
International Journal of **PSYCHOTHERAPY**

Journal of the European Association of Psychotherapy

Volume 28

■ Number 2 ■

Summer 2024

***A Special Issue on
'Women & Love'***

International Journal of PSYCHOTHERAPY

Volume 28

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The International Journal of Psychotherapy is a peer-reviewed, scientific journal and is published three times a year by the European Association of Psychotherapy (EAP). EAP is a member of the World Council for Psychotherapy (WCP) and is an International NGO member of the Council of Europe.

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Published by: European Association of Psychotherapy (EAP)

Mariahilfer Straße 1d/e, Stock/Tür 13, A-1060 Vienna, Austria

E-mail: eap.admin@europsyche.org

Website: www.europsyche.org

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ISSN: 1356-9082 (Print); ISSN: 1469-8498 (Online)

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The International Journal of Psychotherapy is a leading professional and academic publication, which aims to inform, to stimulate debate, and to assist the profession of psychotherapy to develop throughout Europe and also internationally. It is properly (double-blind) peer-reviewed.

The Journal raises important issues in the field of European and international psychotherapy practice, professional development, and theory and research for psychotherapy practitioners, related professionals, academics & students. The Journal is published by the European Association for Psychotherapy (EAP), three times per annum. It has been published for 24 years. It is currently working towards obtaining a listing on several different Citation Indices and thus gaining an Impact Factor from each of these.

The focus of the Journal includes:

- Contributions from, and debates between, the different European methods and modalities in psychotherapy, and their respective traditions of theory, practice and research;
- Contemporary issues and new developments for individual, group and psychotherapy in specialist fields and settings;
- Matters related to the work of European professional psychotherapists in public, private and voluntary settings;
- Broad-ranging theoretical perspectives providing informed discussion and debate on a wide range of subjects in this fast expanding field;
- Professional, administrative, training and educational issues that arise from developments in the provision of psychotherapy and related services in European health care settings;
- Contributing to the wider debate about the

future of psychotherapy and reflecting the internal dialogue within European psychotherapy and its wider relations with the rest of the world;

- Current research and practice developments – ensuring that new information is brought to the attention of professionals in an informed and clear way;
- Interactions between the psychological and the physical, the philosophical and the political, the theoretical and the practical, the traditional and the developing status of the profession;
- Connections, communications, relationships and association between the related professions of psychotherapy, psychology, psychiatry, counselling and health care;
- Exploration and affirmation of the similarities, uniqueness and differences of psychotherapy in the different European regions and in different areas of the profession;
- Reviews of new publications: highlighting and reviewing books & films of particular importance in this field;
- Comment and discussion on all aspects and important issues related to the clinical practice and provision of services in this profession;
- A dedication to publishing in European ‘mother-tongue’ languages, as well as in English.

This journal is therefore essential reading for informed psychological and psychotherapeutic academics, trainers, students and practitioners across these disciplines and geographic boundaries, who wish to develop a greater understanding of developments in psychotherapy in Europe and world-wide. We have recently developed several new ‘Editorial Policies’ that are available on the IJP website, via the ‘Ethos’ page: www.ijp.org.uk

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The IJP Website: www.ijp.org.uk

The IJP website is very comprehensive, with many different pages. It is fairly easy to negotiate using the tabs across the top of the website pages.

You are also able to subscribe to the Journal through the website – and we have several different ‘categories’ of subscriptions. However, the Journal is now more of an “open-access” journal, so subscriptions are less relevant.

You can also purchase single articles and whole issues as directly downloaded PDF files by using the Catalogue on the IJP website. Payment is by PayPal. We still have some printed copies of most of the Back Issues available for sale.

Furthermore, we believe that ‘**Book Reviews**’ form an essential component to the ‘web of science’. We currently have about 60 books available to be reviewed: please consult the relevant pages of the IJP website and ask for the books that you would enjoy reviewing; and – as a reviewer – you would get to keep the book. All previously published Book Reviews are available as free PDF files.

There is also a whole cornucopia of material that is currently freely available on-line (see the top left-hand corner of the website). **Firstly**: there are several “Open Access” books on Psychother-

apy available, free-of-charge; **next** there are an increasing number of free “Open Access” articles; **then** there are often a couple of articles available from the forthcoming issue, in advance of publication.

There is also an on-going, online ‘Special Issue’ on “**Psychotherapy vs. Spirituality**”. This ‘Special Issue’ is being built up from a number of already published articles and these are available freely on-line, soon after publication.

Finally, there are a number of previously published **Briefing Papers**. There is one on: “*What can Psychotherapy do for Refugees and Migrants in Europe?*”; and one on an important new direction: “*Mapping the ECP into ECTS to gain EQF-7: A Briefing Paper for a new ‘forward strategy for the EAP.*” Because of a particular interest that we have in what is called by “Intellectual Property”, we have included a recent briefing paper: “*Can Psychotherapeutic Methods, Procedures and Techniques be patented, and/or copyrighted, and/or trademarked? – A Position Paper.*” Lastly, as part of the initiative to promote psychotherapy as an independent profession in Europe, we have: “*EAP Statement on the Legal Position of Psychotherapy in Europe*”, which we published in a recent issue.

Editorial

Susanne Vosmer

Editor IJP Special Issue 'Women & Love'

Welcome to this Special Issue on Women and Love. Love is fundamental to women's lives. Therefore, this Special Issue on *Women and Love* focuses on several forms of love, which range from motherly over to romantic, and to erotic love. The *International Journal of Psychotherapy* has offered women the opportunity to write about love. Aspects of love that are important for, or unique to, women find their expression in the articles, which are as diverse as love itself. The authors have grappled with different forms of love, its expression in literature, through poems, in psychotherapy and relationships.

What is love? In Christianity, love is God and a supreme virtue. Love is not necessarily unconditional. There is something compelling about the presentation of relational engagement when it is based on love, as expressed in Christian scriptures and writings, psychotherapists, Kathy Spooner and Sue Monckton-Rickett, suggest. Love seems to be connected with a deep human longing to be desired, understood, and accepted for who we are (personal communication).

While Nietzsche viewed love as affirmation of life, Schopenhauer regarded it as the urge to procreate. Freud linked love to a history of loss and Proust to terror (see May, 2011). When people talk about love, they commonly mean romantic love or falling in love with someone. Romantic love is what culture makes romantic, Karandashev (2017, p. 277) wrote. Frequently, we encounter myths and stories that resemble fairytales when reading about love.

However, social status and money also affect outcomes of romantic love (Henderson, 2020). This reality does not tally with the romance genre and stereotypical views that love overcomes all racial, religious, political, and socio-economic

conomic barriers between couples. Ideas that erotic and romantic love are a pre-requisite for marriage are commonly found in contemporary societies.

Successful Hollywood and Bollywood movies follow a heterosexual, gender script: man and woman fall in love, conflicts occur, they break up and eventually are re-united to live happily ever after. Films without a happy end tend to disturb the audience.

Unrequited love is depressing, both in movies and in real life. Love sickness, infidelity, divorce, separation and unfulfilled erotic desire are all painful. As psychotherapists, we encounter the emotional sequelae of breakups. We witness the power of romantic passion. Ethel Spector Person (1988) called it, "Dreams of Love and Fateful Encounters",

Traditional nuclear families have almost become an endangered species. 'Until death do us part' is a core feature of romantic comedy, but less so of actual marital relationships.

Love and its shadows make their appearance in psychotherapy groups: "I love you because I need you". For Fromm (1995), this clingy attitude signified immature love. Whilst existential psychotherapists explore with clients how they love (van Deurzen, 2012), group analysts and psychodynamic psychotherapists focus on unconscious dynamics. These include gender. Unfortunately, gender disparity continues to exist regarding love and marriage.

Men are more frequently breadwinners and women often marry up (Henderson, 2020). This contradicts romantic ideals that deny the amalgamation of romance and wealth. Neo-liberalism has exacerbated inequality between ethnic groups. At the same time, female socio-economic achievement has also fostered male impotence. When wives earn more than their husbands, it poses a monetary threat to displays of patriarchal male authority.

Escaping sexism and racism is almost impossible if one wants to flourish in capitalist societies. Interestingly, due to unconscious racism, it might be easier for black women than for black men to succeed (Roberts, 2010). Their female gender could be regarded as a privilege when prioritised over race. Henderson (2020) pointed out that such stratification does go against the work of the Third World Women's Alliance. Like other feminist queer organisations, it rejected race and gender hierarchies. Non-normative sexuality is nevertheless still viewed with unease. Partly, because it does violate dominant conventions, where women's bodies are portrayed as male possessions.

High incidences of domestic, intimate, male-perpetrated partner-violence evidences the asymmetrical power relationship that exists between men and women. I would argue that socio-political awareness of gender abuse reflects a barren political landscape. Historically, politics and the law have failed to protect females from rape, sexual molestation and exploitation, as well as from physical, emotional, psychological and structural oppression, irrespective of their ethnicity and age. Female empowerment still leaves much to be desired

for in the 21st century. Both regressive gender ideals about love and the idealisation of romantic love have a lot to answer for. Whether love is socially constructed or performed are interesting questions. However, traditional models of partnership, motherhood, and femininity connote a commitment to marriage.

In many cultures, girls are disallowed a childhood and adolescence. Instead, they are either coerced or forced into marriage prematurely (Henderson, 2020). Frequently, females are silenced. Individual or group psychotherapy can be a space that gives women the opportunity to speak without their fear of being silenced about love and intersectionality. That is, the relationship between racism, sexism, class, religion, and intimacy.

Female psychotherapists themselves can discuss these aspects in supervision, as **Elizabeth Rohr**'s article *Palestinian Loves and Disasters, and Transcultural Understanding* shows. Her interesting case material from a workshop in Palestine also offers readers of this Special Women's Issue insight into gender violence, as well as into coping strategies in a male-dominated Arabic society. Drawing on an anthropological method, Elizabeth provides us with a vivid account of a couple's therapy case. Transcultural understanding of the supervisor's countertransference reactions uncovers hidden layers and unconscious dimensions of this case. She reveals symptomatic, conflictual, and repressed social dynamics that especially affect women.

Perhaps women across the globe are more prone to adhere to societal norms. Customs, norms, and traditions that women must adhere to can be brought into consciousness and problematised by analysing music, film, poems, and myths.

In the second article, *Penelope, translated*, **Maria Pavlidou** explores Penelope's portrayal in the Greek *Odyssey*. Described as a resilient but complex woman, who endured adversity while awaiting her husband's return from war, Penelope's loyalty and patience are tested by uncertainty about Odysseus' whereabouts and her pursuit by suitors. Maria refers to Emily Wilson, who was the first woman who translated *The Odyssey* into English. Feminine stereotypes and societal norms are embedded in this narrative. Maria examines how contemporary understanding of masochistic behaviour intersects with Penelope's experiences. The influence on gender roles and societal norms of that era come to the fore. Readers will encounter androcentric ways of thinking and behaving, which prevail in contemporary societies.

Even though 'love' is a commonly used word, it also has an enigmatic quality, **Rina Kakad** suggests in *Working with Love in the Therapy Room*. Attempting to gain a deeper understanding of love, Rina researched love. We are surrounded by cultural depictions of love. Permeating so many of our closest relationships and lives, love affects people across all countries, race, gender, and sexual orientations. Hence, a deeper understanding of love could enable existential therapists to investigate the nature of love with clients, Rina demonstrates. As-

sertions that music, films, novels, poetry, and artwork are ‘love-themed’ have intuitive appeal.

Some would even argue that love should be left to poets instead of psychologists. Whether this holds true for psychotherapists as well, remains to be seen. Many psychoanalysts have emphasised the importance of love and the impact of its absence on our psyche. Philosophers, anthropologists, religious faiths and cultures, poets, musicians, film directors, and photographers have said so much more about the influence of love (Charura & Paul, 2015). I am pleased that **Attracta Gill** has written four poems, *Wild Woman*, *Safe Touch*, *My Garden of Hope* and *Love Letters for my Daughter* for our readers.

Maternal love is crucial for the survival of humans. When loving bonds between mothers and their children are not formed, or adequate attunement and attachment do not occur, the child does not develop a resilient sense of self (Cundy, 2015). Exploring the notion of maternal love from an existential perspective, **Claire Arnold-Baker** in *Maternal Love: The Antidote to the Existential Crisis of Motherhood?* draws on existential writers and researchers, as well as on her own research. Maternal love comes from the responsibility motherhood requires. It is the positive pole of the maternal experience, which helps women bear, or overcome, the existential crisis that is caused by ‘Matrescence’, Claire concludes. When we are not loved as children, we do not acquire the capacity to love ourselves and others. Hence, maternal love is essential for the development of self-love.

Lydia Armir provides our readers with some insight into self-love in her article, *Women, (Self-)Love, and (Self-Referential) Humour*. She associates self-love with self-referential humour. The former is formed through the latter, Lydia shows, identifying possible sources of poor self-love in women. Critical of feminist writing on humour, she proposes that a gradual change in one’s attitude toward oneself could happen when women systematically learn to use self-referential humour. It may foster self-acceptance, self-esteem, and self-love.

Loving themselves is particularly important for women, it seems to me. Susie Orbach told me that many women struggle to be in a reciprocal intimate relationship due to their upbringing. Girls are raised to give, but not to receive, love. How to deal with this in psychotherapy forms part of my interview with the British psychoanalyst, writer, feminist, and social critic, **Susie Orbach** on ‘*Women, Love and Psychotherapy*’. Orbach problematised the relationship that women have with their bodies. Since the late 20th century, women have become obsessed with how they look, and they experience problems with their bodies. These difficulties are perpetuated by society, the social media, films, and advertisements that present women as slim and sexy.

Unsurprisingly, this has consequences for ageing females. As women grow older and life stretches beyond menopause into old age, they reach what is often referred to as ‘Cronedom’, **Emmy van Deurzen** explains in *Love in Crone-*

dom. Emmy writes that an existential way of approaching Cronedom brings out its wealth of wisdom. She offers women hope. Emmy suggests that a woman's capacity for love can be more fully revealed and developed, as it evolves at this late stage of life. Although many women dread, or even deny the advance of age/maturity, a feminist perspective may enable women to face this phase of life with courage and determination.

Popular portrayals of sexuality are commonly linked to youth. Sexuality seems to be a prerogative of youthful bodies. The internalisation of societal views is reflected in '*Crinkly sex, no thanks!*' (Vosmer, 2023, p. 39). Nonetheless erotic desire does not depend on age. **Alexei Procyshyn** and **Susanne Beiweis** write about *The Rationality of Erotic Desire: Sappho, Aristophanes, Diotima, and Héloïse on the Nature of Romantic Love*. In their rational reconstruction of several accounts of erotic desire or romantic love that are central to the European intellectual tradition, namely Sappho's, Aristophanes', Diotima's, Héloïse's, Susanne and Alexei argue that erotic desire or erotic love have a rational content in these traditions. Erotic desire is regarded as a process whereby lovers achieve a form of autonomy and equality by acknowledging their dependence on one another. They postulate that romantic love has a potential to realise an interdependent form of autonomy and equality and is largely developed by female figures within the philosophical canon.

Be this as it may, desire and love are not always rational. On the contrary, being in love can lead to irrational and even destructive behaviour (Vosmer, 2022), due to diminished prefrontal cortical functioning, hormones, and neurotransmitters. Dopamine can cause feelings of intoxication. At times, it almost resembles a delusional psychotic episode. People in love can become a passive subject of passion. Because falling in love has been conceptualised as an ephemeral and symptomatic state, in which stimuli overwhelms the psyche, since the exciting love object cannot be defended against and takes on hallucinatory intensities (Green, 2002). But falling or being in love does not last. Given this transitory nature, what is the secret of lasting relationships?

Anne Colgan has interviewed women in a long-term relationship to find out what keeps couples together. In *Women Who Love*, she writes that there is an appreciation of the security within the relationship, a commitment to having fun, although small children, managing households and work, can be challenging. Anne's interviews show that the women she spoke to knew how to navigate the 'I and the We'.

Perhaps we see these women less in psychotherapy than those who experience love and relationships as too difficult. Of course, as psychotherapists, we are not exempt from falling in love, from unrequited love, and from lovesickness. Love can be detrimental to our wellbeing. It may even be dangerous. Even psychotherapists can get lost in love, act unprofessionally and lose their boundaries. Do we share this with colleagues, or do we keep it to ourselves due to fear of judgement or shame? My colleague, Jo Edwards-Goodman, who is a group

analyst, posed these questions. Experiencing maternal love is acceptable and positively encouraged. However, other forms of love and being in loved are somehow unwanted. They denote a useless therapist, who seems to be overwhelmed and has lost her analytic mind (personal communication).

However, this could also be construed as transference love. It is noteworthy that Freud (1915) did not sharply distinguish between transference love and 'real' love. The former is merely dominated to a greater degree by repetition compulsion of oedipal triangulations. Uncovering fixations loosens their ties and paves the way for love without repetitions. Of course, this only causes problems when we repeatedly choose partners who are not good for us.

Irrespective of how we conceptualise love, whether we experience it in real life, on the internet, in films, works of art, literature or in intimate relationships, love is the cornerstone of our existence, in my humble opinion. I hope that you will find this edition on women and love interesting, inspiring and useful for your clinical practice.

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Palestinian Loves and Disasters, and Transcultural Understanding

Elisabeth Rohr

Abstract:

Case material from a workshop in Palestine reveals unusual insights into a male dominated society, into gender violence, and into coping strategies of people, especially of women, living in this society. The anthropological method of “thick descriptions” (Geertz, 1973) is used to give a vivid account of the presentation of a case, concerning a couple’s therapy. It is shown, how transcultural understanding of countertransference reactions of the supervisor helps to uncover hidden layers and unconscious dimensions connected with this case, throwing a symptomatic light on highly conflictive, but repressed social dynamics that affect especially women.

Key Words:

Palestine, couple’s therapy, gender violence, transcultural understanding of countertransference

Introduction

In group analytic workshops in Palestine, participants were eager to talk about their psychotherapeutic and counselling experiences. Supervision was hardly known. However, it was desperately needed, as they admitted. Therefore, our workshops focused on the supervision of case histories, using the cases as a starting point for further theoretical explorations. There was never any hesitation to present case material. The workshops seemed to be a perfect opportunity to talk about difficult, confusing, and challenging psychotherapeutic and counselling situations in a group of colleagues and with a professional supervi-

sor, who was a foreigner. There were three to four workshops per year, each one lasting one week. They were all financed and organised by the International Association of Group Psychotherapy and Group Processes (IAGP) in cooperation with a Palestinian organisation that offered counselling for families of imprisoned Palestinians in Israeli custody, and psychotherapeutic treatment for Palestinians after their release from prison.

Several workshops, conducted by different members of IAGP, had already taken place. It was my second time to stay in Palestine and conduct these workshops. The aim was to convey basic group analytic and superviso-

International Journal of Psychotherapy

Summer 2024, Vol. 28, No. 2, pp. 11-20: ISSN 1356-9082 (Print); ISSN 1469-8498 (Online)

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Submitted: July 2024. DOI: 10.35075/IJP.2024.28.2.2/Rohr

ry knowledge in theory and practice. There were about ten participants, in their majority female, with different social and religious backgrounds, on average around 30–40 years old. They all knew each other personally, but not professionally, and they knew the local organisation, where the workshops were taking place. The majority of the participants worked in different jobs in social and medical institutions, some in schools, and others in private practice. They did not form a fixed or steady group. Participation fluctuated considerably over time and in every workshop.

Thick Description

The following case description follows the methodological rules set by Clifford Geertz (1973) under the heading of “Thick Description”. The main idea behind this anthropological research method is the attempt to link participant observation with a narrative description of the situation and context, thus, embedding the researcher in the enactment of the setting. A thick description tries to capture the story that people tell in a given context, as well as the observations that a researcher is bound to make in this same situation. Thus, thick descriptions add a record of subjective explanations and meanings, which are provided by the people engaged in the context, including imaginations and emotions of the researcher. It is a method that goes way beyond thin descriptions (factual count of data), trying to add meaning to a significant experience. Therefore, thick descriptions rely on participant observations, on interpretations, as well as the “literary” narration of a story.

The literary quality of “thick descriptions”

It is not by chance that this reminds us of Freud’s remarks, concerning the literary quality of his case studies. Freud’s best-known

statement about his case histories, namely that “... the case histories which I write are to be read like novellas” (Freud, 1952, p. 227), indicate that they could be classified as thick descriptions. This notion of thick description is extremely helpful in supervision (as well as in therapy), because we always have limited time and usually limited context knowledge to analyse. Finally, we have limited time to understand case histories, which a group or an individual presented for clarification and exploration. Therefore, supervisory understanding is stimulated and enhanced, if the case material offers space for interpretation; or if it contains the observation and interpretation of the author and if the material itself is recounted and narrated like a “novella”. However, if we want access to unconscious layers, we would have to add the analysis of countertransference reactions of the supervisor, helping us to unravel unconscious dimensions of the story, its social context, and the hidden conflict or problem involved.

Furthermore, the literary quality of thick descriptions is even more important, and at the same time more relevant, when case histories originate from a culturally foreign environment. In this respect, Kakar (2012, p. 24) points out that psychotherapists usually are not able to reach a profound knowledge and in-depth understanding of the cultural background of their foreign patients. This is, of course, true for supervision as well. Therefore, the only solution out of this dilemma is to reflect on one’s own cultural imaginations obtrusively, as they come to mind when listening to case histories; and to understand these imaginations as a mirror, or a shadow (a cultural projection) of that which is extrinsic, or alien (Kakar, 2012, p. 24). Decades earlier Devereux (1973, p. 18), had already stated that there was only one way to overcome the cultural, perceptual distortions: raising awareness of one’s own emotional involvement.

This means reflecting on all countertransference reactions of the supervisor. As a result, we have to accept that the critical reflection of one's own cultural subjectivity turns out to be the only possible method of understanding. We have only our participant observation, the story we are listening to, and finally our countertransference reactions. However, no other preconceived cultural, or social knowledge, to rely upon, when we are dealing with explorations of case histories in a culturally diverse environment (Nadig, 2000). Bearing all this in mind, I would now like to present the thick description of a case story that was presented in a workshop in Palestine a few years ago.

A Couple's Therapy

One day, one of the most energetic, bright and in fact, most beautiful women in the group, offered to present a case, saying this was urgent. She definitely needed the support and guidance of the group. She had already worked with a couple for some time. However, it seemed not possible to reach any understanding, neither between the two, nor between the couple and herself. The reason for them coming to therapy was quite clear: having just got married, it seemed that their sex life was pure misery. The husband said his wife was frigid; sex with her was no fun. Both seemed sad, disappointed, frustrated, and worried. The therapist recommended the husband to get lubricating crème from the pharmacy. They left and when they came back, they had tried everything with the lubricating crème, but still, had no success. The therapist tried very cautiously to encourage them to talk about their miserable feelings, but they rejected this. All they wanted was practical advice how to proceed and what more they could try. Even though the couple kept on coming to the therapy and never missed any session, they seemed not to be able to open up and talk about their painful experiences. Eventually, the therapist herself

started to feel very uneasy, because every time the couple came back, they always admitted that nothing had worked, no matter how hard they had tried. With every session, the frustration seemed to grow. No matter how much the therapist tried, they simply would not talk about this increasingly dramatic situation at home. Sex seemed a never-ending misery for both of them. Finally, the therapist, feeling helpless and at her wit's end, asked the couple if they would work with her individually. They consented. The wife came alone. She cried desperately and was very upset. From her perspective, the story sounded completely different. The wife told the therapist that her husband was impotent. No matter what they tried, he was unable to fulfil the sexual act. She was absolutely miserable, helpless, and ashamed, since her husband blamed her alone for all their sexual difficulties. She felt humiliated and had not the slightest idea what to do or say. She only knew that she could not name his predicament. It had to stay a secret, otherwise, it would destroy him, she thought. She also begged the therapist not to mention this to her husband. When the therapist asked the husband to come for an individual session, he readily came and talked about his professional career, his success and well-established position in life and in society. He was a well-known medical doctor. He loved his wife, he said, but insisted that it was her frigidity that caused all the problems. Since, as he admitted freely, with all the prostitutes he ever had, sex (with them) there had never been any problem. After this session, the couple never returned to see the therapist. All attempts to reach them by phone were in vain. They obviously did not want to continue with the therapy. Perhaps they were too afraid to tackle their problem and to talk about their experiences. About a year later, the therapist read in the local newspaper that a rather well-known medical doctor had thrown his wife from the balcony onto the street. The details described in the paper left

no doubt, it was the very couple the therapist had seen for almost one year. The woman had a broken back. Her injuries were so severe that she would stay paralysed for the rest of her life. Still in hospital, she demanded a divorce and proceeded to fill charges against her husband, accusing him of attempted homicide. However, she later withdrew her divorce petition and lawsuit about infidelity against her husband.

Participant Observation

Listening to this case history, I sat there in stunning silence, feeling shocked, emotionally empty, and somehow lost and very sad. The therapist, who had presented the case and the whole group, looked at me in complete astonishment. I had tears in my eyes and could not speak. After a while, I was able to ask the group what they did think or feel, listening to the story of this case. It did not take long until the group engaged in a very emotional discussion, asking the therapist for more details, also reassuring her that this terrible accident, as they named it, was not her fault, that she had not done anything wrong. There was no reason to feel guilty, they kept on saying. Nevertheless, the young therapist insisted that she often thought about this case, especially this young woman. She worried that she might have made a mistake. There was a heated discussion, but finally neither the therapist nor the group were able to find something that would justify any wrongdoing. The group continued to discuss the case, trying to explore, why she felt guilty, but to no avail. There was not one intervention they could find that was completely wrong. However, they finally concluded that her interventions had obviously opened a Pandora's Box. After the secret, this man's impotency and his betrayal, had been pronounced, it could not be contained anymore and eventually led to this brutal act of violence. It was an attempted femicide, fitting into the scheme of gender-related violence,

which happens globally every day, as UNODC (2023) statistics reveal.

Then, the discussion in the group turned to the decisions of the woman to return to her husband. I could not believe the comments in the group. Everybody, I mean everybody in the group, including all women, agreed that it was all right that the woman had withdrawn her application of divorce and her charges against her husband. Because otherwise, as they explained, she would not have a home to live in, nobody to take care of her, and nobody to pay her medical bills. Her parents would not take her back, since she was a married woman. Therefore, she was completely dependent on her husband. She needed him to take care of her, since she was sitting in a wheelchair, unable to work and unable to live a life on her own. As a divorced, disabled woman without any income, she would have been an outcast, unable to keep on living, prone to die.

Countertransference Reactions

These explanations were of course rational arguments and insofar understandable. Of course, they were born out of cultural and social knowledge. Nevertheless, these explanations were hard for me to bear. I loved this group of people; they were very engaged in their different fields of work. They were lively, intelligent, often joyful, funny, eager to learn and to engage, and very curious. Until that moment, they had never seen me sitting somehow frozen, sad, feeling shocked about the contents of this case, and equally shocked about the explanations of the group, which reconfirmed that woman's decisions. I really felt like a foreigner, a total alien, completely ignorant, realising then more than ever before that we lived in completely different worlds. It eventually dawned on me that I had just listened to a traumatising story of

attempted femicide that left me numb, paralysed, and emotionally aching. What did they try to tell me, I wondered. I looked around and saw many beautiful and professionally highly qualified women and sensitive men, none of them afraid to speak up. But how many of these women suffered and, possibly, were still suffering under traumatising repressions in their lives, and were seriously affected by heavy restrictions of freedom and liberty that their society imposed upon them? Still, it was obvious; they would never be able to talk about it openly in a group of peers and with a foreigner. There seemed to be social and psychological barriers. They put a taboo on the disclosure of intimate details of violence and of oppression that was happening within the family, as well as the immediate surrounding society. It seemed unthinkable to do so and the violence itself was a taboo (Freud, 1913).

First Reflections

What was this case standing for? What was this woman in the case standing for? I could only guess. Was the group giving me a lecture about some of the dark secrets of their society? Or, let us say, a lecture on the unwritten societal laws and taboos that nobody was supposed to challenge and talk about? One of these obvious, essential laws that concerned women? No matter how much a woman suffered, no matter how much trauma, violence, blaming, and shaming she had to bear, her truth, her experiences, in fact her life, did not count. To put it more gently, her life did not count as much as any man's life. This meant that women had to find ways to bear repression and to cope with all sorts of heavy restrictions on their freedom and liberties, which society was imposing on them. Were they perhaps telling me, I asked myself whilst listening, that there was no way out of this dilemma? That there is no way to talk about this, neither with friends nor with colleagues, and most certainly not in

this group and with me, the foreigner. It would seem like a betrayal to their society, they simply had to remain loyal. Hidden fears and anxieties followed me out of the workshop into the evening. Walking to my hotel alone, I was almost the only woman on the street without a veil. I felt flooded with undefined fears. Having to stay in a hotel, being the only visitor and guarded by one young man, who was sitting in the entrance hall, I could hardly sleep, feeling lonely, professionally lost, and helpless. The group had obviously noticed my anxiety.

Several of the women brought delicious food the following days before the workshop started. They tried to invite me to their homes for supper, or to invite me to go out to eat with them in the evenings. I wanted to accept their invitations. However, I knew it would be better to decline, since this would have created too much envy and rivalries in the groups and, of course, broken the rules of abstinence. To stick to boundaries in this challenging situation gave me some inner stability. At least, this worked.

