

The Erotic Magus: Ficino's *De Amore* as a Guide to Plato's Symposium

Angela Hobbs

This article was originally published in

Platonism and its Legacy

*Selected Papers from the Fifteenth Annual Conference
of the International Society for Neoplatonic Studies*

Edited John F. Finamore and Tomáš Nejeschleba

ISBN 978 1 898910 886

Published in 2019 by

The Prometheus Trust, Lydney.

This article is published under the terms of **Creative Commons
Licence BY 4.0**

Attribution — You must give appropriate credit, and indicate if changes were made. You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use.

No additional restrictions — You may not apply legal terms or technological measures that legally restrict others from doing anything the license permits.

The Prometheus Trust is a registered UK charity, no. 299648

www.prometheustrust.co.uk

The Erotic Magus: Ficino's De Amore as a Guide to Plato's Symposium

Angela Hobbs

‘A lodestone puts into iron a certain quality of its own by which the iron is first made like the lodestone, and then drawn to it.’

(Ficino *De amore* 6.2)¹

[*Erōs* is] ‘a great *daimōn*² ... [and] philosophizes throughout his life, a clever magician, wizard and sophist.’ (Plato *Symposium* 202d-203d)³

‘Love is a daemon ... philosophizing all of his life, a sorcerer, an enchanter, powerful, a magician and a sophist.’ (Ficino *De amore* 6.9)⁴

¹ ‘Ferro magnes lapis suam quamdam inserit qualitatem, qua ferrum magneti factum persimile ad hunc lapidem inclinatur’ (cf. Plato *Ion* 533d). The Latin text is that of Marcel 1978 (this quote from 75r). English translations from the *De amore*, unless otherwise stated, are from Jayne 1985. There is also a fine edition by Laurens (2002); the reason I have chosen to employ Marcel is that he was the text that Jayne worked with, and I wished to engage closely with Jayne’s reading.

² It is very important to clarify from the outset the terminology surrounding ‘*daimōn*’, ‘daemon’ and ‘demon’. I use *daimōn* to refer to the spirits of ancient Greek religious thought – in Plato and the Neoplatonists usually intermediary beings who move between the mortal and immortal realms; in ancient Greece they can work for good or ill (more usually good), and are to be distinguished from the evil demons in Christian thought (even though the latter are descended both semantically and to some extent conceptually from the former). Ficino, however, uses ‘daemon’ and ‘demon’ interchangeably, and both terms are employed by him to refer both to the *daimōn* of ancient Greece, and the ‘demon’ who works in the service of Satan to oppose the Christian God. As we shall see, he does distinguish between good and evil daemons/demons. See Rees 2013 for the evolution of ancient Greek *daimōnes* into the wicked demons of Christian thought.

³ I discuss this passage in the *Symposium* in Hobbs 2017a and 2017b. In both those papers Ficino makes a brief appearance, and I became increasingly conscious that a third paper was needed in which he takes centre stage; the additional research I have undertaken in the intervening period has strengthened this feeling, as my views on Ficino have developed and modified. Thus, although the present paper can easily be read as an independent study, it is also designed to form part of a triptych.

⁴ ‘Amorem esse demonem ...per omnem vitam philosophans, incantor fascinatorque, potens, veneficus atque sophista.’ Ficino has transcribed this

‘But why do we think that love is a *magician*? Because the whole power of magic consists in love. The work of magic is the attraction of one thing by another because of a certain affinity of nature.’ (Ficino *De amore* 6.10)⁵

Very few modern commentators and translators of Plato’s *Symposium* turn to Ficino’s *Commentarium in Convivium Platonis, De amore* (or his translation of the *Symposium* into Latin) for assistance, or indeed mention Ficino or any of his works at all. An exception is Osborne (1994: 94), who notes Ficino’s observation in *De amore* 7.2 that Socrates is portrayed by Plato as a representative of Amor (*Erôs*) as depicted by Diotima (the fictional religious figure who describes *Erôs* as a *daimôn* in 202-3). Another is Rosen, who also remarks on this resemblance, and in addition mentions both Ficino’s discussion of the topos of whether characters in the dialogue are barefoot or shod and his treatment of the halved proto-humans in Aristophanes’ speech.⁶ But in general scholars of the *Symposium* pay no regard to Ficino unless they are interested in what Renaissance readings of the work can tell us about the Renaissance itself.⁷

This attitude is not just prevalent amongst ancient philosophy specialists; it is also shared by Renaissance scholars. Here too the general consensus is that the *De amore* can tell us much about how Plato was received in the period – and even more about how the Neoplatonists were viewed – but gives us few if any insights into Plato’s text. This is in large part because they view the Renaissance as particularly interested in Plato as mediated by the Neoplatonists rather than directly in Plato himself.⁸ Robb, for instance, makes it clear in

quotation – with alterations – from his Latin translation of the *Symposium, Opera Platonis* (Lyons 1590), p.328a-c.

