
Receptions of Plato in the English Renaissance: Spenser on Love and Beauty

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Abstract

In this paper, I propose to examine some of the ways in which Plato's elaboration of transcendent love penetrated and influenced English Renaissance poetry, specifically Edmund Spenser's, and to point out how certain accretions from Renaissance Neoplatonism may be said to have filtered into a specific literary expression, the 'Hymne'. I shall attempt to offer a glimpse into the artistry of a poet who met the considerable challenge of encompassing philosophical doctrines into poetic structures and to show how the remarkable blend of apparently divergent beliefs, as presented by ancient and modern schools of thought, provided a rich array of ideas that could be exploited in poetical terms.

In a recent wide-ranging book, *Shakespeare the Thinker*, AD Nuttall remarks:

[]when I speak of an incipient Platonism I have to add at once that, although a kind of transcendence is discernible, the hard Platonic *chorismos*, the severe separation of the Form from the turbulent half-reality of the sensuous available world, is not there, in Shakespeare's mind. All remains this-worldly, fully human.¹

Nuttall's comment refers to a specific context in a specific play, but it does evince, nevertheless, further reflection on modes of Platonic reception chosen by Shakespeare. Such reflection, in turn, might usefully embrace a broader context and include authors such as Spenser or Milton. An inquiry into the influence of Platonic theories in the English Renaissance must necessarily begin from the philosophical and literary humanist background of the Italian Renaissance, and particularly from the process through which Plato regained a central place in modern thought, after centuries of relative neglect. This path of exploration, therefore, opens the way to an analysis of a complex and multi-layered series of receptions, philosophical and literary,

ancient and modern, reciprocal and unilateral, which can be addressed only briefly within the compass of this paper.

As familiarity with Greek gradually vanished in the West, the works of Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus (amongst many other ancient authors) became known only through commentaries, epitomes or Latin translations of excerpts. It was largely through the writings of Augustine, who was a Plotinian Neoplatonist before his conversion, that the Platonic tradition reached the Middle Ages and gained ascendancy at the School of Chartres, in the 12th century.² The humanist movement of the late fifteenth-century sparked scholars' interest in learning ancient Greek, an interest fostered by Greek-speaking teachers and loads of manuscripts, both shipped into the West from a vanquished Byzantium (1453).

The Florentine Neoplatonists, Marsilio Ficino in particular, were responsible for the revival of Platonism in the Renaissance and for the dissemination of Platonic and Neoplatonic texts. Ficino translated the whole Platonic and Plotinian corpora into Latin, wrote commentaries on many of the works and developed his own system of Platonic theology, the *Theologia Platonica*, whose declared object was to reconcile and assimilate Platonic and Christian beliefs:³

Let us, I beg, as celestial souls who long for our celestial country, break as quickly as we may the bonds of our earthly fetters, that, borne up by Plato's wings and guided by God, we may the more easily fly to our ethereal dwelling-place, where we shall happily contemplate the excellence of our race. (Ficino, *Theologia Platonica*: 1)

Thus begins Ficino's philosophical masterpiece, asserting at once its fundamental sustaining principle, the fusion of Platonic and Christian conceptual structures into a unified edifice of thought. Ficino's theory of love, expounded in his commentary to Plato's *Symposium* (*Commentarium in Convivium*) follows a similar centripetal pattern, drawing together and assimilating aspects of Platonic, Neoplatonic and Christian thought into a redefined model of erotic sublimation. This model exercised immeasurable influence upon philosophers, poets and artists of the Renaissance, well beyond Italy's boundaries, and, in particular, infused new life into the legacy of medieval courtly love, by lending philosophical and spiritual underpinnings to extenuated patterns of vision and expression. Plato's dialogues *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* offered Ficino and his contemporary interlocutors, such as Pietro Bembo, Pico della Mirandola and Cristoforo Landino, the means to submit to an overarching philosophical concept their attempts at establishing an innovative vision of love.

