

Love and Marriage

Literature and its Social Context

Laurence Lerner

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Preface

What is love? And what can we know about it? 'In a yet unpublished monograph,' writes a sociologist, 'the writer has developed a theory of intersexual attraction and love which holds that love is an affectionate response to one who is instrumental in the gratification of an individual's needs.' That is one way of looking at it, which we shan't be able to avoid, and one kind of vocabulary, which I shall do my utmost to avoid. Another way of looking at it is that of the poets. 'Tis not hereafter, sing the drunken old men in *Twelfth Night*: present mirth hath present laughter. It is a prick, it is a sting, suggests George Peele: it is a pretty pretty thing; it is a fire, it is a coal. And how many other things too, pretty or stinging: a red red rose, an ever-fixed mark, a sickness full of woes; it is of God and passes human wit, but it has pitched its mansion in the place of excrement. It is begotten by despair upon impossibility. And so on and so on: the poets never tire of this senior-junior giant dwarf Dan Cupid.

It? Is it one thing? Can we clear up the babel of voices telling us what love is by saying that they are talking not of one but many things? If we ask what relationships are described by the word, the answer will be a list of perhaps four or five—sexual love, parental (and filial) love, friendship, spiritual (and divine) love. Damon loves Chloe and Robert Browning loved Elizabeth Barrett; a mother loves her child, a man loves his mother; the love of David and Jonathan surpassed the love of women; the mystic loves God, and God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son. The distinctions are important, but they will not sort out the babel for us, for it is almost entirely concerned with the first: there are poems about the love of God, but on the whole when the poets say 'love' without qualification they mean Cupid—that is, sexual love. That is what the arguments are about, and that is what this book is about.

And what is marriage? An honourable estate, ordained for the procreation of children, for a remedy against fornication, for mutual society, help and comfort. A sexual union with economic cooperation, involving residential cohabitation, and forming the basis of the nuclear family. The purposes of marriage in the Christian service, and the functions of marriage according to the anthropologists: are they polar opposites, or saying the same thing? To say of marriage that it is commended of Saint Paul, and to be taken in hand reverently, discreetly, advisedly, soberly, may be solemn obfuscation; to speak of social functions without reference to holiness or mystical union may be reductivism; or it may

be in the nature of the institution that it can be defined in two kinds of language, even though it took us centuries to devise the second.

The history of love and marriage can study three things. First, there is what people actually do. At what age do they marry, and does that vary with sex, social class and sibling order? How many children do they have, at what intervals, and how many grow up? What forms of sexual activity take place before marriage, and what after (frequency of intercourse, positions used, accompanying rituals)? What do husband and wife do together, and what apart (work, eat, pray, sleep)? The list is very long, and of every item we can ask if it has changed over time. Second, there is sentiment. What do lovers feel about each other, and how does it differ from what married couples feel? How does married love change in the lifetime of the couple, how has it changed over the centuries? And third there is ideology. The members of any society have a picture of what its institutions are, ideally, like. The purpose and functions of marriage, the duties and responsibilities of the partners, the dangers and wickedness of neglecting these, are discussed in sermons and marriage manuals, improving tracts and radical pamphlets. The three-fold division corresponds to William J. Goode's distinction between real behaviour, real ideals and ideal ideals. Only for the third of these is there clear and abundant evidence: it is always easy to find out what people thought ought to be done, by themselves and (especially) others, and if there is a difficulty in writing the history of the ideology of marriage, it is because there is too much material, not too little. For the first, real behaviour, there is in principle no problem of evidence, but as we go back in time (before the social survey, before the census) it becomes more difficult in practice. But what is evidence for the history of sentiment? The work of those social historians who believe that *la vie intime* has a history which can be studied (Aries, Flandrin, Shorter, Stone and many others) has been invaluable to me in writing this book, but it has left me profoundly sceptical about the problems of evidence. We cannot go back and ask Mrs William Temple or Mrs James Boswell if they loved their husbands very much ☐ mildly ☐ sometimes ☐ not at all ☐ , and we would not trade their letters for the answer if we could.

