

Love, Humoralism, and “Soft” Psychoanalysis

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LIKE HUMORAL THEORY, psychoanalysis has been largely hesitant to appraise the most esteemed of human passions, love, in any terms other than symptomatic ones. That is, both discourses might be characterized as treating love somewhat suspiciously, in almost wholly affective terms. In *A Treatise on Lovesickness* (first ed. 1610), for example, Jacques Ferrand follows Galen in naming “the temperature of the humor as the principal cause” of love, and describes its caloric dimensions and melancholic quality by citing André du Laurens, a French physician whose Galenic credentials were impeccable.¹ Lacan’s Seventh Seminar (1959–60) is also devoted to analyzing the “ideal of human love,” and in particular the high estimation of “genital love” and interpersonal attachment, and its phobic relation to feminine sexuality.² “Analysis,” according to Lacan, “has brought a very important change of perspective on love by placing it at the center of ethical experience.”³ But love also changes Lacan’s attitude toward analysis, for what is demanded at the end of analysis, he asks at the conclusion of this seminar, if not “*bonheur* or ‘happiness’”?⁴ Love is not containable by the praxis of Lacanian psychoanalysis, even if love is somehow what psychoanalysis is about.

I think that a theoretical reappraisal of love, not to mention the other passions performed and solicited in Shakespearean dramaturgy, would benefit from a critical approach that balances an awareness of the period’s theories for understanding the passions with a psychoanalytic perspective on human agency. Coupling these discourses means critiquing their distinct, and shared, limitations, which is probably not very unsettling for scholars interested in Galenism, since humoral theory has been safely relegated by sci-

ence to the category of metaphor or associative—rather than diagnostic—understanding.⁵ For psychoanalytic critics, however, a version of what I will term “soft” psychoanalysis is potentially controversial. By “soft” psychoanalysis, I mean to designate the use of psychoanalytic concepts, and the consideration of the kinds of questions that psychoanalytic inquiry typically provokes: questions regarding agency, subjectivity, self-awareness, and of course self-delusion. Such questions abound in Shakespeare, but when psychoanalytic readings of their manifestations are developed holistically, they often produce jargon-filled interpretations deemed persuasive only by those readers who are already “in the know.”

By juxtaposing the limitations of humoral theory and psychoanalysis, it is my belief that we might produce more nuanced readings of the emotional contours of Shakespearean characters than would be possible if we restricted ourselves to a single critical approach, be it psychoanalytic or historicist. To give an example of the kind of interpretation I have in mind, I would like to turn to a work that revolves around issues of love, selfhood, and passionate outbursts: *Romeo and Juliet* (1595?). As the play opens, we as readers and spectators are led to believe that Romeo is suffering through an extreme bout of love melancholy, brought about by his rejection at the hands of Rosaline. If we come to the play prepared to insert a humoral analysis, we find much fodder with which to work, and yet also some points of resistance. Ferrand’s *Treatise on Lovesickness* postdates *Romeo and Juliet* by more than a decade, but Ferrand draws amply from materials available to Shakespeare’s generation, materials that help to make love melancholy the most celebrated kind of sadness in the literature of the sixteenth century. Romeo displays the expected symptoms of this sadness perfectly. As described by his father, the young man is said to spend his time thus:

Many a morning hath he there been seen,
 With tears augmenting the fresh morning’s dew,
 Adding to clouds more clouds with his deep sighs.
 But all so soon as the all-cheering sun
 Should in the farthest east begin to draw
 The shady curtains from Aurora’s bed,
 Away from light steals home my heavy son,
 And private in his chamber pens himself,
 Shuts up his windows, locks fair daylight out,

And makes himself an artificial night.
 Black and portentous must thus humour prove,
 Unless good counsel may the cause remove.⁶

When he appears onstage immediately thereafter, the young Montague confirms his father's description, in effect mourning his own demise as a lover, such that he is no longer himself: "This is not Romeo," he says to Benvolio, "he's some other where" (1.1.191).