In this paper, I propose to examine to what extent it may be claimed that Plato's elaboration of transcendent love penetrated and influenced English Renaissance poetry, specifically Edmund Spenser's, and how

accretions from Renaissance Neoplatonism, attached to such Platonic theories, may be said to have filtered into a specific literary expression, the 'Hymne'. With this end in view, it may be useful to comment very briefly upon Ficino's own elaboration and extension of Plato's accounts of the nature of the soul, beauty and love.

Although Plato's later followers did not adhere to all aspects of his vision, the concept of the existence of two worlds held particular appeal to both Plotinian and Renaissance Neoplatonists. The first world, which is intelligible or apprehended by the intellect, is the world of archetypal patterns, Ideas or Forms. It is the world of *Being*, immutable and perfect. The second, which is sensible or apprehended by the senses, functions as a copy of the real world of Forms. It is a world marked by mutability and incompleteness, the world of *Becoming*. The human soul issues from the world of Being, but, once it has descended into the body, it remains caged in the world of Becoming, from which it continuously yearns to escape, striving to return and ascend to its former state.

Plato's exploration of the problems inherent in this movement of return or ascent of the soul to the world of Forms takes different paths. Whereas in the *Republic* it is the chasm between the two worlds that urges the soul to aspire towards the Idea of Good, and the allegory of the cave illustrates the exacting demands placed upon the philosopher who undertakes both ascent to the Forms and descent to the lower world, in the *Symposium*, Eros, through its revelation of beauty, provides a powerful *connection* between the two worlds.⁴ Love of the beauty of a particular human being initiates a sequential and gradual uplifting of the soul towards love of physical beauty in general, then of moral beauty, of intellectual beauty, and finally of the Form or Idea of Beauty itself.

Thus, Plato's account of the soul's relationship to the two worlds is complicated by tensions between divergent inclinations. The one, conveyed in *Phaedo* and *Republic*, embodies the soul's impulse towards asceticism and disengagement from the inferior world, and conveys its realisation that attaining a return to pure Form requires strenuous efforts and self-discipline. The other, articulated in Diotima's speech in the *Symposium*, draws the soul towards aesthetic enjoyment of the lower world, whose beauty and goodness reflect those of the real world of Forms.⁵

It is, therefore, the beauty of the *material* world that first intimates to the soul the possibility of apprehending the Idea of Beauty, urging it onto an ascent enfolded in rapturous ecstasy, in contrast to ascetic elevation towards the contemplative state. Later Platonists explored the implications of both these tendencies, which re-emerged in particularly interesting guises in Renaissance love poetry, both Italian and English: not unexpectedly, in view

of the rich trove of conceits potentially inherent in the antithetical relationship between the two.

Whereas a keen interest in cosmological questions had attracted pre-Renaissance Platonists chiefly to the creation theories posited in the *Timaeus*, the ambition to inaugurate a novel philosophical system founded upon Platonic ideas of love and beauty gave impetus to the Renaissance Platonists' study of the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*.⁶ Marsilio Ficino was largely responsible for this important theoretical shift, to which he contributed by publishing, first in Latin, later in Italian, his *Commentary on the Symposium*. Instead of providing an analytical interpretation of Plato's text, the commentary attempts to construct a philosophical system, which addresses the power of Eros from the perspective of the study of natural sciences, cosmology, theology, ethics and aesthetics, while blending Platonic with Plotinian principles.⁷

In his interpretation of Socrates' speeches, Ficino designates three kinds of love, which correspond to three types of individuals. Love always originates in the act of gazing, performed through the material sense of sight. Whereas the love of a *contemplative* person ascends from sight to intellect, the love of the *voluptuous* person descends from sight to touch, and the love of an *active* person remains sited in the act of gazing. The love of the first person is directed to the highest demon rather than to the lowest, the love of the second to the lower rather than to the highest, and the love of the third holds the same distance from both. This three-fold love is defined by a three-fold designation: the love of a contemplative person is called divine, the love of the active one human, and the love of a voluptuous person animal.

