

Introduction

A young woman declares that she would rather die than “chose love by another’s eyes”. A young man threatens to “love” the woman he has idealized “against the nature of love” by raping her. Another young woman bewails the fact that love “sees not with the eyes but with the mind” while two young men switch between loving and loathing her without apparent rhyme or reason. A teenage girl is astonished that the more she gives her love, the more she has to give. An older man resolves upon hearing of his lover’s death that he has no more reason to live; and then, when he hears that she lied to him about her death, asks simply to be taken to die in her arms. Another older man smothers his wife for supposed infidelity, and then excuses himself for loving her not wisely but too well, before he takes his own life in despair. An adult couple, believing that they hate each other, are brought by a theatrical trick into being “horribly in love”; a melancholic man gives his heart to enable his friend to pursue a “lady richly left”; a young woman in love with her master in the guise of a page acts as a go-between to help him secure his fantasy object of love, while another, also in the guise of a young man, plays love games with her lover in the free space of a forest before giving herself to him. Two men spend pleasurable nights with women other than those they desired and expected, making “sweet use of what they hate”. And a common player-poet is torn between an idealized love for a young man and a “perjured eye” that drives him to self-loathing in his desire for an unconventional and promiscuous woman.

These are instances of erotic love and desire in Shakespeare: the large and impossibly complex topic of this book. They offer no discernible pattern; they comprehend no encompassing theory; they can be reduced to no single attitude. “Love” is a messy, indefinite concept, with rough edges and divergent uses, prone to historical change, personal variation and philosophical disagreement. It encompasses a vast range of affective attitudes and forms of behaviour. Does such messiness reside in the

inadequacy of the concept or the intractability of the phenomena that it is supposed to embrace? The Catholic philosopher, Jean-Luc Marion, is scathing about the philosophical poverty of our discourses on love: “We have no concept whatever of love. Without a concept, each time we pronounce the word ‘love’ or reel off ‘words of love’ we literally no longer know what we are saying and, in fact, we say nothing.”¹ Encompassing but not differentiating the classical concepts of *eros*, *philia*, *agape* and *nomos*, the English word “love” is almost impossible to use with any kind of precision.

In *Shakespeare, Love and Service* I traced the relations of love and service by distinguishing the contours of these four cognate Greek concepts. *Shakespeare, Love and Language* focuses on love as *eros*, although it acknowledges that it is impossible to ignore the affinities of *eros* in the early modern period with *philia* (friendship) and *nomos* (service). Even *eros*, the examples from Shakespeare show, is impossibly complex. The greatness of Shakespeare on love lies not only in the range of his imaginative reach but also in his capacity to make each instance compelling. For analytical clarity I pursue one, classic bifurcation of the concept of *eros*: as love, on the one hand, and desire, on the other. Here Ancient Greek – which offers divisions among *eros*, *philia*, *agape* and *nomos* – is of little help, for the Greek word *eros* does not differentiate between love and desire. Indeed, from Plato onwards the Greek concept has tended to *reduce* love to desire. This reduction had profound consequences and continues to inform our current notions of love.

Three Stories in Plato

There is a decisive moment in Plato’s *Symposium* when Socrates interrogates Agathon. “And now, said Socrates, I will ask about Love: – Is Love of something or of nothing?”² Upon the crux of the preposition “of” Socrates turns love from a god into a concept. This move, which draws the essence of love out of the grammar of desire, has profound ramifications for the concept of love across its history. It pulls love into the orbit of desire. For that grammatical relation – of love to something else in the formula “love of something” – insists that love is essentially desire.

¹ Jean-Luc Marion, *The Erotic Phenomenon* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

² Irwin Edman ed., *The Works of Plato*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (New York: Modern Library, 1956), 365. All quotations from Plato are from this edition.

Three Stories in Plato

3

That love is always *of* something is true enough. But the ideology of desire insists that love is necessarily of something that it does not have: what is loved is a *lacked* object that the subject of love *wants*. Love's supposed identity to desire is nicely conveyed by the double meaning of this English word: one wants or desires something when it is wanting – missing, lacking, at a distance. If one wants something in the sense of not having it, and then goes about getting it, it is no longer wanting, and it makes no sense, therefore, to want it. Once it gets what it desires love will no longer lack what it wants – it will stop being wanting – and so will stop desiring it. This means, according to this story, that one will stop loving it. The twist that Socrates gives this corollary is that desire can be satisfied only in the final analysis: it moves ceaselessly from object to object until it is ultimately united with the Form or Idea of the Beautiful or the Good itself.

