PLATO, CHRISTIANITY, AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF MODERN SEXUALITY

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Plato’s dialogues, particularly the Symposium, are permeated with the notion that love between two males is the most noble form of love. Therefore, when Christian Europe returned to these dialogues as a source of inspiration and enlightenment during the Renaissance, they posed a very real problem for the new culture and its intellectuals. The process of translating these dialogues into Latin for the wider European audience was a complex one, which, as ongoing research is showing, cannot possibly have eliminated every trace of Platonic homoeroticism. Because these translations, and particularly those of the Symposium, so heavily influenced the formation of western thinking on love, sexuality, theology, and philosophy in general, they are well worth a closer inspection. Of particular interest within the corpus of Symposium translations is the speech of Aristophanes (191E-192B), wherein men who love their own are characterized as naturally the most manly and most deserving of honors and public offices.

I was chosen to translate and study, under the guidance of Dr. Todd Reeser, four of the most important and interesting Renaissance translations of Aristophanes’ speech in the Symposium: the Latin versions of Ficino (1484), Cornarius (1548), and Stephanus (1578), as well as the French version of Le Roy (1558). My task was to help Dr. Reeser in his book on the roots of modern sexual culture by philosophically analyzing the patterns of Latin and French language usage in the translations as they compared with the original Greek of Plato, and discerning what cultural insights could be gained from such an analysis of the texts in question.

As I read through the various translations, three strong patterns of tension began to emerge which characterized both the individual texts and Renaissance sexual culture in general: 1. there is a conflict in classifying individuals as either vir/mulier (one who is, according to cultural norms, a man/woman, respectively), or mas/femina (one who is, from a strictly biological point of view, a male/female, respectively); 2. there is a tension in describing desire as a thing of either choice or a matter of uncontrollable drive; 3. there is a tendency to equate sexual/erotic act with sexual identity.

While the first issue might seem a simple matter of style and textual variation, there is sufficient internal evidence that the translators themselves were conscious of the conflict and chose their words very carefully to reflect most accurately what each considered a “man.” Particularly, in line 192A5, when Aristophanes explains men