Like Plato, Ficino conceives the cosmos as an organism composed of body and soul and encompassing a multiplicity of beings.⁸ The three worlds created by God are correlated by Ficino to the stages through which Diotima leads Socrates in the *Symposium*: above the body (*mundi corpus*) he places the soul, above the soul (*mundi anima*) the angel (*mens angelica*, angels and demons), and, above the angel, God. The pinnacle of all being and its sun is God the creator, whereas in Plato it is the Good.⁹ From God's goodness emanates perfect Beauty, whose rays penetrate the spiritual and material world, inspiring love. The lover of beauty, therefore, proceeds from the beauty perceived by the material senses to the contemplation and love of God.¹⁰ Ficino concludes: *Fons totius pulchritudinis Deus est, fons amoris Deus est* ('the source of all beauty is God, the source of all love is God').

A very important modifier to the purely Platonic vision embraced by Ficino is represented by Plotinian views on love and beauty, which provided, for the Renaissance Neoplatonist, a necessary stage between the Platonic

theory of the soul's ascent and the Christian vision of the soul's fusion into divine and absolute Good.

Plotinus, the third century AD Neoplatonist, whose philosophical works were as influential as Plato's in the Renaissance, articulated an elaborate hierarchy of being, which both departs from the Platonic model of the two worlds and maintains some of its features. At the pinnacle of his hierarchical structure, Plotinus envisaged the ultimate principle, the transcendent One, with which the individual soul yearns to be mystically united. Below the One, he located the Divine Mind, encompassing the world of the Ideas; on a lower rung, the Soul, which links the intelligible and the sensible world, and contains in it individual souls. Plotinus envisions the individual soul as tripartite, as does Plato: one part is concerned with the intelligible world and one with the sensible, while the third is free to follow either path.

Though the sensible world lies at the lowest level of the hierarchy, it is well-ordered, good and beautiful. Plotinus identifies beauty with the invisible and intelligible Form, which functions as archetype to works of art or nature; by correlating the Form in the intelligible world to its counterpart in the sensible world, the soul is capable of recognising embodied beauty, as it occurs in the latter. In an inverse process, the soul may ascend from this embodied beauty to the appreciation of abstract Beauty, as exemplified by the virtues:

These are the feelings that any beauty must arouse: wonder, an awestruck delight, and longing and love and a quivering of pleasure. These feelings may be excited by unseen beauties, and virtually all souls experience them, but especially those with a deeper love for unseen reality; just as all see the beauty in bodies, but not all are stung as sharply, and those who feel the sharpest pang are called lovers. But what is it that arouses this passion? Not shape, not colour, not anything extended, but Soul. Soul itself has no colour, and the moral wisdom and all the splendour of the virtues that it owns have no colour; yet it is the source of that passion, whenever you see in yourself, or in another, magnanimity, a righteous character, moderation and purity, grim-visaged courage, gravity and modesty... and over all the godlike light of Intellect. (*Enneads* 1.6.5)

Just as ugliness in the soul is caused by its having 'sunk deep in matter', beauty in the soul is produced by the purifying power of virtue. The Good is the transcendent source of the ideal Beauty of Intellect, which in its turn informs the soul and beauty in the sensible world. By elevating itself to the realm of pure Being, the soul, purified by virtue, attains likeness to God: the passions aroused by Beauty are contrasted with the stillness of mystical union. The supreme attainment of the soul is the vision of the Good, the transcendent cause of Beauty, and its contemplation demands a *different way of seeing* (*Enneads* 1-6):

But how shall we find the way? What method can we devise? How can one see the inconceivable beauty which stays within in the holy sanctuary and does not come out where the profane may see it? Let him who can, follow and come within, and leave outside the sight of his eyes and not turn back to the bodily splendours which he saw before. When he sees the beauty in bodies he must not run after them; we must know that they are images, traces, shadows, and hurry away to that which they image... Shut your eyes, and change to and wake another way of seeing, which everyone has but few use. (*Enneads* 1.6.8)

The clearly mystical element in the Plotinian experience of love and beauty provides a new angle to Platonic ascent. Plato had described, in the *Symposium*, a lover's amorous agitation for his beloved, the carnal impulse that, with the ascent of the soul, becomes the driving force of an intellectual process. Thus, Platonic love cannot be equated to a mystical elevation, but may be described, rather, as a kind of ascending dialectic, a climb through a series of stages, each of which subsumes and unifies the multiplicity inherent in the previous one.