⁵ ‘Sed cur *magum* putamus amorem? Quia tota vis magice in amore consistit. Magice opus est attractio rei unius ab alia ex quadam cognatione nature’ (Marcel 82r).

⁶ Rosen 1968: 233; 17 and 150 n.76.

⁷ Such as Diskin Clay 2006: 341-59.

⁸ This separation of Plato from the Neoplatonists is of course a modern stance. In the Renaissance itself, Pletho, Ficino, Pico and others regarded Plato and Neoplatonism as different layers of interpretation of the one, true, ancient theology – a theology that in its pre-Christian forms could variously incorporate Zoroaster, Hermes Trismegistus, Orpheus, Aglaophemus, Pythagoras and Plato, as well as the Old Testament prophets, and was later revealed with even greater clarity by the Neoplatonists and, above all, by Christian theologians. See Hankins 1990 ii: 461-3; Robb 1935: 48.

her introduction that this is why she has decided to call her study *Neoplatonism of the Italian Renaissance* rather than *Platonism*.⁹ In respect of Ficino, she certainly emphasizes his Neoplatonic credentials (e.g. pp. 67 and 69), as do Allen, Cosenza and Copenhaver.¹⁰ Even Hankins, who does firmly call his magisterial work *Plato in the Italian Renaissance* (doubtless with an eye on Robb) and does believe that in other works Ficino has a few contributions to make to our understanding of Plato,¹¹ nevertheless takes a tough stance on the *De amore*:

'I exclude here the *Commentarium in Convivium Platonis, De amore*, which is not so much a commentary as a compilation of ideas on love from Plato and other sources ... Though an imitation of Plato (and of the traditional *trattati d'amore*), its relation to the text of the *Symposium* is rather distant' (1990 i: 342 n.209).

In this Hankins may well have been guided by the seminal edition and translation of Jayne (1985). Jayne's stance has proved so influential that it is worth quoting from his introduction at some length:

'Perhaps the most striking fact about the neglect of the *De amore* among historians of philosophy is that they do not treat it seriously as a commentary on Plato's *Symposium* possibly because the *De amore* discusses only six short passages of the *Symposium*, or possibly because Ficino himself gave them little encouragement to do so. The full title of the work in Ficino's autograph manuscript is *Commentary on Plato's Symposium on Love*, but when Ficino translated the work into Italian in 1474, several years before he permitted it to be published, he called it simply *Sopra lo amore (On Love)*, and he gave it the title *De amore* in two of the three lists of his own work which he left.'¹²

⁹ 1935: 11.

¹⁰ Allen (1981: 38 n.108); Cosenza (1992:145); Copenhaver (2007: 137-69, particularly 140).

¹¹ Notably in respect of Ficino's championing of the organic unity of the dialogues (1990 i: 328).

¹² In fact, as an anonymous reader has pointed out, Ficino's first Italian version of *De amore* appears to have been entitled simply *dello amore* and may have been prior to 1474. See Kristeller, *Sup. Fic.*, 1, p. cxxv. The later title (*Sopra lo amore*) seems to have come from one or both of the first printed editions of 1544.

Jayne proceeds to give a detailed table of the contents of the *De amore* which gives what he believes to be the ‘primary source on which each section seems to me to be based’ (p.4), and indeed in that table of alleged sources he does only list six passages from the *Symposium* itself (although they are not particularly ‘short’, as claimed): other authors, such as Plotinus and Aquinas, are referenced more. Jayne also makes the point that his approach has a long tradition, going back at least to Agostino Nifo (c.1473-1546), who writes that,

‘Amplifying Plato’s views on love partly by allegorizing Plato and partly by adding to him, Ficino made a not unskillful compilation of many different ideas about love.’¹³

However, I believe that this assessment by Jayne is misleading. It would of course be foolish to deny that the *De amore* is – Ficino’s views on the one ancient theology notwithstanding – a rich concoction brewed from many different sources to which Ficino has added his own distinctive alchemical and astrological spices. Yet there are many more explicit references to the *Symposium* than would appear from Jayne’s table of possible sources (as well as many references to other Platonic dialogues),¹⁴ and the entire work is infused with the spirit of the *Symposium* in its quest to delineate the origin, aim, object, function and effects of love, and in the central role it gives to our attraction to both physical and moral beauty. Moreover, and crucially, even if we were to accept Jayne’s table, it would not follow that the *De amore* tells us little about Plato’s text: the very fact that relatively few passages from the *Symposium* are discussed in specific detail gives all the more significance to those that are. Why has Ficino selected these in particular?

¹³ Jayne 1985: 4.

