

Like other men of letters, Ariosto enjoyed these oral performances and his poem owes something to them. For example, although he wrote to be read, the author took over some of the popular formulas telling the audience to listen – 'as I shall continue the story in the next canto' ('come io vi seguirò ne l'altro canto'), and so on. Ariosto thus exemplifies a complex process of reappropriation, that of an educated man borrowing and transforming popular themes which had earlier been borrowed from high culture. When the *Furioso* was itself popularized, as we have seen it was, we are confronted with a case of double reappropriation. Circularities of this kind are not unknown today. For example, a novel by the Brazilian writer Jorge Amado, *Tereza Batista* (1972), draws on a chapbook by Rodolfo Coelho Cavalcanti (these booklets were and perhaps still are circulating in the northeast of Brazil, at least in the areas most remote from towns and television). Cavalcanti drew in turn on the traditional theme of the *donzela guerreira* or warrior maiden which goes back to the romances of chivalry – and of course to Ariosto's heroine Bradamante.

The last example to be discussed here is that of Pietro Aretino. Aretino made his reputation in Rome as a composer of biting pasquinades [satires, lampoons]. The *pasquinata* was a genre on the frontier between learned and popular culture. The practice of attaching satiric verses to the mutilated classical statue on Piazza del Pasquino in Rome goes back to the later fifteenth century, and at that time the verses were in humanist Latin. In the early sixteenth century, it became common to write the verses in a vernacular which everyone could understand. Aretino went on to write *Il Marescalco*, the carnival comedy built around a *beffa*.

However, the best example of the mixture or interaction of learned and popular elements in Aretino's work is surely his *Ragionamenti*, dialogues in which an old prostitute instructs a young one in the skills of the profession. The dialogues offer a series of scenes from low life in early sixteenth-century Rome, apparently faithful to the colloquial language and the slang of that social milieu. At the same time, humanist readers would have been aware that the dialogues borrow from and allude to a classical Greek text, Lucian's *Dialogues of the Courtesans*. The dialogues also may be read as a parody of Renaissance treatises on good manners, and especially of Castiglione's famous *Book of the Courtier*. Here as elsewhere Aretino exploits the similarities between the terms *corregiano*, 'courtier', and *corregiana*, 'courtesan'.

Aretino [1492–1556] was the son of a craftsman, he grew up in the world of popular culture, and to the end of his life he appreciated street singers. He was a friend of Andrea, one of the court fools to Pope Leo X. Like the painters already discussed, he lacked the opportunity for a conventional humanist education in Latin and Greek (it was presumably a more learned friend who drew Lucian to his attention). He came to high culture as an outsider and he rejected some of it as artificial and affected, notably the conventions for the Petrarchan love sonnet and the rules for spoken Italian laid down by Castiglione's friend Pietro Bembo (rules which are mocked in the *Ragionamenti*). Like his friend the artist Giulio Romano, Aretino liked to break rules. In this sense he was a self-conscious 'modernist' or 'anti-classicist'. Low culture, the culture in which he grew up, was his instrument to subvert high culture, or at least those parts of it which he disliked.

One might say that he drew on the non-Renaissance for the purposes of an anti-Renaissance.

Cultural historians are surely right to shift, as they have been doing, from concern with popular culture in itself to a study of the long process of interaction between learned and popular elements. If we focus on the interaction between high and low, however, we need to recognize the variety or polymorphism of this process. The examples cited in this chapter do not exhaust the range of possibilities, but they may at least be sufficient to suggest the remarkable range of possible relationships between high and low, the uses of popular culture for Renaissance writers, the uses of the Renaissance for ordinary people, and finally, the importance of the 'circular tour' of images and themes, a circular tour in which what returns is never the same as what set out.

## 6 Jill Krave 'The transformation of Platonic love in the Italian Renaissance'

Source: from *Platonism and the English Imagination*, ed. Anna Baldwin and Sarah Hutton, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1994, chapter 8, pp. 76–85.

One of the most serious obstacles to the reception and adoption of Platonism by Italian scholars of the early fifteenth century was the theory of Platonic love. Yet by the middle of the sixteenth century this doctrine had become the most popular element of Platonic philosophy and was playing a significant role in the development of Italian literature. The transformation of Platonic love from an embarrassing liability into a valuable asset was a key episode in the history of Plato's reemergence during the Renaissance as a major influence on Western thought.

