

Interrogating Romantic Love

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Despite its ubiquity, the term ‘romantic love’ is a relatively recent creation. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a romantic notion was a whimsical flight of fancy, something which was ‘partly true, partly romantick’. Writing in a ‘romantic stile’ meant using overblown flowery language akin to a romance.¹ It was not until the closing decades of the nineteenth century that the term gained currency to refer to a particular kind of love, distinct from filial, maternal, paternal, brotherly and sisterly love.² Its origins and defining characteristics have since been subject to continued debate among historians, philosophers, and literary critics. In his famous but controversial study *Love in the Western World*, the philosopher Denis de Rougemont situated the invention of romantic love in the medieval romances of the courtly tradition.³ This notion has since been firmly rejected by scholars such as Irving Singer, who present Romantic love – with a capital ‘R’ – as a characteristically modern idea, intrinsically connected with the rise of Romanticism.⁴ For others, romantic love as we understand it today derives from the classical concept of *erōs*, and so is interchangeable with the term ‘erotic love’.⁵ If its origins are new, historians (and everyone else too) tend to use it capaciously for all times and places, and with reference to quite different types of relationships.

Given the elasticity of the term today, what does it mean to write of romantic love? Is it a particular cultural expression of emotion, associated perhaps with chaste medieval courtships, and reappearing in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as prelude and response to Romanticism? If so, what connects these quite different historical emotional forms, other than a shared etymology? Or is romantic love something more generic – the

¹ ‘Romantic, adj. and n.’. OED Online. June 2019. Oxford University Press. <https://www-oed-com.oxfordbrookes.idm.oclc.org/view/Entry/167122?rskey=F9MELN&result=1> (accessed June 24, 2019).

² See for example Henry Theophilus Finck, *Romantic Love and Personal Beauty: Their Development, Causal Relations, Historic and National Peculiarities* (London, 1887), pp. 16-29.

³ Denis de Rougemont, *Love in the Western World*, trans. Montgomery Belgion (Princeton, NJ, [1956] 1980). Similarly, see Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, Vol. II: Power and Civility (New York, 1982), p. 83.

⁴ Irving Singer, *The Nature of Love*, Vol. II: Courtly and Romantic (Cambridge, MA, and London, 2009), pp. 283-302.

⁵ Robert C. Solomon, ‘The Virtue of (Erotic) Love’ in *idem* and Kathleen M. Higgins (eds) *The Philosophy of (Erotic) Love* (Lawrence, KS, 1991), pp. 492-518.

‘longing for association’ that William Reddy suggests in *The Making of Romantic Love* – that speaks of the desire for two individuals to form a connection that marks their relationship as discrete from the rest of society?⁶ If the latter, romantic love might be found in almost all times and places, but does this do a disservice to ‘romantic’ as a conceptual framework? This special issue ‘Interrogating Romantic Love’ asks what is encompassed by this term in Britain across the seventeenth to twentieth centuries with a particular focus on how ‘love’ is produced, practiced and expressed.

In doing so, the special issue contributes to a growing scholarship analysing emotions as a cultural and social practice. The history of love had a head start here, a topic at the heart of a long-running debate around how the family and, through it, society evolved. For historians like Lawrence Stone, the rise of the affective family in the eighteenth century marked a transitional moment in the making of modernity – the right to marry for love became a key evidence of the growing rights of the individual, and so associated with other key modern institutions – democracy, the nuclear family, the market economy and so forth.⁷ Medieval and early modern historians provided a robust response to such teleology, arguing instead for the significance of affective ties over time.⁸

More recently, historians, now writing with a history of emotions in view, sought to explore what terms like love and affection meant and how that related to social experience in particular times and places. For some, this enabled a trajectory of romantic love in the west, from the domesticity and touch of the early modern, to the union of souls of the eighteenth century, to the companionate love of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the confluent love of the modern.⁹ If the form and function of romantic love varied across time, historians have asked similar questions of it, seeking to understand how it felt; its association with gendered practices and power relationships; its relation to ideas of self, individuality and their

⁶ William Reddy, *The Making of Romantic Love: Longing and Sexuality in Europe, South Asia, and Japan, 900-1200CE* (Chicago, 2012).