To illustrate the problem, let us look at the main thesis of Lawrence Stone's monumental *Family Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800*. This concerns the supposed rise of affective individualism. In the course of the eighteenth century, Stone believes, English men and women developed stronger affective bonds, in the family and perhaps in all their relationships. In earlier times, social relations were cool, even unfriendly: most people 'found it very difficult to establish close emotional ties to any other person'.

How could one show this? Stone is shrewd at using linguistic or

material evidence, but these are incidental: what really matters is what people have said about their feelings. The comments of observers, always unreliable, are by definition useless in this case: how could they know that in future ages affective life would grow richer? And even if we find cool statements at one time and, in a later age, warm statements in the same situation, how can we know what has changed, the emotion or its expression? Stone quotes the correspondence of John Dickinson and his wife Mary, at the end of the eighteenth century: 'I love you as much as it is possible for one human creature to love another. . . . I have only time to say that I love you dearly . . .', and claims that it 'exudes a warmth and an emotional commitment that is very hard to find in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries'. This is doubtless true, but the Dickinsons were writing in the age of sentimentality: because Yorick and the Man of Feeling shed tears of sensibility, and were admired for doing so, can we conclude that mankind's heart had grown softer? If *Sense and Sensibility* were read in Stone's spirit, Marianne would represent the new, and Elinor the old; and Marianne, who expresses her feelings with passion, would be an example of affect, while Elinor, who bottles hers up, would belong to the cool world without emotional involvement. This is certainly not Jane Austen's intention: she wrote the book to tell us not to judge on appearances. True, there is a rhetorical problem here: the fact that all our evidence for Elinor's inner sufferings is accompanied by an insistence on how well she controlled it has the effect on the reader of giving him a very theoretical or cursory picture of her feelings compared to Marianne's passionate drama. It is meaningful in a literary context to say that Elinor does not suffer, because her suffering is not expressed. But that is because her reality is created solely by the author's words: there is no pre-existing Elinor that Jane Austen is telling us about, because fiction is fictitious. But if *Sense and Sensibility* were a historical document we would have to entertain seriously the view that the grief that does not speak whispers the o'er fraught heart and makes it break.

There is of course one other source I have not yet mentioned, the most familiar of all, and that is literature. This book is mostly about literature, for two reasons. The first is purely personal: I am a student of literature, and that is what I know and want to write about. The second is that most of what we know about love comes from the poets. It is therefore very tempting to regard literature as the answer to the social historian's problems, the true quarry for evidence about the history of sentiment. This is especially plausible if we adopt those theories that regard literature as directly inspired by social reality, without the intervention of ideology. Nonetheless, I have felt I must resist the temptation, for a simple and inescapable reason. If one is going to compare two things, it is necessary to establish each of them independently first. The social historians

who distrust novels may be missing all the fun, but they do enable us to compare literature and society without arguing in a circle.

The purpose of this book, then, is to describe the way our literary tradition has perceived love and marriage, beginning from the relationship between the two, which it has seen as one of contest; then to explain the concept of love that has made such a conflict seem inevitable. Then, having established the literary vision of the subject, I turn in the third chapter to the social reality of marriage, both the ideology and what we can know about the actual practice, and ask how literature has responded to this, concentrating on the favourite topic of choice of mate. As society developed a view of married love very different from that discussed in the first two chapters, there were some attempts to find literary expression for this; their very limited success offers a counter-tradition to that of romantic love, and the fourth chapter, which discusses this, can thus be seen as a kind of riposte to the first. I then turn to the most influential of recent criticisms of love and marriage, those that have emerged from feminism, and ask how they are reflected in the fiction of women writing today, and how far they are implied in the fiction of earlier, protofeminist novelists: doing this forces us to ask what it means to claim that a novel implies ideological positions that no one has yet formulated. Finally, I lie down where all the ladders start, and discuss the sense in which sex is the basis of love, and what this means for literary expression.

