

*Shakespeare  
and the  
Fire of Love*

JILL LINE



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## *Preface*

THIS BOOK is the culmination of my research over the last few years for many lectures and essays on Shakespeare and Christian-Platonism. These include a series of essays in booklet form written for the Globe Theatre's season of Roman plays, a contribution to a book on Marsilio Ficino<sup>1</sup> and lectures for the Temenos Academy and for the Prince of Wales' Shakespeare School for Teachers with the Royal Shakespeare Company.

My interest in this subject began in the 1970s when I first read John Vyvyan's books on Shakespeare and the work of Dame Frances Yates on Renaissance philosophy. At the same time I was introduced to Platonic and Hermetic philosophy and, in particular, to the Christian-Platonic writings and letters of the fifteenth century Florentine, Marsilio Ficino. My own research began with a study of the Platonic concept of love in the masques of Ben Jonson and Inigo Jones. It was not until some years later, during a year spent at the Shakespeare Institute in Stratford-upon-Avon, that I realised just how intrinsic these concepts are to Shakespeare. Strangely, whilst Christian-Platonism has long been associated with the poetry of many of his contemporaries, its relationship to Shakespeare and his plays is not so well known. Jonson had openly acknowledged his debt to the 'Platonicks' but I now found that, with this philosophy in mind, the whole inner meaning of Shakespeare's plays and poems began to fall into place.

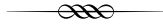
It has not been possible to cover all the plays and poems in this book and some are explored in greater depth than others. Most of the comedies and some of the sonnets are mentioned as they show most clearly the concepts of Christian-Platonic love, while the great tragedies, some of the Roman plays and Shakespeare's last plays will be used to show how he expanded on these ideas throughout his writing life. There is little reference to the histories since, although they contain the ideals of Christian-Platonism, they follow a different path and would be the subject of another book

It has been an exciting journey and there is still far to go. Discoveries are endless and, for this reason, it has been a difficult book to complete. Many would agree that, each time Shakespeare's words are heard afresh, something new is realised. This is true, of course, on whatever level Shakespeare's plays are taken, whether for their plots or their politics; but, if the greater riches they contain are to be unlocked, there needs to be some sort of ground-plan, an understanding of his underlying philosophy. The aim of this book, therefore, is to provide that ground-plan so that readers may be inspired to discover more for themselves and with 'I see!' to experience a flash of Shakespeare's own inspiration.

## CHAPTER ONE

### *Ficino and the Platonic Worlds*

From women's eyes this doctrine I derive:  
They are the ground, the books, the academes,  
From whence doth spring the true Promethean fire  
4.3.298-300



THESE WORDS, spoken by Berowne in *Love's Labour's Lost*, embody all the passions of the early stages of love. What young man would desire to bury himself in his studies when a woman's flashing eyes tempt him to a learning experience of a quite different nature. But Berowne seems to be saying far more than this. Within a woman's eyes, often called the windows or mirrors of the soul, the whole world may be revealed, encompassed and given nourishment. It is not so much the eyes themselves as the light or fire, the true Promethean fire, with which they sparkle, that carries this true knowledge to the lover. What does Shakespeare really mean by this and what is the true Promethean fire? The answers lie in the Christian-Platonic philosophy of love in which all Shakespeare's plays and poems have their genesis. In its most immediate form, it may be traced to the Florentine philosopher Marsilio Ficino who had lived a century earlier.

With the intention to 'demystify', most Shakespearean criticism of recent years has been set firmly in the historical, social and political context of our contemporary world. Whilst an academic deconstruction of his language may unearth a multiplicity of approaches, there is no need to tear Shakespeare apart in order to find a meaning for audiences today. The meaning is there, in his words, his themes and his poetry, a meaning that goes beyond current political issues, beyond gender and race, to the ideas, forms and universal laws that lie beyond the material world and have their roots in one source. It is from this

point that Shakespeare viewed creation and from which he was able to write of such universal themes as the harmony and disharmony between nations and princes and the inner conflicts of mind and soul in men and women whose natures and desires are not confined to any particular age.