⁷ Edward Shorter, *The Making of the Modern Family* (London, 1976); Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800* (London, 1977); William Goode, ‘The Theoretical Importance of Love’, *American Sociological Review*, 24, (1959), pp. 38-47; Anthony Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love & Eroticism in Modern Societies* (Cambridge, 1992); Eva Illouz, *Why Love Hurts: A Sociological Explanation* (Cambridge, 2013).

⁸ Keith Wrightson, *English Society 1580-1680* (London, 1982); Linda Pollock, ‘“An Action like a Stratagem”: Courtship and Marriage from the Middle Ages to the Twentieth Century,’ *The Historical Journal* 30.2 (1987): 483-98; Peter Borschied, ‘Romantic Love and Material Interest: Choosing Partners in Nineteenth-Century Germany,’ *Journal of Family History* 11-12 (1986-7): 157-68; Francesca M. Cancian, *Love in America: Gender and Self-Development* (Cambridge, 1987).

⁹ Theodore Zeldin, *An Intimate History of Humanity* (London, 1998); Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy*.

collapse in ‘the other’; and the role of love in the production of society.¹⁰ Modernity has remained a critical dimension in discussions of romantic love, as western models for sexuality and relationships spread globally, following imperialism and colonialism, missionary efforts, and later global popular culture (if not without local resistances and adaptations).¹¹

Drawing on approaches from the history of emotions, this special issue explores romantic love as a social and cultural practice, seeking to highlight love not just as a singular idea or experience but something produced, and shaped, within the everyday. The linguistic, material and emotional dimensions of ‘making love’ – meaning to court or woo – have evolved significantly over time. By the eighteenth century, Samuel Johnson’s *Dictionary of the English Language* described suitors embarking on ‘lovesuits’ using ‘lovetricks’ and ‘lovetoys’, which mediated the understanding, expression, and hence the experience of love itself.¹² The articles in this special issue explore the social customs of falling and staying in love through love letters, valentine cards, romantic gifts and similar ritual exchanges, not least the marriage ritual itself. Across the issue, we investigate how men and women negotiated the process of falling in and out of love, and how this varied according to gender,

¹⁰ Walter G. Andrews and Mehmet Kalpakli, *The Age of Beloveds: Love and the Beloved in Early Modern Ottoman and European Culture and Society* (Durham, 2005); Claudia Jarzebowski, ‘The Meaning of Love: Emotion and Kinship in Sixteenth-Century Incest Discourses,’ in *Mixed Marriages: Transgressive Unions in Germany from the Reformation to the Enlightenment*, ed. David Luebke and Mary Lindemann (Oxford, 2014), 166-83; Claire Langhamer, ‘Love, Selfhood and Authenticity in Post-War Britain,’ *Cultural and Social History* 9.2 (2012): 277-97; Claire Langhamer, *The English in Love: The Intimate Story of an Emotional Revolution* (Oxford, 2013); Alana Harris and Timothy W. Jones (eds), *Love and Romance in Britain, 1918-1970* (Houndmills, 2015); Caroline Arni, ‘Simultaneous Love: an Argument on Love, Modernity and the Feminist Subject at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century,’ *European Review of History* 11 (2004): 185-205; Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Love: On the Frailty of Human Bonds* (Cambridge, 2003); Jacquie Gabb and Janet Fink, *Couple Relationships in the 21st Century* (Houndmills, 2015); Lynn Jamieson, *Intimacy: Personal Relationships in Modern Societies* (Cambridge, 1998); Katie Barclay, *Love, Intimacy and Power: Marriage and Patriarchy in Scotland, 1650-1850* (Manchester, 2011); Sonia Cancian, ‘The Language of Gender in Lovers’ Correspondence, 1946-1949,’ *Gender & History* 24.3 (2012): 755-65; Lena Gunnarson, *The Contradictions of Love: Towards a Feminist-Realist Ontology of Sociosexuality* (London, 2014); Anna G. Jónasdóttir and Ann Ferguson (eds), *Love: A Question for Feminism in the Twenty-First Century* (London, 2014).

