

On the Nature of Love

FICINO ON PLATO'S
SYMPOSIUM



Translated from the Tuscan by
ARTHUR FARNDSELL



SHEPHEARD-WALWYN (PUBLISHERS) LTD

© Arthur Fardell 2016

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form without the written permission of the publisher, Shephard-Walwyn (Publishers) Ltd

First published in 2016 by
Shephard-Walwyn (Publishers) Ltd
107 Parkway House, Sheen Lane,
London SW14 8LS
www.shephard-walwyn.co.uk

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record of this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-85683-509-4

Typeset by Alacrity, Chesterfield, Sandford, Somerset
Printed and bound in the United Kingdom
by 4edge Limited

CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	xi
Introduction	xiii
Preface of Marsilio Ficino of Florence	3

SPEECH 1

Preface	5
1 The right way to praise Love. His dignity and greatness.	6
2 Love's origin	8
3 The Usefulness of Love	11

SPEECH 2

1 God is goodness, beauty, and justice; the beginning, the middle, and the end	15
2 How the beauty of God gives birth to love	16
3 Beauty is the splendour of divine goodness; God is the centre of four circles	18
4 Plato's exposition of things divine	21
5 The beauty of God shines through all and is loved in all	23
6 The passions of lovers	24
7 Love's two births and the two Venuses	25
8 Encouragement to love and a discussion of simple and reciprocal love	27
9 What lovers seek	32

SPEECH 3

- | | |
|---|----|
| 1 Love is within all things, towards all things, maker of all and lord of all | 33 |
| 2 Love is the maker and preserver of all | 34 |
| 3 Love is the master of all the arts | 36 |
| 4 No part of the cosmos bears hatred towards any other | 39 |

SPEECH 4

- | | |
|--|----|
| 1 Presenting Plato's text on the primeval nature of mankind | 41 |
| 2 An exposition of Plato's view on the primeval nature of mankind | 42 |
| 3 Man is the soul itself, and the soul is immortal | 44 |
| 4 The soul is created with two lights. Why she comes into the body with two lights. | 46 |
| 5 The number of ways by which the soul returns to God | 48 |
| 6 Love transports souls to heaven, apportions the levels of blessedness, and bestows everlasting joy | 51 |

SPEECH 5

- | | |
|---|----|
| 1 Love is most blessed, for he is good and beautiful | 54 |
| 2 The depiction of Cupid; and the parts of the soul by which beauty is known and Love is begotten | 56 |
| 3 The spiritual nature of beauty | 59 |
| 4 Beauty is the splendour of God's face | 62 |
| 5 The birth of Love and hatred. Beauty is spiritual. | 65 |
| 6 The number of parts required to make something beautiful; beauty is a spiritual gift | 67 |
| 7 The depiction of Love | 69 |
| 8 The power of Love | 71 |
| 9 The gifts of Love | 73 |
| 10 Love is older than the other gods – and younger | 74 |
| 11 The reign of Love is prior to Necessity | 75 |

12	In what sense Saturn castrated Uranus during the reign of Necessity, and in what sense Jupiter bound Saturn	77
13	Which gods bestow which arts on mankind	78

SPEECH 6

1	Introduction to words on Love	80
2	Love is midway between beauty and its opposite, and is both a god and a daemon	81
3	The souls of the spheres and the daemons	83
4	The seven gifts which come down from God to men through His ministers	85
5	The orders of Venusian daemons, and how they shoot the arrows of love	87
6	Falling in love	89
7	The birth of Love	91
8	In all souls there are two loves, but in our souls there are five	95
9	The passions that are in lovers on account of the mother of Love	97
10	The gifts received by lovers from the father of Love	103
11	The usefulness of Love from the way he is defined	110
12	The two Loves, and the fact that the soul is born shaped by truth	112
13	How the light of truth comes to be in the soul	115
14	The origin of love for the male and of love for the female	116
15	A demonstration that Soul is above Body, Angel is above Soul, and God is above Angel	118
16	A comparison of God, Angel, Soul, and Body	121
17	The beauty of God compared to the beauty of Angel, Soul, and Body	122
18	How the soul rises from the beauty of Body to the beauty of God	125
19	How we are to love God	129