Plato's earliest dialogue on love, the *Lysis*, devoted to the nature of friendship rather than erotic love, demonstrates the limits of conceptual analysis with which Socrates begins in the *Symposium* and from which he draws his conclusion concerning the identity of love and desire. Socrates seeks to teach two young friends, Menexenus and Lysis, what friendship is. The *Lysis* is consistent with the other two dialogues in its insistence that friendship is a kind of desire. But the result of its bewildering quest for the relationship between friend and enemy, love and hatred, like and unlike – and especially the vexed question of reciprocity through the conceptual analysis of the relations between these terms – ends not in knowledge but in the confession of ignorance:

O Lysis and Menaxenus – how ridiculous that you two boys, and I, an old boy, who would fain be one of you, should imagine ourselves to be friends – this is what the bystanders will go away and say – and yet we have been unable to discover what is a friend!

(Plato, *Works*, 32)

Each of us knows indubitably that we are friends, Socrates concludes, but stipulating what a friend or friendship is, even after a long investigation, escapes all of us.

Once he has reduced love to desire through conceptual analysis in the *Symposium*, Socrates, however, turns away from grammar to myth – in the story told by Diotima, who intervenes at the very point at which Socrates presses the dialectic upon Agathon. Here conceptual analysis is curtailed abruptly in favour of an anecdote: Love is by nature the lover of beauty because he was conceived on Aphrodite's birthday; but he is not a god, he is a daemon – he moves between man and the gods. He is the child of the

union of Poros, who combines resourcefulness with ingenuity and cleverness, and Penia, the female embodiment of poverty. It is Penia (penury) who lacks and therefore desires: she rapes Poros while he lies in a drunken stupor. He therefore does not know that he is loved or desired by Penia. This *lack* of knowledge introduces an aspect of the conception of love of which Lacan will make much: Poros, like Socrates – like the beloved and ultimately the lover – *does not know*. This ignorance is central to desire. *Eros* does not know either why or what it desires. Nor does the beloved know what he (or she) might be desired for. He or she does not know how to answer the Lacanian question *Che Vouli?* or *What do you want?*³

On the basis of the lack that drives desire, Diotima tells the story of the metonymic chain of its progress from the desire for immortality through the production of children, “using these as steps only” (378–9), to the desire for the body of a single beautiful boy; from there the lover moves to the love of the boy as a beautiful soul; then through the recognition of the idea of beauty common to all beautiful boys; and finally to the pursuit of the ultimate “vast sea of beauty” (378), which will enable him to approach “the notion of absolute beauty, and at last know what the essence of beauty is” (379). Love or desire – they are the same thing here – moves along a metonymic chain, in a restless quest for the beautiful and the good, which cannot be embodied by any single earthly thing.

In the *Phaedrus*, as in the *Republic*, the soul is split. It is imagined as a charioteer trying to control two radically different horses, one white, the other black; the white horse is tractable and susceptible to reason and control; the other is wild and driven by passion. The charioteer’s task is to drive his pair of contrary steeds through episodes of human desire so that the original wings of the soul might sprout again to soar upwards towards its original transcendental unity with Beauty and Truth. The black horse is consumed by the desire for carnal consummation and pleasure. One might therefore expect the white horse to represent the controlling measure of reason. But although this horse is tractable to the control of reason and amenable to the power of true beauty, it embodies a kind of divine madness that possesses the soul through its recognition of something of the ultimate ideal of Beauty in a specific encounter with a beautiful being. Such madness or *mania* is what the *Phaedrus* adds to the story of the ascent of love in the *Symposium*, representing this irrational impulse as a necessary component of the kind of love that seeks beauty through its love of discourse or philosophy.

³ See Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book VIII*, trans. Cormack Gallagher (S.I.: s.n., 2002), sec. ix.

Three Stories in Plato

5

Lysis's argument that the non-lover is better than the lover because his love is disinterested and rational desecrates the sanctity of love, which is a form of divine possession. This is a crucial move for the later traditions of *eros*, since it contradicts the idea that love could ever be expected to be rational. Love is by definition a kind of madness. But it is not any kind of madness. Its *mania* is directed at the recovery of a beauty dimly recollected by the soul and embodied imperfectly in its carnal form as the beauty of particular bodies. In this sense, then, it is *driven*. The passion to engender or reproduce beauty through beauty does not stop at the merely physical desire for sexual intercourse, but transcends or sublimates that passion into what A.W. Price calls called "educative pederasty". The love of beauty in a particular boy (the *erastes*) is channelled by the older lover (the *eromenos*) into a desire to bring the boy, through the educative discourses of philosophy, to an appreciation of the kinds of beauty sought by the soul in its erotic rapture.