In contrast, when Plotinus employs the terminology of the *Phaedrus*, he does not describe human love but expresses a mystical experience. For Plotinus, human love is no longer the first stage in a gradual ascent, but has become a 'mere term of comparison', a reflection of the genuine love infused into the soul by the Good: a reflection which vanishes as the Good manifests itself.¹¹

Ficino's syncretic interpretation of the *Symposium*, which blended Platonic, Plotinian and Christian elements, exerted a powerful fascination on his circle of disciples, some of whom wrote in similar vein about love and beauty, further fostering and enriching Ficino's concept of 'Platonic love' and the divine quality of a union that is able to transcend the carnal, in its aspiration to the highest rung on the *scala amoris*, or 'ladder of love'. Pico della Mirandola, follower and rival of Ficino, composed, in 1486, a *Commentary* on Girolamo Benivieni's *Canzone on Divine Love*, in which he strove to explain and clarify the obscure and intricate allusions to Ficino's *Commentary on the Symposium* contained in Benivieni's work:

Because man may be understood by the rational soul, either considered apart, or in its union to the body; in the first sense, human love is the image of the celestial; in the second, desire of sensible beauty, this being by the soul abstracted from matter, and (as much as its nature will allow) made intellectual. The greater part of men reach no higher than this; others more perfect, remembering that more perfect beauty which the soul (before being immersed in the body) beheld, are inflamed with an incredible desire of reviewing it, in pursuit whereof they separate themselves as much as possible from the body, of which the soul (returning to its first dignity) becomes absolute mistress. This is the image of celestial love, by which man arises from one perfection to another, till his soul

(wholly united to the intellect) is made an angel. Purged from material dross, and transformed into spiritual flame by this divine power, he mounts up to the intelligible heaven, and happily rests in his Father's bosom.

(Pico della Mirandola *A Platonic Discourse*, being a commentary on Benivieni's *Canzone on Divine Love* 2.20)

Evident traces of this passage, which, of course, replicates well-known Ficinian syncretic positions, are found in a poem by Edmund Spenser, *A Hymne in Honour of Beautie* (cf particularly vv 48-49 below). Even a superficial reading of the two texts provides a clear demonstration of the process of absorption of Ficinian erotic syncretism into English Renaissance literature, a process largely encouraged by the publication of two works in the Ficinian mould, Pietro Bembo's *Gli Asolani* ('The Lovers of Asolo', 1505) and Baldassare Castiglione's *Il Libro del Cortegiano* ('The Book of the Courtier', 1528), widely circulated and repeatedly imitated in various forms throughout Europe.¹²

The *Fowre Hymnes*, the last work of Spenser, may be seen either as a four-fold structure of ascending stages towards the Essence of Beauty and Love, or as a counterpoised pair of dyptichs, representing the earthly (*The Hymne in Honour of Beauty* and *The Hymne in Honour of Love*) as opposite to the sublime (*The Hymne in Honour of Heavenly Beauty* and *The Hymne in Honour of Heavenly Love*). In his *Hymne in Honour of Beautie*, Spenser first describes the beauty of the external world, then proceeds to explain how human beauty came into being, employing the concept of the divine Pattern of perfect Beauty, drawn from both Plato and Plotinus:

What time this worlds great workmaster did cast
To make al things, such as we now behold,
It seems that before his eyes had plast
A goodly Paterne, to whose perfect mould
He fashioned them as comely as he could;
That now so fair and seemly they appear,
As nought may be amended anywhere.