¹¹ Saheed Aderinto, ‘Modernizing Love: Gender, Romantic Passion and Youth Literary Culture in Colonial Nigeria,’ *Africa* 85.3 (2015): 478-500; Temilola Alanamu, ‘“You May Bind Me, You May Beat Me, You May Even Kill Me”: Bridewealth, Consent and Conversion in Nineteenth-Century Abéòkúta (in Present-day Southwest Nigeria),’ *Gender & History* 27.2 (2015): 329-48; Lynn Osborn, *Our New Husbands Are Here: Households, Gender, and Politics in a West African State from the Slave Trade to Colonial Rule* (Athens, 2011); Insa Nolte, ‘New Histories of Marriage and Politics in Africa,’ *Gender & History* 29.3 (2017): 742-48; Janet Theiss, ‘Love in a Confucian Climate: the Perils of Intimacy in Eighteenth-Century China,’ *Nan Nü* 11.2 (2009): 197-33; Ann Laura Stoler, *Haunted by Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History* (Durham, 2006); Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette Burton (eds), *Moving Subjects: Gender, Mobility and Intimacy in an Age of Global Empire* (Urbana, 2009); Adele Perry, ‘The Autocracy of Love and the Legitimacy of Empire: Intimacy, Power and Scandal in Nineteenth-Century Metlakahtlah,’ *Gender & History* 16. 2 (2004): 261-88.

¹² Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language: In Which The Words are deduced from their Originals, And Illustrated in their Different Significations By Examples from the best Writers* (London, 1756), Vol. II, p. 74.

rank, region, religion, and over time. A study of romantic love must explore the contexts in which its rituals were appropriate, at times expanding the traditional boundaries of love between courting men and women to illicit love, same-sex love, and love as a relation to the divine. Across their articles, our authors explore how the performance and production of romantic love shapes the nature of marriage, relationships, communities, culture and society, and historical change. Romantic love is thus not just feeling, but how feeling reciprocally operates to produce our social world.

A central contribution made by this special issue to the history of romantic love is the important role of material culture and the everyday in the operation of emotion. That objects, landscape, and physical environment are emotional – producing or enhancing particular emotions, placing boundaries on feeling, becoming ‘sticky’ with emotion themselves and thus implicated in the circulation of emotional economies – is a topic of increasing interest amongst historians.¹³ Goods and objects have long been associated with romantic love, an emotion evidenced through the giving and acceptance of gifts, the exchange of rings, hair or similar tokens, and associated with the creation of the household, a site of economy, production and reproduction. The symbolic and affective value of particular objects often exceeds their monetary worth, stemming from their longstanding association with romantic rituals and the practice of setting up home. Such objects provide valuable access to a nonverbal language of love, which can take histories of emotions beyond the textual sources on which they are so often reliant. Equally important is how individuals used such objects in practice, whether pored over or set aside, displayed or hidden from the wider community, discarded or preserved for posterity.¹⁴

¹³ Stephanie Downes, Sally Holloway and Sarah Randles (eds), *Feeling Things: Objects and Emotions through History* (Oxford, 2018); Sally Holloway, *The Game of Love in Georgian England: Courtship, Emotions and Material Culture* (Oxford, 2019); Alicia Marchant (ed.) *Historicising Heritage and Emotions: The Affective Histories of Blood, Stone and Land* (London and New York, 2019); Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh, 2004); Anna Moran and Sorcha O’Brien (eds), *Love Objects: Emotion, Design and Material Culture* (London, 2014); Joanne Begiato, ‘Beyond the Rule of Thumb: the Materiality of Marital Violence in England c. 1700-1857’, *Cultural and Social History* 15.1 (2018): 39-59; Sasha Handley, ‘Objects, Emotions and an Early Modern Bed-Sheet’, *History Workshop Journal* 85 (2018), 169-94; Jennine Hurl-Eamon, ‘Love Tokens: Objects as Memory for Plebeian Women in Early Modern England’, *Early Modern Women: an Interdisciplinary Journal* 6 (2011): 181-86; Maya Wassell Smith, “‘The fancy work what sailors make’”: Material and Emotional Creative Practice in Masculine Seafaring Communities’, *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies* 14.2 (2018): <http://www.ncgsjournal.com/issue142/smith.htm>