About two-thirds of the way through the *Phaedrus* the dialogue seems to depart from the topic of love and turns to the nature of rhetoric and the superiority of speech over writing. As I read it, this suggests that a relationship between lover and beloved may be reduced to pure desire only with difficulty. This section of the *Phaedrus* is thus in tension with at least part of the story of the *Symposium*. For Socrates's disparagement of writing in the former stems from two things: first, its careless promiscuity and, second, its indifference to the moral development of the person who encounters it. The person who puts his faith in writing does not address his words to a specific person or beloved, seeking to cultivate virtue and wisdom in his soul. Rather, he disseminates them indiscriminately, sowing them on barren ground, where they will neither take root nor flourish. Writings are "tumbled about anywhere, amongst those who may or may not understand them, and know not to whom they should reply, to whom not . . . and they cannot defend or protect themselves" (324).

Speech, on the other hand, which knows what it is up to – which has developed into a proper art or *techne* – is capable of being "an intelligent word graven in the soul of the learner" (324) because it has mastered the "art of enchanting the soul" by "learn[ing] the differences of human souls". Speech can therefore attend to the specificity of a dialectic or conversation with a particular person. *Such an engagement with the beloved cannot be reduced to the metonymy of desire driven by lack*. The responsibility assumed by the lover through speech does not rest on something he lacks, but rather on his attention to the specificity of the soul of the beloved. By implication, at least, the beautiful boy is appreciated, loved, and addressed for the

uniqueness of his soul, even if such attention is aimed at the begetting of truth in beauty as the *Symposium* describes the process.

In sum, then, Plato leaves us with three related but differently nuanced positions on love and desire in each of his dialogues. In logical, but not chronological, order: first, in the *Symposium* love is reduced to desire, which arises from a serial lack that leads to a series of substitutions on the path towards its culmination in the general Form of Beauty rather than a particular, beautiful body; second, the demonstration of the superiority of speech over writing in the *Phaedrus* produces a tension with the *Symposium*, since the responsibility of love towards the singular person in conversation celebrates the specificity and uniqueness of the beloved rather than his status as a point of absence or lack; finally, in the *Lysis* even Socrates is forced to admit the limits of the dialectical method – he does not know what a friend is, even though friends assuredly recognize their reciprocal friendship. In the later conversations of the *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium* this position is at least implicitly acknowledged by the fact that Socrates resorts to myth to explicate the nature of love. But he never quite abandons the fundamental dialectical position that love is desire.

This essentialising of love as desire marks almost the entire tradition of the representation of erotic love: from the Roman philosopher Plotinus's aspirational "pang of desire" to become one with the ultimate Being in the third century BC;⁴ through the Augustan poet Ovid's transformational, uncontrollable violence of wanting in his *Metamorphose*; to the courtly tradition with its roots in St. Augustine's insistence on love's necessary transcendence of the world of flesh, manifest in forms of idealizing desire in the troubadours, Dante and Petrarch in the late Middle Ages. Roland Barthes sums up desire's essentialised basis in absence with a rhetorical question: "Isn't desire the same, whether the object is present or absent? Isn't the object *always* absent? – always, that is to say, elusive, unintrojected, unmastered, unpossessed?"⁵

Each of the strands of this tradition finds expression in parts of Shakespeare. But Shakespeare is also concerned with a counter-view, in which desire is transformed into love. And this has significant implications for our understanding of the way in which desire and love are negotiated through language and action and language as action in Shakespeare's plays.

⁴ Plotinus, *The Six Enneads*, First Ennead, Seventh Tractate, www.sacred-texts.com/cla/plotenn/enno10.htm (accessed 28 October 2016).

⁵ Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill & Wang, 2010), 15.

Love versus Desire

The large claim of this book, which is fully substantiated only in the final chapter, is that for Shakespeare desire is indeed an emotion or affect – “Unstaid and skittish in all motions” (2.4.20) – but, further, that love is not merely a feeling. Love *involves* emotion or affect, sometimes different and even contradictory affects, but it cannot be reduced to any emotion. It is a complex attitude or disposition established and developed over time through forms of behaviour in relation to another person who is regarded as unique and incapable of substitution. Love is not fungible. The forms of action and attitude that it encompasses are exemplified by what J. L. Austin calls performative speech acts. Such performative acts – what Stanley Cavell calls “passionate utterances” – are like Plato’s notion of “speech” as opposed to “writing” in the *Phaedrus*, insofar as they *single out* another person for a response in kind. Love is therefore primarily a performative concept: love *acts* rather than simply is or feels. The theatrical medium of Shakespeare’s plays shows repeatedly that it is an embodied, performative concept.

