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Eros and Literature

I

The relationship between eros and literature begins with pleasure: pleasure of the body, pleasure of the text, pleasure of wondering how each affects the other. Common sense (never fully to be trusted) tells us to start with the pleasure of the body, that stable ground from which all else derives, whose needs – food, sleep, sex – are written deep within our corporeal selves. "Eros," then, would figure those desires common to the sexual and/or romantic body, those desires we generally think of first, before "storge" ("familial love"), before "philia" ("friendship"), also before "agape" ("spiritual love").[1] The pleasures of eros track the beauty of the beloved in all of its myriad forms, and – comfortable in each of the five senses – they attend a variety of events: discovery, courtship, consummation, commitment, etc. If the word "love" expands routinely into affections of an all-inclusive sort (applicable in English equally to spouse, favorite color, and family pet), then the word "erotic" denotes pleasures of a specifically or potentially sexual nature. As inflexible as chromosomes, as self-evident as genitalia, as relentless as hunger, those pleasures tempt us with an idea of "human nature" as unequivocal as the flesh of which it is composed. Who are we to argue, so the reasoning goes, if the body simply wants what it wants? In fact, however, the pleasures of the erotic body have never *not* been regulated by cultural forces both large and small: by religion, by law, by science, by gender, of course; but also by etiquette, by propriety, and by a variety of seemingly innocuous social conventions. Christianity used the doctrine of original sin to condemn and control sexual pleasure; codes of law, ancient as well as modern, prohibited rape, incest, and polygamy; medical science, particularly since the late seventeenth century, labored to define the normal and diagnose the perverse; while ideas of gender – masculinities and femininities from a variety of diverse cultural moments – struggled to maintain an understandable and stable difference between the sexes. At the same time, codes of propriety

and decorum have regulated social interactions generally and courtship and mating rituals in particular. We are all aware that much depends on who holds the door for whom, who is allowed to wear what when, and which topics are broached and how. The erotic body, as a result, however much it may tempt us to think otherwise, never appears outside the social, political, and cultural contexts within which it is defined. Nor are its so-called "natural" pleasures ever fully separate from the historical moment that seeks to regulate them. On the contrary, bodies of flesh, bodies of words, and bodies of knowledge are unavoidably, inextricably interdependent.[2]

In Genesis, for example, the bodies of Adam and Eve serve that interdependence precisely. Mortality, hunger, fatigue, pain in childbirth, and sexual desire are all encoded upon textual bodies in such a way that actual flesh and blood gets rewritten in their likeness for the next three thousand years. An originary myth that begins by asking, "Where did we come from?" and "Why do we die?" imagines humanity's own prequel so powerfully that Saint Augustine could use it to transform the pleasures of sex into the pains of sin.[3] Subsequently, shame, guilt, and self-loathing attended procreation, and key details about whose rib was taken from whom, who was created first, and who was allowed or not allowed to speak directly to God confirmed a gender hierarchy so self-evident that it reappeared indelibly thereafter in body height, weight, and muscle mass. Thus, the acts of recognition required to feel shame or acknowledge female inferiority began with erudition and over generations became common sense. No less prone to warfare than bodies of flesh, bodies of knowledge adapted themselves to cultures and geographies and, just like their more political counterparts, sought dominance. That dominance achieves itself most perfectly when the three bodies align: flesh, word, and knowledge all in perfect reciprocity. At those moments, cultural context and historical specificity fade away and the body *au naturel* stands before us in all its seemingly simple splendour, its nakedness a reminder that ideology's triumph is never more successful than when it disappears entirely from view.

Unsurprisingly, the erotic body and its pleasures are not fond of submission. Serve a variety of masters, they most certainly do, but the relationships are fraught. Consider an example from Plato, an author not generally appreciated for his eroticism. In his dialogue the *Phaedrus*, a treatment of love and lust well known for its devious complexities, the body of the eponymous interlocutor is erotically charged from beginning to end, even after Socrates explains himself out of the temptations of physical pleasure and into the higher truths of philosophy.[4] In fact, Plato foregrounds the body of the beloved as a significant philosophical problem that requires a full

explanation of the nature of the soul, the rules of reincarnation, and the structure of the cosmos. This is the case because the beauty of the body and its ongoing invitations to carnal pleasure constitute a nexus that, when poorly navigated, can result in errors no less profound than those of Genesis. Whereas Genesis laid the groundwork for subsequent ideas about the inherent sinfulness of the body, the *Phaedrus* warns that carnal pleasures distract us from the higher truth, much in the same way that shadows on the wall of a cave can impede our desire to walk in the light of the sun.

