



Jowett, Benjamin (1817-1893)

by Nikolai Endres

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Benjamin Jowett was a classical scholar and unorthodox theologian. For glbtq purposes, he is remembered especially for his translations of Plato's erotic dialogues, his investigations of "Greek love," and his influence on Matthew Arnold, John Addington Symonds, Algernon Swinburne, Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde, Gerard Manley Hopkins, E. M. Forster, and others.

However, inasmuch as his translations bowdlerized Plato and obscured the homoerotic relationships in Greek literature, Jowett's contribution to the glbtq literary tradition is decidedly mixed. He might best be remembered as a poignant example of the hypocrisy and embattled relationships with sexuality that resulted from the homophobia of the Victorian age.

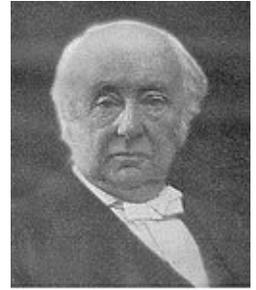
Jowett was born in Camberwell on April 15, 1817. His family supported the Evangelical movement in the Church of England. After attending St. Paul's School in London, Jowett obtained a scholarship to Balliol College, Oxford in 1836. In 1838, he was awarded a fellowship and graduated with first-class honors one year later. As a student, he soon got involved in the Tractarian movement and flirted with High Anglicanism.

Jowett stayed at the university as a tutor and was ordained a clergyman in 1842. In the 1840s, he also became a student of German skeptical criticism. Although he was rejected for the mastership at Balliol in 1854, the following year Jowett was appointed to the Greek professorship. He became Master of Balliol in 1870. He died on October 1, 1893, regarded as one of the great Hellenists of his time.

Jowett is remembered for his Greek translations and studies, some of which were quite controversial. *The Epistles of Saint Paul* (1855), for example, aroused controversy among theologians because the work was a (too) liberal interpretation of the writings of the apostle. *Essays and Reviews* (1860), of which Jowett was a co-author, even led to charges of heresy, but he was acquitted by a chancellor's court at Oxford.

More famously, Jowett translated Plato's dialogues in four volumes (1871; second and third editions in five volumes in 1875 and 1892), as well as Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* (1881) and Aristotle's *Politics* (1885).

In Victorian England, where homosexuality was the sin not to be mentioned among Christians and, as Oscar Wilde termed it, the love that dare not speak its name, translating Plato proved problematic. He is the most eminent of Greek writers on homosexual themes, and homoerotic activity is a crucial subject of his writing. For all his willingness to court controversy in his Biblical translations, Jowett showed a lack of courage in his translations of Plato, which may be why they were so well received and remained the standard texts for almost a century.



Top: A portrait of Benjamin Jowett.
Above: A caricature of Benjamin Jowett by Carlo Pellegrini published in 1876.

Jowett sought to establish Hellenistic studies as an attractive alternative to Christian theology and also to prevent his students from investigating too deeply matters of Greek love and glorifying a "Uranian" counterdiscourse of male homosexuality. Jowett proudly extolled Platonic studies--"Aristotle is dead, but Plato is alive"--but bowdlerized his translations in order to make Plato conform to Victorian mores. Frank Turner quotes Jowett's questionable rationale: "Had [Plato] lived in our times, he would have made the transposition himself." (Jowett may actually have a point, but it is hardly a view to which a translator should subscribe.)

A memorable scene in E. M. Forster's *Maurice* makes Jowett's dilemma clear. Maurice and Clive are attending a Greek translation class; when they come to some particularly suggestive passages, Mr. Cornwallis exhorts them: "Omit: a reference to the unspeakable vice of the Greeks." Of course, just like Jowett's efforts to tone down the erotic and physical in Plato, so the dean's injunctions actually draw his students' attention to the censored material.

For example, in his Introduction to the *Symposium*, Jowett downplays Phaedrus' great encomium to homoerotic love and to Achilles and Patroclus and instead blows the minor (heterosexual) example of Alcestis' love for her husband out of proportion. For Plato's stance on homoerotic love, Jowett uncritically and one-sidedly refers the reader to the *Laws*: "it is impossible to deny that some of the best and greatest of the Greeks indulged in attachments, which Plato in the *Laws*, no less than the universal opinion of Christendom, has stigmatized as unnatural."

Next, Alcibiades bears the brunt of Jowett's grudges: "in his drunken state [he] is able to tell of things which he would have been ashamed to mention if he had been sober." Socrates is not immune from criticism either: "[he] does not appear to regard the greatest evil of Greek life as a matter of abhorrence." Plato himself fares hardly better: "Nor does Plato feel any repugnance, such as would be felt in modern times, in bringing his great master and hero into connection with nameless crimes."