¹⁴ Jayne usually (although not always) cites the other references to the *Symposium* in his notes; but my point is that the introductory table of possible sources is very misleading: every speech refers to its Platonic original at a number of points. When I first started working on the *De amore*, although I always believed that its debt to the *Symposium* was greater than Jayne recognizes, I was still overly influenced by his table of contents and sources (see Hobbs 2017b n.44). Other Platonic dialogues explicitly mentioned by Ficino include the *Republic* (2.2; 3.3); *Statesman* (3.2); *Laws* (3.3; 6.3); *Phaedrus* (4.6; 6.3; 7.3; 7.12; 7.14); *Philebus* (6.3); *Sophist* (6.10); *Parmenides* (6.15); *Protagoras* (7.2). Dialogues apparently referenced in addition to the explicit mentions (and indeed acknowledged by Jayne in his notes) include the *Meno* and *Timaeus*.

It is my submission in this paper that our understanding of Plato's original text can be enriched by addressing this question, and that the *De amore* amply repays study by those interested in the *Symposium* for itself, and not simply in how it was received and understood in the Renaissance, or even in how Neoplatonic interpretations of it were received and understood. In turn we will find that by considering Ficino's direct debt to Plato – rather than just Ficino's debt to the Plato of various Neoplatonists – we can deepen our understanding of Ficino's own thought, and indeed its influence on those who came after him, in science as well as in philosophy and art.

For reasons of space I will concentrate on one Platonic passage and Ficino's approach to it in particular (though other passages explored by Ficino will also be mentioned), notably the description of the *daimôn Erôs* given by Diotima in 202-3 and quoted in part at the outset. For there is no doubt that one of the things that fascinates Ficino most in the *De amore* is this claim of Diotima that *Erôs* is a *daimôn* occupying the connective realm between mortals and gods and transmitting messages between them (and although Ficino is indeed principally concerned with Plato's original text on this point, his interest may well have been strengthened by the attention given to the very same passage by Porphyry in *Abst.* 2.38)¹⁵. It sparks a disquisition on ancient Greek *daimônes* (spelled daemons or demons in Ficino) in 6.2-5 and 6.8-10 and is picked up again in 7.2, where Ficino explores the similarities between Diotima's account of the daemon Love and Plato's characterization of Socrates, including a reference to Socrates' personal admonitory *daimonion*, guardian spirit.¹⁶ To understand Ficino's fascination, we first need to consider the other denizens of this connective daimonic realm in addition to Love, the philosophizing magician. *Symposium* 202d-e says that it is through this space that,

¹⁵ 'Among these good daimons are to be numbered 'the transmitters' as Plato calls them, who convey and announce the concerns of men to the gods and divine matters to men. They convey our prayers to the gods as if to judges; they also bring down to us their commands and guidance together with prophecy' (translated by Clark 2000 and modified by Rees 2013).

¹⁶ See Osborne (1994: 94) and Rosen (1968: 233), mentioned above p.1244. Apart from the daimonic connection, Ficino notes many others: for example, Socrates and Love both spend time in doorways and thresholds; both (usually, in Socrates' case) go barefoot; both are poor but resourceful; and of course both philosophize.

‘the whole *technê* of the seer operates, and that of priests, and of those concerned with sacrifices, rites and incantations, and everything to do with the seer and with magic.’

The reference to the intermediary powers of priests and seers has been partly anticipated in the doctor Eryximachus’ speech, where Eryximachus says,

‘All sacrifices and the things which come under the seer’s art – that is to say all means of communion between gods and humans – are concerned with nothing other than the preservation and cure of *Erôs* ...The seer’s art is the craftsman of friendship between gods and humans by means of its knowledge of human erotic love.’¹⁷

It is notable that Ficino also discusses Eryximachus’ speech in some detail in *De amore* 3 and that he specifically references *Symposium* 188 when he says,

‘the power of prophets and priests seems to consist principally in this, that it teaches us what offices are pleasing to God, how men become friends to God, and what kind of love and charity is to be shown to God, to country, to parents, and to others, both living and dead.’ (3.3)

It is hardly surprising that, with such inhabitants, this intermediary daimonic realm of the philosopher, priest and magician – the workings of which are also of interest to a doctor such as Eryximachus - should hold great allure for Ficino, a medically trained¹⁸ priest, philosopher, and serious (if circumspect, as we shall see) student of magic. As a practical man as well as a theoretician, he has an especial interest in precisely *how* connections can be brought about, *how* a human can attain the divine realm. His interest in the connective daemons of ancient Greece – which he often regards as guardian angels or innate guiding spirits¹⁹ - is manifest in many of his works: see, for example, *Three Books on Life* 3.23 p.375 and *Platonic Theology* 10.2.²⁰ It is not an uncomplicated interest, as we shall explore below. And it is also, of

¹⁷ *Symposium* 188b6-d3.

¹⁸ A doctor in his own eyes, and he certainly practised as such. See Celenza 2007: 81-4.