Plato's dialogue establishes a love triangle in which Socrates, smitten by the physical beauty of Phaedrus, must compete with the rhetorician Lysias for the affections of the boy. Socrates flirts and allows himself to be agreeable initially by making no objection to a speech by Lysias that Phaedrus recites. The speech warns of the destructive passions of love and encourages the youth to submit to non-lovers rather than lovers because it will be ultimately more efficacious and less messy. Socrates plays along until he no longer can, and then makes a speech of his own in which he defends the divine madness of love. His speech then closes with a prayer to Eros:

> Thus, dear Love, I have made and paid my recantation as well and as fairly as I could: the poetical figures I was forced to use, for Phaedrus would have them. Please forgive my former speech; grant this one your favor. Be kind and merciful to me. Do not blind me in anger. Grant me to be even more esteemed than I am now by the beautiful. If in our former speech Phaedrus or I said anything harsh against you, blame Lysias, the begetter of that discourse. Make him cease from such speeches and turn him to philosophy, just as his brother Polemarchus has been turned; so that his lover here may no longer waver as he does now, but may wholeheartedly live for love, together with philosophy.[5]

Anticipating the prayer that will end the dialogue – "grant me to be beautiful within" – Socrates pleads for divine guidance in his pursuit of Truth and Beauty, at the same time asking for forgiveness for his former untruths.[6] Pointedly, he also asks forgiveness for his "poetical figures," referring not just to those of the charioteer and the two horses but also to those of the tumescent wings, which "sprout," "grow," and "swell" every time the soul is excited by the beloved. These figures, which Socrates uses only because Phaedrus likes them, pull the textual body and the somatic body into exact correspondence, acknowledging an excitement that pleasures both flesh and word. Like Lysias, in other words, Socrates is aroused by beauty; but unlike Lysias, he moves past carnal pleasure – and its erotically suggestive language – to an appreciation of transcendent Truth.

For Ovid, on the other hand, writing in imperial Rome nearly four hundred years after Plato, the beauty of the body metamorphoses in less

predictable directions. A reflection in a pool causes Narcissus to become enamored of himself; an overheard prayer transforms Pygmalion's cold statue into a warm wife and mother; the music from the lyre of Orpheus brings Eurydice back from the dead. Unlike Plato – famously intolerant of the representations of art and literature, suspicious even of writing itself as a technology that leads away from the immediacy of thought – Ovid accepts not only the inevitability of chaos and change but also the inevitability (and power) of love's imaginative guises. Why shouldn't Jupiter take Danae as a shower of gold? Why shouldn't the boundaries between the human and the divine, porous as they are, give way again before the relentless and creative passions of eros? Above all, why shouldn't literature and art honor those passions and exercise their ability to animate and reanimate both the human and the divine?

In the *Amores*, for example, his first published poem, Ovid chooses love over war, and with it the power of language to enact, as well as describe, human passion. In the midst of contemplating his own "regular epic" with its formal march of hexameters, he tells us of being interrupted by Cupid, who first shouts: "Hey, poet! … you want a theme? Take *that*!" and then lets loose with one of his arrows.[7] Struck by desire, literally and figuratively, Ovid is forced to relinquish hexameters for elegiacs and to proceed with a poem that now takes eros as it subject. This "anatomy of desire," as he describes it, depends for its success on its clever, irreverent, occasionally hapless narrator, who satirizes the pretensions of epic poetry while entertaining the reader with the ongoing comedy of love: he outwits drunken husbands at dinner parties, entertains married women in the afternoon, and seduces his mistress's maid, all the while proclaiming his innocence and good intentions. An anti-hero of the first order, he gets locked out, lied to, and cheated on. In fact, the *Amores* ends with Ovid's narrator losing his mistress to a rival, a loss that he attributes ironically to the success of his verses:

> That's it: *she* was prostituted by *my* art,
> And serve me right for trumpeting her beauty abroad! If my darling's
> On the market, it's all my fault –
> I've pimped her charms.[8]

So "charm[ing]" was his body of words that the body of flesh was able to find a more desirable lover, a turn of events that underscores the reciprocity between aesthetic and sexual pleasure. Thanks to Cupid's arrow, in other words, Ovid the lover and Ovid the poet conflate: the beauty pursued by the one subsumed nicely into that composed by the other.