However, I did accept an invitation of the director and the president of the local cooperating organisation. I went out to eat with them one evening in a very pleasant restaurant. Before we even started to eat, the president started a political discussion about the Israeli occupation of the Westbank, saying that the Israelis treated the Palestinians as the Nazis had treated the Jews. I was severely shocked, angry, and upset. I managed to say that I strongly disagreed, that this comparison was historically, politically, and scientifically wrong and unacceptable. My answer obviously spoiled the evening. We all felt uneasy. I guess nobody enjoyed the meal anymore. I do not remember anything about our discussion following these remarks. However, it was definitely small talk we avoided any further clashes.

The following morning, the director, who had stayed almost mute throughout the evening, waited for me and asked me into his office. There, he told me, that he disagreed with his boss, but did not dare to admit this, because it would have been inappropriate to criticise his superior in front of me. This showed me, or rather proved to me, how much politics were involved in these workshops, even though this was never mentioned directly. However, indirectly it was always palpable. For example, the workshop participants were always very curious to find out, if I would stay in Israel afterwards. Yes, I explained that I would stay with Israeli friends for some time after the workshops would end. I found myself entangled once again in quite different political debates, however, participants stayed very interested in our group analytic supervision workshops.

Being a Foreigner

My workshops with different groups ended about two years later. At that time, an individual online therapy started with one of the women of one of the groups. It lasted for several years, with weekly, sometimes, twice-weekly sessions. I learned and heard a lot about arranged marriages, about one thousand ways of living a secret life, about keeping up a perfect disguise and being a good mother, who cared for her kids and family. The therapy was a space, where secrets could be talked about, where the veil could be taken off, where tears and happiness could be shown, and where the turmoil of an Arabic woman's life could unfold. Of course, there was not only suffering. There were joy, happiness, and success as well. We managed to reflect on numerous conflicts, countless crises that overshadowed women's lives in a culturally restricted environment, in an occupied territory, in a politically repressive climate. They were searching for and finding niches of liberty that miraculously could always be found.

There was trust, confidence, and love involved in this online therapy. The fact that I was a stranger, living far away, helped this woman to open up. Since I was not involved in her society or being part of it, she could trust that our sessions would be confidential. I had no other connection to anybody in her environment. She might have had the fantasy that I, coming from a liberal, western country, would understand her desires, fantasies, and wishes without condemning any of them. This was true for our workshops as well. I did not speak Arabic, so the workshops were held in English and many times, I had to ask for explanations, because I was not familiar with the circumstances they talked about. It was good to be a foreigner. I was an outsider. Therefore, I was perceived as a more objective, neutral conductor maybe. This made it much easier to talk about their amazing cases.

For example, how to counsel a woman, whose husband had decided to marry a second time. He expected the first wife and children, to stay in the same compound, but denied her presence, ignoring her completely. Again, there was no way out of this trap. The first wife could not leave. She would have lost her children and all subsistence. She simply was forced to stay and had to bear being treated like a nobody. That was how it seemed to me at first. Then she found a therapist and had a space to talk about her misery, sorting out all possible perspectives between leaving and staying. She was not alone anymore. She was able to share her misery, her difficulties, and fears. The women in the groups were very engaged when discussing this case. Sometimes, I had the impression that this case might have activated their secret fears that this could happen to them, too. Since I was a foreigner and not entangled in their social traditions, they dared to present all kinds of difficult and unsolvable case histories that they struggled with in their daily working lives. I asked so many questions

and felt so upset and outraged about so many injustices that they eventually started to wonder about their own perceptions. This experience gave the case discussions an intensity and depth that really surprised them. Sometimes, it seemed as if I introduced the affects, which they had to deny, or were used to suppress. At the same time, these cases offered various opportunities to gain insight into social nightmares. That left me often speechless, unable to respond, having no answers. However, underlying all these case stories was so much violence and oppression. I could sense that they also strongly wanted to convey their feelings of what it meant to live in occupied territories. How this political violence affected them and how much rage there had to be contained and suppressed. There simply were no words to express their inner state of mind and their emotions.

Transcultural Understanding

Taking the writings of Devereux (1973) seriously, any transcultural understanding starts with the countertransference of the researcher or the supervisor/therapist. He even claims that countertransference reactions are the king's path to recognition, since they are a unique source of insight and understanding (p. 20). There were many countertransference reactions hidden in the case material, which I described above. I will explore the most important transcultural understanding in what follows.

First example: One had to do with the betrayal and the lie of the man, who blamed all sexual difficulties solely on his wife. I felt an almost uncontrollable outrage, when he admitted that he had never had any sexual difficulties with prostitutes. He seemed completely unaware of the fact that he had admitted to his infidelity and betrayal. He acted as if this was normal. He did not even attempt to hide it. There was not

the slightest sign of guilt or shame. He seemed to think that this was a man's right. It was a legitimate right, no doubt. Therefore, there was no reason to deny it. I remember thinking that I was going to choke when hearing his explanation. I felt an almost unbearable rage and was full of prejudice. Of course, in an Arab, patriarchal society, hegemonial masculinity, gender violence, and female suppression are perceived as an unquestionable social norm. This behaviour just fits every stereotype of male supremacy, female oppression, and male acts of structural violence (Connell, 2016). I felt appalled and wondered how any woman could bear this, how all these smart women in these groups could bear to live there.

Second example: Still trying to digest these images, the man's violence (throwing his wife off the balcony and injuring her for the rest of her life, in fact, destroying her life) was even more painful. What a brutal act! It was filled with hatred and a desire to get rid of her. Because she had witnessed his impotency and failings. Hence, she had to be punished and to be destroyed, at least partially. There had been trauma, mistrust, issues about sex and death threats in their marriage, but the subsequent violence was nevertheless unimaginable. His way to resolve secrecy was trying to kill his wife, his only expert witness.

Third example: Even though I felt shocked while listening to the story and outcome of this case, I felt even worse, when the groups did not condemn the husband. Instead, they expressed empathy and understanding for the woman's decisions to withdraw her charges against her husband and to withdraw her petition for divorce. I managed to understand and listen. However, I was unable to accept her decision, thinking that it was just wrong that this man could continue to live without any judicial proceedings and sanctions. There was an almost unbearable conflict that I could not resolve. Without doubt, there were limits

to my understanding. I had mixed feelings. My love for these groups was overshadowed by disappointment and frustration. I felt lonely and professionally inadequate, because I was unable to overcome these barriers.

Fourth example: It had also been brave and courageous of these groups to talk about this and other similar cases. However, it left me with a strong negative image of Palestinian society. I had tried so hard to bracket all my biases about Arab societies and instead view it with curiosity. I started to wonder, if maybe, all my feelings of irritation mirrored theirs. Perhaps they were something like a shadow of their hidden emotions. It was quite clear that they would never be able to show, talk about, or reflect upon them. At least not in a group of peers. They would never be able to discuss repressed societal symptoms openly, even though they talked about these negative images through their cases in supervision. Being a stranger and foreigner, I became an object for their cultural projections and transferences. Maybe, I felt all these abominable thoughts, ideas, and feelings that they could not express. I sympathised and even identified with their fantasy. However, if they would talk about it all, they would be unable to live in their country. They would become outcasts like that woman. Breaking social laws and norms was too scary and impossible.

Exploring My Emotional Entanglement

I needed to return home and work through this and other similar cases in my own supervision in order to come to terms with this shocking experience. I slowly started to understand that maybe I had offered myself as a container and a mirror for their unconscious and forbidden critical stances toward their society. This attitude and inner state of mind created a strong unconscious bond between this group and

myself. They transferred their attitudes to me, knowing that I would condemn that man, not being able to understand that woman's decision to stay with him.

Maybe these cultural transference processes and my readiness to act on them were sufficient, enabling them to feel contained and held. Therefore, it was not so important to deal with that and other cases. Being a foreigner was a very helpful construction. I would leave again and take these stories and cultural projections with me, out of the country. They deposited their silent protest, unspoken rebellion and critique in my soul and in my thoughts. There was no other option. Over the course of the following workshops, I heard about the existence of women's shelters, miserable and dangerous places for a temporary stay that are not protected. Worse still, there was no perspective for the future. Women, who had fled violence, lived there, because they could never live alone and rent an apartment. Society and their families would not have accepted it. Moreover, it was impossible for them to find work without having a permanent address. Therefore, many were forced into prostitution and often sold off by the guards of their shelter. The attendees at the workshop did not want to be victims. In fact, they were successful professionals and mothers. One was an excellent swimmer. Another woman went on long vacations with her children in the company of her mother. Yes, it is true that many suffered under the social restrictions, wanted to take off their veil, but at the same time, they did not want to give up their family bonds. They enjoyed being part of a big family with all its restrictions, pleasure and security that families offer.

Eventually, I really understood that my most important task was to contain, hold, and understand them with all their contradictions and not criticise or condemn them for the solutions, they had found for themselves. They taught me a lesson about their society through

their case histories and stick to boundaries. Possibly, they unconsciously also expected me to reflect upon my 'Whiteness' and not compare our different societal systems and devalue theirs (Gomperts, 2018).

"Perhaps the primary task that globalisation imposes on psychotherapists is to make their own cultural boundaries more porous" (Kakar, 2012, p. 28). Yes, but this is not an easy task to accomplish. Nevertheless, at the end, we managed to establish very good and mutually enriching working relationships. Despite all difficulties and controversies, there was intimacy. It was "about creating closeness without denying the differences. An awareness of culture that allows the other culture to exist in its own right and at the same time anticipate cultural difference as something that can be bridged and that could contribute to the success of intercultural understanding" (Engelisch, 1999, p. 23).

Conclusions

Working as a supervisor (or therapist) in a culturally foreign environment means invariably to accept being part of an adventure with unknown outcome. Of course, this is true for

any supervision or therapy, since you never know what kind of material will be presented. However, to do this in a socially, politically and culturally diverse and unknown environment means that the adventure gains additional dynamics and additional unconscious dimensions. The description of the case material presented above shows that a culturally unknown situation tends to confront supervisors with limits of their professionalism, with helplessness and with fears of failing. It simply is not possible to enter into an unknown social context and understand it immediately, without difficulties. Not to know, not to understand is a normal and quite adequate reaction to a seemingly alien process. However, this is not easy to bear, since we appear as experts. Clients expect us to be experts as well. It is important not to ignore and not to hide our limitations and feelings of helplessness, because this is the only way to establish a connection and to feel resonance with the people, we work with. By bearing our limitations, we show that we are not only experts, but also and foremost human beings; thus, allowing others to be human beings as well, with all their weaknesses, failings and limitations. Maybe this is the true art of being a 'good enough' supervisor or therapist.

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Penelope, translated

Maria Pavlidou



Penelope, by David Ligare^[1]

Abstract: The article explores Penelope's portrayal in *The Odyssey* as a resilient and complex woman enduring adversity while awaiting her husband's return

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1. Picture credit: www.wikiart.org/en/david-ligare/penelope-1980

International Journal of Psychotherapy
Summer 2024, Vol. 28, No. 2, pp. 21-38: ISSN 1356-9082 (Print); ISSN 1469-8498 (Online)
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Submitted: July 2024. DOI: 10.35075/IJP.2024.28.2.3/Pavlidou

from war. Her loyalty and patience are tested by uncertainty and the constant threat of suitors. The article examines how contemporary understandings of masochistic behaviour intersect with Penelope's experiences, highlighting her role throughout the epic and its influence from cultural standards of the era. The article also describes our contemporary understanding of the female situation today, as heavily influenced by androcentric frameworks. Penelope's passages throughout the article are drawn from Emily Wilson's translation of *The Odyssey*, the first English translation by a woman. She depicts the integration of the feminine stereotype in a story entrenched in societal norms, providing depth and visibility to the ongoing dynamics, shedding light on Penelope, as a unique, elaborate person.

Key Words: masochistic traits, resilience, gender roles, intergenerational trauma, intersectionality, matrixiality, feminine archetype dynamics

Tell me about a complicated woman

We might imagine Homer, this monumental figure in literary history, as the blind poet who wrote the *Odyssey*, one of the oldest epics in the Western tradition. Today, we understand it rather as a collective oral tradition, created by many voices and minds over the end of the 8th century BC (Foley, 2007). Ever since, it has conveyed deep human experiences and cultural identity across generations through its vivid storytelling. It is this very depth and universality that resonated with Freud when, in 1907, he was asked to list his most cherished readings, and started with a single name rather than a specific book: Homer. (Nobus, 2006).

The *Odyssey* is the story of a man trying to make his circuitous journey back home after many years of war. This decade-long, adventurous homecoming, his *nostos*, is filled with terrible challenges and mythical encounters that delay his return, culminating in his reunion with his wife, Penelope.

The *Odyssey* is also a story of a woman's inner journey through 20 years of yearning for her husband to come back from war and his god-inflicted wanderlust. It is Penelope that we accompany in this article, following her through the lines of this great epic, keeping herself, her son, and her home together, showing strength and resilience as she faces exhausting and abusive circumstances, as she faces 108 suitors courting around the palace, seeking the throne of Ithaca, plotting against her son.

She has a hard time navigating the intricacies of gender roles and societal expectations of her era, lacking an external armor (and the choices) that Odysseus possesses. We explore the intersectional factors that make it so challenging to differentiate between masochistic characteristics manifesting within her role and the mere act of being a woman who perseveres. We also illuminate the complexi-

ty of Penelope's character and her significance in both ancient and contemporary context, which has allegedly gone past the traditional feminine stereotype.

Echoing her narrative in our ongoing journey, we aim to deepen our understanding of these roles and the seamless way they are woven into behaviour, incorporating modern feminist perspectives, evolution of psychoanalytic theory and the impact of women's translations and analyses of the Odyssey.

Penelope was renowned for her beauty and intelligence, the daughter of King Icarius and Periboea, an ocean nymph. Odysseus, who asked for her hand, had to compete with many other kings. Despite not being the fastest runner, Odysseus used his wits to win the race set by her father. As Pausanias^[2] (a Greek traveller and geographer of the second century AD) mentions:

When Icarius gave Odysseus his daughter Penelope for a wife, he tried to make Odysseus himself live in his kingdom. Because he could not succeed, he begged his daughter to stay, and when she set out for Ithaca, he still begged her, walking beside the newlywed chariot.

At first Odysseus was patient, but eventually he gave Penelope the dilemma of following him willingly or choosing her father and returning to Sparta. It is said that she did not speak but covered her face with her veil. Icarius understood this gesture as a sign that his daughter wanted to follow Odysseus and left her. And he dedicated a statue to Aedo, (the goddess of shame) as they say, at the point on the road where they parted, a symbol of the father's sadness.^[3]

Penelope's new role as a young bride, and her culturally conditioned silence, are moulding the beginnings of her veiled responses, already forming a pattern, that is central in the epic. For two decades, Penelope has faithfully upheld her devotion to her husband. Fiercely protecting her marital honor, she claims that she expects him to return, refuses to marry any of the would-be suitors and refuses to leave the matrimonial home. Antinous, the leading suitor, complains to her son, Telemachus, as he blames them for exploiting his house's wealth:

"Telemachus,
you stuck-up, wilful little boy! How dare you
try to embarrass us and put the blame
on us? We suitors have not done you wrong.
Go blame your precious mother! She is cunning.
It is the third year, soon it will be four,
that she has cheated us of what we want.
She offers hope to all, sends notes to each,
but all the while her mind moves somewhere else.

2. (Pausanias 3.20.10–11) in Nörenberg, H. W. (1977).

3. Fletcher, J. (2008)

She came up with a special trick: she fixed
a mighty loom inside the palace hall.
Weaving her fine long cloth, she said to us,
'Young men, you are my suitors. Since my husband,
the brave Odysseus, is dead, I know
you want to marry me. You must be patient;
I have worked hard to weave this winding-sheet
to bury good Laertes when he dies.
He gained such wealth, the women would reproach me
if he were buried with no shroud. Please let me
finish it!' And her words made sense to us.
So every day she wove the mighty cloth,
and then at night by torchlight, she unwove it." (2.87-107)

Penelope's shroud is designed to be undone.^[4] It is, as the suitors complain and Penelope herself admits, a '*metis*', a cunning device, a spinning of ruses^[5] intended to delay the shroud's completion and keep her in a liminal time and space, "a realm of pure potentiality" beyond the reach of the suitor's dominating occupation of what had formerly been her home. It is also a communicative process whose '*telos*', or ultimate intent, is veiled. Defined by societal norms, prohibited from using the usual male power-tools, Penelope – rather than confronting the impossible choice – delays it, wielding her traditionally feminine craft to assert control over her situation, preserving her autonomy. Despite her massive hopelessness, she is being remarkable in her ability to keep going.^[6]

However, Telemachus, confesses his fear to the goddess Athena, who visits him transformed into a foreign traveler, that by perpetuating the morbid situation with suitors, Penelope is endangering not only their household but also his own life.

"All the chiefs
of Same, Zacynthus, Dulichium,
and local lords, from rocky Ithaca,
are courting Mother, wasting our whole house.
She does not turn these awful suitors down,
nor can she end the courting. They keep eating,
spoiling my house – and soon, they will kill me!" (1.245-251)

There is something in his mother, that angers him, but as Penelope is already a symbol of prudence, he is unable to establish or even defend these feelings. His mother's perpetual stasis – dynamic is leaving him helpless.

4. Pantelia, M. (1993)

5. Felson-Rubin (1994)

6. Clayton (2004)

As her act of weaving, unweaving, and reweaving is discovered^[7], Penelope is left with only her son and a few powerless slaves as possible allies in her resistance to the suitors. Meanwhile, the Olympian gods are working on a plan for Odysseus' return home and Telemachus is persuaded by the disguised goddess Athena to leave Ithaca, to ascertain news of his father's survival. More than ever, he seems determined to take over the reins of his estate. This is foreshadowed by his words when he commands his mother to retire to her rooms:

"Go in and do your work.
Stick to the loom and distaff. Tell your slaves
to do their chores as well. It is for men
to talk, especially me. I am the master."
That startled her. She went back to her room,
and took her son's uneasy words to heart.
She went upstairs, along with both her slaves,
and wept there for her dear Odysseus,
until Athena gave her eyes sweet sleep." (1.356-364)

This may be the first recorded example in Western literature, of a man telling a woman to shut up. Telemachus' declaration of his own authority and Penelope's subsequent expulsion by him from the public domain strike her in astonishment. Her silence is double-edged. Penelope seems to ignore the affront, her silencing perpetuating an intergenerational gender pattern. Perhaps, as her son transitions into manhood, she is even marveling at his employed "mythos", although dismissed to her cloistered, inner chambers.^[8] We witness her frustration only at the end of her silent ascent to her private world, where "she wept for dear Odysseus", her sorrow, always bound to him. She soon learns that her son has slipped away in secret, setting off to find Odysseus, and that the suitors are already plotting to murder Telemachus when he comes back.

"At the news, her legs grew weak; her heart sank; she was struck
dumb for a time, her voice blocked as her eyes filled up with tears...
Penelope lay upstairs in her bedroom,
refusing food and drink, consuming nothing.
She wondered if her fine son would escape
from death, or be brought down by those proud suitors.
Her mind was like a lion, caught by humans,
when they are clustering round him in a circle,
trying to trap him;" (4.703-705, 786-793)

She is turning her son's chances over in her mind in the same spirit that the lion turns circles in tense anticipation. Neither she nor the lion are weighing alterna-

7. Underwood, C. (2018)

8. Heath, J. (2005)

tives; they are looking for a hope, an “opening”.^[9] There is no exit. In her lament, which begins immediately afterward, Penelope lashes out her misdirected rage, to her women slaves:

“Grief wrapped around her, eating at her heart.
The house was full of chairs but she could not
bear to sit upright. In her bedroom doorway,
collapsing on the floor, she wept and cried.
Voice thick with tears, she sobbed.
the winds have taken my dear son, and no one told me
that he was setting out. Shame on you all!
You knew that he was leaving in that ship!
Not one of you came here to wake me up!
If only I had known about his journey,
he would have stayed – no matter how he wanted
to leave – or else have left me dead right here.” (4.726-733)

In this situation of threat, she is acting out the abuser role. She finds a fleeting sense of control, mimicking the very power dynamics that oppress her. It does not come as a surprise at all that Penelope can go from a state of defensive anguish to one of aggressive determination when her son’s life is at stake. In such a mood shift, we find her appearing before the suitors determined to outwit them and thus possibly thwart their plans to exterminate her son:

“Penelope decided she must show herself to these ungentlemanly suitors,
since she had found out about the plot to kill her son –
... Her women at her side, she went downstairs,
into the hall, approached them and then stopped,
standing beside the doorpost with a veil
across her face. She told Antinous,
“You are a brute! A sneak! A criminal!
... You are insane! How could you
devise a plan to kill Telemachus?
Do you have no respect for ties created
by supplication, which Zeus watches over?
Now you consume your benefactor’s wealth,
and court his wife, and try to kill his son,
and you are hurting me! I tell you, stop!
And make the other suitors stop as well.” (16.410-436)

“She went up to her light and airy bedroom,
and wept for dear Odysseus, her husband,
until Athena gave her eyes sweet sleep.” (16.451-453)

9. Barnouw, J. (2004)

Penelope is essentially forced to act under intense pressure. She's being bold, but when she withdraws, her pain regains full ground, and she grieves again, for her lost companion.^[10]

Telemachus, however, with help from the goddess Athena, returns safely to Ithaca. The moment of their meeting is truly touching, as we see Penelope glowing with joy:

"Then wise Penelope came from her bedroom, looking like a goddess,
like Artemis or golden Aphrodite,
and flung her arms around her darling son and wept.
She kissed his face and shining eyes,
and through her tears her words flew out.
'You came! Telemachus! Sweet light!'"

(17.40-41)

Homer offers the most striking description of her beauty, in this scene, likening her to Aphrodite in grace and Artemis in strength. It's the only moment she fully owns her beauty without divine intervention, showing a rare, tender side of herself.

Meanwhile, Odysseus has finally managed to return to Ithaca. In a very moving scene, disguised as a beggar, he encounters Telemachus and together they plan how to eliminate the suitors and restore normality to the house and the kingdom.

Although Telemachus withholds from Penelope news of Odysseus' return, we are able to detect a subtle shift in her mood. Unlike her usual self, she's starting to feel a faint stir of hope for the first time. We wonder whether she has indeed recognized him, as her insistence on meeting this beggar with such fervor seems out of place for a woman of her position.^[11]

"Call him over, let him tell me in person...
Are you not bringing the traveler?
Is something wrong?" Is he too scared or shy ...?"

(17.530-531, 576-577).

Yet, at this pivotal moment, she decides to end the prolonged deadlock by appearing in front of the suitors and announcing she is going to end their waiting.

"Athena, with her gray eyes glinting,
gave thoughtful Penelope a new idea:
to let the suitors see her,
so desire would open up inside them like a sail."

(18.159-162)

It is also the first time we find her laugh, as the poet hints:

Mysteriously, she laughed, and told her slave, "*Eurynome, I have a new desire:
to let the suitors see me, though I hate them.*"

(18.163-165)

10. Cohen B. (1995)

11. Vlahos (2011)

Masochistic pleasures seem odd because it is hard to imagine how one and the same sensation could be both painful and pleasant^[12], the pleasant here is not attributed to Penelope (of course) in the epic, but to godly intervention. Penelope's loneliness and suffering are again palpable:

“Eurynome, I know you care for me,
but do not tell me I should wash myself and put on oil.
The gods destroyed my beauty on that day my husband left in hollow ships.”
(18.178–181)

Athena, who, despite Penelope's resistance, has decided to give her a facelift, succumbs her to a deep slumber. But Penelope, still, wishes for the worst:

“Despite my bitter grief, a peaceful sleep
enveloped me. If only Artemis
would bring me gentle death right now to end my misery.
I waste my life in longing
for my beloved husband, who was good at everything
– the best of the Achaeans.”
(18.201–205)

Penelope reveals a deep inner struggle, caught between resisting the temptation of hope and resigning herself to enduring pain. Her refusal to care for her appearance suggests a profound self-denial, yet it also underscores her strength in maintaining control over her own body and emotions, despite divine intervention.

Her wish for death shows her deep desire to escape the tormenting uncertainty of her life through the ultimate renunciation – death itself. Yet her persistence in living, carrying the heavy burden of grief each day, reveals her resilience – a refusal to give in completely, even as she longs for release. She makes a grand appearance, leaving the suitors trembling with desire, and then asks and accepts their royal presents.

Penelope has skillfully employed psychological strategies to delay the suitors, beginning with the traditional duty of weaving her father-in-law's shroud, only to unravel it each night. When her ruse is exposed, she escalates her tactics, sending them to her homeland to seek her father's approval – a subtle test of their intentions. As their patience wears thin and their hostility toward Telemachus intensifies, Penelope introduces the ultimate test: an archery trial, knowing only Odysseus – or perhaps Telemachus – can succeed.

Through each stage, despite her profound loneliness and emotional suffering, Penelope maintains psychological resilience and autonomy, exercising remarkable agency within the constraints of her situation.

12. Klein, C. (2012). *The Penumbra Theory of Masochistic Pleasure*. Taormino. (p. 496)

In her private meeting with the beggar-disguised Odysseus on the evening of the same day, we cannot be sure whether she has sensed his identity. What follows now is again a slow and gradual testing, while showcasing her loyalty:

“If he came back and cared for me again,
I would regain my beauty and my status.” (19.128–129)

She will marry the winner. However, with almost every word she says, she implies that her devotion to her husband remains steadfast, regardless of the decisions she is forced to make. Her fear of being deceived is ever present. As also is her uncertainty about Odysseus’ devotion, in the possibility of meeting him again.

Yet, even as the hope of Odysseus’ homecoming might have nestled in her heart, Penelope appears to deny it. Despite signs that her fate might be changing, she seems to hold on to the pain. She keeps lamenting her husband clinging to the hope and omens of his survival, but she’s now also grieving the prospect of marrying someone who stands as his lesser – and by implication, her own.

“May Artemis strike me dead,
with my gaze fixed upon Odysseus!
Let me not make a lesser husband glad.” (20.80–82).

Subsequently, her servant’s news about Odysseus’ return and the killing of the suitors also fails to stir any enthusiasm or motivation within her. Even the notion of the eliminated suitors is probably not enough to redeem her. Her only longing is for him to be back, yet she doubts in disbelief:

“Penelope said carefully,
Do not start gloating. As you know,
my son and I would be delighted if he came.
We all would!
However, what you say cannot be true.
Some god has killed the suitors out of anger
at their abuse of power and their pride.
They failed to show respect to visitors,
both good and bad. Their foolishness has killed them.
But my Odysseus has lost his home,
and far away from Greece, he lost his life.” (23.58–68)

Seeking proof that her own eyes can witness, Penelope enters the palace’s hall trying to prepare her stance, hesitating, torn between her longing to uncover the truth and her temptation to embrace the possibility of his return without probing further.

“Her heart could not decide if she should keep her distance
as she was questioning her own dear husband,
or go right up to him and kiss his face
and hold his hands in hers.” (23.85–87)

But when he stands in front of her, Penelope freezes.

“She crossed the threshold
and sat across from him beside the wall,
in firelight. He sat beside the pillar,
and kept his eyes down, waiting to find out
whether the woman who once shared his bed
would speak to him. She sat in silence, stunned.
Sometimes when she was glancing at his face
it seemed like him; but then his dirty clothes were unfamiliar.” (23.89–95).

This lack of welcome is not what Odysseus expected, but who is especially shocked and rather infuriated, is her son Telemachus, who rushes in to accuse her of being cruel and inflexible. It is not the first time he seems to be reproached for her unbending attitude.

“Mother! Cruel, heartless Mother!
Why are you doing this, rejecting Father?
Why do you not go over, sit beside him, and talk to him?
No woman in the world would be so obstinate!
To keep your distance from him when he has come back a
After twenty long years of suffering!
Your heart is always harder than rock!” (97–103)

Alone with Penelope, Odysseus finds her coldness inexplicable, especially after he (too!) has been rejuvenated and beautified by Athena’s divine touch. He’s baffled and hurt by her persistent rejection and distance.

“Extraordinary woman!
The gods have given you the hardest heart.
No other wife would so reject a husband
who had been suffering for twenty years and finally come home.
Well, Nanny, make a bed for me, so I can rest.
This woman must have an iron heart!” (23.166–172)

Despite Odysseus’ frustrated reaction, which seems to risk pushing them further apart rather than bringing them closer, Penelope remains steadfast in her attitude.^[13] No reassurance sways Penelope, except for the proof she personally seeks. She subjects him to a new trial, in a very calm and cool-headed manner:

Penelope said shrewdly, “*You extraordinary man!*
I am not acting proud, or underplaying this big event;
yet I am not surprised at how you look.
You looked like this the day your long oars sailed away from Ithaca.”

