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What is this Thing Called Love?

There is nothing that the human heart more irresistibly seeks than an object to which to attach itself.

William Godwin

The pursuit of love has engaged human energy for centuries. That comment implicitly assumes, as a great deal of writing about love also does, that the emotion which we describe in the West as 'love' is about personal, emotional relationships. We no longer also assume that all love is about heterosexual love (or between people of the same age, race and religion) but our association of love is with an individual relationship which also involves a sexual relationship.¹ Although we use the word love to indicate our feelings for objects, situations and ideas, most people, in thinking of love, would probably associate the word with love for another, chosen, person. Despite the fact that for many people the greatest loves of their lives are their children (or their parents) it is love for unrelated others which dominates our present thinking, and expectations, about the subject. Indeed, some of the more famous declarations of affection (such as that of the biblical Ruth to her mother-in-law, 'Whither thou goest, I will go') are often subsumed into romantic discourse.

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The way in which we construct love, which is the subject of this book, has long been the concern of writers and artists. The highs and lows of love have been recorded on miles of canvas and forests of paper. From this tradition has emerged the consensus that romantic love is both deeply desirable and extremely difficult to achieve, let alone maintain. Thus we grow up, and are socialized into, a set of expectations about love which both endorse the aspiration of romantic love and are sceptical about its achievement. We hope that through love we will end the emotional loneliness of adult life but have to confront, like Levin in Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, the stark truth that the loved other is not only unable to offer perfectly realized intimacy, but is also another person. We associate being in love, and the state of bliss of love, with the love sonnets of John Donne ('For love all love of other sights controls'²) but seldom read the more sombre, later, poems of Donne in which he professes his recognition of the limits of earthly loves and passions.

Donne's acknowledgement of the disappointments, as well as the joys, of love was first published in the seventeenth century. Since that time 'love' has never been absent from the agenda of writers, artists and moralists in the West. Love matters, not just to us as individuals, but to society and the social world in general because it is the language, the understanding and the behaviour through which we organize our sexuality and our personal lives. It is because of this that love has recently acquired a place amongst the concerns of sociologists and social historians: 'love', it would seem, is becoming more problematic and is giving rise to confusions and contradictions which have a destabilizing effect on the social world. It is this question which is the concern of this book: what does 'love' mean to us at the beginning of the twenty-first century and is it an emotion, and an expectation, which we should abandon or continue to pursue? Dare we entertain the idea of a world without love and could another vocabulary, in which words such as care, commitment and desire were more often used, actually make us happier? Would we, could

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we, live more fulfilled and contented lives without the emotional state which we describe as 'love'?

The possibility that individual happiness, organized around 'love', is becoming more difficult to achieve in the West (despite generally improved living standards, access to contraception and the economic emancipation of women) has begun to attract considerable attention, not least because the problems of 'love' have been linked to what is described as the 'breakdown' of the family. That breakdown has been much exaggerated, and often viewed – as is much else in the contemporary West – in an ahistorical way, so that there is little understanding of long-term instabilities in the family (resulting, for example, from death or migration). But social pundits concerned with what they see as the increasing fragmentation of social life are quick to identify 'selfish' attitudes to personal life and love. Against these voices (amongst which can be identified that of the journalist Melanie Phillips) are sociologists such as Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck who have argued that personal life has become not more chaotic than ever, but more democratic.³ In the view of Giddens, 'intimacy' (by which he means primarily, although not exclusively, relations between women and men) is being transformed in ways which offer the possibility of a 'pure' relationship. (A 'pure' relationship is one founded upon the autonomy of both parties and their ability to relate to each other as separate, functionally and emotionally competent adults). For Giddens, love is no longer tied to sexuality and those 'pure' relationships which he values are entered into for 'their own sake'.⁴ Like the majority of writers on love, he shares much of the Western language of love, in which love between adults is essentially a matter of individualized attraction, although one which can now exist within a new moral framework. The cornerstone of that framework, the new 'democracy' of intimacy, is that the relationship need only continue, in Giddens's words, 'in so far as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfaction for each individual to stay within it'.