The rest of the passage reveals that, while Plato's *Timaeus* is the primary source (mediated by a long medieval tradition of commentaries on the dialogue's creation theories) for Spenser's vision of a pattern of beauty upon which God modelled the material world, the *Symposium* provides the example for the identification of the divine Pattern with Abstract or Perfect Beauty:

That wondrous Paterne wheresoe'r it be,
Whether in earth layd up in secret store,
Or else in heaven, that no man may it see
With sinfull eyes, for fear it to deflore,

Is perfect beauty which all men adore,
Whose face and feature doth so much excel
All mortal sense, that none the same may tel.
Thereof as every earthly thing partakes,
Or more or less by influence divine,
So it more fair accordingly it makes,
And the gross matter of this earthly mine,
Which clotheth it, thereafter doth refine,
Doing away the dross which dims the light
Of that fair beam, which therein is empight.

(Edmund Spenser *A Hymne in Honour of Beautie*, vv. 29-49, st.1)

This beauty is first of all eternal; it neither comes into being nor passes away, neither waxes nor wanes; next, it is not beautiful in part and ugly in part, nor beautiful at one time and ugly at another, nor beautiful in this relation and ugly in that, nor beautiful here and ugly there, as varying according to its beholders; nor again will this beauty appear to him like the beauty of a face or hands or anything else corporeal, or like the beauty of a thought or a science, or like beauty which has its seat in something other than itself, be it a living thing or the earth or the sky or anything else whatever; he will see it as absolute, existing alone with itself, unique, eternal, and all other beautiful things as partaking of it, yet in such a manner that, while they come into being and pass away, it neither undergoes any increase or diminution nor suffers any change. (Plato, *Symposium* 211a-b)

The juxtaposition of the two passages not only confirms Spenser's reliance on Plato, but also reveals that Spenser's Platonic vision was mediated and enlarged by both Plotinian and Ficinian Neoplatonic elaboration of absolute Beauty as the sun, whose splendour beneficially penetrates and infuses all earthly things. This process, which Plotinus called *effluence*, in his treatise on aesthetics *An Essay on the Beautiful*, in turn closely recalls the change which affects the lover's soul when he contemplates the beauty of the beloved, as described in Plato's *Phaedrus*: the winging of the lover's soul through the infusion of beauty enables it to aspire to higher flights.¹³

Spenser clearly calls upon the Platonic concept of *effluence of beauty*, passing through the lover's eyes and imparting warmth to his heart, when he remarks:

.... that imperious boy [Cupid]
Doth therewith tip his sharp empoisoned darts,
Which glancing through the eyes with countenance coy
Rest not till they have pierst the trembling harts,
And kindled flame in all their inner parts,...

(*Hymne to Love*, st. 18)

It is beauty that sparks the passion of love,

... gentle love, that loiall is and trew,
Will more illumine your resplendent ray,
And adde more brightness to your goodly hew,
From light of his pure fire...
Therefore, to make your beautie more appeare,
It you behoves to love.

(*Hymne in Honour of Beautie* st. 26-27)

which Spenser describes in his *Hymne to Love* as a cosmogonic principle, that harmonises and unifies the chaotic elements of nature and encourages procreation. Ficino, in his *Commentarium*, draws this idea from the speech of Erysimachus in Plato's *Symposium*:

Like is preserved in like. Love, however, draws like to like. Mutual love acting as the link, each single part of the earth is drawn to its like and is preserved in it... All things, to speak the truth, are preserved by the unity of their parts and perish through their dispersion. (*Commentarium*, 3.2)

Spenser follows a Neoplatonic model in his conception of human beauty as a reflection or copy of divine Beauty, which implies the lover's progress or ascent from acknowledgement of physical features in the particular beloved to the contemplation of infinite divine Beauty.¹⁴ After the initial stage of admiration for material attractions, the lover passes through a second stage, the idealisation of the beloved:

Such is the power of that sweet passion,
That it all sordid baseness doth expell,
And the refined mynd doth newly fashion
Unto a fairer forme, which now doth dwell
In his high thought...