If we turn now to the pseudomedical and philosophical texts available in the period from which Romeo and our understanding of him might emanate, we find a wide range of materials that would interpret the condition of love melancholy with the utmost, diagnostic seriousness. To find one's death by love unreciprocated is the worst of imaginable calamities, Marsilio Ficino argues, for "[e]ach man by loving gives up his own soul, and by loving in return restores the foreign soul through his own. Therefore, out of justice itself, whoever is loved ought to love in return."⁷ Without the benefit of reciprocal love, the figurative death of the soul risks becoming the literal death of the body, as the superabundance of the melancholic humor produced by the overheated blood makes the victim susceptible to all other infirmities, physical and mental alike.⁸ Thus does the melancholic heart, in the words of Timothy Bright, author of *A Treatise of Melancholie* (1586) "ouercome with inward heauines, and skared with inward feares . . . withdraweth it selfe, and shroudeth it as secrete and closse."⁹ In order to avert such isolation, Bright recommends that melancholic lovers be aided by the "comfort of their friends," who may distract them from meditating on their pitiable state by "other delights brought in in steed, and more highly commended" than the scornful woman.¹⁰ Even more to the point, Bright suggests that if the "melancholick is to be perswaded [that] the subiect of that he liketh is not so louely," he will find his blood cooled as a result, and a more serious melancholic bout potentially averted.¹¹

Benvolio adopts this exact cure for Romeo's love melancholy, offering to attend the Capulet's feast with his cousin so that he may "Compare her [Rosaline's] face with some that I shall show, / And I will make thee think thy swan a crow" (1.2.86–87). While Romeo's cousin hardly would have needed a primer course in humoral theory to devise this strategy for improving Romeo's mood, nonetheless, the playwright's identification of one of his titular characters with a "Black and portentous . . . humour" invites a Galenic analy-

sis (1.1.134). Likewise, the play itself pays dividends for readers knowledgeable of at least some of the dimensions of sixteenth-century, European medical practice and beliefs. For example, the hasty consummation of Romeo and Juliet's marriage serves not only to validate a bond forged without the permission of the lovers' parents, but also—less romantically—the evacuation of Romeo's pent-up seed, which, unreleased, would continue to overheat his body and mind.¹²

Nonetheless, to pursue a strictly Galenic reading of the play here is problematic for a number of reasons. For starters, the play itself offers its own resistance to a full-on, "humoral" interpretation. That is, while every medical authority that one may cite from this period or earlier ones views the condition of love melancholy with the utmost gravity, Romeo's friends and relatives do not. Rather, they see Romeo's mood as at least partly affected. Benvolio's reaction to his cousin's mournful self-description (1.1.166–76), for example, causes Romeo to ask if he laughs at his state of mind: "No, coz," comes the sarcastic reply, "I rather weep" (1.1.176). Mercutio is also in on the joke. Asked by Benvolio to summon Romeo, he replies, "Nay, I'll conjure too. / Romeo! Humors! Madman! Passion! Lover!" (2.1.7).

That a distance exists between the status of humoral theory as a viable means by which to explain the passions and its incorporation in *Romeo and Juliet*, that the latter in other words is not *interpolated by* but rather *in play with* the former, is made abundantly clear in a number of other ways, most notably through the character Juliet. Critics who have noticed Juliet's levelheadedness in comparison to Romeo's emotional immaturity, including her desire for the physical consummation of her love for reasons of imagined enjoyment (3.2.26–31), are noticing something else: her body does not seem to obey the same fluid dynamics as does her young husband's. She is in control of what she is thinking, and her passionate outbursts appear appropriate in relation to the objects and events that cause them. At the very least, others do not laugh at her for feeling what she does. On the contrary, her refusal to have her emotions scripted for her—"I'll look to like, if looking liking move;" she says to her mother when she proposes a match with Paris, "But no more deep will I endart mine eye / Than your consent gives strength to make it fly"—sets her apart from the more volatile model of human agency that not just Romeo but the entire irrational conflict between the Capulets and Montagues represents (1.3.99–101). Juliet

not only stands outside of a certain kind of historicist analysis, she invalidates it as irrelevant to her psychological situation.