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Cynics (both feminist and otherwise) might argue that this is exactly how many men have always viewed relationships with women, as relationships that need only continue as long as they are satisfactory to men. The difference – according to Giddens – is that now the ending of relationships need not take place within a rhetoric of blame or the assumption of the economic abandonment of women. It is tempting to read Giddens's account of the democratization of intimacy as an optimistic male rationalization (and legitimation) of a new order of Western gender relations made possible by the economic emancipation of women. But for Giddens the new order benefits women as much as men, a view challenged by, amongst others, Wendy Langford. Her case, to be discussed later, emphasizes many of the persisting inequalities of gender which Giddens tends to minimize. But the argument here is less with the politics of gender in Giddens than with his account of the politics of the social world. There is a consensus amongst sociologists that there has been a shift in late modernity towards a new rhetoric and a new set of expectations about some aspects of gender relations. It would be extraordinary if the 'language of love' did not change as other aspects of the social world change. Nevertheless, the question of how, and why, that language changes remains problematic. To assume, as Giddens does, that the 'new' organization of love in the twenty-first century will create more democratic societies and civil cultures is extraordinarily optimistic. To suppose that changes in the private world will bring about corresponding changes in the public world is to ignore the strength of those public institutions and structures which are far from democratic.

When demonstrators against the war in Vietnam famously confronted the National Guard of the United States by placing flowers in the barrels of guns, they created a vivid image about power in the West. Those demonstrators contributed to the ending of the war in Vietnam; but whilst political opinion was changed, the structural order of political power was not. Since the 1960s individuals in

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the West have known greater personal freedoms, albeit in terms which have been identified as ‘repressive tolerance’. As those critics of mainstream Western culture have argued, this greater personal sexual freedom has neither changed the absolute sum of human happiness or unhappiness (although the forms may have shifted) nor made significant inroads on the structural distribution and organization of economic and political order. On the contrary, and a theme for discussion here, it is possible to argue that greater sexual ‘freedom’ has increased personal dissatisfaction and had a destabilizing effect on everyday life. The expectations of romance and sexual pleasure within intimacy which are the subject matter of the various dream factories of the West endlessly threaten the fragile possibilities of human happiness. Perhaps most significantly, we have become less able to recognize the limits and boundaries of love: the ‘democratization of intimacy’ is thus more about the democratization of the miseries and the disappointments of love than about an increase in its many rich pleasures.

Thus the discussion of love has come to the attention of social pundits largely because it has become clear that love, and most specifically heterosexual love, has disruptive social consequences. As a consequence of being ‘in love’, or falling ‘out of love’, individuals change partners, move house and leave behind jobs, homes and children. Economists in the United States have remarked that divorce and separation are good for business, in that people who leave home generally have to engage in setting up another home. In setting up this new home (and often beginning to live – as increasing numbers of people do – alone) individuals have to buy all those household goods they left behind or did not manage to take with them. The slogan published in Britain in the Second World War (‘Careless Talk Costs Lives’) was never more true than in the contemporary politics of love and romance. The fateful admission of love, or its lack, literally changes lives and creates consequences not just for the individuals concerned, but for those others

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involved in the relationship. Those 'others' are notably children, who may grow up, particularly in Britain and the United States, as the results of vanished 'loves'. The familiar mantra of 'Mummy/Daddy and I no longer love each other, but will always love you' has become part of the lives of many children, who experience in real life the vagaries of love portrayed in television soap operas. It would no doubt startle many viewers if a character in the British soap opera *EastEnders* admitted that even though 'love' had disappeared from a relationship, they would nevertheless stay in it for the sake of the children, social respectability or religious principles. Love, or its absence, as an acceptable motive for individual action has become part of the expectations of our culture. We take it as a form of socially sanctioned and accepted individual entitlement that the presence or absence of love legitimates the establishment or the ending of personal relationships; the moral force of the idea that parents should stay together for the 'sake of the children' has largely disappeared from our culture.

Thus, as many of us experience the increasingly diverse and general controls on our lives associated with complex industrial societies, love, and our love relationships, may appear to be becoming less controlled as moral codes and taboos change or fragment. As women and men of the twenty-first century we are allowed to go out and look for love, on what is supposed to be the newly level playing field of relations between women and men. There is no longer the expectation that men will express feelings of love in order to persuade women into sexual relationships or that women will exchange sexuality for love. That such exchanges still occur, and are still part of many people's assumptions, does not invalidate the fact that the expectation is no longer held as the normal or single discourse of love. It is permissible for sexual desire to be openly expressed by both women and men and for a separation to be made between sexual desire and romantic and emotional attachment. A popular culture exists throughout the

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West in which fleeting sexual encounters are regarded, if not as necessarily normal or desirable, then certainly as commonplace. This has allowed moral judgements about sexual behaviour to move to other aspects of sexuality, such as those of deceit or care with contraception. Establishing a morality for the 'new' sexuality remains a contentious issue: but in that debate 'love' still plays a considerable part, in that in the absence of other forms of social control it remains an informal, but generally recognized, sanction.⁵