(*Hymne in Honour of Beautie*, st.31)

This stage of idealisation draws a mocking comment from Shakespeare's Theseus, the natural casualness of which reveals how commonplace certain well-known aspects of Platonic and Neoplatonic doctrines had become:

Lovers and madmen have such seething brains,
Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend
More than cool reason ever comprehends.
The lunatic, the lover, and the poet
Are of imagination all compact:
One sees more devils than vast Hell can hold –
That is the madman; the lover, all as frantic,
Sees Helen's beauty in a brow of Egypt...

(Shakespeare *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 5.1)

In the third stage, the lover acquires the notion of *universal* beauty, gathered from the generalisation of different examples of earthly beauty:

... out of the object of their eyes
A more refined forme, which they present
Unto their mind, voide of all blemishment...
Beholdeth free from flesh's fraile infection.

(*Hymne in Honour of Beautie*, st.31)

As he passes into the fourth stage, the lover acknowledges beauty as a spiritual entity and as an indivisible part of his soul. He contemplates the beauty which 'he fashions in his higher skill' as 'the mirror of his owne thought'. More accurately, beauty is seen as an inherent attribute of the mind, comprehended by the intellect alone:

Which seeing now so inly faire to be,
As outward it appeareth to the eye,
And with his spirits proportion to agree,
He thereon fixeth all his fantasie...

(*Hymne in Honour of Beautie*, st.33)

The last two stages on the upward journey allow the lover's soul first to arrive at the most abstract hypostasis, Heavenly Beauty or Sapience, through the contemplation of the beauty of divine wisdom and goodness as revealed in God's creation (the fifth stage). And, lastly, to immerse itself in the Primal Essence, in supreme communion with Beauty and Goodness:

... doth bereave
Their soule of sense, through infinite delight,
And them transport from flesh into the spright.

(*Hymne to Heavenly Beautie*, st. 37)

It is worth reading Castiglione's account of the sublimation of the soul, the last stage of the lover's ascent to 'pure heavenly Beauty', in order to gain further insight into Spenser's indebtedness to Ficinian Neoplatonism:

And therefore burning in this most happy flame, [the soul] arises to the noblest part of her, which is the understanding, and there no more shadowed with the dark night of earthly matters, sees the heavenly beauty: but yet does she not, for all that, enjoy it altogether perfectly, because she beholds it only in her particular understanding, which cannot conceive the passing great universal beauty. Whereupon not thoroughly satisfied with this benefit, love gives unto the soul a greater happiness. For like as through the particular beauty of one body, he guides her to the universal understanding. Thus the soul, kindled in the most holy fire of true heavenly love, flees to couple herself with the nature of angels, and not only clean

forsakes sense, but has no more need of the discourse of reason, for, being changed into an angel, she understands all things that may be understood: and without any veil or cloud, she sees the main sea of pure heavenly Beauty and receives it into her, and enjoys the sovereign happiness, that cannot be comprehended of the senses.

(Castiglione *Il Cortegiano or The Book of the Courtier*, 4)

Ficino's fundamental theory of a universe permeated by eternal and infinite Beauty, and unified by the desiring thought of the rational human soul, is wholly pervasive in Spenser's *Fowre Hymnes*. Diotima's Platonic ladder (*Symposium* 210a-212a), transmuted into an ontological ascent from the hypostasis of human soul to the summit of the Plotinian One (or Christian God), re-emerges in Spenser's poems as a central concept, which, clothed in vibrant imagery, sustains both rational speculation and passionate affect. Ficino's reiteration of the distinction between corporeal and spiritual aspects in the love-beauty synthesis is subsumed by Spenser into an attempt to integrate, through poetry, Platonic and Christian concepts of love, and resolve the tension between the impulses of earthly desire and the soul's yearning for sublimation.¹⁵

There is no doubt that the 'new' theories that had emerged from the Italian Renaissance had not wholly displaced medieval conventions of courtly love or cosmogony. But the new combined with the old to shape a terrain of poetic expression and intellectual questioning that seemed worth exploring. Although the enclosure of philosophical doctrines into poetic structures posed a not indifferent challenge to the creative powers and ability of a poet (yet Lucretius, whom Spenser admired, had succeeded), the remarkable blend of such (apparently) divergent beliefs as presented by ancient and modern schools of thought indeed provided a rich array of ideas that could be exploited in diverse ways.

