

# Plato's Hermaphrodite and a Vindication of the Sense of Touch in the Sixteenth Century

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*This essay considers readings of Plato's Symposium in sixteenth-century trattati d'amore (love treatises) — especially Francesco Patrizi's L' amorosa filosofia — that offer an alternative to Marsilio Ficino's pervasive interpretation as presented in his De amore. Against the backdrop of a larger debate concerning the role of the lower senses (touch, in particular) and the relationship between body and soul, these alternative readings of the Symposium attempt to redeem the role of tactility in love matters. Whereas Ficino and his most influential followers — Pico della Mirandola, Pietro Bembo, and Baldassare Castiglione — center their exegesis on Diotima's speech and privilege sight as the most noble sense, Patrizi's reading — to a large extent preceded by those of Sperone Speroni, Agnolo Firenzuola, and Flaminio Nobili — focuses on Aristophanes's myth and the figure of the hermaphrodite as the model for a different kind of human love that is both sensual and spiritual.*

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## INTRODUCTION

WHEN IN THE early 1640s William Cartwright (1611–43) wrote his famous poem “No Platonic Love,” he was expressing a Baroque annoyance with the notion that true love only happens between disembodied souls.<sup>1</sup> This annoyance, far from being a Baroque or an English novelty, can be traced back to Italy and to the previous century when intellectuals began to dispute the most prevalent interpretation of Plato's (ca. 420–348 BCE) *Symposium*, which had been proposed by Marsilio Ficino (1433–99) and popularized by Pietro Bembo (1470–1547) and Baldassare Castiglione (1478–1529). According to this reading, the only form of love that is conducive to a life of virtue is the one that instigates a desire in the soul to rid itself of the body and ascend to the divine. While the only two senses compatible with this type of eros are sight and hearing, the other senses, especially touch, distract the soul from its necessary

<sup>1</sup>In Maclean, 286: “Tell me no more of minds embracing minds / and hearts exchanged for hearts; / that spirits spirits meet, as winds do winds / and mix their subtlest parts / that two unbodied essence may Kiss / and then, like angels, twist and feel one bliss. . . . The body is the way.” The revolt against Platonic love seems to have been a trope in Stuart England, as Davenant's satirical play *The Platonicke Lovers* and Abraham Cowley's poem “Platonic Love” show. Cowley says, “Indeed I must confess, when souls mix 'tis an happiness / but not complete till bodies too combine”: in *ibid.*, 339.

voyage away from the body, weighing it down until it sinks in the ontological midden of matter where, as Pico della Mirandola's (1463–94) *Oration on the Dignity of Man* (1486) powerfully illustrates, humans become animals. Although Ficino and his more immediate continuators acknowledge tactility in its most intimate form as necessary for human reproduction, and even accept physical attraction as a launching point for a more elevated form of love, they never cease to stress its grave dangers and the need for the soul to subjugate it and to overcome its temptations altogether. This reading of the *Symposium* was pervasive and extremely influential in the sixteenth century. However, toward the second half of the 1500s a number of intellectuals began to actively contest this reading, and they did so as they reevaluated the role of corporeality in general, and tactility in particular, by presenting the tactile as a key player in the dialectics of human love. Interestingly, these men make their arguments not by opposing Plato but by taking less traveled roads of Platonic exegesis. Whereas Italian mainstream love philosophy, from Ficino onward, makes Diotima's speech in the *Symposium* the key to understanding Platonic eros, Agnolo Firenzuola (1493–1545), Flaminio Nobili (1533–91), and Francesco Patrizi (1529–97) focus on Aristophanes's (ca. 446–386 BCE) speech with its famous mythical account of the origins of human love and the extraordinary figure of the hermaphrodite.

This revaluation of tactility was certainly not exclusive to the *trattato d'amore* (love treatise) tradition; in fact, the phenomenon crosses genres as well as linguistic and disciplinary borders in the sixteenth century. One finds it in some of the most radical readings of Lucretius's (ca. 99–55 BCE) *De rerum natura* (*On the Nature of Things*) — without a doubt the most prominent classical thinker of the tactile — in the writings that set in motion the anatomical revolution with its strong epistemological and ethical vindication of the work of the hand, in the revolt against Petrarchismo initiated by Neo-Latin and vernacular poets whose verses exalt the pleasures of the flesh, and, last but not least, in the exciting developments in the study of skin that led to the birth of dermatology. After over a millennium of being accorded the last place in the hierarchy of the senses, touch acquired substantive ontological, epistemological, ethical, and aesthetic prevalence.<sup>2</sup> It does so to the extent that it becomes foundational to a new cultural paradigm that involves an understanding of the senses not as echelons of a hierarchy but as competing and collaborating agents on a leveled playing field. Focusing on this intellectual redemption of tactility can help explain the epistemological shift from authority-based evidence to first-hand experience, the new conception of the human body and its place in the universe, and the

<sup>2</sup>For the history of the sense of touch and its systematic neglect through antiquity and the Middle Ages, see Paterson; Ackerman. On Western oculo-centrism, see Summers; Jütte; Vinge.

aesthetic sensibilities that make this period exceptional in its provocative amalgam of literature, science, and religion.

Whereas the history of the lower sensorium has been the object of a number of excellent recent studies,<sup>3</sup> the negotiations between Renaissance authors and their classical sources have not yet received full attention. The reevaluation of tactility appears in the context of an intricate dialogue between intellectuals and their classical sources, of which these competing readings of Plato's *Symposium* is a particularly compelling example. Before tackling the issue in the Renaissance, however, it is best to go back to Plato's *Symposium* and revisit some of its most revealing passages concerning the bodily senses.

### LOVE AND THE SENSES IN PLATO'S *SYMPOSIUM*

It is no secret that Plato and his followers — pagan and Christian alike — preferred vision among the senses, deeming it the most akin to intelligence and thus the most conducive to contemplation. As he gives his account of the generation of mankind in the *Timaeus*, Plato discusses only sight and hearing, completely ignoring any other senses,<sup>4</sup> and in the celebrated beginning of book 7 of the *Republic* it is the dialectics of sight and light that articulate the allegory of the cave. Toward the beginning of the *Symposium*, Socrates even makes a joke that reveals his ideas concerning the epistemological value of touch. As soon as he arrives to the drinking party, after standing on the porch for some time in one of his notorious trances,<sup>5</sup> Agathon asks him to sit next to him “so that by contact with you perhaps I shall absorb whatever it was you were thinking about outside.”<sup>6</sup> Socrates replies: “Wouldn't it be marvelous, Agathon, if ideas were the kind of thing which could be imparted simply by contact?”<sup>7</sup> Thus Plato's only work dedicated exclusively to eros — the only topic on which Socrates claimed to be an expert — begins with a dismissal of tactility as a legitimate source of knowledge.

Under such an epistemological premise begins the succession of speeches, the first three of which are rather conventional encomia. Phaedrus emphasizes the antiquity of eros and its capacity to inspire courage in the lover. Pausanias, a Sophist, taxonomizes eros, which he considers as being of two kinds: heavenly

<sup>3</sup>See, for example, Sawday; Hillman and Mazzio; O'Rourke Boyle; Harvey; Egmond and Zwijnenberg; Smith; Clark; Milner.

<sup>4</sup>In fact, the distinction between the five senses was first introduced by Aristotle in book 2 of *De anima*.

<sup>5</sup>Socrates was known for going into sudden states of trance, during which he would remain immobile for a long period of time.

<sup>6</sup>Plato, 1985, 175c.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 175d.

and earthly.<sup>8</sup> Then comes Aristophanes's turn, but a memorable fit of hiccups prevents him from speaking, which significantly breaks the order of the speeches,<sup>9</sup> so Eryximachus takes the stand with his scientific eulogy to a cosmic love that acts as a harmonic principle in nature. When Aristophanes finally begins his speech he does so by distancing himself from the previous speakers: "Well, Eryximachus, I do intend to make a rather different kind of speech from the kind you and Pausanias made. It's my opinion that mankind is quite unaware of the power of Eros."<sup>10</sup> Aristophanes subsequently proceeds to explain the origins of mankind.