Through their knowledge of Greek, Italian humanists became familiar with a wider range of Platonic dialogues than had been known in the Middle Ages; but they did not always like what they read. Among the things they found particularly offensive was the homosexual and pederastic orientation of Platonic love. Leonardo Bruni, the most prominent early translator of Plato, felt obliged to bowdlerise his Latin versions of the *Phaedrus* (1424) and the *Symposium* (1435). In Bruni's translation, for instance, Alcibiades' attempted seduction of Socrates (*Symposium* 215a–22a) becomes a high-minded quest for philosophical enlightenment, with Alcibiades describing himself as 'inflamed with the desire for learning'. Fascinated though he was by the concept of divinely-inspired amatory fury, as expounded in the *Phaedrus*, Bruni was simply unable to accept Plato's explicit treatment of homosexuality.

Bruni's contemporary in Florence, the Camaldulensian monk Ambrogio Traversari, had similar scruples. These led him to delete from his Latin version of Diogenes Laertius' *Lives of the Philosophers* (1433) the homosexual love poems attributed to Plato (iii.29–32), including the lascivious epigram about kissing Agathon. Virtually the only humanist to express appreciation of these poems was Antonio Panormita, author of a scabrous verse collection entitled

*Hermaphroditus* (1425). The 'wanton' and 'effeminate' love poetry which Plato addressed to young men provided Panormita with classical precedent for his own pornographic efforts. Rather than bolstering Panormita's case, however, this claim served to undermine further Plato's moral credibility. And worse was in store.

George of Trebizond published his *Comparatio Aristotelis et Platonis [Comparison of Aristotle and Plato]* (1458) as part of a one-man campaign to save Christianity from the irreligious and immoral doctrines of Platonism. He therefore went out of his way to portray Plato as a purveyor of sexual depravity and an unshamed pederast. Aristotle, whom George regarded as the bulwark of Western civilisation, may have been over fond of women, but at least he had not indulged in unnatural vice nor inflamed grown men with a desire for the youthful beauty of adolescent boys. In his lurid account of the *Symposium* – pointedly referred to as *De cupidine* ('On Desire') rather than by its customary title *De amore* ('On Love') – George deliberately distorted the speech of Aristophanes (189c–93d) so as to equate Platonic love with continuous sexual fulfilment, achieved when the two masculine halves of the original male creature were reunited.

The aim of Cardinal Bessarion's *In calumniatorem Platonis [Against the Calumniators of Plato]* (1469) was to defend Plato against George's allegations, especially the damaging accusations of sexual misconduct. Bessarion did not deny that Platonic love was essentially homosexual in outlook, but he did insist that Socrates' attachment to young men such as Phaedrus was entirely honorable and chaste, and that it had nothing to do with lust. To reinforce this point, Bessarion stressed the similarity between Plato's concept of love and that praised in the Song of Solomon and the letters of St Paul. He also associated it with the cosmic love described by Dionysius the Areopagite in chapter 4 of *De divinis nominibus [The Names of God]*, which had God as both its source and its goal. Contrary to what George had claimed, Plato's spokesman in the *Symposium* was not the raffish Aristophanes but the wise and noble Socrates. As for the amatory verses to Agathon and other boys, Bessarion maintained that Diogenes Laertius had wrongly attributed to Plato poems which were actually written by the volupriary Aristippus of Cyrene.

#### FIGINO

Marsilio Ficino, equally anxious to discredit George of Trebizond's attack on Plato's character, had one of the characters in his *Symposium* commentary (1469) state, with obvious reference to George, that those who dared to slander Plato because 'he indulged too much in love' should be ashamed of themselves, 'for we can never indulge too much or even enough in passions which are decorous, virtuous and divine'. Like Bessarion, Ficino too attempted to defend Socrates' reputation for moral probity. After noting that even in his trial Socrates had not been charged with immoral love affairs, Ficino asked: 'Do you think that if he had polluted himself with a stain so filthy, or rather, if he had not been completely above suspicion of this charge, he would have escaped the venomous tongues of

such detractors?' He also followed Bessarion's lead in reassigning to Aristippus the homosexual poems traditionally attributed to Plato.

Ficino likewise took over Bessarion's tactic of associating Platonic discussions of love with those found in the Bible. He maintained, for instance, that the burning desire Socrates says he feels upon glimpsing Charmides' torso (155d) should be interpreted, like the Song of Solomon, allegorically. Ficino, however, carried the Christianisation of Platonic love much further than Bessarion, even managing to impose a Thomist interpretation on the salacious speech of Aristophanes. Another way in which Ficino made Platonic love more palatable was to emphasise its place within an elaborate system of Neoplatonic metaphysics. Relying heavily on Plotinus, *Enneads* 1.6 ('On Beauty') and III.5 ('On Love'), Ficino turned Diotima's ladder (*Symposium* 210a–12a) into an ontological ascent from Soul, the hypostasis to which man belonged, through the Angelic Mind and ultimately to the One, the Neoplatonic equivalent of the Christian God.