The doctrines of Platonism, and of Plotinian and Renaissance Neoplatonism were often treated as indistinguishable or mutually equivalent, and rigorousness was not always a well-cultivated virtue, especially by poets. I would suggest that this 'weakness' paradoxically resulted in a profound enrichment of poetical language that enabled Milton, for instance, to withstand the rigours of composing (both in stylistic and conceptual terms) a poem as complex as *Paradise Lost*.

To sustain this point and to conclude, I should like to suggest a (private) reading of (at least) extracts of two further poems, John Milton's *Comus* and Andrew Marvell's *A Dialogue between the Soul and the Body*. These passages aptly illustrate the powerful and far-reaching influence of Platonic and Neoplatonic doctrines, their adaptation to new exigencies, both cultural and artistic, and, therefore, their vigorous vitality.¹⁶

The Elder Brother speaks:
 So dear to heaven is saintly chastity,
 That when a soul is found sincerely so,
 A thousand liveried angels lackey her,
 Driving far off each thing of sin and guilt,
 And in clear dream, and solemn vision
 Tell her of things that no gross ear can hear,
 Till oft converse with heavenly habitants
 Begin to cast a beam on the outward shape,
 The unpolluted temple of the mind,
 And turns it by degrees to the soul's essence,
 Till all be made immortal: but when lust,
 By unchaste looks, loose gestures, and foul talk,
 But most by lewd and lavish act of sin,
 Lets in defilement to the inward parts,
 The soul grows clotted by contagion,
 Embodies, and imbrutes, till she quite lose
 The divine property of her first being.
 Such are those thick and gloomy shadows damp
 Oft seen in charnel-vaults, and sepulchres
 Linging, and sitting by a new-made grave,
 As loth to leave the body that it loved,
 And linked itself by carnal sensuality
 To a degenerate and degraded state.
 (John Milton *Comus*, vv. 452-474)

Soul: O, who shall from this dungeon raise
 A soul, enslaved so many ways,
 With bolts of bones, that fettered stands
 In feet, and manacled in hands
 Here blinded with an eye; and there
 Deaf with the drumming of an ear,
 A soul hung up, as t'were, in chains
 Of nerves, and arteries, and veins,
 Tortured, besides each other part,
 In a vain head, and double heart?

Body: O, who shall me deliver whole,
 From bonds of this tyrannic soul,
 Which, stretched upright, impales me so,
 That my own precipice I go;
 And warms and moves this needless frame
 (A fever but could do the same)
 And, wanting where its spite to try,
 Has made me live to let me die,
 A body that could never rest,
 Since this ill spirit it possessed?

(Andrew Marvell *A Dialogue between the Soul and the Body*, vv. 1-20)