According to the bizarre myth that follows, humans used to originally be spherical, portly creatures with four legs and four arms, and they used to be of three, rather than two, genders: masculine, feminine, and androgynous, or hermaphrodite. One day they defied the gods and Zeus decided to diminish their power by cutting them in half. Ever since then they have spent their lives looking for their other half. This explains heterosexuality and both male and female homosexuality. It also explains, says Aristophanes, that the highest aspiration lovers have is to be molten together and made one with their other halves.<sup>11</sup> Aristophanes's speech is peppered with tactile images, from the description of Apollo mending with his hands the bodies of the primordial humans mutilated by Zeus,<sup>12</sup> to that of the overpowering drive to embrace one another that moves the severed halves in their melancholy wanderings.<sup>13</sup> Aristophanes concludes that love's power resides in its being a primal yearning to be physically reattached to the lost other half. If lovers

<sup>8</sup>This distinction would prove to be immensely influential in the Platonic tradition. Plotinus bases his reading of the *Symposium* on it and includes it in his allegorical reading of the myth of the birth of eros from Diotima's speech. Borrowing from Pausanias's speech, Plotinus refers to the two Aphrodites: the first one, the heavenly daughter of Uranus, the second one the daughter of Zeus and Dione, patron of human marriages. See Plotinus, 3:175 (*Enneads* 3.5.2.15–16).

<sup>9</sup>Leo Strauss, 95–96, finds the change in order of exceptional significance, since it blatantly redistributes the speakers, consolidating the two groups of three: one intellectually strong and one weak. Socrates, the philosopher, and the two poets constitute the second, stronger group, and Eryximachus, the physician, displaced by Aristophanes, joins the first, weaker group with the Sophist and the dilettante.

<sup>10</sup>Plato, 1985, 189c.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 189c–193e.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 190e–191a: "So Apollo twisted the faces round and gathered up the skin all round to what is now called the stomach, like a purse with strings. He made a single outlet and tied it all up securely in the middle of the stomach; this we now call the navel. He smoothed out most of the wrinkles and formed the chest using a tool such as cobblers use for smoothing out wrinkles in a hide stretched over a last."

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 191b: "They put their arms round one another, and embraced each other, in their desire to grow together again."

had the chance to ask one thing from the gods, Aristophanes adds, they would address Hephaestus — not Zeus or Apollo — and they would ask the patron of sculpture and metallurgy to weld them back together so they can again be one.<sup>14</sup> The novelty that Aristophanes anticipated in the beginning of his speech is that love at its very basis has little to do with ethics, politics, or the cosmic order; instead, it is no more and no less than a constitutive human craving for physical contact.

While Aristophanes's speech presents eros as a yearning for proximity, the main point of Socrates's speech — which he borrows from the priestess Diotima — is that eros is an intermediary force, a daemon, who acts as a guide as one distances oneself from the world of bodies. Far from vilifying the sensitive world, this constitutes a call for ontological awareness and decorum. Bodies ought to be loved for what they are, that is, as perishable, transient entities whose opaque beauty should merely arouse the desire to leave them behind and ascend to higher, more noble realities. In this guise, Pausanias's two kinds of eros, the earthly and the heavenly, are resignified by Socrates. Earthly love is the love of bodies for what they are in themselves; heavenly love is a gradual erotic ascent that starts with bodies, but, taking them as means, ends with the love of forms and, eventually, an epiphany. Shortly before he introduces Diotima's speech, Socrates adopts Aristophanes's premise: eros is the desire for something that is lacking.<sup>15</sup> Whereas for the comic playwright what was lacking was a long-lost half, another body, for the philosopher it is intelligible beauty. Beauty is a trace that one must follow, starting with bodies, then moving on to souls, then laws by way of contemplation, and "then suddenly he will see a beauty of a breathtaking nature . . . the beauty which is the justification of all his efforts so far."<sup>16</sup> For there to be vision and contemplation there must be distance between the observer and the observed, in this case the lover and the beloved.

The last speech in the *Symposium* entails a descent from the peaks of the intelligible realm to the earthly world of bodies and physical attraction. It comes from the mouth of Alcibiades, who joins in and, disregarding the rules of the game, instead of praising eros as a deity, praises him as a man, as Socrates himself. Alcibiades's passionate eulogy narrates how he and Socrates, presented by the young Athenian general as eros incarnate, became close friends. The six stages of seduction that Alcibiades traversed to "see the real Socrates"<sup>17</sup> comically replicate the six rungs of Diotima's spiritual ladder that leads one to "see the divine beauty itself in its

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 192d.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 200e.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 210e.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 216e.

unique essence.”<sup>18</sup> Although Alcibiades was initially seeking tactile gratification, after spending the night together embraced under the same cloak but without engaging in sexual activity, the lesson he learns is that Socrates’s wonders lie inside, and they are visual: “look beneath the surface . . . and you’ll find . . . countless models of excellence,” says Alcibiades to the audience.<sup>19</sup> This realization comes after Socrates warns him about the use of the senses and reminds him that the intellectual sight becomes acute when the visual “starts to fail.”<sup>20</sup> Sight, be it of earthly or intellectual beings, requires distance.

Alcibiades concludes his speech by emphasizing the many ways in which Socrates proves to be a master of detachment. He not only remains impervious to the passions of the lower body — as the night of chaste cuddling with Alcibiades shows — but also to hunger and extreme cold weather, as attested by anecdotes of the days spent in the army when he even managed to remain physically unscathed by discouraging others to hurt him with a simple glance, a compelling reminder that the visual always prevails over the tactile.<sup>21</sup> Making the point even clearer, Alcibiades adds that Socrates, in his trances, observes specific problems:<sup>22</sup> Socrates has the power to remain detached from physical reality. He stands aside, separated from everything, impermeable, and contemplates. This brings us back to the beginning, when Agathon expressed his desire to sit next to Socrates so that “by contact with him” he would enjoy some of the wisdom just acquired by the master outside of the house. Socrates had mocked Agathon then, since knowledge is not a product of physical contact,<sup>23</sup> and he mocks Alcibiades now as the young man concludes his encomium, calling it a jealous ruse to initiate a fight between him and Agathon.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 211e. The anabasis consists of the following steps: (1) fixation with one beautiful body, (2) appreciation of all beautiful bodies, (3) contemplation of all beautiful minds (souls), (4) contemplation of all beautiful practices/laws, (5) contemplation of all knowledge, and finally (6) vision of beauty itself. Alcibiades’s courtship of Socrates developed in the following six stages: (1) Alcibiades and Socrates spend time together accompanied by attendants, (2) Alcibiades and Socrates spend time together alone, (3) Alcibiades and Socrates exercise together, (4) Alcibiades invites Socrates for dinner and is denied, (5) Socrates goes over for dinner but departs early, (6) Alcibiades and Socrates spend the night together under the same cloak.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 222a.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 219a.

<sup>21</sup>Reminiscing on their days in the army, Alcibiades narrates how he once saw Socrates “marching along with his head in the air staring at all around him, calmly contemplating friend and foe alike. It was perfectly clear, even from a distance, that any attempt to lay a finger on him would arouse vigorous resistance. So he and his companion escaped unhurt. On the whole, in battle, you don’t meddle with people like that”: *ibid.*, 221a–b.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 220c–d.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 175d.

At this point Agathon remembers that upon crashing the party Alcibiades had sat in between Socrates and himself. Agathon declares to Socrates: "His sitting between us [is meant] to keep us apart. But it won't work. I'll come round and sit next to you."<sup>24</sup> Blinded by their yearning for proximity to the beloved, neither of the two disciples succeed in learning the main lesson: true knowledge and true love are products of distance, not proximity.<sup>25</sup> In a way, the *Symposium* is too, like Plato's earliest works, an aporetic dialogue: whether eros is a god, a daemon, a cosmic force, or a primal instinct; whether its object is bodily or spiritual; and whether the way to attain it is through physical contact or detached contemplation are issues that are not resolved. These last two questions in particular accompanied Platonism in its return to the West in the fifteenth century.

