



1987

The History of Love

Michael B. Young

Illinois Wesleyan University

Recommended Citation

Young, Michael B., "The History of Love" (1987). *Honorees for Teaching Excellence*. 12.
http://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/teaching_excellence/12

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by The Ames Library, the Andrew W. Mellon Center for Curricular and Faculty Development, the Office of the Provost and the Office of the President. It has been accepted for inclusion in Digital Commons @ IWU by the University Archivist & Special Collections Librarian at Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@iwu.edu.

©Copyright is owned by the author of this document.

As I stand here before you tonight to talk about the history of love, I am reminded of the Peanuts cartoon I have posted on my bulletin board. Poor Peppermint Patty is sitting rigid in her school seat at the beginning of a test. You can sense the panic she is feeling. She reads the test question: "Explain World War II." Explain World War II?! The mind boggles. And then Peppermint Patty reads the instructions: "Use both sides of the paper if necessary." In order to confine myself to about thirty minutes tonight—my two sides of the paper, so to speak—I will have to leave a lot out. I cannot take time to worry over a definition of love. I cannot talk about the whole history of love, only a few hundred years of it. I cannot deal with the whole world, only England, with a few references to western Europe. I cannot incorporate literature and the findings of cultural anthropology as I would like to do. I cannot carefully distinguish between different socio-economic classes. I cannot show how tricky it is to interpret historical evidence, not least because there is often a difference between what people preach and how they actually behave (as Jim and Tammi Bakker have recently demonstrated).

What can I do, then? I'll begin by briefly describing the one historical couple I am really well acquainted with: John and Marie Coke. They were English. They lived in the early 1600s. And I think they were in love. See if you agree. In John's first extant letter to Marie, written at about the time of their marriage in 1604 but while John was delayed by business in London, he attested to "my continued affection," and he said that this affection had increased as a result of reading Marie's letters because "love kindleth love." John promised that "my affection will whet my industry and help my despatch." In the meantime, he asked Marie if there was anything he could send her from London, saying, "I will take it for a favour from you, and will think you then love me indeed, when you dispose freely of me and mine." When John was back in London two years later, he expressed the same sentiments again. He told Marie that "here I remain as far divided from myself as I am from you." He expressed the hope that this separation would "not estrange but rather enflame our desires and affections." In closing, he sent Marie "the kisses of true love."

And the feeling was mutual. In one of Marie's first letters, addressed to her "loving husband," she thanked John for the gift of a hat and gown, although she admitted that the foul English weather and the dusty grounds around their home prevented her from wearing the long, golden gown as often as she wished. On another occasion, Marie told John: "I have received the ribbon you now sent. I confess I am deeply indebted to your lips for it..." From these same letters it is clear that Marie missed John's company. In the first letter, she said she could not help thinking "that we are not in our own place whiles we are so far asunder." In the second letter, she chided John good-naturedly: "You seem sometimes in your

letters to be somewhat melancholy. I wish myself with you to put you out of it and to prattle with you. No doubt I should give you good council [sic] and further you much in your business. You have great cause to wish for me."

Both John and Marie were upset by the business trips that separated them. After two years of marriage, John told Marie he would devote "all my thoughts and endeavors to a speedy contriving of such a course of life wherein we may continue together without these distractions." And he asked Marie to help him choose "either by this foreign attendance and striving with the world to seek a better estate, or by a domestical frugality and united counsels and endeavors to improve that small condition which we have already." Marie undoubtedly preferred the latter course. She suffered from loneliness during John's absences, a loneliness that was seemingly compounded rather than alleviated by the birth of their first child. In one of her letters, Marie lamented, "I want your companie many times to make mee merie when I am apt to be sad." Their son had been restless for two days, Marie reported in this letter, and her parents, who had recently had another child of their own, insisted on rocking him. "And if he were not rocked," Marie explained, "they would take him up and dance him and shake him, which I thought would hurt him less than rocking. I will do what I can to break him from it, which will be hard to do in this house where there are so many rockers." In another letter, Marie wrote, "My thoughts do many times make me earnestly desire your company, that we may spend this short life together as much as may be." To this she touchingly added, "Your son calleth often, 'Dad, Dad,' although you do not hear him."

