

**THE BANQUET OF
PLATO AND
OTHER PIECES**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649109005

The Banquet of Plato and other pieces by Percy Bysshe Shelley

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PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY

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THE BANQUET OF PLATO

AND OTHER PIECES



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*From the Painting by George Clint, A.R.A.,
in the National Portrait Gallery.*

THE BANQUET OF PLATO

AND OTHER PIECES

Translated and Original

BY

PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY

With an Introduction by
HENRY MORLEY



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LONDON, PARIS, NEW YORK
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INTRODUCTION.

IN March, 1818, Percy Bysshe Shelley, in the twenty-sixth year of his life, and four years before his death, left England for Italy, there to seek health. He had been warned to avoid, for a time, the excitement of original composition. In July of that year he was at the baths of Lucca, still languid, reading Plato and Herodotus, and the Italian poets, when it occurred to him, "in despair of producing anything original," as he said in a letter to William Godwin, that he would make a translation of Plato's "Banquet." This he did under the spell of what he felt as "the divine eloquence" of the book itself, for his own double enjoyment, in the pleasure of companionship with Plato, and the pleasure of so introducing Plato to his wife. He began his translation on the 9th of July, finished the first draught on the 17th, and spent the next three days in revision. Mary Shelley then wrote a fair copy, and Shelley, prompted by his wife's comment on some of the

views of Plato concerning love and friendship, began "A Discourse in the Manner of the Ancients relative to the Subject of Love."

Shelley's translation of the "Banquet" of Plato was first published eighteen years after his death, by Mrs. Shelley, in 1840, in two volumes of "Essays, Letters from Abroad, Translations, and Fragments." They included the translation of Plato's "Ion," which comes to us through transcripts that do not give the work in all parts exactly as it left the hands of Shelley. In the same volumes Mrs. Shelley added to "Ion" her husband's translation of the fragment of "Menexenus," as "another admirable specimen of Socratic irony."

The translations of the "Banquet," or "Symposium," that had preceded Shelley's, Mrs. Shelley described as "dry and stiff compared with the soaring poetry, the grace, subtlety, and infinite variety of Plato. They want also," she said, "the dramatic vivacity and the touch of nature that vivifies the pages of the Athenian. These are all found here. Shelley commands language splendid and melodious as Plato, and renders faithfully the elegance and the gaiety which make the 'Symposium' as amusing as it is sublime. The whole

mechanism of the drama, for such in some sort it is—the enthusiasm of Apollodorus, the sententiousness of Eryximachus, the wit of Aristophanes, the rapt and golden eloquence of Agathon, the subtle dialectics and grandeur of aim of Socrates, the drunken outbreak of Alcibiades—are given with grace and animation. The picture presented reminds us of that talent which, in a less degree, we may suppose to have dignified the orgies of the last generation of free-spirited wits—Burke, Fox, Sheridan, and Curran. It has something of licence—too much, indeed, and perforce omitted; but of coarseness, that worst sin against our nature, it has nothing.”

Plato was essentially the poet among philosophers, and Shelley, whose mind, even in school-boy days, Plato had touched, felt him as he could never be felt by any student who brought to his reading logic and philosophy, but left out of account the dramatic genius, the glow of human feeling, the bright flashes of poetic insight. Socrates lives for us in Xenophon’s “Memorabilia” and “Apology” of Socrates, and in the Dialogues of Plato, who left himself out of his writings, and ascribed all his finest thought to the beloved master under whom he began to study when