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Asking for Plato's Forgiveness. Floyer Sydenham: A Platonic Visionary of 18th-century Britain

Kyriakos N. Demetriou, *University of Cyprus*



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“Floyer Sydenham: A Neglected Eighteenth-Century British Platonist”

Author: Kyriakos Demetriou

Floyer Sydenham (1710–1787), the eminent British Platonist, has been unduly neglected in the interpretative historiography of the modern Platonic tradition. Amid a climate of indifference, he set out to offer the first complete English translation of the Platonic dialogues, begging for subscriptions that never materialized. He died in debtors’ prison on April 1, 1787. Between 1759 and 1780 he managed to translate nine dialogues incorporating a large number of explanatory notes and linguistic emendations to the existing texts. Set in the context of the intellectual and discursive tradition of the era, Sydenham’s Platonism expanded on Lord Shaftesbury’s teleological views of human nature and moral rationalism against empiricism and moral egoism. The association of Platonism with Shaftesbury’s theories led to a number of interpretative novelties, such as the rejection of various strands of mystified Platonism as the inheritance of Plato, especially those connecting Platonism with Christianity, and a new approach to the dialogues as dramatic and theatrical compositions. Sydenham’s Platonic scholarship has been blurred by its being misleadingly associated with the general project of the eccentric Neoplatonist Thomas Taylor, whose first English translation of the entire *Corpus Platonicum* (5 vols, London 1804) bears, almost inappropriately, Sydenham’s name.