But Ficino's efforts to accommodate the theory to the values of a fifteenth-century audience did not include concealing or denying – it would hardly have been possible in a commentary on the *Symposium* – that the virtuous love practised by Socrates and promoted by Plato was homoerotic. Indeed, Ficino completely accepted the idea that Platonic love involved a chaste relationship between men, as can be seen from his dedication of the work to his friend Giovanni Cavalcanti. Giving Cavalcanti credit for having inspired the commentary, Ficino stated that although he had learned the definition and nature of love from Plato, the power and sway of this god was hidden from me for thirty-four years, until a certain divine hero, beckoning to me with heavenly eyes, demonstrated . . . how powerful love is'. Further corroboration of the strictly masculine context of Ficino's conception of Platonic love comes from a contemporary biography of him, which states that 'he was enraptured by love just as Socrates was, and he used to discuss and debate the subject of love in the Socratic manner with young men.'

Ficino differed from Plato in his outright condemnation of consummated homosexual love, which he described as 'against the order of nature'. But this did not stop him from endorsing Plato's belief that the soul's spiritual ascent to ultimate beauty was fuelled by love between men. The man who follows the lower sort of love, which seeks mere physical 'conception and generation' (*Symposium* 206e), desires, according to Ficino, a 'beautiful woman' to procreate 'handsome offspring'; but the man who pursues the higher and heavenly love, which pertains to the soul rather than the body, desires to teach 'men who are handsome', seeing in their external appearance a reflection of internal virtue. On the heavenly journey, Ficino wrote to Cavalcanti, we should have god as our guide and a male friend as our companion.

One of Ficino's followers, Girolamo Benivieni, was inspired by his *Symposium* commentary to produce an elegant but obscure Italian *canzone*. The poem was itself commented upon, in 1486, by the young Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, who used this form to put forward his own interpretation of Platonic love, which

differed in some respects from that of Ficino. But Pico shared Ficino's conviction that while 'earthly love, that is, the love of corporeal beauty, is more properly directed towards women than towards men, the reverse is true of heavenly love', citing as his authority the speech of Pausanias (*Symposium* 180c-5c). In Pico's opinion, sexual love, which led to copulation, was less unseemly with the feminine sex than with the male. Heavenly love, on the other hand, was directed entirely towards the spiritual beauty of the soul or intellect, a beauty that was 'much more perfect in men than in women, as is true of any other attribute'. It was with this 'chaste kind of love', wrote Pico, that Socrates loved not only Alcibiades, but 'almost all of the cleverest and most attractive young men in Athens'. Pico was by no means proof against female beauty - earlier in 1486 he had caused a scandal by attempting to abduct the wife of a government official from Arezzo - but, for him as for Ficino, what prompted the soul to start on its arduous spiritual ascent to God was the masculine beauty of Alcibiades, or Phaedrus, or some other attractive body'.

Following in the footsteps of Bessarion and Ficino, Pico linked Platonic love to the Song of Solomon, adding, however, a new dimension by drawing on the Cabalistic doctrine of the *mors osculi*, 'the death of the kiss'. This death, symbolised by a kiss, occurred 'when the soul, in an intellectual rapture, unites so completely with incorporeal things that it rises above the body and leaves it altogether'. Pico stated that the opening verse of the Song of Solomon: 'Kiss me with the kisses of thy mouth', alluded to this sort of kiss. Even more audaciously, he accepted the Platonic authorship of the poem about kissing Agathon, denied by Bessarion and Ficino, and asserted that it too referred to *mors osculi*.

Through their interpretive skills, Bessarion, Ficino and Pico had removed from Platonic love the immoral connotations which had threatened to hinder the reception of Plato's philosophy by Renaissance thinkers. But while they expunged any taint of carnal homosexuality from Platonic love, they did not question its homoerotic nature, nor its relegation of heterosexual love to an inferior status on the grounds that love between the sexes resulted in physical procreation, whereas love between men led to spiritual perfection. This distinction is clearly enunciated in the writings of Lorenzo de' Medici, the unofficial ruler of Florence and the patron of both Ficino and Pico. In 1474 Lorenzo wrote a series of Platonic love letters to Ficino, demonstrating that he had thoroughly absorbed the lessons taught in his *Symposium* commentary. Lorenzo was well aware that the spiritual love which he felt for Ficino was more exalted than the human love, directed towards women, which he celebrated in his poetry. In his *Comento* on his own poems, Lorenzo stated that they were not concerned with the love praised by Plato, which is 'the means for all things to find their perfection and to rest ultimately in supreme beauty, that is, in God'. His poetry dealt instead with a love, which, although not the supreme good, was nevertheless good in itself and natural, because it was necessary for the propagation of the species. Yet despite his recognition of the difference between the two sorts of love, Lorenzo allowed himself to borrow certain Platonic themes from both Ficino and Pico, using them, alongside motifs taken from Ovid, Petrarca and the *Stil nuovo* (New Style) poets, to elaborate the story of his love affair with his mistress.

