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The Story of Romantic Love and Polyamory

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ABSTRACT *This article explores the relationship between romantic love and polyamory. Our central question is whether traditional norms of monogamy can be excised from romantic love so as to harmonize with polyamory's ethical dimensions (as we construe them). How one answers this question bears on another: whether 'polyamory' should principally be understood in terms of romantic love or instead some alternative conception(s). Our efforts to address these questions begin by briefly motivating our favored approach to romantic love, a 'narratival' one inspired by 1930s cultural theorist Denis de Rougemont, wherein such love is exclusive, supernatural or promising transcendence, painful, impeded, and, ultimately, fatal. We maintain that, even once exclusivity is removed as an official component, tensions with polyamory's ethical dimensions remain: romantic love's other elements rationalize acting and feeling in ways that privilege a singular beloved above others. A tempting solution is to further revise romantic love. However, we are skeptical that this leaves space for distinctively romantic love. Our tentative proposal, then, is that polyamory's ethical dimensions favor rejecting romantic love as ultimately desirable.*

1. Introduction

This article explores the relationship between romantic love and polyamory. We ask whether traditional norms of monogamy can be excised from romantic love so as to harmonize with the ethical dimensions of polyamory. This question bears on whether 'polyamory' should be principally understood in terms of *romantic* love, perhaps in some suitably revised sense, or whether we should instead sever any essential connection between polyamory and distinctively romantic love.

Polyamory is more than just an openness to multiple loving relationships; it is a form of ethical non-monogamy (Section 2). Most obviously, practicing polyamory mandates embracing norms of open and honest communication between lovers;[1] and we likewise center a form of polyamory that endorses altruistic motivations for rejecting monogamy's exclusivity norms.[2] But we note that typical approaches to polyamory do not advocate abandoning romantic love; rather, the idea is to accommodate genuine romance without exclusivity. And why not? Romantic love is flexible. For comparison, consider that heteronormativity is increasingly being uprooted from dominant models of romantic love. Yet can we separate exclusivity from romantic love in a way that parallels the case of heteronormativity?

Addressing this question requires speaking to the nature of romantic love (Section 3). Here, we develop our own favored approach, one which will be broadly familiar to literary critics and which highlights the distinctiveness of *romantic* love. We develop our theory in response to an organizing challenge: any plausible theory of romantic love distinguishes it from the lusty feelings characteristic of new relationships while also recognizing the

flexibility of non-romantic friendships. After reviewing the depth of this challenge, we argue that literature is a natural place to look for the solution. Such love, we contend, is distinguished by its conformance to a story framework. This framework provides the narratival grooves which channel a lover's desires and emotions, bringing a specific story to life, until such experiences run their course and the story ends. Drawing on the work of 1930s cultural theorist Denis de Rougemont, we propose that romantic love's characteristics, detailed below, include that it is exclusive, supernatural or promising transcendence, painful, impeded, and, ultimately, fatal. This framework offers traction to answer whether polyamory, as we understand it, harmonizes with romantic love.

We argue that even once we excise (the norm of) exclusivity, there are tensions between romantic love and polyamory's ethical ambitions (Section 4). Tensions arise because romantic love's other elements, if left intact, rationalize (i.e. make intelligible from the lover's perspective) acting and feeling in ways that privilege a singular beloved above others. And yet an embrace of polyamory rationalizes not doing so. Thus a commitment to polyamory's ethical dimensions, which we take as part of polyamorous love, gives the polyamorist reason to reject romantic love. The article concludes (Section 5) by asking how this sort of polyamorist might move forward: revising their polyamory, revising romantic love, or dismissing romantic love. We tentatively favor the third option, preferring a more inclusive, expansive vision of friendship.[3] However, we note that romantic love might be preserved as the mere 'story' or 'fantasy' that, arguably, it should always have been.

2. Polyamory

Language surrounding love and relationships is flexible and mutable, but our inquiry regiments certain terms. To begin, a paradigmatic *monogamous* relationship is one between two lovers who commit to exclusivity in certain respects.[4] Following Justin Clardy, we call these *intimacy confining constraints*. These constraints restrict forming romantic and sexual connections with people outside the dyad. To violate such constraints is to 'cheat'. What precisely counts as cheating varies between couples. It is likewise puzzling how to classify certain relationships if they adopt only some paradigmatically monogamous constraints, or if they relax these constraints in certain contexts.[5]

While *non-monogamy* is simply a rejection of monogamy, we focus on *consensual* non-monogamy, and we understand such consent robustly: based on honesty and good communication rather than secured through manipulation or fear.[6] One form of consensual non-monogamy is *polyfidelity*. Paradigmatic polyfidelity features intimacy confining constraints analogous to paradigmatic monogamy but holding between multiple lovers.[7] One might view polyfidelity as a form of polyamory, but, aligned with some contemporary literature, we understand polyamory more narrowly as rejecting even polyfidelitous constraints.

Informed by Clardy, the polyamory we have in mind renounces intimacy confining constraints for ethical reasons.[8] Since intimate relationships can have substantial value both instrumentally (offering emotional and material resources to pursue life projects) and intrinsically (contributing to a meaningful life), we have potent reasons not to restrict those we care for from pursuing intimacy. Clardy's ultimate conclusion is that the intimacy confining constraints that define monogamy and polyfidelity are ethically wrong.

We instead adopt the weaker claim that there are strong ethical reasons to favor polyamory. However, this leaves open the possibility that these reasons could be outweighed by other concerns for some people and in some circumstances. Nevertheless, the polyamorist we have in mind is motivated by a recognition of the value of intimacy so as not to restrict their partner in the manner of monogamy or polyfidelity.