¹⁴ See for example Sarah Anne Bendall, ‘To Write a Distick upon It: Busks and the Language of Courtship and Sexual Desire in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century England’, *Gender & History* 26.2 (2014): 199-222; David Cressy, *Birth, Marriage and Death: Ritual, Religion, and the Life Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford, 1996), pp. 263-6; Holloway, *The Game of Love in Georgian England*, pp. 69-117; Vicki Howard, ‘A “Real Man’s Ring”: Gender and the Invention of Tradition’, *Journal of Social History* 36.4 (2003): 837-56; Diana O’Hara, *Courtship and Constraint: Rethinking the Making of Marriage in Tudor and Stuart England* (Manchester, 2000), pp. 57-98; Marcia Pointon, “‘Surrounded with Brilliants’”: Miniature Portraits in Eighteenth-Century England’, *The Art Bulletin* 83.1 (2001): 48-71; Peter Rushton, ‘The Testament of Gifts:

The special issue opens with Sarah Ann Robin's article on amorous gifts selected by men in seventeenth-century England. Robin highlights how the gifts middling and elite men presented to their lovers, through motifs indicating their virility, fertility and capacity to provide, offered a particular gendered model for love and marriage. Sex, desire and the promise of a fertile union both recognised physical attraction as critical to marital love, and redirected it to the orderly production of the fruitful family-household. A similar focus on gifts arises in Sally Holloway's examination of the evolution of Valentine's Day customs in England between c.1660 and 1830. If Robin's gifts led to patriarchal marriage, this holiday provided a moment of carnivalesque play and reconsideration of the promise of marriage and what it entailed. Valentine's rituals offered women, in particular, an opportunity to resist a model of courtship where they often had limited agency. Katie Barclay conversely looks at the wedding certificate as an example of everyday materialities, exploring their role in enabling the conditions for emotional expression and feeling in Scotland over the long eighteenth century, whether in acting as security for women, or representing marriage as a relationship that embedded people in community. Here the wedding certificate reinforced a patriarchal and communally-orientated model for loving. For all these authors, emotional objects not only represented feeling, but became part of the practice of love, shaping its form and meaning.

If material culture helped to give form to love, for many lovers of the eighteenth century and later, love was ineffable. It was a feeling expected to transport lovers beyond language and outward expression, to exceed the possibilities of everyday communication.¹⁵ Clara Tuite explores this idea in her article on 'speechlessness' in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's best-selling novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774) and the associated cult of 'Werther-fever' that grew up around it. Tuite argues that 'Werther-fever' was part of a moment of the 'impassioning' of romantic love, where it moved from a socially-disruptive emotion, a challenge to patriarchal order, to a desirable expression of the self and its relationality. Rather than limiting communication, speechlessness became a mechanism to share emotion – the blank page filled by mutual recognition of love's excess, its refusal of containment. Like Barclay then, Tuite emphasises romantic love as an emotion that extends

Marriage Tokens and Disputed Contracts in North-East England, 1560-1630', *Folk Life* 24.1 (1985): 25-31; Diana Scarisbrick, *Historic Rings: Four Thousand Years of Craftsmanship* (Tokyo, 2004).

¹⁵ Renata Grossi, 'Romantic Love: Our 'Cultural Core', 'General Ideology' and 'Undeclared Religion'?', *Contemporary Sociology*, 43.5 (2014): 637-639; Katie Barclay, 'Love and Violence in the Music of Late Modernity', *Popular Music and Society* 41 (2018): 539-55; Sarah Pinto, 'Researching Romantic Love', *Rethinking History* 21.4 (2017): 567-585.

and produces community, but rather than affirming social order, love here is disruptive, troubling.

As a destabilising emotion, love opens up possibilities. Several contributions to this special issue highlight love's association with liberty, an idea that gained particular currency towards the end of the eighteenth century as love intertwined with political revolution.¹⁶ If Holloway's valentines offered women a tool to express feeling, Kate Gibson evidences that love could provide a language of affirmation and justification for women engaging in adulterous relationships in eighteenth-century England. Here she suggests that discourses of love allowed a few women access to the sexual freedoms that a small number of elite men gained during the late eighteenth century, but rightly notes that when made public, the heightened social condemnation targeted at women made love challenging to sustain.¹⁷ Jane Mackelworth turns to same-sex love and the uses of Hellenistic metaphors of feeling to enable the expression of love between women in the early twentieth century. Love's moral and transformative effects enabled a rethinking of passion between individuals for whom love was taboo; critically it enabled such women to move beyond ineffable feeling to voicing love. In doing so, like the material culture of love, emotion bound couples not just in feeling, but into networks of relation, friendship, and community.