## BEMBO

Lorenzo's appropriation of the language of Platonic love to describe some aspects of the romance between a man and a woman prepared the way for works such as Pietro Bembo's *Gli Asolani* [*The Lovers of Asolo*] (1505), in which both human and divine love were presented as unequivocally heterosexual. In this dialogue, set in the court of Asolo, a group of men and women gather together to converse on the subject of love. The inclusion of women is defended on the grounds that they 'as well as men have minds' and therefore have the right to seek knowledge of 'what one ought to flee from or pursue'; the love being discussed is clearly as relevant to them as the men in the group. Lavinello, attempting to strike a balance between the attack on love by Perottino and the overpraise of it by Gismondo, portrays an elevated, spiritual love, which obviously derives from the Platonic theory. But here, unlike previous treatments, women are envisaged as the object of Platonic love:

Who can fail to see that if I love some gallant, gentle lady, and love her rather for her wit, integrity, good breeding, grace, and other qualities than for her bodily attractions, and love those attractions not for themselves but as adornments of her mind - who can fail to see my love is good because the object of my love is likewise good?

Most of the central ideas set out in Ficino's *Symposium* commentary are echoed by Bembo, but he transforms the latter's abstract, philosophical terminology into vivid, poetic metaphors. Ficino's doctrine that the beauty which provokes love can be perceived by the eyes and the ears alone of the five senses is expressed by Bembo through an image of love spreading and beating its wings: 'And on its flight two senses guide it: hearing, which leads it to the mind's attractions, and sight which turns it to the body's'. While Ficino - and, for that matter, Plato (*Symposium* 201d) - provided only a perfunctory description of Diotima, Bembo carefully sets the scene for Lavinello's encounter with his guide to the mysteries of love: from a little grove on a charming mountaintop, surrounded by silvan quietude, emerges 'a solitary figure, a bearded white-haired man clothed in material like the bark of the young oaks surrounding him'. Although the message this hermit conveys is taken from Ficino, he speaks straightforwardly, avoiding any overtly philosophical language. Instead of erudite discourse on the Neoplatonic hypostases [i.e. enduring essences underneath externals], the hermit explains to Lavinello that 'beyond this sensible, material world... there lies another world which is neither material nor evident to sense, but completely separate from this and pure... a world divine, intelligent and full of light'. The aged hermit tells Lavinello that he now regards the sensual delights which he desired in his youth in the same light as a man, restored to health, might regard his fevered fancies. It is only when we grow older, he says, that 'our better part, namely the soul' is able to rule our worse part, the body, and that our reason is able to control our senses. For Bessarion, Ficino and Pico, there was a complete separation between physical love, which had women as its object, and spiritual love, which was shared between men. By contrast, Bembo's version of Platonic

love is unified and evolutionary, with male-female relationships gradually progressing, as one grows older, from a sexual to a spiritual plane.

#### CASTIGLIONE

Although *Gli Asolani* [*The Lovers of Asolo*] was widely read and influential, the new style of Platonic love formulated by Bembo reached its largest audience when his friend Baldesar Castiglione chose to cast him as one of the main characters in his hugely popular *Il libro del cortigiano* [*The Book of the Courtier*] (1528). Castiglione sets out a vision of the perfect courtier and uses Bembo's speech, which is the culmination of the book, to describe what his attitude towards love should be. As in *Gli Asolani*, there is a progression from the sensual love of youth to the spiritual love of old age, both directed exclusively towards women. Moreover, Plato's pederastic ideal of an older and wiser man educating his young lover in virtue is given a novel heterosexual twist by Castiglione's Bembo, who states that the courtier should be at pains to keep his lady 'from going astray and by his wise precepts and admonishments always seek to make her modest, temperate and truly chaste'. Much of the philosophical content of the speech is taken over from Ficino, but Castiglione gives these doctrines even more literary embellishment than Bembo had done. The Ficinian doctrine that beauty can be perceived only through sight and hearing becomes, in Castiglione, an admonition to the lover to 'enjoy with his eyes the radiance, the grace, the loving ardour, the smiles, the mannerisms and all the other agreeable adornments of the woman he loves' and to 'use his hearing to enjoy the sweetness of her voice, the modulation of her words and, if she is a musician, the music she plays'. Castiglione carried on the trend, initiated by Bessarion, of giving Platonic love a strongly religious colouring. He has Bembo end his speech with a hymn, which is full of Biblical imagery, and in which love is identified with the 'searing power of contemplation' that ravished the souls of 'ancient Fathers', taking them from their bodies and uniting them with God. And from Pico, Castiglione takes the idea that the Song of Solomon refers to 'the death of the kiss'; but while he too alludes to the poem about kissing Agathon, unlike Pico he does not name the male dedicatee of these verses.