Finally, Jowett neutralizes gender markers, preferring harmless terms such as "friend," "lover," and "beloved" to "boy," "man," and "boyfriend"; more specifically, in Pausanias' speech in the *Symposium*, Jowett too coyly translates *hupourgein* and *charizesthai* as "yield any compliance" and "yield with honor," while the verbs actually mean "to give sexual pleasure."

Similarly, Jowett planned to expound the view that homosexual love in Plato was merely a "matter of metaphor" and "figure of speech." Only when John Addington Symonds severely reprimanded him for delving into something of which he knew so little (and which could be so "dangerous to certain characters in youth") did Jowett drop the project.

There is, of course, a long tradition of mistranslating Plato and minimizing the physical element in Greek love. What makes Jowett's bowdlerization of Plato and deliberate mischaracterization of Greek homosexual activity so surprising is that Jowett himself was almost certainly attracted to men. He never married, felt riveted by male beauty, bonded with his (male) students, lived in a homosocial environment, and showed a revealing interest in Greek homoeroticism.

Jowett's biographer, Geoffrey Faber, collects interesting details about Jowett's emotional life. His physical appearance was not conventionally masculine: "As a boy he looked like a girl; as an old man he looked and spoke something like a eunuch"; his classmates teasingly referred to him as "Miss Jowett." His relationship with the most important woman in his life, Florence Nightingale, who was herself probably a lesbian, was merely "Platonic": "He never desired her as a woman, nor did she ever desire him as a man."

In response to an "outbreak of abnormal immorality" among young men at Oxford, Jowett was, in the words of a close friend, "the wisest, most prudent and gentlest of counsellors" and "a help and blessing to many beyond what it is possible to publish." Apparently, certain events remained unspeakable, but Jowett showed courage for dealing with the problem responsibly.

Later, Algernon Swinburne tried to clear Jowett's name of allegations of improper conduct, pointedly disassociating him from Walt Whitman, Symonds, and other "Uranians": "The cult of the calamus [a reference to Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*], as expounded by Mr. Addington Symonds to his fellow-calamites, would have found no acceptance or tolerance with the translator of Plato." But is not the irascible Swinburne protesting too much? As a matter of fact, when Symonds was falsely accused of "corrupting" Magdalen College choirboys, Jowett, fully aware of Symonds' sexual proclivities, stood by his side and helped clear Symonds' name.

Other incidents complete the picture. When Hallam Tennyson was compiling a biography of his father, Lord Tennyson, he asked Jowett for a critique of *In Memoriam*, the poem in which Tennyson eulogizes his friend Arthur Hallam. Jowett's reply is quoted by Richard Dellamora: "[Tennyson] found [Shakespeare's] sonnets a deeper expression of the never to be forgotten love which he felt more than any of the many moods of many minds which appear among the dramas. The love of the sonnets which he so strikingly expressed was a sort of sympathy with Hellenism."

Jowett was probably homosexually inclined, but he also had a strong aversion to sexual intercourse: "There is not the slightest indication that Jowett ever knew by direct or deliberate experience the quality of sexual enjoyment," his biographer concludes. Maybe his sexual orientation is best termed "homosocial."

The reticence of Jowett's publications about Greek homoeroticism points up the price Victorian prudery, cant, and intolerance exacted of men who desired other men. As one of the leading classicists of his age, Jowett certainly knew that his translations were less than honest. But that was the price of respectability and of the comfortable life he led as an Oxford don. Surely, the knowledge of his misrepresentation of Hellenism must have also cost Jowett a considerable decrease in self-esteem.

Finally, Jowett has been the inspiration for a number of literary characters. Not only did Forster find in him the prototype of the self-denying schoolmaster Mr. Cornwallis in *Maurice*, but W. H. Mallock modeled Dr. Jenkinson in *The New Republic* (1877) on him. More recently, Jowett makes an appearance in Tom Stoppard's play *The Invention of Love* (1997).

Jowett's translations have been reissued in cheap paperback editions by Dover and by major publishing houses such as Penguin and Modern Library; his texts are reproduced in standard anthologies, such as Norton, and in the collection (with the singularly misleading and anachronistic title) *Plato on Homosexuality: Lysis, Phaedrus and Symposium* by Prometheus Books, where fresh translations are highlighted in brackets besides Jowett's.

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About the Author

Nikolai Endres received his Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill in 2000. As an associate professor at Western Kentucky University, he teaches Great Books, British literature, classics, mythology, and gay and lesbian studies. He has published on Plato, Petronius, Gustave Flaubert, Oscar Wilde, E. M. Forster, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Mary Renault, Gore Vidal, Patricia Nell Warren, and others. His next project is a "queer" reading of the myth and music of Richard Wagner. He is also working on a book-length study of Platonic love as a homoerotic code in the modern gay novel.