The philosophy by which he was guided is perennial and has passed from the mists of time through a long line of teachers including Hermes Trismegistus, Pythagoras, Plato and Plotinus. The one philosopher of this tradition, however, whose ideas Shakespeare most clearly reflects was a scholar-priest living in fifteenth-century Florence named Marsilio Ficino. It was he who drew the strands of many teachings together and, having found the same truths in Christianity, formulated a philosophy that is generally referred to today as Christian-Platonism.

The son of Cosimo de' Medici's physician, Marsilio Ficino was born in Florence in 1433 and became a philosopher, priest, doctor, astrologer and a highly accomplished musician, skilled on the lyre. Under the patronage of the de' Medici family, he was the founder and leader of the Platonic Academy in Florence, where he himself was responsible for the translations, from Greek into Latin, of Plato, Hermes Trismegistus, the Orphic hymns and neo-Platonists such as Plotinus and Porphyry. Many of the manuscripts he used had been recovered by Cosimo's agents from remote monasteries where they had lain, lost to the world, for centuries. The academy, whose members included Lorenzo de' Medici and the philosopher-poet Pico della Mirandola, inspired a renaissance of the arts in Florence that spread over the whole of Italy and across Europe.

Among Ficino's correspondents, who included some of the most influential men in Europe, was John Colet, Dean of St Paul's Cathedral and the founder of St Paul's School. It was he who helped to promote Ficino's teachings in England and it was not long before translations and commentaries by Ficino were to be found in the university libraries. Ficino's philosophy, known at the time as the new learning, became well-known in academic and artistic circles and was soon inspiring the poets and artists of the English Renaissance. In 1578, when Shakespeare was fourteen, a work that was to provide a framework for his inspiration, Ficino's *De Amore*, a commentary on Plato's

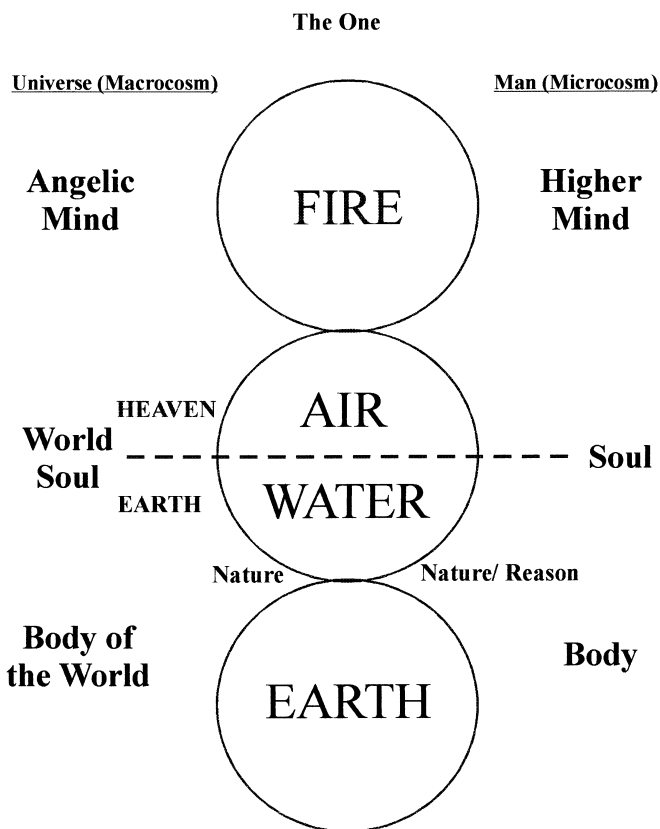


*Symposium on Love*, became more widely known when it was translated into French. Ficino always referred to his commentary as *De Amore* or the Book of Love. Sears Jayne's excellent translation is titled *Commentary on Plato's Symposium on Love* and therefore will be referred to in the notes at the end of this book as the *Commentary*, but wherever it is mentioned in the following pages it will be given Ficino's Italian title.

Although Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier*, translated into English in 1561, has been more widely recognised as a source of the new learning, it still owes its philosophy of love to Ficino and *De Amore*. Spenser, Chapman and Donne were among the many poets inspired by this philosophy of love, as it was also called, and the court masques of Ben Jonson and Inigo Jones were steeped in Platonic imagery. So whether or not Shakespeare read *De Amore* himself, he was growing up in a society imbued with Ficino's form of Christian-Platonism.