### THE *SYMPOSIUM* ACCORDING TO FICINO

In 1484 Marsilio Ficino published the first Latin translation of Plato's complete dialogues. Twelve years later he would complete the endeavor with a collection of commentaries on several Platonic dialogues. The commentary on the *Symposium*, known as *De amore*, was written earlier, however, in 1469, and translated into Italian by Ficino himself in 1474. It is a commentary unlike any other mainly because it is, in the words of Diskin Clay, a "reenactment."<sup>26</sup> *De amore* is staged as a dinner party attended by some of the most prominent figures of the late fifteenth-century Florentine intelligentsia. The purpose for its composition, in Ficino's own words, was "to summon the lost lovers of earthly beauty to return to the love of immortal beauty."<sup>27</sup> The distinction between earthly love and heavenly love, the latter one what human beings should ultimately aspire to, comes from Plato himself, especially from Pausanias's and Socrates's speeches, though also, to some extent, from Alcibiades's, and even more explicitly from Plotinus, an author on whom Ficino relied heavily in his

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 222c–e.

<sup>25</sup>In the famous passage of the *Phaedrus* where Plato compares the lover's soul with a chariot drawn by two horses, the aim is also to underscore the ethical value of restraint and detachment. Plato, 1995, 44 (*Phaedrus* 253e–254a): "Now when the charioteer looks in the eye of love his entire soul is suffused with a sense of warmth and starts to fill with tingles and the goading of desire . . . and the [horse] who is obedient to the charioteer is still controlled . . . by its sense of shame and so prevents itself from jumping on the boy."

<sup>26</sup>Clay, 345.

<sup>27</sup>Ficino, 1985, 1. All translations of Ficino's *De amore* are from Jayne's 1985 edition. Jayne's introduction in Ficino, 1985, 3, argues that "Ficino was responsible for shifting the emphasis in treatises on love from an Aristotelian emphasis on the physiology and psychology of love to a Platonic emphasis on love as Desire for ideal beauty."



interpretation of Plato. Ficino's reading of Plato's *Symposium*, however, insistently emphasized this aspect of the dialogue and crystallized it in an interpretation of Platonic love philosophy that became immensely influential in the following century. The divulgation and impact that Ficino's treatise had in Italy, France, and England between its publication and the mid-seventeenth century is attested by its numerous editions, translations, and by the astonishing number of *trattati d'amore* that imitate it, paraphrase it, and cite it.<sup>28</sup>

Ficino's *De amore* is of particular importance in a debate concerning the role and value of the senses that intensifies over the sixteenth century because it constitutes a reading of Plato's philosophy that openly endorses oculo-centrism and dismisses the lower senses, especially touch. Giovanni Cavalcanti, the first speaker and one of Ficino's closest and dearest disciples, begins his commentary on Phaedrus's speech, arguing that love is love of beauty, and beauty is threefold: "of souls, of bodies, and of sounds. That of souls is known through the intellect, that of bodies through the eyes, that of sounds through the ears, so what need is there for taste or touch?"<sup>29</sup> The lower sensoria are not vehicles for appreciating beauty, but for what Ficino calls "appetite" and "madness."<sup>30</sup> The drive for physical contact in general and sexual intercourse in particular, and the drive for love are not just different, they are contradictory to one another: "The desire for coitus and love are shown to be not only not the same motions but opposite."<sup>31</sup> Of all the bodily senses, sight is the only one that can awaken true love in the soul. Agli, the second speaker, commenting on Pausanias's speech, concludes along the same lines: "beauty of the body is nothing other than splendor . . . [which] not the ears, not smell, not taste, not touch but only the eye perceives."<sup>32</sup> However, when dealing with the two Venuses — a matter more Plotinian than Platonic — Agli does endorse "generation and coition within the bounds prescribed by natural law and civil laws drawn up by men of wisdom."<sup>33</sup> Human beings need to procreate and procreation involves coitus, the lowest form of eros. The acceptance of a socially domesticated expression of physical love, presumably within marriage, is

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 19–23.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 41. Cavalcanti had learned this lesson from the master himself, who writes to him in a letter from late 1468: "The right end of love is union, which consists in these three: thinking, seeing, and hearing. . . . However it is not love when the appetite of the other senses drives us rather toward matter, mass, weight, and the deformity that is the opposite of beauty or love, but a stupid, gross, and ugly lust": Ficino, 1979, 1:91.

<sup>30</sup>Ficino, 1985, 41. Ibid., "Thus the pleasures of taste and touch . . . love not only does not desire, but hates and shuns as things which because of their intemperance are contrary to beauty," concludes Cavalcanti.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 58.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 49.



a necessity. However, although sexual intercourse is a necessity and can even act as the launching point of the lover for the more noble forms of beauty, it is, for Ficino, much closer to vice and degradation than it is to virtue, and it is imperative to underscore its dangers.<sup>34</sup>

Furthermore, that the first two guests read Phaedrus's and Pausanias's speeches in such a similar vein is not coincidental. In fact, Ficino's *De amore* offers a homogenous exegesis of the *Symposium*, radically different from Plato's polyphonic dialogue. All of the interlocutors in Ficino's *De amore* agree with the basic distinction between earthly, depraved appetite and spiritual, anabatic love. *De amore* is monochord; in a way, all the speeches are commentaries on Diotima's speech. Ficino accomplishes this through allegorical exegesis, something he had learned from the Neoplatonists.<sup>35</sup> Perhaps the clearest example of this ancient form of hermeneutics in *De amore* is Cristoforo Landino's commentary on Aristophanes's speech. Landino begins by establishing that since it is "wrapped in very obscure language," then the speech "must be an allegory"<sup>36</sup> in which, when Aristophanes refers to "man" being cut in half on account of his hubris, he is actually referring to "souls."<sup>37</sup> The soul can exist independently of the body and remain immutable and untouched, whereas the body is in a constant state of change and decay. The soul, however, has two lights, one of which directs it to the divine and the other to the bodily. Being cut in half means losing the divine light, and searching for the other half is the goal of a life dedicated to philosophy. No bodies yearning for bodies, no lovers begging Hephaistus to weld them together: in Ficino's *De amore*, Aristophanes agrees with Diotima (and Pausanias, Phaedrus, et al.) that eros is the sacred impulse to abandon the world and indulge in the vision of the divine.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>34</sup>This is anticipated in the allegory of the two horses in Plato, 1995, 43–48 (*Phaedrus* 253c–256e). The concupiscent part of the soul (the black horse, characterized as lustful and evil) needs to be subjugated and domesticated by the rational part (the white horse, but also the charioteer). In 1496 Ficino wrote an incomplete commentary on the *Phaedrus* where, according to Allen, 89, "he insists, unlike Plato, in calling [the black horse] less good and contrary rather than fundamentally evil," thus suggesting that lust is a natural handicap more than an evil.

<sup>35</sup>Plotinus's allegorical reading of the myth of Poros and Penia in *Enneads* 3.5 is one of the most influential examples of Neoplatonic allegorical exegesis: see Plotinus, 183–203.

<sup>36</sup>Ficino, 1985, 72. *Ibid.*, "Aristophanes tells these things and many other things like wonders or portents, behind which, as if behind veils of some kind, divine mysteries must be supposed to lie. For it was the custom of the ancient theologians to conceal their holy and pure mysteries in the shadows of metaphors, lest they be defiled by the profane and impure."

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, 76–77. The three genders, according to Ficino, are allegories for three virtues: courage (masculine), temperance (feminine), and justice ("feminine inasmuch as because of its inherent innocence it does no one any wrong, but masculine inasmuch as it allows no harm to be brought to others"), combined with a remarkably complex astrological affiliation: *ibid.*, 77–78.