Love, in our present use of the term, can only be seen as a changing code. To look for 'real love' in the history of love (or the literature about it) will lead us, assuredly, to find many different meanings and expressions of the word. The fixed point in this context will be the question of the social implications of love. Sociologists (and historians and literary critics) have come to recognize that love matters in social, just as much as in individual, terms. As Stevi Jackson has pointed out, contemporary sociologists fall 'in love' and in part, no doubt, because of this have started to re-engage with a subject that initially attracted previous generations.⁶ Max Weber, Georg Simmel, Talcott Parsons and Jürgen Habermas have all noted the connection between romantic love and modernization.⁷ Indeed, nobody brought up and educated in European bourgeois culture could fail to notice that a generalized discourse of romantic love, as we now know it, first made its significant appearance at the end of the eighteenth century when women, just as much as men, become active participants in the discourse of romance. Just as ideas about human freedom and autonomy challenged the practice and ideology of slavery, so the language of romantic love began to allow women a greater, legitimate part in the negotiation of marriage. The language of emancipated individualized love contained similar ideas to the debate about slavery: ideas about freedom, liberty, ownership and personal choice.⁸ The expectation of mutual attraction began in which male and female partners had to make themselves lovable to the other party.

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This expectation, which is now part of the gender relations of all Western societies, began to take certain recognizable forms in Europe in the late eighteenth century. These forms differed over time and in different contexts, but have increasingly come to form the cocktail of explicit sexual desire and shared secular interests which is the basis of contemporary, heterosexual, Western love. This is not to say that romantic love has only been invented in the past 200 years: the history of love includes Abelard and Héloïse, Romeo and Juliet as well as those Renaissance nuns described by Judith Brown as being ‘passionately in love’.⁹ But these loves existed as much outside marriage as within, and what became distinctive about constructions of love from the beginning of the nineteenth century was their identification with marriage: an identification which marginalized other ‘loves’ and created the expectations of marriage which are currently being renegotiated. A contest over the meaning of marriage was not an invention of the nineteenth century, but what was a significant departure was the expectation that romantic love was an essential part in both the construction and the continuation of marriage.

Unfortunately for many people this contest – and discussion – remains unresolved. The history of how ‘love’ has changed in the past 200 years is the subject of the next chapter, but in order to illustrate the dramatic difference that can exist between individuals from the same culture and society about love we need look no further than the case of the marriage of Prince Charles and Diana Spencer. This unhappy relationship dramatized the different expectations and aspirations that can exist about love, and the disastrous consequences for individuals if they do not share at least a measure of common understanding about the relationship between love and marriage. As spectators of this marriage we could all observe the havoc that these different expectations caused. We know that when asked, before the marriage, if he was ‘in love’, Prince Charles could only bring himself to admit to a doubtful yes, and

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the qualification 'whatever love means'. The tape has been frequently re-run to show either the honesty of Prince Charles, or his deceitfulness. On the one hand, he was a man who was genuinely confused about encoded messages in the discourses of late capitalism or on the other he was a two-timing deceiver who knew perfectly well his real affections were with a woman other than his fiancée. The constrained engagement interview essentially talked away the kind of single-minded passion which many individuals aspire to in love: the most positive characteristic of Lady Diana Spencer was, to her fiancé, that 'she was very energetic' and the most important question about their marriage was that 'lots of other people are involved'. 'Very energetic' could be taken as a coded reference to sexual enthusiasm and energy, or it could be a reference to the kind of energy associated with children and young animals. As a description of a loved one, and a singled-out loved one, it is not particularly flattering. On the other hand, what we now know about the circumstances in which Prince Charles went into this marriage (and his comment at the time that a lot of other people were involved in it) may lead us to suppose that the comment on Lady Diana's energy was a reflection on his lack of it.¹⁰ A much older man confronting a young bride was faced, and hardly for the first time in recorded history, with the prospect of needs (both sexual and otherwise) greater than he could meet.