In one of his many letters to his friends and pupils, Ficino wrote that 'it was the chief work of the divine Plato ... to reveal the principle of unity in all things',<sup>1</sup> a phrase that encapsulates not only the chief work of Ficino himself but also that of Shakespeare for, as his plays and poems reveal, the principle of unity was their foundation. Adding the dimension of Christianity to the Platonic teaching, Ficino tended to refer to this principle of unity as God, although he also used the Platonic terms of the One or the Good.

The One is the source of all creation and its many worlds. From the One comes multiplicity and form; as each world expands into the next its forms increase and become more dense. The full Platonic model contains six worlds but Ficino simplifies them into three, or sometimes four.<sup>2</sup> The first world is that of Mind: although often translated as Intellect, it is far above ordinary thought and reason. Since it is the world of the angels and the gods, Ficino calls it the Angelic Mind and, as we shall discover in a later chapter, it is also the world of creative imagination. Next comes the realm of the Soul and finally the Body of the World, the whole of the material world that we perceive through our senses. The body is ornamented by Nature, which Ficino refers to sometimes as a separate, fourth world. All that lies in the upper part of the soul and the angelic mind pertains to the heavens, whilst the lower part of the soul and all beneath belongs to the earthly world.



*The Platonic Worlds and their Elements*

As Ficino tells it in *De Amore*, creation is a love story for, as each world is created, it falls in love with the beauty of the higher world and, from that love, a new world is created. As there are three worlds so there are three chaoses, by which Ficino means dark unformed nothingness. The chaos of the unformed angelic mind lies in the mind of God, the creator. This initial essence of mind falls in love with its creator and thus becomes the first act of love. From their union, the angelic world is given form. In the creation of the other worlds, love remains the activating force. The unformed chaos of the soul, falling in love with the angelic mind, gives birth to the world of the soul. Likewise the material world is born:

In the same way, the Matter of this world, although in the beginning it lay a formless chaos, without the ornament of Forms, immediately because of a love innate in itself, it directed itself toward the Soul and offered itself obedient to it, and through this conciliating love, receiving from the Soul the ornament of all the Forms which are seen in this world, from a Chaos became a world.<sup>3</sup>

This act did not occur once, at the beginning of time, but is an on-going process and, as the worlds manifest on the universal scale, so they are also to be found within each individual being. Man<sup>4</sup> is a universe in the microcosm and, like the macrocosm, is composed of the same worlds of mind, soul, nature and body. For both the universe and for every human being, each moment has its own creative potential.

Now the innate beauty of each world, whether in the macrocosm of the universe or the microcosm of a human being, is illuminated by a ray that lights the beauty of each world and, through its light, inspires love for that beauty. Ficino calls it 'the one truth, which is the single ray of the one God'.<sup>5</sup>

The divine ray, lighting beauty and inspiring love, acts as the creative power of God in forming the universe. It also acts as a guide, to those who so desire it, to return to the source of their being and become unified in God. Passing through all higher worlds on our journey into creation, we find ourselves in a corporeal body, living in the material world and ornamented with our nature. But we are all given the opportunity to discover those higher worlds of which, imprisoned as we are in our bodies, we may have only an occasional glimpse. The return journey is also through love, being the act of creation in reverse. Those who search are first attracted by the outward beauty of the physical world, then the lover progresses through love of the beauty of virtue, the beauty of soul and the beauty of mind. Finally the soul is seized by the brilliance of divine beauty itself and, drawn upward as if by a hook, itself becomes God. Ficino writes of this in a letter to his close friend, Giovanni Cavalcanti, who first urged him to write *De Amore*:

... the single ray of the one God ... shines in every individual thing according to its nature and is called grace and beauty; and where it shines more clearly, it especially attracts the man who is watching, stimulates him who thinks, and catches and possesses him who draws near to it. This ray also compels him to revere its splendour more than all else, as if it were a divine spirit, and, once

his former nature has been cast aside, to strive for nothing else but to become this splendour ... The soul, consumed by the divine brilliance which shines in the beauteous man as though in a mirror, is seized unknowingly by that brilliance, and is drawn upward as by a hook, so that the soul becomes God.<sup>6</sup>

In this way the divine ray, that lights beauty and inspires love, becomes the path to unity with God. It is the path on which Shakespeare's lovers embark and it is the goal to which they aspire. In truth, all Shakespeare's heroes are lovers for, as Ficino points out, the two words have the same derivation: 'All are called heroes, that is, lovers, from the Greek word "heros" which means "love".'<sup>7</sup> As we shall discover in some plays, such as *Love's Labour's Lost*, the lovers have hardly started upon their journey, while Bassanio in *The Merchant of Venice*, is well on his way before the play opens.

