

On the Nature of Love: Ficino on Plato's Symposium, trans. Arthur Farndell. London: Shephard-Walwyn 2016. 200 pp. £19.99

The theme of love was central to the Renaissance revival of Platonism led by Marsilio Ficino of Florence (1433–99). Ficino translated and commented on the entire Platonic corpus, as well as translating the *Corpus Hermeticum*, translating and commenting on Plotinus' *Enneads* and writings by other Neoplatonists (e.g. Synesius, Porphyry, Iamblichus, Proclus), and completing his own original works (most notably, the *Platonic Theology*). Love is the central topic of two Platonic dialogues, the *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium*, and Ficino's Commentary on the *Symposium* was the only one of his Commentaries which he himself translated into his native Tuscan. Ficino was working on his translations of Plato in the 1460s, and immediately after the completion of the *Symposium* (1469) he wrote his Commentary, which he entitled *De amore*. Five years later, at the request of Lorenzo de' Medici, Ficino made the Tuscan translation, which included a significant amount of new material added to the Latin text. Sears Jayne has informed us that this included headings for the seven speeches and chapter titles, but also some completely new passages.¹ *De amore* was not published until 1484, and the Tuscan *Sopra lo Amore* not until 1544.

This text, in both Latin and Tuscan, was immensely influential in Italian courtly circles where the topic of love was keenly discussed, and its influence spread throughout Europe in the following two centuries inspiring new genres of poetry, prose, and literary romance. Ficino was not only providing his contemporaries with an explication of Platonic love, but also weaving into it a Christian conception of divine love, and adding into the mix a wealth of ideas from Plotinus, Proclus, Dionysius and Aquinas as well as Petrarch and Dante. Thus the work is very much a synthesis, incorporating Ficino's own original evocation of love as a universal principle or power which mediates between all levels of being—mind, soul, nature and matter—and ultimately draws humanity back to the Divine Source of creation. Ficino is certainly more concerned than Plato to defend human heterosexual love as a natural physiological expression, although he himself was never tempted in this direction and embraced the priesthood in 1473. Elsewhere Ficino tells us that 'Venus is but Diana to me', and the entirety of his vast number of correspondents are male.

Much of the originality of Ficino's method lies in his laying out the often contradictory views of his many authorities without judgement, thereby allowing the reader to find their own position. Jayne for one is convinced that

1. S. Jayne, *Marsilio Ficino, Commentary on Plato's Symposium on Love* (Dallas: Spring Publications).

behind the various arguments put forward on the nature and purpose of love lies an esoteric agenda—for Ficino held Plato to be a keeper of the mysteries, who used the language of erotic love to lead souls to the realisation of their immortality. This seems entirely plausible, for in his ‘divine Plato’, Ficino found a confirmation of love as the *daimon* who mediates between men and gods, and he wanted to infuse his contemporaries with the desire to overcome their mortal condition and aspire to their true, but hidden, divine self. What could be a more effective way to do this than appealing to the most common, and profound, of all human emotions?

It is somewhat surprising that there has been no English translation directly from Ficino’s Tuscan, but this has now been remedied by Arthur Farndell in an elegant volume from Shephard-Walwyn. Farndell’s approach is very much that of an apologist for Ficino and the message of his text for today, and as such it is clear, direct and accessible. However, it does not satisfy the requirements of academic scholarship on various counts: the Introduction is short and rather perfunctory, with no textual or manuscript history, thematic discussion, or analysis of Ficino’s method (unlike the standard translation of the Latin version by Sears Jayne, which contains a thorough reference list of sources for the themes of each speech). That there are no textual footnotes or references is in my view a great loss for readers unfamiliar with Ficino’s wealth of mythic, astrological, and metaphysical terminology. There is however a thorough index.

A regrettable feature is the omission of the original Italian text. It is tantalising to be told that in the Tuscan, ‘Ficino’s language equals, or perhaps surpasses, his finest use of the Latin language in its beauty and eloquence’ (p. xiii), but not to be able to judge this for oneself. I cannot comment on the accuracy of translation, but it certainly reads very fluently, and is presented in an uncluttered format. However, if Farndell is determined to minimise the academic ‘apparatus’ of the text, then at least it would be useful of him to point to sources where the interested reader could identify the ‘numerous small divergences’ (p. xiii) from the Latin, or the passages which Ficino added before he made his Italian version. Consulting Jayne’s edition, I was led to James Devereux’s article, ‘The Textual History of Ficino’s *De amore*’, where it was fascinating to learn that several of these additional passages concerned astrology, one of Ficino’s major interests which contributed significantly to his Platonic project of psycho-spiritual alignment.

