

**THOMAS COOKSEY, *Plato's Symposium*. London; New York: Continuum Books, 2010. Pp. v, 174; ISBN 978-0-826-44417-2. £14.99.**

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Thomas Cooksey's commentary on Plato's *Symposium* fills an important and hitherto neglected niche in recent scholarship on this dialogue. Where most other analyses have been aimed primarily at those who have an established background in ancient philosophy, Cooksey, by contrast, aims to introduce the dialogue to undergraduate students and other newcomers to ancient philosophy and classical studies. The task for an author writing such a work is twofold: first, to give a clear review of the content of the text while preserving the subtleties of the material; and second, to foster and encourage further discussion of, and ever-deeper engagement with the text. In respect to the first task Cooksey is, for the most part, successful, as his overviews of the speeches in the *Symposium* are lucid and engaging, although occasionally he does not communicate effectively the complexity of certain speeches. His execution of the second task is excellent, and it is through his contributions here that Cooksey ensures that his books will be an essential resource for newcomers to the *Symposium*.

Cooksey's book is divided into four sections: an introduction to the context in which Plato wrote (Chapter 1); an overview of the themes of the dialogue (Chapter 2); his review of the text (Chapter 3); and a discussion of the influence of the *Symposium* on figures from a variety of disciplines in the modern and ancient world (Chapter 4). Cooksey's analysis of the text in the third chapter takes up the majority of the book. Following the convention of most commentaries, Cooksey's divides his discussion of the *Symposium* into three parts, giving roughly equal attention to each. The first part includes all the material up until the end of Agathon's speech, and the second and third focus exclusively on the speeches of Socrates and Alcibiades respectively. In following this structure Cooksey's review of Socrates' speech – the heart of the dialogue – is adequately extensive, and it allows him to go into considerable detail in his examination of Alcibiades' speech. But given the amount of material he attempts to cover in the first part of his review his engagement with the first five speeches of the dialogues often lacks in complexity.

Cooksey's examinations of each speech contain a similar structure. To begin Cooksey reviews the biography of the historical figures whom Plato dramatizes in the *Symposium*, and also details their appearances

in other of Plato's dialogues. He then spends somewhere between two to three parts reviewing the content of the speeches, before concluding the discussions by considering briefly two or three issues raised by the speaker. The introductions of the characters are helpful to new readers of Plato, and give a deeper insight into the content of the speeches. The reviews of the speeches, despite being relatively short, are always appropriate in their emphasis, and Cooksey does a fine job in summarizing the main elements of the speeches. It is in respect to his engagement with the speeches, however, that the quality of the discussions most differs. Regarding those speeches that are more superficial, such as those of Phaedrus and Eryximachus, the limited time Cooksey spends on this part of his analysis is appropriate. But for those speeches that are richer in content, particularly those of Pausanias and Aristophanes, to draw out only two issues from these speeches is less appropriate, and the brevity of these discussions belies the complexity of these compositions.

Cooksey's examinations of the speeches of Socrates and Alcibiades follow a similar structure to those of the earlier speakers, the only difference being that he splits his discussion of these passages into several sections. Because of this, and due to the fact that he spends considerably more time on these speeches, Cooksey avoids the problems present in some of the first part of his analysis. Here again Cooksey's review of the speeches is clear and engaging, although it is his discussion of the issues raised in these speeches that will be most helpful to readers. Some highlights in his examination of Socrates' speech include his consideration of the role of Diotima, which contains some fascinating insights regarding the role of priestesses in the ancient world (64-7, 92-5), and his analysis of Socrates' presentation of immortality (86-92), that contains an excellent review of important interpretations of this passage, and an interesting discussion of the uniqueness of the model of immortality Socrates advances here.

In his examination of Alcibiades' speech one of the most interesting discussions concerns the significance of the famous general's equations of Socrates with Marsyas and Silenus. Here Cooksey provides great insight into the significance of these figures in mythology, and advances the attractive suggestion that (among other things) Alcibiades uses this image to highlight the violence he believes Socrates to have done to him (103-7). Equally as noteworthy, though perhaps less successful, is Cooksey's attempt to locate Alcibiades on Socrates' 'Ladder of Love' (117-23). By appealing to various claims Alcibiades makes throughout his speech Cooksey situates Alcibiades on the fourth rung of the Ladder, gazing upon a sea of beautiful objects, but not yet in the presence of the form of Beauty. Although a thought-provoking exercise I do not believe that such a task can be successful. For Socrates a lover cannot even

count himself as being situated on the bottom rung of the Ladder until he has committed himself to the active pursuit of beauty, and the production of good for oneself in its presence. Alcibiades fails to match this description as, although he does pursue the beautiful Socrates, he is satisfied to be a passive recipient of the latter's virtue, and expects Socrates' wisdom to be poured into him like wine into a jug.