Yet might lovers have reason to further resist tendencies to restrict intimate connections? Discussions of polyamory often distinguish *hierarchical* and *non-hierarchical* polyamory. Jessica Fern describes hierarchical polyamory as follows:

> A subset of polyamory where there is a ranking system among romantic/sexual relationships and some relationships are considered more important than others … Typically, the people in a primary relationship with each other set the rules for all subsequent relationships, which might include restrictions on certain recreational or social activities, limits on certain sex acts or on how strong, deep or invested other relationships can become.[9]

Talk of hierarchy in a polyamorous relationship may simply describe how the relationship functions. But we (and current polyamory scholarship) are particularly interested in *prescriptive* hierarchy, wherein certain partners commit to privilege their relationship (e.g. regarding living arrangements, scheduling time, or sharing resources). As Eve Rickert observes, much of the literature on polyamory in the 1990s/2000s favored or assumed such hierarchy.[10] This makes sense given the cultural dominance of monogamy, for prescriptive hierarchy approximates traditional intimacy confining constraints. But consequently, one worries that there are ethical reasons not to impose such restrictions on the type of intimate relationships one's partner can form. As Fern reports, such hierarchies can create difficulties for partners labeled 'secondary' or 'tertiary', largely because they are not given equal voice; their relationship is subject to partial control by a third party.[11] Going forward, we thus center non-hierarchical forms of polyamory, assuming that there are ethical reasons for this approach. However, we don't insist that hierarchical polyamory is generally wrong, or even that it is not best for some.[12]

Another ethical dimension of polyamory, as we understand it, is a commitment to *emotional work*. Emotional work 'helps people feel and understand their emotions, communicate without confrontation, and contain the difficult emotions of others'.[13] Emotional work can also involve an effort to 'absorb' intense emotions felt by one's partners, without becoming immediately defensive or combative. Skillful emotional work likewise requires knowing when and how to check in with one's partner. While all relationships would benefit from this emotional work, as Luke Brunning argues, polyamory's demands in this regard are robust and distinctive. This is due partly to the (contingent) fact that polyamory doesn't conform to culturally dominant relationship models; as such, these relationships invite interpersonal and intrapersonal exploration in charting a new path. Furthermore, the structure of polyamory, allowing multiple lovers and metamours (i.e. lovers of one's lovers), is inherently more complex. For example, a person may be jealous about a partner's new relationship, or their own new relationship energy (NRE) may make it difficult to attend to their other partners' needs. In general, while such emotional work is challenging, it fosters improved communication and honesty, two central ideals of consensual non-monogamy noted above.[14]

To summarize, we foreground a more recent approach to polyamory that eschews traditional intimacy confining constraints as well as prescriptive hierarchies. Such a

polyamorist is open to the possibility that one's partner(s) may find additional loving relationships and likewise aims to negotiate such relationships in an egalitarian fashion. Additionally, they commit to values of honesty, good communication, and emotional work. When we speak of polyamory (or polyamorists), we assume a commitment to these ethical dimensions as constitutive of polyamory's loving ideals. Once again, we don't insist that this is 'the best' approach to relationships. Our view is merely that this approach to polyamory has substantial ethical attractions.

3. Romantic Love: Preliminaries

Polyamory is about *love*, but love can take many forms. As discussions of polyamory often center *romantic* love,[15] we explore the interface of romantic love and polyamory. But here's the rub: it is controversial how to define romantic love. We thus need to be realistic: we cannot systematically defend our favored theory, rebut rivals, and answer all important objections. We instead proceed by identifying an important challenge for any analysis of distinctively romantic love. We then offer our own favored theory which overcomes that difficulty and fits with deeply rooted cultural assumptions.[16]

The said challenge is to account for the distinction between romantic love and (non-romantic) friendship love. One may be tempted to explain the difference by insisting that romantic love involves sexual attraction. We reject this approach. First, most people who identify as asexual do not identify as aromantic.[17] Second, it isn't obvious why sex and sexual attraction couldn't be incorporated into one's non-romantic friendship.[18] So even if sexual attraction *tends* to pair with romantic love, it doesn't distinguish it.

We can see how elusive the difference is by considering the ways in which they might seem similar.[19] To begin, romantic love is in some sense *selective*. Friendship is, too. This selectivity arguably contrasts with other forms of love, such as of one's children, which may seem 'part of the natural order of things' and plausibly obligatory.[20] Additionally, romantic love may involve some kind of 'other-regarding' stance toward the beloved. For example, it might involve an appraisal (recognition/awareness) of the beloved's intrinsic value. Or perhaps it involves caring about the beloved for their own sake. But even if these are plausible claims about romantic love, friendship can involve similar appraisal and concern.[21] We might rather see romantic love as *bestowing* value rather than (simply) discerning existing value. Such a view has been developed by Irving Singer. As Singer observes, though, God's love (*agape*) (e.g. in Christianity) can arguably be viewed as involving bestowal, a divine gift.[22] It likewise seems that friendship love would be capable of bestowing value, if such bestowal is possible at all.