The obsession with vision and the contempt for touch become even more evident in Cristoforo Marsuppini's commentary on Alcibiades's praise of Socrates. Marsuppini says that love is born "from the form of a body seen through the eyes,"<sup>39</sup> and, later in the text, he explains it in the language of fifteenth-century medicine: "A ray extends as far as the person opposite and that . . . emanates a vapor of corrupt blood, by the contagion of which the eye of the observer is infected. . . . The eye, wide open and fixed upon someone, shoots the darts of its own rays into the eyes of the by-stander [which] wound the heart."<sup>40</sup> Earthly love, presented as a disease,<sup>41</sup> like divine love, also enters through vision, but this is a type of vision contaminated by tactility. Ficino's language here abounds in verbs that allude to forms of touch: the vapor "impacts" the eye like a "contagion" and "penetrates" all the way into the heart.<sup>42</sup> Interestingly, Marsuppini's speech also includes several references to the infamous ending of book 4 of Lucretius's *De rerum natura*, where the mechanism of lust is explained in graphic detail.<sup>43</sup>

One should not overlook that Ficino's *De amore* starts and ends with a Cavalcanti. Giovanni is the first speaker, and Marsuppini, the last, begins his speech with a congratulatory praise to the Cavalcanti family for being masters of "Socratic love."<sup>44</sup> Young Cavalcanti not only allegedly exhorted Ficino to write the *De amore* — a treatise that would "summon the lost lovers of earthly beauty to return to the love of immortal beauty"<sup>45</sup> — but he also became the model for this kind of chaste love. Perhaps Ficino saw the young Cavalcanti as an Alcibiades, who, unlike the Athenian general, understood the main lesson concerning love without ever needing to woo, let alone touch, the beloved. And if he understood, it was also thanks to Ficino's vigilant tutelage, as this passage from a letter the master sent the pupil in 1468 shows: "The lover is not content with the sight or touch of

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., 154.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 160.

<sup>41</sup>Cavalcanti emphasizes this analogy in the next chapter, as he asks how such subtle rays of light can contaminate so powerfully: "This will certainly not seem strange if you will consider the other diseases which arise through contagion such as the itch, mange, leprosy, pneumonia, consumption, dysentery, pink eye, and the plague. Indeed, the amatory infection comes into being easily and becomes the most serious disease of all": *ibid.*, 162.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid.

<sup>43</sup>As a young man Ficino had read Lucretius avidly and even composed a "little commentary," which he then set to flames out of decorum: Hankins, 138. Lucretius, an enemy of providentialism and teleology, a materialist, a champion of tactility, only has room in the Ficinian *Weltanschauung* when it comes to matters of sex and lust, especially since — according to the myth — the Roman poet had been driven to suicide by a fatal passion.

<sup>44</sup>Ficino, 1985, 153.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., 1.

the beloved. . . . Then must a man be considered mad as well as miserable, who whilst thus called to the sublime through vision, plunges himself into the mire through touch.”<sup>46</sup>

Far from being an eccentricity of youth, this opinion on the sense of touch accompanied Ficino throughout his life. In *De vita* (1489) he says: “The first monster is the venereal act,” and “among the senses, Nature placed the sense of touch the farthest from the intellect.”<sup>47</sup> As an older and more experienced physician and philosopher, Ficino was more convinced than ever that human love too easily degenerates into appetite, and that tactility, albeit natural and necessary, carries the gravest dangers for the soul. His notion of “Platonic love”<sup>48</sup> is meant as an antidote to the erotic disease, as it avoids the lower senses and inspires the soul to rid itself of the body. It is also Ficino’s way of dismissing the strong elements of homoeroticism in Plato that had scandalized intellectuals such as George of Trebizond (1395–1472).<sup>49</sup> The three most important immediate successors of Ficino continue the task of heterosexualizing earthly eros and reminding their readers that the lower senses are the main gateways for vice.<sup>50</sup>

In *Commento sopra una canzone d'amore* (*Commentary on a Love Song*, composed in 1486, published in 1519) Pico della Mirandola argues that “vulgar love, sponsored by the lower Venus, is appetite for earthly beauty through the sense of sight.”<sup>51</sup> Vulgar love is dominated by sight, but this is not yet at the level of tactility, which makes its appearance when this vulgar love degenerates into beastly love as it becomes lust and appetite for coitus. For Pico, true love is not a yearning for proximity but for detachment. When the craving for physical contact is indulged, Pico repines, there is a “desecration of the chaste love mysteries of Plato.”<sup>52</sup> Another highly influential work was Pietro Bembo’s *Gli Asolani* (1505), probably the first dialogue on love in the vernacular. *Gli Asolani* comprises three conversations that proceed in dialectical progression, beginning with Perottino’s hyperbolic love complaints in book 1, followed by Gismondo’s fanatic

<sup>46</sup>Ficino, 1979, 1:85. For more on the medical implications of Ficino’s love philosophy, see Wurm.

<sup>47</sup>Ficino, 1980, 12–13.

<sup>48</sup>The notion of *amor platonius* appears in a letter to Alammano Donati in Ficino, 1979, 5:81.

<sup>49</sup>In *Comparatio Aristotelis et Platonis* (*Comparison between Aristotle and Plato*, 1458) George of Trebizond denounces Platonism for endorsing sodomy, pederasty, and homosexual love in general. For more on this, see Robb; Krayer.

<sup>50</sup>For more in-depth studies on the process of heteronormativizing Plato’s *Symposium*, see recent articles by Panizza; Schachter.

<sup>51</sup>Pico della Mirandola, 65–66.

<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*, 68.

apology of the goodness of love in book 2,<sup>53</sup> both positions that are eventually overcome by Lavinello's theory of Platonic love in book 3. Lavinello — Bembo's Socrates, who learned all he knows about love from a male hermit — negotiates between Perottino's pessimism and Gismondo's optimism by establishing that love inspired by the eyes, the ears, and the intellect is good, whereas love inspired by "the other senses" is "evil."<sup>54</sup>

Finally, this position is revisited in Baldassare Castiglione's immensely influential *Il libro del cortegiano* (*The Book of the Courtier*, 1528). In book 4, the character of Pietro Bembo lectures a group of notable men and women on his Ficinian views concerning love. The pleasure produced by the bodily senses, argues Bembo, is "false and mendacious," since the body is not an end in itself, but a mere springboard to the spirit.<sup>55</sup> Castiglione, like Ficino and Bembo, opposes love and appetite, the cause of the latter being "il senso" ("sensitivity"),<sup>56</sup> meaning the lower senses and, in particular, touch. Castiglione concludes: "Beauty is the true trophy of the soul's victory, when it defeats matter with its divine virtue and with its light overcomes the shadows of the body."<sup>57</sup> In a famous passage, the author reminds his audience that beauty's radiance is enjoyed through vision, not touch: "Just like you can neither hear with your palate, nor smell with your ears, it is absolutely impossible to enjoy this Beauty and to satisfy the desire that it produces in the soul through touch, instead of through the sense of which she is the true object: the virtue of sight."<sup>58</sup>

His advocacy for rational love follows the conventional lines drawn by Ficino, but with one fundamental difference: among young people, in whom *il senso* is particularly overpowering, Castiglione opines that physical love is harmless because it is fueled by honest feelings and virtually impossible to control.<sup>59</sup> This is highly relevant because it anticipates a question that would prove to be pervasive in the *trattati d'amore* of the following decades: whether touch is legitimate as a means to pursue a love that is physical and sacred at the same time.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>53</sup>Bembo, 60.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., 130.

<sup>55</sup>Castiglione, 417.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., 418.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., 425.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., 428.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., 420.

<sup>60</sup>When Castiglione's Bembo concludes his inspired speech, remaining in a state of trance not unlike that of Socrates at the beginning of the *Symposium*, Mrs. Emilia grabs him by his robe and shakes him: "Beware, Mr. Pietro, lest with such thoughts your soul doesn't flee your body": Castiglione, 439. Castiglione is here suggesting perhaps that touch is what keeps one grounded to the world, whereas physical and intellectual sight lead to ephemeral chimeras.