SPEECH 7

1 Conclusion of all that has been said, together with the view of the philosopher Guido Cavalcanti	131
2 Socrates is the true lover and resembles Cupid	133
3 Bestial love: a kind of madness	137
4 Common love is the evil eye	138
5 It is easy to fall in love	142
6 The strange effect of common love	144
7 Common love is a disturbance in the blood	145
8 How the lover can become like his beloved	146
9 The kinds of people that make us fall in love	147
10 Ways of falling in love	148
11 How to get free from common love	149
12 The harm caused by common love	151
13 Divine Love, its usefulness, and the four types of divine frenzy	152
14 The levels through which the divine frenzies lift up the Soul	154
15 Love is the noblest of the divine frenzies	156
16 The usefulness of the true lover	157
17 How we should offer thanks to the Holy Spirit, which has illumined us and set us afire to speak of Love	159

INTRODUCTION

On the Nature of Love is a translation of Marsilio Ficino's commentary on Plato's *Symposium*. Although Ficino wrote commentaries on all the Platonic dialogues, he exceptionally wrote two versions – Latin and Tuscan – of his commentary on the *Symposium*. The Latin version was published in 1484, but the Tuscan version did not appear for another 60 years.

The Tuscan version is called *Sopra lo Amore*, and the present volume is considered to contain the first English translation of this text, which, while running broadly parallel to the Latin, presents numerous small divergences from it. In the Tuscan work Ficino's language equals, or perhaps surpasses, his finest use of the Latin language in its beauty and eloquence.

The story-line is very simple. On November 7, 1468, nine men gathered at Careggi to honour Plato's birthday. After the meal, the *Symposium* was read out, and each of the guests – now reduced to seven, for the bishop was called away to care for souls, and the doctor was summoned to care for bodies – spoke on the nature of love. Ficino, who was also present, recorded what was said, although he himself did not speak, and his report constitutes the text of his commentary.

His work was eagerly taken up by court circles throughout Europe and became part of their standard fare for the next two centuries. Writers and artists were inspired by it. The topic of idealised love immediately resonated with the makers and shakers of many countries, particularly Italy, France, Spain, and England. In more recent times, Ficino's commentary has exercised the minds of theologians, philosophers, and

psychologists. At a convention of more than a hundred Plato enthusiasts gathered at Delphi in the summer of 2015, this translation of the Tuscan text was warmly – in some instances, rapturously – received. There is every reason to be confident that the influence of the work will continue, for it has rightly been said that love is the secret password to every heart.

Ficino himself gives the essence in his preface: ‘We all love unceasingly in one way or another, but nearly all of us love wrongly. To put us back on the right road, God inspired Diotima, who taught Socrates, who revealed the mystery to Plato, who wrote a book for the Greeks. I have put this book into Latin and into Tuscan, together with my own commentary.’

We might add that this book has now been put into English, the current world-language, in the hope that its message may play its part in nudging the world away from its propensity towards hatred and violence and reminding it that more peaceful and loving times are ever available.

Arthur Farnell.

Plato’s birthday, 2015.

Preface of Marsilio Ficino of Florence
concerning the book on Love, dedicated to
his very dear friends, those judicious citizens
of Florence, Bernardo del Nero and
Antonio di Tuccio Manetti

AFTER long practice human beings come to be good at those things which they do routinely and frequently; and the more often they do them, the better they become. Through our foolishness, and to our distress, this general rule does not obtain in the case of Love. We all love unceasingly in one way or another, but nearly all of us love wrongly; and the more we love, the worse we become. And if one in a hundred thousand loves correctly, he is not trusted, because his ways are not the usual ones. We fall into this extraordinary error (heaven help us!) because we boldly set out on this exhausting journey of Love before learning about the journey's end and how to traverse the dangerous tracts. As a result, the further we wretches go, the further we stray and the more we suffer. Getting lost in this dark wood has more serious consequences than getting lost on other journeys, for we make our way there in greater numbers and with greater frequency.

To put us back on the right road, from which we have gone astray, the supreme Love of divine Providence in ancient times inspired a truly pure woman in Greece known as the priestess Diotima, who, being inspired by God and meeting the philosopher Socrates, who was devoted above all others to Love, taught him what this burning desire was, how we can fall from it to the most grievous evil, and how we can rise again from this to the supreme Good.