A work of literature has three main determinants: the society, the literary tradition and the individual author. This book will not be greatly concerned with the last: although every book is, in the end, the work of an individual, a study of general patterns will not deal with what makes one writer distinctive, and my examples are chosen because they illustrate (or seem to refute) a general trend or theory. But the other two contexts—that of literature and that of social reality—are important to my argument, and a few preliminary remarks on method seem necessary.

Can we even speak of a literary tradition? Is it not a verbal fiction, distracting attention from the fact that literature consists of nothing except particular poems and stories? Such scepticism can be dealt with in the way nominalism always can, by distinguishing what the individual work has in common with others from what makes it unique. If the common elements are consciously formulated, we call them conventions: if not, recurring patterns—of imagery, of action, of motivation, and so on. If we attribute to tradition an immanent rather than a transcendent existence, these conventions and patterns *are* the tradition. Verbal fictions are, after all, necessary for making general statements.

But it is also possible to resist too much concern with tradition not

because it is fictitious but because it is reductive. Modern readers often feel that what one work has in common with others is precisely what makes it undistinguished; and that the best way to illustrate a tradition is from the minor writers, who lack the uniqueness of the great. Since I have no wish to write about Googe's sonnets or Mrs Craik's novels, does this not present me with a problem: will not any discussion of *Othello* or *Middlemarch* which is concerned with what they are truly like be incompatible with an interest in tradition?

I believe, on the contrary, that a masterpiece may exemplify the tradition as well as, even better than, a minor work. In turning Arthur Brooke's *Tragicall History of Romeus and Juliet* into a taut, fast, moving play, Shakespeare removed irrelevancies, emphasized the tragic nature of the love, and showed how intimate, and how destructive, is its involvement with family life. The contest of love and marriage which emerges so hesitantly from Brooke's long and often tedious poem is enacted with great skill and concentration in Shakespeare's more single-minded construction. There are, in the end, two very different ways of conceiving the relation of minor work and masterpiece. The more usual one sees lesser works as tame and commonplace, the masterpiece as complex and unique; this has its truth, but so has the alternative view, which sees the lesser works as awkward and superficial, the masterpieces as profoundly in touch with the archetypes that move and convince us. By this view conventions can represent not the obvious patterns that the masterpiece transcends, but the significant patterning that only the masterpiece attains.

As for the relation between literature and social reality, it is not easy to summarize the view that informs my discussion, and, since this is not a work of literary theory, not possible to defend it at length. Briefly, then: it must be clear to anyone with a touch of scepticism that ideology is not always in close touch with real behaviour: that is one reason why reliable evidence for the latter is so hard to come by. There is a view, held in different ways by different schools of criticism, that literature is a direct, even inarticulate, response to social behaviour: Lucien Goldmann's theory of homologies is an influential recent version of this, claiming that literature bypasses ideology by responding directly to patterns of thought and conduct that have not yet been formulated theoretically. I believe, in contrast to this, that the literature of love and marriage is drenched in ideology. It engages in constant dialogue with the ideals and criticisms of marriage, and with doctrines of the true nature of love. But on the other hand its relation to ideology is not the subservient one that moral critics like to attribute to it, of illustrating orthodoxy or making virtue delightful: the literary imagination tests our ideals and our moral beliefs, by measuring them against the feel of real

experience. This is why literature is, in the end, the profoundest record we have of our real ideals.

I owe the usual thanks to friends, colleagues, students and family who have listened patiently to the contents of this book in lectures, argued with it in seminars, and (most valuable of all) read and criticized earlier drafts of it. For this I am grateful to Peter Burke, Patrick Grant, Peter Hennock, Stephen Medcalf, and above all Tony Nuttall and Tony Thorlby, whose criticisms have led to endless and fascinating arguments and (often) to illuminating my own position to me. For all faults, eccentricities and complications of presentation I must admit sole responsibility.