During the next twelve years of their marriage, John and Marie enjoyed a more settled household, building their own home in the Herefordshire countryside and increasing the number of their children to six. In 1618, however, John's "striving with the world" resumed when he seized the opportunity to strike it rich at the court of King James I. As their letters resume, John can be found lamenting again, "I suffered enough by being [away] from home where I love to be, and at London where I never take pleasure." In another letter, he wrote, "I will not be induced nor forced to live from you any longer, but will rather break away and abandon all the expectation of reward than neglect those real duties which I owe to yourself and my family." In John's words, it was the "expectation of reward" that made this separation worthwhile. And as the prospect of reward drew nearer, he dreamed of what this would mean for himself and Marie. "We shall have means," he wrote, "to live together here, or in the country when we think fit, and in a better fashion than we have done heretofore...and shall be able to settle our children at the university, and you shall be freed from those drudgeries and domestical cares which now take up your time." But there was already a cloud hovering over this bright prospect. Marie was plagued by a lingering illness, which John attributed in one of his letters to "the cares of our family and my absence." John was a notoriously frugal man, but not where Marie's health was concerned. In one letter, he wrote, "sweet wife spare yourself rather than

money." At another time, he waited anxiously for news of Marie's health, and when a reassuring letter finally arrived, he was "so glad of your letter...that I willingly gave the deliverer a triple reward." John was soon to experience the terrible misfortune of a man whose dreams come true—almost. In quick succession, he obtained a lucrative court office, moved his family to a new home in London, and sent his two oldest sons to Cambridge University. But during their first Christmas in London, John and Marie lost their oldest son to spotted fever. John bemoaned this "affliction that we suffer, I by the breaking of the very staff of my age and my wife in her motherly affection." Required by his new office to spend the next month away from home, John regretted that he was not able "to comfort my family nor to support or assist a woman that is indeed very sensible of her loss." What little support John could provide, came in his letters. Though separated, he assured Marie, "you are dailie in my hearte and dearest affection...I esteeme you as myself...no woman shall have more cause to be confident in the love, care, and tenderness of a husband than you shall finde whilst I live." To combat Marie's depression, John again offered the prospect of a brighter future: "doubt not sweete harte, that God hath still his mercie in store for us, and that you and I by his goodness shall see better daies..." But John was cruelly deceived in these hopes. Two months later, while giving birth to twins who barely outlived her, Marie died.

Even this brief synopsis of John's and Marie's marriage should be sufficient to show that the fundamental emotions binding them together and the strains threatening to pull them apart were not unlike those we experience today. One obvious strain on their marriage was John's ambition, which carried him away from his home and family and placed a greater emotional and physical burden on Marie. It also deserves to be said, however, that we can never know for sure how much John pursued a court office, as he himself claimed, for the sake of his wife and family. And even this tension between career and family makes John and Marie look contemporary, except of course that in their day John was the only one who had a chance to pursue a career at the risk of being criticized later for neglecting his family. Far more important, however, is the obvious love that drew John and Marie together and sustained them through twenty years of married life. To anyone who has experienced love in the twentieth century, the love between John and Marie, though it occurred three hundred years ago, should look quite familiar.

