



Research Paper

Mazes of Modern Love

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Abstract:

This short paper traces the history and genealogy of the modern, near-universal, concept of romantic love from its invention in 12th century France in the tradition of courtly love itself consequent upon the medieval reception and transmission of classical Ovidian and Platonic traditions and looks very briefly at its transmutations in social, cultural, and literary history upto the present times. It takes a psychoanalytic look (Freud, Lacan, Zizek) at the dynamics of courtly love and the construction of woman qua Lady which continues to have a bearing on contemporary attitudes and practices.

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In the 'Book of Judges' in 'The Old Testament' of the *Bible* we read the story of Samson and Delilah, the subject matter of John Milton's closet drama *Samson Agonistes*. And of Saint-Saens' opera *Samson et Dalila*. The story is well known. Samson is a hero. A Nazirite warrior who killed a lion bare-handed and destroyed a tribe of Philistines with a donkey's jaw bone. But Samson, like Oedipus, was also good at solving riddles: posed with the question 'What is sweeter than honey? What is stronger than a lion?' he came up with the correct answer—love. Samson, then, knew what love is. But, he was betrayed by his love for the Philistine Delilah. Samson, then, did not know what love is. What, then, is love? Is it an essentially unknowable, though not exactly unknown, energy? I shall speak to you, then, of love. But can love be spoken? Can it be said? Can love, well and truly, be expressed? I shall come back to this question, by way of conclusion.

In Act I of Giuseppe Verdi's opera *La Traviata* Alfredo, just having met the beautiful and fragile courtesan Violetta at a ball, confesses to being overcome with an 'unknown love'. He serenades Violetta with a paean to love:

*Di quell'amor ch'è palpito Dell'universo, Dell'universo intero, Misterioso, altero,
Croce e delizia cor. Misterioso, Misterioso altero, Croce e delizia al cor.*

To paraphrase, 'That love that is the pulse of the whole universe, mysterious and exalted, torture and delight to the heart.' Here we are confronted with the cosmic reach as well as the contradictions of love. Love, qua affect, is aporetic. The ontology of love is oxymoronic. This quivering state of anxious afflatus is what most of us would recognize as the quintessence of romantic love. And romantic love, perhaps for most of us, is not only the paradigm of modern love but the very pattern of love itself, timeless and universal. But is it really so? The idea of romantic love is more naturalized than natural, and is historical rather than transcendental. It flowered and flourished at a fairly specific time and place in the West.

The word 'romance' comes from the word ROMA (Rome), and ROMA spelled backward is AMOR (love). Not so much Rome itself but the culture which it represented became closely associated later with a certain cult of love. Especially influential in this regard was Ovid's *Ars Amatoria* (2 CE), a practical guide to dating, which was popular in the Middle Ages.

Romantic Love, it has been claimed by scholars, was 'invented' in the Middle Ages, in the 12th century (or 11th according to some) in the south of France. Andreas Capellanus wrote a treatise called *De Arte Honeste Amandi* in the 12th century which was discovered by one Renouart and published in 1917 and has been translated into English as *The Art of Courtly Love*. The predominantly poetic expression of a highly refined form of love in 12th century Provence was given the name 'courtly love' (*amour courtois*) by Gaston Paris in 1883. The practice in

the Middle Ages itself was called '*fin'amor* (Occitan), i.e.(re)fine(d)love.

Capellanus's work comprises three parts: the first is a theoretical discussion of love; the second a practical demonstration of how to win love, put in the form of dialogues between lovers belonging to different social classes; and the third an account of the proceedings of the courts of love presided over by noblewomen. While a key text in the codification of the culture of courtly love, which received its finest expression in the poetry of the French *troubadours* and the *trouverses*, as also of the German *Minnesingers*, Capellanus's work also satirizes and thus potentially destabilizes the ideology of courtly love. Capellanus writes that having been married is no excuse not to fall in love. But he also states that love between husband and wife is impossible: out of the question. Love for one's wife was deemed not only unmanly but sinful. Hugh of St. Victor (12th century) had written that if you love your wife then you will go to hell. Uxoriousness was a sin. One was supposed to love God above one's wife. Within this scheme of things, the wife could not be a man's legitimate object of love. The beloved, then, had to be an Other woman, another man's wife. Thus adultery, a sin in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, was given a moral gloss and was elevated to an ethical as well as aesthetic principle. The illegitimate was not only legitimated but valorized. The sinful became the source of a new kind of salvation through service. This was accomplished by making fidelity—loyalty—the basis of a relationship based on infidelity. The church, in time, condemned courtly love. Capellanus's book was burnt. But the practice, if only poetic, had made its mark and was there to stay.

