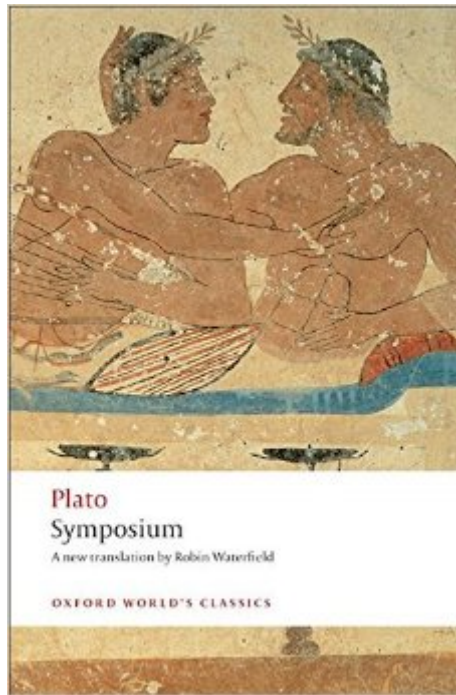


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# Symposium (Oxford World's Classics)



## Synopsis

In his celebrated masterpiece, *Symposium*, Plato imagines a high-society dinner-party in Athens in 416 BC. The guests—including the comic poet Aristophanes and Plato's mentor Socrates—each deliver a short speech in praise of love. The sequence of dazzling speeches culminates in Socrates' famous account of the views of Diotima, a prophetess who taught him that love is our means of trying to attain goodness, and a brilliant sketch of Socrates himself by a drunken Alcibiades, the most popular and notorious Athenian of the time. Engaging the reader on every page, this new translation conveys the power, humor, and pathos of Plato's creation and is complemented by full explanatory notes and an illuminating introduction. About the Series: For over 100 years Oxford World's Classics has made available the broadest spectrum of literature from around the globe. Each affordable volume reflects Oxford's commitment to scholarship, providing the most accurate text plus a wealth of other valuable features, including expert introductions by leading authorities, voluminous notes to clarify the text, up-to-date bibliographies for further study, and much more.

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## Customer Reviews

In this review I will compare 5 translations of Plato's *Symposium*: 1. Alexander Nehamas & Paul Woodruff (Hackett Pub Co, 1989). 2. Benardete (University of Chicago Press, 2001). 3. R.E. Allen (Yale University Press, 1993). 4. Shelley's Translation (St Augustine Press, 2002) 5. Sharon (Focus Publishing/R.Pullins Co, 1997) I have given all translations 5 stars for their own unique perspectives. Each of these editions has its own strengths and weaknesses, and because of this, none of this

edition is complete in itself. Inevitably, if you are serious in undertaking this work, you need to pick up more than one edition. I will give a recommendation on which one to use, at the end of this review. Symposium consists of a series of speeches on love (Eros), culminating in Socrates' and then Alcibiades'. What I am looking for is, first, ease of understanding the central concept of the book, this is obtained through different types of translations. My bias is toward a translation that is fluid, natural, and conveys the concept in a straight forward way. Second, I am also looking for helpful insights and philosophical explanations of some key thoughts. You get this from the quality of commentary/notes as part of the book. Both Sharon's and Nehamas' editions are similar in their lucid, straightforward, and current translations. I find that these 2 editions to be the best and easiest in understanding the text. On the translation side, I give these 5 stars. However, the commentaries in both editions are basic, and unsatisfying in my mind. For this, I give 4 stars. Benardete's edition has a superb commentaries both written by him and another (which is the gem here) written by Allan Bloom. You may or may not like Bloom's style, but he does give you a lot of background especially in ancient Greek pederasty culture, and valuable insights in each of the speeches. I give this a 5 star. I will recommend buying this book just for those 2 commentaries. On the translation itself, however, I am not a fan of Benardete's style. I have commented this in other reviews for his other translations, especially the "Sophist". For some reason, I find it more complex, long winded, and harder to understand. For this I give this edition translation 4 stars only. Allen's edition is superb for both translation and commentaries; this is a 5 star book for me. Finally, on Shelley's translation: this is a unique edition for a couple of reasons. It is a translation of a masterpiece work, by a master in literature himself, Percy Shelley. So, you are reading not only Plato's works, but also a work by one of the most influential literary figure in the English world. Secondly, there is an extensive commentary by David O'Connor, not only on the Symposium, but also on Shelley's process and motivation of doing the translation. A superb edition. My final recommendation: pick up either Sharon or Nehamas' book (personally I prefer Sharon's, it is beautifully done) for the translation, and then pick up Stanley Rosen's "Plato's Symposium" for the commentary (I have a separate review for this superb book). However, if you must read 1 and only 1 book, I would stay with Allen's.