Now how does all this fit the history of love? Well, there's the problem. It doesn't fit at all. At least it does not fit the widely accepted view enshrined in a blockbuster best-seller by Princeton historian Lawrence Stone (*The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800*) published ten years ago. Stone's book is now used in hundreds of college classrooms across the country, and here is what students are learning from Stone. According to Stone, at the time when John and Marie lived, people did not care much for each other. Marriages were arranged by parents and kin for the purpose of preserving or expanding family financial

interests. The children had no voice in this arrangement, and it would have been absurd to suggest that marriage should be based on anything so hare-brained as romantic love. According to Stone, the sympathies of Shakespeare's contemporary audience would have been entirely on the side of Romeo and Juliet's parents, not the crazy kids. Just as husbands and wives did not care much for each other, parents did not care much for their children. Since mortality rates were terribly high, it was not sensible to invest much emotion in anything so fragile as a child. Those children who did survive were treated harshly and unappreciatively. Stone has no doubt "that more children were being beaten in the sixteenth and early seventeenth century, over a longer age span, than ever before." The society of this period, Stone wrote, was one in which "a majority of the individuals that composed it found it very difficult to establish close emotional ties to any other person. Children were neglected, brutally treated, and even killed; adults treated each other with suspicion and hostility; affect was low, and hard to find." Or, as Stone wrote in another place,

About all that can be said with confidence on the matter of emotional relations within the sixteenth-and early seventeenth-century family at all social levels is that there was a general psychological atmosphere of distance, manipulation and deference; that high mortality rates made deep relationships very imprudent; that marriages were arranged by parents and kin for economic and social reasons with minimal consultation of the children; that evidence of close bonding between parents and children is hard...to document; and that evidence of close affection between husband and wife is both ambiguous and rare.

This is a bleak picture, but it is not Stone's own personal, eccentric view. Many other sociologists and historians since the time of Karl Marx, through the writings of Max Weber, to the more recent work of Philippe Aries and Lloyd de Mause, have assumed that there was a transition from the "feudal" family to the "modern" family. They have insisted that you could not have had individualism—and hence "affective individualism," as Stone calls it—until you had the modern nation-state and the modern economic system. According to this theory or model of modernization, the modern "companionate" marriage simply could not have existed until the eighteenth century because the modern nation-state and capitalism were not firmly established until then. This is a powerful argument or theory. But it has not gone unchallenged.

Stone's severest critic is another historian named Alan Macfarlane. Macfarlane has shown the ways in which Stone had to ignore evidence, misinterpret evidence, and select evidence carefully so as to prove the theory he already assumed to be true. Macfarlane calls this a "massive effort" to prove a "false paradigm." To take just one example, Stone argues that parents refrained from becoming attached to their children because of the high infant mortality rate until

the eighteenth century when “affective individualism” blossomed. Presumably, then, affect went up as the mortality rate went down. But Macfarlane points out that even Stone’s own graph of the infant mortality rate in one English area where it has been calculated shows that it remained the same from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries. Thus Stone’s own data contradict his theory. This is only one of many reasons why Macfarlane pronounces Stone’s book “a disaster.”

The basic disagreement between Macfarlane and Stone is over the question of whether love or “affective individualism” was a rarity prior to the eighteenth century. In contrast to Stone, Macfarlane finds overwhelming evidence of affective individualism as early as the fourteenth century. Actually we have here a new version of the old argument about whether we have to wait for the Renaissance to witness the birth of a better, brighter world to replace those gloomy middle ages. Scholars who devote their lives to a study of the middle ages naturally resist the insinuation that these were dreary, brutal, loveless ages. One medieval historian, David Herlihy, puts the question this way: “...if we are to believe Philippe Aries, medieval parents did not recognize their children to be children, and did not respond emotionally to their special qualities. Distinguished historians affirm that the affective family, comprised of loving spouses, loving parents and children, is a modern, even recent creation. Were medieval people really cold and indifferent toward their closest relatives, with whom they shared the most personal and penetrating experiences of life?” Herlihy finds this heartless portrait of medieval people “dubious indeed.” Another medieval historian, Barbara Hanawalt, has reconstructed the courtship practices and marriages of medieval peasants. Hanawalt concluded that “modern descriptions of marriage in traditional society appear to be distortions.” Hanawalt dispels many commonplace, false assumptions about the way medieval husbands treated wives. She finds that marriage was not “as devoid of companionship as Stone describes it.” Hanawalt likewise rejects the “patriarchal model of marital relationships” as too simplistic, preferring instead to think of medieval marriages as partnerships. Hanawalt’s work is solidly based on historical evidence of real behavior—court cases—not on a selective reading of fictional or prescriptive literature. Martin Ingram’s work has the same virtue, and he arrived at much the same conclusions. Ingram studied matrimonial litigation in the church courts of late medieval and early modern England. In actual practice, Ingram found, the power of parents to arrange marriages was balanced against some freedom of choice among the children. As a rule, parents did not try to force children into unhappy marriages. Children could in effect veto arranged marriages. But by the same token, children were expected to marry only with their parents’ approval. All this balancing of interests—taking each other’s feelings into account—suggests that these people cared for each other. This is Ingram’s conclusion. In Ingram’s own words: “Despite the opinion of some modern historians that marriages tended to be loveless affairs before the eighteenth century [there is a footnote to Stone here], it seems clear that one generally