## THE TAMING OF THE LOWER SENSES

Whereas the Ficinian tradition focused mostly on celestial eros and warned time and again against the dangers of carnality, in the first half of the sixteenth century the intellectual debate on the nature of love started gravitating toward the problem of the mediation between celestial and terrestrial love. In one of the most influential early philosophical works on love, Mario Equicola's (1470–1525) encyclopedic *Di natura d'amore* (*Book on the Nature of Love*, published in 1525, but begun in 1495), the author argues that true lovers love both body and soul.<sup>61</sup> Although this is not something that Ficino and his followers would have denied, it is certainly not something that they would have stressed, as the body and its touch are to them uncomfortable realities against whose danger one should always be alert. In Equicola's work, however, the debate around the importance of touch makes an unusually powerful appearance. The author says: "while the other senses were given to us as ornaments of our essence, touch is the condition of our being."<sup>62</sup> Since without touch there is no life, touch is much closer to the spiritual realm than tradition has thought, and it actually operates in the very border between the material and the spiritual. As he moves on to discuss sexual intercourse, Equicola concludes: "Coitus is the son of touch and Nature hid pleasure in it so that love would force us to procreate, and so that in producing genital semen all animals would feel joyous sweetness."<sup>63</sup> The first step in the taming of the lower senses proves to be their ontological redemption; as fundamentally constitutive of human nature, they might not be as dangerous and menacing as earlier thinkers thought them to be.<sup>64</sup>

One of the most interesting examples of this new attitude toward the lower senses can be found in Sperone Speroni (1500–88). His *Dialogo d'amore*

<sup>61</sup>Equicola, 298. Equicola believes, as Patrizi will argue later, says Robb, 188, that all forms of affection stem from self-love and the particular needs of each individual for their own well-being.

<sup>62</sup>Equicola, 167.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., 170.

<sup>64</sup>Leone Ebreo's *Dialoghi d'amore* (*Dialogues on Love*, 1535) constitutes a bridge between Ficino and new ideas that revalued the lower sensoria. Toward the end of the first dialogue Philo, the lover, explains to Sophia, the beloved, that the two "vital" senses, touch and taste, are "naturally limited" in the sense that they can be easily satiated, whereas the higher senses are insatiable and always ready for delight. But this only means that compulsive sexual intercourse is vicious and deadly; honest love actually dignifies sex, transforming it into a key feature of any loving bond on this earth. Ebreo also famously reconciled the accounts of the creation of man found in *Genesis* and in Plato's *Symposium*, by associating Adam and Eve with the hermaphrodite, but he also associates the figure of the hermaphrodite with male homosexuality. See Ebreo, 348–50.

(*Dialogue of Love*, 1542) includes a vivid description of erotic passion in terms of a never-ending struggle between the senses to enjoy the beloved, reminiscent of Lucretius.<sup>65</sup> Love between humans, Speroni says, is imperfect and subject to excesses due to the powerful protagonism of the senses; however, such love is also the only kind that one can truly experience, and one must do so exercising measure rather than zealous asceticism. Interestingly, Speroni's dialogue includes numerous references to Aristophanes's hermaphrodite from the *Symposium*. Toward the beginning of the dialogue, Nicolo Grazia establishes that perfect love is that which "ties the lovers together perfectly in such a way that, losing their own countenance, they become a third of sorts, as it is told in the myth of the hermaphrodite."<sup>66</sup> From then on, Grazia simply calls the perfect couple "l'Ermafrodito amoroso" ("the erotic hermaphrodite"),<sup>67</sup> an almost indistinguishable union of man and woman that is both physical and spiritual. In this way, through the figure of the hermaphrodite, heterosexual love becomes the paradigm of true mediation between terrestrial and celestial eros.<sup>68</sup>

Speroni's dialogue appears at a time when women were becoming key figures in love philosophy, both as fictional characters but also as authors; the most famous example is Tullia D'Aragona (1510–56) and her *Dialogo dell'infinità d'amore* (*Dialogue on the Infinity of Love*, 1547).<sup>69</sup> In fact, one of the main

<sup>65</sup>Speroni, 17: "Where does it come from among lovers the need to bite one another, the heart beating as if it wanted to pop out of the chest, words interrupted by kisses . . . the sudden need to stop touching and contemplate the beloved, only to feel the yearning to embrace and squeeze them once again?"

<sup>66</sup>Ibid., 3.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid., 6, 13, 24. Early modernity had conflicting ideas about hermaphroditism: see recent works by Gilbert; Long. On the one hand, Gilbert, 9, argues that a hermaphrodite could be this "elevated ideal, this perfect union of opposites," while on the other, it was also a monstrosity of great interest to the branch of science, sponsored by Bacon, that studied the preternatural.

<sup>68</sup>This notion is somewhat anticipated in Antonio Beccadelli's infamous collection of poems, *L'ermafrodito* (1426). At the end of book 1, in an address to Cosimo di Medici, Beccadelli explains the title: "I have divided my book into two parts, Cosimo, for the Hermaphrodite has the same number of parts. This was the first part so what follows is the second. This stands for the cock, the next will be cunt": Beccadelli, 55. The hermaphrodite symbolizes heterosexual love.

<sup>69</sup>Tullia D'Aragona follows Leone Ebreo rather closely, and defines honest love as that reasonable type of love that consists in the transformation of oneself into the beloved, which can only happen on a spiritual plane. This leads D'Aragona, 90, to conclude that the senses that play a relevant role in it are the "spiritual senses," i.e., sight and hearing. It is natural for lovers to strive for a carnal union as well, but such a union is impossible. Just like Ebreo and Speroni before her, D'Aragona, 94, struggles to redeem sexual intercourse, mostly by admitting its necessary role in procreation and its presence in all living beings, but makes a strong appeal for the taming of passions.

interlocutors in Speroni's dialogue is Tullia, a Venetian courtesan, whom Grazia explicitly compares to Diotima.<sup>70</sup> The case of Sperone Speroni's Tullia is a clear sign of the return of women to the spotlight; but there are many more. By the 1540s women had become key interlocutors in the arena of love philosophy. Within the context of Platonic love philosophy, this can be understood as a continuation of attempts by Ficino, Pico, Bembo, and Castiglione to heterosexualize eros. The Ficinian tradition, however, was male dominated and found a way out of Platonic homoeroticism in the chaste practice of Platonic or Socratic love. Therefore, the return of the female philosopher must also be read against the backdrop of a larger debate on the dignity of women that had as some of its most vocal participants Mario Equicola, who wrote one of the first defenses of women, as well as Flavio Capra, Agostino Strozzi, Cornelius Agrippa, and Sperone Speroni himself.<sup>71</sup> These works, undoubtedly influenced by Boccaccio's *Lives of Illustrious Women*, revalidate the role of women in society and as spiritual role models. In the work of Agnolo Firenzuola (1493–1543) this reevaluation is directly associated with Platonic love philosophy as well as with the figure of the hermaphrodite.

Firenzuola's *Ragionamenti d'Amore* (*Love Stories*, 1524), a collection of bawdy stories in the vein of Boccaccio, was inspired by a woman, Costanza Amaretta, with whom the author was enraptured. In fact, Amaretta is the main character of the work, the queen of the coterie, and she is also the Diotima who holds the key to the mysteries of love. In the introduction, which constitutes a brief *trattato d'amore*, Costanza Amaretta reminds everyone of the old Platonic distinction between celestial and terrestrial love, but with an important difference: terrestrial love, she says, is "an inner fire" that performs a double operation. It can be libidinous fury that turns humans into animals — the origin of a myriad of evils including adultery, sacrilege, and even murder — or "it can ignite us in a more temperate manner" as the natural instinct of multiplication, which brings man and woman together to produce offspring.<sup>72</sup> The way to regulate this second kind of terrestrial love and to keep it within the bounds of decency and reason is marriage.<sup>73</sup> The ardor that in Ficino was an awkward physiological necessity and in Castiglione an unfortunate flaw that could only be forgiven among young people is here not only a constitutive part of the mechanism of terrestrial love and reproduction of the species, but something that can be made sacred by

<sup>70</sup>Speroni, 27.

<sup>71</sup>Mario Equicola's *De mulieribus* (*On Women*) was published in 1501, and the first printed version of Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claris* (*On Famous Women*; an Italian translation) came out in 1506. Sperone Speroni's *Della dignita delle donne* (*On the Dignity of Women*) was published in his *Dialogi* (*Dialogues*) in 1542. For more, see Kolsky.

<sup>72</sup>Firenzuola, 54.

<sup>73</sup>*Ibid.*, 55–56.



matrimony. Two decades later, Firenzuola returns to this idea in his most influential work, *Dialogo delle bellezze delle donne* (*On the Beauty of Women*, 1548), when one of the characters, Mona Lampiada, asks Celso, the main interlocutor, whether beauty is the same for men and women. Celso bases his answer on Aristophanes's myth of the origins of mankind, as he discusses the three original genders and claims that the majority of humans were of the androgynous kind.<sup>74</sup> Among those who were all male and all women, there are some who admire beauty in a chaste manner and some who do so in a vicious manner by giving in to lust.<sup>75</sup> The first two genders, Celso insists, are not worthy of discussion as they behave in ways that are either saintly or degenerate,<sup>76</sup> but the hermaphrodite is at the same time more common and more complex, and the reason for this is that men and women can indulge in the tactile pleasures without becoming degenerates, as long as they are bound by marriage.<sup>77</sup> An emblem in Barthélemy Aneau's popular *Picta Poesis* (*Poetic Imagination*, 1552) shows the perfect marriage as a two-headed hermaphrodite (fig. 1).

A more explicit and self-aware twist to the matter comes in 1556 from a close friend of Torquato Tasso's (1544–95), Flaminio Nobili. Nobili's *Trattato dell'amore humano* (*Treatise on Human Love*, 1567) argues that love is "a vigorous bending of our appetite and our will inspired by a known beauty, that suddenly becomes a desire to generate something beautiful, or to gain the favor of the beloved."<sup>78</sup> Will, sensitive appetite, and the desire to generate are all instances of the phenomenon known as love. And there is nothing reprehensible about physical contact, argues Nobili, "as one can see in the natural instinct to touch and embrace our children, our siblings, our friends. This is why, according to Plato, Aristophanes is certain that lovers are keen on finding a certain Vulcan who might melt them together with their beloved so that from two they can become one. And also Lucretius when talking about love says that the lover would like to penetrate the body of the beloved with his whole body. I see that these superstitious men who wrote about love approve of the kiss, which, in the

<sup>74</sup>Ibid., 541. In the second dialogue of Bembo's *Gli Asolani*, Gismondo alludes to Aristophanes's speech in the *Symposium* to defend the need for men and women to search for one another, but his enthusiasm is portrayed as just as counterproductive as Perottino's melancholy. He also avoids mentioning the two other same-sex genders that were produced alongside the androgynous. See Bembo, 74–75.

<sup>75</sup>Firenzuola's examples are Socrates and Alcibiades, Achilles and Patroclus, Nisus and Euryalus, and, among the women, Laudomia Forteguerra and Margherita of Austria: Firenzuola, 542.

<sup>76</sup>Ibid., 544.

<sup>77</sup>Ibid., 543.

<sup>78</sup>Nobili, 31.

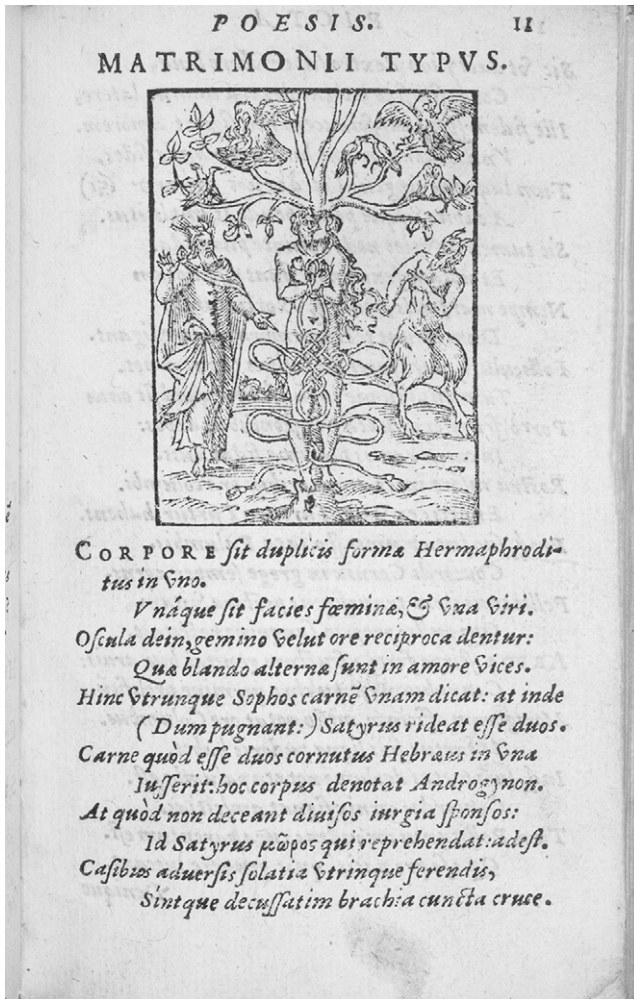


Figure 1. "Matrimonii Typus." In Barthélemy Aneau. *Picta Poesis*, page 11, Lyon, 1552.

end, is also a merger of bodies . . . such a merger is compatible with human love as long as it is reasonable and honest, it does not go against any laws, and it is ruled by temperance."<sup>79</sup> Nobili here is referring tongue in cheek to Castiglione's timid admission of the kiss. For Nobili, not only the kiss, but the general yearning to touch and be touched, to be molten together by Vulcan, is

<sup>79</sup>Ibid., 23–24. The translation is my own. By this point, the notion of *ermafrodito amoroso* as the model for the heterosexual couple was somewhat of a trope, not just in Italy.

acceptable, but neither as a means to ascend on the road of spirituality, nor as a symbol of the merger of souls: it is acceptable because it is a “natural instinct”; and it is innocent, since even children kiss and desire to touch. When Nobili clarifies that it must be a love that is “reasonable, honest, temperate and law-abiding,” he is referring, as Firenzuola before him, to marriage. Like Firenzuola and Speroni, Nobili’s novelty is that he directly associates a more pragmatic approach to physical (heterosexual) love — a naturalistic approach — with Aristophanes’s notion of the hermaphrodite. In what constitutes a strong reaction to Ficino’s reading of Plato, these intellectuals move away from allegorical exegesis: the union of the lovers is essentially psychosomatic, and the carnal union of man and woman, the *ermafrodito amoroso*, is the model for terrestrial love. This position finds its most accomplished expression in one of the least read love treatises of the sixteenth-century: Francesco Patrizi’s *L’amorosa filosofia* (*The Philosophy of Love*).

#### L’AMOROSA FILOSOFIA

A utopian, a historian, a sailor, a philologist, a mercenary, a manuscript dealer, a literary critic, a natural philosopher, and a *trattatista d’amore*, Francesco Patrizi is better known today for having been one of the most vitriolic critics of Aristotelianism in the sixteenth century, as well as the first person ever to be appointed professor of Platonic philosophy — first at the University of Ferrara (1577), later at La Sapienza in Rome (1592).<sup>80</sup> *L’amorosa filosofia*, written some time between 1577 and 1578, was never published during Patrizi’s lifetime. It survived in one codex, handwritten and incomplete, published for the very first time by John Charles Nelson in 1963. The structure is that of Plato’s *Symposium* and Ficino’s *De amore*: there is a banquet and there is a posse of luminaries, whose members take turns discussing eros. Only in this case, eros is actually present in the flesh, sitting there among the guests. In Patrizi’s rendition of the *Symposium*, eros is Tarquinia Molza.

Tarquinia Molza (1542–1617) was a poet, musician, and philosopher who lived in Modena at the time. Even though she plays a role in Torquato Tasso’s

<sup>80</sup>In 1577 Patrizi “was appointed professor of Platonic philosophy at Ferrara (*Ad lecturam philosophiae Platonicae*), the first such position in a European university. In 1592 he was invited by Cardinal Ippolito Aldobrandini, after he became Pope Clement VIII, to teach Platonic philosophy at the University of Rome”: Grendler, 303–04. One of his better-known works is the *Discussiones Peripateticae* (*Peripatetic Discussions*) in which Patrizi attacks the monolithic structure of Academic thought, modeled upon Aristotelian principles, as he defends a *prisca filosofia* (ancient philosophy), passed on from the Persians, to the Chaldeans and the Egyptians, and onto the Greeks: Vasoli, 1989, 150.

dialogue on love, which is named after her — *La Molza overo del amore* (*Molza, or On Love*, 1583) — as well as in Annibale Romei's *Discorsi* (1585), most of what is known of her life comes from *L'amorosa filosofia*. In the pages of the first, and longest, of the four remaining dialogues, Tarquinia is described as having complete mastery of Latin — she understood the licentious poetry of Tibullus and Catullus better than any of her contemporaries<sup>81</sup> — and Greek, which she learned in only three months, reading the *Phaedrus* with Patrizi.<sup>82</sup> Her admirers also insist that she was the best soprano of her time, wrote sonnets and madrigals, played the viola and the basso, and was witty, ingenious, and simply brilliant at the age of thirty-three.<sup>83</sup> The praises in dialogue 1 also describe with vivid precision Tarquinia Molza's eyes, which were neither blue nor black, but mixed perfectly in color; they were big, happy, radiant, luminous eyes, always humid, almost lacrimous: the most beautiful eyes one has ever seen.<sup>84</sup> Her neck was white and smooth like snow, no veins or muscles to be seen,<sup>85</sup> and her lips were pure honey and ambrosia.<sup>86</sup> Contemplating Tarquinia, says one of the guests, is coming a step closer to God.<sup>87</sup> Every gesture, every movement, every action, every laugh, every word, every wink of her eyes “is an explosion formed by all the Minervas, all the Venuses, all the Graces, all the Muses, and all the Loves in infinite space.”<sup>88</sup>

The most unique characteristic of Tarquinia Molza, however, was something else, notices Monsignor Quarengo, a friend of Patrizi who introduces the speeches. Tarquinia's beauty is somewhat “contradictory,” he points out: mysteriously, no painters — more than ten had tried in vain — were ever capable of properly representing her features on the canvas (fig. 2). Finding Tarquinia something of a “marvel,” an overwhelming oddity, none of them knew where to start the portrait because of that “strange mixture” of Lady Molza. “What mixture?” someone asks. And Quarengo replies: “They say that Lady Tarquinia's beauty consists of a very subtle mixture of female and male; two elements that are perfectly mixed together in her, so much so that it is

<sup>81</sup>Patrizi, 1963, 13–14. Translations of Patrizi are my own.

<sup>82</sup>*Ibid.*, 25. Four letters from Patrizi to Molza, dated in 1577 and 1578 and dealing mostly with astronomy, have been preserved and published by Aguzzi Barbagli; see Patrizi, 1975.

<sup>83</sup>Patrizi, 1963, 22–23. Cavallari, 130, argues that from Molza's production there are about thirty poems in Italian, mostly madrigals; six compositions in Latin; and a Greek distich.

<sup>84</sup>Patrizi, 1963, 30.

<sup>85</sup>*Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>86</sup>*Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>87</sup>*Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>88</sup>*Ibid.*, 70. Nelson, 1962, 94, has rightly pointed out that the descriptions of Molza bear the imprint of Platonic and Petrarchan language, as well as the influence of the *stilnovisti* (new style) poets and of Angelo Poliziano's verses.



Figure 2. "Tarquinia Molza." In Francesco Maria Molza. *Delle poesie volgari e latine*, unnumbered page following frontispiece. Vol. 2 of 3. Bergamo, 1747–54.

impossible to distinguish one from the other."<sup>89</sup> With her androgynous beauty and her superior intellect, Lady Molza is there to teach about love matters. Patrizi adds that, as they read the *Phaedrus* together, he learned all he knows about love from Tarquinia, "like Socrates learned it from Diotima."<sup>90</sup> The comparison should not be misinterpreted.<sup>91</sup> Tarquinia's only resemblance to Diotima has to do with her introducing a philosopher to the mysteries of love. But Tarquinia's ideas about love have nothing to do with Diotima's. In fact, Tarquinia Molza's love philosophy can be read as a philosophical exegesis of

<sup>89</sup>Patrizi, 1963, 6.

<sup>90</sup>Ibid., 25.

<sup>91</sup>Later, in the fourth dialogue, Patrizi, 1963, 134, refers to Tarquinia as "Diotima mia." In one of the very few articles on the text, Nelson, 1962, 99, takes for granted the analogy "Tarquinia-Diotima; Patrizi-Socrates" without pointing out the gigantic differences between Tarquinia's and Diotima's views on love.

Aristophanes's speech in the *Symposium*, and it is laid out in the second dialogue of *L'amorosa filosofia*.

When Tarquinia finally takes the stand she conducts a careful dissection of *amore*, a phenomenon that includes benevolence, charity, friendship, predilection, affection, inclination, hunger, avidity, will, concupiscence, desire, yearning, appetite, lust, and wish. But love can either be love of oneself, or love of something or someone else,<sup>92</sup> and Tarquinia's conclusion is that all of these different kinds of love, and, therefore, love itself, begins in oneself and is for oneself.<sup>93</sup> All love is *philautía*.<sup>94</sup> Tarquinia Molza's views on *philautía* (self-love) are the subject of the third dialogue.<sup>95</sup> Love for oneself, she argues, is the beginning of every single feeling of affection in every living being. In other words, the affective *intentio* (strain) is always the product of a feeling of affection for oneself that ricochets within ourselves and goes out into the world. Before she can even be accused of heterodoxy, Tarquinia adds that God's love, which lies at the basis of creation, is originally a form of *philautía* simply because before the creation of the world there was nothing outside of God at which he could direct his love.<sup>96</sup> So too is charity, as a way to serve God and come closer to him, done "for our own sake," says Tarquinia.<sup>97</sup> If for no better reason, this is clear because of the Platonic principle that establishes that "it is not granted to what is impure to touch what is pure."<sup>98</sup> Tarquinia clarifies that if the goal is to become one with God — and in order for two things to become one they have to touch — one must become pure before one may even aspire to touch God. If the highest form of love is the love of God, which inspires the desire to become one with God, and every kind of love stems from the love for oneself, then both at the very beginning and at the end love is

<sup>92</sup>Patrizi, 1963, 88.

<sup>93</sup>Ibid., 92.

<sup>94</sup>Both Nelson and Vasoli stress the surprisingly un-Platonic flavor that this argument has. Vasoli, 1988, 419, sees Patrizi's *philautía* as a dismantling of traditional Platonic Renaissance love philosophy. Nelson, 1962, 101, stresses the complete elimination of all hierarchy-based arguments in Tarquinia's views on love, and points out that the focus on *philautía* is not only a subversion of Ficinian Platonism, but also of Christian values.

<sup>95</sup>The notion of *philautía* was first elaborated by Aristotle in the *Nichomachean Ethics* (9.8.1) as a crucial feature of the *spoudaios* (the diligent man). Against popular notions of self-love as selfish and callous, an honest man must necessarily love himself first in order to love others. See Aristotle, 549. In the *Praise of Folly*, Erasmus, 22, also tackles the concept, making Folly praise *Philautía* as a fundamental mean for happiness. More relevant to Patrizi's work, in Mario Equicola's *Di natura d'amore* (*On the Nature of Love*), 77, there is a long digression on the virtues of self-love.

<sup>96</sup>Patrizi, 1963, 110.

<sup>97</sup>Ibid., 115.

<sup>98</sup>Ibid.



a unity, a unity that is the product of the most intimate touch. As one becomes pure one can aspire to touch God and become one with him, and in order to perpetuate the species — yet another instance of self-love — lovers strive to physically become one with one another. In order to understand what sort of touch, if any, is involved in self-love one must turn to the figure of the hermaphrodite.

The intensity of eros, according to Aristophanes's speech, comes from a nostalgic yearning to go back to what humans once were; to the comic playwright, eros, a powerful longing for physical contact, is ultimately an expression of *philautía*. Tarquinia Molza's views on love thus constitute a commentary on the myth of the severed halves. Therefore, *L'amorosa filosofia* is not, as Nelson claims, a "surprisingly un-Platonic"<sup>99</sup> work by a self-proclaimed Platonist; it is, instead, a heterodox reading of the *Symposium*. All kinds of love come not from a yearning to detach oneself from the world of bodies and ascend to contemplate God, but from a primal feeling of self-love, and from an overpowering need for contact and proximity. Even divine love is described in tactile terms when Molza claims that the ultimate goal is to touch God. As the instantiation of the Aristophanic hermaphrodite, the origin of all heterosexual love, and the incarnation of what Speroni called "l'Ermafrodito amoroso," there is no one better qualified to teach love matters than Tarquinia Molza. Remarkably, Patrizi manages to combine the three main speakers of Plato's *Symposium* in the figure of Tarquinia Molza, who simultaneously represents Aristophanes's hermaphrodite, Diotima, and Socrates himself, since the first dialogue is a long praise of Molza comparable to Alcibiades's praise of the master.

As the works of Firenzuola, Speroni, and Nobili show, Patrizi's heterodox approach to the *Symposium*, and especially to Aristophanes's speech, was no novelty.<sup>100</sup> *L'amorosa filosofia*, however, constitutes perhaps the most compelling response to Ficino's *De amore* produced in the sixteenth century, as it is centered on the notion of love as *philautía* based upon a sacralized understanding of tactility. Patrizi affirms that love, from its beginnings in the inner self to its end, which is to touch the divine, cannot but be a phenomenon that engages the tactile. Undoubtedly, this need to redeem tactility stems in Patrizi both from a naturalistic attitude toward the body and an interest in the mediation between matter and spirit. Among many other things, Patrizi was also a physician who had experienced firsthand the anatomical revolution of the mid-sixteenth

<sup>99</sup>Nelson, 1962, 101.

<sup>100</sup>In a recent article, Vuilleumier Laurens, 36, argues that Patrizi introduces a third kind of love between Ficino's heavenly and beastly love: "l'amour sensuel humain et non bestial" ("sensual human love that is not feral"), and he does so by rehabilitating the lower senses, in particular touch. The author, of course, is right in making this distinction, but Patrizi was not the first to introduce this human love that is not beastly, as works like Firenzuola's *Delle bellezze delle donne* show: see Firenzuola, 519–96.



century. He enrolled at the University of Padua in 1547, four years after the publication of *De humani corporis fabrica* (*On the Fabric of the Human Body*, 1543), which opens with a famous appeal to Emperor Charles V (1500–58) where Andreas Vesalius (1514–64) vigorously calls for a new epistemology based on the collaboration between the eye and the hand.<sup>101</sup> A growing concern with firsthand evidence, typical of sixteenth-century anatomy, is combined in Patrizi with a philosophical obsession that would make its way all the way to Descartes: locating the exact border between body and soul.<sup>102</sup>

### CONCLUSION: TO TOUCH A HERMAPHRODITE

At some point in the early 1440s, when Marsilio Ficino was hardly ten years old and the Platonic manuscripts he would later translate and comment upon were still slowly arriving to the stacks of Cosimo de' Medici's library, the accomplished sculptor and art critic Lorenzo Ghiberti (1378–1455) was witness in Rome to an awe-inspiring event: the exhumation of a headless hermaphrodite. The statue, "the size of a thirteen-year-old girl and made with admirable genius,"<sup>103</sup> was found buried in an ancient sewer completely covered in dirt, and was carried to the church of Santa Cecilia in Trastevere to be cleaned and restored. Ghiberti remembers the occurrence in the third book of his *Commentarii* (ca. 1447), which is dedicated to anatomy and to the theory of vision: "It is not possible to express in words the perfection of this statue . . . which, covered in a subtle cloth, showed the male and the female nature. . . . Many pleasant attributes did the statue possess, and none of them could be grasped by sight, unless the hand found it through touch."<sup>104</sup> As a renowned master of relief, who was especially drawn to the tactile sensibility of late Roman art,<sup>105</sup> Ghiberti introduces here a notion of "aesthetic

<sup>101</sup>In the preface to *De humani corporis fabrica*, Vesalius, 10, argues that the downfall of contemporary medicine has to do with the fact that physicians have forgotten how to use their hands. He says to Emperor Charles V: "I would not do this if I had not stuck my own hands and refused to be satisfied just watching others do it."

<sup>102</sup>Patrizi's dialogue *Delfino* is a philosophical discussion on the sweetness of the kiss, which is understood to be the quintessential psychosomatic phenomenon. The kiss interests Patrizi neither as a symbol nor as a regrettable display of beastly love, but as a particularly remarkable instance of the tactile that reveals profound truths about the relationship between body and soul. Patrizi concludes that the sweetness experienced when kissing has to do with the fact that the kiss is an exchange of spirits, and thus the threshold between body and soul. Like in *L'amorosa filosofia*, touch is once again the sense that reveals some of the most vexing mysteries of creation.

<sup>103</sup>Ghiberti, 107. According to Schlosser, 159, this description cannot be associated with any surviving statues from the Roman period.

<sup>104</sup>Ghiberti, 108. Translation is my own.

<sup>105</sup>See Krautheimer, 282. Goethe, 40 (*Roman Elegy* 5.10), will later call this "sehende Hand" ("the hand that sees").

touch.”<sup>106</sup> Anticipating arguments that would reappear in the *paragone* of the sixteenth century, Ghiberti affirms the crucial importance of tactility not only for the production but also for the appreciation of sculpture. Like Vesalius in his address to Charles V a hundred years later, Ghiberti calls for a collaboration between touch and vision.

In those first decades of the fifteenth century, as piles of manuscripts were making their way back to Italy and ancient artifacts were starting to be unearthed all over the peninsula, there is no doubt that the discovery of the Roman hermaphrodite must have been an exhilarating event. But the image of Ghiberti almost in ecstasy caressing the androgynous statue is much more than a postcard of that love for classical antiquity that defines the Renaissance. It also prefigures some of the main characteristics of an intellectual sensibility that would dominate the following two centuries and beyond: a renewed interest in corporeality, a more nuanced and self-aware approach to issues of gender, a reevaluation of the role of the senses, a reaction against long-established dualisms, an exaltation of curiosity, and a fascination with the eccentric, the paradoxical, and the ambiguous. Across disciplines, languages, and time the hermaphrodite would bespeak all of these characteristics like few other figures did. In literature, this starts not long before Ghiberti's epiphany, with Antonio Beccadelli's *L'ermafrodito*, a collection of pornographic poetry equally divided in songs about male and female genitalia. It follows with the many translations and imitations of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which in book 4 includes the myth of Hermaphroditus and Salmacis,<sup>107</sup> and continues in two seventeenth-century novels, Thomas Artus's *Description de l'île des hermaphrodites* (*Description of the Island of the Hermaphrodites*, 1605) and Ferrante Pallavicino's *Il principe ermafrodito* (*The Hermaphrodite Prince*, 1640), satirical commentaries on the hypocrisy of gender politics. In turn, a scientific interest in hermaphrodites arises in the second half of the sixteenth century with the work of Pierre Boaistuau, *Histoires prodigieuses* (*Extraordinary Stories*, 1560), and of Ambroise Paré, *Des monstres et prodiges* (*On Monsters and Marvels*, 1573),<sup>108</sup> which anticipate three important treatises on the topic: Caspar Bauhin's *De hermaphroditorum monstrosorumque partuum* (*On the Parts of Hermaphrodites and Monsters*,

<sup>106</sup>The term is Rosalyn Driscoll's: see Driscoll.

<sup>107</sup>For more on the Ovidian myth of the hermaphrodite and its reception in Renaissance Europe, see Brisson. See also Carter, 115–35.

<sup>108</sup>One of the fathers of modern French anatomy, Paré was also a very vocal advocate of firsthand experience. In his *Ten Books of Surgery* (1564) he says: “Thou shalt fare more easily and happily attain to the knowledge of these things by long use and much exercise, than by the reading of bookes, or daily hearing of teachers. For speech how perspicuous and elegant soever it be, cannot so vively express any thing as that which is subjected to the faithfull eyes and hands”: cited in Smith, 156.

1600), Jacques Duval's *Des hermaphrodites* (*On Hermaphrodites*, 1612), and Jean Riolan's *Discours sur les hermaphrodites* (*Discourse of the Hermaphrodites*, 1614). As liminal beings who dwell in the border between genders, between the human and the monstrous, between science and mythology, hermaphrodites represented for the early modern mentality the daunting mystery of mediation. It should not surprise anyone that love philosophers evoked them to better understand the complex relation between the spiritual and the sensual; after all, for the Greeks, Eros himself was a mediator.

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