Socrates revealed this sacred mystery to our Plato. Plato, a philosopher more reverent than all others, at once wrote a book about this for the sake of the Greeks. And for the sake of the Latins I have translated Plato's book into their tongue; and being encouraged by our Lorenzo de' Medici, the Magnificent, I made a commentary on

the mysteries in that book which were more difficult to understand. And in order for this life-saving manna, sent from Heaven to Diotima, to be readily available to more people, I have translated these Platonic mysteries from Latin into Tuscan, together with my own commentary. This work is addressed to you in particular, my beloved Bernardo del Nero and Antonio Manetti, because I am sure that you will receive with Love the Love which your Marsilio Ficino is sending you, and you will make it clear to anyone who might presume to read this book heedlessly that he will never be able to do so, because no one can embrace the heedfulness of Love with heedlessness or take hold of Love with hatefulness.

May the Holy Spirit, divine Love, which inspired Diotima, illumine our mind and kindle our will, that we may love him in all his beautiful works, and thus love his works in him and find boundless joy in his boundless beauty.

SPEECH 1

PREFACE

The order of the book

PLATO, Father of Philosophers, reached the end of his life, after completing eighty-one years, on November 7, the very date on which he had been born. He was sitting at table, and the dishes had been cleared away.

This banquet, which embraces both the beginning and the end of Plato's life, was celebrated annually by the early followers of Plato right down to the times of Plotinus and Porphyry; but these festive meals were subsequently suspended for twelve hundred years. Eventually, in our own times, the renowned Lorenzo de' Medici, wishing to re-establish the Platonic banquet, entrusted this matter to Francesco Bandini.

And so, because Bandini had arranged the celebration for November 7, he welcomed nine Platonic guests with a splendid reception at the villa in Careggi. They were Antonio degli Agli, Bishop of Fiesole; Ficino the doctor; Cristoforo Landino the poet; Bernardo Nuzzi the rhetorician; Tommaso Benci; our friend Giovanni Cavalcanti, who was called the Hero by the other guests on account of the nobility of his soul and his aristocratic appearance; Cristoforo and Carlo, sons of Carlo Marsuppini the poet; and, finally, Bandini wished me to be the ninth, so that, with the addition of Marsilio Ficino to those listed above, the number of the Muses would be matched.

And when the dishes had been cleared away, Bernardo Nuzzi took up the dialogue of Plato named *The Banquet of Love* and read all the speeches from this work. After the reading he asked the other guests to expound one speech each. To this they all agreed, and the exposition of the first speech (that of Phaedrus) fell by lot to Giovanni

Cavalcanti; that of Pausanias, to Antonio the theologian; that of Eryximachus the doctor, to Ficino the doctor; that of Aristophanes the poet, to Cristoforo the poet; and that of young Agathon, to Carlo Marsuppini. Tommaso Benci was allotted the disputation made by Socrates, and the final speech (that of Alcibiades) fell to Cristoforo Marsuppini. They all approved their lots, but the bishop and the doctor were obliged to leave, the former to care for souls and the latter to care for bodies. They both entrusted their parts to Giovanni Cavalcanti, to whom the others directed their attention to hear what he would say.

Giovanni then began to speak as follows.



CHAPTER 1

The right way to praise Love.
His dignity and greatness.

DISTINGUISHED fellow-guests, a most delightful lot befalls me today, by which I am to represent Phaedrus the Myrrhynian: that very Phaedrus whose friendship the superlative orator, Lysias of Thebes, valued so highly that he strove to gain his goodwill by means of a speech that was crafted with the utmost care; that Phaedrus whose appearance aroused such admiration in Socrates that, being moved and borne aloft by its splendour one day while beside the river Illisus, Socrates sang of the divine mysteries, even though until that time he had repeatedly said that he was totally ignorant of all matters, both heavenly and earthly; that Phaedrus by whose abilities Plato was so taken that it was to Phaedrus that he dedicated the first-fruits of his studies: his epigrams, his *Laws*, and his first book to deal with beauty, which is called *Phaedrus*.

So, since I have been judged to resemble Phaedrus – not by me, of course, for I wouldn't give myself such airs, but by the