In an introductory work such as this it is not so important that the author contribute original insights concerning his subject-matters, and, indeed, this is not one of Cooksey's main goals. His work very often contains discussions of particular issues that are more synoptic and more clearly expressed than in other analyses of the *Symposium*, but these discussions usually contain a review of the interpretations of other scholars. At times, however, Cooksey does challenge and build on the extant literature. The most notable addition Cooksey makes is his contention, which, to my mind, has never been advanced in any other commentary on the *Symposium*, that eros is a passionate and non-rational, rather than a rational, desire (77-8, 99). The only other scholars who have come close to such a view are Martha Nussbaum (*The Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge, 1986)) and C. D. C. Reeve ('Plato on Eros and Friendship' in Hugh Benson (ed), *A Companion to Plato* (Massachusetts and Oxford, 2009)), although the former (certainly) and the latter (seemingly) conclude that eros is transformed into a rational desire as the lover moves up the Ladder. Cooksey's suggestion here is truly novel, and although he does not argue for the case rigorously, he does provide sufficient evidence for this view to be at least entertained by Plato scholars.

Plato's *Symposium* is so thick with meaning that, even if commentators spent ten times as long reviewing the material as Cooksey does, they would still only have scratched the surface of the significance of the dialogue. In an introduction to the *Symposium*, then, it is imperative that the author opens up paths towards deeper insight into the dialogue, and motivates students to reflect on the dialogue for themselves. Throughout his book Cooksey employs several means to fulfill these functions, including: i) familiarizing the reader with the historical and cultural context in which Plato wrote; ii) highlighting passages in other dialogues that bear relevance to the *Symposium*; iii) discussing the influence of Plato's *Symposium* on the works of thinkers with whom the reader is already familiar; and iv) most importantly, by examining the purpose of the Platonic dialogue.

The opening chapter of this work, in which Cooksey reviews the context in which Plato wrote, is littered with pithy historical discussions. Particularly of note here is his discussion of *symposia* (8-10), in which Cooksey outlines both the historical significance of such events, and

Socrates' various comments on such engagements in the dialogues. These historical discussions give the reader insight into the deeper meanings of various parts of the text, and the references to other dialogues open the reader to Platonic thought in its wider context. Similar kinds of discussions are found throughout Cooksey's book, and another that is of note is Cooksey's introduction to *daimones*, found in his review of Socrates' speech (68-70).

In the final chapter of his analysis of the *Symposium* Cooksey reviews the influence of Plato's *Symposium* on various thinkers. Like Cooksey's references to other Platonic dialogues, the discussions in this chapter open up various avenues of interest for readers, although here more to modern streams of thought. Cooksey goes through a number of examples that include film and television adaptations of the dialogue, psychoanalysts who have been influenced by Plato, as well as various literary figures who have fallen in love with the dialogue. Being a professor of English, Cooksey brings a great deal of material to bear here, and his discussions of 'Silenic' texts and 'poet-philosophers' (writers who, like Plato, tread a fine line between poets and philosophers) contain some fascinating comparisons of which I was hitherto oblivious. There were some notable omissions, however. In the section on psychoanalysis no mention was made of Freud – a shame, as there are several high quality analyses that explore the relationship between Plato's *Symposium* and Freud (see especially Gerasimos Santas, *Plato and Freud* (Oxford, 1988)). His discussion of Platonic love is also rather brief, focusing only on Marsilio Ficino. Given that 'Platonic love' is a familiar term in modern vernacular some discussion of our understanding of this phenomenon in contemporary times would have been of interest to students.

The second chapter of Cooksey's work is entitled 'Reading the Text', and it contains two important discussions for new readers of Plato. Here Cooksey outlines his reasons for taking the (commendable) approach of examining the dramatic details of the dialogue as well as the arguments and ideas raised in the speeches. In his review of the text Cooksey does a fine job of demonstrating how Plato integrates these two elements in order to communicate meaning, thus painting a rich picture of the *Symposium* for the reader. But most impressive in this section is Cooksey's discussion of the purpose of Platonic dialogues – an issue of which Cooksey constantly reminds the reader throughout his book. In his dialogues, Cooksey argues, Plato is not "transmitting doctrine that can be reduced to a series of wise maxims to be taken away as if they were offered in the spirit of traditional wisdom literature ... Rather, by creating a work of art, part narrative, part dramatic, Plato engages us in a more visceral process, the various parts contributing to the impact of the whole" (58). Cooksey is constantly drawing the reader's attention to

the ambiguities in the text, and the various levels of what he calls 'narrative frame', in order to invite the reader to "rethink and reinterpret what he or she has read" (130). In doing this Cooksey demands of the reader that they engage with the *Symposium* for themselves, and directs them to search for ever-more meaning from the text.

Cooksey's analysis of the *Symposium* offers clear and engaging reviews of the text without downplaying its complexity, and it does much to open up discussion of the text, and impel readers to engage with the dialogue for themselves. It is certainly the best available introduction to the *Symposium* for beginners in Plato.