Contents

The Contest of Love and Marriage

Tristan	1
Romeo and Juliet	5
Wives and Daughters	8
Tristan in context	11
Romeo and Juliet in context	14
Wives and Daughters in context	24
Excursus on Realism	32

The Paradoxes of Love

Love's Unreason	36
Religion and Love	41
Who is Beatrice?	46
Sarah's Lover	50
Love and Death	53

Choosing a Mate

What is the Extended Family?	61
The Arranged Match	65
Propaganda for Romance	76
Alternatives to Realism	80
The Newcomes	88
Esther's Suitors	94
Botho's Dilemma	97
Romance and Real Life	101

Married Love

Protestant Marriage	111
Adam and Eve	114
Marrying Laura	120
Spenser or Shakespeare?	125
The Angel in the House	130
The Angel in Literature	143

The Brangwens	153
Phallic Marriage	160

Feminism and Love

An Anti-Marriage League?	167
Marriage and Liberation	170
Love and Liberation	175
Sisterly Imaginations	182
Protofeminism: Charlotte Brontë	187
Protofeminism: Samuel Richardson	201

Sex

Forms of Reticence	213
Forms of Outspokenness	220
Sublimation	226
Poetry and Eroticism	234
Conclusion	244
Index	259

1

The Contest of Love and Marriage

If we are to believe the poets, love and marriage exist in a state of conflict: love exists outside marriage, or ceases when marriage begins, or enters marriage only to destroy it. The aim of this first chapter is to tell the story of how European literature has presented this conflict: it is the one purely literary chapter in this book, questions of how that literary tradition relates to social reality being saved for later discussion.

But how can one discuss anything so vast as a literary tradition? I propose to survey the forest by beginning with three large and interesting trees; then, after I have looked at each as a thing in itself, by comparing it with some of its immediate neighbours, to show that it was not chosen at random.

Tristan

Tristan and Isolde is the greatest of medieval love stories. It made no memorable impact on English literature, and has come down in four main versions, two French and two German, of which the most important is that of Gottfried von Strasbourg, composed at the beginning of the thirteenth century, which I shall take as the text for this discussion.¹ Tristan was the posthumous son of Rivalin, prince 'of Brittany', and Blanchefflor, sister of King Mark of Cornwall, brought up by Rual, Rivalin's faithful steward. He grew up skilled in music and languages, and found his way to the kingdom of his uncle, Mark. After a conventional series of adventures (giant-slaying, poisoned wound, cure by Queen Isolde of Ireland, wooing for Mark, dragon-slaying) he is bringing Isolde, daughter of the Irish Queen, across the sea to be his uncle's bride: her handmaid Brangane has been given a love potion by Isolde's mother, intended for her and Mark, but Tristan and Isolde drink it by mistake.

In an instant that arch-disturber of tranquillity was there, Love, waylayer of all hearts, and she had stolen in! Before they were aware of it, she had planted her victorious standard in their two hearts and bowed them beneath her yoke. They who were two and divided now became one and united.²

2 *The Contest of Love and Marriage*

Isolde declares her love by means of a verbal trick; asked what was distressing her, she replies 'lameir' (the sea; bitterness; love), and this precipitates a mutual declaration. Once in Cornwall, they enter on a long series of deceptions, sometimes duping Mark and sometimes not, sometimes protecting their honour by equivocal oaths and tricks, sometimes banished, sometimes recalled. In his wanderings Tristan fights for the King of Arundel (? in Brittany) and is fascinated by his daughter, also called Isolde (Isolde of the White Hands); he marries her, but the marriage is not consummated. Wounded by a poisoned spear Tristan realizes he is dying, and sends for his Isolde, the only one who can save him. Told that the approaching ship has black sails he believes that his Isolde is not on board, and dies heartbroken. Isolde arrives too late and dies of grief in his dead arms.

Gottfried's doctrine of love is expounded for us in a digression inserted just after the lovers' declaration. It begins with a lament on the shabby way we love nowadays, cultivating love with guile and deceit, sowing failure and disaster, selling it in the open market: we have trampled under foot its true basis, which is Fidelity. Fidelity there clearly does not refer to marriage, since Tristan and Isolde, patterns of fidelity, deceive King Mark, often very elaborately. The guile and deceit which have crept in nowadays to destroy love must refer to lovers deceiving each other; and the discourse is followed by an account of how happy these two lovers were for the rest of the voyage, because they dropped shyness and gloried in their intimacy. This was right: 'for lovers who hide their feelings, having once revealed them . . . are robbers of themselves'.