Perhaps other-regarding characteristics are the wrong place to look for a difference. Simon Keller, for instance, maintains that love involves a desire to grow and change with the beloved. He doesn't argue it as distinctive, however.[23] And this seems right; friendships can likewise involve a desire to grow and change together. More recently, Monique Wonderly argues that security-based attachment is 'an essentially self-interested attitude' that 'represents a distinctive form of needing another that can help to illuminate certain aspects of love'.[24] But, again, while Wonderly centers romantic love, she clarifies that such loving adult attachment relations can similarly feature in friendships.[25]

Another approach to romantic love emphasizes conformance (knowingly or not) to a 'script'. In contemporary Western societies, love's script might seem to consist in initial

courtship followed by physical affection, leading to marriage, children, and 'happily ever after'.[26] This script likewise tends to include various heteronormative, gendered, and monogamous assumptions. On this approach, one's stance toward another is legible as romantic love in proportion to the extent that (to put it roughly) one's desires and emotions conform to love's script. Of course, a person's circumstances (e.g. whether their love is requited) means that carrying out the script can look different from case to case. Yet the specifics of this narrative are important, as they detail the content or substance of romantic love. These details clarify how romantic love differs from mere lust or obsession as well as possible forms of non-romantic friendship.

While our own approach to romantic love is structurally similar, we don't focus on this specific script, or 'happily ever after' *story*.[27] It isn't clear, after all, why two non-romantic friends cannot find each other attractive, establish a relationship, get married, and have children.[28] As we see it, this model of romantic love is parasitic on the story that we highlight, for romance and marriage were historically conceived as separate and even at odds. Marriage was (fundamentally) pragmatic, a matter of shoring up socio-economic or political ties, while romance was a transcendent, emotional affair.[29] This tension borders on cliché, hinted at by the title of Esther Perel's well-known *Mating in Captivity*.[30] As we expound elsewhere, the vexed relationship between romantic love and marriage derives from the *retelling* of an older, tragic, love story in a different genre, namely the romantic comedy (e.g. Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*). As this comedy is the result of grafting historical, non-romantic elements onto a more foundational romantic story, focusing on the comedic variant would likely distort our inquiry. Yet for skeptical readers, we emphasize a modest dialectical point: we doubt that the 'happily ever after' script is even *prima facie* attractive from the perspective of polyamory and non-traditional relationships more generally.[31] We will thus explore this older, more basic conception of romantic love without expectations of marriage, children, or 'happily ever afters' that support social reproduction.

This account of romantic love is indebted to Denis de Rougemont and his analysis of this love's 'foundational myth', *Tristan and Iseult*.[32] We organize his insights in a list of archetypal characteristics, though the literary and cultural references are our own.[33] The promise of turning to literary and cultural analysis is partly rooted in such love's peculiar history, especially in the West.[34] The word 'romance' first designated a literary genre, denoting a chivalric tale of adventure; the term's connection with ardor or love affairs arose much later in the nineteenth century.[35] Moreover, narrative is built into the very word 'romance', as 'roman' means 'narrative.' Indeed, many scholars trace the rise in popularity of romantic ideals to the court of Eleanor of Aquitaine, who brought the courtly love tradition from the troubadours in southern France to the courts of Paris and then England. Romances dedicated to her, and suited to her tastes, include *Tristan* by Thomas of Britain, Wace's *Brut*, and the *Lais* of Marie de France. As the poet Chrétien de Troyes makes plain in the dedication of his *Lancelot* (an account of the infamous love affair), the Countess Marie, Eleanor's daughter by King Louis VII of France, dictated not only his poem's subject matter but also its execution. And the said Countess likewise commissioned the infamous tract of Andreas Capellanus, *The Art of Courtly Love*.[36] Hence the co-emergence of certain romantic ideals with this literary genre grants, we believe, special reason to look to literature in this context.

Furthermore, the psychologist Dorothy Tennov observes a marked similarity between romantic fictions and people's testimony of their experiences of romance.[37] This is no

accident.[38] Literature can move us, providing rich contents that prompt emotions. Anyone who has ever dreaded a character's fate as with Hector in the *Iliad*, or been thrilled by a couple's love as one might by Feyre and Tamlin's in *A Court of Thorns and Roses*, can attest to literature's emotional impact. And beyond prompting feelings, deep engagement with literature may even (re)forge underlying emotional tendencies.[39] Christine Tappolet puts the idea as follows:

> [E]ven if the world of fiction has been crafted by the novelist, the way we emotionally react to the fictional world is the same as we emotionally react to the real world. This suggests that the calibration of emotional dispositions that results from our engagement with fiction is no different from calibration in real life.[40,41]

We suspect that literature's emotional impact partly explains the tendency of literature to, as Eileen John describes, *initiate conversations* whereby readers reflect on questions of value and potentially refine or revise their evaluative beliefs.[42] While John, Tappolet, and others think that the influence of (at least certain) literature is often for the better, we take no stand on whether, or to what extent, such influence is good.[43] For our purposes, the key is merely this: literature featuring romantic stories often nurtures tendencies to experience desires and emotions that follow a distinctively romantic arc. We further assume that, if widespread tendencies toward romantic love are partly the result of popular and powerful romantic narratives that idealize this vision, then scrutiny of the stories themselves can be a way of gaining extra-literary insight about such love.[44]

Yet this turn to literature is ultimately warranted by its fruits. Our proposal is not that literature is an alternative to philosophical intuition and judgment but rather a way of informing and sharpening them.[45] The latter have the final word. We maintain that our model is attractive because it distinguishes romantic love from mere lust/obsession as well as the many possible forms of non-romantic friendship; it manages this while delineating what is clearly a form of romantic love. Any alternative account of romantic love would need to somehow accommodate this picture; or if one advocates some independent model to stand alongside ours, this would require an explanation for why such disunity is plausible.