However much, therefore, we might want to stabilize our understanding of eros with the solid truths of the body – the body male or female, young

or old, beautiful or not so much – Ovid is there to remind us that that body always seems to arrive as part of someone else's story. It comes, like the very God it serves, as a figure in a narrative whose historical specificity can indeed be chased down and better understood, but whose purported identity can never fully escape the conditions imposed by the language that represents it. For Plato, what we see, feel, and do (erotically) is always already a reminder of a divine Truth from which we have fallen but to which we would like to return. Philosophy, not art or literature, provides the only reliable way back, and the Socratic method, reworked as Platonic dialogue, stands as vastly superior to both the sophistry of rhetoricians and the make-believe of poets. For Plato, in other words, the erotic body in life and the erotic body in language have analogous dangers, and we must pray to the gods for the strength to resist the temptations proffered by each. For Ovid, on the other hand, those same human experiences – erotic seeings, feelings, and doings – are a source of pleasure; inseparable as they are from the myriad stories of which they are a part, they are equally delightful in flesh and in word. As a result, poetry provides the perfect opportunity to enact, not simply reflect, the pleasures of the body.

II

Consideration of the relationship between eros and literature requires, in addition to an ongoing preoccupation with the body, close attention to the pleasures specific to language. Those pleasures might arise from diction, syntax, or narrative; or they might attend character, setting, or plot. They might be tied directly to the erotic body they purport to describe, or they may have an erotic charge specific to language but at significant remove from the sexual and/or romantic body to which they eventually return. Thematically, they might serve Plato's fears about human beauty, or they might tilt towards Ovid and his obvious delight in the transformative powers of love. Either way, they also move comfortably from genre to genre. They happily attend plays, poems, and novels; short stories, essays, and non-fiction of various kinds. In late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century England, for example, a reader might have enjoyed the ribald wit of Aphra Behn's comedy, the full-frontal obscenity of the Earl of Rochester's poems, or the titillating voyeurism of Delarivier Manley's scandal fiction. For the more adventurous, there were also bawdy ballads, obscene travelogues, salacious medical manuals, whore dialogues, and scandalous trial reports.[9] Although we may be tempted to build our own monolithic "eroticism" from canonical love stories – from, say, Sappho and Shakespeare, Boccaccio and Petrarch, Donne and Richardson, or Byron and

Browning – literary history suggests a far more complicated affair. Literary history suggests that the "erotic" was always a diverse and overwhelming menu of possibilities; that genres high and low, elite and popular, literary and not, all made use of romantic and/or sexual content, often for very different purposes; and that the languages of eroticism were as numerous and as varied as the bodies and the desires they describe.

Canonically speaking, there is in English no more famous a meditation on language and the lover's body than that spoken by Juliet on the balcony:

JULIET O Romeo, Romeo! Wherefore art thou Romeo?
Deny thy father and refuse thy name;
Or, if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love,
And I'll no longer be a Capulet.
ROMEO *(aside)* Shall I hear more, or shall I speak at this?
JULIET 'Tis but thy name that is my enemy.
Thou art thyself, though not a Montague.
What's Montague? It is nor hand, nor foot,
Nor arm, nor face, nor any other part
Belonging to a man. O, be some other name!
What's in a name? That which we call a rose
By any other word would smell as sweet.
So Romeo would, were he not Romeo called,
Retain that dear perfection which he owes
Without that title. Romeo, doff thy name,
And for that name; which is no part of thee
Take all myself.[10]

Juliet's plea, of course, is that Romeo unclothe himself of name, that he "doff" his linguistic identity, his "title," and be a body naked of familial and social connection. For that "dear perfection," she offers herself "all" in exchange. To take "off" is to be revealed "as," the less of social affiliation becoming the more of revealed essence, which, like the scent of the rose or the body of the beloved, can be experienced directly. That this consummation can only occur through the very language Juliet wishes to do without is precisely the point, as Romeo makes clear:

I take thee at thy word.
Call me but love, and I'll be new baptized;
Henceforth I never will be Romeo.[11]

To "take" here is first to "understand," second to "trust," and third to "have," with the last an erotically appropriate response to Juliet's "Take all myself." Obviously, too, the word he "take[s]" from her speech is "love," which he reclaims for himself and is born again, this time naked of affiliation, untrammeled by kinship. Giving up the name of the father lays claim

to a purity of self that "take[s] all" in return. Crucially, however, that union is predicated on the language of the beloved: "Call me but love" puts back on Juliet the power to remake the old "Romeo" anew. With the word "Call," Romeo is asking Juliet to reveal an inner truth – her own love for him – that will be strong enough to supplant the authority of the father and recreate the beloved in its own image.