As episode succeeded unhappy episode in the sad saga of the Charles and Diana marriage, the global public saw a tired (both individually and generally) version of patriarchal, dynastic marriage confronted by a set of modern expectations about emotional life. Inevitably, critics, commentators, friends and relations lined up on either side of this contest, but there was little attempt to acknowledge the strengths, and horrors, of *both* sides of this domestic drama. The two central characters were world-famous, rich and privileged, but in their different ways each represented the considerable difficulties of resolving the question

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of both defining the meaning of love and showing how to implement that meaning. To begin with their respective families: each extraordinarily materially secure yet riddled with dissent and rage. On the Spencer side Diana's grandmother had virtually disowned her daughter, Diana's mother, whilst amongst the Windsors the children, and specifically Prince Charles, had been sacrificed to a homophobic regime of separation and brutality.¹¹ The personal misery inflicted in childhood and adolescence on all British male heirs apparent since the time of Queen Victoria was duly inflicted upon Charles, and what emerged was a man of erratic temper inside the faultless tailoring of royalty.¹² Charles, it was taken for granted, had to marry, and he did so in a way which demonstrated both the respect and the contempt for marriage which has long been a part of aristocratic understanding. Marriage is important as a social contract, because it secures succession ('the procreation of children', as the Church of England marriage ceremony states). Marriage is much less important as a relationship of realized and fulfilled personal love. Signing up to the contract of marriage as outlined by the Church of England (the procreation of children first, safety from 'sin' second and the mutual help and understanding of husband and wife a somewhat belated third) demonstrated a commitment to an understanding of marriage which has long been abandoned by many couples. The seventeenth-century prayer book was written a century before the first general emergence of romantic love in marriage and what it defines is an explicit distinction between ideals of union (which are part of a religion) and secular aspirations about behaviour. Reading the words of the Anglican marriage ceremony in the twenty-first century confronts us with a statement about marriage which is at odds with romanticized expectations.¹³

The expectations of Lady Diana Spencer were clearly for a 'modern', romantic, marriage and when she died there was a considerable body of opinion which suggested that she had been cheated out of this. That view obscured

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the reality of the marriage for the groom and his family in which the imperatives of succession outweighed other considerations. Diana Spencer's attempt at modernizing the British Royal Family ended not least because her view of romance and marriage was in many ways as anachronistic as that of her husband. The extreme individualization of her expectations, the interpretation of marriage as an exclusively individual relationship and the need for personal reparation through marriage were all part of one interpretation of the contemporary culture of romance. Given that these ideas are shared by many people, it was inevitable that Diana Spencer received, after her death, an extremely sympathetic press. Whatever the comments of her detractors, there is no doubt that she was mourned (for whatever reason) by millions. There was a general awareness that there was a considerable degree of projection and displacement involved in the public display of mourning, but even given this qualification, and reservations about the actual degree of public mourning, there was an unparalleled sense of general loss. Within two years of her death, Diana had become one of the great icons of the twentieth century. She had also become, in the essays of Julie Burchill and Beatrix Campbell, a feminist icon, a woman almost literally sacrificed to the tribal interests of the Windsors and betrayed by her own family and her husband's.¹⁴ Burchill and Campbell have little sympathy for the institution of monarchy (a sentiment which they share with an increasingly large part of the British population) but what shines through the accounts of Diana by both women is their horror at the emotional manipulation and deceit involved in the Diana and Charles courtship and marriage. Whatever they, or anyone else, may think about the behaviour of Charles and Diana after the marriage, the contract of the marriage, and its initiation, transparently involved the misuse of social power. However much Diana Spencer was a silly girl who envisaged marriage as a series of new clothes and romantic exchanges, it nevertheless remains the case that we expect, as a culture, that age and

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power carry with them the responsibility of protecting the young from their own vulnerability. The corruption of minors is recognized in our culture as both a moral and (in the context of institutions) a social offence; and this form of behaviour was not altogether far removed from that of the Royal Family towards Diana.

This argument – which would obviously be entirely unpalatable to those who found Diana's behaviour in the marriage unacceptable – should not obscure Diana's often erratic and narcissistic actions. As Elizabeth Wilson and Joan Smith have pointed out, Diana was not a saint and had a limited understanding of the world.¹⁵ It is not difficult to make out the case that Diana was an emotionally unstable individual. But in judgements about the individuals concerned (Diana was warm and loving, Charles was cold and deceitful versus Diana was selfish and wilful, Charles was well-meaning and kind) we lose sight of two issues: first, that in their different ways both Charles and Diana represented the many pitfalls of late twentieth-century constructions of love; and second, that just as the Establishment raged and closed ranks against Diana so those very similar conservative factions voiced concern – in debates about sexuality – for responsible adults to protect the vulnerable young.

