressed with his height and apparent size, but do not recall seeing his hair. I think the coffin was typical of those hexagonal affairs still in vogue in Europe. The lid was still intact, I believe . . . I saw no deviation from normal in the bones of the face of Poliziano, although Chiaroni claims in his article ['La recognitione delle ossa di A. Poliziano.' *Rinascita*, III, 1940, p. 327 quoting a description by Prof. Lidio Cipriani] that the left eye and neck and nose showed those deformities which have been made familiar to us who have read about him in life.

(Letter from Mr. H. C. Bodman to me 14th November, 1953.)

³ I suggested and discussed this point with Mr. Bodman and am grateful for his elucidations which I have incorporated here.

⁴ In 1498 Codro Urceo refused to allow his letter to be altered for inclusion in the Aldine ed. (Dorez, *La Mort de Pico de la Mirandole*, p. 325 and note 3.