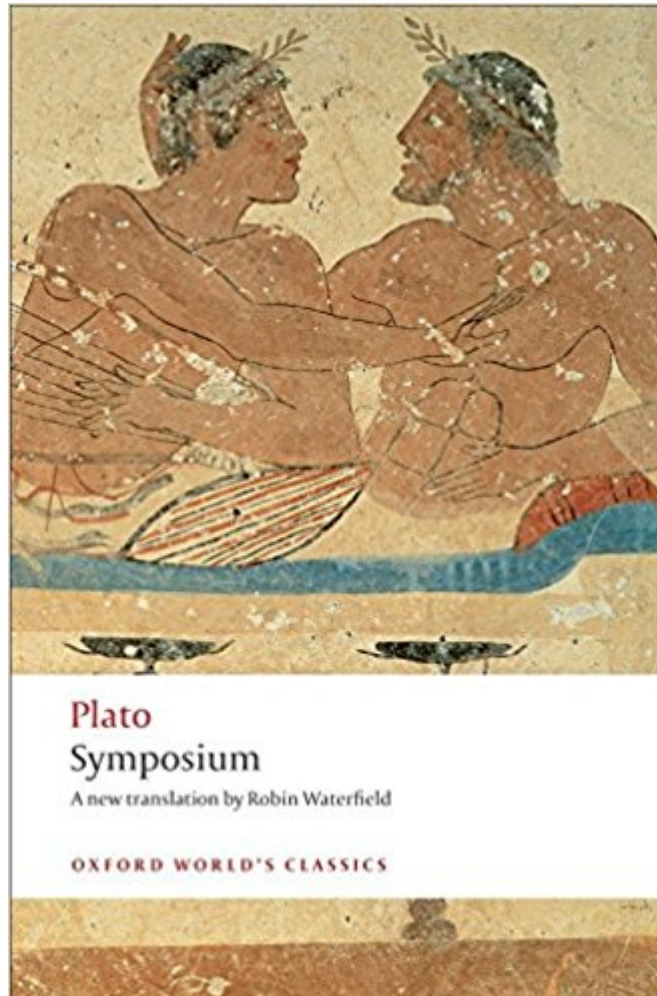




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# Symposium (Oxford World's Classics)



## 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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

'In his lucid introduction Waterfield highlights the artistry and subtleties which might elude non-classicists. He emphasises that Plato's *Symposium* is fun.' Sophia Sackville-West, London Evening Standard

Robin Waterfield is a well-known writer, translator, and editor, much praised for his translations of Plato which include *Philebus* (1982), *Theaetetus* (1987), *Early Socratic Dialogues* (1987), and the *Republic* (1993). He currently works as a consultant editor for Collins-Harvill.

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.

In this fluent and fast-moving translation, Waterfield captures the vibrant quality of Plato's writing and achieves an accurate version of the styles and tones of the original Greek. From the rhetorical flourishes of Agathon to the bold simplicity of Alcibiades, from the learned lecture of Eryximachus to the playful and profound contributions of Socrates, W. succeeds in converting Plato's "seven different styles" (p. xix) into convincing English. The notes on the text encompass both the wider social, historical and mythological background and careful observations on dramatic details of the dialogue (e.g. on 181d, 193a and 222e). Waterfield provides thorough analysis of the arguments on love and discussions of relevant material elsewhere in Plato. He also offers insights into the various problems of translation. Overall this is an excellent work. The translation is faithful to the Greek yet refreshingly modern and the text is supported by a valuable introduction and commentary. With plenty of suggestions for further reading, the book will be of great benefit both to students of the Greek text and general readers seeking an introduction to Plato. Readers will enjoy debating who gives the best speech. My own vote goes to Aristophanes!

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.

With this I read the Hackett edition and I was pleased with it. Unlike many of their other Plato editions, this one had a decent amount of footnotes and a great introduction, with an easy to read translation. I knew beforehand that this book contained dialogues about Eros, but I didn't realize that with many of the dialogues the love is referring to pederasty, I should have guessed from some of the interactions with other Plato dialogues. To someone like myself from a different time and

culture this was slightly disturbing at first, but once I got past my own opinions, this was actually a great dialogue. I did wonder how this dialogue was so well copied throughout the Catholic middle ages, one would think that it would get swept under the rug like so many other documents, but perhaps because its Socrates or just because its good, it got a pass. I think its among the best of the Plato dialogues I've read, it seems more lively and entertaining than some of the others. In this, men at a symposium sit around making speeches in praise of love. I don't remember the first ones very well, but the later ones were pretty good. I liked the popular one by Aristophanes where he tells of a love creation type of myth where people at one time had double the body parts but were separated into two by a god, then they search for their other half. I think my favorite part though happened at the end where Alcibiades comes in drunk and tells stories about Socrates, it gives another dimension to the man and made me appreciate him more (his apology was even more effective when I read it after this).

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