Thus in the debates in the British parliament about the age of homosexual consent much was made of the issue of the power relations implicit in sexuality. The debates again brought to the surface the complex, contradictory views of our culture about sexuality and moral responsibility: some were prepared to argue that sixteen-year-olds were perfectly able to make autonomous decisions about sexual relationships whilst others put a much higher age on this ability. The issue is, inevitably, entirely a grey area in which legislation can intervene only clumsily and imperfectly. Nevertheless, the point of the debates is that they recognize that decisions about sexuality and sexual partners involve ideas, ideologies and discourses about questions related to love, desire and romance. In debates about these

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issues (generally related to questions of the age of consent) one thread remains consistent: that there are differences in power between people who contract or enter into sexual relationships. The argument that there should be no age of consent, and that there should be no legally enforced restrictions on sexual activity and access, remains deeply unacceptable to most people. Even if there is a tacit recognition that young people can be 'mature' (very often a code word for seductive), there is equally a strong sense that this 'maturity' should not, in itself, allow sexual activity.¹⁶

It was in the context of these debates that Charles courted and married his young bride. The marriage was presented, not least by the two participants, as a meeting of age and youth, of innocence and experience. Diana, presumably by personal choice, attired herself for her wedding in a dress which both concealed her body and kept her husband at a distance. She chose as bridesmaids and pages very young children and constructed an image of herself which associated her entirely with innocence, and a form of innocence which visually marginalized her sexuality. Thus the wedding dress and the clothes of the attendants suggested both innocence and distance. The rigid construction of the wedding dress disallowed the human form, whilst its elaboration (and extensive train) suggested a state of separation – literally, a virgin island. Against his bride, Charles appeared as a rigid figure of authority. Rather than marry in morning dress he chose military uniform, a uniform designed for the commanders of a vanished British Empire, and resonant with the associations of military rule and conquest. To say that the participants chose to marry wearing something approaching fancy dress suggests that they knowingly participated in masquerade. The problem, it became clear as the world became a party to the marriage (and the public was just as much the notorious third person in the marriage as Camilla Parker-Bowles), was that this was not fancy dress, but dress which called up living, real fantasies and not departed ones. The bride saw herself as an object of romance, the bridegroom saw himself as

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the embodiment of a particular kind of tradition. The former validated, indeed demanded, individual romantic choice, whilst the latter demanded the relegation of the individual to the general and the abstract. The television cameras which tried so hard to avoid the ranks of the divorced and separated amongst the families of the chief protagonists could not entirely dispel the impression of the unhappy meeting of two very different ways of organizing and constructing personal relations.

The same public which watched the wedding of Charles and Diana was the public which consumed the millions of miles of print about the marriage and its dissolution. Two miserable people fought for control of the public and private agenda of the marriage. At the service of each party were different constituencies: Diana could command the services of the media whilst Charles could call upon the services of significant sections of the British Establishment. The media – and most particularly the Murdoch press – was endlessly anxious to absorb Diana into its own industry of romance, whilst the Crown was concerned to maintain ancient privileges and hierarchy. As the saga unravelled, it became clear that Diana had to rely on essentially individualistic strategies: she could appeal or speak or act as a person, but her ability to do so was entirely dependent on appearing as a commercially attractive and appealing person. Her access to institutionalized power was far less than that of Prince Charles, who probably realized the limitations of being a commodity, however apparently marketable. The essential and final tragedy of Diana was that of her belief in the power of romance to provide happiness and even security against the risks of being driven too fast by a drunken driver. It is all too easy to envisage the final conversations of Diana's life in which a rhetoric of love ('you'll be safe with me', or 'I'll always look after you') was more persuasive than mundane comments about the dangers of excessive driving speeds. In endorsing a masquerade of romance, Diana became an object of its potential for destruction.

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There now exists an extensive literature about the masquerades of masculinity and femininity.¹⁷ Both sexes, whether gay or straight, can be seen to be acting out these masquerades – of which one is romance and the romantic in various forms of public display. Part of our contemporary performance of gender is the performance of the lover or the loved, in appropriately gendered ways. Every time that Diana chose to lower her eyes and look demure and frightened, she ‘performed’ femininity. From the bows on her wedding dress onwards, she consciously participated, through dress and body language, in a late twentieth-century urban game. Her difference from her husband lay, in part, in his refusal to recognize that he too was performing a part. Prince Charles, like many people in the culture, identified himself with ‘normality’ and ‘the ordinary’ and saw nothing constructed about either his sense of self or his appearance. That all appearance, and behaviour, is to a certain extent dictated by our fantasies about ourselves is a recognition impossible for those who cling on to the belief in the fixed and stable self.