This discourse is not the only moment when the poet tells us his view of love. We have already been told that love is the arch-disturber of tranquillity, and have been given many of the famous paradoxes: 'the pleasing malady that works such miracles as changing honey to gall, turning sweetness sour . . . robbing hearts of their natures, and standing the world on its head'. Early in the poem, in the account of Rivalin and Blanchefflor, we are told how love's clinging sweetness ensnares the lover so that he cannot get free; how it turns him into a different man, granting him a new life, in which all he does is chequered with strangeness and blindness. And when Tristan and Isolde have declared and consummated their passion, the perfection of their union is rendered by simple symmetry in the verse:

Thus he was she and she was he. He was hers and she was his. There
Blanchefflor, there Rivalin: There Rivalin, there Blanchefflor! There both,
and there true love!³

Love is bitter-sweet, is the pleasing malady; we are told this not only through verbal antithesis, but in the whole conception of the story. The

perfection of the union brings an intensity of happiness, not only on the voyage, but in all the hours the lovers are able to steal together; but at the same time it is ineluctably tragic. This is clear from the beginning, for instance in Brangane's horrified response when she learns they have drunk the love potion: 'that flask and the draught it contained will be the death of you both.' A love so blissful cannot have a happy outcome.

To set against these two pairs of perfect but tragic lovers, we have three marriages. First, there is that of Tristan's guardian Rual, who pretends that Tristan is his son in order to protect him from Morgan, who has conquered his father's kingdom. We do not see much of his good wife, worthy, constant, chaste Floraete, who readily agrees to pass Tristan off as her own son—though we may notice that, to make no mistake about family relationships, Rual commands her to do this most strictly on pain of death. But though Rual is a minor character, whose feelings are not our concern, we do learn about one very powerful feeling, his love for Tristan. He has three sons of his own, but he leaves them and his wife to go and look for Tristan when he has been abducted by pirates, resolving never to return till he has heard news of his whereabouts. He wanders in search of him for more than three years till his clothes are in rags and he has lost all traces of nobility, bearing his load of shame like a vagabond born and bred. Great devotion is necessarily irresponsible: it is as if fatherly love, like sexual love, only attains true intensity outside marriage.

Then there is the marriage of Isolde to Mark. Cuckolds are never dignified, and the range of attitudes suggested towards Mark never includes true tragic grandeur. He is, to begin with, a victim of the bed-trick: to conceal her loss of virginity, Isolde arranges for her maid Brangane to replace her on the wedding night. The trick succeeds, as the bed-trick traditionally does, and to make matters worse for Mark, Gottfried tells us, when Isolde has slipped into Brangane's place and he clasps her close and resumes his pleasure, 'to him one woman was as another'. It is difficult to know how far to invoke realistic notions of plausibility for this: if we are allowed to, we have a Mark who cannot tell who the woman is but can tell—in the dark—whether she is a virgin: not only contemptible but rather unpleasant.

It is difficult for the modern reader to be sure what the attitude to Mark was meant to be. He is torn by inner conflicts in a way that might almost be tragic, except that contempt is always too near. Gottfried gives him dignity and deprives him of it as Tolstoi does with Karenin, that supremely complex study of a cuckold. And so after Mark's blind agony has led him to banish the lovers ('it was death to his reason that his darling Isolde should love any man but himself'), he is reduced to a wittol by the trick of the sword. The lovers, sleeping together in the *Minnegrotte*

or cave of love, have laid a naked sword between them to deceive spies, and sure enough Mark sees them, and sure enough he is deceived because he wants to be. His gullibility is due to the blindness of love, 'that foolish insensate blindness of which a proverb says "Love's blindness blinds outside and in"'. Gottfried has already taken the trouble to explain that despite the false versions of the story that are found, Mark did not drink any of the love-potion, and Mark's love, we see, has many of the symptoms but none of the dignity of Tristan's. It does not seem excessive to call him a parody of Tristan.