¹⁹ See Rees 2013: 47 and 183.

²⁰ See also *In Apologiam Socratis Epitome, Opera Omnia* p.1387; *Letters*, vol.7, letter 5. And see Rees 2013: 183-5 and 246 n.26.

course, a popular topic in Neoplatonism: witness e.g. Plotinus *Enneads* 3.4; Iamblichus *On the Mysteries* 3.18; Proclus *Elements of Theology*, propositions 7, 11, 14, 15, 32 and 33.

However, the most significant aspect of Ficino's treatment of the daemon Love for the modern scholar of Plato's *Symposium* is Ficino's interest in Love as a *magician* (he uses *veneficus* and *magus* interchangeably), and his claim that, as we have seen, Love can be described as such because 'the whole power of magic consists in love' as 'the work of magic is the attraction of one thing by another because of a certain affinity of nature' (6.10). His focus on the magical powers of *Erôs* is important precisely because almost all modern commentators either deliberately ignore or unconsciously overlook this key feature of Diotima's description in 202-3, perhaps embarrassed by or blind to an aspect of Plato which cannot easily be assimilated to the analytic tradition.²¹ And yet Diotima's claim that *Erôs* is a magician is all the more startling given Plato's usual condemnation of magic and magicians,²² and also because, if Socrates is indeed portrayed as a representative of the *daimôn Erôs* in the *Symposium*, then Socrates will be a magician too.

When I first started reflecting on *Symposium* 202-3 in the context of Plato's wider corpus, it struck me as decidedly puzzling. The point I want to emphasize in the present paper is that the *De amore* has helped considerably with untying the knots: in particular it has helped crystallize my thoughts on precisely *how* the *daimôn Erôs* (and the subjective experience of *erôs*)²³ can reveal, access and strengthen the normally hidden interconnections between different parts of the cosmos through an ever deepening love for and rational understanding of their homogeneous beauty on the ladder of love, and *why* this process might initially seem magical (before reason has fully grasped the nature of the interconnections).²⁴ There are two features of the *De amore* above all that sparked the development of my own ideas. The

²¹ See Hobbs 2017b: 102 n.6.

²² See for example *Grg.* 483e; *Men.* 80a-b; *R.* 364b-c; 598d; *L.g.* 909a-b; 932e-933e. The point is argued in detail in Hobbs 2017b: 102-3.

²³ There was of course no such distinction between upper and lower case in Plato's time; however, for the sake of clarity I employ them here to differentiate between the *daimôn* and the experience.

²⁴ 'This astonishing process of revelation and transformation may well initially strike us as magical. As we come to understand it better, however ... the magic is likely to fade: the 'magical' stage is a transitional one' (Hobbs 2017b: 118).

first is its general emphasis on the role of beauty, both visual and aural: Ficino's perceptive discussion of the often neglected speech of Agathon (especially *De amore* 5.7, 5.8 and 5.13) helped me to realise more fully the extent to which Agathon's speech itself prepares the way for that of Diotima – not just the elenchus between Agathon and Socrates, as is commonly thought.²⁵ Secondly, and crucially, is the assumption which underlies the claim that love is a magician because the work of magic is the attraction of one thing by another because of a certain affinity of nature: namely the assumption that the cosmos is in fact an interconnected whole, although only a select few – also magicians – can come to see and appreciate the connections.

Ficino's conception of an interconnected cosmos was doubtless strengthened by many of his Neoplatonic studies, especially a tract by Proclus on sacrifice, theurgy and magic which Ficino translated as *De sacrificio*. According to Proclus, heaven and earth are magically linked by natural forces of likeness and sympathy which allow the 'sages of old' (as Proclus terms them) to bring divine powers into the mortal realm.²⁶ However, it is vital to emphasise – and often overlooked – that on this point the Neoplatonists are only elaborating on ideas that exist within Plato, and particularly in the *Symposium*. So although the Proclus text, together with the Porphyry passage in *Abst.* 2.38 quoted above,²⁷ does indeed help to clarify how this underlying

²⁵ Socrates himself introduces Diotima and the (almost certainly) fictional conversations he had with her on *ta erôtika* as a young man by saying that he will 'follow up the points on which I and Agathon have just agreed by narrating to you the account [of erotic matters] which she gave to me' (201d). The points on which he and Agathon have just 'agreed' in the elenchus following Agathon's speech are that beauty is homogeneous and that all particular instances of beauty are simply tokens of a type, and also that all beautiful things are coextensive with the set of all good things. This has led commentators to suppose that the elenchus and the speech of Diotima that builds on it repudiate wholesale the contents of Agathon's speech. But this is too sweeping: although Agathon does indeed confuse the *erastês* with the *erômenon* in his speech, his strong emphasis on attraction to the beautiful and fine, the *kalon*, as the key motivational desire and propulsion to action (e.g. 196a-b and 197a-b) anticipates the main thrust of Diotima's speech, and Ficino recognizes this (e.g. 5.2 Marcel 42v-43r).