Thus in this unhappy pair lay two competing discourses about the late twentieth-century self: neither good nor bad, better or worse, but fatally different. Within these different discourses lay radically dissimilar ideas about love and romance, and with that an intense competition for command of the private space. Inevitably, Diana at first seems the more attractive partner: more personally fluent and more apparently accessible, she appears to embody current expectations about the terms on which we engage with others: terms of intimacy, accessibility and absence of a sense of social hierarchy. To touch people with AIDS and to kneel down to speak to children suggests democratic attitudes to others. The physical posture says equality and shared experience of the same planet. On the other hand, to shake hands with people whilst often keeping one hand inside the jacket (as Prince Charles is apt to do) suggests at the very least a limited wish to share physical intimacy. Indeed both Charles and his father show a

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marked inclination when in public to keep their hands under strict control, as if their hands might all too easily stray to forbidden places and people. There is, in the body language of both father and son, little of that willingness to touch, and allow oneself to be touched, which so differentiated Diana. Amongst a family remarkable for the wish of its female members to shake hands with strangers only when wearing gloves, Diana's reckless physical availability was immediately a mark of differentiation.

This sharing of the bodily space, and easy physical intimacy, is part of a Western culture which now allows, and to a certain extent expects, a paradoxical openness about the body. On the one hand, the body is a matter of intense display but, on the other, public expectations have come to assume scrupulously observed boundaries between bodies. Thus in public places, whether or not the body is clothed, we regard it as a basic right to remain literally untouched by others. The ideal physical presence of the late twentieth century is thus one which fluently performs its chosen sexual role but does not intrude in the performances of others. It is in this context – of a space for the body that is both permissive and restrictive – that people perform the rituals of love and romance for themselves and observe the performance in others. In the bridal pair of July 1981 millions of television viewers throughout the world saw the meeting of two cultures about the body and sexuality. Diana was instantly recognizable as a person of the late twentieth century: apparently easy with her physical self, fluent in her movements and conversant with the meanings attached to the body in the contemporary West. That this was not entirely the case was not immediately known: but as it became known and as the 'facts' of Diana's anorexia and bulimia became publicly available, what remained was a sense of a person who – whatever her personal problems with her own body – nevertheless lived within a particular, modern code of the body. This code recognized the ironic and performative possibilities of dress; it was conversant with ideas about the juxtaposition of

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different kinds of dress; and, above all else, it made apparent the recognition of the self-consciousness of dress and physical appearance. When Diana dressed up as an erstwhile teenager, or the Madonna-like mother, the public recognized an engagement with performance through dress.

Performing ourselves has become a known and acknowledged part of both theoretical and actual practice.¹⁸ Part of that performance, as much as it involves dress, bodily behaviour and public demeanour, also involves performing certain key social rituals. This aspect of our social lives has been noted for some time by sociologists: Erving Goffmann and subsequently Harold Garfinkel showed how, through the performance of certain forms of behaviour, we can convince others about our social identity.¹⁹ For Goffmann, this ability was described most vividly in the context of *Asylums*, in Garfinkel's case his most dramatic instance was that of the male individual who convinced others that 'he' was actually female.²⁰ Cross-gender impersonation – and cross-class impersonation – have a long history and literature in the West, and what both show is that it is possible by the demonstration of certain key social characteristics to convince others of our social identity.²¹ This tradition – often forgotten in discussions such as those by Judith Butler – assume that performance rituals are a distinctive feature of the modern world. Like much else that is assumed to be a unique feature of the contemporary world, performance as part of social life is a long-standing part of social existence. Judith Butler has focused on the performance by men and women of differentiated gender identities, but there are many other performances – related to class and ethnicity – which are equally important. When we say of others that 'I was taken in by their appearance', we say, in effect, that what we saw was the external self, which apparently resonated and seemed to meet our particular needs and desires. Our language about appearance contains expressions such as 'looking the part' and 'dressed for success', both ideas which contain the idea of 'putting on' a social identity.

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But it is important to emphasize that what is also involved here is a complex expectation: as much as we recognize that people can ‘dress up to’ certain identities, we also expect them to fulfil those identities.²²

Just as we ‘perform’ particular roles and identities of women and men, so we perform the roles of lover and loved. Thus Diana deliberately and publicly played the part of the damsel saved, or at least found, by Prince Charming. When this fantasy could not be sustained within marriage, and lacking as it did a partner willing to accept and play out a ritual of romance, Diana, and the public, chose another role associated with Western expectations of love – that of the woman scorned and deceived by a faithless husband. In the fiction of Diana’s step-grandmother, Barbara Cartland, the end of the novel is always (as is the case of much ‘great’ literature) the beginning of the marriage. As many cynics have said at many weddings, ‘That’s the easy bit.’ This note of caution, widely made and widely acknowledged, is the explicit recognition that men and women are brought together in marriage through fantasies as much as more mundane considerations. The West, at this particular historical point, makes much of its condemnation of arranged marriages, regarding them as part of the general barbarism of non-Western cultures. At the same time, the West equally deplores the high rates of divorce and separation that are part of heterosexual relationships. In this there is an extraordinary absence of social imagination – or even the ability to make connections between transparently related situations. Put simply, the West (in the form of its produced and everyday culture) endorses and validates romance, and yet cannot recognize that the encouragement of this set of feelings places a terrible burden of expectation on its participants. To be ‘romantic’ has always been associated with turning away from reality. In relations between men and women our apparently overwhelming need for romance would sometimes suggest that the reality of these relations is too awful to be allowed.