The conventions of genre dictate that in *Romeo and Juliet* (1595) the power of eros will be undone by fate – the truth of love, like the pleasures of consummation, transient. In tragedy, death is the ultimate winner, emerging at the end to confirm the futility of individual desire and the play's own high seriousness. In comedy, however, love becomes a joke, irrational and unpredictable, absurd and humbling, always amusing. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1597), for example, Shakespeare allows eros to revert to the mischievous imp, the agent of chaos and confusion with the power to turn the world upside down. Social order is defined at the outset by a hierarchy of paired lovers and by the authority of a patriarch who insists on marriage by his own design. Fleeing the authority of the father, the lovers take to the forest on a midsummer night's eve, where – thanks to the mischief of Puck and his magic potions – chaos ensues. As we might expect, Shakespeare's chaos is carefully orchestrated. His "green world" inverts conventional hierarchies and, for the space of a single night, allows for the ascendancy of nature over culture, dream over waking, imagination over reason – and, of course, eros over all else.[12]

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* the erotic body is everywhere and nowhere, incongruent and volatile, likely to be held hostage to vicissitudes beyond its control. Identities are mistaken and confused and shifting because the play imagines desire as the defining characteristic of the self and then creates a magic spell – derived not coincidentally from Cupid's arrow – capable of transforming the libidinal object at a moment's notice. Both the original desire and its magical replacement are equally true, and the more characters articulate what and who they want, the more the audience can enjoy making fun of an irrationality from which there is no escape. In this perfect hall of mirrors, taking someone at his word – as Romeo was eager to do – is at once an impossibility (because that someone is no longer himself) and the only correct option (because the desire is no less real for being magical). Lysander's speech to Helena in Act II provides a case in point:

> Not Hermia but Helena I love.
> Who will not change a raven for a dove?
> The will of man is by his reason swayed,
> And reason says you are the worthier maid.
> Things growing are not ripe until their season:
> So I, being young, till now ripe not to reason.

> And touching now the point of human skill,
> Reason becomes the marshal to my will
> And leads me to your eyes, where I o'erlook
> Love's stories, written in love's richest book.[13]

The deluded lover rationally defends his irrational "change" by insisting on his "skill" in a two-part interpretive process: first, he has listened attentively to what his own internal "reason" has had to "say," and then he has read correctly the "stories" inscribed externally upon the body of the beloved. His failure at both is evident from the wonderful "o'erlook," a contronym that means at once "to look at" (look over) and "to look past" (over look). Capturing the logical impossibility of explaining desire, "o'erlook" uses the traditional relationship between sight and insight, perception and knowledge, to highlight the comedy of arbitrary, "changeful" passion. Helena, being of right mind, can only assume that Lysander's appeal is comedic mockery.

Although Shakespeare will resolve this erotic chaos at the play's end into the stable order of proper marriage, Puck famously gets the last word, reminding the audience that if "offended" they should consider the comedy itself "but a dream" easily "mend[ed]."[14] The epilogue confirms the primacy of the magic spell, aligns fairy trickster and playwright, and to the ongoing problem of changeful passion offers as a solution only additional change: "amend[ation]." If the erotic body of tragedy stands on the balcony congruent and absolute – inviting us both to love it at first sight and take it at its word – then its comedic counterpart sits, like Bottom with the head of an ass, polymorphous and perverse, promising only to confuse and mislead. The former follows in the tradition of Plato and is respectful of a love true and unchanging; the latter descends from Ovid, irreverent and promiscuous.

Of course, eros flourished offstage as well. Textual bodies were – like their flesh-and-blood counterparts – eager to transgress and just as eager to do so in low venues as high venues. During the Restoration, for example, while audiences were delighting in the drama of Wycherley, Behn, and Congreve, obscene satire circulated at the Court of Charles II, bawdy street ballads flooded London pubs and coffeehouses, and "curious" books became increasingly lucrative for booksellers. The languages of eroticism were many and varied. John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester, passed manuscript copies of his poems to friends at court, who no doubt appreciated how effective sexual obscenity could be when mocking the high and mighty: "Signior Dildo" personifies the artificial penis as a visiting Italian nobleman; "The Imperfect Enjoyment" muses on the ignominy of impotence; and "Against Constancy" offers tribute to polyamory.[15] "Cunts" and "pricks" proliferate throughout, a choice of diction that violates social and literary protocols as it enlists the sexual body as a weapon against hypocrisy and pretension.

This kind of "libertine literature" circulated behind the scenes and was fashionable among the dissipated rakes with whom Rochester associated. But the word "libertine" also suggests a freedom from propriety and constraint. Elitist in origin it most certainly was, and unrepentantly misogynistic as well, but Rochester's obscene satire also served anarchical tendencies: it was so adversarial in nature, and so single-minded in pursuit of personal pleasure, that it could not but be disruptive and disordering.