Distinguishing between love and desire involves not a separation of the concepts, but rather the proper delineation of the relationship between them. Love is not radically separable from desire. Plato (or Socrates) is correct when he makes the grammatical or logical observation that love is always *of* an object. But Plato reduces that love *of something* to the *desire* for a thing that one does not have. The argument, which begins soundly, misleads by elevating the relational preposition into an absolute lack – one cannot love what one has, so one has to desire in a serial way, moving from one object that one lacks to another, similarly absent, one. The Platonic story turns this restlessness into a virtue: the lover moves step-by-step, object by desirable object, to attain a re-union with ultimate Beauty only in the ultimate instance, divorced in the end from any actual person. Furthermore, without Plato’s teleological metaphysics, desire is trapped in an endless quest that by definition has to be carried along a chain of deferred satisfaction without end: what Jacques Lacan calls a *metonymic* chain of essential lack.⁶

⁶ Tzvetan Todorov calls this logic of desire “diabolical” (Tzvetan Todorov, *Imperfect Garden: The Legacy of Humanism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002), 123). It reduces the person loved to a mere means, whereas in his own avowedly humanist view, love should focus on the beloved as a singular end. One should not love anyone for what they represent or promise but for their unique being – for themselves. As we shall see, however, it is less than clear what it might mean to love someone “for his or her self”.

If desire is the expression of a permanent and ineradicable emptiness – of wanting what one does not have – then what is love? There are many historically divergent answers to this question, but the clearest one made in the name of humanism regards love proper as the dedication of oneself to a unique person who is cherished *for themselves* – for his or her singular, irreplaceable being. Desire is for something lacking; love is for a unique person who is an end in him- or herself. In his defence of humanism, Todorov pointedly calls this singularity “the finality of the *you*” (*Imperfect Garden*). This *you* stops the Lacanian regress at a specially regarded person who is not a pathway or lure to something else. But it has its own problems, of which Shakespeare is presciently aware, and which I will examine in due course.

All of Shakespeare’s erotic relationships involve relations of desire, and such desire is not always convincingly transformed into love in the sense in which I wish to differentiate it from desire. The reasons are generic and conceptual. Drama, especially comedy, tends to rest on the uncertain intensities of desire rather than the extended and active behaviour required by love. Shakespeare’s comedies tend to end at the point at which desire is about to be satisfied but love has not yet had the time to settle (if it is ever settled). Many plays, notably *As You Like It*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Twelfth Night*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Troilus and Cressida* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, offer a dialogical interplay of what I shall call, after Cavell, “passionate utterance” and action through which desire is incessantly embodied and re-embodied *as love*. Of all the romantic comedies, only *Love’s Labour’s Lost* breaks off unconventionally before the satisfactions of desire to gesture towards what is required for love to prove itself – as a form of sustained action rather than mere affective intensity, in a prolonged future of dedicated behaviour that extends beyond the limited timeframe of a play (or perhaps even a lifetime):

BEROWNE Our wooing doth not end like an old play.
 Jack hath not Jill. These ladies’ courtesy
 Might well have made our sport a comedy.
 KING Come, sir, it wants a twelvemonth and a day,
 And then ’twill end.
 BEROWNE That’s too long for a play.

(*Love’s Labour’s Lost*, 5.2.947–52)⁷

⁷ All quotations from Shakespeare’s plays and long poems are from Barbara Mowatt and Paul Werstine (eds.), “Folger Digital Texts,” www.folgerdigitaltexts.org.

A striking feature of Plato's analysis of love and Lacan's meditations on desire is their shared interest in the imbrication of love/desire in *language*: the Socratic attempt to wrest the concept of love from grammar is echoed by Lacan's (in)famous pronouncement that the unconscious is structured like a language and by his claim that to speak is to demand to be loved.⁸ Neither holds that love or desire and language are identical, but each posits a compelling relation between love/desire and language in the sense that the elusive nature of *eros* may be discerned by following the turns of language. Rachel Carson's beautiful disquisition on desire via the classical Greek lyric poets (like Plato's *Phaedrus*) draws direct analogies between *eros* and language: from her argument that "as *eros* insists on the edges of human beings and the spaces between them, the written consonant imposes edge on the sounds of human speech and insists on the reality of that edge", to the ways in which desire and meaning never quite reach their respective objects: "The words we read and the words we write never say exactly what we mean. The people we love are never just as we desire them. The two *symbola* never perfectly match. *Eros* is in between."⁹ Carson emphasizes the aspects of language that encompass difference and distance; Cavell the ways in which language in action may overcome difference. The two are always in tension; they always work together, as do love and desire.

