Negotiations of Renaissance Desire

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Pangs of Love and Longing: Configurations of Desire in Premodern Literature

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NEGOTIATIONS OF RENAISSANCE DESIRE

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Marguerite de Navarre’s Heptaméron (1559) has been seen as a French version of Plato’s Symposium, since the main topic for the frame, the novellas, as well as the discussions following each novella, is love.¹ In this article I will assess how the classical and traditional configuration of perfect love, determining desire in the homosocial relationship between men, is challenged through a repeated construction of heterosexuality. As many scholars have pointed out, Marguerite was inspired by Marsilio Ficino’s platonistic philosophy, and Marguerite herself commissioned a translation of his De amore (1474).² Ficino is however not the only source of her Neoplatonic views on love and desire, and she most definitely makes out a great contrast to the view Ficino presents. In fact, her view is closer to that of Leone Ebreo, who presents a heterosexual desire as the highest form of love and who puts the woman in what was, for the time, a rather transgressing position in his Dialoghi d'amore or Dialogues of Love (1535). Hence, the dialogue is, as we will see, more or less driven by the active Sophia.

Before we proceed to the analysis of the Heptaméron and Marguerite’s appropriation of the Neoplatonic love we will discuss how the classical and traditional configuration of desire changes between these two philosophers, beginning with Ficino’s Commentary on Plato’s Symposium On Love or the De amore.

From the Platonic Family

According to Sears Jayne, the English translator of the De amore, most scholars agree on Ficino’s fundamental importance “for shifting the emphasis in treatises on love from an Aristotelian (and medieval) emphasis on the physiology and psychology of love to a Platonic (and Renaissance) emphasis on love as desire for ideal beauty”.³ This is probably a correct description of the philosophic shift Ficino managed to accomplish. However, we should also be aware of the symphony of voices from this very lively period in history, and I argue that his shift was not so clean-cut as
Jayne says. Ficino is, for instance, using theories from the very mentioned Aristotle to which I will return.

John Charles Nelson points out that “Ficino does not share all the stil-nuovo motives adopted by Dante—for example, the theme that love is intensified by the death of the loved one. Neither does Ficino employ the troubadour theme of exalting the lady with praise and service. In fact, male friendship rather than love of women remains the basis of moral love”.

This notion of homosociality can however be traced back, not only to Plato but also to Aristotle, who thought that the male sex was the complete and fulfilled human whereas the female sex was an incomplete and not fully developed version of the same. Men stood for morality, intellect and sense of control—women for immoral, unintellectual and uncontrollable feelings, especially erotic ones. The theory of Aristotle had been repeated in different contexts during the Middle Ages, as in Thomas Aquinas, and had also found its way into the Renaissance and into Ficino’s works.

According to Plato, love is a desire for beauty, and Ficino agrees on that. In chapter four of the first speech he says: “When we say ‘love’, understand ‘the desire for beauty’”. (Quando noi diciamo amore, intendete desiderio di bellezza). But the question is, as Unn Irene Aasdalen puts it, “could love in the form of friendship between men be defined as ‘desire for beauty’”? Love is also connected to erotic desire—a desire that was defined as ‘vulgar love’ representing the low and the body in contrast to the heavenly, Platonic love which was high and striving from the soul towards God. This separation of high and low is nothing Ficino invents, but goes back to Plato’s Symposium as well. Nevertheless, Ficino takes it a step further when he says that

\[
\text{where the body is certainly beautiful but the soul is not, let us love the body very little if at all, as a shadowy and fleeting image of beauty. Where the soul alone is beautiful, let us love this enduring beauty of the soul ardently. And in this way we shall show that we are truly from the Platonic family.}
\]

\[
\text{e dove non l’animo ma solo el corpo fussi bello, quello come ombra e caduca imagine della bellezza appena e leggermente amiamo; dove solamente fussi l’animo bello, questo perpetuo ornamento dell’animo ardentemente amiamo; e dove l’una e l’altra bellezza concorre, vehementissimamente piglieremo admiratione. E cosi procedendo dimostreremo che noi siamo in verità famiglia platonica [...].}
\]

\[(De amore Orazione I, iv, 38, trans., 43)\]
Thus, Ficino brings the erotic desire into the highest form of love, i.e. the Socratic—the one between a young male and an older male—uniting the body and soul on the terms that both of them are beautiful, or as Aas-dalen describes it:

In the second speech, Ficino makes Giovanni Cavalcanti explain that Pausanias in the second speech of the Symposium had divided love into two kinds, lower and higher Aphrodite, or as Ficino names her, Venus. These two loves are mirrored not only in process of the coming to be of the world (the two Venuses understood as the two first hypostases in emanation, the Intellect and the World Soul) but also in human lives, as a choice between a higher and a lower love. All the way through Ficino’s banquet-fiction, he advocates the choice of higher Venus or love, and the earthly form of this higher love, is a Socratic friendship, in which the two friends contemplate beauty and strive to ascend to the higher.⁸

It is not only love that is divided in two. The human soul is also split, a thought that Ficino has developed from the Platonic division of the human body in two represented in the speech of Aristophanes in the Symposium. Plato’s view is furthermore directly erotic since the human bodies seek each other and are drawn to each other due to a desire for physical reunion. Hence, the reunion that is regarded the highest, is the one between men. Ficino keeps the male relationship as his ideal, but he present a movement, starting with the physical desire and then progresses to the soul’s desire for completion:

When souls, already divided and immersed in bodies, first have come to the years of adolescence, they are aroused by the natural and innate light which they retained (as if by a certain half of themselves) to recover, through the study of truth, that infuses the divine light, once half of themselves, which they lost in falling. This once recovered, they will be whole, and blessed with a vision of God.

Poi che furono divisi, el mezzo tirato fu al mezzo; l’anime già divise e immerse ne’ corpi, quando giungono agli anni della età discreta, pe ’l lume naturale che riserborono quasi per uno mezzo dell’anima sono svegliate ad ripigliare, con studio di verità, quel lume sopra naturale che già fu l’altro mezzo dell’anima, el quale cadendo perdettono. E ricevuto questo saranno intere e nella visione di Dio beate.

(De amore Orazione IV, ii, 12, trans., 73)

As we have seen, the woman is never mentioned as part of the Socratic or Platonic friendship that Ficino presents, and when she is mentioned it is only in connection with the “lower Venus”. As we have seen, this lower
love is for souls without insight into the true origin of beauty—namely God and philosophy. In other words, women are not capable of philosophical insight and are driven by physical desires. Men, on the other hand, do not only have the ability to strive for the “higher Venus”, but also to combine this love with desire for physical beauty, as Ficino writes:

Certainly in the intellect of man there is an eternal love of seeing the divine beauty, thanks to which we pursue both the study of philosophy and the practice of justice and piety. There is also in the power of procreation a certain mysterious urge to procreate offspring. This love too is eternal; by it we are continuously driven to create some likeness of that celestial Beauty in the image of a procreated offspring. These two eternal loves in us are daemons which Plato predicts will always be present in our souls, one of which raises us to things above; the other presses us down to things below. […] [T]he second is called evil because, on account of our abuse, it often disturbs us and powerfully diverts the soul from its chief good, which consists in the contemplation of truth, and twists it to baser purposes.

Certamente nella mente dello huomo è uno eterno amore di vedere la bellezza divina, e per gli stimoli di questo seguitiamo gli studi di filosofia, e gli ufici della giustitia e della pietà. È ancora nella potenza del generare uno occult stimolo a generar figliuoli, e questo amore è perpetuo, dal quale siamo continuamente incitati a scolpire nella effige de’ figliuoli qualche similitudine della superna bellezza. Questi due amori in noi perpetui sono. Quegli dua demoni e quali dice Platone sempre all’anime nostre esser presenti, de’ quali l’uno in su e l’altro in giù ci tiri […]. Ma la cagione perché el secondo amore si chiama mal demonio, è che pe ‘l ostro uso disordinato egli spesso ci turba e divertisce l’animo a’ ministeri vili, ritrahendolo dal principale suo bene el quale nella speculatione della verità consiste.

*(De amore* Orazione VI, viii, 4–10, trans., 119)

Reading this we can see that women certainly have a place in the world, since procreation of the offspring is an eternal love and part of the human soul. Nevertheless, if man gives in to this kind of love he will be misled and “disturbed” in his “contemplation of truth”. Hence, the seduction of the female body is a danger, but how is it with the bodies of other men? Ficino explains and defends a desire of sorts in speech six, where he says that the love which rules and governs the body tries to […] procreate handsome offspring by a beautiful woman. Similarly, the love which pertains to the soul tries to imbue it with most elegant and pleasing learning, and to spread knowledge like its own […] and to reproduce it, by teaching, in some very beautiful soul […] which is pure, intelligent, and excellent.
L’uno e l’altra amore ricerca cose belle: certamente quello che regge el corpo desidera nutrire el proprio corpo di nutrimenti dilicatissimi, suavissimi e spetiosissimi, e desidera generare belli figliuoli di bella femmina; e l’amore che s’appartiene all’animo s’affatica di riempiere l’animo di ornatissime e gratissime discipline, e scrivendo con ornato e bello stilo pubbicare scientia alla sua simile, e insegnando generare la medesima scientia, per similitudine, in qualche animo bello. Bello dico quello animo che è acuto e optimo.