A bird's-eye preview of our proposal's different elements may be helpful before delving into the weeds. The first characteristic, and most obviously at odds with polyamory, is that romantic love is exclusive, sealed by oaths of eternal fidelity. The lover promises to have only one beloved and to place their commitment to them above all other duties, commitments, or loves. Second, this love is magical, having supernatural power, rendering lovers passive victims. Lovers cannot help that they love or whom they love, and they are not, therefore, (fully) morally responsible for acting foolishly in love's name. Moreover, love's 'magic' evokes the feeling of transcendence offered by romance. Third, this love is painful. Just as passion denotes suffering (e.g. Christ's passion), so this overwhelming desire and longing is excruciating. Fourth, this love is impeded, requiring obstacles to sustain it due to the nature of desire, for to fully obtain that which one desires would extinguish or diminish it. Consequently, romantic love is paradigmatically illicit, violating widely accepted norms or obligations. And lastly, such love is fatal; it either ends in the death of the desire, which having been consummated is now squelched, or the death of the lovers, who die together as love's ultimate culmination, seemingly offering the transcendence they seek. Though these elements make for compelling stories more generally, once these characteristics are dampened or excised from this narrative the love reads as less

romantic and becomes more legible as loving friendship. After describing each characteristic, we then consider how it interfaces with polyamory *on the* (*non-trivial*) *assumption that the love of polyamory is conceived as principally romantic*.

4. Romantic Love's Character and Tensions with Polyamory

4.1. Exclusivity or 'I Only Have Eyes for You'

As was the case for the courtly love tradition, romance requires oaths of fidelity to the beloved. This oath surpassed all of the lover's other responsibilities, and thus they could only make one such oath. Lancelot's oath to his beloved Guinevere means that he cannot form any other such relationship, and moreover, that his commitment to her supersedes those to his lord and king, Arthur. Romantic love requires 'forsaking all others' and that love will 'conquer' all. This expectation of exclusivity is everywhere today. The song 'L-o-v-e' by Nat King Cole idolizes the love object: there is 'only one I see', the beloved is '*extra*ordinary', and their connection exceeds all other loves or 'even more than anyone that you adore'.

Polyamory requires the immediate removal of this element of romantic love. But, as will slowly emerge throughout this article, this exclusivity constraint is not altogether isolable from the other dimensions of romantic love. By contrast, heteronormativity has only a tentative connection with this narrative. Take, for instance, Netflix's rendition of 'Hallmark' Christmas romcoms featuring LGBTQIA+ couples (e.g. *The Happiest Season*, 2020, and *Single All the Way*, 2021). Notably, heteronormativity had a tenuous connection to romance in earlier historical periods too. The first half of Shakespeare's sonnet cycle features poems addressed to a male beloved, and Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II* highlights the relationship between the titular monarch and his beloved Gaveston. The problem with exclusivity, however, is that it remains at the gravitational center of the romantic tradition. That is, even if an explicit promise/oath to be exclusive is removed, other features of romantic love still favor feeling and behaving as if such a promise/oath were made.

4.2. Love Magic and Transcendence

Whether as the result of a love potion in *Tristan and Iseult*, or the proverbial 'love at first sight', romantic love has supernatural power. Lovers cannot help *that* they love or *whom* they love. They *fall* in love. Consequently, lovers are excused for the foolish or immoral actions they might commit in love's name. The potion unwittingly imbibed by Tristan and Iseult means that they aren't responsible for their love being adulterous, treasonous, and, arguably, incestuous (Iseult has married the king who is both Tristan's uncle and adoptive father). Romeo and Juliet's love at first sight provides an excuse for ignoring their duties to kin.

In fiction this characteristic of love has a practical role, rendering the story's lovers more sympathetic. But however useful in fiction, it doesn't harmonize well with polyamory. While polyamory allows for indulging in passion, up to a point, it favors readiness to actively manage it through emotional work. Love magic, by contrast, renders failures of emotional control not only explicable, but also as desirable expressions of genuine

romantic love, at least from the perspective of the beloved. One can easily imagine a beloved, for instance, taking some pleasure in discovering that their lover has been rendered incapable of thinking of anything else. Moreover, these failures are ultimately deemed *excusable* (or at least taken as mitigating factors in assigning moral reproach). To view oneself as passive and irreproachable in the face of love's magic does not align with polyamory's ideals.

Yet love magic has a second dimension. Most fundamentally, romantic love offers 'transcendence': either an incomparably heightened experience of the world or the promise of something greater beyond it. Desiring such transcendence with and through the beloved is central to what makes romantic love the distinctive form of love that it is. Disney's Jasmine and Aladdin sing of a 'whole new world'; in *An Officer and a Gentleman* (1982), the song goes: 'love lifts us up where we belong'. Lovers might maintain that only when in the throes of passion do they feel truly 'alive'.[46] The ballad 'Being Alive' from the musical *Company* highlights this transcendent quality, hoping for somebody to 'make me alive' and insisting that 'alone is alone, not alive'.

