

Allusions and Reflections

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*Greek and Roman Mythology
in Renaissance Europe*

Edited by

Elisabeth Wåghäll Nivre
With Anna Carlstedt, Anders Cullhed,
Carin Franzén, Peter Gillgren,
Kerstin Lundström and Erland Sellberg
Editorial Assistance: Per Sivefors

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INTRODUCTION

You shall perceive them make a mutual stand,
Their savage eyes turn'd to a modest gaze
By the sweet power of music: therefore the poet
Did feign that Orpheus drew trees, stones and floods
Since nought so stockish, hard, and full of rage,
But music for the time doth change his nature.
The man that hath no music in himself,
Nor is not mov'd with concord of sweet sounds,
Is fit for treasons, stratagems and spoils;
The motions of his spirit are dull as night,
And his affections dark as Erebus:
Let no such man be trusted. Mark the music.
(V.1.54–88)

This is Lorenzo's view, in *The Merchant of Venice*, of music as the cipher of a cosmic order. If we consider the overall theme of the multidisciplinary symposium held in Stockholm in June 2012, "Allusions and Reflections: Greek and Roman Mythology in Renaissance Europe," Shakespeare can be said to foreground the broad cultural clash between two ideological positions in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe: humanism and its Orphic faith in art, poetry and music, versus a material, "matter-of-fact," impersonal and quantitative logic. As the proceedings of the symposium in the present volume show, this two-pronged *topos* returns time and again in the works of nearly all of the early modern humanists. Greek and Roman mythology was indeed persuasive. The myth often articulated responses to cultural contradictions and to intellectual and political demands. For example Orpheus, to many an allegory of Christ, became important to the Neoplatonic perception of tolerance and openness, a benign tutelary deity of a peaceful and civil society, at a time when people were caught in the turmoil of religious or ideological contention.

During the Renaissance, mythology found a way to coexist with Christian doctrine since pagan religion had ceased to pose a threat to Christianity. The old Greek and Roman tales played a crucial role in Renaissance culture, partly because the ancient sources, both literary and artistic, many of them recently uncovered, provided rich material for the writers and the artists of the period. Mythology provided a network of

allusions and references for contemporary poetry and art, reinforcing the possibilities of allegorical interpretation. Furthermore, it offered moral guidance since deities would easily be materialized into personifications of vices and virtues. The words of illuminist Louis de Jacourt demonstrate this fundamental importance of mythology:

The study of mythology is a necessity for painters, sculptors, and particularly poets, and in general for all those who strive to embellish nature and to appeal to the imagination. Mythology is the wellspring of their works and they draw their principal ornaments from it. It decorates our palaces, our galleries, our ceilings, and our gardens. Myth is the patrimony of the arts, it is an inexhaustible source of unusual ideas, agreeable images, interesting subjects, allegories, and emblems. How effectively these are used depends on the taste and genius of the artist. Everything is animated, everything breathes in this enchanted world. There, intellectual beings have bodies, material bodies have souls, and fields, forests, rivers, even the elements have their own divinities. I know well that these are fanciful figures, but the part that they play in the works of the poets of antiquity and the frequent allusions of modern poets have almost given them a real existence for us. They have become so familiar to our eyes that we find it difficult to look on them as imaginary beings. We believe that their history constitutes the distorted representation of events in earliest times. We attempt to discover in these events a consistency, continuity, and verisimilitude which they do not possess.¹

All artistic expressions, visual and textual, whether they belonged to a secular or a religious tradition, made use of mythology. The rediscovery of antiquity ensured the continuous cult of Virgil, the very pinnacle of all literature if we are to believe Julius Caesar Scaliger, as well as the new emphasis on authors such as Homer, Cicero (the letter-writer and philosopher as much as the orator), Ovid and Statius; some of these *auctoritates* had enjoyed an uninterrupted tradition of admiration and commentaries, whereas others—notoriously Lucretius, the poet of *De rerum natura*—were rediscovered in monastic libraries by travelling humanists such as Poggio Bracciolini. In addition, mythographical handbooks such as Apollodorus' *Bibliotheca* and Boccaccio's *Genealogia deorum gentilium* were important sources of information, although the most influential work in the Western tradition was of course Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a source of inspiration for most authors and artists in the Renaissance. As Ernst Robert Curtius wrote, the *Metamorphoses* were “a repertory of mythology as exciting as a romance. Who was Phaeton? Lycaon? Procne? Arachne? Ovid was the *Who's Who* for a thousand such questions.”² Ovid was the obvious informant for the Renaissance poets',

painters' and critics' knowledge of the mythological world of Greece and Rome. The following chapters exemplify how their acquaintance with the mythological accounts from Homer down to Apuleius was of utter importance for their creative work, as it was for their readers and those contemporary patrons of art who saw themselves as the living embodiment of some remote ancient deity.

*

Intent on gathering scholars from a variety of disciplines—from political sciences, religious and art history to literature and architecture—the organizers of the symposium focused on the early modern period (ca. 1450–1650) in Europe, covering authors writing in vernacular languages as well as in Latin. The contributions to the following volume testify to this interdisciplinary variety. To mention only the articles by our keynote speakers, Hans Henrik Brummer returns to the Platonic interpretation of Luca Signorelli's Pan, Angela Locatelli (from whom we borrowed the initial Shakespeare quotation) concentrates on the figure of Orpheus in the Elizabethan theatre, while Teresa Chevolet sheds new light on the Muses and Orpheus in the Neoplatonic poetics of Italy and France. Olivier Millet focuses on Rabelais' contributions to the creation of a European mythology, and Unn Irene Aasdalen analyzes “the Double Aphrodite” and her reflections in Renaissance philosophy.

Rather than trying to summarize each article in this introduction, we would like to single out some themes that stand out throughout the volume. Several articles discuss the use of mythological characters and themes for moral and didactic purposes; some of them re-examine the Renaissance investment in mythological themes for the purpose of enhancing the power and the glory, specifically of contemporary monarchy. Yet other articles discuss the resistance to mythology that also existed during this period. The contributions all have in common the focus on the re-configuration of classical myths in early modern Europe, in political, erotic and ceremonial contexts. By returning to the classical world of cosmic strife and harmony, of gods and metamorphoses, Renaissance poets and artists were able to express their aesthetic ideals, personal preoccupations and moral attitudes. Ancient mythology offered them a full set of useful metaphors, which could take on new meanings in a new cultural context.

Still, the present volume also gives an opportunity to problematize a well-researched field: why all these reflections and allusions? What happens if we go beyond the study of sources in order to analyze the

functions, effects and consequences of this constant recycling of age-old tales and legends? Which arguments did sceptical or religious intellectuals mobilize most efficiently against mythology? What about the period's conspicuous *Mythenkorrektur*, its bent on adapting, moralizing and even "rectifying" the ancient myths (to borrow a term from the title of a German research volume on the theme)? In short, by posing new questions and suggesting alternative answers to old ones, the authors of this volume bring about a better and more detailed knowledge of the struggles and strategies of recycling, recuperating and transforming ancient mythology during the Renaissance.

Before diving into the various contributions and many discourses of our topic, we would, finally, like to thank for the unwavering support we have received from the Royal Swedish Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities who made the Symposium and hence this volume possible. We also want to thank the Department of Art History, the Department of Baltic Languages, Finnish, and German, and the Department of Literature and History of Ideas at Stockholm University for generous contributions towards the publication of this volume. Kerstin Lundström was responsible of the copy editing and all the details that make a manuscript a printed article. Alice Pick Duhan helped us with a first round of language corrections. Per Sivefors was responsible for the final language proofs of several pieces in the volume. A warm thank you to these colleagues.

Stockholm, January 2015 / The editors

Notes

¹ Chevalier Louis de Jaucourt, "Mythology," *The Encyclopedia of Diderot & d'Alembert Collaborative Translation Project*, transl. Nelly S. Hoyt and Thomas Cassirer (Ann Arbor: Michigan Publishing, University of Michigan Library, 2003), <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.did2222.0000.162>, accessed November 23, 2014. Originally published as "Mythologie," *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, 10:924–27 (Paris, 1765).

² Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2013), 18.

PART I

IDEAS AND IMAGES

DOUBLE APHRODITE AND HER REFLECTIONS IN RENAISSANCE PHILOSOPHY

UNN IRENE AASDALEN
NANSEN ACADEMY

The myth about Aphrodite's day of birth tended among Italian Renaissance Neoplatonists to be treated with as much, or even more, reverence than they reserved for the words of the Bible. The details of the story of Aphrodite's birth at the banquet of the gods from Plato's *Symposium* were like the words of Moses in the *Pentateuch* read and interpreted as a veiled account of the beginning of time. Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499) gave an analysis of the myth of Aphrodite in his *De amore* (1469). Marsilio Ficino, who had translated all of Plato's dialogues from Greek into Latin during the 1460's and with their publication in 1484 made most of them known in the West for the first time in more than a thousand years, gave primacy to Plato's theory of love. The first own work Ficino wrote after translating Plato was his commentary on Plato's *Symposium*, the *De amore*.¹ In this work, Ficino concluded that it was not knowledge of God but *love* that could restore men to heaven. Ficino's Eros was both intellectual and erotic. Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463–1494) answered in his *Commento* (1486) and the *Heptaplus* (1489), and Pico argued that the love assisting human souls ascending to heaven could absolutely not be of a sensual kind.² For the human soul to return to the divine sphere, philosophy and exercising the intellect as the soul's highest capacity would be man's only possible means for ascent. Sensual desire would only lead astray.

The controversy between Ficino and Pico over the metaphysical conclusions to be drawn from the myths about Aphrodite and Eros in Plato's *Symposium* will in the following essay be discussed with hindsight to the different roles the two philosophers attributed to Aphrodite. Their two competing versions of Neoplatonism represent a genuine conflict, concerning both how to read Plato's works and how best to live according to Plato's theory of love.

Neoplatonists of the Renaissance were generally quite obsessed with beginnings. They returned without much inhibition to the beginning of the Ideas, of the Universe, of numbers, of man, and of philosophy. Reading the Bible, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola stressed the particular importance of Moses and the *Pentateuch*, with Genesis, book 1, verses 1–26 about how God separated light from darkness, water from land, and created everything, ranging from the stars of the firmament to the fish of the waters. Under the simple words about how God created the cosmos and found it all good, Pico sought and found a detailed account of the beginning of the world. Pico wrote an entire philosophical commentary on the first book of Moses. His *Heptaplus* from 1489 dedicated one little book to each of the six days of creation and one additional to the seventh, when God had rested. Out of a few Biblical verses, grew 7 by 7 chapters on the mysteries of creation, of man's place in the cosmos as well as God's plan for his universe.

If this hermeneutical endeavour seems excessive, it is still not on par with the flow of text written in commentary on a few passages from Plato's twin-commentaries on love and beauty, the *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium*. In these Platonic dialogues the central myths about Aphrodite and Eros are found, and these myths became the focus for philosophical speculation concerning the coming to be of cosmos and man, of the whole emanative process, and the particular roles therein played by Aphrodite and Eros. To paraphrase Michael Allen: For Renaissance thinkers, myths were the stuff of ancient poetry. For Ficino and Pico, the myths constituted a gentile Scripture, a Scripture revealed, rather than compiled, by a line of ancient theologians. Collectively they articulated a metaphysics that was almost perfected by Plato, as seen anachronistically through the interpretative eyes of Plotinus, and then perfected in Christian theology.³

There are two key passages for the particular Renaissance discussion about the role of Aphrodite located in Plato's *Symposium*. The first is found in the second speech of Plato's dialogue on love, where Pausanias divided Aphrodite into two goddesses (*Symposium* 180c–181e). The other is found in the priestess Diotima's account about the heavenly banquet where the gods had been celebrating the birthday of Aphrodite, drinking nectar and ambrosia in the garden of Zeus (*Symposium* 203b–204b). This story was recalled in the sixth speech of Plato's *Symposium*, where Socrates had explained what he had learned from Diotima about the mysteries of love. While all the speeches at the Platonic banquet were held in honour of Eros or Love, it was made clear in the sixth speech that Aphrodite and Eros were intimately linked. Eros, it was said, will always follow Aphrodite, just as love tends to follow beauty. In the form of myth,

the relationship between Eros and Aphrodite constituted a main driving-force in the Platonic cosmos, and provided the fundamental definition of love in Plato's *Symposium*: Love, defined as desire for beauty.

Diotima had told Socrates:

When Aphrodite was born, the gods held a celebration. Poros, the son of Metis, was there among them. When they had feasted, Penia came begging, as poverty does when there is a party, and stayed by the gates. Now Poros got drunk on nectar (there was no wine yet, you see) and feeling drowsy, went into the garden of Zeus, where he fell asleep. Then Penia schemed up a plan to relieve her lack of resources: she would get a child from Poros. So she lay beside him and got pregnant with [Eros] Love. That is why Love was born to follow Aphrodite and serve her: because he was conceived on the day of her birth. And that's why he is also by nature a lover of beauty, because Aphrodite herself is especially beautiful. (*Symposium* 203b–c)⁴

When Giovanni Pico della Mirandola in his *Commento* interpreted these lines from the *Symposium*, he understood the location for the banquet, Zeus's garden, as paradise. Pico explained that this was the heavenly place where Plato's Ideas had grown, almost like trees in a garden.⁵ In this way, Pico made an explicit link between paradise and the realm of the Ideas: between the garden where Adam and Eve according to Moses had lived in harmony before the onset of human history and a higher level in the Neoplatonic hierarchy of being. When Pico retold the story of creation through the myth of the birthday of Aphrodite from Plato's *Symposium*, Eros was presented as born in paradise.

Aphrodite and Eros had according to the myth come into being on the same day. Pico made the myth explain the process of coming into being of the realm of the Ideas. Poros (Eros' father, interpreted as the multitude of the Ideas) was joined with an unformed substance of Mind called Penia (Eros' mother, poor because she was devoid of all being and act). Out of their union grew little Eros who because he was born in paradise, in Pico's view symbolised a desire to perfect the Ideas. Aphrodite symbolized for Pico simply ideal beauty, and Eros was naturally understood as love.⁶ The bond between the two, between beauty and love, would all through history always remain the same. Love would follow beauty on all levels of being. Pico's analysis in the unfinished *Commento* emphasised that Eros and Aphrodite had not only partaken in the creation of the world, but that they would ultimately lead all the created back to their divine origins.

Pico was specific in explaining that only heavenly Aphrodite could generate heavenly love, and that heavenly love was a purely intellectual

desire for the ideal beauty found in the world of Ideas.⁷ In this question, Pico followed *Liber de causis*, when he said that the Ideas are ideal forms of the nature of things, and that every mind is full of forms. These Ideas or forms exist causally only in God, formally in the Intellect and participatory in the World Soul. Following from this definition, heavenly love is not achievable at all for man when the human soul still was burdened down by the weight of the body and the mind's lower functions. Connecting to his expounding of Eros born in paradise, Pico underlined that a life in paradise would mean a totally non-physical intellectual life. Pico's ideal of love accessible for men on earth would therefore mean to lead a life in imitation of the angels, who lived their lives in contemplation of heavenly beauty, far removed from any stains of physicality.⁸

Metaphysical Complexity

Very few today expect truth to be veiled in myths, and in post-metaphysical philosophical analysis the hierarchy of being has lost its centrality. Renaissance Neoplatonism represented in both ways our antidote: characterized with an almost hysterical impulse to allegorise myths of Greek and Roman Antiquity, and with a strict belief in the hierarchy of being. Their quest had a model-interpretor in late Antiquity, where the philosopher Plotinus (AD 204/5–270) in his *Enneads* had given a systematising account of Plato's philosophy. While Plato had postulated two aspects of reality; one that is material, perceptible, temporal and changing, and another that is immaterial, intelligible, eternal and permanent, the Neoplatonists after Plotinus accepted this to be correct, but added further levels within the higher level of being. Neoplatonism is as Pauliina Remes wrote, "marked by metaphysical complexity . . . with a tendency to further differentiate ontology and to postulate new entities to solve further philosophical dilemmas."⁹

Plotinus had read the myth of Aphrodite's day of birth from Plato's *Symposium* as a story about how the world had come to be, in a process of emanation or 'procession' from the One. In his *Ennead* 3.5 *On love*, Plotinus had brought out from Plato's text an explication of the universe as based on three successive levels of being. The hierarchy of being had its origin in God, which was termed *the One* in Plotinus's terminology, thereafter came two hypostases, the divine Mind or Intellect and the World Soul and at last, our material world.¹⁰ Plotinus's theory presupposed a cosmic scheme in the creation of the world that disclosed the divine and a philosophical anthropology that acknowledged a divine essence as human

nature. Through love, it was possible for souls to return to their origin in the divine sphere.

Plotinus was not only the founder of Neoplatonism, with a philosophical school set up in Rome around 245 AD, and many followers during the next centuries. He was for his Renaissance readers '*Plato redivivus*,' the born-again Plato. Plotinus's treatment of Platonic myths was therefore as Michael Allen referred to in the passage paraphrased above, a prism through which his Renaissance successors understood Plato, as a thinker inspired by God to reveal truth. Nowhere in Renaissance philosophy was one closer to what was regarded as Truth with a capital T, than in the myths presented in Plato's works and in the works of the other ancient theologians. Both Ficino and Pico accepted Plotinus's notions of a hierarchy of being stretching between God and the world. Both these Renaissance thinkers' analyses were complex and related to the readings of the Neoplatonists of late antiquity. They both seemed implicitly to answer a question raised by Plotinus, initiating his ennead on love:

What is Eros? A God, a Celestial Spirit, a state of mind?¹¹

Plotinus had concluded that everyone recognizes that the emotional state for which 'Love' is responsible rises in souls aspiring to be knit in the closest possible union with some beautiful object. He had stated that this could take two forms: One that is of the good, and whose devotion is for Beauty itself, and another that seeks its consummation in what Plotinus called "some vile act."¹²

The driving-forces for human love were found on a higher level. Plotinus presented heavenly Aphrodite as the Intellectual Principle, the Soul at its divinest, as the second hypostasis, following the One in the hierarchy of being.¹³ This higher Aphrodite was as Plotinus described her:

unmingled as the immediate emanation of the unmingled; remaining ever above, as neither desirous nor capable of descending to this sphere, never having developed a downward tendency, a divine hypostasis essentially aloof, so unreservedly an authentic being as to have no part with matter.¹⁴

Beside her, the purest soul, there was a soul of the all. This was the second and lower Aphrodite; the secondary soul is of the universe. She was not soul unmingled and alone, not soul the absolute, but giving birth to the Love concerned with the universal life. This was the Love presiding over marriages. These two Aphrodites followed the One at the top of the Neoplatonic hierarchy of being, but Plotinus explained that there was also

an Aphrodite connected to each of this world's individual souls. The Love connected to this Aphrodite was a spirit, a kind of guardian angel.

The Renaissance philosophers looking to Plotinus for guidance saw that the two Aphrodites from Plato's *Symposium* could be understood as the second and third hypostasis of the hierarchy of being, or connected to functions within the process of emanation. In this way to connect Aphrodite with the hierarchy of being, was a typical mark of a Neoplatonic love-philosophy. Plotinus had also stated a succession of Aphrodites and accompanying Loves, a train of particular Aphrodites, each with their particular Love in attendance, dependent upon the first.¹⁵ Pico and Ficino both held Plotinus in high regard, but did not agree on how to understand him.

Both Pico and Ficino accepted Plotinus's notion of love as either directed upwards toward the beauty of the higher good or downward into vile acts of sexuality, but they still did not agree on further conclusions. For Pico, the beauty of the higher good could not at all be seen by human eyes, but only through man's inner vision. This meant that the beauty of the Good could and should only be sought through philosophy, and that the ascent of the human soul would not in any way follow from delight in bodily beauty. Delight in bodily beauty would always distract men from the heavenly beauty they should rather have sought. Pico's view on earthly beauty represented one of the main disagreements with Ficino. For Ficino had in his *De amore* presented Socratic love as a loving friendship between two men, where delight in physical beauty assisted the soul in its search for the divine.¹⁶ Ficino definitively saw male beauty as a reflection of divine beauty.

When the Renaissance Neoplatonists did not agree on how to interpret Plato's dialogues on love and beauty, the *Phaedrus* and its twin-dialogue the *Symposium*, the defining problem was provided by how one could differentiate between heavenly beauty and earthly beauty, heavenly love and vulgar love. In a Christian Renaissance setting, the explanation Pausanias had given in Plato's *Symposium* added to the complexity. When Pausanias had described vulgar Aphrodite, he had said:

This, of course, is the love felt by the vulgar, who are attached to women no less than to boys, to the body more than to the soul, and to the least intelligent partners, since all they care about is completing the sexual act. Whether they do it honourably or not is of no concern. (*Symposium* 181b)

Pausanias defined vulgar love as love connected with women and less intelligent boys, and went on to contrast vulgar love with the Love of heavenly Aphrodite:

This goddess [heavenly Aphrodite], whose descent is purely male (hence this love is for boys), is considerably older and therefore free from the lewdness of youth. That's why those who are inspired by her Love are attracted to the male: they find pleasure in what is by nature stronger and more intelligent. But, even within the group that is attracted to handsome boys, some are not moved purely by this heavenly Love; those who are do not fall in love with little boys; they prefer older ones whose cheeks are showing the first traces of a beard—a sign that they have begun to form minds of their own. (*Symposium* 181c–d)

Plato had let Pausanias define vulgar Aphrodite as connected to a kind of Love which did not value quality, and therefore held allure to men indiscriminately desiring both the stupider among boys and even women. Heavenly Aphrodite's Eros, on the other hand, concerned men with a strong sense of quality. This differentiation would hardly do, when Christian Renaissance Platonists took up this definition. The problem was not per se the lacking acceptance of women, but the idealisation of sex between men. Both Ficino and Pico agreed that females were of a lesser quality than men, but Pico still found it less scandalous for a man to give in to sexual temptation with a woman than a man. Around the time when Ficino translated Plato's dialogues, there were strict laws in Florence against homosexual practises.¹⁷

The bond of beauty was by the Neoplatonists seen as laid down by God or the One to provide a ladder of love for the soul, and so lead the human soul back from this earth toward the realm of higher beauty. A problem was that the beauty of this world was only *mirroring* the beauty of the divine sphere, representing a reflection of a reflection of real beauty. The metaphysical prior was always more powerful, better and more unified than the metaphysically lower in Neoplatonic reasoning. Was it safe to trust the beauty seen on earth? Would it with surety draw the soul from its prison in the body, towards divine beauty? Pico did not think so, while Ficino was not that much of a sceptic. After having explained the function of divine beauty, Ficino described how the soul is weighted down by the inclination to the function of procreation and therefore neglected the glow of the divine countenance shining in itself. Only through contemplation of beauty could the soul be awakened, and see “the face of God shining in the machine of the world.”¹⁸ According to Ficino, this higher beauty would attract men through the beauty of other men:

Thus we are attracted to a certain man as a part of the world order, especially when the spark of the divine beauty shines brightly in him. This affection arises from two causes. Not only because the image of the paternal countenance pleases us, but also because the appearance and

figure of a well-constructed man correspond most closely with that Reason of Mankind which our soul received from the author of all things and still retains.¹⁹

Ficino was struggling to explain why it could be that the sensation of male beauty was so pleasantly connected to the higher realms of being. To say that it was the “paternal countenance” that pleased, naturally meant to remind of the Bible’s description of man created in the picture of God. This would not have been such a controversial statement, had it not been linked with sensual desire between men.

Two Goddesses in the Renaissance

If we look into the tradition for Renaissance love treatises, a main philosophical battlefield for the Italian intellectual elite in the years in between the 1470’s and 1560’s, one of the most debated topics in these treatises were how one should understand the role of Aphrodite in Plato’s love theory. The myth about the heavenly banquet from the *Symposium* 203b–c, the birth of Aphrodite and Eros, was interpreted by a string of philosophers. Traditionally, the focus on these philosophers has not so much been on their disagreement as on their overall agreement.²⁰ If their disagreements have been noted at all, it has often been characterised as superficial. The Renaissance protagonists almost always quoted the same passages from Plato, Plotinus, Proclus, Porphyry, Dionysius the Areopagite and the Tuscan tradition for philosophical love poetry, and tended to lay down the same definitions. They seemed therefore to be in general agreement, but the surface was deceptive. There is hardly any Renaissance Neoplatonist who did not define love as desire for beauty or did not recognise a tight bond between Eros and Aphrodite, but this did not create fundamental agreement, since philosophers of the Renaissance tended rather fiercely to disagree on the further definitions of ‘desire’ and ‘beauty,’ and did not intend at all the same by the term ‘love.’

Let us return for a moment to the division of Aphrodite into two in the second speech of Plato’s *Symposium*, where Pausanias holds that Eros and Aphrodite are inseparable (*Symposium* 180c). If Aphrodite were a single goddess, there could also be a single Love; but, since there are actually two goddesses of that name, there are also two kinds of Love. There is a vulgar love as well as a heavenly love. The older goddess is heavenly Aphrodite, the motherless daughter of Uranus, the god of Heaven. It was understood as a mark of quality that she lacked a mother, as motherhood was too closely connected to materiality to be celebrated in Platonic theory. As Plotinus had stated about higher Aphrodite, she was not born of

a mother and “had no part in marriages, for in heaven there is no marrying.”²¹ The younger goddess was common or vulgar Aphrodite, the daughter of Zeus and Dione. Pausanias had in Plato’s *Symposium* concluded that “although, of course, all the gods must be praised, we must still make an effort to keep these two gods apart” (*Symposium* 180e). The actualised question was: how could this be done?

In the *De amore* Ficino celebrated higher Aphrodite, but assured that even lower Aphrodite had a necessary role in the hierarchy of being. In the second speech of the *De amore*, Ficino’s interlocutor Giovanni Cavalcanti presented Ficino’s view of double Aphrodite or Venus, as Ficino named her after Roman custom:

Venus is twofold. One is certainly that intelligence we have located in the Angelic Mind. The other is the power of procreation attributed to the World Soul. Each Venus has as her companion a love like herself. For the former Venus is entranced by an innate love for understanding the Beauty of god. The latter likewise is entranced by her love for procreating that same beauty in bodies. The former Venus first embraces the splendour of divinity in herself; then she transfers it to the second Venus. The latter Venus transfers sparks of that splendour into the Matter of the world. Because of the presence of these sparks, all of the bodies of the world seem beautiful according to the receptivity of their nature.²²

Ficino understood heavenly Aphrodite as the power to contemplate higher beauty, not as Plotinus had done, equalling her with the second hypostasis, or the Intellect. In Ficino’s view, souls could be drawn up-wards in the hierarchy of being through contemplation. Lower Aphrodite represented for Ficino the power of procreation, and a movement down-wards, away from the divine sphere, into materiality. In an indirect way, lower Aphrodite had in Ficino’s view from the beginning partaken in God’s creation of the world, when she infused a wish in the Angelic Mind (the second hypostasis) to reproduce divine beauty. Lower Aphrodite’s realm could be seen to stretch downwards in the Neoplatonic hierarchy of being, from the Angelic Mind via the World Soul down to the material world. On earth, lower Aphrodite denoted the wish to beget beauty through beauty in a very direct sense.

As Ficino saw it, the human soul had twin powers. It had the power to understand higher truth, and a power of procreation. These powers represented double Aphrodite on the level of humans, and she was accompanied by twin loves:

When the beauty of a human body first meet our eyes, our intellect, which is the first Venus in us, worships and esteems it as an image of the divine

beauty, and through this it is often aroused to that. But the power of procreation, the second Venus, desires to propagate a form like this. On both sides, therefore, there is a love: there a desire to contemplate beauty, here a desire to propagate it. Each love is virtuous and praiseworthy, for each follows a divine image.²³

While Ficino was grateful that lower Aphrodite had inspired creation of the universe, he was uneasy about her place in human life. He admitted reluctantly that she was honourable in making the human race multiply, but he advised against divulging in this kind of sensual love. Ficino's ambiguity can be felt several places in his *De amore*. Discussing how men are ensnared by vulgar love, Ficino showed how he in a self-evident way took male beauty to be more alluring than female beauty, even if he had to admit that also females could hold vulgar attraction:

Women, of course, catch men easily, and even more easily women who display a certain masculine character. Men catch men still more easily, since they are more like men than women are, and they have blood and spirit which is clearer, warmer and thinner, which is the basis of erotic entrapment.²⁴

When Ficino in the sixth speech of his *Symposium*-commentary made Tommaso Benci expound the place of love in human lives, he stated that while double Aphrodite and their two loves are present not only in the World-Soul, but also in the souls of the spheres, of the stars, of daemons and of men, Ficino concluded that while in all other souls there are two loves, in humans there are five. This new and surprising number of different human loves was explained by placing the two extreme loves as daemons, while the middle three were passions. Ficino placed heavenly love at one extreme and vulgar love at the other, and made a graduation between them. There were still basically two kinds of love, but if we compare these to black and white, there are also several shades of grey in between them. Ficino thus described the first of these daemons, the pure and white one, as an eternal love of seeing the divine beauty. It was thanks to this erotic daemon that men in Ficino's view pursued the study of philosophy and the practise of law and piety. The fifth daemon, on the opposite side of the spectrum, was the dark and vulgar daemon of procreation, or what Ficino presented as a certain mysterious urge to procreate offspring.²⁵ Ficino likened these two extreme loves with the daemons Plato predicted always would be present in human souls, one of which raises men to things above; the other presses men down to things below:

One is a *kalodaemon*, that is, a good daemon; the other is a *kakodaemon*, that is an evil daemon. In reality both are good, since the procreation of offspring is considered to be as necessary and virtuous as the pursuit of truth. But the second is called evil because, on account of our abuse, it often disturbs us and powerfully diverts the soul from its chief good, which consists in the contemplation of truth, and twists it to baser purpose.²⁶

Ficino's wording underlines his ambiguity. He wrote that procreation is considered necessary and virtuous, and therefore had to be considered good, but he was not too committed to this thought. In any case, there was a difference in the status of the good of contemplation of beauty and the good of procreation. The first could not be overdone, while the second easily could.

Presenting the human loves that were passions and placed in between the two extremes, Ficino explained that men were born and brought up inclined toward the contemplative, active or voluptuous life:

If we are disposed to the contemplative life, we are immediately elevated by the sight of bodily beauty to the contemplation of spiritual and divine beauty. If to the voluptuous life, we descend immediately from sight to the desire to touch. If to the active and moral life, we continue in the mere pleasure of seeing and conversing. Those of the first type are so intelligent that they rise to the heights; those of the last type are so stupid that they sink to the bottom; and those of the middle type remain in the middle region.²⁷

Ficino made it a question of disposition and intelligence, whether men fell into the divine love of the contemplative man, the human love of the active man, or the bestial love of the voluptuous man. In this we can note a decided mark of elitism in Ficino's love-theory. The stupider among men did not deserve heavenly ascent, and would therefore, according to Ficino, not be in a position to realise it. Females did not much interest Ficino. The only positive role attributed to real life women in Ficino's *De amore* is that they were capable of bringing new boys into the world.

Man's Choice

Ficino's younger contemporary, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, disagreed in much of his love-theory with Ficino. The main point of disagreement was that Ficino's ideal of Socratic love was social and homoerotic, and Pico's ideal was not.²⁸ While Ficino recommended a loving friendship between men, where the two friends would be celebrating philosophy and beauty together, Pico argued that every kind of delight in earthly beauty

represented a distraction from divine beauty, and so had to be avoided. Pico did not accept what Ficino had claimed, that intelligence would secure ascent from sensual beauty to higher beauty, if an older man found delight in the outward beauty of a younger friend. Ficino claimed that higher beauty could and should be contemplated through male beauty; Pico claimed that this could not be done.

For Pico, higher Aphrodite represented a beauty connected with the divine and with the intellectual realm, while lower Aphrodite simply represented earthly beauty, which meant, all beauty connected with our fleeting world. Pico's love theory from the *Commento* argued that man had to choose between the two. A man could choose vulgar Aphrodite or he could choose heavenly Aphrodite, but he could not have both. To concentrate on lower Aphrodite and the beauty of the bodies of this earth would mean risking one's salvation and the possibility of return to the divine sphere.

What was really at stake? The main question concerned the role and meaning of beauty, for one aspect of the goddess Aphrodite was according to both Ficino and Pico that Aphrodite could also simply mean "beauty" in general, a beauty that inspired love. To a certain degree, all Neoplatonists accepted man's intuition as trustworthy and able to lead the soul back to its heavenly home. Beauty was seen as a main factor giving the lead in the quest for return, because as Ficino described it, beauty was a bond, through the created, from God and the realm of the Ideas, down the hierarchy of being, through the first Intellect and the World Soul, ending in earthly beauty, as in material things like young male bodies. Ficino had written:

[T]he single face of God shines successively in three mirrors, placed in order: the Angel, the Soul and the Body of the World. In the former, as nearer to God, the image shines most brightly. In the second, more remote, more dimly. In the latter, most remote, if you compare it to the others, most dimly. Then the holy Angelic Mind, hampered by no duty to a body, turns back to itself. There it sees that face of God imprinted in its own breast. It immediately admires what it has seen. It cleaves passionately to it forever. The grace of that divine face we call beauty. The Angel's passion, clinging inwardly to the face of God, we call Love.²⁹