13. Marquardt, P. (1985)

Now, Eurycleia, make the bed for him outside the room he built himself.
 Pull out the bedstead and spread quilts and blankets on it."
 She spoke to test him, but Odysseus was furious, and told his loyal wife,
 "Woman! Your words have cut my heart! Who moved my bed?
 It would be difficult for even a master craftsman – though a god could do it with ease.
 No man, however young and strong, could pry it out.
 There is a trick to how this bed was made. I made it, no one else.
 Inside the court there grew an olive tree with delicate long leaves,
 full-grown and green, as sturdy as a pillar, and I built the room around it.
 I packed stones together and fixed a roof and fitted doors.
 I trimmed the olive tree and used my bronze ax to cut the branches off from root to tip
 and planed it down and skillfully transformed the trunk
 into a bedpost ... with gold and silver and with ivory.
 I stretched ox-leather straps across, dyed purple.
 Now I have told the secret trick, the token.
 But woman, wife, I do not know if someone – a man –
 has cut the olive trunk and moved my bed, or if it is still safe."
 At that, her heart and body suddenly relaxed.
 She recognized the tokens he had shown her.
 She burst out crying and ran straight towards him
 and threw her arms around him, kissed his face,
 and said, "Do not be angry at me now, Odysseus!
 In every other way, you are a very understanding man.
 The gods have made us suffer:
 they refused to let us stay together and enjoy our youth
 until we reached the edge of age together.
 Please forgive me, do not keep bearing a grudge because when I first saw you,
 I could not welcome you immediately.
 I felt a constant dread that some bad man would fool me with his lies.
 There are so many dishonest, clever men." (23.173–221)

The Homeric couple navigates a tense conflict upon their long-awaited reunion. Finally, they embrace each other, and their shared lamentation is long, as cathartic as land for castaways, as depicted in one of the most beautiful metaphors in the epic.

"This made him want to cry.
 He held his love, his faithful wife and wept.
 As welcome as the land to swimmers,
 when Poseidon wrecks their ship at sea and breaks it with great waves
 and driving winds; a few escape the sea and reach the shore, their skin
 all caked with brine.
 Grateful to be alive, they crawl to land.
 So glad she was to see her own dear husband,
 her white arms would not let go his neck." (23.242–247)

During this respite, Odysseus discloses to his wife that his adventures are still ongoing and she then implores him to share the full truth. Perhaps it's because she hopes he will feel relieved by sharing them, or perhaps she already anxious, sensing the challenges that lie ahead in their shared journey?

"But since a god has made you speak about these future labors,
tell me what they involve.

I will find out eventually, and [its] better to know now." (23.259-262)

To ensure they will have all the time they need to reconnect, Athena extends the night on their behalf, delaying the arrival of dawn.

"They would have wept until the rosy Dawn
began to touch the sky, but shining-eyed Athena intervened.
She held night back, restraining golden Dawn beside the Ocean,
and would not let her yoke her swift young colts, Shining and Bright."

(23.242-247)

The Prolonged Night

The circuit is closed. They are back together in the unmovable – yet alive – bed, the symbol of their bond. It acts as a pocket dimension, therapeutically in itself, in its essence. Their external and internal wanderings are being retold, relived and shared. They remember: at least, they try. What has changed, what has not? What is still familiar? Is there any common ground left? Can she still look the other in the eyes? Can she confide, find comfort and let go? Is she able to discharge, to make love? What is at stake now? Is she willing to renew her commitment to their life journey? What is sure is that she slept deep and long before Athena finally allowed Dawn to creep in once again.

The next day, nothing seems to have really changed in Penelope's life. Odysseus has already announced his next long and uncertain journey and directs her to stay in, with all the other women, and not talk or meet anybody, as he and Telemachus need to deal with the suitor's slandering aftermath.

During this layered interaction between the couple, Penelope's reluctance is emblematic. This delayed recognition reflects a deep-seated tension between her resilience and traits that could be seen as masochistic, both difficult to disentangle. Her hesitation in embracing Odysseus after his long absence has been shaped by years of isolation, societal expectations, and the constant threat posed by the suitors. Though traumatic, it's a survival strategy, that has shielded her from the potential devastation of misplaced trust.

Penelope's recognition of Odysseus, sparked by their shared secret of the bed, goes beyond mere vindication; it's a reclaiming of her emotional and psychological space. The bed, deeply tied to their shared history, becomes proof that allows her to finally lower her defences. This moment, not only affirms Odysseus' identity, but also marks Penelope's potential release from the long-held burden

of endurance, signalling a deeply significant reconnection. Their time together in the “bed that is a tree”^[14] represents more than physical closeness; it is a profound emotional and psychological reconnection attempt.

As dawn approaches, we are left with the uncertainty of what the future holds for Penelope and Odysseus. Her last words in the epic are:

“If the gods allow you to reach old age in comfort, there is hope
that there will be an end to all our troubles.” (23.285–288)

The text keeps us – to a large extent – in the dark about Penelope’s state of mind.^[15] One of Penelope’s most significant epithets throughout the epic is “periphron” (watchful and discreet, observing all around).^[16] She is portrayed with this epithet 49 times in the *Odyssey*. Always sensible, always cautious, always confined, always suffering, and provoking, there are hardly any masochistic characteristics she does not embody. Or is this just a woman’s fate?

In a passage from Jane Austen’s *Persuasion*, Anne Elliot argues that women, “*Love longest, when existence or when hope is gone.*” She continues,

“We certainly do not forget you so soon as you forget us. It is, perhaps, our fate rather than our merit. We live at home, quiet, confined, and our feelings prey on us. You are forced on exertion. You have always a profession, pursuits, business of some sort or other, to take you back into the world immediately, and continual occupation and change soon weaken impressions.”

The Bed That Is A Tree

Penelope’s grief as she waits for Odysseus takes the form of an imaginary nocturnal monologue, in the following poem by Kim Lasky (2011). As she writes in her descriptive note, Penelope’s perspective is “*one that might be more complicated than is usually told*”:

“And as she mourns him the tears run down from her eyes,
... since this is the right way for a wife when her husband is far and perished.
Naked, I am without a sheet to wind me.
Even vacant sleep won’t shroud me tonight;
so exposed, I notice the blood thinning
in my corpse-veins, hear the shrinking of skin,
see bare limbs decompose in the darkness.
Lost, a tragedy without a body.
Scraps of lament my love I loved you well
distract me in this bed that is a tree

14. Lasky (2022)

15. Wilson (2017)

16. Finkleberg (1989)

... where we should lie together my love.
I kept you well (forgive my wanton grief)
 like musk in the box and wire in the reed
... in this bed that is a tree, where night falls
... and things are not as they seem.
When night falls, the sea is a distant death.
Your bones roll in the wash of the breakers
 and I hold the living near to me, saved.
My love I kept you well; this bed, this tree.
Easing wanton grief, they come to caress
 my dreamless breast, but you come to me too;
 the listing hull of a driftwood ship.
My love I loved you well; this tree, this bed.
So much done in darkness, unsaid. Night work
 scorns the loom's reed, wires that would keep threads
 apart are sidestepped. We come together
 barbed in intimacy, secrets well kept.
I look for you in them, my love, don't know
 what they see in me. Aggrieved, perhaps
 talons and beaks, the sharp flaunted freedom
 of a woman always dreaming an eagle."

Throughout time, countless literary texts have drawn inspiration from Penelope, reflecting the experiences of modern women in their respective eras. Anne Eliot's reflections on the persistence of women's love, even when hope fades, and Kim Lasky's portrayal of Penelope's grief, both add a layer of complexity, suggesting that the internal lives of women, like Penelope's, are far more intricate than society often acknowledges.

Weaving Femininity

Penelope's journey from daughter to wife and mother, unlike the active, heroic men in the *Odyssey*, is largely static and shaped by the constraints of her time and the male-dominated perspectives that have historically narrated her story. Traditionally celebrated for embodying virtues such as patience, attentiveness, and compassion, these qualities were, by the 20th century, further labeled as signs of masochism or passivity. In Freud's theory of masochism (1920s) and the female situation,^[17] endurance in a women's life was tied to an inherent attachment to suffering, often linked to an unconscious source of pleasure.

However, since the 1980s, relational psychoanalysis, particularly through Jessica Benjamin's intersubjective theory, has re-examined such views.^[18] Penelope's

17. Benjamin, J. (2022)

18. Chodorow, N. J. (2023)

endurance, once viewed as passive submission, was understood as an adaptive process of negotiation within the constraints of her patriarchal environment. This adaptive resilience reflects the intersubjective negotiation women must engage in to preserve self and family within constraining environments.

Chodorow's insights into the reproduction of mothering, also highlight how cultural and familial structures shape women's roles, further complicating the understanding of resilience and submission.^[19]

Modern feminist theories, particularly those informed by intersectionality, as introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw, reveal how overlapping identities – such as race, class, and gender – shape women's experiences.^{[20] [21]} Behaviours traditionally labelled as masochistic might be better understood as survival strategies within these intersecting layers of oppression.

Moreover, as proposed by coping and emotion regulation theorists, the interaction between the person and the situation informs adaptation over time.^[22] In this context, Penelope's emotional regulation and strategic decision-making resonate with contemporary understandings of adaptive problem-solving and cognitive flexibility. Her significant stress tolerance and ability to maintain decision-making processes despite chronic stressors demonstrate qualities that transcend gender-specific characteristics, aligning with modern bio-behavioural patterns.

Similarly, Bracha Ettinger's matrixial theory (1990s–2000s) offers another perspective on Penelope's endurance. The matrixial lens highlights the shared relational spaces, viewing Penelope's weaving not just as a delay tactic but as part of a co-emergent identity. In matrixial terms, weaving can be seen as an enactment of jointness-in-separation – where Penelope, though physically separate from Odysseus, maintains an active relational thread, metaphorically “weaving” their connection despite the long distance. Her identity, like her weaving, is evolving – fluid rather than static, and her endurance becomes a testament to adaptive survival.

Epilogue

Goddesses and Lesser Divinities

Homer makes the notion that the divine and the human world are less separate than we might imagine.^[23] Goddesses and lesser female divinities embody the archetype of the free woman who defines her destiny, is “kinetic” and not limited

19. Crenshaw, K. (2019)

20. Rogers, L.O. & Syed, M. (2021)

21. Bonanno, M., Papa, D., Cerasa, A., Maggio, M. G., & Calabrò, R. S. (2024)

22. Pollock, G. F. S. (2009)

23. Wilson (2017)

to her physical, sexual, and mental expression, a contrasting profile to Penelope. This dynamic is increasingly mirrored in the modern world.

As women assert their agency and redefine their roles, they dissolve the opacity of femininity across fields. Emily Wilson's *Odyssey* translation shows how a woman's insight can reshape our understanding of classical texts. As the first woman to translate Homer's epic into English, Wilson brings an unpretentious approach to her portrayal of Penelope. Though initially feeling alienated in a male-dominated field, she ventured into uncharted territory, delivering a translation marked by its wit and clarity. She faced Penelope and interpreted her, lending her voice as a woman, giving attention to her intelligence and emotional depth.

Just as in narrative medicine, where women reclaim their stories and find healing within their own voices, Wilson's translation – an achievement beyond what Homer could have imagined – creates space and visibility within a narrative deeply woven into entrenched cultural structures.

"All translations are interpretations, so of course it matters that I'm a woman," said Wilson. "Social identities, including gender identities, matter for any kind of interpretive work. Being a historian, a scholar, a translator is a development of who you are, what your embodied state is, what your personal histories might be. I read Homer's great poem as a complex and truthful articulation of gender dynamics that continue to haunt us".

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Acknowledgements

The author would like to express sincere gratitude to Dr Lily Anagnostopoulou, Director of the Greek Biosynthesis School, and Dr Maria Paz Cardin Garcia, Director of the Spanish Biosynthesis School, for their support throughout the course of this research. Special thanks to Konstantina Douvi, for her insightful feedback and assistance in the initial analysis of Penelope's role.

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Working with Love in the Therapy Room

Rina Kakad

Abstract:

Although love is a commonly used word, it retains an enigmatic quality when a deeper understanding of it is attempted. Love-themed music, films, novels, poetry and artwork are all around us. There is even a day set aside to celebrate love in western civilization. Even while love permeates so many of our closest relationships and, by extension, our lives, there is still a dearth of research on the subject. Even less so as an existential practitioner. Love impacts all people in all walks of life across all countries, races, genders, and sexual orientations. I propose that a deeper understanding on love may help therapists to investigate the nature of love with clients.

Key Words:

Love, Romantic, Therapy, Existential, Phenomenology, Psychotherapy

Introduction

I chose to research^[1] the phenomenon of love for my Doctoral research. Love is an experience that transcends so many relationships and across cultures, genders and sexualities. It became clear early on that an approach that allowed an examination of a particular type of relationship would be a place to start. Therefore, I chose romantic relationships as a starting point, I believed that this was something that clients often spoke about in individual work and indeed in couples work too. The

next consideration was the best way in which to do this: so, I started with an assumption that love exists, even though its experience can be so different for different individuals. I am reminded here of the Husserlian approach to phenomenology that requires a capacity to self-reflect (in Moran, 2008). A starting point was to consider how I experienced love, its meaning for me. From this position, I then began to explore what others (including friends or colleagues and even clients) thought about love. I share a brief insight into my findings and propose that, as therapists, a starting

1. To protect the privacy of clients and interviewees all names and any identifiable information has been changed.

point in working with love must be a deeper exploration into the phenomenon of love in our own lives. It seems important to state at the outset that the position I take in this article comes from my own experience, born as a woman and maintaining this identity. From my experience of being a woman, I perceive that is often made more difficult by the norms and expectations of being an Indian woman living in the western world. This awareness enabled me to explore the experience of love with a broad lens inviting women and men from different sexualities and cultures, and not only in my work, both as a therapist, but also as a researcher. Early reflections with my supervisor alerted me to the fact that it would be difficult to recruit male participants to talk specifically about love. This indeed was the case, through a real concerted effort, I managed to recruit only two males. I had wrongly assumed that recruiting an Indian woman would be easier, but with all my networks, I was surprised at the dearth of Indian / South-East Asian women that came forward and I eventually managed to find only one.

Whilst I narrowed down my doctoral research to the experience of love in romantic relationships, as social beings living in the world, the experience of love in all the narratives played some part in how love was experienced, for clients and participants alike. I begin this paper with my own experiences, followed by some of the experiences of clients, colleagues and friends, followed by a brief discussion of some of my findings.

Love has always been a phenomenon that has been important in my life. It has until recently remained in the background. To be a little Freudian about it, it has been somewhere in my subconscious. I recognise this because I have written about it, I have read about it in fiction and poetry, yet I had never given it the platform it deserves. The feeling of being loved and the feeling of not being loved both

have had a profound effect on who I am and the choices I have made in my life. Although this feature of my life has huge meaning, it wasn't until I started my own research that it dawned on me just how important it has been in the work that I do.

Over the last 15 years, I have worked in adult mental health teams, education, or children's services. When working with adults, or young people, I have often wondered how different their experiences may have been if they had known or felt love in their lives. The possibility of not feeling loved often emerges when exploring their interpersonal struggles, or their experiences with parents, siblings, children, and partners.

Friedman and Firestone (see Grossi, 2013) purport the idea that love – and in particular romantic love – can be the starting point for oppression for women in hetero-normative relationships. This has emerged time and time again in my work with women, traumatised by abusive relationships. The female participants I interviewed, although not having experienced this, could – to a greater or lesser degree – relate to risk of this happening. All the participants (except 1) had found their own way of moving on from those difficult relationships and, in, fact found a different, more fulfilling way to love. As Grossi concluded in her piece, *“love must be understood as connected rather than disconnected to agency, as connected with, but not subordinate, to desire, and as something that exists both within and outside of the heterosexual scripts”*. She argues that love requires standing outside the periphery of historically imposed barriers of marriage and hetero normativity by a rejection of established rules and barriers.

I began my own research with a period of reflection, alone, with others, and with my therapist. Finlay (2005) suggests that if our own emotional responses are based on the way in

which we make sense of experiences, then phenomenological inquiry requires that we do this before any research process. I propose that the capacity to do that is an essential process, not only as a phenomenological researcher, but also as a practitioner. I furthermore propose that it is important to examine our own identities as women, and any additional pressures that being a woman may bring especially in terms of culture, race, sexuality, wifehood, motherhood, or not being a mother. As suggested by van Manen, analysing data phenomenologically enables researchers to “transform lived experience into a textual expression of its essence – in such a way that the effect of the text is at once a reflexive re-living and a reflective appropriation of something meaningful” (van Manen, 1997, p. 36). Therefore, following interviews or dialogue in therapy, we are presented with words. As a researcher, I have attempted to present a description of human experiences of love in the manner that I received them in the therapy space or the research room. “Phenomenological descriptions are rich and evocative, invoking in readers the phenomenological nod in recognition of a phenomenon so richly described that they too may have experienced” (van Manen, p. 27). In the therapy space, a phenomenological approach should encourage us to explore deeply, analyse and help our clients consider their experiences of love. Only with an opening up of this can they begin to go further with what it is they want or need to make changes or improvements in their lives.

I read a novel a few years ago called *The 40 Rules of Love*, which placed the narrator in the modern day and the 13th century poet, Rumi, in two parallel worlds. It examined the relationship between spirituality and love as well as the magnitude of love’s power:

“A life without Love is of no account. Don’t ask yourself what kind of love you should seek. Spiritual or material, divine or mun-

dane. Eastern or Western. Divisions only lead to more divisions. Love has no labels, no definitions. It is what it is pure and simple. Love is the water of life. And a lover is a soul of fire! The Universe turns differently when fire loves water.” (Shafak, 2010, p. 230)

As I began to start conversations with young people, colleagues, and friends, I asked them to describe what love is. No two responses were the same. It was everyone’s experience that surfaced whether a love of partners, children, parents, friends, or animals. Love had different meanings for different people. However, there was something about love that helped some feel energised, secure, and safe in their own world.

Whilst love may well energise and make people feel secure, some conversations highlighted just how long-term spouses, partners, or even siblings, are so embedded in their love that the love manifests itself in a less obvious manner. Their love can be harder to describe as they are so entwined in their relationships. I distinctly remember two young clients looked at me quite matter of fact and stated that their parents were trapped in a loveless marriage, after being in the relationship for 20+ years, a separation seemed impossible. An older client who reflected on the lack of love in parental relationships, told me that dad loved mum more than she loved him. She took the view that her parents were merely fulfilling their duty towards their families and the community. This is not an uncommon position within the cultural norms in which they lived. Her parents had had an arranged marriage, one in which they initially found love. However, as they grew older, they grew apart in their values and their own wants and needs and, with this, their love also began to wane. For this client, it was not love that kept her parents together, but a fear of breaking the norms of acceptable “behaviour” or “duty” expected of 50+ year olds.

Another client told me that her parents would not separate because their finances would be too complicated to organise. I wonder here if there is any entanglement, especially in certain cultures, where duty is a key aspect of how individuals live their lives. There are expected roles that family members play as part of their duty be this as a husband / wife / adult son or daughter and indeed other roles within the family network. I question however that without love would duty even exist? Would we, as humans, be able to continue in our duty without the presence of love?

An interesting response I got to this question from a much younger client was a notion of her parents becoming institutionalised to the convention of marriage – a loving relationship lasting beyond love, because the other person fulfils some basic human need in the form of shelter and companionship. Another client agreed and told me that sometimes people just stay in a relationship, over and above duty, but because they are afraid of what lay beyond that relationship.

I looked at Jean Paul Sartre's own account of his 51-year love affair with Simone de Beauvoir (Monteil, 2018). Their personal relationship was unusual for the period. During their relationship, they both had other lovers and yet they never married. One could speculate that Sartre's pessimism regarding the motives behind people's love can be discerned from his own experience of love. It is probable that his writing reflects his own romantic experiences. Their love included the freedom to adapt, to love without possessing the other, and to love without being devoured by it (Greer, 2018). Yet, when this exploration of their love and their life together is explored further, it is interesting to note that de Beauvoir found this more difficult (Monteil, 2018).

Through my research, I noted early on that one bias that I held was a notion that love can

only be a positive experience. Here my friend told me that love was – for her mum – just a way to fill a role that she considered was her duty. I wondered if I could have probed her mum, then would she describe love as a negative experience, or was love as a sense of duty still positive? Other ways that love and loving someone could in fact be a negative experience is if that love is unrequited, or a love that for some may be too overwhelming, or even overpowering. Another female client demonstrates this overwhelmingness of love, at the start of each session she looks towards my bookshelf and places the book titled 'Love' facing down.

The findings of my Doctoral study suggest that in romantic relationships, love is expressed and experienced through the four dimensions of our existence. Van Deurzen (2010) proposes that human existence cannot be examined in isolation from the very world they reside in. To get a broader understanding of the human experience, it is important to look at existence through the physical, social, personal, and spiritual dimensions of life. I therefore looked at this more closely in relation to love. I propose that love is indeed, not only an embodied experience (physical) which we experience and express through our actions and touch or sex, but also an interpersonal experience (social) in which we need love to flow between ourselves and others it needs reciprocity. The personal dimension of our love requires for some to begin with a place of self-acceptance. If we can begin to value ourselves perhaps, we can make space for others to do the same. Again, the starting point may be to developing a better understanding of ourselves. For some of my participants, this came through loving relationships, for others it came before, through family or friends which enabled them to embark on loving relationships. Finally in the spiritual dimension of our lives – love was experienced either as conditional or unconditional. For all except one of my participants,

romantic love was conditional. Spirituality and faith in God are often considered to fall under the same construal. The theme that I identified under the spiritual dimension was the intangible nature of love. I incorporate the power of love in this particular theme, with a particular focus on the love of God, as I believe that this may also relate to how we love others in the world.

In all 8 participants that I interviewed, one thing that cannot be ignored is the power contained in love. Through love, albeit of partners or friends, both clients and participants felt empowered and energised to move forth in their lives. They expressed that by finding love in their lives they would find the solace that they seek; this solace, this comfort, is a source of power that would help them to move forwards, feel settled and content. The principal idea here was that it was the subtleties of feeling love that can do that. With some of the clients that I have worked with, who are isolated and live alone, what I have seen is this lack of love has de-energised them: they seem to lack purpose and no reason to live – the classic question that clinical practitioners ask of suicidal service users is what it is that will keep these people from ending their lives – they take reassurance from answers that pertain to the love of family friends and even pets. It is when the patient is isolated and doesn't love a living being that can so often raise concerns. Without the love for another human, or even pets, some people lack the purpose and meaning to go on in their lives.

The purpose derived from love is all around us. Erskine (1998) suggests that it is in therapy that clients can be offered “attunement”. He describes real attunement as a *“kinesthetic and emotional sensing of others knowing their rhythm, affect and experience by metaphorically being in their skin, and going beyond empathy to create a two-person experience of unbroken feeling connectedness by providing a reciprocal*

affect and/or resonating response” (Erskine, 1998, p. 3). I consider here whether this is one reason that clients unwittingly come to therapy, a missing sense of connectedness, despite all other basic needs being met. The therapy space can offer this in the form of attunement.

Another way this notion is an important one to consider is the way people feel when there is hate present in their lives. Talking to clients, it seems that hate is at the root of abuse – clients who have told me that they have been at the receiving end of abuse, either through parents or partners have felt debilitated – they try and make sense of their own self-worth – they feel unworthy of love. They rationalise that if mum or dad doesn't love them, then maybe it is because they are flawed in some way, they are attention seeking, they are a burden and they don't possess the qualities required to be loved. One client, who had been in an abusive relationship for many years, had given up on all hope – she felt that she was better off staying alone in her life – she knew where she stood, and she managed her own life in a way that she could. She did not expect to find love – when she did, it took her by surprise after almost two years in a relationship, she still questions whether this love is “real”: she cannot fully comprehend that being loved in the way that she wanted could be a possibility.

Faith-based love postulates that an incentive desperately needed in so many lives is God's love. Arendt (2014) describes the love of God as most appropriate sort of love. This is one facet of love that is thought to be how the notion of endless life may abate the fear of death in individuals from a spiritual sense. People therefore choose this kind of love because it helps them move closer to their own sense of self. In a similar vein, Kierkegaard (2009) asserts that love is the everlasting love of God and draws on Christian precepts to argue that loving God first enables us to love others.

Cupiditas, is love for worldly possessions; this is the same kind of love that is depicted in many Eastern scriptures and literature (Bhagwat Gita, 1983). Using language from Heidegger (2007), Arendt characterises Cupiditas as a fleeing from death. Individuals are stuck in a paradox, whereby in their pursuit of stability they become attached to worldly objects that lack permanence (Arendt, 2014). This results in an unsatisfying dependency to things that can be lost. Because the fear of loss (loss of love) remains constant in this sense – Cupiditas does not eliminate the fear of death. Arendt describes this as akin to Heidegger’s notion of an inauthentic life and calls it a, “flight from the self.”

Therefore, although Cupiditas distracts individuals from a fear of mortality, the anxiety about death remains unresolved. However, Arendt contends that a love for this world is a necessity. According to Arendt, the love that longs for eternity is a return to oneself and to the Creator. It is only through an understanding of our own history and origins can we begin to understand ourselves. In order to do this, others are important to initiate and continue this process with. Stated differently, Caritas requires love of the world as a necessary precondition. In a similar vein, Kierkegaard addresses the idea of “love thy neighbour” in Christianity as a means of directing this love towards God. He makes it clear that the neighbour in this context also means romantic partner.

Georganda (2019) reiterates this notion that one must first love another to have the ability to love life. She says that being in love is such a powerful experience that, during those intense moments of absolute commitment to the other, the presence of death is forgotten. Unfortunately, with time, emotions might wane, and the heart becomes heavy. It is in this context that a love of life needs to subsist alongside love for the other. I suggest it is this that

can help individuals to endure the unavoidable difficulties and challenges present in our lives.

I reflect here that this was what I have experienced through my own life, the experiences of love that resonate most closely with me are those that the companionship of people that exude love, a love of life and a love of others – a love devoid of all the lustre and sheen. I question once more whether it is our duty to assist our clients in discovering their own reason for loving life. Living a meaningful life is made possible by being in love with it. Frankl (2006) emphasises in his book, *Man’s Search for Meaning* that at periods of extreme anguish, the significance of meaning becomes evident.

Over the last two years, I have been researching the experience of romantic love and I have shared a brief outline of my findings. Although I didn’t set out to only hear the experiences of women in my research, most voices I have heard are those of women. My sample was a group of eight individuals in long term committed relationships. In addition, I have shared some reflections of my client work in relation to the literature on love. It is my aim that as practitioners, we may delve into this phenomenon with our clients to help them make sense of their own experiences and harness the power that resides in love to push themselves ahead or deeper in the direction of their own choosing. Love, in my own experience, is an energy that exists within people lost in the labyrinth of worldly pursuits. As a trainee counselling psychologist/psychotherapist, I wanted to reflect on how other people experienced love. I believed that by doing so, I would be able to shed light on how this phenomenon can be discussed with clients to help them make their own decisions in life. Amidst numerous other feelings, love enables people to feel important, safe, and comfortable. Through my research and indeed this article, I did not set out to present a one-size-fits-all solution; instead, I wanted to examine more

closely and share the experience of love for a sample of individuals to allow an opening up of the phenomenon for practitioners and researchers to consider further.

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4 Poems

Attracta Gill

MY GARDEN OF HOPE

I planted my own
garden of Hope
by accepting rejection,
not
as a child
crushed by the
fear of abandonment,
but
with the resilience
of a woman
who has survived
so much worse.

In my old life
I used to sit
in soulless boardrooms
making executive decisions
for the so called
little people.

Now
I spend my days
carefully rescuing
the Bumble Bees
who stray from
my garden
into the stagnant heat
of the conservatory.

Shortly before they
give up
slumbered in
their coma state
succumbed to their
stifling coffin
I place a piece of paper
ever so gently beside
their hairy legs

And I coax
each one to survive
so that I can
lovingly return
these bumbling beauts
onto a flower
heaving with nectar.

This ordinary job
has brought
much joy
into
My garden of Hope.
this ordinary job
has become
to me
the most important
extraordinary vocation
of my life.

SAFE TOUCH

Look at all
this misogynistic
Mother Earth hating
projection
of all
our mother wounding.

I have decided
to let
the scars heal
by
rewilding,
giving
healing breath back
to the land
just like
my Body
healed
after Trauma.

Good touch
felt like bad,
crying out
to be caressed
gentle strokes
tamed the
mistrust
butterfly massage
regulated
my nervous system
alleviating the pain.

Your body knows
wants
needs
safe touch
If only
you will
trust
in yourself
First.

LOVE LETTERS FOR MY DAUGHTER

I spend
my mornings
on the
beach
talking
to my
dead
friend
and writing
poetry.

I collect
love Letters
in the form
of white stones
for my

little girl
to count.
She carefully
paints purple
love hearts
on each one.
This is how
I spend my days now.
Building love bonds
collecting blessings
and feeling
a deep gratitude
for a complex life
of trauma recovery
guided by Love's Discovery.

WILD WOMAN

Wild woman
shy Heart
lover of
words
quiet nights
in
beside
the fire
simple pleasures
pints
and
chats
long walks
in nature
solitude.

An introvert
who
loves
people
collector
of
trauma
stories
white stones
champion
for
the underdog.

A being
who

feels
deep
inside.

A complex
mess
of
broken
parts
healing.

A child
who has
been touched
violently
without
consent.

A woman
who now
roars
no!
and has
landed
in the arms
of acceptance.

Wild Woman
time to rest.

Wild Woman
you have done your best.

Author

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Maternal Love: The Antidote to the Existential Crisis of Motherhood?

Claire Arnold-Baker

Abstract: This article explores the notion of maternal love from an existential perspective by drawing on existential writers and researchers, as well as the author's own research. The article concludes that maternal love comes from the responsibility motherhood requires. It is the positive pole of the maternal experience, which helps women bear, or overcome, the existential crisis that is caused by 'Matrescence'^[1].