De Rougemont points to the origins of this characteristic in Manichean traditions. Here we find esoteric forms of (neo-)Platonism with Iranian and Orphic precedents, mystical Celtic or druidic traditions, early Arabic love poetry, and the heresy of the Cathars. All of these traditions center dualist philosophies that cast the world as evil, a place wherein the soul is trapped, seeking an opportunity for release and communion with goodness (e.g. God). To borrow Platonic language, the beloved is symbolic of, or an instance of, the Good, the ultimate object of love. It's unsurprising, then, that interactions with the beloved frequently assume a religious bent. The beloved's deification (or at least beatific casting) is apparent in love lyric, from Petrarch's Laura to Dante's rendition of Beatrice as an angel of Paradise. This tradition finds its contemporary erotic analog in the figure of Heart's infamous 'Magic Man' (1977) whose hands transform a child into a woman; and in Hozier's 'Take Me to Church' (2013), worship takes place in the bedroom and only the beloved offers absolution, as he pleads, 'Offer me that deathless death / Good God, let me give you my life'.

Romantic love's desire for transcendence creates difficulties for polyamory. For one, it rationalizes viewing the beloved as not only special but as offering something *better than anything else the world could offer*. Polyamory, however, favors openness toward love's possibilities (e.g. new beloveds). Moreover, polyamory on our construal rejects embracing hierarchies of lovers. By contrast, romantic love's elevation of the beloved seems intrinsically comparative, treating the beloved as the only means to experience transcendence. This characteristic illustrates why friendship love aligns better with polyamory's ethical ambitions. While non-romantic friendship love can feature a longing for happiness with the beloved, it lacks the other-worldly and comparative elements of romantic love that threaten to disrupt other commitments and relationships. Hence even without explicit oaths of exclusivity, the romantic pattern of thinking invites ranking loving relationships in a way that polyamorous love finds problematic. One could pivot to say that each loving relationship is unique, irreplaceable, or 'elevated' on particular/limited grounds, but this proposal aligns more closely with friendship.

4.3. Love Hurts

To quote Nazareth's classic rock ballad (1976), 'Love Hurts'. Or as de Rougemont puts the conundrum, 'Happy love has no history … What stirs lyrical poets to their finest flights

is neither the delight of the senses nor the fruitful contentment of the settled couple; not the satisfaction of love, but its passion. And passion means suffering.'[47] The notion of love as a sickness reaches back millennia. From the poetry of Sappho, to Catullus and Ovid, to the medieval troubadours, to the sonneteers of Renaissance lyric, to the Romantics (of course), and the contemporary pop star, this truism is among the oldest. Just as *passion* denotes suffering, romantic desire is excruciating. Its familiar symptoms include the inability to eat, sleep, or focus, emerging from a persistent anxiety about or obsession over the beloved. As Petrarch, inventor of the Renaissance sonnet, describes the emotion, 'Love kills me not, nor breaks the chains I wear, / Nor wants me living, nor will grant me ease'.[48] The rock band Halestorm articulates the apparent masochism beneath this experience: 'I love the way that it hurts / I don't miss you / I miss the misery' (2012). In the 2017 film *Phantom Thread*, the protagonist Reynolds Woodcock apparently only experiences romantic love when physically ill, reproducing the sense of powerlessness that he requires to manifest love's constitutive passion.

The intensity of this desire and longing, its sickness, its torture, is a byproduct of the nature of desire. We desire only what we do not have, and lacking what we desire is (*inter alia*) painful.[49] Plato's *Symposium* recounts that Eros was the child of Poenia (poverty) and Poros (plenty). And paradigmatically the beloved exists at a remove. For the troubadours, this beloved exists 'above' the lover – both in terms of their sociopolitical station (the beloved was often the wife of the feudal lord or king) and metaphorically (the embodiment of virtue). A troubadour's songs plead for their love to be requited, but, of course, for the beloved to descend from their pedestal is to *condescend*, to cease to be the idealized love object. As an inheritor of this tradition, Dante's love for Beatrice is never tainted. Dante loves Beatrice from afar, she dies prematurely, and Dante depicts her in the *Divine Comedy* as his angelic guide in Paradise. Aligned with this model, the lover is stuck, yearning, burning, aching with a desire that cannot be fulfilled. The contemporary poet Rupi Kaur writes, 'you were temptingly beautiful / but stung when I got close.'[50] Poet of the English Renaissance, Edmund Spenser, bemoans the 'iciness' of his beloved who defies the laws of nature, asking, 'How comes it then that this her cold so great / Is not dissolved through my so hot desire / But harder grows the more I her entreat?'[51] The oxymoronic character of lovesickness as 'bittersweet'[52] is figured by his 'exceeding heat', which, rather than be tempered by her iciness, causes him to 'burn much more in boiling sweat'.[53] And yet Spenser's articulation of the tortuous experience of love is beautiful; a 'wonderful device', his pain is the sonnet's catalyst.[54]

The tension with polyamory, of course, is that the obsessive, intense character of lovesickness distracts the lover from other duties and attachments, favoring a fixation on a singular beloved.[55] De Rougemont characterizes the thought:

> passion is by no means the fuller life which it seems to be in the dreams of adolescence … verily, [it is] a bitter destitution, the impoverishment of a mind being emptied of all diversity, an obsession of the imagination by a single image … 'the others' cease to be present; and there are no longer either neighbors or duties, or binding ties, or earth or sky; one is alone with all that one loves.[56]

Friends and family of lovers often complain that lovers aren't 'present' but rather distracted. All other emotional connections pale in comparison with that of the beloved; and this makes sense to the lover because their passion is oriented (as described above) to transcendence. Yet a healthy polyamorous relationship requires efforts to manage one's

attention in order to nurture multiple loving relationships. Consequently, the polyamorist would look to monitor or subdue these feelings in an effort to appropriately 'show up' for each partner. In fact, the shift from talk of 'falling in love' to 'new relationship energy' (NRE) is one way that polyamorists can begin to denude lovesickness of its distinctively romantic quality (rejecting its 'magic' and treating it akin to mere obsession or lust).