_(De amore Orazione VI, xi, 17, trans., 131f.)_

But since the soul is not visible to us we rely on the body’s beauty as the image of the soul. Ficino says

Certainly we cannot see the soul itself. And for this reason we cannot see its beauty. But we can see the body, which is the shadow and image of the soul. And so, judging by its image, we assume that in a beautiful body there is a beautiful soul. That is why we prefer to teach men who are handsome.

Noi non veggiamo esso animo e però non veggiamo sua bellezza, ma veggiamo el corpo che è imagine e ombra dello animo, sì che per questa imagine coniecturando stimiamo che in un formoso corpo uno animo spetioso sia; e di qui adviene che noi più volontieri insegniamo a’ belli.

_(De amore Orazione VI, xi, 19 trans., 132)_

I will leave Ficino at this point and continue with a discussion of the Neoplatonic view on love that Leone Ebreo presents, a view that is rather in opposition to Ficino.

**Heterosexual Desire and a Woman in Charge**

It is mainly the third and last dialogue, “On the Origin of Love”, that discusses the definition of love in a deep and outlined way in Leone Ebreo’s work _Dialoghi d’amore_. The dialogue between Philo and Sophia starts when Philo walks by Sophia in the street without noticing her. He claims that he was in such deep contemplation of her beauty that he couldn’t see what happened in the real world

my mind, as it often is, was withdrawn in contemplation of the beauty formed in you, whose image is impressed upon it, and which is always desired. This caused me to take leave of my perception of what is outside me
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The argument gives rise to a number of questions in Sophia, which then leads to the long dialogue where not only the Christian and the Jewish (Kabbalistic) traditions are discussed, but also the Platonic and Aristotelian works—both the origins and their interpreters such as Ficino and Pico della Mirandola. This is a dialogue of love and knowledge, where the two speakers, Sophia and Philo, discuss their own beliefs and interpretations of love. Sophia is the active participant in the conversation and Philo the passive, yet instructive one. The two speakers also discuss this notion in relation to lovers. Sophia asks: “But what will...

Ebreo is also very down to earth in his treatise on love and he does claim the world to be a creation bound together by heterosexual and highly dynamic relationships. The love for the beautiful (and the good) results in an urge to reproduce that beauty, just as Ficino so far but, as Kodera says, “in order to become meaningful, love [in Ebreo’s view] has to result in sexual intercourse and in the begetting of a child” and that “Leone’s focus on heterosexual acts as universal, creative forces entails that love occurs exclusively between partners who are different.” This view opposes the Neoplatonists’ ideal friendship between men, the love for one who is like oneself, which not only, as we have seen in Ficino, includes an intellectual relation but also has rather obvious homoerotic connotations.

So Ebreo presents a rather different view on love than Ficino when he highlights the heterosexual love between man and woman, but what about his thoughts of male and female attributes? Does Ebreo follow his predecessors’ misogyny or does he negotiate a transgression of the traditional views of sex and gender characteristics? Well, Ebreo’s treaty does present a relation between woman and man that differs from the theories of his time regarding the notion of men as active and women as passive. Ebreo shifts his time’s gender roles, making Sophia the active participant in the conversation and Philo the passive, yet instructive one. The two speakers also discuss this notion in relation to lovers. Sophia asks: “But what will...
you tell me of the meaning of the terms, which have deceived me, where ‘lover’ means active and ‘beloved’ passive?” and Philo answers:

This is true because the lover is active in his service of love, but not in its generation, and the beloved is the recipient of the service of the lover, but is not passive in the causation of love. And if I ask you which is worthier, the one who serves or is served, the one who obeys or is obeyed, and the one who respects or is respected, you will assuredly answer that the servant, though active, is lower than him who receives his services. And such is the relation of lover and beloved, for the lover serves, obeys, and respects his beloved.

(SOFIA:) “[…] ma che mi dirai de la significazione de’ vocabuli, qual mi ha ingannato, che amante vuol dire agente, e amore paziente?”

(FILONE:) “Così è il vero: perché l’amante è l’agente de la servitù de l’amore, ma non de la generazione sua, e l’amato è recipiente del servizio de l’amante, ma non de la causalità de l’amore; e [se] io ti dimandarò qual è più degno, o il servitore o il servitor, l’obbediente o l’obedito, l’osservante o l’osservato, certo dirai che questi agenti sono inferiori a questi suoi recipienti. Così è l’amante verso l’amato, però che l’amante serve, obedisce e osserva l’amato.”

(Dialogues III, 229–230, trans., 222)

So, active and passive are not reduced to man and woman in Ebreo’s view, but to lover and beloved, and do not seem to constitute a strictly dialectic pair. Hence, the (male) lover is not the only one active but also the (female) beloved, and the value of being loved by someone is higher than being the mere “servant” as a lover.

Kodera also points out, regarding the man and woman, that “[i]t is characteristic of the Dialoghi that the woman wants to be recognized as human, as a thinking and real being.” She is further not to be “reduced to one of Philone’s obsessive mental constructions nor is her body a mere container for male semen.” I find this claim for recognition in the following where Sophia says regarding Philo’s contemplation of her beauty: “Yes, I complain that the image of my person has more sway over you than my person itself.” (Dialogues III, 197, trans., 193; Pur mi lamento che possi e vagli in te, più che mia persona, l’immagine di quella.) She wants to be regarded for what she is in reality, not as Philo’s “mental construction”. They also argue about what they actually are supposed to do, where Sophia holds strictly to what was said from the beginning; Philo will teach her about the origin of love. But Philo himself is more interested in other activities. Sophia says: “would you not understand that what I want from
you is the theory of love, and what you want from me is its practice?” and she continues

And you cannot deny that knowledge of the theory should always precede application in practice, since it is reason that rules man’s work. [...] So, without further delay, you must perfect what you have already begun and satisfy my remaining desire.

Non vedi tu [che] ciò ch’io voglio da te è la teorica de l’amore, e quel che tu vuoi da me è la pratica di quello? Non puoi negare che sempre debbe precedere la cognizione de la teorica all’uso de la pratica, ché negl’uomini la ragione è quella che indirizza l’opera; [...] sì che senza ponerti intervallo dèi dar perfezione al già cominciato da te e porger satisfazione a questo residuo del mio desiderio.

(Dialogues III, 200–201, trans., 196)

A woman should not, in the traditional view on women, be the one to speak these words. Thus, Sophia speaks of reason, theory and knowledge—strictly male virtues and interests—and she thereby opposes the thoughts of women as ruled by the body and the “lower love”. And of course, “Sophia” is the very personification of wisdom, “Philo” the love for her and together they make “Philosophia”, the love of wisdom. But it is through Sophia’s negotiations of Philo’s desire she makes this possible, convincing him to “perfect what you have already begun and satisfy my remaining desire” (perfezione al già cominciato da te e porger satisfazione a questo residuo del mio desiderio).

In the Dialoghi we have seen an obvious heterosexual norm be presented, as well as a more female-friendly approach in contrast to Ficino’s work on Neoplatonic love. In the next part of this essay we will see how Marguerite de Navarre makes use of and reinterprets these Neoplatonic views in her Heptaméron, an appropriation that indicates a negotiation of desire that resembles the one we find in the Dialoghi.

The Neoplatonic Tradition in the Heptaméron

As already pointed out, Marguerite de Navarre was familiar with the Neoplatonic philosophers of her time; we know that she read Marsilio Ficino since she commissioned a translation of his Commentary in the very same decade that she wrote her spectacular, though incomplete, Heptaméron, in the 1540s. It is more uncertain how familiar she was with philosophers such as Leone Ebreo, Tullia d’Aragona or Baldassare Castiglione. Allusions to several of them can at any event be found in her work,
especially Castiglione. She also makes use of, or creates some of the very same, arguments pursued in the love treatises following on Ficino’s comment on the *Symposium*, where the homosocial relationship is no longer regarded as the highest form of love, but the heterosexual has become norm as in Ebrero’s *Dialoghi*. In the following I will demonstrate some of the ways in which this is done in the *Heptaméron*.

It is well known that Marguerite’s work differs from her “model author”, Boccaccio (1313–75), in many respects. Her aim is to be true to reality, and where Boccaccio has seven women and three men telling his novellas, the ten *devisants* of the *Heptaméron* are equally divided into five women and five men. And she goes even further in pointing out the equality between these characters, and at the same time makes the reader aware of the notion; Hircan, the patriarchal nobleman says: “Where games are concerned everybody is equal” (car au jeu nous sommes tous esgaulx).15 Further, while the Italian “prequel’s” main focus is the short stories, this is not the case in the *Heptaméron*. There are vivid discussions on the subjects of the stories and the whole literary piece is framed by a more detailed story than Boccaccio’s. The discussion mostly concerns the moral right or wrong regarding love and its definition, and since the various *devisants* represent different opinions the discussions are often left open without a clear, agreed meaning about this right and wrong.

