

On the Nature of Love

BY ARTHUR FARNDELL

It is easy to fall in love. Falling in love. Ways of falling in love. The kinds of people that make us fall in love. The passions of lovers. What lovers seek. The power of Love. The gifts of Love. The birth of Love and hatred. Common love is the evil eye. Common love is a disturbance in the blood. Bestial love: a kind of madness.

These are some of the topics in a book called *On the Nature of Love*. The book is a translation of a work by the fifteenth-century magus Marsilio Ficino, who takes the reader through many shades of grey as he comments on Plato's *Symposium*, the dialogue in which Eryximachus proposes to the guests gathered in Agathon's house that each 'shall make a speech in honour of Love'.

Ficino's commentary offers many shades of white in addition to the grey, from off-white to dazzling purity, as further chapter headings reveal: The reign of Love is prior to Necessity; Love transports souls to heaven, apportions levels of blessedness, and bestows everlasting joy; Love is the master of all the arts; Love is the master and preserver of all; How the beauty of God gives birth to love; Love is the noblest of the divine frenzies; How we are to love God; How the soul rises from the beauty of Body to the beauty of God.

The story-line is very simple. November 7 was presumed to be Plato's birthday, and on that evening in 1468 nine men met at Careggi outside Florence in his honour. After supper the *Symposium* was read aloud, and each of the guests then 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 to Plato's dialogue.


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Ficino's Latin commentary to the *Symposium* was published in 1484 under the title *De Amore*. Sixty years later his Tuscan version of this commentary made its public appearance as *Sopra lo amore*. It is believed that *On the Nature of Love* is the first English translation of the Tuscan version, which runs broadly parallel to its Latin counterpart, while presenting numerous minor divergences from it.

Given the universal appeal of its subject matter, Ficino's commentary was eagerly taken up in court circles throughout Europe and became an essential part of their standard fare for the next two centuries. Writers and artists were inspired by it. The topic of idealised love, so evident in Shakespeare's plays, immediately resonated with the makers and shakers of many countries, particularly Italy, France, Spain, and England. In more recent times, this work has exercised the minds of theologians, philosophers, and psychologists, and there is every reason to believe that its influence will continue to be felt, for it has rightly been said that love is the secret password to every heart.

Ficino himself gives the essence in his preface, where he says, '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.'

This commentary has now been translated 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. 



MEET THE TRANSLATOR

ARTHUR FARNDELL has translated many of Ficino's commentaries on Plato's Dialogues and been part of a team of scholars translating *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino* for over forty years.

On the web

<http://www.shephard-walwyn.co.uk/authors/arthur-farnell/>

Bookshelf

ON THE NATURE OF LOVE: FICINO ON PLATO'S SYMPOSIUM, TRANSLATION BY ARTHUR FARNDELL, published by Shephard-Walwyn, Paperback, (200 pages).