Ficino described a young man's outward beauty as a kind of "hook," with the power to draw the viewer to him. The young man would, according to Ficino, have got his beauty from God, on account of his interior goodness. Ficino could therefore describe a sensual drawing "which is love," as deriving from the beautiful, good and blessed.³⁰

Imitation as Ideal

If Renaissance philosophers differed in their interpretations of Plato's writings, they agreed that a deeper truth was hidden under the surface of the text. Plato had made Pausanias define the two Aphrodites, but the text was decidedly deciphered in different ways. Ficino would solve this particular question defining the condemnable aspect of vulgar Aphrodite's Love as the Love that *explicitly* included physical, sexual contact, and therefore a movement downwards into materiality, as opposed to heavenly Aphrodite's love. This kind of love, Ficino presented as an intellectual love, where two men joined in Socratic friendship attempted to climb Diotima's ladder of love. In this latter case, he would allow physical desire as part of the attraction of heavenly Aphrodite, as long as no touch was involved. Pico would naturally protest, and state that all visual beauty represented vulgar Aphrodite, and that man had to choose the one or the other of the two goddesses.

Ficino's view was that the stories from Plato's dialogues were told so that they could be imitated, and that to be a Platonist, required imitation of Plato and his friend and teacher, Socrates. This meant that the way the ancient philosophers had socialised with their young friends and followers should be taken as an example. In Plato's works, Socrates were usually surrounded by groups of young friends and admirers, and Socrates was described as inclined to take delight in the beauty of his favourites, like Phaedrus and Alcibiades. Both of these young and handsome Athenians figured in Plato's *Symposium*. Phaedrus was given the first speech in honour of Eros, Alcibiades the last. Ficino understood their relationship with Socrates as representing Plato's ideal. These were the primary examples of Socratic friendship.

The ladder of love, as Socrates had explained it in the *Symposium*, had started with a first step where older men should take delight in a young boy's beauty, followed by a next step where they should take delight in several handsome boys' beauty. On the third step, they should appreciate beauty generalised, and understand that beauty of body was less important than beauty of soul. On the fourth step the beauty of laws and customs should bring happiness, on the fifth step the beauty of knowledge, and on the sixth and last step, the lover would be able to gaze at a vision of Beauty itself (*Symposium* 210a–e).

An implication of the disagreement between Ficino and Pico was that while Ficino in his *De amore* made it perfectly legitimate to take delight in earthly beauty as a kind of pre-taste of divine beauty, and even to desire the physical beauty of a boy, as long as one did not succumb to physical

temptation, Pico in his *Commento* issued a warning: Earthly love was simply a desire to possess earthly beauty.³¹ If the source for the desired beauty were a material body, there would arise a desire for sex. This implied a profanation of what Pico called the “chaste mysteries of the Platonists.”

It was an interesting phrasing Pico chose, for rather than seeming “chaste,” Platonic dialogues are occupied with sexual attraction between men, desire as an important part of the relationship between teacher and student, and the beauty of young boys. Pico’s solution to this rather acute embarrassment was to set aside the homoerotic stories as insubstantial surface. In Pico’s view, these stories were not at all told to be imitated. What Pico found hidden, was instead an ascetic theory of intellectual love, differing from Ficino’s in its denial of erotic desire as an integral part of Platonic love.

Pico’s reading of Diotima’s ladder made a main point out of leaving the first steps with their physical desire for beauty, understood as the beauty of this world, as soon as possible. Naturally, because Pico understood all beauty seen on earth as connected with vulgar Aphrodite. For Pico, the way up the ladder of love had little to do with young boys (he must have understood them mostly as examples for condemnable earthly beauty) and solely to do with philosophy. In his *Oration on the Dignity of Man* (1486) Pico had described a ladder where different philosophical disciplines created the steps of the ladder, and prescribed even in the *Commento* a ladder where the beauty of the world was left as soon as possible. Pico left to philosophy to teach lovers to generalise the concept of beauty and come to a truer understanding.

Pico and Ficino did not only disagree on the role of Aphrodite at the bottom of the hierarchy of being. They held different notions of the divine sphere as well. For Ficino, there was as we have heard an extremely close relationship between beauty and divinity: God was beauty, and from this, Ficino concluded that to take delight in a young man’s beauty would really not mean desiring the beauty of this particular person, but the beauty of God. For Pico, this was scandalous. Pico stated that God was not beauty: God was above beauty. In the *Commento*, Pico concluded that God was absolute unity, and that without variety there could be no beauty.³²

Ficino and Pico both attributed to Aphrodite immense meaning. She could be understood as simply “beauty,” or as a function of the World Soul and the First Intellect, the two hypostases in Neoplatonic theory of emanation. But the two philosophers did not agree upon what kind of divine sphere man’s soul could return to, by what means, or to what extent man on earth was able to see divine beauty.