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Within the marriage celebrated between Charles and Diana we know that neither partner found either romance or lasting love. What each person confronted, after the honeymoon was over (or even on it, if the stories of the marriage are to be believed), was a person with whom they had, in the language of everyday speech 'little in common'. To many outsiders, what they had in common was actually considerable, given that both parties were vastly over-privileged in terms of material possessions and had lived lives in which their social experience was limited to a tiny fraction of the population. (The Windsors are often described as a 'dysfunctional' family, but given their ability to maintain their grasp on power and privilege this is hardly an accurate description of their social, if not their emotional, competence.) Indeed, in terms of similarities of class, race and culture, the two parties were hardly miles apart. But what they did not have 'in common' and what proved to be the undoing of the marriage was a shared enthusiasm for, and agreement about, the meaning of love and romance. Thus on public (indeed global) display was dissimilarity and disagreement about perhaps the most individually significant ideology of our times: the question of how we organize our personal and emotional relationships. As inhabitants of complex societies (or as inhabitants of any society) we live in a set of rules, expectations and norms. Many of us (although by no means all) are much more free from material constraint than we were in the nineteenth century, but at the same time we are endlessly constrained by the demands of the labour market.²³ We have become 'free' in certain aspects of our lives (in that we are generally free from starvation and widespread disease) but on the other hand contemporary normative structures assume levels of social and personal success that are often unrealizable. A culture of rising material aspirations has become the norm of Western societies and with this expectation has come a culture which assumes the entitlement to personal and emotional fulfilment. The 'pursuit of happiness' was enshrined in 1776 in the

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constitution of the United States, but it is only in the past century that the full implications of that concept, in secular societies which have abandoned the self-limiting idea of the ultimate love for, and moral authority of, a God, have become clear. As Gillian Rose has suggested in *Love's Work*, the self-reliance of modernity 'leaves us at the mercy of our own mercilessness; it keeps us infinitely sentimental about ourselves, but methodically ruthless towards others'.²⁴ As a comment on the Diana/Charles marriage, the words are particularly apt in that they accurately describe the brutal personal revelations about the other made by husband and wife. In the same broadcast, Diana Spencer sentimentalized herself as a 'Queen of Hearts' while she ruthlessly damned her ex-husband's personal qualities.

In the secular social worlds of technologically developed and sophisticated societies the appeal of ideologies of love and romance are deeply seductive. In them we think we can find an area of life which is ours and ours alone and through which we can validate other aspects of our existence. We were told, in the 1950s, that 'love and marriage go together like a horse and carriage' and that the ideal woman was one who is 'so nice to come home to'. Even as these ideas disappeared in the more explicitly sexualized culture of the 1960s, there was still an enduring expectation that individuals, if they were fortunate, would meet the man or woman of 'their dreams' and go on loving them until the unimaginable age of sixty-four. By the beginning of the 1970s it had become acceptable, throughout the West, for heterosexual couples to live together without the blessing of either church or state, and – increasingly – to leave each other if love disappeared. An orthodoxy (albeit contested) developed which argued that divorce and separation were better for children than long-term disagreement between their parents.²⁵ With this, and part of this, was the acceptance of the idea of marriage and long-term relationships as essentially matters of consumer choice, in which individuals had the right to leave

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unsatisfactory relationships. It was feminists who pointed out the structural inequalities of marriage, but they did so in a culture which was already losing its belief in that particular form of relationship.²⁶ The feminist badge 'Don't Do It, Di', at the time of the royal wedding of 1981, was designed as a comment on the institution of marriage rather than Diana's unfortunate choice of partner. In this emphasis feminists alluded to an older tradition of thinking about marriage than that of Diana: a tradition which recognized that marriage involved individuals but also had a known history of turning individuals (men, women) into the different people of husbands and wives.