²⁶ And see also Iamblichus *De mysteriis*, discussed in Copenhaver 1987: 441-5. Ficino had a deep and abiding interest in both Proclus and Iamblichus, translating much of *De mysteriis* and *De sacrificio* in 1488. Iamblichus' *Four sects* was one of the first texts Ficino translated into Latin c.1474.

²⁷ n.15.

view of the cosmos gives rise to the ladder of love in *Symposium* 210-12, it is nevertheless a fundamentally Platonic vision that is being clarified. And the same is true, I submit, of Ficino *De amore* 6.10: Ficino's understanding of *Symposium* 202-3 may be assisted by his deep knowledge of and sympathy with Neoplatonism, but it is something within Plato's text itself that he is uncovering; he is not simply reading Plato through a Neoplatonic filter. There is indeed a way of reading the *Symposium* itself which can allow for *Erōs* to be described as a daimonic magician. And just as this way depends on *Erōs* revealing normally hidden aspects and connections of the cosmos, viewing the *Symposium* through Ficino's selective lens allows us to see and appreciate the significance of aspects of the dialogue normally clouded by modern tastes and prejudices.

In turn, by focusing afresh on the classical – and not just Neoplatonic – roots of Ficino's thinking on love and magic, we are better able to grasp some of the challenges he faced and his strategies for dealing with them. For any discussion of magic in fifteenth century Florence risked accusations of impiety – a serious danger which might result in a visit from the Inquisition.²⁸ Ficino usually tries to avert criticism by appealing to a distinction between 'natural' magic, which reveals and accesses the normally concealed inherent properties of animate or inanimate beings, and 'demonic' magic, which calls on the intercession of wicked demons in the service of Satan. According to Copenhaver (2007: 149), Ficino

‘categorically rejects demonic magic and attributes it to Satan. But there is also a nondemonic magic that only “brings natural materials under natural causes at the right moment to form them in a wondrous way.”²⁹

²⁸ Copenhaver and Schmitt 1992: 159; Hankins 1990 i: 281-2; Hankins notes that '[i]t was for magic, in fact, that Ficino came under the notice of the Inquisition in the 1480s, although he was able to garner enough influence in Rome to have the charge dropped' (although in fact no *formal* charges against Ficino were ever brought, he had certainly been scrutinized by the Inquisition as a person of interest). The Church had been deeply concerned about magical beliefs and practices ever since St Paul instructed the Ephesians to burn their magic books. In c.1456 Johannes Hartlieb lists 7 magical arts prohibited by canon law.

²⁹ Ficino 1989: 396-8, quoted in Copenhaver 2007: 149; pp. 158 and 160 explain further how Ficino thought natural magic worked, and Copenhaver and Schmitt 1992: 159-60 outline how Ficino employed the distinction between natural and demonic magic in *De vita* III. See also Collins 2008: 1 and Kieckhefer 1994:

The trouble is that, given that Ficino writes of the ancient Greek *daimônes* as ‘daemons’ or ‘demons’, *Erôs* as depicted in the *Symposium* blurs this distinction: although it does indeed help reveal, access and strengthen normally hidden properties and connections of and within the cosmos, it is itself, in Ficino’s translation, a daemon/demon. Ficino’s solution is to make subtle distinctions between daemons and claim that although the ‘lower’ daemons are the demons or devils that tempt us to evil, others can do good, and even act as guardian angels.³⁰ This is the route he takes, for example, in responding to George of Trebizond’s gleeful attacks on Socrates’ *daimôn*.³¹ The daemon Love can work for ill if unhealthy loves are permitted to develop (Ficino’s main targets are almost all forms of carnal love); but love of truly beautiful bodies, souls, practices, laws and bodies of knowledge can lead us to love of divine Beauty itself and help us to understand how all individual beauties are connected, which in turn strengthens our love for them. In its purest form, love is the force which binds the cosmos together. It is natural, but it requires art fully to understand, appreciate and utilize its workings. We saw at the outset how Ficino calls love a magician because ‘the work of magic is the attraction of one thing by another because of a certain affinity of nature’ (6.10); a few lines later he nuances this:

‘... the works of magic are works of nature, but art is its handmaiden ... The ancients attributed this art to daemons because the daemons understand what is the inter-relation of natural things, what is appropriate to each, and how the harmony of things, if it is lacking anywhere, can be restored ... daemons are magicians through understanding the friendship of things themselves.’

817-20. Exactly when this distinction occurred is disputed. Both Origen and Augustine view *daimônes/ daemones* as unqualifiedly pernicious spirits (Thorndike 1908: 46-66), but this attitude can appear even in non-Christian C.E. writers: Iamblichus, for instance, attacks the Egyptians for demonolatory in *De myst.* 32.8-33 (although Iamblichus’ metaphysics presents problems for this stance, as we shall shortly see).