If love melancholy is something of a joke in *Romeo and Juliet*, and humoral theory cannot see where this "humor" lies since it is inside of it, psychoanalysis can, but only to a point. Of course, there is not a psychoanalytic reading of *Romeo and Juliet*, nor a single kind humoral one for that matter, but unlike Freud, who emphasizes issues of debasement and neuroses when he writes of love attachment,¹³ Lacan, in his Seventh Seminar, focuses on the dialectical impulses to idealize: both the love object and one's own self-presentation before this object. In her reading of this seminar, Kaja Silverman emphasizes the importance of idealization in Lacan's understanding of love, "without which there is no love, and no pleasurable identification,"¹⁴ and the manner in which this idealization occurs within the subject and between the subject and his or her love object. This means that narcissism is a fundamental attribute of love, insofar as lovers project their own images and wants onto the objects they love, rather than erasing or supplanting their own identities with that of the other.¹⁵

Shakespeare is not only aware of this feature of the love bond, he exploits it for dramatic effect by having Juliet learn that Romeo has slain Tybalt *before* she consummates her love with her husband. In effect, what this scene (3.2) witnesses is that Romeo's murder makes Juliet's idealization of him *stronger*, not weaker: the "Beautiful tyrant, fiend angelical! / Dove-feathered raven, wolvish-ravening lamb!" becomes, just a few lines later worth the lives of "ten thousand Tybalts" (3.2.75–76, 114), precisely because the initial impediment to loving Romeo in this scene, the fact that he has been revealed as a murderer, forces Juliet to love him that much more in order to justify her desire for him as both a lover *and* an idealized love object. Thus asked by her nurse if she will weep over Tybalt's body, Juliet opts instead to mourn her presumed death as a "maiden-widowèd" (3.2.135), mourn in other words that Romeo's banishment might cost her the opportunity to consummate her marriage.

One temptation afforded by a psychoanalytically inflected understanding of this scene, however, is to deconstruct Juliet's love as mere desire. In fact, the play sustains, in opposition to both Ficino and Freud, the notion that love and desire can mutually reinforce, rather than degrade, one another.¹⁶ Moreover, and more problematically—although also, I think, more intriguingly—the play leaves

unscripted the precise manner in which Romeo and Juliet become attached as mutual love objects. Directors have typically filled in this lacuna by staging the young lovers looking into one another's eyes during the Capulet feast, although nothing in the text, other than logical inference, scripts this mutual gaze for us. What Shakespeare gives us instead is commentary on the life-changing encounter, first by Romeo—"O she doth teach the torches to burn bright!" (1.5.41)—and, only after their shared sonnet, by Juliet.

Romeo and Juliet's passions indeed constitute the heart of this play; Shakespeare is less interested in how the two meet than in the depths of what they both feel shortly thereafter, less interested in what the two lovers say to one another than in how they describe the way they feel about the other to various confidants (the Nurse, Friar Laurence, and so on), and less interested in establishing an airtight *raison d'être* for their deaths than in making sure they die passionately, with drug overdoses and daggers. Regardless of the form one's psychoanalytic account of this love takes, it will lead one inevitably back to these passions, which themselves invite a historicist account outside of the purview of psychoanalysis itself, although this account also is bound to frustrate, since the precise reason why these two end up together is as much a matter for the stars to have decided than for their bodies, or their families.¹⁷

Lacan's Seventh Seminar situates amorous attachment within a tradition that *Romeo and Juliet* both avows and disavows. Examining courtly love as the cultural code by which the high idealization of the love object was permanently established in Western culture, Lacan insists that this idealization requires that the feminine object be "introduced oddly enough through the door of privation or of inaccessibility."¹⁸ *Romeo and Juliet* does not offer quite the same message. If he began his composition not with a characterological approach but a situational one, Shakespeare could have hardly selected a better scenario in which both to refute the supposition that the virgin can only become a whore by making Juliet's introduction to wedded bliss exactly that, while transforming the relationship between Romeo and Juliet into that which cannot be held as real, even as it signifies, through emotional torment and death, the kernel of the real, Heidegger's *das Ding*. And yet, the tragic trajectory of this love does not invalidate the love of Romeo and Juliet as something slight and immature; on the contrary, the two lovers give everything they can to substantiate their feelings, except a reason for their feelings, which—the play argues—is beneath the dignity