By the late 1980s Charles and Diana had played their part in helping to discredit the very ideology of romance that had initially united them. Scepticism about romance is no new thing, but the royal couple helped to revive that traditional wariness ('marry in haste, repent at leisure') about romantic fantasies that had always been part of our culture. In this it has often been difficult to refuse romance, or romantic love, since to do so seems to embrace a cold-hearted attitude to others that is seen as chilling and dismissive of others and individual difference. We have needed romance, since without it we are faced with the prospect of admitting to certain material and physical needs which it is often more psychologically comfortable not to address. The characters in fiction – and real life – who have admitted to their material motives in marriage have been regarded as basely calculating. To say of someone that they married 'for money' or 'security' carries with it a negative association: that person becomes a 'gold-digger' and as such worthy of public condemnation. We have come to expect love and romance in marriage and/or long-term relationships. It is, for Western people generally, a sign of the superiority of our culture that we do not associate marriage with explicitly material or social convenience. We no longer assume that heterosexual sexual relations have to be regulated and organized through marriage, but we do expect that marriage is constructed through love. Thus whilst

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we have taken marriage out of love and sexuality, we have not taken love out of marriage.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century we thus pursue 'love' with unstinting enthusiasm. We want to be loved, and to love, and the word, and the expectation, is used generally and frequently throughout our culture. It is – as the following chapters will suggest – a word with diverse meanings. We have been told that 'Love means never having to say you're sorry' and Prince Charles has told us that although he used the word he had no idea what the word meant. Yet we use the word endlessly in everyday conversation and in written communications. It is a word used to influence, to indicate a particular position and to initiate actions. We love ice cream just as much as we might love our cat or the person with whom we live. We are, as people in our culture – very active as 'lovers' of objects, situations and even people. But the extent to which the same word is used to cover a multitude of possibilities should also warn us of the conceptual confusion around the idea. It is possible, therefore, that we love too much and too widely and that we have reached a situation where it is difficult to distinguish between different kinds of love, and the different contexts in which we might love. In this confusion we may no longer be able to distinguish 'true love' or 'real love' from matters of taste or inclination. It is equally possible that we never could and that it does not matter if we no longer make these distinctions. The argument here will be that current redefinitions of the meaning of love have become more open about the distinction between sexual desire and love, but are deeply confused about the links between love and morality. We are more able than previous generations to live our personal lives without threat of unwanted pregnancy, economic dependency and the social stigmatization of the unmarried, but a new moral order has yet to emerge. The theoretical fascination of love (apart from its endlessly seductive personal appeal) is its potential for both creation and destruction – a potential recognized by societies from

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the dawn of history. The question to be asked in the following pages is thus about the state of health of 'love' at the beginning of the twenty-first century: is it a redundant concept in a secular, sexually liberalized society or does it still exist, and should we encourage its existence, as a necessary, passionate assertion of our humanity against the calculative normality of late capitalism?

In considering these questions there are three issues which will recur throughout the discussion. The first is that of the relationship between love and desire. Centuries of romantic poetry and passionately expressed romantic feelings attest to the capacity of human beings for loving each other. The look across the crowded room (for example, in Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* the moment when Vronsky sees Anna and 'the blow falls') and the sudden recognition of the desired other have long been portrayed as 'love at first sight'. Science might tell us that we are smitten for biochemical reasons, but we assume that we have encountered 'love'. The more sceptical might suggest that we have seen a sexually desirable person: this is not 'love' but lust. But a feature of our contemporary Western culture is that we do not have to decide: we can desire and we can love. This raises a second issue which will recur here – not our freedom both to love and to desire but our moral confusion about how we do this. We have, to a significant extent, separated sexuality both from marriage and from the dominance of heterosexuality. Welcome though this may be, it nevertheless raises questions of how – if at all – we should now organize personal relations. The deregulation of sexuality is, for many people, an attractive option, given those long histories of the persecution and the harassment of the sexually nonconformist. Yet the absence of moral regulation may not involve the sexual anarchy of fevered imaginations but the dissolution of desire and eroticism. Laws (in the sense of customs and conventions rather than formal legislation) about sexuality may not threaten it, but actually underpin and maintain the force and power of the erotic.

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The final question which must run through any account of love is that of the relations of women and men to love. One of the most important features of the Enlightenment was to assume the possibility of human domination over Nature. However, the identification of women with Nature bequeathed a complex legacy of the relationship of women and men to love and desire, in which women have had to reclaim a voice for female sexual desire: we now appear to have reached a point where the Western social world does not formally distinguish between the engagement of women and men with love and desire. We still need to consider if a discourse of equality allows discourses of difference.