Key Words: Maternal Love, Motherhood, Existential Crisis, Matrescence, Responsibility

Introduction

Mothers often report 'falling in love' with their babies as soon as they are born: an intense love, that feels like nothing they have experienced before. It can, at times, feel overwhelming. For some mothers, love develops slowly, a gentle smouldering of a spark lit at birth, creeping up on these women and becoming easier when the babies can interact and respond. Other mothers may experience a fierce, protective love, which can feel animalistic in its power. There are also some mothers, who are not sure that they feel love toward their babies and children. So, caught up in the daily

worries and anxieties of motherhood, just how much love has been involved in their care only hits them when something happens, or when their children leave home. In whichever way it comes, for the vast majority of mothers, love is always there.

Maternal love is quite different from other types of love, such as romantic love, or love toward a sibling, relative, friend or colleague. It is unique in its unconditional nature and linked to the responsibility that comes with motherhood. Whilst the remit of this paper is a focus on biological mothers, maternal or paternal love is not limited to this group. There

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1. **Matrescence** is defined as the physical, biological, hormonal, psychic and emotional process of becoming a mother, which it can be completely transformational to one as a woman.

International Journal of Psychotherapy

Summer 2024, Vol. 28, No. 2, pp. 51-61: ISSN 1356-9082 (Print); ISSN 1469-8498 (Online)

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Submitted: July 2024. DOI: 10.35075/IJP.2024.28.2.6/Arnold

are a multitude of ways, in which families are constructed and in which parental love can be experienced. Maternal or paternal love can be experienced by anyone, who takes on the parenting of a baby. It can include being an adoptive mother, father, mother or father in a same sex relationship, non-binary parent or grandparent. However, each will bring forth further nuances.

Richards' (2017) chapter on *Parental Love*, offers a philosophical exploration of how parental love differs from other types of love and identifies some underlying qualities. He notes that parental love will change in its qualities, depending on the developmental stage of the child, and on what is required at each moment, such as patience, instruction or being in charge. He makes the point that whilst parental love may take many forms for different people, and at different times, at its most basic form, it must not be morally objectionable. This means that the love expressed is good for both parties in the parent-child relationship. Of course, parental love goes further than that, and it is these other aspects that will be explored in more detail below.

Unconditional Love

Probably one of the most universally accepted aspects of maternal love is that it is unconditional. Unlike other types of love, which may rely on the love of the other as a condition for love to flourish, to start with at least, mothers love without getting anything in return. There is an inequality to this early motherly love. The baby is unable to respond socially or emotionally to its mother. Its needs are great and urgent, resulting in the mother putting her baby's needs before her own. This unconditional nature of maternal love is a requirement of early childrearing. It is connected with the choice the mother has already made in accepting the responsibility of motherhood (Garland,

2020). It can feel instinctual, or an obligation, but either way, it is accepted by the mother as part of her role to care and provide for her baby. As Stadlen states, "*Only we ourselves can make love happen*" (Stadlen, 2011, p. 2).

It was Erich Fromm (1956), who coined the term 'unconditional love' in this book, *The Art of Loving*. Fromm described how a mother is indistinguishable from safety, warmth, and food at the beginning of a baby's life. Unconditional love, he believed, is a passive process for the baby: "*There is nothing I have to do in order to be loved, mother's love is unconditional*" (p. 39). But a love that is passive also has a drawback in that it cannot be acquired, it is either there or it is not. "*There is nothing I can do to create it*" (p. 39). Over time, children learn to create and give love themselves. In doing so, they move into more mature reciprocal ways of loving.

Fromm (1956) stresses that, at the beginning, the baby needs unconditional love in the same way that it needs physical or emotional care. He goes on to state, "*Motherly love, ... is the unconditional affirmation of the child's life and his needs.*" (p. 49). In this statement, Fromm goes beyond the idea that a mother merely puts her infant's needs before her own. He suggests that a mother is also required to hold an attitude, her own love for life, which "instils in the child a love for living" (p. 49).

It is easy to see how Fromm's ideas, formed in the 1950s, have gone some way to create the myth of the perfect mother (Caplan, 2000; Badinter, 2010). This can still be seen today. A myth has been created that perpetuates the image of a mother being always loving and caring, forsaking her needs whilst, at the same time, encapsulating a joy of living for her children. This promotes a selfless and almost angelic ideal for women that is often impossible to live up to. What has not been taken forward in the same way in this social discourse is how

Fromm saw the entirety of the mother's role. That her unconditional love is directed toward helping her child grow and develop and, in time, separate from her. Fromm sees this as the main difference from other types of love. Allowing space for children to separate in order for them to go out into the world on their own as independent adults, is not given as much emphasis, setting up a one-sided view of motherhood in modern society.

The reality of motherhood is that it is paradoxical (Arnold-Baker, 2020a). However, setting up this paradox in an 'either/or' way is unhelpful. It is important for mothers to hold both polarities and the tension these create, rather than trying to move toward one pole or the other. This paradoxical experience of motherhood highlights the messiness of human existence and of human relationships.

One of Winnicott's (1964) most well-known ideas was that of the 'good enough mother'. He believed that striving for perfection is not helpful for infants either. Mothers need to be responsive enough most of the time for their infants to develop trusting relationships. But infants also need to experience frustration or boredom, to develop their abilities to self-soothe. There is no one formula, sadly, which enables mothers to know how much is enough and when it is too much.

It is this aspect that Parker (2005) highlights in her work on the ambivalence of motherhood. She examines the polarity of love and hate. She takes issue with Bion's (1984) concept of *maternal reverie*, which is the process by which the mother makes sense of the baby's unbearable feelings, and in doing so the baby feels understood. Parker argues that the mother is not able to make sense of her baby's feelings, if she is unable to access and understand her own internal reality. Whilst Parker and Bion take a psychoanalytic perspective on motherhood, their ideas resonate with other

theoretical conceptualisations of the mother, such as Winnicott's *Maternal Preoccupation*, and Stern's (1998) *Attunement*. These three concepts focus on how mothers turn their attention toward their babies after the birth, rather than toward other aspects in their lives. And how this remains central, inducing receptiveness and enhanced empathy.

Attunement and Attentiveness

Motherhood is a largely embodied experience, especially at the start. During conception and pregnancy, one body contains two, and this ambiguity in embodiment can cause a bodily confusion. This confusion is accentuated after birth with a loss of corporeal autonomy, integrity, and identity (McCarthy, 2020). Birth heralds the beginning of the 'continuous separation' process, according to Kristeva (2002). What was once a part of a mother is now separate. This separation can challenge a woman's identity, but it also opens up the possibility of a new experience. Kristeva describes how "*the arrival of the child, on the other hand guides the mother through a labyrinth of a rare experience, the love for another person, as opposed to love for herself*" (p. 366). Kristeva goes on to state that the "rather slow, difficult, and delightful process of becoming attentive, tender, and self-effacing" (p. 266) helps the mother overcome the dramatic ordeal of birth.

The period directly after the birth is now referred to as the *fourth trimester* (Choi et al., 2022). This early stage of motherhood is a time of pre-communication, according to Merleau-Ponty (1964). Mother and baby are *inter-embodied*; they are interconnected and intertwined as "*an anonymous collectively, an undifferentiated group life*" (p. 119). As part of this *inter-embodiment*, the experience of holding and being held becomes blurred, highlighting Merleau-Ponty's (1968) notion of

reversibility. Communication and interactions are bodily at first. Contemporary thought highlights the more dynamic relationship that develops between mother and baby. It emphasises that the baby has as much impact on the mother as the mother has on her baby. As Miller (1997) contends, babies 'grow their mothers'. Out of this embodied milieu, these bodily interactions form the initial communication of love.

There is much current debate about the nature, or notion, of the maternal instinct (Gustafsson *et al.*, 2013; Oakley, 1987), and whether it indeed exists or is just a myth. It might be better understood as an instinct, or choice, to respond to the survival instincts of the baby. It is the *unconditional love* that Fromm describes. This has been demonstrated in recent research, which used neuroimaging to plot the regions in the brain connected to maternal love. The results found that mothers respond more strongly to their babies' distress than to their smiles. The distress activates a need to respond. There is also a complex interconnection between the mother's activation and reward systems. And how their babies also protect their mother through producing homeostatic emotions (Kikuchi & Noriuchi, 2015). This shows once again the dynamic that occurs between mother and infant in the caregiving response.

In order to respond, the mother needs to be aware of what to respond to. She needs to tune into her baby. This requires an intensive awareness and a 'listening' process, as Rossiter (1988) states: "*Listening involves a constant 'tuning in' to the baby's needs, preferences, dislikes and responses*" (p. 66). Levin (1989) concurred with this and contended that mothering was a mode of expert listening, requiring the mother to be open, receptive, and attentive. This is a different type of listening to the one that might ordinarily occur in everyday living. It has two functions: one con-

cerns how to respond, but the second relates to how the mother listens in order to understand and familiarize herself with her baby. Stadlen (2005) describes this process in detail in her book, *What Mothers Do*, giving words to a largely invisible process that all mothers go through to help them understand and respond to their babies.

I-Thou relating

The type of listening or responding that mothers embark on, from birth onward, is part of a mode of meeting or encountering the Other. It could be argued that mothers enter what Buber (2000) conceptualises as an I-Thou relationship with their babies. Buber makes a distinction between two types of relating, I-It and I-Thou. In I-It relating a person relates to the other as if s/he were an object. The focus of this type of relationship remains with the individual and her/how own understanding. I-Thou relationships, in contrast, are characterized by meeting the other in an open and receptive manner so that understanding is co-created. The boundary between Self and Other becomes hazy in those moments. Both are fully present. In I-Thou relationships, each person is trying to reach out to the other to connect to the other's essence, through understanding and encountering the other as s/he is. Frankl (1984) likens this relationship to love, "*Love is the only way to grasp another human being in the innermost core of his personality. No one can become fully aware of the very essence of another human being unless he loves him*" (p. 134).

The mode of listening that mothers undertake can be seen as an example of I-Thou relating. They are focused on the present moment of meeting their babies fully and openly. This meeting enables understanding to be gained. Buber (2000) also believes that babies have an 'inborn Thou', which may be connected to

a survival instinct. Also, babies have the impulse to establish relationships with others. Psychological studies have demonstrated how babies are drawn to faces rather than other objects. Recent research by Kamps *et al.* (2020) conclude that babies' brains are already hard wired to respond to faces, rather than being the *tabula rasa* they were once thought to be. A baby's inbuilt I-Thou, their preference to turn toward faces, results in he/her trying to establish a relationship, which in time turns into mutual relation or 'tenderness' (Buber, 2000, p. 39).

Creating Heartroom

An essential component of maternal love is the degree to which mothers can open themselves up to meeting and understanding their babies and to their ability to tune in with what their babies need in any given moment. Women undergo a tremendous shift when they become mothers. The most obvious aspects of this shift are seen in the changes to the mothers' bodies and their sense of their embodiment. There are also psychological and emotional changes, which are required when women have babies.

Recent research has provided evidence for certain neurophysiological changes. Referred to as 'mummy brain' in common parlance, these occur during pregnancy and birth. A longitudinal study, mapping cortical changes in 34 first-time mothers, found significant neuroplasticity during the perinatal and postnatal period (Paternin-Die *et al.*, 2021). However, there is also an overlooked spatial dimension to the motherhood shift.

Women create space during their pregnancy to accommodate their babies in their bodies. They also have to create space within their lives. This spatial dimension has both a psychological and emotional element. Stadlen (2005) describes how modern mothers go

through a slowing-down process, which enables them to relate to their babies better. A slower pace of life and an opening of attentiveness and attunement is required in the early stages of motherhood. Stadlen (2011) draws on Kierkegaard's (1962) notion of *up-building*, which she reconceptualises as *heartroom*. She states that "*if a mother opens up real heartroom for her child, it does not seem possible to fold it away again*" (p. 18). This was confirmed by my own research. I found that the understanding that mothers needed to harness, in order to be able to connect to their babies, extends to other people, too (Arnold-Baker, 2020b). Motherhood creates a shift in mothers' modes of relating, which affects all their relationships, not only the relationship with their babies.

Heartroom is not the only spatial aspect that opens up once a woman becomes a mother. An existential space is also created during the transition to motherhood when the mother becomes confronted with her existence in a new way. This existential space allows a further opening for the mother, a space to see her place in her life and the world around her. Mothers start to gain a wider perspective on existence and how their role extends from the bond between the mother and child out to their connection to society as a whole.

Existential Crisis

The creation of existential space is a direct consequence of the existential crisis that women go through in the transition to motherhood (Arnold-Baker, 2020a). My research into the early motherhood experiences of first-time mothers found that women experienced changes in all four dimensions of their existence. Some of the changes have already been highlighted above. They form part of the shift that mothers go through, such as changes to their body, their attitude and spatial dimension. However, mothers also experience

changes in their closest relationships, with their partners and their own mothers, all the while, grappling with integrating the new identity of ‘mother’ into their sense of themselves. On the spiritual dimension, mothers’ priorities, motivations, and purposes also change, which often brings new meanings into their lives (Arnold-Baker, 2020b).

As well as these profound shifts, which occur during *matresence* (Raphael, 1975), mothers are also confronted by existential themes, such as natality, mortality, time and temporality, embodiment, responsibility and freedom, and the ‘unknown’ (Arnold-Baker, 2020b). Mothers are not always aware of these elements at the time. This contributes to their sense of *not understanding* something that felt significant but remained unresolved (Simmons, 2020). Simmons concludes that “*in the murky no-man’s land of not-understanding, tensions between existential conditions such as uncertainty, groundlessness, thrown-ness, responsibility and freedom were exacerbated, and this called for a response.*” (p. 108).

The existential crisis of motherhood is best understood as a time of choice and decision making rather than a traumatic event or time of danger, although, of course, this can also be present in a mother’s experiences. The shifts and changes that are evoked in *matresence* (‘mother becoming’), as Raphael defined it, cause mothers to stop and consider the entirety of their lives and to make decisions about their existence (Arnold-Baker, 2020a). An existential crisis occurs when we become aware of the unpredictable nature of life. *Matresence* is a time when mothers feel uncertain and do not understand what is happening to them, they have the sense of entering the ‘unknown’. The everyday familiarity of life disappears. Even the mother’s experience of time changes (Arnold-Baker, 2020b). When mothers are trying to create a home for their families, they feel most *not-at-home*, or as Heidegger

(1962) termed it, ‘*umheimlich*’. This mode of existence is anxiety provoking. It reveals the mothers’ freedom and responsibility and her need to choose. This was echoed by one of my research participants, Helen, who said “*It’s the constant choice making. Every day you’re making choices, which will affect, like even now, the choice about when to wake him up.*”

Yet, despite these challenges and difficulties, and despite the experience of existential crisis that motherhood brings, which leads to not feeling at home in their lives, mothers find the resilience to keep going in the face of the struggle. As Simmons (2020) states, “*The sense of live human struggle, of reaching through not-understanding in order to better connect with their babies*” (p. 110). Existential courage and strength are needed to enable mothers to continue caring for their infants, as well as finding ways to connect and reconnect with them. This is not only required in early motherhood but continues throughout the mothering journey. Price (1988) sums it up well when she says: “*My two children have instructed me in the arts of motherhood ... They continually take me on a guided tour of my limits, physical, emotional, and intellectual, and having demonstrated these, revealing my inadequacy, they then proceed to love me despite everything*” (p. 150).

Responsibility and Love

As can be seen, motherhood is a struggle: it is paradoxical. There is a relentless feel about it, that also involves huge shifts and changes to a mother’s life. Fromm would suggest that unconditional love empowers mothers to keep loving, relating, and responding to their infants, despite the difficulty of being a parent. But if unconditional love is not a biological instinct, then mothers must first decide that they are going to love unconditionally. Existential research into early motherhood has demonstrated the affect that responsibility

has on mothers (Arnold-Baker, 2020b; Garland, 2020).

Mothers feel totally responsible for the survival of their babies. They are very aware of their choices and the impact these choices will have on them. Mothers are also conscious of the responsibility they hold toward their babies and the wider society. They must ensure that they are enabling their infants to become good citizens. At times, this level of responsibility can seem burdensome. But Garland (2020) notes that before mothers can experience responsibility, they must accept responsibility for their babies. They must choose to be their babies' mothers in an intentional way. Unconditional love, therefore, is a choice that a caregiver makes toward her baby and continues to make throughout her child's life. This echoes Merleau-Ponty's (2010) contention that maternal love *"is created by oath, decision, i.e., promised behavior. But we throw ourselves into it, i.e., we end up feeling, and not only by acting, according to the promise. If we did not feel according to the promise, it is because we have not truly decided or promised, a half-decision is a decision to be double. The true decision results in the feeling."* (p. 28)

Responsibility is, therefore, present before love is established. It ensures that the baby is looked after and cared for. As Daws and Rementeria (2021) stressed, *"'Falling in love' does not come easily to all parents"* (p. 49). An interpretative synthesis of qualitative studies on the struggle of maternal love found that those mothers who struggled had also experienced uncertainty in being able to imagine their unborn children or their maternal future. They often felt a disillusionment of the birth. This may also be linked to an experience of birth trauma and experiencing a lack of control, and 'increasing alienation' (Røseth et al., 2018). My research also highlighted how love grows through the process of relating and connecting with the baby. As Christie stated:

"I think I feel protective of [daughter's name] but I didn't immediately feel a massive loving, wow, wow, wow this is incredible, you're mine and this is the best thing ever. I didn't have that immediate, immediate connection I just thought 'woah' and it was really strange".

Christie described how her love toward her daughter developed over time,

"so that felt just unnatural and I must have convinced myself she was going to be a boy and kept saying he, he, he. So, it felt quite strange actually, thinking about it. I haven't really ever thought about it and then it wasn't until maybe four or five weeks that I actually asked and looked at her and thought, 'Oh my God, you're mine' and 'Yeah', I really felt it".

Fiona described something similar:

"I remember thinking I hadn't, you know, they talk about this massive surge of love and I never had that early on. I knew I loved him, but I never had this all-encompassing, you know, burst of love. But I do absolutely adore him and love him to bits, and I think when I was saying his character is coming out more and more, then that love is growing even more, which is lovely".

Fiona goes on to describe how love becomes easier once her baby was able to respond and interact:

"My relationship with [son's name] has ... come quite easily, obviously it's got easier when he's interacted more. The first month it doesn't really feel like you've got a relationship although you try to and you kiss them and you try and put them on your skin and stuff like that, but you're not getting a lot back. But, as soon as he's been able to interact, that's been fine."

Stadlen (2005) observed that it became easier for a mother, once she started to feel like her child's 'particular mother'. When babies rec-

ognised and responded to their mothers, this helped mothers see that they mattered to their babies. This gave them a sense of purpose and helped the mothering process.

The love experienced by my participants toward their babies was also quite intense. Christie stated, *“what a privilege to have her really”*, and Eleanor said, *“I think this is cheesy. I think you do underestimate how much you’ll love them.”* Beth describes her experience as, *“obviously I love [daughter’s name] to bits and sort of have days when I look at her and think ‘you’re just amazing!’”* and how the experience was *“very magical, me and [daughter’s name] against the world sort of thing”*. Participants’ experiences echo Rossiter’s (1988) view that the responsibility and attachment that mothers feel toward their babies create a powerful emotional state. It can be overwhelming (Figes, 1998).

Nativity, Maternity & Mortality

Stern (1995) also links maternal responsibility with the survival of the species in his conception of the motherhood constellation. Whilst this may play a part, responsibility also arises out of *care* (Sorgen) (Heidegger, 1962). Heidegger believed that a fundamental structure of human existence is one of care: the world and others matter to us. Maternity also has the effect of bringing together natality and mortality. Birth brings life and death into sharp focus. Mothers become aware of the fragility of life, which coupled with the vulnerability of a newborn baby, creates a period where the ontological structures of life are revealed (Arnold-Baker, 2023). Stone (2019) describes how natality reveals the vulnerability and relationality of human existence, and our dependency on others. Mortality reveals our temporality and facticity and how we are bound in time. The vulnerability of a newborn

also puts the mother’s own vulnerability into focus. How she herself also was once this vulnerable. Love, then, can be seen in terms of reciprocity. Our vulnerability and dependency on others help us to be caring and responsible toward others. Giving out what we either have received or wished to receive.

Conclusion

Maternal love is a complex concept, which has responsibility at its root. The unconditional nature of maternal love also makes it a unique type of love, which endures over time, despite moments of a lack of reciprocity and difficulties in the relationship. Maternal love emerges out of *care*, which is an essential aspect of human relations. Because fundamentally we care for others and are also dependent on others for our survival: we accept responsibility for the care of our infants.

Furthermore, maternal love is a means through which mothers connect and relate to their babies. It helps mothers to become receptive and open, as they move into a mode of understanding and listening through *I-Thou* relating. This opening-up is possible since ‘matresence’ causes women to shift and adapt. In this process, they create space for their babies in their lives, physically, psychologically, emotionally, spiritually, and existentially. Mothers move into a new mode of relating. It involves slowing down, being receptive, tender, open, and seeking understanding, even if faced with situations and emotions that they do not always comprehend. Mothers are confronted by the very tenets of existence, of life and death, and freedom and responsibility (Arnold-Baker, 2020b).

The existential awareness that is created provokes an existential crisis. This prompts mothers to choose how they are going to respond to motherhood. In making this choice, they accept the responsibility of being their

children's mothers. Maternal love is the opposing pole of an existential crisis. Therefore, it is the antidote to the struggle and constant decision making that motherhood requires. It offers an intense positive emotion of joy, connection, and pride to counteract worry and anxiety that an existential crisis might evoke.

In this confusing and paradoxical time, mothers need to harness their existential courage to develop love in the face of difficulty. Maternal love provides the motivation to face each day anew, with the intention to connect and reconnect. It enables mothers to find their way through the journey they have embarked on.

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Women, (Self-)Love, and (Self-Referential) Humour?

Lydia Amir

Abstract:

This article associates self-love with self-referential humour, with the intent of fostering the former through the latter. It identifies the possible sources of poor self-love in women, debunks the stereotype of the lack of a feminine funny bone, takes issue with feminist writing on humour, and proposes a gradual change in one's attitude toward oneself through a systematic use of self-referential. The ambiguity of humour in relation to truth and its ambivalence in relation to its contents may help us reach unconscious aspects of the self, enabling an encounter with difficult emotions, such as shame and disgust. These are sometimes the outcome of internalisation of stereotypes about women and their bodies, which often translate into low self-esteem and difficulties in exploring sexual and emotional needs. Instead of yearning for partners with a sense of humour, as many women are reported to do, developing self-referential humour may ensure that one enjoys humour without ever suffering from the outcome of the Sophists' rhetorical device: facing someone who counters your seriousness through humour and your humour through seriousness. The best strategy to have laughter always on your side, is to learn the workings of self-referential humour, or self-directed intra-personal humour, in order to use it as a systematic tool for self-acceptance, self-esteem, and self-love.

Key Words:

self-love, self-referential humour, shame, disgust, conflict-resolution

"Humour: Une forme de comique, mais qui fait rire, surtout de ce qui n'est pas drôle".

[Humour: a form of the comical, but which makes us laugh, especially at that which is not funny].

André Comte-Sponville, "Humour",
in *Dictionnaire Philosophique* (2001)

Introduction

When people think of love, they mainly think of romantic love, some also think of parental love. Yet, there are many forms of love worth developing. Among others, impersonal kinds of love, such as the

International Journal of Psychotherapy

Summer 2024, Vol. 28, No. 2, pp. 63-77: ISSN 1356-9082 (Print); ISSN 1469-8498 (Online)

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Submitted: July 2024. DOI: 10.35075/IJP.2024.28.2.7/Amir

love of wisdom or the love of humanity,^[1] but none is as important as self-love (Amir, 2022). Indeed, if we believe Benedict Spinoza, non-narcissistic self-love is no less than redemptive (*Ethics* [1985]; Rorty, 2009), and, along the same lines, Friedrich Nietzsche advises to “*Love yourself through grace. Then you are no longer in need of your God, and you can act the whole drama of Fall and Redemption to its end in yourself*” (1982, I, sec. 79). Knowingly or not, both follow the Renaissance thinker, Michel de Montaigne, who emphasised in his *Essay* self-possession or self-belonging as a key to self-enjoyment (Montaigne 1965; see Basu, forthcoming).

Enjoying one’s self seems to presuppose knowledge of self, which, if the unconscious plays a part in it, lays outside of our reach. Some may find self-enjoyment more challenging, amongst them, we can find also women. In what follows, I will argue that self-referential humour may overcome the problem that unconscious aspects of self may represent for the task of self-love (see Amir 2006), and that a systematic use of that kind of humour may help us befriend ourselves. Thus, I will associate self-love with self-referential humour, with the intent of fostering the former through the latter.

We may wonder why self-love may be in need of nurturing in women. The reason may be that attitudes associating women with human vulnerability, animal-nature, and death tend to be internalised as shame and disgust toward women’s bodies, and their inner vulnerability. Coming to terms with these inevitable features of human life promotes compassion along with a deeper awareness of our common lot, which in turn, brings about well-being

for us and for others. Humour may be helpful for acknowledging and gradually freeing oneself from shame and disgust, leading to the self-acceptance and the self-liberation. Thus, I argue that self-referential humour is a highly efficient tool for gradual change, which can be effectively used to enhance women’s self-esteem and self-love.

The workings of self-referential humour as a topic are rarely addressed by feminists and other theoreticians of humour. Society may put a high premium on humour, but the common view is that humour is not so prevalent amongst women. Addressing this view is significant for my argument because, women’s internalisation of stereotypes about their (in) capacity for humour may hinder its use. Thus, I begin by examining the validity of the view that women suffer from frigidity of the funny bone by introducing feminists’ responses to it. I then examine the origins of disgust and shame, and explain how women may internalise these emotions. Finally, I propose an effective way to counter these emotions through a gradual process that uses self-referential humour as a tool in the practice of self-love.

Women and Humour

Did you know that only about two percent of the population confess to lacking a sense of humour? In *Personality and Sense of Humour*, psychologist Avner Ziv tells us that we prefer to be perceived rather as stupid than as humourless (Ziv, 1984, p. 3). Deemed the best medicine in *Women and Laughter* (Gray, 1994), laughter is supposed to be good for us. It has been promoted as such in all disciplines that address the good life. Yet encouraging women to use humour may not be an easy task, because women often internalise stereotypes

1. See Amir (2001), Amir (2002), Amir (2004).

about their (in)capacity for appreciating and creating humour. Thus, I first examine the view that women have no sense of humour and feminists' responses to this charge.

Since the word "humour" began about three hundred years ago to denote a capacity for laughter rather than a bodily fluid (see Sanders, 1995), men, and some women, have been perpetuating the idea that women have no sense of humour. William Congreve asserted at the end of the seventeenth century, that he had never made any Observation of what he apprehend to be true Humour in Women (Congreve, [1695] 1964). Reginald Blyth quipped that "women have not only no humour in themselves, but are the cause of the extinction of it in others" (Blyth, 1959, p. 14). Francis Gray explains that laughter, when in disrepute, tends to be attributed to both women and children:

Like sexuality, laughter has been sometimes highly valued, sometimes denigrated; but like sexuality and indeed, with it, laughter has been closely bound up with power. Cultures which did not exalt humour to its current overblown status could attribute it to women ... Only when laughter is the sign of the civilized man ... do women appear to suffer from a mysterious frigidity of the funny bone. (Gray, 1994, pp. 6-7)

Many have associated rationality with humour, the former being the mark of civilized man. Arthur Schopenhauer, who rejected rationality, argued that a keen sense of ethics, which women notoriously lack, is required for humour. Long is the list of philosophers, authors, and thinkers, who deplore women's lack of rationality, ethics, and humour. Yet there is

no reason to elaborate on their views. I suggest looking instead into the answers of contemporary feminists to the charge that women have no humour. They have devised two main strategies to address this. While some consider the claim false, some say it is true. Let us examine these answers in detail.

The Claim is False:

Out of various authors who investigated the relation between gender and humour, Regina Barreca (1988) is notable for her persistence, arguing for the last twenty years against the idea that the creation and enjoyment of humour are a masculine privilege. Audrey Bilger maintains that humour has historically served as a simultaneous psychological survival skill and an emancipatory strategy for women in sexist societies. From a political point of view, women have used humour as a method for conserving community principles and subverting community expectations. While nineteenth- and early twentieth-century women were seen as "lacking" a sense of humour, Bilger argues that twenty-first century women, who make use of humour, must strike a particularly sensitive balance so as not to be seen as too cerebral, forward, frivolous, or antagonistic (Bilger, 1998, pp. 10-50). Cynthia Willett and Julie Willett have recently joined the debate in *Uproarious: How Feminists and Other Subversive Comics Speak Truth* (2019). Echoing the view of Gilles Deleuze on the humour of minorities,^[2] they argue that "*the socially disempowered have historically found humour to be a tool of resistance in hidden (and not so hidden) transcripts that recharge the social atmosphere and body politics. Yet their humour has been ignored to such a degree that they often are not even considered funny*" (pp. 1-2; emphasis added).

2. On this topic, see Amir (2021, Chapter 2).

The Claim is True, but ...:

To fully understand women's use of humour as cultural production, Barreca argues that we need new definitions for assessing their comic output and for evaluating their role as "decentering, dis-locating, and destabilizing" cultural authority (Barreca, 1988, p. 15). Her introduction to *Last Laughs: Perspectives on Women and Comedy* (1988), challenges the "universal" standards for identifying humour. Her aim is not to outline the allegedly essential elements of "feminine" humour, but rather to argue that we should not overlook humour produced by women when it does not conform to established standards.

What would be, then, the criteria for feminine laughter? In *Sexes et Parentés*, Luce Irigaray argues that as for the moment, there are no female values. Feminist humour is inauthentic in that it merely apes the power structures of phallocracy and the assumptions of phallocentrism. Another prominent contemporary philosopher, Hélène Cixous, recognises laughter as a feminist strategy.³ Whilst Freudian psychology directs its energy against hysteria and therefore against femininity, she claims in "The Laugh of the Medusa" solidarity with hysterics. One of the most obvious, striking, and perhaps disturbing features of hysteria is uncontrolled and unexplained laughter. She sees it as significant and appropriate that this laughter disturbs, arguing for it is "*the moment at which the woman crosses a dangerous line, the cultural demarcation beyond which she will find herself excluded*" (Cixous, 1976, p. 884).

The laughter advocated by Cixous demolishes hierarchies by rendering nonsensical the aggression between father and son, which is at

their origin. It thus removes the difference between margin and centre. Women cease to be outsiders, because of the resulting meaninglessness of the very concepts of "outside" or "inside". This is why Cixous summons the woman's text to "*shatter the framework of institutions ... blow up the law ... break up the 'truth' with laughter*" (Cixous, 2003, p. 282).

As laughter is seen as a strategy, whose goal it is to dismantle power structures through writing, French post-structuralist feminists have been charged with neglecting actual political action. Building on conservative feminists' view that there is no other revolution than the revolution every woman makes by herself, I believe that self-liberation is a pre-condition of political action. Rather than recommending the dismantling of power structures through writing, I suggest that humour can be useful for feminists, because it is a significant tool of self-liberation. Here, my focus is more narrowly on liberation from shame and disgust, which requires first an understanding of how these emotions are created.

Shame and Disgust

Human beings suffer from the uneasy tension created by their perceived dual nature. This duality is expressed in various ways: soul or mind *versus* body, angels *versus* animals, infinite and finite, spirit and matter, and so on. But this dualism is not neutral or egalitarian. Matter, the body, or animal part, has traditionally been, and still is, mostly rejected. This explains both our attitudes toward bodily functions and animals. So, powerful is the desire to cordon ourselves off from our animality that we do not stop at bodily functions and

3. See Cixous and Clément (1975), Cixous (1978), and Cixous (1976), in Calarco and Atterton (2003); see also Parkin (1997, pp. 230–77), who chooses Cixous to represent Feminist laughter in his *Humour Theorists of the Twentieth Century*.

animals but need a group of humans against which we can unite.

Martha Nussbaum argues that the *locus classicus* of group-directed projective disgust is the female body (Nussbaum, 2004, p. 107). As receivers of semen and closely linked, through birth, with the mortality of the body, women in more or less all societies have been the expression for male loathing of the physical and the potentially decaying.^[4] Taboos surrounding sex, birth, and menstruation express the desire to ward off something that is too physical, that partakes too much of the secretions of the body.

In *The Anatomy of Disgust* (1997), legal theorist William Miller describes these male attitudes toward women as inevitable aspects of male sexuality: women become the sticky mortal part of him from which he needs to distance himself. Both misogynistic and homophobic disgust have deep roots in ambivalence about bodily products and their connection with vulnerability and death. Disgust focuses on reminders of our mortality, while embodiment is seen as sources of contamination for the self. It thus distances us from what we truly are. It is an inherently self-deceptive emotion, whose function is to conceal from us, on a daily basis, facts about ourselves, which are difficult to face.

The disgust with one's softness and mortality that prevails in Western society dates back at least to Plato's *Symposium*. Aristophanes points there to a kind of primitive shame at the very fact of being human and nonwhole, which underlies more specific types of shame (Plato, 1953, *Symposium*, 189c-193e). Shame is a painful emotion responding to a sense of failure to attain some ideal state. As a painful awareness of inadequacy, shame focuses on

the sexual because our sexual organs are symbols of our animality and mortality (Scheeler, 1957, pp. 55-148).

Shame can arise out of feelings of neediness. Boy-culture encourages young people to hide their need for others and avert their own gaze from their inner world, leaving it as uncharted territory. This can become a vicious cycle as unstudied and underdeveloped emotions remain at an infantile level. And are therefore felt to be all the more shameful, all the more out of step with the appearance of the controlling adult self. Thus, heterosexual boy-culture denigrates all aspects of personality that are viewed as female: emotions, need, sadness, and compassion. The multiple experience of shame, which marks boys' lives, is often channelled into hostility toward women and toward their own vulnerability.

"Primitive shame", the demand for perfection and the constant inability to tolerate any lack of control or imperfection, is a specific type of shame. It is closely connected with narcissism or infantile omnipotence (Nussbaum, 2001, pp. 196-200). It is a paralysing shame of all that is human in oneself that acts as a barrier to compassion. Pathological narcissism can affect both males and females. However, Nussbaum insists that "*we have reasons to think that the tendency is often connected with common patterns of male development*" (pp. 342-47). She emphasises possible differences in sexual development, noting that this kind of frenzy for control has been variously traced in a number of recent analyses of the origin of misogyny. Seen in this light, it will be a narcissistic refusal to tolerate the reality of something different from oneself, especially, if it is at the same time a reminder of one's bodily vulnerability.

4. See, for example, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Purity_and_Danger

Along the same lines, Elizabeth Young-Bruehl studies the psychological origins of sexism and shows how it is particularly closely connected to narcissism. It stems from the inability to tolerate the existence of the mother as separate, rather than a part of the child and subject to the child's control (see Young-Bruehl, 1996, p. 132).

Although these are extreme cases, normally functioning people have these traits to a degree that encourages self-deceptive thinking about their own vulnerability. In *Upheavals of Thought: A Theory of Emotions*, Nussbaum explains how narcissism is associated with the female body:

Because the child aiming at omnipotence does not accept the soft, fleshy, fluid aspects of himself, which are so many signs of weakness and mortality, these must be repudiated from the self, as a violent gesture of differentiation and subordination. What Theweleit's *Freikorps* officers loathe is "mire", "slime", "swamps", "floods", "stench" – all, he plausibly argues, metaphors for the female body, and ultimately for the vulnerable aspects of their own. (Nussbaum, 2001, p. 346)⁵

Some women may internalise these views of themselves and their bodies, which often translate into low self-esteem and difficulties in exploring their sexual and emotional needs. The female side of the shame-inducing cultural ideals contains other destructive elements, in particular, the continual emphasis on an inflexible ideal of female beauty that emphasises thinness as a key to desirability.

There is a connection between these ideals and the eating disorders that are prevalent in adolescent and preadolescent girls. Andrew Mor-

risson has associated these problems with the hypertrophy of shame. This means that shame of imagined bodily imperfections is a frequent vehicle for earlier and more general feelings of infantile shame, further feeding the tendency to a destructive type of narcissism (Morrison, 1986, pp. 19, 86–89). The eating disorder, initially aimed at restoring control over the body and achieving the desired perfection, becomes a new source of shame. A lesser yet significant problem may occur after birth and motherhood, when women often find their bodies less appealing than they used to. Combined with the natural process of ageing, this may make them feel ashamed of their sexual needs and emotional desires.

Women may feel ashamed of the emotional needs of the "inner little girl", because, educated by their mothers to care for others, they do not dare to demand to be taken care of (Eichenbaum & Orbach, 1983). Coupled with their often veiled emotional and sexual neediness, these experiences may sustain shame and internalised disgust. As holding oneself to an ideal introduces shame as a permanent possibility, a society that emphasises the ideal of self-reliability and invulnerability, can make us feel ashamed of our emotional and physical needs.

The immediate family is a powerful agent in the development of shame, whether healthy or unhealthy. But the surrounding society is another. If we bear in mind that immediate family members are also conditioned by socially-induced emotions, we have a strong case for women's potential shame and disgust at themselves as a consequence of socialisation. Even if human beings share similar capacities for feelings, and a common social and cultural world, feminists believe that significant

5. See Theweleit (1987–1989).

differences of status, power, recognition, and responsibility in the social world prompt individuals to learn patterns of feeling and patterns of expressing feelings that make sense to those individuals and to their social position in the world (Walker, 2007, pp. 103–4). As emotions within and between persons share an intense synergy, feminists prefer social theories of emotions. Thus, Margaret Walker maintains that:

We need to ask whose gazes we have learned to live under and what we have come to expect, fear, or need, flows back toward us in the emotional responses of particular others to our displays of feeling. Some emotional synergies between people will have destructive consequences, as in interpersonal spirals of shame and contempt. (Walker, 2007, p. 112)^[6]

It is important to uncover and, if possible, distance oneself from these socially-induced emotions, shame and disgust, in order to choose more freely one's attitudes toward one's body and inner vulnerability.

Liberation from socially-induced opinions and feelings has always been at the core of the philosophic agenda. The difficulty lies in our unwillingness and inability to recognise these views, because the products of good socialisation are assimilated within the self. Self-referential humour, when systematically practised, is a valuable tool for fostering self-knowledge, acknowledging ambivalence, reducing painful emotions, such as shame and disgust, enabling acceptance of self and others, living with irresolvable conflict, or alternatively, and providing conflict resolution by endorsing a worldview that considers conflict essential to the human condition.

Self-Change and Self-Referential Humour

By self-referential humour, I mean self-directed, intra-personal humour. This kind of humour has hardly been studied. Many believe that it is quite rare. And because it cannot be an object of observation, but rather of introspection, it has not been addressed by contemporary psychologists. I have advanced a new model of rationality (Amir, 2023), which is a necessary tool for this kind of humour.

Moreover, I have found that self-directed, intra-personal humour enacts an inner dialogue which is conducive to gradual change with high efficiency. Usually not considered as radical or revolutionary, humour is a 'win-win' situation, a 'both-and' rather than an 'either-or' position. Compassionate aggression is at its core, with both components of this uneasy combination being equally necessary for effective criticism. Effective criticism interests us here, because it is the only means given to us to quicken our growth, evolution, or maturation. Self-directed, intra-personal humour is conducive to growth, because it enables us to accomplish various things. Acknowledge feelings and thoughts, maintain an ambivalent attitude toward them, live in a state of full awareness of internal conflicts whilst reducing the tension they create, and eventually altering the balance that characterises ambivalence to begin a gradual movement toward an inner resolution of the intra-personal conflict. The resolution I am alluding to involves self-acceptance and self-liberation.

In the frame of my article, the self-liberation stems from attitudes toward women that associate them with vulnerability, animal-nature, and death. It may be internalised as

6. See also Calhoun (1989, 389–406).

shame and disgust toward their bodies, and as vulnerability toward their inner selves. The workings of internal, self-referential humour begin by furthering the awareness of shame and disgust, and recognising their internalised messages. This kind of humour generates an ambivalent attitude toward these emotions, which enables us to contemplate them as true or not, ours or not, and as defining of our selves or not. This is followed by a gradual distancing from them due to their reduced impact, which leads ultimately to replacing shame and disgust with self-acceptance. Self-acceptance is necessary for compassion, as well as for social and emotional well-being. Let me explain these ideas by detailing the various facets of the internal exercise of humour.

Self-knowledge

Self-knowledge is a pre-requisite of effective deliberation, which, in turn, is imperative for deciding whether and how to solve a conflict. Awareness of internal conflict and familiarity with the conflict's components are important for self-knowledge. Self-referential humour facilitates self-knowledge by creating the distance necessary to observe one's self with the calmness that characterises aesthetic contemplation. By suspending blind emotions, silencing shame and disgust, and incapacitating rash action, a safe inward environment is created, where hidden aspects of the self are encouraged to emerge under the impartiality of the humorous gaze.

Self-knowledge is a mode of reflection that involves judgment, aiming to make our character less fortuitous and more deliberate. This is the same process as that of increasing control. To move our character in the desired direction requires that we control it so that it can approximate more closely our conception of a good life. This transformation proceeds through the evaluation of our desires, capaci-

ties, opportunities, values, and actions, with a view to forming from these enduring patterns conducive to living a good life (Kekes, 1995, pp. 127–28). Similarly, self-knowledge, in the sense of knowing one's heart, true desires, and primary passions, is needed as a first step for attaining the ideal of authenticity or “being yourself” (Guignon, 2005, p. 14).

Self-knowledge assumes the inner dialogue, we are all familiar with, which has been explored by philosophers, anthropologists, and psychologists. There are two main models of inner dialogue, the reflexive model and the social model. Humour fits them both. The reflexive model takes speech to be the manifestation of reflection, i.e., of the act, by which I am able to think about the contents of my consciousness (see Edelman, 2006). I may, for example, possess a moral intuition of the virtue of justice, and live according to its principles. But in reflecting on it, I examine this content from some higher or more abstract perspective. While the original level is merely “lived” and relatively unexamined, the higher level is evaluative and critical. Since this evaluation requires conceptual analysis, I talk to myself when I reflect. I may compare the abstract perspective with the lived one. This procedure is common in character building. If we follow Benedict Spinoza, we evaluate ourselves according to a correct principle of living, which we apply constantly to the particular instances that are frequently encountered in life (*Ethics*, bk. 5, Prop. 10 Scholium). To fully accept what lies between the ideal and reality, we need humour. It helps us cope effectively with shame and disgust, among other emotions.

Other accounts of inner speech invoke a more overtly dialogical structure. Among these is the idea that my inner conversation takes place between different personas. The roles of ‘parent’, ‘child’, ‘teacher’, or ‘victim that I carry within myself might be adopted in re-

lation to one another. In fact, my Self can be seen largely as a set of such roles, determined to a significant extent by my social relationships. This model allows for humorous interactions between these inner parts that mirror the significant role humour plays in social conflicts. A familiar model for Freudian (and later) psychotherapists has been the rational, conscious, articulating ego, which is confronted with its powerlessness in the face of the emotional, unconscious, and non-verbal Id. The tolerance which humour conveys may explain its success in encouraging the emergence of hidden aspects of the personality.^[7]

Acknowledging Ambivalence:

Acknowledging ambivalence is necessary for understanding oneself, others, and human relations in general. Ambivalence, the state of simultaneous conflicting feelings, is experienced in thoughts and emotions of both positive and negative valence, toward someone or something. Its opposite is a rigid intolerance for ambiguity, nuance, and paradox. A common example of ambivalence is feeling both love and hate for a person.^[8] The term also refers to situations, in which mixed feelings of a more general sort are experienced, or when a person experiences uncertainty or indecisiveness concerning something. Because both positive and negative aspects of a subject are present in a person's mind at the same time, ambivalence is a psychologically unpleasant state that often leads to avoidance and procrastination, or to deliberate attempts to re-

solve the ambivalence. Ever since the Swiss psychiatrist, Eugen Bleuler ([1911] 1952) introduced the term early in the twentieth century, ambivalence in human attitudes has been under continual investigation, especially by psychologists.

Long before the term was coined, the experience of ambivalence (being pulled in psychologically opposite directions) had been noted. In his treatment of the emotions in the third part of his *Ethics*, Spinoza makes much of ambivalence, which he terms 'fluctuation or vacillation', resulting from a transfer of emotions, which he calls 'imitation' (*imitatio*) (propositions p. 17 and p. 27). He also focuses on various types of ambivalence. In general, no observer of the human condition can fail to note the existence of mixed feelings, mingled beliefs, and contradictory actions.

Psychoanalysis has associated the awareness of ambivalence mainly with pathology, but ambivalence is possible without an abnormal breakdown of reasoning, as the "logic" of emotion allows for ambivalence. A key concept in normal psychology, ambivalence is also embedded in social functions and professions.^[9]

This makes the recognition of ambivalence imperative. Although knowing one's feelings may seem simple, many ignore or try to sedate strong emotions like anger, sadness, and fear, and eschew ambivalence as threatening. But our ability to handle conflict depends on being connected to these feelings and tolerating ambivalence enough so that it can emerge. Acknowledging hateful feelings in ourselves, as

7. See Freud (1938 [1905]), but also Freud (1928). Since Plato, who equated thinking with inner dialogue in *Theaetetus* (189e), various philosophers emphasised the significance of inner dialogue. See, for example, Hermans and Hermans-Konopka (2010).

8. But see also Suttie (1936) for a different approach.

9. For the sociology of ambivalence, see Bauman (1991) and Miller (1997). For the ambivalence involved in normal emotions, see Greenspan (1980, 223–50).

well as in others, might be necessary for true loving (Valerio, 2002, p. 264).

Humour brings forth ambivalence. In contrast to rational thinking, a thing can be both X and not-X at the same time in the humorous mode of thinking (Mulkay, 1988). Rather than removing the incongruity, as in the incongruity resolution model of humour, Arthur Koestler's "bisociation", or ongoing incongruity, creates a humorous effect. Synergy describes this cognitive process, according to Michael Apter, in which two contradictory images or conceptions of the same object are held in one's mind at the same time. When one's thoughts oscillate back and forth between two incompatible interpretations of a concept, a pleasurable sensation is created. Thus, humour enables to playfully manipulate ideas and activities so that they are simultaneously perceived in opposite ways, such as important and trivial, threatening, and safe, real and not real.

The pleasure we derive from ambivalence through humour enables us to feel simultaneously contradictory emotions about the same idea, event, or person. It is the most fundamental skill required for handling both internal and interpersonal conflict. Unfortunately, throughout history we have tended to interpret conflict, whether internal or interpersonal, as traumatic. Something that cannot be tolerated and that must be avoided or stopped, rather than using than seeing it as a challenge.

Reducing shame and disgust

Humour can reduce shame and disgust. It provides us with a new perspective that transcends the current uncomfortable perspective. Adopting another perspective is contrary to the partial nature of emotions. Thus, it is incompatible with an intense emotional state.

Consequently, laughing at ourselves serves to distance us from a shameful situation, as we join others (imagined or real) in taking a fresh perspective on it. Thus, the new vantage point humour provides helps reduce the significance of a shameful situation (see Lewis, 1992, pp. 127-37).

Humour can also reduce disgust, as the move from shame to disgust tracks the move from public to private, from external to internal, from child to adult, from repulsive to repulsive. In *The Anatomy of Disgust*, William Miller argues that the comic and the disgusting share significant points of contact, and that there is an intimate connection between some styles of contempt, disgust, and the comic (Miller, 1997, pp. ix, 116).

The experience of disgust can be more entertaining to us as is commonly the case in comedy when it is elicited by another's shamelessness or ineptitude. Through the distancing from ourselves that humour affords, our own ascribed inaptitude can also be a source of pleasure. If the comic and the disgusting share significant points of contact, the comic may be actively used in self-referential humour to discharge disgust.

The role of fear or disgust in laughter is such that the fear or disgust stimulus retains its function even when promoted to laugh. It is 'bisociated' with a positive emotion. Contemporary research on the Amerindian clowns shows that in the clown the stimuli of fear and disgust are often indistinguishable from each other. In the light of the theory of bisociation, laughter itself is marked by ambivalence, the negative and distressing effects of fear and disgust are neutralised by their exalted place in the ritual. If laughter is used internally and self-referentially, the feeling of disgust is joined with laughter, enabling thus at least an ambivalent attitude toward disgust, which points toward its eventual eradication.

Acceptance of self and others:

By gradually replacing emotions, in this case, feelings of shame and disgust, with sympathy and compassion, humour encourages self-acceptance and tolerance of self and others. Empathy may teach us something about humour: both concepts seem to be elements of wisdom (Orwoll & Perlmutter, 1990). Empathy is obstructed when we project onto others those parts of ourselves that we reject. In distancing ourselves from problematic feelings like shame and disgust, however, we can re-experience them in the sympathy we feel when they are someone else's. Instead of impeding compassion by projecting the rejected parts of the self onto others, this sympathetic distancing from self brings one closer to others (see Amir, forthcoming). Acceptance of our vulnerability, finitude and "softness" is necessary for compassion, and for our personal and social well-being.

Living with conflict:

As the incongruity theory of humour explains, the contradictions and incongruities contained in self-referential humour can help in living with conflict. Indeed, humour feeds on conflict and gradually replaces discomfort with pleasure. Describing this process in detail exceeds the space of this article, so further reading is recommended (i.e., Amir, 2014, pp. 219–86; Amir, 2019).

This may be all that we can achieve if, as some thinkers have maintained (Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, and more recently, Nussbaum), human beings cannot fully accept their humanity. Nussbaum notes that the poet of Democracy, Walt Whitman, invites us in the final poem of *Leaves of Grass* (1973) to have a simple relationship to our own mortality and its bodi-

ly realisation, which will free us to truly pursue liberty and equality. Without fear or loathing, we are to embrace the decay and brevity of our lives. Nussbaum objects to this ideal and argues that if "the complex struggle we currently wage with mortality has disgust as its corollary, we should not expect to dismiss disgust utterly from our lives" (Nussbaum, 2004, pp. 121–22).

Morrison argues that whilst guilt is related to an action, and its antidote is forgiveness, shame is related to the whole personality, and consequently tends to seek the healing response of self-acceptance despite the self's weaknesses, defects, and failures (Morrison, 1986, p. 370). Both Morrison and Nussbaum describe a movement toward health where the self is increasingly understood and accepted as human, incomplete, and partial, rather than as grandiose and demanding completeness. Yet the idea that most people can come to accept their incompleteness, lack of control, and mortality is far too optimistic (Nussbaum, 2004, p. 188).

However, I have recently shown how a systematic use of humour can result in a redemptive acceptance of our own humanity. I call the new worldview that obtains through such a transcendent acceptance, "*Homo risibilis*", or the Ridiculous Human Being. This theory may be for the few, but because humour makes self-knowledge intrinsically pleasurable, I believe it has more chances of being successfully implemented than most philosophic theories (see Amir [2019]).

Even if keeping shame and disgust at bay through internal self-referential humour is all most of us can achieve, this lesser goal is worth attempting, since it promotes self-acceptance and self-love. It is both viable and desirable. Viable, because it makes use of humour in order to live successfully with internal conflict. Humour has been repeatedly

recognised by sociologists and psychologists as an exceptional tool for living with (internal) conflict. Furthermore, contrary to common opinion, humour can be taught and learnt (see Amir 2024, forthcoming). I believe that success in achieving the more modest goal of maintaining shame and disgust at bay through the use of humour is guaranteed. Desirable, because no happiness is possible with internalised disgust, and shame is an important impediment to self-satisfaction. False views

of the self, built on dissociating its desirable from its less desirable aspects, cannot be maintained in the face of reality. In order to be a stable, well-being needs to be based on reality. Thus, developing a taste for reality through the systematic use of humour is a worthy goal, both in itself and for its beneficial outcomes.^[10] Self-acceptance and self-love irradiate, benefiting those, who happen to witness it, and profoundly impacting those, who depend on acceptance and love of such a person.

Author

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10. Previous versions of this article, yet quite different from what is offered here, can be found in Amir (2015); reprinted in Amir (2017, Chapter 6).

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The British psychoanalyst, writer, feminist, and social critic *Susie Orbach* on Women, Love and Psychotherapy

Susanne Vosmer

Abstract: This article is about the work and views of the well-known British psychoanalyst and feminist psychotherapist, Susie Orbach. It is based on an interview with her in 2024.

Key Words: love, women, psychotherapy, intimacy, relationship

Love is an area that can be challenging for many psychotherapists. What do you do when a client tells you “I love you” in your session? How might you experience this client? Do you express love toward your clients? Is there a difference between women and men with regards to love? How do you address love in supervision? Which books could psychotherapists read that might be helpful for thinking and dealing with issues surrounding love in clinical practice?

These were the questions that I asked Susie Orbach when we spoke on 19th February 2024. It was a privilege and great pleasure to hear her view on love, women, and the psychotherapist. I would like to express my gratitude for

agreeing to speak with me and for sharing her thoughtful insight into women and love.

Susie Orbach herself is a remarkable woman. Not only because her book *Fat is a feminist issue* changed how women regarded themselves, or because she founded the Women’s Therapy Centre in London in 1976, as well as co-founding the Women’s Therapy Center Institute in New York with Luise Eichenbaum in 1981, or because she was Princess Diana’s psychotherapist. But also, because she published 12 further books, one of which, *Bodies*, won the APA Women’s Book Prize in 2009. Orbach has problematized the relationship that women have with their bodies. Since the late 20th century, women have become obsessed with how

International Journal of Psychotherapy

Summer 2024, Vol. 28, No. 2, pp. 79-82: ISSN 1356-9082 (Print); ISSN 1469-8498 (Online)

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Submitted: July 2024. DOI: 10.35075/IJP.2024.28.2.8/Vosmer

they look and experience problems with their bodies. These difficulties are perpetuated by society, the social media, films, and advertisements that present women as slim and sexy. Many females seem to use food as a means to assert control over their lives.

Together with Luise Eichenbaum, and separately, Susie Orbach has helped numerous women. Their books, *Between Women* and *Understanding Women*, have also contributed to giving women a voice.

Asking her about women and love, Susie Orbach clarified that love differs from admiration. Many women struggle to be in a reciprocal intimate relationship due to their upbringing. Girls are raised to give, but not to receive, love. When this manifests in psychotherapy, the therapist has to open up the channels of reception so that women can develop the capacity to receive love.

Men tend to present differently in therapy sessions than women. They are interested in other things. Females can feel more ashamed about their longing for love, irrespective of culture and social class. However, younger women may feel more legitimated to form friendships, or to go out with girlfriends, than the older generation. Even though friendship is related to love, the latter is more than just an attachment. Love is a powerful engagement with the other. It entails passion, longing, and sharing. Whilst friends often accept that their friendships can be bumpy occasionally, which also happens in love relationships, many difficult emotions can arise between women: anger, envy, and guilt. Such feelings have emerged as a result of the drastic changes in women's roles in the 1980s. Often, they are related to competition and are projected into others.

The mother-daughter relationship is at the heart of a girl's developing self. Women can

develop strong loving feelings for each other. In *Understanding Women*, Eichenbaum and Orbach explain dilemmas of independence, emotional dependency, and sexuality. They discuss the process of psychotherapy and challenges psychotherapists may face.

I asked Susie Orbach what she does when a client says: "I love you". Her nuanced reply attests to her clinical wisdom and expertise. How she would interpret and address this, would depend on the context, she explained. These three words can be an expression of appreciation. When they are authentic, she feels touched. It signifies that the client feels understood and is connected to her.

However, saying "I love you" can also be an act of hostility or an attempt to distract from the content of the therapy. Then, it is an indication that things in the session are not as they seem to be.

At times, Susie Orbach says she also loves her clients. In this instance, her love indicates interest. It is a respectful acceptance and curiosity about the patient. She clarified that this love is not erotic.

When female clients feel that the psychotherapist accepts them, it enables them to love and become agents of their lives. Women, who feel secure in the relationship, become more self-reflective. They can reflect in and on the therapy sessions, as well as having a capacity for aliveness.

Susie Orbach's vast experience came across in our discussion. She was honoured in the BBC series '100 Women' in 2013/14 as being one of the most inspiring and influential woman globally. An annotation of her book, *In Therapy, The Unfolding Story* featured on the BBC's Radio 4, offering listeners the opportunity to eavesdrop on the world of psychotherapy. Orbach explores what happens in psychotherapy in this book.

Which writers would she recommend for novice psychotherapists, I asked her. She referred to Steven Mitchell's book, *Can Love Last?* Mitchell was a psychoanalyst with a philosophical inclination toward Heidegger.

Romance is a sandcastle for two. It is a structure that requires continuous rebuilding, according to Mitchell. He defines romance as a particular kind of love with a degradation of erotic currents. While romance gets its fizz from sexuality, long-term relationships depend on understanding, instead of lust. Mitchell argues that romance does not diminish in such relationships. People themselves kill it. If this is indeed the case, then there is hope. Becoming aware of one's own self-destructive tendencies seems essential. These can include idealisation. A relationship is at risk of becoming troublesome when a person idealises others and thinks that they are better than her/his own partner. Mitchell was not a Freudian psychoanalyst. In contrast to Freud, who believed that when a patient loves, s/he has no desire, and when s/he desires, s/he cannot love, Mitchell used relational concepts. As a result of his clinical experience, he found that people kill love out of fear. The experience of erotic currents toward someone is just too dangerous.

Susie Orbach also talked about fears. People can have problems with intimacy. They are quite ingeniously, unconsciously creating a certain distance to keep the space, they

feel they need. They do a 'Cha-Cha', she explained. One goes forth, the other goes back. Susie Orbach's hope in working with couples is that both parties can balance the seesaw, and acknowledge their dependencies, needs and affections for each other. Psychotherapy can change unhelpful patterns.

Orbach illuminates the complex interaction, which is at the heart of the psychotherapy process, and the mutual discovery, which contributes to the effectiveness of therapy, in her book, *The Impossibility of Sex*. Stories of intimate relationships in the therapy are skilfully told. For example, she writes about a client, who formed an erotic attachment. He is consumed by his sexual desire. This behaviour helps him deal with his history of neglect.

Supervision has an important place when this happens. Since body and mind are connected, therapists can be emotionally and physically affected in sessions. That is why therapists may experience in the countertransference bodily pain or other sensations.

Of course, supervisors vary in their practice, Susie Orbach said. A person-centred supervisor tends to work differently than a psychoanalyst.

She draws on the concepts of transference and countertransference. How she handles different scenarios depends on the context. Ultimately, she tries to help supervisees to become the best psychotherapists they can be.

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Love in Cronedom

Emmy van Deurzen

Abstract:

As women grow older and life stretches beyond menopause into older age, they reach what is often referred to as 'cronedom'. While this is a stage that many women dread and seek to avoid, by holding on to a youthful appearance and denying the advance of age and maturity, a more feminist perspective can enable women to face this phase of life with courage and determination. An existential way of approaching cronedom brings out its wealth of wisdom, showing how a woman's capacity for love can be more fully revealed, developed, and evolved at this late stage of life.

Key Words:

women, cronedom, existential, love, transition

Introduction

When women are fortunate enough to live beyond their three score years and ten, it is all too easy for them to feel disempowered, excluded, undervalued, and marginalised (Blackie, 2022). From a feminist perspective, this phase can be seen as a time when the intersectionality of two forms of oppression come together (Åberg *et al.*, 2020). Being a woman as well as being old, can seem quite problematic, if a more affirmative stance to this experience cannot be found. Feminist authors have demonstrated how this phase of life can easily lead to a sense of self-deprecation, meaninglessness, and loss of motivation (Sontag, 1972; Wolf, 1991). Studies have shown that self-esteem goes down with age in general, but more so for women than for men, and more so for

working class women than for middle- or upper-class women (McMullin & Cairney, 2004).

From menopause onwards women frequently become acutely aware that their position in the world is altered because their youthful appearance, charm and sexual appeal no longer provide them with a sense of intrinsic value (Åberg, Kukkonen & Sarpila, 2020). They feel more invisible than ever before (Criado Perez, 2020). Additionally, if the woman has been a mother, she is likely to have come to the end of her caring years, because her children have flown the nest and have often settled elsewhere with their own families. She can, therefore, no longer derive a sense of self-worth from motherhood and at seventy, if she is still caring for elderly parents, this will feel more like servitude than like something that can provide her with any credit or respect in the

International Journal of Psychotherapy

Summer 2024, Vol. 28, No. 2, pp. 83-93: ISSN 1356-9082 (Print); ISSN 1469-8498 (Online)

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Submitted: July 2024. DOI: 10.35075/IJP.2024.28.2.9/vanDeurzen

world. She may prolong her years of mothering by being an active grandmother, but this too will come to an end (Stadlen, 2023).

If a woman has established herself in a career that makes her economically self-sufficient, these issues tend to be less impactful than if she is dependent on someone else's income for her sustenance and survival. What is, however, often left out of the picture is the extent to which a woman may be able to liberate herself at this stage from the straight jacket of society's expectations of her. The crone years may be the crowning years of a woman's life, a moment where, no longer driven by the need to please, care, or be attractive to others, she can finally focus on her own values and develop and evolve in a new direction. It may very well be that the phase of cronedom, starting in a woman's mid-sixties or seventies, brings a new liberation where values like love, understanding, empathy, reciprocity, consideration, creativity, and liberation can come to the fore and define her existence.

Negative Images of Elderly Women

Peri-menopausal women, in their late forties and early fifties, are often very concerned about the transformation they are going through (Heart, 2022). It is a difficult phase of life that confronts women with changes in their bodies and minds. They are no longer fertile, and the hormonal changes have an impact on the body, which is soon softening and spreading, whilst hair is thinning, wrinkles becoming more defined, and skin on chins, breasts, thighs, abdomen, and upper arms is sagging. Women are confronted with the dread of being seen as an old hag and find to their dismay that they are now much more easily overlooked, spurned, or derided in the world. They no longer attract the same male attention and are easily pushed aside by younger women, too,

so that they find themselves denigrated or degraded in public situations. This is made worse by many post-menopausal women dressing 'their age', in sombre, less vibrant tones, in an attempt at hiding. It is as if women assume too often that once they have passed their prime, they must make themselves inobtrusive, invisible, and as self-effacing as possible. Perhaps the liberation of ageing women is the final frontier to conquer for many women, who are feminists as was argued by De Beauvoir and Greer (Beauvoir, 1970, 2009; Greer, 1970, 1991). Even though battles have been fought and won for equality, still in some professions, such as in acting or media work, the hospitality industry or the retail industry, women find it hard to get decent employment after the age of fifty (ONS, 2019). Women start to be afraid of being unwelcome and many become much more self-conscious. This affects their well-being very negatively.

The classic image of the crone is that of the woman in her sixties, seventies, or eighties. It is that of a sinister or even malicious older woman, who is presented like a scary witch, bent over with straggly hair and fuzzy chin. The mythical concept of the crone is based in the French word for corpse '*charogne*', which refers to the ageing woman's dwindling powers and decaying body. There are many tales of Baba Yaga, the Slavic myth of the powerful old woman, who lives in the woods and eats children (Blackie, 2022; Walker, 1985). The story of the witch in Hansel and Gretel is inspired by this myth (Estes, 2011; Bolen, 2007). In the Bible, in Exodus 22:18, it is stated that "thou shalt not suffer a witch to live". In consequence, witchcraft and sorcery, spells and herbal medicine, have often been considered evil, for instance in the Middle Ages across Europe.

Up to the 17th century, witch hunts and trials of women who were healers were common. It is well-known that women were unable to

defend themselves in any way once they had been marked as a witch. The tests they had to go through to prove they were not a witch invariably killed them. Being drowned or burnt at the stake does not leave you with any prospect of justice or survival. The fictional play *The Crucible*, by Arthur Miller (Miller, 2000), about the 1692 Salem witch trials in Massachusetts, USA, is an astute description of the way, in which paranoia and fear could be spread to point the finger at women, who were seen to be disobedient to male power. Lynching and burning of witches were not, however, just a Western problem. They were also commonplace in Sub Saharan Africa, Nepal, India, Papua New Guinea, Saudi Arabia, and other countries.

Positive Images of Cronedom

And yet there are also very different images of the older woman. There is, for instance, the Norse myth of Elli, who impersonates old age, and who, in the holy story of the Edda, defeats Thor (Bolen, 2007). This is in line with the pagan image of the crone as being crowned with a halo of light and wisdom. Clarissa Pinkola Estes claims that the word 'crone' comes from the Latin *corona*, which means crown (Estes, 2011). In this version of cronedom, the crone is a visionary who can see between the material and spiritual worlds. She is an elder, who passes on knowledge and know-how, and who holds strong against injustice, because she embodies the mystery of life itself (Metrick, 2022; Walker, 1985).

There is a new ritualistic practice that some women like to go through in their sixties or seventies, claiming this new status of cronedom. It is a celebration of the passage into old age, called 'croning'. Some women choose to take on a new name during the ritual and may decide to change their physical appearance, in

dramatic and colourful ways. These women see cronedom as the most important phase of a woman's life.

This is consistent with the perception, in some cultures (e.g. Lakota or Navajo Indians) of elderly women as holding an important and loving role in society. In this position, they safeguard numerous things, such as holding knowledge of the roots of language, and to pass the information through the generations. They may have specific status as elder and occupy a leadership role, so that they can share their wisdom about relationships and emotions, also easing bereavements and losses. Elderly women, like the witches, often hold culinary and plant wisdom, which they apply freely for alternative healing purposes. In this role, they may also keep the peace and hold family and clan members to truth, ethics, and religious rituals, as well as reminding people to apply the customary rules of kinship and hospitality (Kimmerer, 2013). Women in these positions remind the group to foreground the education of the young, and to attend to suitable support for those in need. They frequently practice arts, songs and magic, and are at ease in accompanying people through funerals and other moments of transition. These habits still exist in some Western cultures, too, but are not formalised in the same way. Some women have tried to revive such roles and have described the progression of a woman (i.e. an adult female human being), through life by borrowing from the Jungian tradition of archetypes. Jean Shinoda Bolen has proposed a sequence of seven phases in her book, *Goddesses in Every Woman* (Bolen, 2014). Each phase has a positive aspect and a potentially damaging side:

1. *Maiden*, which is the phase of girlhood, when the girl is curious and creative. She can however also be naïve and, therefore, can easily become a victim.

2. *Lover* is the phase of sexual maturity when a girl becomes a woman and discovers her own sensuality and passion. As the young woman makes relationships at this stage, she may also become clingy and might be seen as seductive and unreliable.
3. *Mother* is the stage when a woman gives birth to her own children or looks after other children. It is when she discovers her instinct for caregiving and develops her inner capacity for radiating warmth and love. This may become a negative thing, if the woman becomes invasive and overbearing in her giving, or if she martyrs herself to love.
4. *Huntress* is the phase when the woman discovers that she is strong and free and is not dependent on others to provide for herself and her family. She is brave and daring, but may be seen as wild, fierce, and hard as she affirms her power.
5. *Queen*, which is the phase when the woman has become confident in her own power and is therefore able and willing to be a leader of others. At this stage, she may be seen as controlling or jealous of the power and of the people she leads.
6. *Mystic* is the phase when a woman has gone through a lot of life and experience, and has reached the post-menopausal plateau, where she finds calm in who she is, and is confident in her intuitive insight and understanding of life. She may isolate herself from society and become a bit reclusive and selective and may be seen as proud and superior.
7. *Sage*, which is the stage of cronedom, when the woman has risen above her mystical phase, is clear, wise, and has a mastery of truth. At this point, she may be thought of as rather ethereal, but she may also be considered to be strategic in her use of her new power of wisdom and love.

In this scheme, cronedom is strongly associated with the passage from mystic to sage. Jean Shinoda Bolen has also written a book about *Goddesses in Older Women*, that elaborates on this theme (Bolen, 2007). What emerges, when we start looking into what elderly women can do, is that their role and their function is often that of mediating love and reminding younger generations of how to work in a loving state of mind and be with each other with a loving way of being. This is very much in line with Naomi Stadlen's book on grandmothers, *Why Grandmothers Matter* (Stadlen, 2023) in which she draws attention to the many things done by grandmas that remain unseen, unheard, and sometimes unnoticed, but are much missed with hindsight. We may well wonder whether love is often like this: modestly supplied without drawing attention to itself and often taken for granted. This raises interesting questions. Is it truly unfair, as Germaine Greer so pointedly argued (Greer, 1970, 1991), that the system lionises the silver-haired male, while scorning his female counterpart as beyond use, pathetic, desiccated, desexualised, as a crone? Have women been reduced to this state by men or is it more complex than that? Could it be that women have still not dared to affirm love as the sacred principle that guides life?

The Task of Older Women

Hélène Cixous (1976) in her well-known text, *The Laugh of the Medusa* suggests that woman must write herself. She must write about women and bring women to writing. Women have been driven away from this as violently as from their bodies, for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text, as into the world, and into history by her own movement. Cixous encourages women to take responsibility, write, and speak up. Women should take charge of their bodies and own them again, if they want to create the necessary space to

be themselves and to be seen and heard. It is not hard to see that this can be easier for older women, who know from experience that nobody else is going to do this for them. Perhaps when women lose their fear of being criticised and assume their cronehood, they can liberate themselves to put love and wisdom at the centre of life. While the habit of folding and hiding and playing second fiddle can last into the final stage of life, women can also surprise themselves and their families by giving up on their tendencies to please. They can free themselves to stand up and claim their own way of life. This frequently happens after the death of a spouse, when a woman suddenly becomes aware that she is more powerful than she ever suspected. When she asserts this power, it turns out not to be about dominance, but about love. Cixous argues that women have become imprisoned by anti-love (Cixous, *ibid.*), which is imposed by patriarchy. It imposes binary structures on us. It stops us feeling the flow of our own embodiment, or prevents us from being ourselves, and write about ourselves. The crone can rise above her life. She can float above the expectations she once had of her life and of herself. She is now in a position, where she can express her capacity for love, instead of trying to comply with the need to compete, fight, and show her ambition to win equality in the world of men. She no longer feels obliged to try to fit in or please anybody. She is liberated from the look of others. She is no longer enacting fertility or attractiveness. She is exempt from pretence. She is ready to look death in the eye and she knows more than enough about death, which she has encountered in the death of her parents and other people, she has loved. She is closely acquainted with both life and death, and still she knows that love is the answer to all the questions people ask.

The crone knows that she is in the middle of a process of change and transformation. She trusts this process, because she has perspec-

tive on the world, having so much experience of it. She has faith in her intuition and knows she needs to proceed with cooperation, generosity, and mutuality, rather than by carrying on the male tradition of competition. She allows herself to feel things deeply and take people's pain and sadness to heart. She can shape shift, as she now has many guises. She can be like a girl, like a lover, a mother, a huntress, a queen, a mystic, or a sage. She can be any of these or all of it at the same time. She feels as ancient as the mountains, but she can open and blossom into a second spring. She knows how to breathe deeply and feel the joy of being. She knows how to appreciate and value what is good in life, to love it, care for it, and foster it. She also knows where her limit lies and she loves to stand in awe, when she admires a starry sky, or a sunrise, for she values transcendence and infinity. She is not afraid to find a path into the beyond. The crone has ripened into her most complete self and is ready to harvest her wisdom to distribute it, before the end of life. She is ready to let go of all regrets and resentments. So that love can finally settle and grow in her heart, without any remaining bitterness or sourness.

The Obstacles

But all of this is only possible, if we have loved our lives, or at least have found a way to absorb everything that has happened to us, making sense of it and integrating it into ourselves. If we have done this, the lessons we have learnt along the way will have strengthened us. Simone de Beauvoir, who spoke so eruditely about old age (Beauvoir, 1970), was surprisingly reluctant to appreciate the gains of maturity. She saw death as an unjustifiable violation, that she did not consent to. She said: "Old age is life's parody, whereas death transforms life into a destiny: in a way it preserves it by giving it the absolute dimension" (Beauvoir, 1970, p. 539). She rebelled against old age, which

she saw as a time of being excluded, and of “revolt against this fundamental dispossession” (p. 478).

De Beauvoir’s conclusion was to carry on, as if nothing had changed, for as long as possible. She said: “*There is only one solution if old age is not to be an absurd parody of our former life, and that is to go on pursuing ends that give our existence a meaning*” (Beauvoir, 1970, p. 540).

What then, gives life meaning to a woman when she is on the path to cronedom and its apogee in death? Is it not exactly that we have been released from values that were relative to our biological tasks and that we can now accept the laws of life that bring growth, flourishing, flowering, and seeding, as well as accept decline and decay, disintegration and decomposition? Cronedom is a time, when we stand with Spinoza (1989), looking at life under a species of eternity, observing the lawfulness of nature that brings us inner peace as we yield to the circle of life. Now, we have perspective on human existence and understand how we want to live our lives, treat others, and evaluate our own actions in the world. We have learnt to recognise our possibilities, and we are confronted very graphically, viscerally and concretely with our limitations. We understand a bit about how things both belong and connect with each other, and where we fit into the huge multi-dimensional jigsaw puzzle of life. We can live with deliberation and be open to what is the case. Nietzsche spoke of *Amor Fati*, the ‘love of one’s fate’, the love of life, really:

In his book, *Ecce Homo*, he said: “*My formula for greatness in a human being is **amor fati**: that one wants nothing to be different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity. Not merely bear what is necessary, still less conceal it – all idealism is mendacity in the face of what is necessary – but **love** it.*” (Nietzsche, 1969, p. 10)

What he meant was that it should be the human objective to love our destiny in all its manifestations, no matter what happens to us. His concept is related to the idea of the ‘Eternal Return’, which is a thought experiment, in which we imagine ourselves reliving this exact same moment in precisely the same way into eternity. He thought that only if we set this standard, would we comprehend the importance of seeing and experiencing life fully. This is what he meant by living in a loving way.

Perhaps Hannah Arendt caught it even better with her concepts of the *vita activa* and *amor mundi* (Arendt, 2018, 2020). Because she had truly faced one of the worst experiences human beings have ever been through, the holocaust of the Second World War. She concluded that we must face such evil head on and aim to understand it rather than merely condemn it. To live the *vita activa*, or active life, is to remain engaged, intensely and with dedication with the things that truly matter in the world, and never slip into complacency or special pleading for exemption. It is to keep creating a world and a civilisation based on the good, and never to give in to negativity. *Amor mundi*, love of the world, is in some ways its counterpart. It was something that was close to her heart. She wrote her doctoral dissertation on the concept of ‘Love in the philosophy of Saint Augustine’, under the well-known philosopher Karl Jaspers. He himself was an expert on what he called the ‘loving struggle of relationships’ (Jaspers, 1951, 1969). Arendt had wanted to call her book, *The Human Condition*, *Amor mundi*. Love was a central concept for her. She distinguished three kinds of love: love as desire, love of God, and love for one’s neighbours. She connected the idea of love with the concept of natality, which is the idea that life is always renewing itself through birth and rebirth. *Amor mundi* is a specific kind of love: it is the capacity to care for the world despite its corrosion and horrors, and to trust in its renewal.

This sentiment is completely appropriate for the kind of love that becomes possible in our years of cronedom. It is the kind of love that has been tested and tried. It has been disappointed multiple times, but still persists and finds new waves of intensity. The kind of cronedom that leads to *amor mundi*, is not the kind of cronedom that flaunts an outrageous, colourful, and glamorous, disgraceful kind of ageing. But it is the kind of cronedom that ages gracefully toward much more seasoned and courageous ways of living, with love for a world that is so often dark, dissolute, despairing, and unlovable.

This kind of love is a kind of earthy love, based in a mother's capacity to love all her children. To love every aspect of her children and to stand in the breach, when disaster strikes, or trouble arrives on the doorstep. It is the kind of love described by aboriginal activists, like Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann, who was the 2021 senior Australian of the year. In her acceptance speech, she reminded people of the practice of *dadirri*, 'deep and respectful listening to the inner spring of wisdom'. She said: "*If you stay closely united, you are like a tree, standing in the middle of a bushfire sweeping through the timber. The leaves are scorched, and the tough bark is scarred and burnt; but inside the tree the sap is still flowing, and under the ground the roots are still strong. Like that tree, you have endured the flames, and you still have the power to be re-born.*" (Ungunmerr-Baumann, 2023, p. 1)

This is very similar to the descriptions of love of the world by the native American botanist, Robin Wall Kimmerer, who wrote the highly successful book, *Braiding Sweetgrass* (Wall Kimmerer, 2020). She said: "*If all the world is a commodity, how poor we grow. When all the world is a gift in motion, how wealthy we become*" (Wall Kimmerer, 2020, p. 31).

In pointing out how much of the physical world has been destroyed and impoverished

by our exploitation of natural resources, instead of our careful tending to these resources, she made it clear that the alternative is a much calmer, all-encompassing awareness of the cyclical nature of life, which respects the gifts we are given, in such a way that we love and pass on what we are given by the earth. This kind of love is essential to the future of humanity. It rests in the hands of the women in indigenous lore. A woman, who has seen it all and has done it all, can stand above crisis and destruction, to get an overview. She knows how to reassure with facts and quiet certainty, because she trusts humanity's capacity to rebuild safety, community, identity, and hope. Such women have a role to play, not just as individuals, but with society and civilisation. Crones know that civilisation is on the wrong track and that organisations, industries, and governments often have the wrong values, of profit, greed, and competition. They know that this has percolated through to towns and villages and families, too, and that much of what goes on in human relationships can be toxic.

As soon as we begin to look at the world, we live in from the perspective of a loving community, we immediately notice how wrong things have gone. We see exploitation over fairness, an emphasis on profit and productivity over a valuing of human creativity. We have each become used to consuming goods, instead of contributing and creating something from generosity. We measure success by achievements and short-term results rather than by thinking about long term viability and future consequences. We are keener to have our freedoms than our responsibilities, our rights rather than our duties and obligations. If society works mainly through encouraging competition rather than by enabling collective collaboration, it is hard to have a world, in which there is a feeling that love holds us all together. We are used to be able to pursue our

personal gain, rather than being reminded of eternal values. It often seems as if fame and fortune are the worthiest objectives, rather than learning to live in the right way with each other in the community. In such a world, excitement and distraction are the big attractors. Youthful experimentation is preferred over mature reflection, understanding, and love.

Cronedom is a phase of life when women, who have become sensitive to this distortion of societal values, can remind those around them of the importance of values like love, truth, beauty, loyalty, honour, friendship, courage, and freedom. This opens us up to a new kind of future, where we work not for ourselves, but for the community that will carry on after our death. This is something we cannot champion on our own. It is something we slowly generate together. In the matrix, where there used to be a community that was brash, competitive, and instrumentalist, we sow the seeds for a new future, which will unfold slowly, as it is tendered with love. Crones know how to create value and meaning. But they are not always sure that they have been given permission to apply their wisdom. Crones need to learn to claim their right and duty to remind civilisation of its need to transform. They can do this by committed and engaged constructive action with each other. It is a process that is engaged on in a slow manner, as we progress step by step, build the new framework brick by brick, and allow the love, distilled from long lives, to be returned to the world, drop by drop. Crones will have to proceed diligently, no matter what challenges will come on their path. By being undaunted in focusing on their new project of reminding the world of a loving way of being, they find new flexibility. They share their joy when they succeed to form new friendships and collaborations with others. This is a loving project to value all the things that have been neglected, but that matter greatly. It could form the basis of a new politics of col-

laboration and comprehension, rather than of the mere exercise of power, control, and dominance. This is precisely what cronedom is about: the dissolution of power by love. This is when plurality is valued and merged into unity. The poem *Fear*, generally attributed to Kahlil Gibran, speaks of the river, which is about to join the ocean, and it is very much in tune with this sentiment. It reminds us that cronedom is not reserved for women only, but that it is a human experience:

*They say that before entering the sea,
the river trembles from fear.
She looks back at the path she travelled,
from the mountain tops,
on the long winding road that
intersects forests and villages.
And before her she sees the ocean
so vast that the entrance to it
seems nothing but to disappear forever.*

(Gibran, 2024, p. 1)

The crone holds in herself the whole of human existence and connects to what is beyond it: she stands in and with truth. She is ready to let things be as they are and to love them in just the same way, as she has learnt to love herself. She knows her life is coming toward its end, and that all she has learnt needs to flow out of her into the whole of humanity. She is merged with the river of life. As Gibran said:

*There is no other way.
The river can't go back.
No one can come back.
In existence it is impossible to go back.
The river must take its chances
to enter the ocean
because only then will fear disappear.
The river will learn that it is
not disappearing in the ocean
but becoming part of the ocean.*

(Gibran, 2024, *ibid*)

Becoming like a river that merges into the ocean is to surrender to life. Through the work of contemplation and understanding, crones find deeper meanings and wider perspectives. They understand how everything fits together and how it is held together by the bonding agent of love.

The crone stands at the liminal space between life and death. She knows that what is, is exactly what is right for this moment. This is how we know that we are entering cronedom. When you are censorious, critical, proud, superior, and defensive, you are not fully ripened into cronedom yet. If you want to be all

knowing and mysterious, you are not. If you are still worried about your own life and death, instead of seeing things from the perspective of the 'Eternal Return', you have not yet fully evolved into cronedom. Wisdom comes to you when you grow wide and round like the earth, and deep as the seas, ready to descend into the abyss, without fear. You will reach high to the skies, whisper with the four winds and be at ease in the dark of the forest, knowing the lore of the land. The crone will love her life, the earth, the people around her and life itself. She will pass on her wisdom to those around her and pass into eternity quietly when her time comes.

Author

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The Rationality of Erotic Desire: Sappho, Aristophanes, Diotima, and Héloïse on the Nature of Romantic Love

Alexei Procyshyn & Susanne Beiweis

Abstract:

This article offers a rational reconstruction of several accounts of erotic desire or romantic love that are central to the European intellectual tradition, namely Sappho's, Aristophanes', Diotima's and Héloïse's. We argue that these views do not see erotic desire as a mere affect or a biological drive. Rather, they all attribute to erotic love a rational content. Each view, we show, conceives of erotic desire as a process whereby lovers achieve a form of autonomy and equality by acknowledging their dependence on one another. We note that this positive view of romantic love as a potential to realize an interdependent form of autonomy and equality is largely developed by female figures within the philosophical canon, whereas male thinkers tend to emphasize the negative consequences of unchecked erotic desire.

Key Words:

Erotic Desire, Romantic Love, Sappho, Plato's *Symposium*, Abelard and Héloïse

Introduction

*I do love nothing in the world so well as
You – is not that strange?*

(Shakespeare, 2009, *Ado* 4.I.268–269, p. 64)

When asked, “*What then is time?*” St. Augustine (354–430 CE) responded, “*If no one asks me, I*

know: but if I were desirous to explain it to one that should ask me, plainly I know not” (Augustine, 1979, p. 239). Something similar can be said when asked, “*What is love?*” Our initial impulse in answering this question might be to characterise love as a basic emotion, such as happiness, or fear. Indeed, an intuitive point of departure might be to describe this emotion as a cognitive activity of appraisal, or as a pro-

International Journal of Psychotherapy

Summer 2024, Vol. 28, No. 2, pp. 95-114: ISSN 1356-9082 (Print); ISSN 1469-8498 (Online)

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Submitted: July 2024. DOI: 10.35075/IJP.2024.28.2.10/Procyshyn&Beiweis

cess of cultivating specific object or interpersonal relationships that elicit this emotion. We might think, for instance, that romantic love involves valuing specific physical or personality traits: we love someone *for* these traits (or for these traits' consequences). Parents' love for a child, on the other hand, seems to be expressed in the care or support they provide to aid in their child's development. Notice, however, that these intuitive proposals already assume a specific sense of love. The love we have for our children differs from the love for our romantic partners. And it is unclear that any one analysis captures the salient features of *both* these distinct relationships, let alone other kinds of loving relationships (for friends, for specific activities, etc.). For the experience of love in each manifests itself differently than within them. Similarly, one can love a specific activity or role (say, the love a citizen has for her country, or a scholar has for her academic work), but this sense of love differs from romantic and familial love, too.

The complexity of love as a phenomenon, then, warrants philosophical attention. Unsurprisingly, 'love' has been central to the Western philosophical tradition, since its emergence in Ancient Greece. Already, the ancients distinguished amongst different forms of love. The canonical taxonomy introduces three categories: (1) *philia*, which connotes, amongst others, "affectionate regard, friendship", "friendliness", and "liking for" (Liddell & Scott, 1968, p. 1934); (2) *agape*, which, in a Christian context, refers to "charity" and the "love of God for man and of man for God" (Liddell & Scott, 1968, p. 6), and which exhibits a child-parent dynamic; (3) *erôs*, which refers to "love, mostly of sexual passion," and "love of a thing, desire for it" (Liddell & Scott, 1968, p. 695). (1) and (2) identify a non-erotic sense of love, whereas (3) picks out a romantic sense typically associated with sexual attrac-

tion and passion (Helm, 2021). The red thread running through this taxonomy is that the distinctive forms of love all involve an evaluative and motivational component. The feeling of friendship involved in *philia*, for instance, evokes a specific *commitment* towards something or someone who *warrants it*, whilst motivating one to act on this commitment (e.g., I am motivated to help you, *because you are my friend*). As we will see below, a similar dynamic obtains with *erôs*, as well. Contemporary philosophical categorisations refine the traditional taxonomy. Philosophers continue to embrace the same basic insight just articulated: in all its forms, love motivates us and involves some kind of evaluation. Theorists disagree, however, on how these elements are best understood. Within the contemporary discussion, we find four broad approaches: (1) love as union, (2) love as robust concern, (3) love as valuing, (4) love as emotion (Helm, 2021).

The four differing views nevertheless embrace the basic idea that we encounter in the traditional account: whatever else one thinks about 'love', it is not a mere 'subjective feeling'. Rather, it involves a (*transformative*) *process* that depends on value (ideas/evaluations that *motivate* agents to act, and that create obligations) or, indeed, on knowledge.

In what follows, we aim to make the conceptual coordinates for contemporary thinking about romantic love explicit by rationally reconstructing the 'historically effective' views that continue to inform contemporary thinking on the subject. We thus approach the idea of love from a historical, *genealogical*, perspective and focus primarily on passionate, romantic *love*. In exploring the historical development of 'love', we find that philosophers (and philosophically minded poets from Ancient Greece, such as Sappho), have all attributed to romantic love an important role in the development of human agency. That is,

they all refuse to see erotic desire as a mere affect or instinctual drive and attribute to it an inherently rational content instead. Indeed, all the philosophically minded accounts of love we reconstruct below insist that erotic desire is an opportunity to cultivate a form of autonomy and equality with others that we could not realise independently. Romantic love, in other words, prompts us to acknowledge our dependence on others (our needs, lacks, and fragilities), whilst providing us with an opportunity to overcome it in some crucial way.

The development of this broad concept of erotic desire and romantic love as a processual phenomenon, in which actors apperceive both a need (a lack or loss of autonomy or a potential to achieve a heightened sense of them) and its potential fulfilment with another, defines the contemporary problem space for thinking about love, philosophically. We conclude our discussion by noting a historical pattern. Interestingly, male and female intellectuals have historically thought about erotic desire in distinctive ways: male thinkers have focused on the potential pitfalls of erotic desire (e.g., as a potentially catastrophic distraction from important life projects), whereas female thinkers have emphasised the potential of romantic love to realise a sense of autonomy and equality with a lover.

Love is Bitter-Sweet: Sappho and Aristophanes on Erotic Desire

“Once again limb-loosening Love makes me tremble, the bitter-sweet, irresistible creature” (Sappho, 1982, fr. 130, p. 147). Sappho of Lesbos (c. 600 BCE), one of the best-known ancient Greek female poets, who wrote intensely on love,^[1] was the first to describe *Erôs* as ‘bitter-sweet’. At first blush, this characterisation might sound paradoxical. The semblance of paradox lifts, however, once we note that Sappho did not understand erotic love as a static emotional state or as a sequential development, i.e., as *first* being bitter, *then* being sweet, or *vice versa*. As she figures it, *Erôs* is simultaneously – ‘dialectically’ – bitter and sweet. It elicits strong, sometimes contradictory feelings of pleasure and pain in us (Carson, 1986, 3–9; Secomb, 2007, p. 22). But one’s feelings of pleasure and pain do not merely *remain* at the level of subjective feeling. The very bitter-sweet experience of erotic love *initiates* specific activities. It introduces a *need*, which one acutely feels, and prompts one to satisfy it.

The affective ‘paradox’ of erotic desire thus resolves itself in a ‘dialectical’ satisfaction of a perceived need. Sappho’s narrator finds herself at such a loss. Specifically, the trembling physical body and irresistible nature of *Erôs*

1. The association of Sappho’s poems with female homoeroticism and Sappho’s own sexuality have been subject of much debate, which we shall not discuss here. See Mueller (2021), for example. Furthermore, as we note in connection with Sappho’s introduction of ‘lovesickness’ and Diotima’s account of love below, any differences between same-sex (whether lesbian or gay) or heterosexual *erôs* concern the cultural construction of gendered bodies and gender-performances, rather than the rational structure of erotic desire itself. Although it is beyond the scope of our current discussion, we believe that the form or rational structure of erotic love remains the same across these different constructions. One’s sexual orientation, in other words, informs how ‘best’ to cultivate erotic relationships, given one’s cultural situation. Sappho touches on this when she introduces ‘lovesickness’. This distinction foregrounds for us a genuine source of psychological stress: one’s cultural surroundings may make it impossible to cultivate fulfilling erotic relationships. Importantly, this is not a pitfall of a specifically gendered or ‘lesbian’ form of *erôs*, but an issue for every rational agent. An analysis of how socially constructed gender roles, or erotic orientations, and social contexts interact with the rational form of erotic love is, therefore, an important next step for the discussion. But it will have to wait for another occasion due to limitations of space.

indicate that she *lacks* bodily and cognitive autonomy: she controls neither her bodily movements nor her power to choose/resist/prioritise her desires. The experience of one's loss of autonomy in the experience of erotic desire, however, also indicates a distinctive resolution. Namely, satisfying the need to restore one's autonomy. Yet this satisfaction involves cultivating an (inter-)dependent relationship. In effect, then, Sappho's bitter-sweet characterisation of erotic desire implies a deep insight about human autonomy. Autonomy is not exclusively, perhaps not even principally, a matter of freeing oneself from desires or needs, but rather of learning how to embrace one's dependencies on, or with, others.

The insight that erotic love involves dependence on others, and hence involves some account of need, is a leitmotif for philosophical reflection on 'love' more generally. For example, we find similar efforts to make *Erôs* intelligible as the 'desire for a thing' one 'wants' and 'lacks' in Plato's *Symposium*. Here, the participants in a 'drinking party' deliver an encomium of *Erôs*, offering us different perspectives on the Greek god of love. Amongst them is the comic playwright Aristophanes, who gives voice to the way in which love motivates social actors to act in virtue of need.

In his speech (Plato, 1997, *Symp.* 189c-193d, pp. 472-476), Aristophanes recounts an ancient myth of humans' original state. According to this origin story, the human being was, in fact, a conjoined pair of persons. The human being had two faces, two pairs of ears, arms, legs, and two sets of sexual organs. These primordial humans (who came in three sexes: male, female, and hermaphrodite) were *complete* and *whole*. They had *no* erotic desires. In fact, they were so powerful and ambitious that their existence posed a threat to the gods. In response to this threat, Zeus cleaved each being in half to weaken them. This separation and the *lack* it creates, introduces again a need

or desire to restore oneself to completeness (where one desires for nothing). This sense of incompleteness characterises *Erôs*: "*Love is the name for our pursuit of wholeness, for our desire to be complete*" (Plato, 1997, *Symp.* 193a, p. 476). Consequently, these incomplete people perpetually embraced their missing other half, trying to knit themselves back together into their original state of wholeness. Their attempts, however, failed. Even once they had found their other half, they were no longer self-sufficient, and many of them eventually died of starvation and inactivity (Plato, 1997, *Symp.* 191a-b, p. 474). Zeus pitied them and "*moved their genitals around to the front*" (Plato, 1997, *Symp.* 191b, p. 474), so they could have sexual intercourse to satisfy the physical desire to unite as one, and find some relief for their longing, "*after which they could stop embracing, return to their jobs, and look after their other needs in life*" (Plato, 1997, *Symp.* 191c-d, p. 474).

Importantly, Aristophanes' account of *Erôs* as the desire for completeness is not resolved in mere sexual intercourse. Instead, *Erôs* is the desire and pursuit for *completeness* or *wholeness*, understood again as a returned autonomy that would rival the gods' own standing. As Aristophanes states, "*the soul of every lover longs for something else. His soul cannot say what it is, but like an oracle it has a sense of what it wants, and like an oracle it hides behind a riddle*" (Plato, 1997, *Symp.* 192d, p. 475). As we will see, Aristophanes' riddle echoes Sappho's paradox. Namely that the desired completeness (and restoration of autonomy) is first felt as a fundamental *lack*, or *need*. This need, in turn, drives one to seek out and cultivate dependencies on another. And through these dependencies, a form of freedom or complete *selfhood* is achieved. According to Aristophanes' account, *Erôs* is the outcome of a *wound*, it is a *lack*. It is a felt absence of one's other half. In Aristophanes' view, the paradoxical nature of *Erôs*

can be captured by noting that it is *both wound and salve* (Plato, 1997, *Symp.* 189d, p. 473).

Like a scar, erotic desire exists because we are *now* incomplete, wounded, and the relations that *Erôs* catalyses us to cultivate ease this suffering. The intensity of love in Aristophanes' account highlights the inevitable attraction that strangers can suddenly feel for one another. They are literally "*struck by love, by a sense of belonging to one another*" (Plato, 1997, *Symp.* 192c, p. 475), when encountering one's missing half. Notice how, unlike more mundane desires, such as hunger or thirst, we describe the experience of love as originating 'outside' of the individual in a way that overcomes her/him. Plato makes a similar claim in his dialogue *Cratylus*. "*Erôs,*" we read, "*is so called because it flows in from outside*" (Plato, 1997, *Crat.* 420b, p. 137).

Aristophanes' characterisation of the experience of love, then, underscores the paradoxical interplay of autonomy and irresistibility. Indeed, for him, *Erôs* seems to be the 'irresistible creature', as Sappho suggested it to be. This suggestion, moreover, prefigures modern romantic sentiments that each one of us has a perfect match, a soulmate, or *the one*, who completes me. Importantly, however, encountering one's other half is not a guarantee that one will be able to restore the sense of completeness of *self* or autonomy. Indeed, Aristophanes suggests that one can only ever approach, but never fully achieve, this completeness (Plato, 1997, *Symposium*, 193c, p. 476). On Aristophanes' account, then, the pathos of erotic desire involves its own 'dialectical' movement. It is a longing to recover a lost *completeness* (and the autonomous powers it entails), and the recognition of being irrec-
oncilably *incomplete* (being subject to desire,

and belonging to others). Aristophanes thus offers us an equally powerful articulation of Sappho's depiction of 'bitter-sweet' *Erôs* as the recognition of lack and desire for wholeness.^[2]

Aristophanes' contention concerning the peculiar nature of need expressed by erotic love emphasises something that we have not yet touched on: one's experience of *Erôs* may be either positive or negative. This seems to follow from his acknowledgment that sexual, and even lifelong romantic relationships with one's other half do not complete us entirely, and that the nature of erotic desire does not dwell completely within us. When confronted with these desires, one is liable to respond in one of two ways. On the one hand, an agent may admit defeat, as it were, and *sink* into a desperate, melancholic state of despair in response to the futility of achieving the desired relationship. Rather than achieving the desired completeness it promises, one experiences here a further *loss*. On the other hand, one can acknowledge this challenge and *rise* up to meet it by seeking out subtler ways to satisfy one's erotic desires. Erotic desire, in short, appears to involve more than a mere 'movement from outside'. For the experience may prompt in us a state of desperate *lovesickness*, a bodily and mental response to the implicitly recognised futility of erotic desire. Or, the experience of desire may spark a contemplative response, where one *reflects* upon the nature of those desires themselves (and we will return to the latter below when discussing Diotima's account).

Of all of Sappho's poems, fr. 31 best illustrates the tensions and destabilising afflictions of erotic desire or love on the lover's body and soul:

2. For a sustained analysis of the dynamic relationship amongst dependence, lack, and wholeness in Sappho, see Carson (1986).

He seems as fortunate as
the gods to me, the man
who sits opposite of you
and listens nearby to your
sweet voice and lovely
laughter. Truly that sets
my heart trembling in my
breast. For when I look
at you for a moment, then it
is no longer possible
for me to speak; my tongue
has snapped, at once
a subtle fire has stolen beneath
my flesh, I see nothing
with my eyes, my ears hum,
sweat pours from me, a
trembling seizes me all over,
I am greener than grass,
and it seems to me that I am
little short of dying

(Sappho, 1982, fr. 31, pp. 79–81).

These lines might perhaps be read as a commentary on the relationship between love and jealousy, or it might, as Anne Carson (1986, pp. 12–17) proposed, gesture towards the triangulation of love. First and foremost, however, the poem engages with the complex psychological and physiological effects or symptoms that accompany the experience of love. It captures the struggles, conflicting drives, and forces upon which erotic desire is based. Indeed, Sappho is often perceived as one of the first to articulate the pathological dimension of love by pinpointing its symptoms (Wack, 1990, p. 14). These include anxiety, the inability to speak, trembling, disturbance of the heart rate and pulse, and sweat, which are closely associated with a second death. The sight of the beloved object seems to evoke strong disturbances in the lover's body.

But also one's soul is in tumult, as also suggested by Longinus (1st or 3rd century CE), who commented on Sappho's poem as follows:

Do you not marvel how she seeks to make her mind, body, ears, tongue, eyes, and complexion, as if they were scattered elements strange to her, join together in the same moment of experience? In contradictory phrases she describes herself as hot and cold at once, rational and irrational, at the same time terrified and almost dead, in order to appear afflicted not by one passion but by a swarm of passions. Lovers do have all those feelings, but it is, as I said, her selection of the most vital details and her working on them into one whole which produce the outstanding quality of the poem (Longinus, 1957, pp. 17–18).

Longinus praises Sappho's depiction of the lover's disrupted physiological and psychological condition through these overwhelming experiences and conflicts of desire(s) *within ourselves*, while stressing the polarity of erotic love that moves us to extremes: oscillating between rationality and irrationality, life and death that underscores the dialectical tension between wound and salve, loss and recuperation of autonomy we noted above in the experience of 'bitter-sweet' *Erôs*.

Sappho's phenomenological descriptions of *Erôs*' pathology and paradoxical effects upon us influenced more than literature. As Longinus' discussion illustrates, she also inspired ancient medicine. In the latter tradition, erotic or passionate love (especially in the context of unrequited love) was often discussed by physicians, such as Aretaeus the Cappadocian and Galen, as a form of disease, which shows symptoms similar to *melancholia* (black bile) and *mania* (madness, frenzy).^[3] In ancient

3. Importantly, the ancient medical tradition did not offer a coherent, systematic discussion of lovesickness.

medicine, the balance of the four bodily humours (i.e., blood, yellow or red bile, phlegm, black bile), which were linked to the four primary qualities (the hot, moist, dry, cold), constituted health. In contrast, the imbalance of these bodily fluids or the predominance of one humour over the others led to illness. An excess of black bile (cold, dry), for instance, was perceived as particularly destructive to the brain, causing either melancholic conditions, such as insomnia, sadness, anxiety, or mental decay, or even frenzied madness (Klibansky *et al.*, 1979, pp. 3–14; Nutton, 1994, pp. 281–291).

Such lovesickness is not confined to ancient medical literature. A similar claim might be found in Plato's dialogue *Phaedrus*, which also includes a direct reference to Sappho's poetry to praise her acumen on the disturbance of love (Plato, 1997, *Phaedrus*, 235c, p. 514). In this dialogue, Plato distinguishes between two types of madness. The first type is understood as a human illness that leads to a loss of self-control and rationality. This 'left-handed' love (Plato, 1997, *Phdr.* 266a, p. 542) is a sort of madness that relates to a negative form of erotic desire (sexual passion) in particular: "A lover will admit that he's more sick than sound in the head. He's well aware that he is not

thinking straight; but he'll say he can't get himself under control" (Plato, 1997, *Phaedrus*, 231d, p. 511; 241c, p. 520). Here, physical desires (appetites) and passions/emotions overtake the soul's higher function (reason),^[4] seeking the beauty of the body:

The unreasoning desire that overpowers a person's considered impulse to do right and is driven to take pleasure in beauty, its force reinforced by its kindred desires for beauty in human bodies – this desire, all-conquering in its forceful drive, takes its name from the word for force (*rhōmē*) and is called *erōs* (Plato, 1997, *Phdr.* 238b–c, p. 517).

One is literally *crazy* in/with love, where the mind is cut adrift. The second, 'right-handed' type of madness is god-given (Plato, 1997, *Phdr.* 244a, p. 522). It is a state of ecstasy and divine inspiration, in which reason does not lose control, entirely. Divine madness (*furor divinus*) takes four forms. The fourth and best of them is erotic/amatory madness, i.e., "that which someone shows when he sees the beauty we have down here and is reminded of true beauty" (Plato, 1997, *Phdr.* 249d, p. 527). That is, the ideal or eternal Form of Beauty itself.

It was not until the fourth century CE that lovesickness was understood as "a separate classification of mental disease" (Wack, 1990, p. 6). For a discussion of lovesickness in ancient, medieval, and Renaissance medical discourse, see Toohey, 1992; Wack, 1990; Beecher's and Ciavolella's Introduction in Ferrand, 1990, pp. 39–97.

4. Plato characterises the human soul (*psyche*) as consisting of three fundamental dispositions or desires: the appetitive desire connected to physical well-being, the spirited desire that seeks to satisfy needs for social status or esteem (honour, wealth, social status, etc.), and finally the rational desire for knowledge or wisdom. We find Plato developing this account across a number of dialogues, including *Republic*, *Cratylus*, and *Phaedrus* (for a thorough discussion, see Lorenz, 2019). And, as Richard Kraut (2019) has shown, this view of the soul informs the *Symposium* too. In the *Phaedrus*, Plato offers an image of his tripartite soul that is helpful for understanding the two 'vectors' of desire introduced above: the soul is akin to "the natural union of a team of winged horses and their charioteer" (Plato, 1997, *Phdr.* 246a, p. 524). The charioteer (reason) controls two horses: on the charioteer's left, a horse of bad breeding, which figures our appetitive desires, and on the right, a well-bred horse gives expression to our spirited desires. The charioteer (reason) works to steer the chariot by reigning in the natural inclinations of the soul so that the movement of the chariot as a whole can reach its destination (i.e., happiness achieved through informed, wise action). Should a charioteer falter (say by not being well-trained), one of the horses will take the lead and steer the chariot towards its desires; when the left-hand horse takes the lead, the soul as a whole becomes obsessed with carnal pleasures; if the right-hand horse takes the lead, the soul becomes obsessed with the trappings of reputation and seeks out ways to demonstrate that it deserves honour or esteem.

This view of two kinds of madness also corresponds with Pausanias' discussions of the two kinds of *Erôs* in the *Symposium*. The negative kind of *Erôs* is oriented toward the body and linked to mere lust and sexual desires, while the positive kind of *Erôs* is oriented toward the higher part of the soul, i.e., the mind/intellect. One *Erôs* accompanies the vulgar Aphrodite, the other the heavenly Aphrodite (Plato, 1997, *Symp.* 180c-185c, pp. 465-469). This distinction found its continuation in the Renaissance. For example, Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499 CE) described in his commentary on Plato's *Symposium* (1469) vulgar love (desire, pleasure, sex) as a type of contagious disease (comparable to the plague and leprosy), which is caught through the eyes (Ficino, 1944, VII.5, pp. 224-225), and evokes madness: "By the sickness of insanity, man is cast down below the human level, and in some way turns from a man into a brute" (Ficino, 1944, VII.3, p. 221). In other words, driven by one's lower instincts, one descends to the level of an animal. Here, the passionate desires take control over us. They consume us, changing our bodies and souls. These changes manifest themselves in a variety of forms. From melancholic despair over grief, from feverish states and raging passions to a loss of one's bodily and cognitive autonomy, which requires medical attention and treatments, such as diets (e.g., warm, moist foods and drinks), or changes in lifestyle (e.g., the traditional six non-naturals), and frequent sexual intercourse to purge oneself of the desire urge (Ficino, 1944, VII.4-11, pp. 221-229). By contrast, heavenly/divine love paired with divine madness (*furor divinus*) leads to the

soul's mental abstraction from the body, the ascent towards the divine, and the acquisition and pursuit of knowledge and wisdom. "Socrates and Sappho," Ficino tells us, "were all seized with the amatory madness particularly" (Ficino, 1944, VII.14, p. 233). "True love," Ficino says further, "is nothing but a certain urge striving to fly to the divine beauty, aroused by the sight of bodily beauty; but the adulterous love is a precipitation from sight to touch" (Ficino, 1944, VII.15, p. 233).

Ficino's views parallel Sappho's insofar as he too emphasises *Erôs*' paradoxical effects. Unlike Sappho's dialectical unfolding of these effects in a unified first-person experience, Ficino's *Erôs* manifests itself as a binary, polarised set of extremes: *Erôs* moves either toward disorder (a state connected with the loss of bodily and cognitive autonomy), or toward order (a state of control, and even a gain in autonomy). Despite Ficino's apparent departure from the Greek views that we have discussed above, his insight into the, mutually exclusive, negative and positive contributions love can make to one's life relies on Diotima's account of love in the *Symposium*.

Diotima's Ladder: Creation and Attraction

In addition to Aristophanes' characterisation, Plato's *Symposium* also presents Socrates' view on *Erôs* (Plato, 1997, *Symp.* 198a-212c, pp. 481-494). Socrates notes, however, that his understanding of love is deeply indebted to Diotima, a priestess from Mantinea.^[5] He

5. There is some doubt in the secondary literature about whether Diotima was a real, historical person or Plato's fictional invention. On this issue, see, for instance, Nails, 2002, p. 137. For a discussion on why Plato might have chosen a female to introduce Socrates into the mysteries of love, see, for example, Halperin, 1990, pp. 113-151. Although Diotima's status as an influential priestess who teaches Socrates may be significant (say, by offering evidence of his piety to vindicate him against persecution for impiety), we find Kraut's (2019) and Sheffield's (2023) arguments concerning Diotima's historical existence to be decisive. As they show, Diotima voices relevant, contemporary view of *erôs* in that it does not exclude homosexual, heterosexual

even concedes that she taught him everything he claims to know about love, and that his view merely repeats hers (Plato, 1997, *Symp.* 201d-e, p. 484). Diotima, too, stresses that *Erôs* is a *desire* for something we do not possess but *want*.

Diotima shows Socrates that *Erôs*, contrary to the common view expressed by other participants in the *Symposium*,^[6] is neither beautiful, good, nor a god. She arrives at this conclusion by offering a conceptual analysis of the personification of *Erôs*.^[7] As the child of *Penia* (poverty or lack of resources) and *Poros* (plenty or contrivance), who was conceived during a party held in honour of Aphrodite's birth, *Erôs* inherits characteristics from both parents. He is needy, poor, shoeless, and homeless, but also "a schemer after the beautiful and the good. He is brave, impetuous, and intense, an awesome hunter, always weaving snares, resourceful in his pursuit of intelligence, a lover of wisdom through all his life, a genius with enchantments, potions, and clever pleadings" (Plato, 1997, *Symp.* 203d, p. 486).^[8] Diotima's account captures these

qualities of the personified *Erôs*, explaining his liminal status in terms of the creative endeavours erotic relationships produce. *Erôs* is a *liminal* figure: he is always half-way between ignorance and wisdom, ugliness and beauty, mortality and immortality. He is a *daimôn* (a powerful spirit), who moves *swiftly* and *freely* between men and gods, between the world of becoming and the world of being (i.e., Plato's eternal realm of the Forms, where the Forms of Beauty and the Good are located/situated).

Furthermore, Diotima explains to Socrates that *Erôs* does not simply aspire to, or desire the beautiful and the good, but "*wants to possess the good forever*". In so doing, "*Love must desire immortality*" (Plato, 1997, *Symp.* 206a, p. 489). This is achieved through *reproduction*: "*giving birth in beauty*" (Plato, 1997, *Symp.* 206b, p. 489). Unlike Aristophanes, then, Diotima's conception of erotic love is *not* primarily aimed at recovering something lost. Her view is not, as it were, backward-looking.

In fact, Diotima's view implies that the experience of erotic desire as 'bitter-sweet' (or as

ual, or genderqueer relationships. The view espoused by Diotima/Plato is therefore important irrespective of its origin because it explicitly argues against limiting the significance of *erôs* or the fulfilment of erotic relationships to specific genders or sexual orientations. As Sheffield (2023, p. 22) argues, "Platonic *eros* seems genderqueer insofar as it does not subscribe to conventional gender distinctions. One lesson learnt from Diotima is that human beings are needy, incomplete, and markedly indeterminate creatures; any determination we ultimately find is up to the individual and the work they are prepared to do, which, ideally here, takes them beyond gender. Plato challenges the gender categories of his day in a way that serves as a timely reminder of their contingency. [...] From that perspective, such interest in Diotima's gender reveals how far away we are from that goal."

6. For example, Phaedrus (Plato, 1997, *Symp.* 178a-180b, pp. 463-465), the first speaker in *Symposium*, postulates *Erôs* as one of the oldest gods, created after *Chaos* and *Gaia* (the earth). In contrast, the fifth speaker, Agathon, declares *Erôs* to be the most beautiful and youngest of the gods. Despite their disagreement about the genealogy of *Erôs*, both speakers agree that *Erôs* is a god. Only Socrates, echoing Diotima, dissents.
7. Whilst characterizing Diotima's strategy as a form of conceptual analysis may initially sound anachronistic, it explains why she focuses on establishing the properties of the divine being, *Erôs*, rather than discussing the qualities of erotic desire that human beings experience when they love or desire one another. The simple point is that the divine being *Erôs* is the personification of the concept, '*erôs*'. And reflecting on this personification serves to ground Diotima's account as a form of conceptual analysis. Indeed, it motivates Socrates' admonishment to Agathon, "Instead of what's likely, [...] ask yourself whether it's necessary" (Plato, 1997, *Symp.* 200a-b, pp. 482-483). The emphasis on necessity underscores that the target phenomenon is accessible from a conceptual, rather than empirical, perspective.
8. Notice the resemblance between *Erôs* and the philosopher, the 'lover of wisdom' (the Greek term *philosophia* literally means the 'love of wisdom') in general, and between *Erôs* and Socrates in particular (see, for instance, Osborne, 2002, pp. 86-116).

driven predominantly by a sense of *loss*) indicates that love has *miscarried* in some important respect.^[9] Although she, too, maintains that *Erôs* involves desire (for something we do not yet possess), she nevertheless argues that love's pathos is *creative*, driven by an *overabundance*. As Diotima says, "*All of us are pregnant, Socrates, both in body and in soul, and, as soon as we come to a certain age, we naturally desire to give birth*" (Plato 1997, *Symp.* 206c, p. 489). Erotic desire, then, is the catalyst of this birthing process.

Erotic desire is thus productive in the full sense of the word. It prompts individuals to realise or create something with the desired partner.^[10] As Diotima quickly points out, the salient senses of 'pregnancy' and 'giving birth' generalise beyond their quotidian meanings to include spiritual and intellectual activities. On this expanded meaning, giving birth includes the reproduction of the species *and* the creation of legislation, social institutions, or the production of works of art and philosophy. As Diotima explains:

Some people are pregnant in body, and for this reason turn more to woman and pursue love in this way [...]; while others are pregnant in soul, because there sure *are* those, who are even more pregnant in their souls than in their bodies, and these are pregnant with what is fitting for

a soul [...]. And what is fitting? Wisdom and the rest of virtue (Plato, 1997, *Symp.* 208e–209b, p. 491).

Diotima's basic contention here is that attraction involves discerning something in the other that might facilitate our desires to create something valuable, something that survives us (and through which we, too, survive in some sense as well). We attain a modicum of *immortality* via these creative acts, insofar as children carry on our names and reproduce the species. Or, indeed, via the continuation of our existence through the cultural achievements for which we are recognised and that we leave behind.

The emphasis on the productive character of erotic desire introduces two new ideas. First, insofar as it is now explicitly connected to creation (in its expanded sense), Diotima's *Erôs* is no longer driven by a sense of loss. For her, the motivating idea is that we *gain* something through erotic love. Specifically, we achieve a continued existence. We approach an immortality denied to us by creating something that endures well beyond our lives (e.g., offspring, cultural artifacts). Crucially, these acts of creation involve others. We can neither reproduce asexually, nor can we originate culturally significant works alone. Our creative desires thus entail selecting a partner. And this fact explains the intimate connection between

9. Within the context of the *Symposium* as a whole, the idea that erotic relationships can *fail* is central to Alcibiades' encomium for Socrates (Plato, 1997, *Symp.* 215a–222c, pp. 497–504). In addition to elucidating an important facet of interpersonal relationships (the phenomenon of frustrated erotic desire, as it were), Alcibiades' speech also presents a partial vindication of Socrates in light of the charges of impiety and corrupting the youth that were brought against him, and that were largely a result of Alcibiades' subsequent actions.
10. Although a detailed discussion of this point falls outside the scope of this article, Diotima's account of erotic love is unique in that she *does not* conceive of *erôs* and *philia* (friendship) as mutually exclusive (in this sense that one can be *either* a friend or a romantic partner, but not both). Indeed, as Kraut (2019) shows, romantic relationships *should* involve friendship (*philia*). As a matter of fact, friendship itself begins with an erotic attraction, whether physical or intellectual. The distal cause of this attraction, so Diotima contends, is the discernment of a potentially shared project that culminates in something independent of these partners and through which they live on.

creation, beauty, and erotic desire. We are attracted to others whom we find beautiful, whilst their beauty indirectly implies their fitness for our own re-creation. Erotic desire, in short, expresses our discernment that someone is a suitable partner with whom to share a creative endeavour. It is an endeavour that yields an independent existence beyond us and our relationship. In this sense, the erotic desire to give birth expresses a desire to *live on*.

Second, because she defines ‘Erôs’ in terms of a creative desire, whose distal cause is to live on (approach, but not obtain, immortality),^[11] Diotima’s account also introduces the idea of an *ascending scale* of erotic desires. Thus, ‘Diotima’s ladder’ introduces a developmental structure into *Erôs* that was absent from the ‘dialectical’ movement we uncovered in Sappho and Aristophanes. For instead of treating the satisfaction of desires as returning one to an autonomous, whole being, Diotima sees the satisfaction of a creative desire as opening up new creative possibilities. The satisfaction of a carnal desire for one person (or the beauty of *one* body), thus introduces the possibility of seeing multiple people as attractive (i.e., recognising the beauty of *all* bodies) in a variety of ways. This goes hand in hand with birthing beautiful, intellectual discourses and the discernment of various forms of attraction, intellectual as well as physical, opening up a new target space for erotic exploration. Next, the lover needs to realise that the beauty of the

soul/mind is more valuable than the beauty of the body. This realisation allows one to experience the beauty of knowledge. The vanishing point at the top of the ladder is nothing less than Plato’s theory of Forms. The Form/ideal of Beauty, which is the real objective of the lover, informs and renders intelligible the ephemeral physical world we experience (Plato, 1997, *Symp.* 210a–212b, pp. 492–494). The lover, as Diotima explains, will perceive something eternal:

Nor will the beautiful appear to him in the guise of a face or hands or anything else that belongs to the body. It will not appear to him as one idea or one kind of knowledge. It is not anywhere in another thing, as in an animal, or in earth, or in heaven, or in anything else, but itself by itself with itself (Plato, 1997, *Symp.* 211a–b, p. 493).

Unlike Sappho’s ‘irresistible creature’, Diotima’s ‘*Erôs*’ is best characterised as a *creative desire for continued life that we satisfy by learning to understand, care for, and communicate with others*, which results in tangible social goods. Thus, Diotima presents an ‘intellectualised’ account of *Erôs*. Whilst this intellectualised account of *Erôs* retains the sense of love as motivation or movement and insists that the significance of love is not exhausted by the emotional state accompanying it, she argues that the pathos of love is in fact coextensive with the desire to *create* and to *understand*.

11. A complication in Diotima’s account concerns how to square one’s initial attraction to others that is grounded in the self-centred desire to approach immortality with the kind of *care* for the well-being of one’s children, friends, or romantic partners that we take to be an essential part of healthy relationships. A full discussion of this issue falls outside the scope of our current discussion. Suffice it to say here, however, that loving relationships *fail* when this shift is not successfully made (the example of Alcibiades makes this evident). Furthermore, the very nature of intellectual creation – guided by, and generative of knowledge and wisdom – ultimately reorients our desire such that we come to realize the importance of the well-being of others. Having children, the pursuit of knowledge, of justice, or the accomplishment of heroic deeds may allow one to live on in some sense, but they also contribute to the well-being of others. A recognition of this fact explains why one might sacrifice one’s own well-being in the service of the things or people one loves.

Héloïse's Intention: Love's Shared Project – Equals Freely Seeking One Another

The forms of love associated with erotic desire discussed so far can also be found in one of the most famous and dramatic love stories of the Middle Ages: the historical relationship between Peter Abelard (1079–1142 CE) and Héloïse (c. 1098–1163 CE), who were considered to be the brightest minds of the twelfth century (see Radice's introduction to Abelard & Héloïse, 2003, pp. xiii–lvii). Their relationship is documented in their epistolary exchange. The first letter, *Historia Calamitatum*, or *The Story of His Misfortunes*, is addressed to an unnamed friend whom Abelard attempts to console. It tells us how he met the young Héloïse, who was living with her uncle Fulbert, the canon of Notre-Dame. Abelard reports that he was immediately attracted to her, noting that what struck him and kindled his desire was her intellect rather than her physical appearance:

In looks she did not rank lowest, while in the extent of her learning she stood supreme. A gift for letters is so rare in women that it added greatly to her charm and had made her most renowned throughout the realm. I considered the usual attractions for a lover and decided she was the one to bring to my bed (Abelard & Héloïse, 2003, p. 10).

Abelard concedes that the attraction was so strong that he conspired to seduce Héloïse.^[12] He approached Fulbert to recommend himself as her personal tutor and then moved into Ful-

bert's house. Soon thereafter, they started a passionate, secret love affair:

[S]o with our lessons as a pretext we abandoned ourselves entirely to love. Her studies allowed us to withdraw in private, as loved desired, and then with our books open before us, more words of love than of our reading passed between us, and more kissing than teaching. My hands strayed oftener to her bosom than to the pages; love drew our eyes to look on each other more than reading kept them on our texts [...] We entered on each joy the more eagerly for our previous inexperience, and were less easily sated (Abelard & Héloïse, 2003, p. 11).

As the passage above suggests, Abelard and Héloïse were consumed by physical desire, but this desire itself sprang from a mutual *intellectual* attraction. Héloïse corroborates this, admitting, that “in you [Abelard], I readily admit, there were two things especially, with which you could immediately win the heart of any woman, i.e. the gift of composing and the gift of singing” (Abelard & Héloïse, 2003, p. 52). Their affair, thus, elicits a sense of *Erôs* similar to Diotima's, Sappho's, and Aristophanes'. For example, the intellectual and creative valences of their relationship resonate with Diotima's views. The love of philosophy and learning drew them to one another and gave rise to a physical attraction. The creative nature of this relationship is also evident in the fact that Abelard was inspired to write love songs about Héloïse that have stood the test of time (Abelard & Héloïse, 2003, p. 11).^[13] Later in life, he

12. As with many narratives, the reliability of Abelard's testimony is questionable. His retrospective account may be coloured by subsequent events or motivated by the hope of sparing Héloïse some of the social censures he experienced. It may also tacitly express regret or wrongdoing – a sentiment that Abelard did explicitly bring up towards the end of the affair (Mews, 2005, p. 79). All this to say, there is enough evidence to believe that Héloïse was the one to initiate contact and the affair. At the very least, the seduction was mutual.

13. Recent scholarship suggests that the pair are responsible for some of the lyric poetry and music collected in the *Carmina Burana* (see Wulstan, 2003; Ruys, 2003).

also composed religious hymns for devotional practices for the Convent of the Paraclete at Héloïse's request. We also find in this relationship a Sapphic 'bitter-sweet' flavour. Héloïse expresses it poignantly throughout the exchange, although it is perhaps best encapsulated in the last line of letter 2, "*Farewell, my only love*" (Abelard & Héloïse, 2003, p. 55). Finally, like Aristophanes, the lovers found a momentary sense of mutual belonging and completeness with one another. It is precisely this ephemeral sense of completeness that intensifies Héloïse's sense of loss more than a decade after the affair. Héloïse's pregnancy with Abelard's child initiated a tragic turn in their relationship, however. To conceal the pregnancy (and protect their reputations), Abelard sent Héloïse to his sister in Brittany to give birth to their son, Astralabe. Upon learning the details, Fulbert was enraged. In an effort to assuage him, Abelard promised Fulbert to secretly marry Héloïse. The secret marriage would save Abelard's position as a scholar of the cathedral school of Notre-Dame (Abelard & Héloïse, 2003, pp. 12-13, 13n.29), whilst protecting Héloïse from the shame of being an unwed mother. But Héloïse rejected Abelard's marriage proposal. According to him, she thought that a marriage would not appease her uncle. More importantly perhaps, it would hinder Abelard's scholarship and progress as a philosopher:

What harmony can there be between pupils and nursemaids, desks and cradles, books or tables and distaffs, pen or stylus and spindles? Who can concentrate on thoughts of Scripture or philosophy and be

able to endure babies crying, nurses soothing with lullabies, and all the noisy coming and going of men and women about the house? Will he put up with the constant muddle and squalor which small children bring into the home? The wealthy can do so [...]. But philosophers lead a very different life from rich men, and those, who are concerned with wealth, or are involved in mundane matters and will not have time for the claims of Scripture or philosophy. Consequently, the great philosophers of the past have despised the world, not renouncing it so much as escaping from it, and denied themselves every pleasure so as to find peace in the arms of philosophy alone (Abelard & Héloïse, 2003, p. 14).

Ultimately, Héloïse's resistance was in vain, and she secretly wed Abelard. However, the secret did not remain hidden from others for long. Fulbert spread the news, causing a scandal. As a result, Abelard sent Héloïse to a convent at Argenteuil, near Paris, to live disguised amongst the nuns. In the meantime, Fulbert and his friends break into Abelard's home one night and castrate him: "*and there they punished me with a most cruel and shameful vengeance of such appalling barbarity as to shock the whole world; they cut off the parts of my body whereby I had committed the wrong of which they complained*" (Abelard & Héloïse, 2003, p. 17). Mutilated, Abelard entered the abbey of St Denis as a monk. Héloïse also took the veil and became a nun (Abelard & Héloïse, 2003, p. 18).^[14]

The romance may distress contemporary readers.^[15] Nevertheless, Héloïse expresses no

14. It is unclear who entered their respective religious orders first. Abelard asserts that he was the first to do so, whereas Héloïse contradicts this claim.

15. It may be difficult for us to imagine that this romantic affair was healthy. Abelard was roughly 15–19 years Héloïse's senior. Not to mention that he (ab)used his position as personal tutor to facilitate the affair. Importantly, however, some of the details are disputed; accounts of Héloïse being 17 at the time of the affair are likely a Renaissance invention; furthermore, what we do know about her suggests that she may have

regret or shame for their affair, 12 years later. For her part, she insists that,

[w]holly guilty though I am, I am also, as you know, wholly innocent. It is not the deed but the intention of the doer that makes the crime, and justice should weigh not what was done but the spirit in which is done [...] God knows I never sought anything in you except yourself; I wanted simply you, nothing of yours [...] The name of wife may seem more sacred or more binding, but sweeter for me will always be the word friend [*amica*], or, if you will permit me, that of concubine or whore (Abelard & Héloïse, 2003, p. 51).

This remarkable passage expresses something we have not encountered in our discussion so far. For unlike Aristophanes' view of erotic desire as motivated by a sense of incompleteness and in which loving relationships are valued *because they complete us (or mitigate a sense of loss)*, or Diotima's view in which erotic desire is actually *a desire for continued life* via creative activity and understanding, Héloïse insists on something we have not yet encountered: a freely chosen, *non-instrumental* romantic relation based on equality and friendship.

Philosophically, insisting that romantic love is non-instrumental is revolutionary. Although erotic desire remains integral to her account, she reorients it. Rather than insisting that desire is born of loss or lack, Héloïse emphasises her freedom to choose, who she will pur-

sue to satisfy her desires, and the equality of romantic partners in romantic relationships themselves. As we will see, Héloïse's 'love' also introduces into the discussion an explicitly ethical dimension, which may have been implicit in previous views, but that was never the primary concern. In reorienting erotic desire so that it springs from the apperception of another's intrinsic value, she can legitimately insist that romantic love entails *moral obligation*.

The non-instrumental commitment is fairly straightforward to see. It is a leitmotif of Héloïse's correspondence. As she stresses, her romantic desire for Abelard is independent of anything that he *can do for her*. She is *not* attracted to him, because she finds in him something she lacks, e.g., reputation, wealth, or education. As she says, she desires him for himself. She apperceives that Abelard *deserves* to be loved (and perhaps that she is able to love him). Elsewhere in letter 2, Héloïse expands on the basic point, writing,

A person's worth does not rest on wealth or power; these depend on fortune, but worth on merits. And a woman should realise that if she marries a rich man more readily than a poor one, and desires her husband more for his possessions than for himself, she is offering herself for sale [...] and she would be ready to prostitute herself to a richer man, if she could (Abelard & Héloïse, 2003, p. 52).

sought out Abelard herself (for a brief, informative discussion, see Mews, 2005, pp. 58–60). For our part, we do not wish to take a stand on these particular issues; doing so would require a nuanced historical analysis of gender roles, gender standards, conceptions of adulthood, and the best practices of education within the Middle Ages (to name just a few considerations). What is clear is that their romantic relationship was vehemently criticised during their lifetimes. For our part, we note simply that Abelard's actions are consistent with Diotima's characterisation of erotic lovers and of *Erôs* as "a schemer after the beautiful and the good; he is brave, impetuous, and intense, an awesome hunter, always weaving snares, resourceful in his pursuit of intelligence, a lover of wisdom through all his life, a genius with enchantments, potions, and clever pleadings" (Plato, 1997, *Symp.* 203d, p. 486). Whatever the case, our focus is not on Abelard (his actions or self-understanding judged from our perspective), but on Héloïse's own understanding of her own actions and experience.

The passage here stresses the intrinsic value of ‘authentic’ romantic desire. In so doing, the passage also weaves a moral dimension into the discussion. The moral dimension emerges from the manner in which Héloïse coordinates three pairs of distinctions. First, she differentiates between instrumental (‘agent-centred’) and non-instrumental (‘target-centred’) romantic desire to allow her to clarify the rationale or intention informing one’s romantic endeavours. Second, she introduces a commonplace sense of moral luck (‘fortune’ and ‘merit’) to clarify the difference between an erotic desire springing from the apperception of another’s intrinsic value (‘their merit’), as well as an erotic desire springing from the apperception of how another might improve my situation. Third, she draws out the moral consequences of these distinct erotic intentions via prostitution and (authentic) love.^[16] The coordination allows Héloïse to insist that instrumentally oriented erotic desire is no different than selling oneself into an exploitative situation. Its *wrongness* stems from the entrapment of (two) people within this exploitative relationship. A mutually beneficial marriage, we might say, borders on indentured servitude, since the married couple relinquishes their freedom for creature comforts. Such an arrangement involves one exchanging one’s freedom (and equality) for extrinsic, contingent goods. One loses oneself for the sake of something inessential and fleeting.

Thus, Héloïse introduces a new dialectical complication into *erôs*. If erotic desire springs from some apperceived instrumental gain (as it is implicitly or explicitly in Aristophanes’ and Diotima’s accounts), then it enslaves us. We become slaves to our passions and to others. Furthermore, our well-being becomes increasingly dependent on the good fortune and good will of others in such a relationship. In becoming a slave to an instrumental desire, we forfeit our equality and autonomy. The dialectical complication explains why Héloïse chooses to be Abelard’s *friend*, or a concubine or whore. In the first instance, her negative view of marriage allows her to *recover* the positive value of choosing to be a concubine or whore. It preserves the autonomy and equality of romantic partners.^[17] Héloïse’s alternative to instrumentally oriented erotic desire is thus an invitation to *friendship*, itself conceived as a freely chosen relationship amongst equals. The insistence on *freedom*, *equality*, and *friendship* illuminates the moral dimension of romantic love. “Remember,” Héloïse writes, “*what I have done and think how much you owe me*” (Abelard & Héloïse, 2003, p. 54). In light of her repudiation of marriage, we can surmise that she is not insisting on some *quid pro quo*. Her point seems to be that her sacrifices demonstrate that she desires Abelard authentically. She loves him romantically, as a friend and equal. She has made sacrifices not for any reward, but because she loves. And this

16. A thick concept is one that *combines* descriptive and normative elements. Héloïse’s use of ‘prostitution’ is a thick concept because it involves a specific description of human behaviour, which may be morally neutral, and a moral assessment of it. Furthermore, she provides a means for assessing one and the same practice as morally permissible or impermissible (e.g., sex work from prostitution) in terms of the specific intention motivating it. For a comprehensive overview of the distinction between thick and thin concepts in moral philosophy (see Väyrynen, 2021).

17. Rhetorically, the strategy of inversion also places Abelard and Héloïse on equal footing. After his castration, Abelard expresses a self-loathing for his mutilated state (Abelard & Héloïse, 2003, p. 18) and the hardships he has endured since. This self-loathing is at least partially responsible for the long silence between him and Héloïse. Héloïse’s transvaluation of her own status as an outcast allows her to re-situate them both in a positive way so that their erotic relationship can continue in the name of *friendship*, even if it cannot be consummated carnally.

selfless love entails moral obligation, which Héloïse characterises, “*restore your presence to me in the way you can by writing me some word of comfort, so that in this at least I may find increased strength and readiness to serve God*” (Abelard & Héloïse, 2003, p. 54). Write me. Be my Friend. Help me by continuing our relationship. Her efforts to rekindle the *intellectual* relationship they once shared, and her insistence that love involves equality and friendship (*amicitia*), hinge on the fact that lovers have a moral obligation to one another. Although the carnal relationship is over, Héloïse insists that she and Abelard remain equals, hopefully friends. As such, they can still share an intellectual relationship that supports and nourishes them both. Such is Héloïse’s hope and desire. To the bitter end, she expresses sincere and abiding love for Abelard, alongside her broken-hearted sense of abandonment during Abelard’s silence across the last decade.

Conclusion: The Rationality of Erotic Desire

Unsurprisingly, the philosophical views of *erôs* that we have inherited from the Ancient Greeks and the Medievals share a broad consensus concerning erotic desire. For in each view we canvassed, we found that erotic desire expresses a rational orientation toward others. Indeed, although this rational orientation has taken slightly different forms in each thinker we have discussed, the thread aligning these positions concerned *autonomy*. Appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, each view characterised (or indeed argued directly) erotic love as allowing us to achieve an autonomy we would not have had otherwise. Furthermore, each account described the achievement of autonomy through successful erotic relationships in a dialectical fashion. Each thinker showed that one’s initial dependency (e.g., loss of bodily autonomy, recognition of

incompleteness or lack, need for a companion to create beautiful things, or that one intrinsically deserves a form of friendship which transcends prudential considerations) is successfully transformed into a new form of freedom by romantic relationships. Acknowledging dependence and seeking out one on whom to depend, generates a whole series of new capabilities that expand our autonomy in ways we might not have even been aware of ourselves. Such is the philosophical import of erotic desire. And this is what Sappho, Aristophanes, Diotima, and Héloïse have all argued for in their own ways.

To be sure, philosophers have not been blind to romantic love’s negative potential. These are implicit in Plato’s depiction of Alcibiades, for example. And Plato’s description of the soul also warns against a form of lovesickness that is *too invested* in physical attraction and romantic love’s carnal satisfactions. Abelard also acknowledges that romantic love is rife with negative possibilities. His contrition echoes the Platonic warning. He condemns himself for falling for Héloïse, partly because of his ‘shameful’ actions, but mostly because it diverted him from the noble pursuits of higher learning. Ficino’s own ‘medicalisation’ of lovesickness in the Renaissance leans heavily on these elements of Plato’s work. Even Héloïse acknowledges that romantic love may ‘misfire’, when she excoriates lovers who pursue romantic relationships for prudential gains. Importantly, the negative potentials associated with erotic desire nevertheless revolve around a concern for autonomy.

What is interesting, however, is that the concern for the potentially negative effects of erotic desire are expressed primarily by *male thinkers*. The fact that Plato’s and Ficino’s writings tend to focus more on the negative potentials of romantic love as distraction from valuable life projects, whereas a woman like Héloïse, or the (fictional) figure of Dioti-

ma in Plato's *Symposium*, emphasises that erotic desire helps one realise a form of freedom and equality, is interesting. We suspect this is no accident, and that there are likely good sociological explanations for this.^[18] We would be particularly interested in examining whether a similarly gendered division exists today. Evidence from social media suggests this. Romantic relationships are increasingly presented as transactional (a way Héloïse criticised). Women on social media report that they expect to be compensated for their time on a date. In turn, it might promote 'simping behaviour'. An equal and opposite reaction is found among 'red-pill' men who have doubled down on the idea that romantic relationships are largely deleterious to one's life projects or well-being. Importantly, both representations categorically fail to acknowledge that romantic relationships cultivate an interdependent form of equality through *shared goals* that were the crux of the philosophical reflections above.

The connection between erotic desire and shared goals may be illuminating for clinical settings as well. Although it falls well beyond the scope of our current discussion, the account of *erôs* offered here suggests a productive approach for dealing with issues of (counter)transference. Specifically, it allows one to differentiate between the values and goals that structure therapeutic settings from the ones cultivated in romantic relationships. Making and keeping the goals of the therapeutic relationship explicit may be productive in responding to transference. Indeed, the goals bringing analysand and analyst together differ

from the ones shared by erotic partners insofar as the salient forms of autonomy and equality involved are different. And yet, the sense of support, trust, and intimacy cultivated in productive therapeutic relationships may lead one to overlook this fact. We do not have the salient background to develop this idea ourselves, but simply introduce its possibility for others to follow up, should they find it promising.

Whatever the contemporary case, all the thinkers we have examined express a worry that one can betray oneself by *loving wrongly*. Sappho, Aristophanes, and the Platonic tradition that perhaps culminates with Ficino all pointed to forms of lovesickness, wherein one loses one's motivation to engage in previously valued life projects, because of an overwhelming erotic desire. The dependency expressed by erotic desire, in short, can always become slavish, and thus betray the potential it once harboured. This is perhaps especially clear in Abelard and Héloïse's case. Abelard attributes his downfall to loving wrongly. For her part, Héloïse accepts her fate because her love was selfless all along. She criticises Abelard for failing to live up to his ethical obligations to her. In effect, Héloïse thinks she *would have loved wrongly, if she believed she would gain from the affair*. Her account of selfless (target-centred) love also provides us with the means to distinguish between pathological and transformative romantic relationships.

Erôs is thus pregnant with a form of autonomy and equality that no individual could conceive alone. This is its rational content and what physical desire ultimately expresses, for

18. In order to explain why men and women have historically articulated different priorities concerning erotic desire, for example, a sociologist might point to the various pressures on social mobility or the relative scarcity of opportunities available to *both men and women* to pursue the life projects they find rewarding. If romance represents one of the few means for upward mobility (and hence greater autonomy and equality) for women, one would expect a woman to emphasize this fact in her philosophical reflections. Similarly, if an indiscrete romantic affair might ruin a man's social standing, he might think twice before acting on any such impulse.

the philosophers we have touched upon here, at least. Still, their views identify something distinctively modern. For we find recent work on the traumatic nature of ‘moral injuries’ like sexual assault reaffirming this view in order to explain the *wrongness* of these injuries. Without hyperbole, moral injury involves a failure to love appropriately or well (see also Bern-

stein, 2015). Hence, in seeking out and cultivating *dependencies* with one another, we acknowledge the obligations arising from these. Thus, we realise a deeper sense of autonomy and equality by sharing ourselves with others. Learning how to embrace the demands love makes of us for the sake of others, just as much as for ourselves.

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Women who Love

Anne Colgan

Abstract:

This article is based on five short interviews with women who love: i.e., women who are in a long-term loving relationship with another adult – having a ‘beloved’ and being a ‘loved one’. Information that was volunteered during the interviews has also been presented.

Key Words:

respect, children, love, touch, attachment

Introduction

Before becoming a psychotherapist, I had often wondered what kept couples together. So, when invited to write an article about women and love, I took the opportunity to explore what makes up a happy long-term relationship. I posed these five questions to four Irish women and one from Eastern European:

- *When did you know you were loved?*
- *How did you know you were loved?*
- *What challenges did having children bring to the relationship?*
- *Tell me about your attachment style in your relationship?*
- *What are the challenges to a long-term relationship?*

In what follows, I present the responses to these questions of Statia, Alex, Joan, Sandra and Kate, as well as some additional information that was volunteered during their interviews.

1 Statia

When did you know you were loved?

Statia said that she had met her husband through a friend. Her first impression was, “He’s alright”. This is an Irish expression meaning much more than just alright. She said she never felt any doubt. It was the absence of doubt that told her that he loved her six weeks after they met, when they went away for a weekend. “He has always been there for me from the beginning. He declared his love first.”

How did you know you were loved?

“I remember going into work one morning and getting this warm feeling in my gut. I knew from that I was loved.” Throughout their relationship, Statia and her husband made room for each other. They would never embarrass or criticise each other, never seek to hurt each other. She said that they have great “nonsense crack” and seek opportunities to be together,

without sacrificing their own hobbies. There is always this freshness, still remaining.

What challenges did having children bring to the relationship?

When children came into their relationship, Statia said it was challenging for a few reasons: one being that neither of their families-of-origin were living near them. Statia was the one who had to adjust her identity incorporating the demands that motherhood brought. Furthermore, it was a different group of people at the school gate to her work colleagues. She always kept her own name. Her husband was very hands on when he was at home. He engaged constantly and consistently with the children. However, her career had changed to accommodate motherhood.

Tell me about your attachment style in your relationship?

The early sudden deaths of both sets of parents impacted on the secure attachment style of this relationship, keeping them close together. They have always sought out fun and adventure. Her husband's philosophy is "No point waiting."

What are the challenges to a long-term relationship?

They have never taken each other's emotions or role in the relationship for granted. "We always prioritised being together and having fun. We have always treated the relationship with respect 'I won't mess with you, there was no game playing.'" They always kept their individuality, while being committed to the relationship.

At this juncture, 30 years later, she said that she knew that he would always do his best. There is comfort in the longevity of it. "I love it that I have no idea what we'll be doing next year. I love that it is not all cast in stone. The

only fixed goal is that we are in it together: anything is up for discussion."

2 Alex

When did you know you were loved?

"I knew from the first moment that I met him that he was the one. A few hours later, he asked me to marry him, and I said yes."

How did you know you were loved?

"It was very exciting and very calm at the same time. I felt that I had known him for a long time; I felt safe. The feeling was like we were a match. He is easy going and we don't fight over small things; we are committed to each other."

What challenges did having children bring to the relationship?

From the beginning, Alex made it clear to her husband that she did not want children. This was because she was the eldest in her family of origin and had to look after her younger siblings. Both of her parents worked. While her friends would be playing outside, she was doing what grown-ups do. She said her mother did everything in the house. Her father went to work and that was all. When her mother was in hospital, it was the one time that her father did everything. He could do everything, but when her mother was there, he did nothing. Alex said she did not want to end up like her mother. "She will not come to see me often, because she will not leave him. We live in different countries."

Six years after she was married, Alex changed her mind about having children. She felt secure in the relationship and heard by her husband. They planned the pregnancy. She was not happy about being pregnant, but when her children were born, she was very happy and loved them. She is very pleased that they made the decision to have children.

Tell me about the attachment style in your relationship?

“My father was king in the house. I never understood it and didn’t want that. I wanted equality in my relationship.” Alex’s maternal grandparents were her role models. She said they were so happy, so affectionate. Her grandfather would always make her grandmother a cup of tea. There was never a problem if the dinner was not ready. She said she often wondered whether her father resented how her mother did everything for him, even though he col- luded with it.

What are the challenges to a long-term relationship?

“Understanding each other.” Alex said that her husband is the first to say sorry. “He doesn’t want the door to close.” This gives her security in the relationship. She said that it is important not to forget your husband when you have children. And that there is a lot of care in her house for her 20-year relationship.

3 Joan

When did you know you were loved?

We were two months into the relationship. I knew I was loved, because of his kindness toward me. He used to clean his house and change his bedsheets, before I would go to see him.

How did you know you were loved?

“I was really excited every time I was go- ing to see him. He drove a long distance to where I lived to collect me.” Joan didn’t drive at the time and her boyfriend (now husband) wouldn’t let her get the bus. He wouldn’t let her spend a penny over the weekend and showered her with food and drinks. “I felt he was the only person in the world that mat-

tered. He was the only person I wanted to be with.” Her mum said as long as she had him that was all she needed.

What challenges did having children bring to the relationship?

“I went back to college after my children were born to study early childhood theories and practice. My husband looked after the chil- dren. He was always open to what I learned in college. All of this brought us together. We shared the childminding evenly. There was al- ways equality. He still does the cooking.”

Tell me about the attachment style in your relationship?

“I learned from my mother and my grandpar- ents. They really loved each other. My father was very set in his ways and left my mother when I was older. There were still young sib- lings with my mother. There was no equality in my parents’ relationship: my mother couldn’t live with him, she was never heard. I did not want this for myself. My mother taught us how to love. I felt loved and cherished from the beginning. This made love easy for me.”

What are the challenges to a long-term relationship?

“We are very much together. We complement and support each other. We don’t tolerate drama. We are not materialistic. Home is very important to us. We enjoy the same movies and, 20 years on, I think this contributes to the strength of our relationship.”

4 Sandra

How did you know you were loved?

“It was easier to know that I was loved than that I loved her: something about the eye con- tact, the way she touched me.”

When did you know you were loved?

"[Because of] the interest in her and the yearning to travel to be with her: we lived very far apart. I could feel her openness and honesty. You wouldn't be that open unless you were serious."

What challenges did having children bring to the relationship?

"Massive". Sandra said they argue so much. More to do, more laundry, more birthday parties, presents, clothes, managing a household and negotiating all those parenting styles.

"We had different expectations about screen time and sugary foods. We would have said that we rarely argued, but there were difficult conversations, and a lot of huffing and puffing."

The couple found they had to be really creative about intimacy. "When one is knackered, a foot rub or making a cup of tea can be intimate". This reminded them that they were individuals and not just parents.

Tell me about the attachment style in your relationship?

"My parents have a secure attachment style, her parents don't, and this was difficult. These different attachment styles presented a challenge to us." Sandra said that sometimes she felt it was too difficult. She saw herself as a secure confident person. She had to work through her own fears and look at the bigger picture.

What are the challenges to a long-term relationship?

Sandra said that she had to learn and accept being terrified of being loved and committing to the relationship, even when they got married. She said that she only agreed to get married because they could also get divorced. At present, they are not having dates, because

the parents, who are nearby are quite elderly. There is only a short window of opportunity when they can go out, because the children are very young. But they have just found a babysitter and hope to remedy this. They have been together for 14 years.

5 Kate***When did you know you were loved?***

Kate said that her husband was very shy when she met him, and at first he would look at the ditch most of the time when speaking to her. "I knew I was loved. It was his kindness and care. I was mucking out stables and trapesing around with small bales of hay. It was quite hard and tedious work. He observed this and offered to get his tractor and take over a big round bale of hay for me, saying it would be less work." Kate told me that this act of kindness meant more to her than a bracelet, or a bunch of flowers. She wanted me to know that she does like flowers as well.

When did you know you were loved?

"When I was able to be comfortable being vulnerable."

What challenges did having children bring to the relationship?

Kate thought having children can put pressure on your relationship. "There are a lot of balls in the air. People having a child to save a relationship are delusional. When they're very small, you're tired. Your sex life probably dips. And when they are teenagers, they know what's going on. You have to find different ways and times to be intimate."

The management of the house fell to Kate as did the management of the children and their timetables, school, and activities. She suggested that going to work can be more attractive.

Tell me about the attachment style in the relationship?

Kate said that her mother was a slave to the house. Reflecting on this, she remarked that a women's success was often measured by the type of house she keeps.

Kate's role models were therefore her father and her maternal grandmother. She told me that her father had enormous empathy and understanding of human nature. She spent a lot of time with him when she was young and during school holidays, she often worked with him. He had a wonderful way of understanding why people behaved the way they did. "I learned a lot from him and one thing that stands out was when he said to me, 'The crux of getting older is that when you see the grey, things stop being black and white.' His wisdom was a piece of my role model. He was gregarious and conservative."

Kate said although she found her paternal grandmother to be a difficult woman she had great admiration for her. "She was the first woman to drive a car in a small village in Ireland in the 1950's. She stood up to the priest and she was passionate about equality. She was very instrumental in my understanding that the dynamic between men and women wasn't balanced. She was a 'State Employed Assistance Officer', who allocated funds to groups of people. She was angry about poverty. There was never enough money to go around." Kate suspected that her grandmother "may

have used her own money to make up the inevitable shortfalls."

What are the challenges to long-term relationships?

Kate said that the concept of the "Grass is Greener on the other side" is a fake trap. We value how lucky we are. I am attracted to my husband. He is attracted to me, because we have the same sense of the world and the same moral compass." They have now been together for 27 years.

Conclusion

The one thing that the couples seem to have in common is their happiness. While they do not take the longevity of their relationships for granted, there is an appreciation of the security within the relationship. There is a commitment to fun, even though having small children, managing households and work, which can all be challenging, if not overwhelming.

Another commonality is their ability to be true to themselves and to their individuality: i.e., not to get swallowed up in the other's personality. The couples seem to be aware that, due to their differences, there will probably be some conflict. But they also know how to navigate the *I* and the *We*. Throughout their conflicts, there is always a connection.

It has been a great pleasure meeting with, and hearing about experiences of women who love and are loved.

Author

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International Journal of PSYCHOTHERAPY

Volume 28

| Number 2

| Summer 2024

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