³⁰ Rees 2013: 183-5 and 246 n.26; see also Copenhaver 2007: 158 and 160 for connections between natural magic and ancient Greek *daimônes* which can work for good or ill.

³¹ Rees 2013: 183; Hankins 1992 i: 314 and 322 n.149 (referring to Allen 1984 ch.1).

Ficino can be of great service to the Plato scholar, therefore, in helping to illuminate an odd passage which appears to go against Plato's usual hostility to magic and magicians. And the *Symposium* is odd in other ways too: there is no mention, for instance, of the immortality of at least the rational part of the psyche – a doctrine that is key to the teachings of e.g. the *Gorgias*, *Phaedo*, *Republic*, *Phaedrus* and *Timaeus*. Instead, in 207cff., Diotima asserts that although mortal creatures seek immortality, all they can hope to achieve is a grade of 'substitute' immortality through the creation of biological offspring, glorious deeds or great works.³² She also puts forward in the same passage a view of personal identity that seems positively Heraclitean in its claim that identity of anything, whether physical or psychical, is only maintained through the continuous replacement of the old with the new. Furthermore, just as the *Symposium* occupies an unusual position amongst Plato's works, so does the *De amore* amongst those of Ficino. In the *De amore*, not only does Ficino allow natural magic to be compatible with normally illicit daemonology, but his discussion of daemons also requires him to make far more connection than he generally does between body and soul.³³ Conversely, in *De christiana religione*, Ficino says that no intermediary is needed between man and god, while in the *De amore* daemons are definitely required.³⁴ It would appear that discussing love does strange but delightful things to both Ficino and Plato.

It seems clear, then, that there is a fruitful relationship between the *Symposium* and the *De amore*, despite the relative paucity of *Symposium* passages discussed in close detail by Ficino. This should not surprise us. The links in the *Symposium* between *Erôs/erôs*, philosophy and magic – all taking place within a daimonic region mediating between the mortal and divine realms – mean that it is the ideal dialogue to support Ficino's lifelong quest, particularly in the *Theologia Platonica* and the *De christiana religione*, to reveal and refresh – and if necessary recreate – a '*docta religio*', informed by a '*pia philosophia*', which will satisfy the most sceptical of youths and

³² This claim is not necessarily incompatible with the belief in an immortal (rational part of the) soul professed elsewhere, as the *Symposium* may simply be claiming that *personal* immortality in time and space is not possible. Nevertheless, the different focus is striking.

³³ As Robb notes (1935: 80), Ficino often sharply differentiates them.

³⁴ *De christiana religione* ch.21, p.22 (*Opera* Basle 1576) and see Robb 1935: 68 n.2.

the most demanding of intellectuals. This quest is expressed with passion in his introduction to *De christiana religione*:

‘Let us, I pray, whensoever we are able, deliver God’s sacred gift, philosophy, from ungodliness, for indeed we can do so if we will; let us redeem our holy religion from accursed ignorance.’³⁵

Plato is the perfect philosopher to help Ficino bind religious belief to reason because Plato shows how religious belief and reason can go hand in hand: for Plato, the rational, mathematical ordering of the cosmos is proof of the divine *nous* in action (see, for example, *Phaedo* 97b-98b; *Cratylus* 400a; *Philebus* 28d-30e; *Laws* 967d-e). Furthermore, and crucially, human reason is akin to this divine, controlling reason. As Socrates eloquently expresses it in the *Timaeus* 90a-b:

‘We should think of the most authoritative part of our soul [i.e. our reason] as a guardian spirit (*daimôn*) given to each of us by god, living in the summit of the body, which can properly be said to lift us from the earth towards our home in heaven, as if we were a heavenly and not an earthbound plant. For where the soul first grew into being, from there our divine part attaches us by the head to heaven, like a plant by its roots, and keeps our body upright.’ (tr. Bury)

In consequence,

‘For Ficino, Platonism, instead of being the nemesis of Christendom, is part of God’s providential design for the human race, a *philosophia perennis*, springing intertwined with Christianity from the same soil of religious experience; each of them lends support to the other in their growth towards perfection and truth.’³⁶

This quest of Ficino for a *docta religio* and *pia philosophia* is served by Plato’s works in general. However, the *Symposium* in particular also shows how the revelation of this divine ordering and cosmic interconnections – revealed to us through our love of and pursuit of beauty – can strike us as magical, at least until we come to a full,

³⁵ ‘Liberamus obsecro quandoque philosophiam sacrum Dei munus ab impietate si possumus, possumus autem si volumus; religionem sanctam pro viribus ab execrabili inscitia rediamus’ (Ficino *Opera* Basle 1576, vol. 1. *De christiana religione* p.1. See also vol.1, p.854 *Epistolae*, Lib. VII).