Our claim is not that polyamory favors an unqualifiedly negative stance toward passion; it rather favors standing ready to manage passion in order to make one a better *lover* on the polyamorous ideal of love. Polyamory thus treats passion analogously to parental love's treatment of affection in the following respect. A parent with multiple children should have affection for each and should stand ready to manage their affection for one child if it risks distracting from the emotional or material needs of another. Indeed, if a parent's affections prioritize only one of their children, it sounds strange to say that they better meet the ideal of parental love (even for that child). But the sickness of romantic love is different: someone is *more* romantically in love – better meets the ideal vision of romantic love – to the extent that their passion utterly disables their ability to think of anyone but their beloved.

4.4. Impeded Love

Any story requires obstacles. But romantic love requires obstacles in a special way since obstacles sustain desire and its resulting passion (without which there may be love but not *romantic* love). As noted above, desire depends on lack, and obstacles, particularly difficult/recalcitrant ones, sustain that lack, thereby intensifying desire and passion. So though counterintuitive, to desire the continuation of the experience of romantic love (in a clear-eyed way) is to desire such obstacles to prolong said emotional experience.[57] Unsurprisingly then, romantic narratives paradigmatically feature forbidden love. It is routinely adulterous, as in Tolstoy's Vronsky and Anna Karenina or Fitzgerald's Gatsby and Daisy. And if not adulterous, this love often violates some widely accepted norm. Examples include interracial tensions for Tony and Maria of *West Side Story* (1961), a class divide for the East Coast elite Oliver and working-class Jenny from *Love Story* (1970), or biological incompatibility for *Twilight*'s human Bella and vampire Edward (2005). Obstacles can take other forms, of course, including the proverbial love triangle (e.g. *Jules et Jim*, 1962, or Netflix's *Bridgerton*, season 3, 2024). Thus inconsistent with fairy-tale's promise of 'happily ever after', when such obstacles are removed, the story, and the love it sustains, is over.

De Rougemont's analysis of *Tristan and Iseult* helps to reveal this seemingly paradoxical desire for obstacles. He explains, 'What [the lovers] need is not one another's presence, but one another's absence … and the love they bestow upon their *passion* rather than on its satisfaction'.[58] Lovers love being in love, a persistent intensity of the emotional experience. And this necessity often produces some rather awkward plot complications. So great is the desire for obstacles, for delaying the gratification of desire (as this gratification is often short-lived), that 'this obstruction we are ready if needs be to invent or imagine'.[59] In *Tristan and Iseult*, the pair, exiled from court for their adultery, live together in the forest. When King Mark finds them, he discovers a sword between them as they sleep, a self-imposed celibacy. The lovers could be together, but they abstain, creating an obstacle where none exists. They do so because otherwise their romantic love would reach not merely the conclusion of its story but the end of romance.

Romantic love's narrative structure, requiring obstacles to kindle intense desire and passion, has several tensions with polyamory (romantically cast). First, this narrative encourages construing other demands on time, attention, affection, and so on, as obstacles to the beloved, and other partners provide one of the most salient candidates. Yet polyamory explicitly disfavors seeing other beloveds (or metamours) as obstacles: such would conflict with a lover's ethical reasons for rejecting intimacy confining constraints, reasons that are rooted in care for others and a recognition of the potential value of additional intimate relationships. Second, the practice of open and honest communication with all partners works against drama that might create (apparent) obstacles to sustain desire/passion for any particular beloved.

But to pair this dimension of romantic love with polyamory, why not just foreground obstacles other than beloveds or metamours? However, committing to open and honest communication as part of polyamorous love conflicts with a desire for obstacles more generally. Namely, this emotional work seeks stability and comfort rather than the passionate *Sturm und Drang* of romantic love.[60] Here one might observe that some obstacles cannot be remedied through such efforts. For example, polyamorous relationships often face impediments from family, society, and so on. But insofar as these are obstacles to *the polyamorists' relationship*(*s*), and not just broader familial ones, social ones, and so on, polyamory's commitment to emotional work aims to overcome them as much as possible.[61]

4.5. Le 'Petit Mort' *or* Liebestod *(Consummation and the Love-Death)*

Ultimately, the story of romantic love is fatal; it either ends in the death of the desire, which having been consummated is now quenched, or the death of the lovers, who die together as this love's culmination. In the latter, the *Liebestod* (love-death) requires that the lovers die together, ideally in each other's arms (e.g. Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*); though the *Liebestod* is rarely fully realized, even in its fictional iterations.[62] The benefit of this conclusion is that the lovers need not face the pain of their love's ending: the death of its constitutive passion. The French build this assumption into their euphemism for orgasm, 'the small death', both capitalizing on losing one's sense of self (like a Lacanian return to the state of pre-individuation) and the figurative death of the desire in its completion. John Donne's 'The Canonization' famously articulates the superstition that each orgasm removes a day from one's life. Romantic poet John Keats, writing to his beloved, Fanny Brawne, dreams of this *Liebestod* fantasy. He recounts that he has been mulling over two luxuries, 'your Loveliness and the hour of my death. O that I could have possession of them both in the same minute'.[63]