Freedom was not just found in love however. Kerstin Pahl's contribution to the special issue offers an original reading of relationship breakdown in novels of the early nineteenth century as a process of 'unloving'. Here unloving not only enabled men and women to refigure their feelings towards more suitable mates, but acted as a critique of sexist discourses that subsumed female identity into the men they loved.¹⁸ The capacity to 'unlove' became suggestive of female reason and agency in resistance to an overwhelming passion. Yet, this was not a refusal of emotion, but rather a rewinding, and the return of a self open to love. If this return of love might enable some forms of autonomy, and so freedom, it could restore a social order that romantic love had disrupted or threatened.

¹⁶ Catherine Komisaruk, *Labor and Love in Guatemala: The Eve of Independence* (Stanford, 2013); Guiomar Dueñas-Vargas, *Of Love and Other Passions: Elites, Politics, and Family in Bogotá, Colombia, 1778–1870* (Albuquerque, 2015); Linda A. Curcio-Nagy, 'The Language of Desire in Colonial Mexico', in Javier Villaflores and Sonya Lipsett-Rivera (eds), *Emotions and Daily Life in Colonial Mexico* (Albuquerque, 2014), pp. 44-65; Suzanne Desan, "'War between Brothers and Sisters": Inheritance Law and Gender Politics in Revolutionary France', *French Historical Studies*, 20.4 (1997), pp. 597-634.

¹⁷ Faramerz Dabhoiwala, 'Lust and Liberty,' *Past and Present*, 207 (2010): 89-179; Barclay, *Love, Intimacy and Power*.

¹⁸ Katie Barclay and Rosalind Carr, 'Women, Love and Power in Enlightenment Scotland', *Women's History Review*, 27.2 (2018): 176-98.

If medieval courtly love produced a romantic love noted for its chastity, famously separating sex (and so lust) from love, explorations of romantic love found within this special issue continuously encounter physical passion. Romantic love might be expected to transform sex into something larger, more spiritual than mundane, but physical desire remains key to its imagining (even if it is to be rejected). This thread within discourses of love reinforced it as a gendered and also material practice, as Alana Harris's concern with masculinity, contraception and female pleasure in 1960s Britain suggests, and provided a continuity from the early modern to the modern, that troubles histories of increasing sexual freedom over time. Rather, romantic love offers feeling that places community and order into productive tension with individual desire and sexual passion. Hence love enables the negotiation of liberty, but without disrupting the reproductive function of the household. As Harris shows, the *Humanae Vitae* – touted as a new 'Magna Carta' for marriage – provided a catalyst for debates in 1968 and beyond which redrew the boundaries of marital love as at once spiritual, companionate, romantic, and physically passionate. Evidently, sex and love are never far apart.

The eight articles collectively chart the shifting boundaries, meanings, and practices of romantic love from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries, through changing patterns of production and consumption, new media, and attitudes to marriage, desire, sex, and sexuality. In doing so, they reiterate romantic love as a social and cultural practice, changing not only with time and place but through negotiations between individuals, communities, and between cultural ideals and everyday experiences. If love and courtship before the twentieth century have often been figured as a rather chaste affair, this collection places desire and reproduction as a critical dimension of what romantic love encompassed in Britain across the centuries, and as normative and socially-productive, rather than disruptive. Yet, love, particularly in response to changing ideas of the political self, also contained an unruly capacity, and potentially an opportunity for liberty. The special issue offers a history of romantic love that highlights significant continuities in ideas and practices, whilst also pinpointing important moments of change and contest between individuals and groups. In this, it does not lead itself either to an overarching narrative of change, perhaps paralleling other institutions of modernity, nor does it offer easy definitions or explanations of love at particular moments. Rather, romantic love emerges as something messy, contested, and negotiated, but also conforming and enabling of social order, as an evolving but critical resource in the production of social and cultural life.