³⁶ Hankins 1990 i: 285; see also 286-7 and Hankins 1990 ii: 459.

rational understanding of it:³⁷ magic may thus also be part of this divine rational plan. It may be argued that Ficino's stance is coloured by the fact that he was himself a medically-trained priest and philosopher with a profound interest in magic and astrology, but the salient point is that he felt able to be all these things because he saw no necessary contradiction between them, and the *Symposium* provided him with strong support – perhaps even the foundations – for this view. It is significant that he also pays particular attention in the *De amore* to the cosmic account of *Erôs* given by the doctor Eryximachus, and recognizes its roots in the philosophy of the self-proclaimed philosopher and magician Empedocles (even though Empedocles – although undoubtedly a source – is not mentioned by name in Plato's text).³⁸

Exploring Ficino's particular interests in Eryximachus' speech and above all in Diotima's account of the daemon Love, therefore, can indeed help us better appreciate an aspect of Plato – namely his view that beneficent magic is possible, if rare, and is connected to both religion and philosophy – which currently receives little attention from Plato specialists and which can help us understand more clearly just how the ladder of love is supposed to work, and why its workings initially strike us as magical. Furthermore, we have also seen how focusing on the direct lines between Ficino and Plato, rather than just those mediated by the Neoplatonists, can also assist us in our understanding of Ficino himself. Nor is this all. By way of conclusion I would like to suggest how this line may move forward as well as back, and briefly draw attention to a possible effect of Ficino's interest in ancient daimonology on one of the founding figures of modern science. Some historians of science have reasonably speculated that Newton's deep interest in and study of ancient beliefs and invisible intermediary *daimônes* – interpenetrating the entire cosmos but acting at a distance – may well have helped shape his thinking on forces.³⁹ And it is at least plausible to suppose that Newton's views in this respect may have been informed by Ficino, and possibly even Ficino's translation of this very passage of the *Symposium*, and perhaps too his discussion of the passage in the *De amore*. Newton owned an edition of Ficino's translation of Plato's works which also includes his *De amore*; and although Newton does not explicitly mention the *De*

³⁷ See Hobbs 2017b: 116-9.

³⁸ *De amore* 3.2; Marcel 24v.

³⁹ See Dobbs 1991 ch.5 and McGuire in McGuire and Westman 1977. See Hobbs 2017a: 239-40.

amore, he does directly cite Ficino at least once.⁴⁰ The *De amore* was still widely read in the seventeenth century, and if Newton did read it, he may well have noticed the citation with which we began, namely Ficino's mention of magnetic attraction in 6.2 at the beginning of his discussion of Diotima's account of Love as a daemon and his treatment of daemons/demons in general. Newton may also have noticed that Ficino returns to the image of the magnet in 6.10, in his explication of why Love can be called a *magus*:

'From this common relationship is born a common love; from love, a common attraction. And this is the true magic. This fire is drawn upward by the concavity of the sphere of the moon, because of a congruity of nature; air, by the concavity of fire; earth is drawn downward by the center of the world; water also is drawn by its region. Thus also the lodestone draws iron ...'⁴¹

Like Ficino, and to an even greater degree, Newton is fascinated by precisely *how* such cosmic interconnections occur.

But whether this speculation is true or not – and I certainly think it merits further study – there is no doubt that Ficino's *De amore*, and indeed Ficino's work in general, is currently unjustly neglected by almost all scholars of ancient philosophy, and by almost all philosophers. For well over two hundred years Ficino was regarded as one of the most brilliant thinkers of his age. We do not have to share his beliefs in, for example, astrology or the humours to understand why this is so. Read with an open mind, he is able to draw our attention to long-neglected features of Plato's thought which greatly enrich our appreciation of the original. And considering the genuinely Platonic, as well as the Neoplatonic, sources of Ficino's thought in turn deepens our understanding of a thinker of sensitivity, imagination and an enduring capacity to attract and spark connections.

⁴⁰ 'As Simon Shaffer has pointed out to me, the 1602 Frankfurt edition of Ficino's translation of Plato, which includes the *De amore*, is listed in Newton's library catalogue. The reference to Ficino occurs in a group of manuscripts, probably compiled in the mid-1680s, which are notes for a treatise on the *prisca* which Newton never completed, and which he provisionally called *Philosophiae gentilis origines philosophicae*. The manuscripts are in the American Philosophical Library, and in MSS Temp.3 Miss, folio 19 Newton refers to Ficino's 'De sole et lumina libri duo' for the view that 'The old physicists called the sun the heart of heaven and earth'.

⁴¹ 'Ex communi cognitione communis innascitur amor, ex amore, communis attractio. Hec autem vera magica est. Sic ab orbis Lune concavitate propter nature congruitatem sursum trahitur ignis, ab ignis concavitate aer, a mundi centro terra ad infima trahitur, a loco etiam suo rapitur aqua. Sic et magnes ferrum ...' (Marcel 82r).