There are furthermore several relationships between the *devisants*: the married Parlament and Hircan, Simontaut, Dagoucin and Saffredent are *serviteurs* to some of the women and there are friendships between women, between women and men, and between men. These relationships are often related to love and desire, as Jules Gelernt points out:

> We may imagine the Queen musing to herself that mankind comprises sensualists and romanticists as well as Platonist and Christians, and all of them are to be taken into account before one can form one’s judgment of love. It is this generosity of mind, this desire, so characteristic of Marguerite, to include rather than exclude, which makes the *Heptameron* unique among literary discussions of love.16

But the relationships are thus far from being regarded in the same manner. Instead, there is a concern about male-male relationships and over and over again we find the norm of heterosexuality repeated and constructed through various discourses. As we will see, Marguerite’s *prefect love* is not to be found in homosocial relations. The following quotation is from the discussion on ancient philosophers, Plato is one of them, following novella thirty-four.
“The philosophers of ancient times […] did not show their feelings, so
great a virtue was in their eyes to overcome the self and the passions.” […]
“That does not mean they were all men of wisdom” said Saffredent.
“On the contrary, it was more a matter of the appearance of sense and vir-
tue than of actual effects.” […]
“Have I not read to you this morning,” said Oisille, “of how those who
think themselves wiser than other people and who by the light of reason
have come to know God, who created all things, only to attribute that glory
to themselves […] believing that it is their own effort that has brought
them such knowledge, have become more ignorant and unreasonable even
than the beasts? For, allowing their minds to go astray […] they have
shown their errors by the disorder of their bodies, forgetting and perverting
their sex, as Saint Paul has written in his epistle to the Romans.”

– Les philosophes du temps passé […] desquels la tristesse et la joye
n’estoit quasi point sentie […] tant ils estimoient grande vertu, se vaincre
eux mesmes et leur passions. […]—Il n’est pas dict aussi, respondit Saff-
fredent, qu’ils fussent tous sages: mais il y avoit plus d’apparence de sens
et de vertu, qu’il n’y avoit de faict.—Ne vous ay’je pas leu au matin, dist
Oisille, que ceux, qui ont cuidé ester plus sages, que les autres hommes, et
qui par une lumiere de raison, sont venuz à cognoistre un Dieu, createur de
toutes choses […] estimans par leur labour avoir gaigné ce scâvoir, ont esté
faitns non seulement plus ignorans et desraisonnables, que les autres homes,
mais que les bestes brutes? Car ayans erré en leurs espirts se sont attribute
[…] ont monstré leurs erruers, par le desordre de leurs corps, oublians et
pervertissans l’ordre de leur sexe, comme sainct Paul nous monster en
l’epistre qu’il escript aux Romans.

(Heptaméron 367–68, trans., 343–44, my italics)

As Gelernt points out, “Neoplatonism reinforced Marguerite’s Chris-
tian view. In this sense, the work of the Neoplatonists was of capital im-
portance to the creation of the Heptameron.”17 There is no doubt that Mar-
guerite’s views have a deep Christian foreground which might be one
explanation for the repeated construction of heterosexuality that I now will
try to assess in more detail.

In Gelernt’s interpretation the notion of same-sex relationships, which
is so clear in Ficino, and that Oisille so intensely disapproves of in the
quotation above, is not once mentioned. There is no doubt that Oisille
means relations between persons of the same sex, and the part of the Bible
she refers to makes it even clearer, since those who break the natural laws
(of heterosexual relations) shall be sentenced to death.18 She is therefore
deeply critical of philosophers like Plato who, in her own words, “have
shown their errors by the disorder of their bodies, forgetting and perverting
their sex” (ont montré leurs erruers, par le desordre de leurs cors, oub-
lians et pervertissans l’ordre de leur sexe; *Heptaméron* 368, trans., 344). Robert D. Cottrell says that Marguerite makes out a great contrast to Ficino and that it is important to point out the two different Neoplatonic views present in France during the sixteenth century. The first is what he calls a Christian view, which would be the one Gelernt has in mind. The other is the Neoplatonism of love, strongly inspired by Ficino. As Cottrell reminds us, Ficino’s philosophy “became increasingly important in French literature from around 1540, the date at which Marguerite seems to have become interested in it”. However, there is a specific French reception of Ficino, which Cottrell describes as essentially critical:

Marguerite never suggests, as does Ficino, that human love can mutate into love for Christ. On the contrary, throughout her work she stresses that human love [...] is an obstacle that must be annihilated before the Christian can arrive at Christ. [...] Her positioning of human love within the arena of sinful flesh is a mark of her profound rejection of Ficinian “Neoplatonism”.

Cottrell’s discussion here is interesting and opposes Gelernt, but he does not consider the same-sex desire in Ficino’s philosophy or the issue of the same in the *Heptaméron* either. A few scholars have begun, though, to put the spotlight on the issue of homosocial relationships in the *Heptaméron*, which, as Todd W. Reeser says, seems to result in a wish to “set Plato straight”. And Katherine Crawford argues that a central aspect of, not the *Heptaméron* in particular, but the French take on Neoplatonism “was its role in articulating heterosexual normativity”.

