



Marsilio Ficino.

Ficino, Marsilio (1433-1499)

by Linda Rapp

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Italian philosopher Marsilio Ficino devoted a lifetime to the study of the works of Plato and their interpretation in the context of Christian theology. Central to his thought was the concept of platonic love, the true union of one man with another, in which an appreciation of earthly beauty leads to an understanding of the beauty of God.

Marsilio Ficino, born October 19, 1433 in Figline near Florence, was the son of the physician to Cosimo de' Medici. Intending to pursue the same career as his father, he studied medicine at the University of Florence. His intelligence and interest in philosophy attracted the attention of Cosimo, who was seeking a scholar to translate ancient Greek texts that had been brought to Italy in the wake of the fall of Byzantium in 1453. With the patronage of the Medici family, Ficino learned Greek and set about translating the invaluable manuscripts.

So pleased was Cosimo with Ficino's work that in 1463 he gave him a villa in nearby Careggi. There Ficino led the Platonic Academy of Florence, a circle of literary men and artists eager to learn from the man they nicknamed "alter Plato." His large "Platonica familia" included his student Lorenzo de' Medici, philosopher Pico della Mirandola, and poets Angelo Poliziano and Giovanni Cavalcanti, Ficino's dear friend. Throughout his life Ficino also corresponded with numerous prominent men of Europe, political and religious leaders as well as scholars.

In addition to the Platonic texts, Cosimo de' Medici also possessed the *Poimandres* ("Shepherd of Men") attributed to Hermes Trismegistus, who was believed to have lived in the time of Moses and to have been related to the Egyptian deity Thoth. Although subsequent scholarship has raised debate over the origin and date of these writings, in Ficino's day they were seen as a crucial link between Christianity and previous religious traditions extending to Zoroaster in the sixth century B. C. E. This context being accepted, Ficino was able to place the writings of Plato within a theological tradition that included rather than opposed Christianity.

Ficino was a devout Christian. He was ordained as a Catholic priest in 1473 and was appointed to a post at the cathedral in Florence.

The works of Plato were always at the center of Ficino's life as a scholar. If he had done no more than translate them, his contribution to European letters would have been great; his Latin version of the complete texts, first published in 1484, gave Western European readers the ability to study the Platonic writings for themselves.

Ficino's commentaries and treatises placed him in the first rank of philosophers of his age. Among his most influential works were *Theologia platonica* (1482), *Commentarius in Platonis Convivium* (1469), and his commentary on love as presented in Plato's *Phaedrus* and *Symposium*, entitled *De Amore* (1484) and dedicated to Cavalcanti.

Ficino introduced the phrase "platonic love," by which he meant a relationship that included both the physical and the spiritual. According to Ficino, love is the desire for beauty, which is the image of the divine. Inspired to love, two people--specifically two men, for Ficino did not consider women capable of such sublime love--each freely abandoned and "died to" himself to be reborn and live in the mind and soul of the other. Through this process the lovers are able to see the image of the beauty of God.

In privileging the physical, Ficino departed significantly from previous Christian tradition. As Marjorie O'Rourke Boyle points out, Ficino not only approved of "gracious laughter" but saw in it "an analogy with divine pleasure," in sharp contrast to the medieval view that expressions of physical pleasure represented a lack of the dignity and serenity appropriate to a pious person. Boyle calls Ficino "the joyful philosopher," writing, "in his philosophy joy was the ultimate human passion, the consummation of the ascent from the body to God in the overflow of the contemplation of the true, the beautiful, and the good. Joy differed between the sensual pleasure of the body and the gaiety of the soul in knowledge."

Ficino's view of platonic love, a deep spiritual as well as physical bond between men with a shared thirst for beauty and knowledge, is complex. He saw human beings as inherently both sexual and spiritual. He stated that sexual attraction was natural "whenever we judge any body to be beautiful." For a man the object of this affection could well be another man, in whom he saw his own beauty mirrored. The relationship could, moreover, be an example of "Socratic love" between a mature man and a younger one.

Although Ficino regarded sexual attraction as intrinsic to human beings, he saw it as a potential impediment in the course to the knowledge of God. Only if the lovers progressed to an appreciation and exchange of each other's souls could they comprehend the beauty of God. Since he felt that men were more capable of this than women, he advanced male friendship as the purest form of love.

Ficino encouraged his followers at the Platonic Academy to write love letters stressing the union of souls who have lost themselves in each other. Ficino's voluminous correspondence, which was published in 1495, contains many examples of such letters, including some to Giovanni Cavalcanti.

Cavalcanti (1444-1509), a handsome Florentine nobleman, lived for many years with Ficino at his villa and was an important member of the Platonic Academy. During a brief separation in 1473-1474 Ficino wrote letters to "Giovanni amico mio perfettissimo" ("Giovanni my most perfect friend") in which he declared his love and compared their union to those of illustrious male companions of classical times.

After a productive and rewarding scholarly life, Ficino died on October 1, 1499.

Ficino's formulation of platonic love exercised an important influence on artists in his own time and beyond, including Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci. His influence can also be seen in the homoeroticism in Michelangelo's and Shakespeare's sonnets as well as in the works of Edmund Spenser, Pierre Ronsard, and Maurice Scève.

With time Ficino's concept of platonic love, clearly a relationship between men, was first heterosexualized and subsequently desexualized entirely and came to mean a non-physical love, a notion that distorts Ficino's philosophy.

Ficino's life and most important relationships were certainly homosocial. Today he would most probably be considered a gay man, but the contemporary categories of sexual orientation to which people are assigned did not exist in his time.

Giovanni Dall'Orto writes that Ficino "camouflaged his homosexual preferences" behind the misogynist tenor of his age. It may also be that the emphasis on spirituality in his philosophy is itself a camouflage for the defense of same-sex love that is at the heart of his thought.

Some commentators have, quite improbably, denied the homosexual implications of Ficino's philosophy. Paul Oskar Kristeller, for example, rejected Ficino's "homosexualism," relegated the eroticism of his letters to a "conscious . . . and technical expression of intellectual communion," and dismissed his declarations of affinity with Cavalcanti as a mere "analogy of friendships among ancient philosophers." This misreading may well have been deliberate. It certainly flies in the face of Ficino's letters and philosophical writings celebrating the gift of sensuality and its connection to the divine.

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