Bibliography

- Allen, M.J.B. (trans.) and Hankins, J. (ed.), 2001-6, *Platonic Theology*. 6 vols. I Tatti Renaissance Library. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Allen, M.J.B. and Rees, V. (eds.), 2002, *Marsilio Ficino: his Theology, his Philosophy, his Legacy*. Leiden.
- Allen, M.J.B., 1984, *The Platonism of Marsilio Ficino: A Study of his Phaedrus Commentary, its Sources and Genesis*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Celenza, C.S., 2007, 'The revival of Platonic philosophy' in J. Hankins (ed.) 2007: 72-96.
- Clark, G. (ed.), 2000, *Porphyry: On Abstinence from Killing Animals*. London: Duckworth.
- Clay, D., 2006, 'The Hangover of Plato's *Symposium* in the Italian Renaissance from Bruni (1435) to Castiglione (1528)' in Leshner, J., Nails, D, and Sheffield, F. 2006: 341-359.
- Collins, D., 2008, *Magic in the Ancient Greek World*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Copenhaver, B.P., 2007, 'How to do magic, and why: philosophical prescriptions' in J. Hankins (ed.) 2007: 137-69. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 1987, 'Iamblichus, Synesius and the Chaldaean Oracles in Marsilio Ficino's *De vita libri tres*: Hermetic Magic or Neoplatonic Magic' in *Supplementum Festivum: Studies in Honor of Paul Oskar Kristeller*, ed. J.Hankins, J.Monfasani and F.Purnell, Jr 441-55. Binghamton, NY.
- Copenhaver, B.P. and Schmitt, C.B., 1992, *Renaissance Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dobbs, B., 1991, *The Janus Faces of Genius: : the Role of Alchemy in Newton's Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Dover, K.J. (ed.), 1980, *Plato: Symposium*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Harte, V. and Woolf, R. (eds.), 2017, *Rereading Ancient Philosophy: Old Chestnuts and Sacred Cows*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hobbs, A., 2017 a), 'Filling the Space Between: What We Can Learn From Plato' in A. Carroll and R. Norman (eds.) 2017: 232-42. Routledge.
- 2017 b), 'Socrates, Eros and Magic' in V. Harte and R. Woolf (eds.) 2017: 101-20. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Jayne, S. (trans. and ed.), 1985, *Marsilio Ficino: Commentary on Plato's Symposium on Love*. Dallas, Texas: Spring Publications, Inc.
- Kieckhefer, R., 1994, 'The specific rationality of medieval magic' in *American Historical Review* 99.3: 813-36.
- 1990, *Magic in the Middle Ages*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Laurens, P. (ed. and tr.), 2002, *Marsile Ficin: Commentaire sur le Banquet de Platon, De l'amour*. Paris: Les Belles Lettres.
- Leshner, J., Nails, D. and Sheffield, S. (eds.), 2006, *Plato's Symposium: Issues in Interpretation and Reception*. Cambridge, Mass. and London, England: Center for Hellenic Studies, Trustees for Harvard University.
- Marcel, R., 1978, *Commentaire sur le Banquet de Platon* (2nd ed.). Paris.
- McGuire, T., 1977, 'Neoplatonism and Active Principles' in McGuire and Westman 1977:
- McGuire, J.E and Westman, R.S., 1977, *Hermeticism and the Scientific Revolution*. Los Angeles: William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, University of California.
- McPherran, M.L., 2006, 'Magic, medicine and religion in Plato's *Symposium*' in J. Leshner, D. Nails and F. Sheffield 2006: 71-95.
- Members of the Language Department of the School of Economic Science (trans.), 1975- , *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino*. London: Shephard-Walwyn.
- Osborne, C., 1994, *Eros Unveiled: Plato and the God of Love*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Raymond, J. (ed.), 2011, *Conversations with Angels*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Rees, V., 2013, *From Gabriel to Lucifer: a Cultural History of Angels*. London and New York: I.B.Tauris.
- Robb, N.A., 1935, *Neoplatonism of the Italian Renaissance*. London: George Allen and Unwin.
- Rosen, S., 1968, *Plato's Symposium*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Rowe, C.J. (ed. With introduction, translation and notes), 1998, *Plato: Symposium*. Oxford: Aris and Phillips Classical Texts.
- Shaffer, S., 2011, 'Newtonian Angels' in J. Raymond (ed.) 2011: 90-122.
- Thorndike, L., 1908, 'The attitude of Origen and Augustine towards magic' in *The Monist* 18.1: 146-66.
- Voss, A., 2002, '*Orpheus redivivus*: the musical magic of Marsilio Ficino' in Allen and Rees 2002: 227-41.