recognized criterion was mutual personal attraction between the potential spouses, to enable them to 'love' one another. (Indeed, something very close to our idea of 'romantic love', with all its heartaches and inconstancies, emerges quite strongly from the pages of depositions in matrimonial suits.)"

Actually, Stone's emphasis on the influence of parents and other kin can be interpreted as a vestige of another theory that is now discredited. It used to be blithely assumed that pre-modern families were "extended" families embracing a wide conglomeration of relatives. According to this theory, it was not until the modern period that the extended family was reduced to the now common nuclear family. Perhaps you have been exposed to this theory. It appeared as a fact in my college sociology textbook; but it is just plain false. Historical demographers have now demonstrated that for England at least, as far back as we can tell from the surviving records, the nuclear family has always been the norm. Older relatives simply did not live long enough in previous ages to comprise an extended family. Englishmen, therefore, did not have to wait until the modern period for the nuclear family to arrive or, presumably, for the emotional bonds that we associate with that smaller, close-knit family.

Stone and others who assume there was a fundamental change in the character of personal relations between the feudal and the modern period have to find some agent to cause that change. Most often that alleged agent of change is capitalism. Sometimes it is also the growth of the nation state and a public educational system. These institutions are alleged to have taken over the other functions formerly performed by the family, leaving family members with nothing else to do for each other except attend to their mutual emotional needs. (This theory strikes me as even more implausible than the theory of the extended family, but it has become a sort of sociological truism.) Another alleged agent of change is the Reformation. Edward Shorter in his book on *The Making of the Modern Family* asserts, like Stone, that personal relations were "affectionless" until the Puritans came along. "There was something about coming to the colonies in the eighteenth century," Shorter writes in all seriousness, "that gave family life a new quality." Here again perhaps the English were especially fortunate. One French scholar (Jean-Louis Flandrin) contrasts the stifling influence of the Roman Catholic Church in France with the encouragement of love among English Protestants. But this, too, is a facile distinction based on a negative stereotype of Catholicism, a favorable stereotype of Protestantism, and a very selective reading of religious texts. Steven Ozment, a Reformation scholar, does not agree with this cold-Catholicism/warm-Protestantism view. Ozment finds it "difficult to argue that Protestant marriages were more egalitarian or that the spouses loved one another any more intensely than did Catholic spouses." Ozment doubts whether any religious affiliation, world view, or system of ideals has as much effect on relations among family members as what he calls "set routine and natural need." Without quite spelling it out, Ozment implies that men and women confronting each other's needs on the most

intimate level have probably responded in ways that were more similar than different from century to century.