The Symposium is what it is: a classic of western culture. So, when one offers a review, it's not about the text itself (I think) but for the translation, presentation and notes. So: Wakefield's translation is the smoothest I've read of this great text. His modern English makes the homoerotic context of the dialogue clear, for one thing. I've taught this text to sleepy undergrads who were clueless about the terms "lover" and "beloved" in the speeches, assuming they were about a boy

and a girl. But the notes are where Wakefield really shines. Wakefield gives not only a readable account of each of the speeches, a special discussion of love in Greek thought, and a literary analysis, but also a useful set of notes at the end. Over all, this is so much better than the tired British translations we used to read in college back in the old days.

This is the same translation as the "Complete Works of Plato" edited by Cooper (known as the "Big Red"), but with an introduction, more notes, and some bibliography. I shouldn't blame the translators for not giving an accurate version of Plato's masterpiece, since their principle of translation is already stated on xxvii: "Our aim has been to produce an idiomatic English version of the Symposium with some literary grace and appropriate variations in style....Sometimes, where the Greek is simple, we have been compelled to be wordy; at other times the situation is reversed." blah blah blah. Fair enough; there should be both literal and literary translations of Plato and I'm happy to see someone attempting the latter while I clearly prefer the former. But there's a limit to everything: just as being overly literal might result in unnecessary unintelligibility that didn't exist in the original, being literary has the danger of turning the practice of translation into paraphrasing. So for example:(214B where Eryximachus speaks to Alcibiades): " 'This is certainly most improper. We cannot simply pour the wine down our throats in silence: we must have some conversation, or at least a song. What we are doing now is hardly civilized.' What Alcibiades said to him was this: 'O Eryximachus, best possible son to the best possible, the most temperate father: Hi!' " A literal translation of the Greek would be something like this: " 'Is this, Alcibiades, the way we're gonna do this? Namely, we are neither speaking in passing the wine-cup nor singing anything, but simply drinking away like those who are thirsty?' And Alcibiades said, 'O Eryximachus, best of the best and the most temperate father: Hi!' "Indeed Eryximachus means that simply drinking without speaking or singing is "improper" or "hardly civilized"; but the words aren't there, and it's not difficult to be "idiomatic" or "literary" even if one sticks to what is actually written. The polite and tentative tone of Eryximachus also becomes rather straightforward and blunt. Moreover, I see no reason for adding "possible" in Alcibiades' reply, and it doesn't make it idiomatic in English. Now this example seems to me guilty of paraphrasing without being wrong; but in another case it becomes simply wrong:185A: "..in every other case it is shameful; both for the deceiver and the person he deceives." The correct translation should be "..in all other cases it is shameful both for the deceived and the one not deceived."Pausanias' point is this: if the beloved intends to get anything other than virtue, then it doesn't matter whether he is deceived or not, it's totally shameful. And there's also a beauty to that - Pausanias never mentions whether it is shameful for the lover to deceive (because he is the

lover of Agathon). By ignoring discussion of whether deceiving is shameful for the lover, Plato artfully points out the flaws inherent in Pausanias' view. These are only a couple among the many unsatisfactory passages that I've noticed up to now (I only compared about 1/6 of the translation with the Greek, and they're numerous enough to horrify me and post this review). One might think that the cases in which these free renderings and/or mistakes occur do not effect the philosophical issues raised in the Symposium, and that's the purpose for which we read Plato. Well if that is the case I'd rather read a summary of or a secondary book on the Symposium than a translation. And who's to say that these dramatic passages have no or less philosophical content? For Plato philosophy is a way of life, and thus one's actions and words respond to one another. And if idiomatic English can be achieved by being faithful to the Greek, why sacrifice the latter? To be fair, Nehamas and Woodruff sometimes do a great job of conveying the tone of the original. Like the ending of Agathon's speech (197d-e) wonderfully reproduces the Gorgianic flavor (jingles, alliterations, rhymes) which is important for appreciation of Agathon's account of eros, and which Socrates picks up for criticism. They also treat the obviously more "philosophical" passages with greater care (more specifically, Diotima's speech) and accuracy as far as I can tell. And at least they did note their several choices of translation when it comes to the keywords in the dialogue (again on xxvii). It also has a nice introduction with some very nice notes that help the reader understand the historical background and notice certain ambiguities in the Greek and/or echoes across different speeches. For these reasons it is certainly a usable book to some extent, and considering the price, I'm willing to give it three stars instead of two.

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