The issue can be illustrated through the relationships between Dagoucin and Saffredent, who are described at the beginning of the prologue as an inseparable pair, “les gentilzhommes”. There is only one sentence where Dagoucin is mentioned by name in the prologue; everywhere else he is referred to as a part of the “two young noblemen”, as a comrade to Hircan or not mentioned at all. The first time he speaks is not until after the discussion that follows novella eight, which I will return to below. Through the frame we can follow a split of these male-male relations and a move towards a stronger individualization, due to differences in the view of perfect love. Saffredent and Hircan believe in men’s right to possess women and that a man categorizes himself when he is an active lover who takes what is “rightfully” his—the female body to satisfy his desire. Showing weakness can, in their view, be profoundly dangerous to the order of the sexes, as Jeffrey C. Persels points out: “Any display of impotence in the individual male body threatens impotence in the body politic.” Dagoucin, on the other hand, represents a type of Neoplatonic and courtly
view of love, where the lady is to be honoured and loved—not for her physical beauty or youth—but for her soul. We will now have to remind us of what Ficino says about the human soul being split and also read the following on his interpretation of the speech of Aristophanes in the Symposium:

Who […] will be so foolish as to attribute the appellation of Man, which is firmly fixed in us, to the body which is always flowing and everywhere changed, rather than to the most stable soul? […] When Aristophanes said men, he meant souls, in the Platonic way.

Chi sarà adunque tanto stolto che l’appellatione dell’uomo, la quale è in noi fermissima, attribuisca al corpo che sempre corre, più tosto che all’anima che sta ferma? Di qui può essere manifesto che quando Aristofane nominò gli huomini, intese l’anime nostre secondo l’uso platonico.  
(De amore Orazion IV, iii, 15, trans., 75)

Ficino has got rid of the body here and emphasizes love in the soul of men, because as we know he still regards the male-male relationship as the perfect one. But what has Dagoucin to say about this? The following discussion takes place after novella eight and illustrates rather clearly both his Neoplatonic and his courtly view, and also his fellow storyteller’s opposing arguments:

“But what about people who have not yet found their ‘other half’?” asked Simontaut. “Would you still say it was inconstancy if they seek her wherever she may be found?”

“No man can know,” replied Dagoucin, “where his other half is to be found, this other half with whom he may find a union so equal that between [the parts] there is no difference; which being so, a man must hold fast where Love constrains him and, whatever may befall him, he must remain steadfast in heart and will. For if she whom you love is your true likeness, if she is of the same will, then it will be your own self that you love, and not her alone.”

“Dagoucin, I think you’re adopting a position that is completely wrong,” said Hircan. “You make it sound as if we ought to love women without being loved in return!

“What I mean, Hircan, is this. If love is based on a woman’s beauty, charm and favours, and if our aim is merely pleasure, ambition and profit, then such love can never last. For if the whole foundation on which our love is based should collapse, then love will fly from us and there will be no love left in us. But I am utterly convinced that if a man loves with no other aim, no other desire, than to love truly, he will abandon his soul in death rather than allow his love to abandon his heart.”
The Neoplatonic view of two halves in need of each other can be found here, and as we see, Dagoucin does not believe in a love based on physical appearance or aims such as profit or “merely pleasure”. These are unstable attributes, and in Ficino’s words again: “always flowing and everywhere changed” ([De amore] IV, iii, 15, trans., 75; che sempre corre). But the reinterpreted view of Neoplatonic love that Dagoucin argues for does not mention love between men, but a clear heterosexual relation to a worshipped woman. Therefore it can be claimed that Marguerite’s view is more like the one represented in Ebreo’s Dialoghi, where love is unquestionably a desire between male and female, not in “the like for the like”. But Katherine Crawford reminds us that Ficino’s homosocial love is narcissistic. She says that “[w]hile men could be attracted to women (despite the fact that they are lesser beings), beauty is between men.” But since beauty is narcissistic in this sense it “opened up space to admit women into Neoplatonism because they could reflect and reproduce one’s self-love.” I suggest that Marguerite uses this notion to her advantage in her negotiation for a heterosexual desire.

