It is notoriously difficult to discover the truth about erotic love, difficult even to discover who we ought to learn it from (Freud, Darwin, the family doctor, a more experienced friend, a more experienced lover, a less experienced lover . . .?). It is this latter difficulty that the Symposium addresses. It is about erôs, about erotic love, certainly, but it is as much about authority in things erotic as it is about ta erôtika themselves.

My discussion, which outlines an approach to the Symposium as a whole, will proceed in four stages mingling topics as seems appropriate. In Part I, I discuss Agathon, Pausanius, Eryximachus, Aristophanes, and Phaedrus; in Part II, Socrates and his examination of Agathon; in Part III, Diotima’s Speech; and in Part IV the speech of Alcibiades.
the list of characters is in fact carefully chosen to further the purposes of the dialogue itself. I am not confident that I have got to the bottom of the Symposium's list, but I am pretty sure that I have gone some significant way towards it.

Agathon, Pausanius, Eryximachus, Aristophanes, and Phaedrus are representatives of the various kinds of people from whom Athenians (or Athenian men, at any rate) acquired their views about erotic love: we have a tragic poet (Agathon), a comic poet (Aristophanes), a doctor (Eryximachus), an erastēs (Pausanias), and an erōmenos (Phaedrus). These are the equivalents of the erotic authorities from whom we learn about love: novelists, journalists, movie makers (Agathon, Aristophanes), and doctors (Eryximachus). We lack an exact equivalent for Pausanias and Phaedrus because our culture does not have the ritualized form of homosexuality, through which young men were supposed to learn aretē or virtue, that they represent. But the sometimes recommended "older man" or "younger woman" are no doubt rough analogues.

The speeches are interesting and I used to believe that they are intended to be mapped in some way onto the stages of the ascent of love Diotima discusses, but I no longer believe that or

3. The dramatic date of the Symposium is 416 BC, the year of Agathon's first victory. The historical Phaedrus was then probably in his mid-thirties - a bit old for an erōmenos. But Phaedrus' speech suggests that this is his preferred erotic identity.

4. In the Protagoras, Socrates distinguishes between a "symposium of common, vulgar fellows" and a "symposium [συμπόσιον] of well-bred, educated people [καλοὶ κἀγαθοὶ]" (347c ff.). Flute-girls feature prominently in the former but are absent from the latter, where the members of the symposium "entertain one another with their own conversation without any such childish trifles, speaking and listening in turn in a dignified fashion, even if they drink a great deal" (347d5-e1). The fact that the flute-girl is dismissed from Agathon's symposium (176e) pegs it as a symposium of καλοὶ κἀγαθοὶ. But, as Manuela Tecusan points out, in a brilliant study of Plato's various treatments of the symposium, "at the same time it [Agathon's symposium] does not fulfil this ideal, on account both of the rhetorical quality of the logoi and of the general descent into revelry at the end. So it might stand as an example of that kind of second-best συμπόσιον alluded to in Protagoras 347c5-7, which, failing to meet the standards of a συνοψια δι' εαυτῶν, remains at least a συνοψια δι' ευνόμων λογίων, all the more so as Socrates himself delivers there the right sort of λόγος συμποτικός, essentially different from those of the others." See Tecusan 1990.