Meanwhile, on the streets of London, cheap ballads like "The Pleasures of a Single Life" (1701) or "The Fifteen Comforts of Cuckoldom" (1706) would have amused those who appreciated the bawdy and those who, to partake in the fun, need not have been literate.[16] Distant relatives of Chaucer's "The Miller's Tale," these ballads treated a variety of comedic topics but preferred cuckoldry of one sort or another to all else. They might have been sung or recited in the coffee house or pub, and they help us to understand an oral tradition that thrived apart from both court and bookshop. Theirs was the world of fair and carnival; it was communal not solitary, boisterous not refined. Very different, of course, were the bookshops. There, scandalous novels and risque poetry would have competed with a whole host of "curious" books generally ignored by literary historians. These include whore dialogues like Michel Millot's *The School of Venus* (1680), prurient pseudo-medical treatises like John Marten's *Gonosologium Novum* (1709), and sensational criminal accounts like Henry Fielding's *The Female Husband* (1746). As the word "curious" suggests, eros was linked to secret or forbidden knowledge about the sexual body. *The School of Venus* made use of anti-ecclesiastical satire to share with its reader what was really going on between nuns behind closed doors; *Gonosologium Novum*, subtitled *A New System Of All the Secret Infirmities and Diseases, Natural, Accidental, and Venereal in MEN and WOMEN*, promised to share the hidden truths of sex and its diseases; and *The Female Husband* offered a fictionalized treatment of a real cross-dressing Sapphite who took advantage of unsuspecting women and was subsequently caught and tried. Whether at court, in the pub or coffee house, or on the shelves of a bookshop, the languages of eroticism proved both varied and enterprising.

The most influential of all the erotic languages being written and read during the eighteenth century was that belonging to the novel. No other genre entertained England's growing readership in the same way; no other genre adapted so beautifully to the expanding middle classes and their demand for increased leisure. Over the course of the first half of the century, the English novel outgrew its scandalous beginnings and attained something that resembled cultural legitimacy. Early-eighteenth-century novelists had followed continental models and put women, romance, and sex front and

center. Some retold famous scandals, some experimented with voyeurism and the secret spaces of bedroom and garden, some used letters and letter writing for heightened intimacy. Maligned as manipulative, pleasure-seeking, and sub-literary, the novel became associated with both women writers and women readers, the result of which was that the genre's success in the marketplace was viewed as a kind of cultural prostitution.[17] When Samuel Richardson published *Pamela* in 1740, he attempted to defend both women and the novel by celebrating female virtue over female vice. His heroine, a chaste servant with a knack for letter writing, protects her honor from a lustful and scheming master until he becomes convinced of her virtue and marries her in the end. If novelists would only respect and encourage morality in the same way that good women protected their chastity – so Richardson's logic went – then prose fiction could and would inculcate Christian values among its readership.

His intervention sparked a controversy that would be continued by fits and starts for the next two hundred and fifty years, a controversy between those who believed that readers needed to be protected from immoral books and those who did not. The former held that fiction was dangerous and could do real damage in the world; the latter believed that even naive readers should be able to negotiate the various differences between bodies and books. At the time, Henry Fielding wrote *Shamela* (1741) and *Joseph Andrews* (1742) in protest, both of which depicted sex as far less dangerous than vanity, hypocrisy, and greed. His "comic epic in prose" was anchored by a faith in simple generosity and love; it ridiculed self-serving piety and sanctimonious pseudo-superiority. Soon after, John Cleland wrote *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* (1748) – another "anti-Pamela," but one that treated openly and repeatedly of sex and sexual pleasure. As Fanny Hill tells us early on, her memoir is an attempt to tell "the stark, naked truth" of her physical experiences. Eschewing the "cunts" and "pricks" of Rochester, Cleland adopts throughout the language of metaphor – prodigious male "machines" batter female "ramparts," etc. – and describes carefully a variety of activities beyond simple intercourse: lesbianism, group sex, flagellation, and sodomy among them. Like Fielding, however, Cleland maintains a comic vision, never letting the reader forget that the novel is making fun of the very erotic effects it is working so hard to achieve.

Of course, poets too continued to experiment with eros and language. When, for example, John Keats decided to rewrite *Romeo and Juliet* as *The Eve of St Agnes*, he found a way of pushing the possibilities of poetic diction until the beauties of language seem indistinguishable from the aroused bodies of his lovers. At a crucial moment just before Porphoro melds into