One could locate in courtly love the beginnings of a secular ethic of love within Western Christendom. But courtly love was not anti- or even non-religious. As historians like Johan H. Huizinga and Denis de Rougemont have shown, there was a conjunction of the religious and the erotic in the elaboration of courtly love. Huizinga tries to show that ideas of chivalric heroism were transferred from warfare to love, not only in the domain of poetry but in the spectacle of mediaeval tournaments and jousts. De Rougemont detects the influence of Catharism, the Cathars being a religious sect denounced as heretic by the Catholic Church, behind the ethic of courtly love. As C.S Lewis points out, one of the cardinal features of courtly love was the 'religion of love', along with humility, courtesy and adultery. With the advent of courtly love, love became a religion—albeit a religion without a god. We remember here Jorge Luis Borges, who writes in an essay on Dante that to love is to found a religion without a god. In the case of Dante, though, the beatific vision of Beatrice in Paradise could indeed lead to the benediction of God. But for the humanists like Petrarch, and later Shakespeare and Donne, the exploration of love would become an end in itself, eventuating in its own rewards and punishments. What is significant in this, though, is that love had become a discipline, an *askesis* almost, an ideal common to Plato and Saint Paul, but not, in this case, through the love of wisdom or of one's neighbour but of the Lady.

It is significant that in courtly love a man loves not a woman but a Lady, whom he addresses as *Domnei* or *Mi-Dom* (Master). And the lover is always a knight, even if he happens not to belong to the aristocracy, like Bernard de Ventadorn, who was the son of a servant, even as most troubadours were dukes and princes. This knight is pledged to serve the Lady, and suffer for her, loyally until she condescends to yield her gift or reward—Gnade. Slavoj Žižek, writing after Jacques Lacan, surmises that this reward is not so much a consent to sexual consummation as a sign of love, whereby the beloved—an object—becomes a lover—a

subject—. If, and when, this happens the 'miracle' of love has taken place.

The phenomenon of courtly love entails sublimation. The Lady to whom courtly love is addressed is idealized and inaccessible. She does not reciprocate. This idealization, if not sacralization, of woman possibly corresponds to what Freud calls a certain 'over-valuation of the object' in men, where the woman is posited as being unattainable and thus beyond the satisfaction of the man's desire *in order, however, to institute the very (metonymic) circuit of desire* whose aim, as Lacan has demonstrated, is dissatisfaction; a position commensurate with that of Socrates' in Plato's *Symposium*. Such idealization of the woman, as Lacan points out, belies the actual impoverishment of women, even of aristocratic origin, in mediaeval Europe. The fetishization of woman, then, was largely a consequence of the crystallization of a certain kind of masculine fantasy at a certain point in history. This fetishization was, and is, narcissistic. At the same time, it goes beyond narcissism. The unresponsive Lady is a screen whereon a man projected his own narcissistic image. But more than being an idealized Imaginary object (Imaginary in the Lacanian sense) of love, the Lady also functions as a Symbolic limit to desire, thereby occasioning a detour, the knight engaged in an endless series of adventures, the man encumbered with an enormous shopping list, so as to prove his love. The inherent structural insatiability of desire is glossed over by deferring to the apparent contingency of obstacles to the satisfaction of desire, obstacles being essential to the circulation and sustenance of desire. However, rather than being a mere blank screen for the projection of masculine narcissistic fantasy, the Lady functions as a 'vacuole' (Lacan) or 'black hole' (Žižek) in reality whereby she attests to the impossible Real of sexual relation which according to Lacan does not exist. Thus, love for the lady—situated in the register of *being*—over and above desire—situated in the register of *having*—elevates—sublimates—the Lady from an object to the dignity of a Thing (in the Freudian-Lacanian

sense of *Das Ding*). This love takes the form of a gift of something one does not have. In other words, it involves the assumption of one's Symbolic castration, whereby one is able to place one's ordinary lack in the locus of the Other.

It can be seen, then, how the conventions of courtly love continue to govern love in the modern world. Love, says Lacan, is a gift of something one does not have and as such makes the sexual non-relationship work, love—and not desire—being the condition of possibility of *jouissance*. But does one profess this love? Can it be spoken? Speaking about love, Lacan opines, reduces us to imbeciles. Love, he feels, can only be expressed in and as poetry, presumably because poetry is able, if only provisionally, to articulate the normally inarticulable Real...

'Love's not Time's fool'. It will be proper, then, to take leave, provisionally and for the time being, of the subject of love, a labyrinth where one may foolishly lose and find oneself, with a poem on the subject of love: Thought leans across
Toward memory

Your footsteps, smile-drenched, silent, Are heard

Along desert-walking Time

I-torsion trips Drips

Over ocean-You

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