As mentioned, we find a representation of courtly love through Dagoucin’s words, where expression of or acts of sexual desire have no place. He claims that death is a better option than letting the perfect love for the worshipped become untrue. He claims further that one never can know where to find one’s other half, but if you believe you have found her “then it will be your own self that you love, not her alone”. ([Heptaméron] 113, trans., 113; ce sera vous que vous aimerez et non pas elle.) This claim echoes Ficino’s narcissistic take on love discussed above, and these opinions dif-
fer strongly from the views of other male *devisants*, not the least the other half of the “two noblemen”, Saffredent. For example, Dagoucin says to him: “Ah, Saffredent, the trouble is that you desire your love to be returned, [...] and men of your opinions never die for love. But I know of many who have died, and died for no other cause than that they have loved, and loved perfectly.” (*Heptaméron* 115, trans., 114;—Ha Saffredent [...] voulez vous donques ester aimé, puis que ceux de vostre opinion n’en meurent point? Mais j’en sçay assez bon nombre, qui son morts d’autre maladie, que d’aymer trop parfaictemnet.) This, in Todd W. Reeser’s words, shows how “the *Heptaméron* represents a move away from a relationship reminiscent of a Neoplatonic male-male androgyne toward heterosexuality” and the separation of the two young noblemen Dagoucin and Saffredent “put[s] Dagoucine through the split he will later recount to his fellow storytellers” in his choice of short stories.27

Novella 47 is one of these stories, and to wrap up I will demonstrate how it exposes the failure of Neoplatonic male-male relationship and instead repeats the construction of heterosexuality.

**They Were One in Heart and Mind**

Novella 47 tells us about a perfect relationship between two men, and Dagoucin appropriately tells the story. This is the very beginning:

> Not far from Perche there were once two gentlemen who had from their childhood grown up together as such good and true friends that, as they were one in heart and mind, so in house, bed, board and purse they were as one. For a long time they lived together in this state of perfect friendship, and never once was there a word or wish any sign in difference between them. They were even more than brothers. They lived as if they were one man.

Auprès du païs du Perche y avoit deux gentls-hommes, qui des le temps de leur enfance avoient vescu en si grande et parfaicte amitié, que ce n’estoit qu’un cuer, une maison, in lict, une table, et une bourse d’eux deux. Ils vescquirent long temps continuans ceste parfaicte amitié, sans que jamais il y a eust entre eux deux une seule volonté ou parole où l’on peust veoir difference des personnes, tant que non seulmen ils vivoient comme des frères, mais comme un homme tout seul.

(*Heptaméron* 448, trans., 410)

But then one of the men gets married. The two friends nevertheless continue to live as before, sharing everything, although the husband chooses to sleep in the middle between his wife and his comrade. But soon
the husband starts to get suspicious. He accuses his wife of having an affair with his friend, but he does not speak to his friend about this. The wife, who is surprised about her husband’s accusations since she has done nothing, explains that he is wrong. She also tells the friend about her husband’s suspicions and he gets frustrated over the husband’s secrecy. He finds it important to talk about everything, just as they have done in the past, and he is really disappointed. Even so, he assures his friend that the wife is telling the truth—nothing is going on between them—but emphasizes that the worst thing a friend can do to another friend is keeping secrets or lie:

I shall not criticize you for it [his jealousy], because you cannot help it. But there is one thing that you could help, and which I can legitimately complain about, and that is that you have tried to cover up your sickness, when never before have you hidden your ideas, your feelings and your opinions from me.

[Je ne vous en donne point tort: car vous ne vous en scauriez garder. Mais d’une chose, qui est en vostre puissance, aurois-je occasion de me plaindre, c’est que me vouissiez celer vostre maladie, veu que jamais passin au opinion, que vous ayez euë, ne m’a esté cachée.

(Heptaméron 449, trans., 411)

He then goes on to say that in the same way he would have been the worst of friends if he were to hide amorous feelings towards the wife from his friend. If he were in love with her, he could not help the feelings, but he would have to stay honest to his friend and tell him about them. But, to assure his friend he says:

However, I can assure you that although she is a good and honest woman, I never saw anyone less likely, even if she were not your wife, to arouse amorous thoughts in me. However, even though there is no cause for concern, I urge you to tell me if you have the slightest suspicion, so that I may set the matter right and so that we do not permit our friendship to be destroyed for the sake of a woman.

De ma part je vous asseure bien, que combine qu’elle soit honneste et femme de bien, c’est la personne que je vey oncques (encore qu’elle ne fust vostre femme) où ma fantasie s’adonneroit aussi peu. Mais jaçoit qu’il n’y ait point d’occasion, je vous requires, que si en avez le moindre sentiment de soupçon, qui puisse ester, que vous me le dictes, â celle fin, que je y donne tel ordre, que nostre amitié, qui tant duré, ne se rompe pour une femme […].

(Heptaméron 449–50, trans., 411, my italics)
As we see here, the male relationship is unquestionably regarded more highly than a relationship to a woman in the eyes of the friend. There might even be an ambiguity in his form of desire here, since the woman is not capable of awakening his “amorous thoughts”, which is marked by italics above. This can be interpreted as a homoerotic notion underlying the novella. However, it is certain that a woman should never be capable of ruining the friendship the two men share.