of love in the first place. It is around the proclaimed power of these feelings, rather than what motivates them, that Shakespeare has the entire drama of the play rest. *Romeo and Juliet* is made "excellent" and "lamentable," as its full title in the Second Quarto proclaims, precisely because the young lovers refuse to compromise what they somehow forge between them by linking it with the corrupted cultural values of Verona, within the city limits of which it cannot function anyway. Humoralism can no more explain such love than the Montagues and Capulets can identify the source of their dispute. Limitless anger is appeased, in *Romeo and Juliet*, only through the sacrifice of love, but not even grieving parents can fully substantiate the loss of their children, and the statues to be erected in their honor will decay over time, not just because they lack the appropriate organs and fluids that might or might not attest to love in this period, but rather because they are missing something that cannot be named but only felt.

The kind of love toward which Shakespeare gestures in *Romeo and Juliet* defies the discursive range of language itself, even as it is constituted—not wholly but largely—by words on the page, so perhaps we should not be surprised to see it wiggle so persistently out of the grasp of both psychoanalytic and humoralist interpretations. Nonetheless, a love that proclaims its effects above and beyond its causes can be circled around, its paradoxical features enumerated and puzzled over most fully when looked at from the inside and outside at once. The aim of the kind of work I have attempted to describe, and perform a truncated version of, is at the very best only softly psychoanalytic, but such "soft" psychoanalysis is in my mind the most effective means by which to conjoin our historicist sensibilities with our post-modern perspective on the psychological.

Notes

1. Jacques Ferrand, *A Treatise on Lovesickness*, ed. Donald A. Beecher and Massimo Ciavolella (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1990), 240.
2. Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (Seminar 7), ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. by Dennis Porter (1986; New York: Norton, 1992, rpt. 1997), 8.
3. *Ibid.*, 8.
4. *Ibid.*, 292.
5. Jerome Kagan, for example, finds the Galenic understanding of inborn temperaments highly useful, even as he rejects the humoral basis for this understand-

ing. See Galen's *Prophecy: Temperament in Human Nature* (New York: Westview Press, 1994).

6. William Shakespeare, *The Most Excellent and Lamentable Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet*, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard, Katharine Eisaman Maus (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), act 1, scene 1, lines 124–35. Subsequent citations will be made parenthetically.

7. Marsilio Ficino, *Commentary on Plato's "Symposium" on Love (De Amore)*, trans. by Sears Jayne (Woodstock, CT: Spring Publications, 1985), 56.

8. See André du Laurens. *A Discourse of the Preservation of Sight: of Melancholike Diseases; of Rheumes, and of Old Age*, trans. Richard Surphlet (1597; London: Ralph Iacson, 1599), 120.

9. Timothy Bright, *A Treatise of Melancholie*, facs. of the 1586 edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 1940), 107.

10. *Ibid.*, 255.

11. *Ibid.*

12. See Ferrand, *A Treatise on Lovesickness*, 334. Ferrand does not sanction the Arabic cure for love melancholy, attributed to Avicenna and Haly Abbas, which approves of purchasing "young girls and sleep[ing] with them frequently" (*ibid.*).

13. See Sigmund Freud, "A Special Type of Choice of Object Made by Men" (1910), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. by James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953–74), 11: 165–75; "On the Universal Tendency to Debasement in the Sphere of Love" (1912), 179–90; "The Taboo of Virginity" (1918), 193–208.

14. Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 43.

15. As screenwriter, Lacan would have therefore rewritten the "you complete me" line in *Jerry Maguire* (1996) to, "you provide me with the opportunity to imagine my own self-completion, and therefore I love you."

16. For Ficino, "the desire for coitus (that is, for copulation) and love are shown to be not only not the same motions but opposite." *Commentary on Plato's "Symposium,"* 41.

17. Lacan terms the criterion of the "ethically, culturally, and socially valorized" as "external to psychoanalysis," although their operation of course permeates the psyche. *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 144.

18. *Ibid.*, 149.

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