Before we begin to explore these plays, it would be helpful to look at the court masques that were being performed in Shakespeare's lifetime. These masques are overtly Platonic and shed much light on what is not, at first, quite so obvious in Shakespeare's plays. Written for performance at the court of King James I by Ben Jonson and others, they are allegories of the ascent of love and depict the Platonic worlds through their poetry, songs and dance, and the stage designs of Inigo Jones. When the first masque of Jonson and Jones' long and often stormy partnership was performed in 1605, James had just ascended the throne and taken over the patronage of Shakespeare's company. In consequence the King's Men, as they were now known, increased their number of court appearances, many of which took place during the winter season alongside the preparations for the annual masque. It is fair to suppose that the King's Men and the masque-makers took a mutual interest in each other's productions and that their two writers discussed their work, finding common interest in 'the Platonicks' opinion', as Jonson annotated his *Masque of Beauty*. The many notes that Jonson made so helpfully on his manuscripts make one wonder what marginalia Shakespeare might have written!

The masques were costly extravaganzas, usually performed once a year as part of the Christmas festivities, although occasionally one was specially commissioned for a particular celebration such as an important wedding. There was much competition among the court ladies to

take part and, often including Queen Anne herself, they would appear as heavenly beauties of the soul. They bedecked themselves in dazzling costumes and did little but pose and dance gracefully, endeavouring to attract the love of the gentlemen courtiers, and the audience, with their beauty. The gentlemen played the lovers' roles as they set out on the path of love: the intention was to take the audience with them on their journey and, in the formal style of the masque that was very like a ritual, to give them a glimpse of the higher worlds.

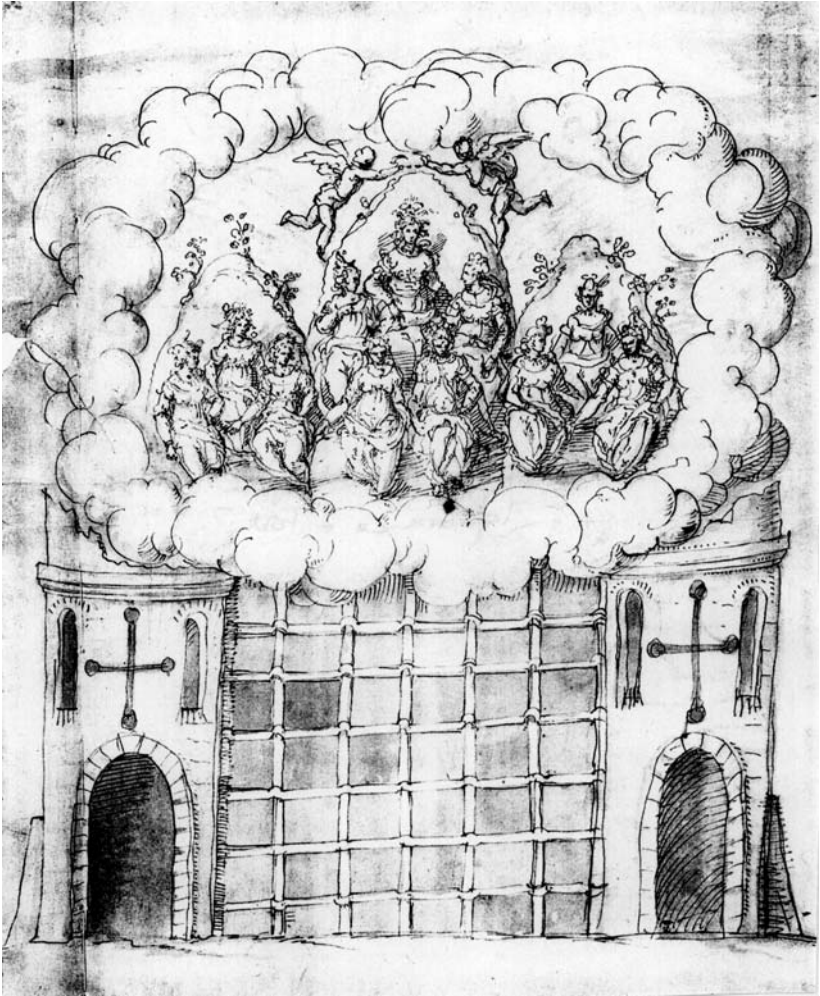
Man enters a golden age and moves with perfect ease from earth to heaven; and most to the point, this vision, at its climactic moment includes us, the mortal spectator; we, too, are transformed by the power of knowledge and reason.<sup>8</sup>