I am entirely in sympathy with Farndell’s desire to allow the meaning and significance of this beautiful text to reach beyond an academic audience, ‘in the hope that its message may play its part in nudging the world away from its propensity towards hatred and violence’ (p. xiv). But the hermeneutic and

inspirational value of philosophical texts such as these need not be rendered any the less relevant by espousing scholarly rigour. Surely it is vitally important that the academic world promotes *both* intellectual thoroughness *and* passionate engagement in order to build bridges between the worlds of critical theory and philosophical living (and loving). A little more of the former would, in my opinion, enhance the status of this translation.

Ficino emulates Plato in setting his Commentary within the context of a banquet, this time in Florence, in honour of Plato's birthday on November 7, 1468. Ficino charges his fellow guests with commenting and elaborating on the ideas of Plato's friends at his Athenian symposium. Originally the group included himself and Archbishop Antonio degli Agli, but he then constructed a dramatic narrative in which they both get called away. This seems to be in order that Giovanni Cavalcanti becomes the centre of attention, as he is given three speeches and opens the proceedings with a commentary on Phaedrus' original contribution. Cavalcanti was Ficino's male muse, a young man who had captivated his heart and who, he says, 'glancing at me with heavenly eyes, showed me, by a certain wonderful nod, how great the power of love is' (Letter to Cavalcanti, as quoted by Jayne). So the tone is set, for a manifesto of Platonic (as essentially homoerotic) love as the innate power of the human soul to rise to divine perfection in God.

A few words, then, on some of the ideas that are discussed in this text. Themes such as the origin of love, love as cosmic dynamism, the nature of the soul, why humans fall in love, and how the soul can transcend earthly love are elaborated and discussed in the rich mythic, metaphorical and poetic language of Ficino's humanist circle. A modern reader will find Ficino considerably less uncompromising than his Athenian master—procreative love is praised when it is in service to the contemplation of Beauty (p. 27), and the dominant homosexual assumptions of Plato's time are tempered (although certainly not absent). Nevertheless, the Platonic view of love is essentially idealist and dualist: the need for two 'Aphrodites' (earthly and heavenly) arose in the 5th century BCE in response perhaps to the Platonic difficulty in reconciling human desires for sexual and spiritual pleasure, and female experience (of any kind of love) is entirely unrepresented—unless one includes Diotima of course. Ficino calls her 'a truly pure woman' (p. 3) and 'most chaste princess' (p. 129), and imagines her counselling Socrates in the nature of an ultimate truth which lies beyond all individual 'forms of instruction' (p. 128). In this she is a spokeswoman for Ficino's own championing of a universal religion which embraces both Christian and Platonic paths—but she is hardly representative of the women of Florence.

The book is a celebration of *eros*, a force which directs the soul back to its

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source through the fires of divine frenzy, and is far removed from the *philia* of family life. The work concludes by juxtaposing 'common love' with 'divine love' in order to prove that the 'madness' of physical attraction is a distorted image of the fervour which incites the rising above earthly desires in an 'illumination of the rational soul' (p. 152). All power, all intelligence, all goodness and all beauty ultimately lie in the highest potential of the soul herself, the divine feminine principle exalted by the intellect as the ideal love object in order to achieve a sacred, inner marriage. This discourse is developed and upheld by male philosophers in male circles, albeit in ways which are spiritually uplifting, imaginably rich, and cosmically all-embracing. But it has a very specific agenda, as exemplified in the following statement given to Cristoforo Marsuppini: 'True Love is nothing but a particular effort to fly to Divine Beauty, an effort aroused in us by the sight of physical beauty. Contaminated beauty is the downward move from sight to touch' (p. 157).

Returning to Farndell's stated aim of presenting this text as a healing balm for our troubled times, I find myself somewhat conflicted. On the one hand, I have tremendous sympathy for Platonism, especially as expressed through the exquisite colours of Renaissance culture. I recognise a need for our times to return to the *symbolic*, the power of the intuitive imagination, as an antidote to the deadening literalism and reductionism of our value-systems—academic, political and institutional. I agree in rejecting materialism in favour of a 'universal mind' metaphor which liberates intuitive insight from the constraints of an overweening rationality. But I am not sure that a Platonic approach to love is the answer, because for all its anti-materialist nobility of aspiration it remains tacitly dismissive of a path to spiritual awakening which fully embraces the sensual, the erotic, and the *earthly* feminine in all her alluring mystery. Ficinian Neoplatonism is artistically and mythically intoxicating, but it is with the wine of *Aphrodite Urania*, not *Pandemos*.

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