

More sex please, we're Greek: exposing the myth of Platonic love

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Plato lent his name to Platonic love but a new book reveals that the ancient Greek philosopher never advocated love without sex.

University of Manchester science historian Dr Jay Kennedy, who hit the headlines last year after revealing he had cracked the code in the great thinker's writings, has now published a decoder's manual that lays bare the secret content of [Plato](#)'s ancient works.

“Plato – the Einstein of Greece’s Golden Age – was long thought to favour love without sex, or ‘Platonic love’, but this new research reveals Plato was far from being a prude,” says Dr Kennedy, who is based in the Centre for the History of Science, Technology and Medicine, part of the University's Faculty of Life Sciences.

“The decoded symbols in fact show that Plato was not an advocate of Platonic love at all; rather he urged a middle path. For him, morality meant moderation – he wanted people to avoid both promiscuity and abstinence.

“Before Plato, sex was about rutting and producing heirs. Plato marks a shift in the history of Western sexuality and some say he invented romance, but, for him, erotic passion was a spiritual force that helps us find our true selves within the deepest, human bond. Eros, or love, was a creative force that inspired art, literature, and the sciences.”

Dr Kennedy cracked the code within Plato’s texts last year when an unexpected insight led him to realise that Greek music was key to interpreting the writings of the Athenian [philosopher](#) and mathematician. Kennedy’s new book, *The Musical Structure of Plato’s Dialogues*, reports on the hidden doctrines revealed so far, including those in *The Symposium*, a philosophical text concerned with love.

“Plato’s teacher Socrates famously spent the night alone with the leading sex-symbol of ancient Athens but resisted temptation,” says Dr Kennedy. “Plato tells the story to show that true love aims at the soul and not the body, so many thought he was anti-sex and the myth of Platonic love spread far and wide. But Plato also celebrated eroticism and homosexuality, and shared the Greek view that naked bodies were beautiful, so historians have long debated his views.”

Socrates was later executed for corrupting the morals of young people and Dr Kennedy has now shown that Plato, also fearing persecution, hid his own philosophy using a system of musical symbols.

“Plato divided each of his writings into 12 parts, inserting a symbol marking a musical note at each twelfth,” explains Dr Kennedy. “At harmonious notes he placed positive ideas such as love and goodness,

while at dissonant notes he placed negative ideas such as rejection, quarrelling and evil. These musical patterns are a hidden commentary on Plato's stories and tell us which characters and which ideas he favoured."

In The Symposium – Plato's great play about love and sex – cheap attempts to trade sex for profit or favour sit above dissonant notes in the musical scale showing Plato's disapproval. But passages about erotic passion born of an abiding love for another's soul sit on top of some of the most harmonic notes, meaning he accepted sex as a part of true love.

There are also a number of symbols that reveal that Plato rejected both promiscuity and asceticism. It can now be definitely shown that, for Plato, virtue was a middle path or mean that avoided extremes.

The term 'Platonic love' originated only 500 years ago. In the Renaissance, postponing sex was an important step toward the equality of women; the Queen of England even commissioned plays to spread the idea. At a time when women were treated as slaves or baby-machines, Platonic love meant longer courtships and delaying the dangers of childbirth.

Kennedy adds: "At the beginning of the modern era, women cleverly used Plato's reputation as a genius to get men to pay attention to their minds. Platonic love was an argument for not settling down and allowing women to participate in arts and culture in the royal court. When sex often meant an early death, Plato was a licence for having more fun.

"Plato's importance cannot be overstated. He shifted humanity from a warrior society to a wisdom society. Today, because of him, our heroes are Einstein and Shakespeare and not knights in shining armour."

More information: Further background information about the book, the research and Plato can be found on Dr Kennedy's website:

personalpages.manchester.ac.uk/staff/jay.kennedy/

Provided by University of Manchester

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