I am thus prompted by this double cue at the two ends of the history of *eros* (Plato and Lacan) to explore love through the extraordinary intensities of Shakespeare's language and the fundamentally constitutive rather than merely instrumental force of discourse in the engagement between his characters in love. My concern is thus primarily conceptual: following Socrates's initiating analysis of the relation between love and desire, I trace that imbrication through the rich and complex dynamics of interactive dialogue in the plays and sonnets. Plato's initiating conceptual analysis and Lacan's account of the metonymy of desire, taken together with the linguistic turn of philosophy in the twentieth century,¹⁰ offer different conceptual frameworks for the exploration of *eros* in Shakespeare as an

⁸ Lacan repeats the claim that the unconscious is structured like a language in many texts. A representative place is Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Bk. 20: On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000). For the claim that all speech is a demand for love, see Bruce Fink, *Lacan on Love: An Exploration of Lacan's Seminar VIII, Transference* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015), 38 passim.

⁹ Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet* (Champaign, Ill.: Dalkey Archive Press, 1998), 55, 109.

¹⁰ Exemplified by Ludwig Wittgenstein, J. L. Austin, Jacques Derrida, Stanley Cavell and William Reddy.

intertwining of emotion, thought, attitude and *linguistic action* that cannot be comprehended by any single theory or historical narrative, but which may be illuminated by the deep involvement of language in human subjectivity and its drives. Though it is a noun, Carson reminds us, *eros* acts as a verb.¹¹

One way of writing about love in Shakespeare would be to offer an historicist account that emphasized his distance from us. Such an account would seek to reduce the concept of *eros* in the poems and plays to what is assumed to be the theory of love as a passion or affect historically available to Shakespeare and his contemporaries – chiefly in the Galenic humoral psychology of writers such as Nicholas Coeffeteau, Thomas Wright and Robert Burton.¹² Another would be to read Shakespeare through the lens of the contemporary Freudianism of Lacan, the renewed Humanism of Todorov, or the radical politics of Queer Studies.¹³ Yet another might treat “Shakespeare on Love and Lust” or “Love and Sex in Shakespeare” from the perspective of popular, modern notions of love, sex and desire, untrammelled by historicist scholarship and the complexities of theory, philosophy or psychoanalysis.¹⁴

¹¹ Carson, *Eros*, 17.

¹² See, for example, Gail Kern Paster, *Humoring the Body: Emotions and the Shakespearean Stage* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2004), Gail Kern Paster, Katherine Rowe, and Mary Floyd-Wilson, *Reading the Early Modern Passions: Essays in the Cultural History of Emotion* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), and Michael C. Schoenfeldt, *Bodies and Selves in Early Modern England: Physiology and Inwardness in Spenser, Shakespeare, Herbert, and Milton* (Cambridge University Press, 1999). There has recently been a reaction to what some regard as an overly reductive historicism in this approach, and which seeks to see emotion and passion in Shakespeare’s texts in the relationship between a historical scholarship and the challenges of the representation of emotion in present-day performance. See Bridget Escolme, *Emotional Excess on the Shakespearean Stage: Passion’s Slaves* (London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2013), and Richard Meek and Erin Sullivan (eds.), *The Renaissance of Emotion: Understanding Affect in Shakespeare and His Contemporaries* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015).

¹³ See Jonathan Goldberg, *Queering the Renaissance* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1993), Bruce R. Smith, *Homosexual Desire in Shakespeare’s England: A Cultural Poetics* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1994), Valerie Traub, *The Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), Melissa E. Sanchez, *Erotic Subjects: The Sexuality of Politics in Early Modern English Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), Will Stockton, *Playing Dirty: Sexuality and Waste in Early Modern Comedy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), and Will Stockton and James M. Bromley (eds.), *Sex Before Sex: Figuring the Act in Early Modern England* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013). The striking thing about these texts is that while they are deeply concerned with desire, they have no truck with love.

¹⁴ Allan Bloom, *Shakespeare on Love and Friendship* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2000); Maurice Charney, *Shakespeare on Love and Lust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001); and Stanley Wells, *Shakespeare, Sex, and Love* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). Earlier books on love and desire in Shakespeare include Alexander Leggett, *Shakespeare’s Comedy of Love* (London: Routledge, 1974), Arthur Kirsch, *Shakespeare and Experience of Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge