A Father Without a Family

Romantic Love in Early Modern Europe

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Throughout Ancient Rome, early Christianity, the feudal period, and in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, romantic love has provided a discourse of social benevolence to ensure that marriage came from a relationship built on romantic love[1]. During the early modern period, Europeans experienced a conflation of specific changes to their society that not only modified how couples experienced romantic love, but how the community perceived it. Buttressed by the religious reformations of the sixteenth century, and the invention of the printing press, societies all over Europe were slowly going through their own social reformation, which in time, led to a decline in feudal and ecclesiastical governance[1]. Moreover, as a continuum of this period, we also see a rise in individualism, urbanisation and personal autonomy not seen before. How this effected or shaped the stigma of romantic love was to liberate it, to disassociate the canonical negativity that for many centuries had pushed the romantic passion behind closed doors. Whether it is the melancholic effects of love on a person's mental state[1], or that love was seen as something that developed after a marriage[1], romantic love in the early modern period was part of the social experience.

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The Protestant reformations of the early sixteenth century had in many ways provided a vehicle to challenge not only the Catholic (Latin) church, but more generally, the social order that was now coming under increased criticism from all parts of the polity. This challenge to the papacy, to the hierarchy of the church, set in motion many other changes that in time would lead to the

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[1] Herman J. Hantz, "Romantic Love in the Pre-Modern Period: A Sociological Commentary," Journal of Social History 15, no. 3 (1982): 351

[2] Ruth H.Bloch, "Untangling the Roots of Modern Sex Roles: A Survey of Four Centuries of Change," Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society 4, no. 2 (1978): 238.

[3] Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, Early Modern Europe, 1450-1789. 8th Edition. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 265.

[4] Stephanie Coontz, "Marriage, A History: Chapter 1 - The Radical Idea of Marrying for Love", http://www.stephaniecoontz.com/books/marriage/chapter1.htm (accessed January 25, 2012).

enlightenment in the seventeenth century. Other motives included the Black Death, which for so many people lead them to start to question the power of the Church and by association, God. For romantic love however, the reformation would unconsciously deliver a seed of individualism that allowed Christians to over time start to question their faith, rules, norms, and values[5]. With a rise in individualism directly proportional to a rise in romantic love, this phenomenon was seen as not only as a, 'threat to the moral community'[6], but also a challenge to how the church would be able to maintain its hegemony. Aiding this dissemination of the Protestant reformation was the invention of the printing press in the mid fifteenth century. This technological advance had a profound impact on how Europeans communicated, and is directly connected to how the middle class were able to emancipate themselves from not only Latin as a core language, but as literacy being a tool of the elite only. The longer-term effects would lead to an increased dissemination in romantic, poetic works, and by consequence romantic love[7]. As people were able to be better educated, their minds also opened to a more pluralist approach to belief, appearance, and sexuality. Feeding this plurality was the urbanisation of society, which as Hantz argues, 'furthered to growth of romantic love'[8].

The changes to the family unit, how people married, and how lines of kinship would be revolutionised also allowed romantic love to become more socially acceptable. Historically, a couple's love for god was to take prime place in love over all others[9]. This however was to change, where in time, love for each other was to be elevated above love for all others. How couples spent their time also shifted throughout the early modern period. Griffith's comments on how for people in England during the sixteenth century, it was not uncommon for them to spend their time, 'taking long walks together'[10], or spending sleepless nights simply conversing with each other. How these activities were perceived and

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[5] Weisner-Hanks, 238.
[6] Hantz, 352.
[7] Hantz, 349.
[8] Hantz, 350.
[9] Coontz
[10] Paul Griffiths, "Courtship, Sexual Behaviour, and Moral Order,"in Youth and Authority: Formative Experiences in England 1560 1640 (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1996), 259.

eventually culturally accepted throughout the early modern period connects us to the increased autonomy people enjoyed post-reformation. When examining marriage during the early modern period, property, status, and everything but love were considered as part of the selection process of an ideal partner. Dowry, and social prestige were also key elements of how the husband's family might benefit from such an exchange of vows. All of these ingredients including for the man, being able to earn descent money, were seen as capitol that, 'would certainly help love flow'[11]. As mentioned above, urbanisation, which in comparison to the village society, allowed other cultural changes to develop, including marriage and how it was experienced. By taking away the intimate, communal style world of the village, and moving a more cosmopolitan settlement of the city, both men and women were able to relieve themselves from the pressures of the patriarchal system of partner selection. For women, where the social status and burden of male rule mattered most[12], the post-reformation years provided a gradual change in some social classes, particularly, the upper and ever growing, middle class. Atkinson supports this when commenting on how different the, 'attitudes and behaviours'[13] of married couples were as compared to their ancestors. The metaphorical attachment of marriage being a right of passage to adulthood also underwent a change in the post-reformation years. This is more evident in the Germanic and Low Countries in Europe where Protestant doctrine was at its highest.

For many centuries love was seen as a type of illness, this relates back to the four humors and how they affect both the male and female sexes. For women, they were labelled as being 'wet and cold', with their bodies, 'producing all sorts of fluids'[14]. They were also capable of entrapping men to satisfy their sexual desires. This 'love sickness' was taken very seriously if you were thought to have fallen

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[11] Coontz
[12] Weisner-Hanks, 46.
[13] Clarissa W. Atkinson, "Precious Balsam in a Fragile Glass: The Ideology of Virginity in the Later Middle Ages," Journal of Family History 8, no. 2 (1983): 131.
[14] Weisner-Hanks, 42.

prey to such an, 'enchantress'[15]. Indeed it could be considered a, 'serious threat to social order'[16].

Love, as argued by Coontz, was something that when considering partners was almost,

'inconceivable'[17] because of its fragility and irrational effects on people. Aside from the sickness of

love, there was also the moral conflict that people endured. Hantz argues this definition as, 'a love

based on personal-emotional attraction, with a strong erotic component which is often repressed

because of moral conflict'[18]. Mendelson and Crawford detail how during courtship couples would,

'accompany each other to markets and fairs'[19], women would be offered gifts, or weekends away to

entice them away from their fathers. There are however many examples of where moral conflict was

not such an issue for people, one case in point is the well-documented affairs of Giovanni and Lusanna

in Florence during the mid fifteenth century. It is evident here that pre-reformation doctrine still

existed, as for Giovanni, his 'feelings apparently deepened over time'[20] supporting the thesis that love

was seen not as an essential part of a relationship but more a bonus[21]. Lusanna herself is quoted

commentating on Giovanni's feelings for her, offering that, 'Giovanni is passionately in love with

me'[22]. Finally, love also was seen a precursor to melancholy. This condition brought about by too

much black bile, was to leave the victim depressed, out of love, and filled with sadness. Love sickness

as it were, manifested itself into emotional heartache, social awkwardness, and real treatable medical

conditions. What the enlightenment would bring is a complete revolution in this thinking.

This paper has argued that romantic love did exist in early modern Europe. There are clear

differences in how romantic love was perceived at all levels of society before and after the Protestant

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[15] Susan Broomhall, Stephanie Tarbin, Women, Identities, and Communities in Early Modern Europe (Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing, 2008), 115.

[16] Coontz

[17] Coontz

[18] Hantz, 359.

[19] Patricia Crawford, Sara Mendelson, "Courtship," in Women in Early Modern England: 1550-1720 (Oxford University Press, 1998), 111.

[20] Gene Brucker, Giovanni and Lusanna: Love and Marriage in Renaissance Florence . 3rd Edition (London: University of California Press, 2005), 78.

[21] Coontz

[22] Brucker, 78

reformations of the sixteenth century. The broad unintentional impact these reformations had along with the invention of the printing press, are intrinsically linked to romantic love becoming a more culturally acceptable behaviour. Other social constructs like individualism, and urbanisation enabled a general emancipation of the genders in the sixteen and seventeenth centuries. This coupled with a change in the geography of how people lived and how was changing from village style towns, to cosmopolitan cities also enabled romantic love to be seen as normal culturally acceptable behaviour. Challenges to the Latin Church from multiple vectors would also play a key part in how all these factors were perceived. Lastly, in the final decades of the early modern period, Europe would undergo a scientific transformation that would allow some of these medical and physiological assumptions to be questioned and ultimately dismissed as untruths.

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