The final union was expressed through a dance in which the masquers joined the audience in the dancing space before the throne:

Every masque moved towards the moment when the masquers descended and took partners from the audience, annihilating the barrier between the ideal and the real and including the court in its miraculous transformation.<sup>9</sup>

Inigo Jones' elaborate designs for the sets and costumes, many of them extant, are also rich in the imagery of love and the Christian-Platonic worlds. Fortunately, Jonson described them very carefully in the published editions of his work; although the design itself has been lost, his description of the set for *Hymenaei*, a wedding masque performed in 1606, is particularly helpful in its representation of the Platonic worlds.

The elaborate and very expensive setting is on three levels, the highest reaching to the roof of the Whitehall Palace banqueting hall, where the masque was performed. On the lowest level stands a huge globe painted with countries and seas which, when it is revolved, reveals a jewel-encrusted mine sparkling in the candlelight; this symbolises earth, the physical world. Arranged in elegant attitudes inside are eight gentlemen of the court dressed as the four humours of melancholy, phlegm, blood and choler and the four affections of desire, joy, fear and grief; in other words they represent the various natures and emotions of mankind belonging to the material world. Seated on top of the globe, controlling these earthly passions but still part of the same world, is



*Inigo Jones' design for Love Freed from Ignorance and Folly, 1612*

Reason, a female figure dressed in a long blue robe, sequined with stars and arithmetical figures. As the illuminator of the mind, she holds up a lamp, and with raised sword she points the way to higher worlds.

On the second level, representing the world of the soul, eight court ladies display their elegant silver and white costumes. The illustration of Jones' set for a later masque, *Love Freed from Ignorance and Folly*, gives

some idea of how this middle world may have appeared. Each world has a particular element, those belonging to the body and the lower part of the soul being earth and water, while air symbolises the heavenly part of the soul and fire the angelic mind. For this reason the ladies are seated against a background of dark rain-clouds, representing the soul's elements of air and water. Beside the ladies stands Iris, goddess of the rainbow that bridges heaven and earth and is also composed of air and water. The soul is where these realms may meet in harmony, so Iris is accompanied by musicians who provide the heavenly harmony that the poets called the music of the spheres. Above them all stands the goddess Juno, queen of the soul.

Above Juno is set the heavenly world of the angelic mind. This region of fire is ruled by Jupiter: Inigo Jones portrays him in classical style as a huge figure brandishing a thunderbolt above a fiery area, ingeniously contrived by a multitude of whirling coloured lanterns.

The completion of the set lay in the audience, in the person of the King. By the divine right of kings, the monarch represented God on earth and, during the court entertainments, his throne was placed in the centre of the banqueting hall, at the point where all sight lines from the stage met. These represented the rays of creation, radiating out into the universe from the Godhead, the source of all the worlds.

In his introduction to *Hymenaei*, Jonson wrote that the masques were intended not only to dazzle the eyes with their 'outward show', but also to 'furnish the inward parts'. Shakespeare frequently warns against taking the outward show of the material world at its face value for, as Bassanio wisely remarks when trying to make the right choice from the three caskets:

So may the outward shows be least themselves,  
The world is still deceived with ornament.

*Merchant of Venice* 3.2.73-4

The following exploration of love and the Platonic worlds in Shakespeare's work is undertaken with the intention of looking beyond the ornament of the outward show and, by furnishing the inward parts, of discovering how Shakespeare, following in the footsteps of Ficino and Plato, also revealed 'the principle of unity in all things'.