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1. Nuttall (2007: 254), in his discussion of the marriage contract in *As You Like It*.
 2. Very few works of Plato were available in the medieval period in Latin translations: *Timaeus*, *Phaedo* and *Meno* were the only dialogues accessible to scholars.
 3. It is important to remember that the Florentine Neo-Platonists held in high consideration a body of writings believed to predate Plato (only in the seventeenth century proven to belong to *late* antiquity), which were attributed to Orpheus, Pythagoras, Hermes Trismegistus and Zoroaster. Plato's doctrines were thought to have derived from these works, which were imbued with mysticism and magic. This conviction fostered the hope that Greek, Jewish and Christian beliefs could be reconciled and interpreted in light of one another.
 4. The philosopher risks his life to teach responsible governance to those whose souls have not yet attained the vision of the Idea of the Good: 'The prison dwelling corresponds to the region revealed to us through the sense of sight, and the firelight within it to the power of the sun. The ascent to see the things in the upper world you may take as standing for the upward journey of the soul into the region of the intelligible... In the world of knowledge, the last thing to be perceived and only with the greatest difficulty is the essential Form of Goodness.... Without having had a vision of this Form, no one can act with wisdom, either in his own life or in matters of state.' (Plato *Republic*, 7.517)
 5. This is the version of the *Timaeus*, in which the mythical creator uses the world of Ideas as a model.
 6. And also of his theory of the perfect state, as expounded in *Republic*.
 7. The *Commentarium in Convivium* (or, *De Amore*) is, in fact, not a direct commentary on the *Symposium*, but, rather, a re-creation or re-enactment of the gathering described in the Platonic dialogue, during a banquet held in the Medici villa at Careggi, just outside Florence, to celebrate Plato's birthday on the 7th of November 1468. The seven speakers, each taking the role of one of the Platonic symposiasts, were members of the Florentine Platonic Academy.
 8. Ficino follows Plato in conceiving the cosmos as an organism composed of body and soul, and embracing a variety of beings. He does, however, introduce additional distinctive categories in the definition of these beings, such as *corpus* (the body), *qualitas* (dynamic power of the body), *anima* (the soul, as potential being), *mens* (the mind) and *Deus* (God, the one and infinite being).
 9. 'In the thirty-odd years before the election of Alexander VI, the Florentine humanist Marsilio Ficino had gradually transformed the solar symbolism of Neoplatonic philosophy into a powerful image of the Christian God, noting the parallels between this Neoplatonic imagery, the solar imagery of Hermes Trismegistus, and the biblical association of God with light (as in Genesis 1 and especially in the Gospel of John)' (Rowland 1998:49).
 10. Ficino's interpretation interweaves Plato's thoughts with the teachings of Hermes Trismegistus, the mystic theology of Dionysius the Areopagite, the Orphic *Argonautica*, and the orthodox teaching of the Church (whereas Plato's thought did not recognise a transcendent *principle of unity*, Plotinus' One could easily be identified with the Christian God). Rowland (1998:46) remarks: 'These wisdom traditions were enshrined in the fifteenth century as "primeval theology" – *prisca theologia* – and were believed to survive

only in fragmentary records, like Plato's reports of Atlantis in his dialogues *Critias* and *Timaeus*, and, most significant of all, in a series of Greek texts called the *Corpus Hermeticum*... The texts of the *Corpus Hermeticum* claimed as their author the Egyptian god Thoth, whom they equated with the Greek God Hermes and to whom they awarded the honorific title "thrice great", Trismegistos. In dialogue form, they spelled out various possible ways by which individuals could obtain knowledge of God; to fifteenth century readers, they seemed to anticipate the doctrines of Christian mysticism with remarkable exactitude.'

11. Hadot 1993: 48-63 offers a concise and well-reasoned account of Plotinian treatment of Love.

12. Aside from being circulated through such publications, Italian humanist culture was brought to England from Italy by John Colet (1467-1519), the first English Humanist whose writings clearly reveal the influence of Platonic thought. In its first period, the English Renaissance was concerned primarily with Platonic theories of theology, education or politics, much less with Plato's metaphysical interpretation of love, which entered English poetry through Edmund Spenser's works.

13. *Phaedrus*, 251: 'As he receives the effluence of beauty through the eyes, the wing moistens and he warms... and the growth extends under the whole soul.'

14. Castiglione's *Il Cortegiano* provided a well-known schema of six distinct stages in the progress of the lover.

15. Referring to the *Mutabilitie Cantos*, Bulger (1994: 128) notes that '*Mutabilitie* is Spenser's final attempt to reconcile the ceaseless tension between being and becoming that permeates the *Faerie Queene*'. A similar tension characterizes *The Fowre Hymnes*.

16. One should, perhaps, mention the fact that a group of Cambridge scholars, philosophers and theologians, in the mid seventeenth century revived and cultivated Platonism as a philosophical system, rather than as literary paradigm. The group became known as the 'Cambridge Platonists'. Far from being a negligible phenomenon, this revival exerted unexpected, and often undetected, influence.

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