Often this desire for death finds articulation in death (or its representative) as a suitor. This conceit reaches back to Hades' abduction of Persephone, though it likewise includes Verdi's *Aida* and George Eliot's *Mill on the Floss*. Death personified is the protagonist of the film *Death Takes a Holiday* (1934) and its remake *Meet Joe Black* (1998). And in *The Phantom of the Opera* (1986), Phantom offers Christine a violent love of darkness. His song 'Music of the Night' encapsulates his mode of seduction, wherein darkness is the avenue to transcendence: 'Leave all thoughts of the life you knew before / Let your soul take you where you long to be / Only then can you belong to me'. This desire for death is thus narratively linked to love's promise of transcendence. Both love and death seek escape from the temporal world and its struggles toward some kind of bliss and release, to die and to be

born anew. Blue Oyster Cult's 'Don't Fear the Reaper' (1976) capitalizes on this romantic trope, asking the beloved to not fear death; through it they will be 'together in eternity' like 'Romeo and Juliet', transcending this world with a newfound ability to fly. The Romantic period saw the worship of death and darkness reach its height, especially in Germany. In Goethe's poem 'The Holy Longing', he describes the paradox: 'I praise what is truly alive, / what longs to be burned to death.'[64]

The love-death of romantic love exists in tension with polyamory. A person should not desire death *in the manner described* with a beloved since one has attachments and commitments to other lovers (present or possible). The case of parental love can help to clarify, though analogous points could be made involving friendship. A parent might stand ready to die for their children (e.g. to save a child's life, at the cost of their own), perhaps because they feel as if their children's lives are more precious even than their own. But parental love does not find its fullest expression in an unqualified desire to die if one's child dies, for one may have other children. By contrast, part of what makes romantic love distinctive is that it *does* involve a felt need to die, no matter what, if the beloved dies. If the romantic desire loses this quality, becoming more like that involved in parental love, it becomes less *romantic*.

To conclude this discussion of romantic love's characteristics and their interplay with polyamory, let's return for a moment to monogamy. Monogamy can more seamlessly embrace each of these characteristics, even if doing so creates friction with other *non-romantic* commitments or loving attachments. From romantic love's perspective, such frictions are even desirable, kindling passion. Yet the complication for polyamory is that certain ethical commitments come baked into its model of love, at least as we describe it; polyamorous love is already antithetical (and perhaps an antidote to) romantic love. However, it is possible for monogamous couples to try to embrace *some* of the same values (e.g. surrounding emotional work), which may create a similar pressure for them to reject romantic love.

5. Where Do We Go from Here?

This last section explores avenues forward in light of the motivational tensions that arise when embracing both romantic love and polyamory. One option is simply to accept the tensions between the pull of romantic love's narrative (*sans* exclusivity) and polyamory's ethical commitments. This picture preserves distinctively romantic love in not privileging the latter over the former. Perhaps this option would work satisfactorily for some; we don't mean to offer any empirical predictions.[65] But assigning limited weight to the ethical considerations may strike many as undesirable or even counter to polyamory's spirit. Thus one might consider *adjusting* polyamory's ethical commitments. One such adjustment permits *hierarchical* polyamory, whereby one places (or desires to place) *one* romantic partner above others (see Section 2). A similar move is possible between multiple lovers (i.e. *polycules*), if they are in love with each other and exalt their love above other actual and possible lovers. Here we only reiterate that these are moves in the direction of a monogamous/polyfidelitous structure.[66] They arguably fit better with romantic love because they restrict said love to the primary relationship.

Another strategy revises romantic love in an effort to alleviate the tensions. But as we have suggested, some of the most obvious avenues for modifying romantic love render it indistinguishable from other forms of love. Still, we look forward to future work on this front. Of

course, a reader might altogether reject our approach to romantic love. Perhaps some entirely different view 'does the trick' of harmonizing with polyamory. We have no general argument to rule this out. However, to show our hand, we argue systematically and at length elsewhere that our approach to romantic love is the most promising.[67] We doubt that there is an ultimately plausible alternative distinct from both mere lust/obsession and non-romantic friendship while being itself recognizably romantic (much less all of these things plus being an attractive fit for the central form of love featured in polyamory).

A last possibility, which we favor, resists centering romantic love. That is, polyamory's 'many loves' needn't be glossed as (paradigmatically) romantic.[68] Even outside discussions of polyamory, the movement away from romantic love has precedents. bell hooks, for instance, hesitates to categorize romantic 'love' with love more generally; its passive character is destructive and 'stands in the way of our learning how to love'.[69] hooks then describes her ideal: 'When we love by intention and will, by showing care, respect, knowledge, and responsibility, our love satisfies', or alternatively stated, 'true love' is 'a sacred alliance whose purpose is to help both partners discover and realize their deepest potentials'.[70] By embracing this alternative model, we relinquish what is distinctive of romance, namely (and put roughly) the intense passion and its (illusory) promise of transcendence, in favor of 'work'.[71] And this love shed of romance's problematic characteristics resembles deep, intimate friendships, ones that can include great joy/happiness, an intertwining of lives,[72] and sexual attraction.[73] What we have in mind, in effect, is a robust form of what has been called *companionate love*.[74]

Before closing, we wish to speak to those who may feel loss in leaving romantic love behind. Like many others, we are moved by beautiful artistic works about romantic love; and should we not indulge? For kindred spirits, we tentatively suggest approaching romance candidly as a story or fiction, something which speaks to our sensibilities, but which shouldn't act as the foundation for stable, loving relationships (particularly in the context of polyamory).[75] After all, as we noted above (Section 3), romance has an intimate connection to fiction. To be sure, some fiction purports to inform how we should respond to similar happenings in non-fictional reality.[76] But we engage with fiction in a variety of ways, including everything from satire like Swift's 'A Modest Proposal', to modern video games, to BDSM porn, and so forth. Insofar as people can engage with fiction in ways that aren't realistic, we believe this opens up the possibility of enjoying romantic fictions and even 'playing' romance. We thus close with a tentative thought: the trouble with romantic love – and particularly the interface of romantic love and polyamory – is that we treat romantic love as more than the fantasy that it is.