Where Castiglione differs from all his predecessors is in the scepticism about Platonic love which he permits his characters to voice. Morello complains that he cannot understand the sort of love described by Bembo because in his view 'to possess the beauty he praises so much without the body is a fantasy'. Morello also does not believe that beauty is always as good as Bembo says, for he remembers 'having seen many beautiful women who were evil, cruel and spiteful . . . beauty makes them proud, and pride makes them cruel'. Bembo firmly denies that this is so and, dutifully rejoining the Platonic line, affirms that 'one cannot have beauty without goodness' since 'outward beauty is a true sign of inner goodness'. None the less, by introducing the down-to-earth objections of Morello, Castiglione raises doubts about the extreme idealism of the Platonic theory.

The combination of literary skill and psychological insight which Castiglione brought to the topic of Platonic love was the high point of the tradition. Now that Platonic love was safely in the heterosexual camp, its themes were taken up in a stream of *trattati d'amore* (treatises on love). The inevitable price of such popularity was a drastic reduction in philosophical content and an increasing staleness, as once lively motifs became hackneyed through continual repetition. A notable exception to this dreary picture is the *Dialoghi d'amore* [*Dialogues on Love*] of Leone Ebreo, written around 1501-2, but not published until 1535. Leone, a Portuguese-Jewish physician who emigrated to Italy after 1492, put forward his ideas on love in the form of a playful, but extremely erudite, conversation between the female Sofia (wisdom) and her male admirer, Filone (love). From the opening lines, Sofia's flirtatious teasing of the besotted Filone leaves the reader in no doubt as to the heterosexual nature of the love they speak about. Like other writers on Platonic love, Leone pointed out its compatibility with the tenets of religion; but, in his case, the religion was Judaism rather than Christianity. Again and again he noted that Plato's ideas derived from Moses and the Caballists: 'Aristophanes' myth of the androgyne, for instance, turned out to be nothing more than the Genesis account of the creation of Adam and Eve, amplified and polished 'after the manner of Greek oratory'.

One of the last Italian Platonic love treatises was Giordano Bruno's *Eroici furori* [*Heroic frenzies*] (1585), written during his sojourn in England. In some respects this work — a series of sonnets written and commented on by Bruno — was quite conventional. There was the by now obligatory reference to the Song of Solomon, 'which under the guise of lovers and ordinary passions contains . . . divine and heroic frenzies, as the mystics and cabalistic doctors interpret it'. And in the dedication to Sir Philip Sidney, Bruno, like most authors of such treatises, attacked sensual love, calling it 'witless, stupid and odiferous foulness . . . worthy of pity and laughter'. But Bruno's polemic took an unexpected turn towards misogyny: 'and all this for those eyes, those cheeks, for that breast . . . that scourge, that disgust, that stink, that tomb, that latrine, that menstruum, that carrion, that quaran ague, that distortion of nature, which with . . . a shadow, a phantasm, a dream, a Circian enchantment put to the service of generation, deceives us as a species of beauty'. This contempt for women was philosophically, not psychologically, motivated. Throughout the *Eroici furori* [*Heroic frenzies*], Bruno deliberately subverts the metaphors of love poetry, bending them to his own metaphysical purposes. Thus, for him, female beauty is a symbol of the allure of the perceptible world; by downgrading it, he was indicating the immeasurable distance between sensible and intelligible beauty, between physical desire and heroic love — man's doomed but noble desire to understand the infinity of God. His aim was to recover the profound philosophical significance which Platonic love had had for Ficino and Pico, not to return to their homoerotic conception of it. That conception had been superseded by a notion of Platonic love which was better suited to the social, cultural and literary concerns of the Renaissance: a non-sexual, spiritually uplifting love between the sexes.