So, at the beginning of the story, the homosocial relationship between the two men is described as a perfect love, since the men live as one in every possible way. The problem does not start until heterosexual desire is brought into the picture; hence there is not a problem with the marriage per se since the three of them lived happy together for a while. It is due to the husband’s suspicion of an affair between the friend and the wife that the very notion of sexual desire is introduced. We then also get to know that the wife has been told to act towards the friend as to her husband, “in all things but one” (Heptaméron 449, trans., 410; en toutes choses, hors mis une). The husband’s choice to sleep between his wife and friend can be seen as one way of hindering desire from blossoming between them, but not necessarily; the choice is actually made from the very beginning, before the argument has started. Nevertheless, the husband gets sick of jealousy. But who is he really jealous of? And what relationship is at stake here: the marriage or the friendship between the men? Well, let’s see how the story develops.

The husband continues to suspect the wife and friend and once again he speaks to his wife about this, forbidding her to even talk to the friend. The wife notifies the friend again and he gets furious with his married friend. He has broken the promise to be honest with him and therefore he decides to end the friendship, splits their belongings in half and then moves out of the house with a promise not to be satisfied with himself until he has done to the wife exactly what the husband has accused him of: “[A]nd as he had promised, the unmarried gentleman did not rest till he had cuckolded his friend.” (Heptaméron 451, trans., 412; en sorte que le gentil-homme, qui n’estoit point marié, ne cessa jamais qu’il n’eust faict son compagnon coqu, comme il luy avoit promis.)

Now, at the end of the story we know that the relationship that fails is the male friendship—and that in a rather brutal way. The wife’s function in the story seems to be to ignite the conflict of the definition of perfect love and also to act as the object of heterosexual desire. Reeser also points this out and says that “[m]asculine oneness must be fractured to make room for, or to create, heterosexuality in the text.” So it seems that, just as the distrusted friend did not rest until he had had his way with the wife,
Marguerite does not rest her case until she has repeated heterosexual relationships to the point where it becomes the normalized relationship. Homosociality must be destroyed, even if it is at the cost of intercourse with a married woman. But, my point is that Marguerite’s appropriation of Neo-platonism not only aims to normalize heterosexuality, it also negotiates women’s value in a homosocial world. Clearly, the wife in the novella has both a strong position and a strong voice, even if she is more or less under the power of her husband and, later, of the friend.

In the discussion following the novella we find, as always, different voices and opinions. But the topic in question is not the male-male relationship but the right or wrong in the wife’s behaviour. Oisille makes it clear that it “is not a reasonable excuse for a woman to take vengeance for her husband’s suspicions at the expense of her honour” (Heptaméron 451, trans., 412; n’est-ce pas excuse raisonnable […] à une femme, de se venger du soupçon de son mari à la honte de soy-mesme) but the younger Ennasuite argues that if “more women acted in the same way their husbands would not be as offensive as they are” (Heptaméron 452, trans., 413; beaucoup de femmes faisoient ainsi, leurs mariz ne seroient pas si outrageux qu’ils sont). Longarine tries to end the discussion by saying that it is “chastity which makes them [women] worthy to be praised” (Heptaméron 452, trans., 413; la chasteté louable, et fault que là nous nous arrestions). Clearly, the desire is between man and woman and the woman is in charge, hence the devisants are all referring to a wife who chooses to be with another man (even though it is the friend in the story who is determined to get revenge on the husband). The opinions of the devisants differ widely and the question of which behaviour is right or wrong for a woman is of course left open, but nevertheless they all put the nail in the coffin of homosociality in the negotiation of desire.

Notes


6 Ficino, *Commentary*, 40; Ficino, Marsilio, *El libro dell'amore*, a cura di Sandra Niccoli (Firenze: Leo S. Olschki editore, 1987), Orazione I, iv, 9. All page references throughout this paper will be to these editions.


9 Leone Ebreo, *Dialogues of Love*, trans. Cosmos Damian Bacich and Rosella Pescatori (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 117; *Dialoghi d’amore*, edited by Santino Caramella (Bari: Gius, Laterza & Figli, 1929), III, 172. All page references throughout this paper will be to these editions.


13 Ibid., 307.

14 Ibid., 328.


17 Ibid., 60.

18 The Bible, Rom 1: 32. On the discussion of norms and normalization, see Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York & London: Routledge, 2004) in which she points out that “[a] norm operates within social practices as the implicit standard of normalization [...] , discernible most clearly and dramatically in the effects that they produce.”, 41, italics in original.


20 Ibid., 10.


Marguerite de Navarre, Heptaméron, 62; 58.


Reeser, “Fracturing”.

Ibid.

Bibliography