We can go further: for when the lovers' assignation in the orchard is betrayed to Mark, the episode is narrated in terms of an analogy with the Fall: 'Now Tristan did just as Adam did; he took the fruit which his Eve offered him, and with her ate his death.' Mark's role in this parallel is that of God, but the poet's comments once again deprive him of all dignity: he is a parody of God.

If Isolde's marriage is a parody of her love affair, Tristan's is a parody of both love and marriage. Since Gottfried's poem breaks off just where he is about to marry the second Isolde, most of this episode has to be supplied from the old French version of Thomas, which was almost certainly Gottfried's original, and of which (by one of the strangest coincidences of literary history) we possess the last part, beginning just about where Gottfried leaves off.

Tristan marries Isolde of the White Hands because of her beauty and because of her name: Thomas explains, at rather tedious length, that neither of these would have been sufficient reason without the other. The marriage is never consummated, though the bride loves and longs for Tristan, because his will to do the deed is conquered by his love. In this obvious sense the marriage is a travesty, and it turns Isolde of the White Hands into Tristan's enemy. Her bitterness is brilliantly rendered in the taut irony of the incident when her horse slips and the water splashes up her thigh—where Tristan's hand has never sought her. From this it is a natural step to the bitterness that makes her lie to the dying Tristan, and cause his death.

Not only is this a grotesque parody of marriage, but the account of Tristan's hesitations reduces him to something more like King Mark. In this form of storytelling (as Wagner clearly perceived) the most powerful effects occur when total commitment clashes with the facts of the situation, not when the characters are in inner conflict. Descriptions of that are patronizing, even mechanical, so that Tristan's uncertainty whether he should sleep with his bride sounds as pathetic as Mark's uncertainty whether he should believe the lovers innocent.

It is love then and not marriage which has all the dignity in this story. The same is true of our next example.

Romeo and Juliet

'Oh she doth teach the torches to burn bright': Romeo's first glimpse of Juliet transforms his world, and the line tells us, instantly, that it is a play about the transfiguring power of love.

If there ever was a play which had to be in poetry, it is this: for only through heightened language can the heightened quality of the love-experience be conveyed. Falling in love can be seen both as extraordinary and as completely natural, as an experience that takes us out of the everyday onto a higher plane, and as one that takes us from sophistication and artificiality into true simple feeling. It is therefore necessary for the poetry of the lovers to be tugged in two directions: towards formality, which provides conventions that take us away from the ordinary, and towards simplicity, to express the need to drop conventions for genuineness. The dialectic between these gives the language its force: to surrender to either extreme would destroy it.

The extreme of formality is represented by the opening exchange of the lovers: their near-stycomythia composes a sonnet, full of word-play upon the love-religion parallel. The passage asks to be spoken in two different ways, and good actors will convey both: on the one hand it should move slowly, with a solemnity appropriate to the dance taking place and (even more) to the fact that this is the tremendous experience of their lives, for which only religious imagery is adequate; but on the other hand there is (certainly from Juliet, possibly from Romeo too) a playful handling of the religious analogy, almost a feeling that a girl must know how to look after herself by keeping the implications of the words at bay:

For saints have hands that pilgrims' hands do touch,
And palm to palm is holy palmer's kiss. (I.v.99)

If the last line is spoken with the emphasis on 'palm to palm' (come now, not lips!) it is fencing; if on the last three words, then the fencing can dissolve in the bliss of what is happening to her.

The extreme of directness, on the other hand, is found at the end of the balcony scene, when Juliet calls Romeo back, asks him something trivial, and confesses 'I have forgot why I did call thee back'. There are no metaphors, no heightened diction, simply the language of being tongue-tied: it could be *Love Story* or *West Side Story*, it could belong with our modern celebration of inarticulateness—and yet it couldn't, simply because of the interplay between this and the rich metaphoric language we have had. Such immediacy derives its literary power from the way it breaks free of a previous formality.