Is there not, as Ozment implies, something abiding in our most personal relationships that outweighs the minor variations in public expression from age to age? Barbara Hanawalt, whom I referred to earlier, entitled her book on the medieval family *The Ties that Bind*; and she clearly means to imply that emotional bonding is pretty much a constant in human relations. Hanawalt observed medieval children going through the same stages of development as modern children; and she found that medieval parents showed normal parental concern for the welfare of their off-spring. Here again Hanawalt studied official records of actual behavior, in this case coroners' inquests into accidental deaths of children. From these records, she reconstructs a society that cared about its children, where parents did not like to leave children unattended, where it was difficult to get reliable baby-sitters when both parents had to be away from home. All this should sound familiar. When Hanawalt turned her attention to medieval teenagers, the patterns of behavior she found were equally recognizable. As she wrote, "The patterns of work and play, the rather late age of majority, and premarital sexual flirtation all point to teenage years not unlike our own. While we cannot reconstruct the pimpled faces, the other biological characteristics of teenage sexuality are abundantly apparent. As in the case of childhood, the stages of biological development must be given their due and cannot be entirely culturally suppressed." Hanawalt reminds us of the biological constants that persist from one generation to the next no matter what changes may occur on the historical-cultural surface. As parents realize all too well, the hormones that caused the zits on the faces of medieval teenagers are the same hormones that run rampant in the bodies of our teenage sons and daughters today. We have the same endocrine systems, the same brains, and the same genetic predispositions of our medieval ancestors. A few hundred years is insignificant in these respects. I do not mean by these remarks to equate love with sex, to rob love of all its wonder, or to reduce love to a purely physiological phenomenon. But I do believe it is presumptuous (even foolish) for historians to write about love as if it had no limiting, constraining biological basis whatsoever. For example, how could human beings possibly turn off their feelings for their children based on a cold calculation of the mortality rate? At least one historian, Linda Pollock, understands that this would require humans to act contrary to the way they are programmed to act. As Pollock writes, "Parental care has evolved as it has done in ape and human societies, because there was a need for that type of care. For parental care to have been as drastically different in past societies as has been suggested [by Stone and Aries, for example] would mean parents acting in direct opposition to their biological inheritance."

Now I realize there are objections to this line of reasoning. Bonding isn't necessarily love. And even if parental care for off-spring could be demonstrated to exist world-wide, it is much more controversial to allege that bonding between

men and women exists world-wide. The nuclear family of which I've spoken tonight is, arguably, a uniquely Western ideal (and only an ideal even in the West, since most families do not in fact conform to that ideal). If anthropological studies of non-Western cultures are to be trusted, there is apparently no universal, biological imperative for monogamous bonding---or love, as I have loosely called it. Humans are uniquely able to override any biological predispositions that may exist anyhow. And the list of objections could go on. But still, it seems to me, love is inherently an interdisciplinary subject. It would be an ideal subject for an interdisciplinary colloquium series; and I would be especially eager to hear what the biologists (and psychologists) have to say.

While awaiting illumination from these and other disciplines, where are the historians themselves left? In a state of disarray, I am afraid. The controversy stirred up by Stone's blockbuster shows no signs of abating. Stone and his harshest critic, Macfarlane, are still going at it tooth and nail. There's no love lost between those two. Meanwhile, we are at least learning more about the issues at stake and the hazardous methodological pitfalls awaiting anyone who ventures into this field. I am painfully aware that hastiness has made me stumble into a few of those pitfalls tonight. One pitfall I have avoided, however, is a false pose of neutrality. My survey of the subject has been admittedly very one-sided. I do not agree with the contention that pre-modern personal relations were basically loveless. I think it much more likely that pre-modern people did, much like ourselves, experience love. Perhaps that is because I have been fortunate to experience love in my own life and simply cannot imagine countless previous generations of pre-modern men and women living without it. Perhaps, too, it is because Stone's bleak view of personal relations simply does not square with the images I carry in my mind of the one man and woman I actually know well from that period. When I think of John and Marie Coke, the images that come to mind are not consistent with Stone's theory. I think of Marie and her parents trying to soothe her crying child in a house full of busy rockers. I think of Marie, lonely, dressed in that long, golden gown, waiting for John to return. I think of John immersed in business at court but anxiously looking for word of Marie's health. I think of a grief-stricken mother trying to cope with the death of her oldest child while her husband futilely searches for words to console her. I think of these two people struggling together to deal with separation and grief, to provide for the needs of their family and yet steal some small measure of happiness for themselves. I think of love.