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NOTES

1 Brunning, "Distinctiveness"; Fern, *Polysecure*.
2 Clardy, "Monogamies."
3 See also Brake, *Minimizing Marriage*.
4 See Jenkins, "Modal Monogamy," 181.
5 See Fern, *Polysecure*, 111.
6 See Brake, "Loving More," 204; Brunning, "Distinctiveness," 514.
7 Clardy, "Monogamies," 21–23.
8 See also Chalmers, "Morally Permissible?," 225–6 ff.
9 Fern, *Polysecure*, 113.
10 Rickert, "Foreword," ix–x.
11 Fern, *Polysecure*, 113–14.
12 Fern (ibid., 231–8) observes that people struggling with attachment may have reasons to 'close' their relationship altogether, though this can be complicated by other ongoing relationships.
13 Brunning, "Distinctiveness," 513.
14 Ibid., 524.
15 See Brake, "Loving More," 204; Clardy, "Monogamies," 18–19 ff; Fern, *Polysecure*, 161; Yuen, *Polyamorous*, 15.
16 See Milona and Weindling, "Literary Essence," for a robust defense of our theory which we present here in abridged form.
17 Brunning and McKeever, "Asexuality."
18 McKeever, "Friends-with-Benefits."
19 A debunking strategy argues that the distinction between friendship love and romantic love has largely dissolved. Specifically, Laurence Thomas ("Friends and Lovers," 191) argues that while romantic love is traditionally distinguished by gender roles rooted in the courtly love tradition, the trend toward more egalitarian love has left sexual passion as the only candidate for distinguishing romantic love; though, like us, he ultimately finds sexual passion inadequate. We are nonetheless optimistic about the prospects for distinguishing romantic love from friendship love, even in an egalitarian relationship.
20 Jollimore, *Love's Vision*, xiii; see also Wolf, *Variety of Values*, 185.
21 See Velleman, "Love"; Frankfurt, *Necessity*.
22 Singer, *Nature of Love*, 270.
23 Keller, "How Do I Love Thee?," 173 n. 15.
24 Wonderly, "Love and Attachment," 235. Wonderly presents her theory partly as an alternative to 'union' theories (e.g. Nozick, "Love's Bond"). She seeks to explain how romantic love involves a 'need' for the beloved that is more promising phenomenologically and metaphysically (Wonderly, "Love and Attachment," 245). These criticisms notwithstanding, even if one thinks a desire for union, suitably understood, is essential to romantic love, we are skeptical that this would be sufficient to distinguish such love since friends can desire to merge. One may counter, following Caroline Simon's "Just Friends," that such desires tend to be more limited in friendship. Yet we suspect that this is a contingent artifact of the present moment. Our view, defended in depth elsewhere, is that robust friendships can involve desires to merge in the fullest sense, even today (cf. Brake, "Recognizing Care"), and historically such models of friendship have been prominent (see Montaigne, "Of Friendship").
25 Wonderly, "Love and Attachment," 245 n. 1.
26 See Jenkins, *What Love Is*, 46; Jollimore, "Love and the Past," 90–91. Berit Brogaard's "Friendship Love and Romantic Love" emphasizes the importance of scripts for understanding romantic love. But while she

helpfully describes the nature of scripts in general, she says little regarding the details of a distinctively romantic script, at least beyond sexual passion, which she indicates is inadequate (ibid., 171–3).

27 Other theorists prefer to speak of a *syndrome* rather than a *script* (Pismenny and Prinz, "Is Love an Emotion?"). For simplicity's sake, we reserve exploration of this distinction for another occasion.

28 We say 'form a relationship' rather than 'court' and/or 'date' since such terms may imply romantic affections. But of course, the whole issue is what exactly makes them *romantic*.

29 In brief, the romantic story that fits with the necessities of marriage and social reproduction is usually cast as the result of historical changes: the Protestant Reformation, emergent capitalism, and Enlightenment ideals. For a historical account of these shifts, see Coontz, *Marriage*.

30 Perel, *Mating in Captivity*.

31 Jenkins, *What Love Is*, chap. 6.

32 De Rougemont, *Love in the Western World*.

33 Beauvoir's discussion of romantic love in *The Second Sex* (chap. 12), published around a decade later than de Rougemont's study, gestures toward similar insights. However, Beauvoir's (entirely appropriate) focus on gender occludes the core of romantic love itself, a core which can be egalitarian. For other models with at least some similar beats, see Lewis, *Four Loves*; Finck, *Primitive Love*, 44–45 ff.; and Giddens, *Transformation of Intimacy*, chap. 3. That said, we take de Rougemont's view to be the most illuminating and persuasive. This is partly due to the importance he ascribes to transcendence (sect. 3), which casts light on the other ingredients of romantic love and highlights what makes such love distinctive.

34 It isn't clear whether de Rougemont takes romantic love to be distinctively Western and, in particular, a twelfth-century creation. Lewis claims as much in his *The Allegory of Love* (cf. 2–4), and though de Rougemont is often read similarly, we are skeptical of this interpretation (see especially *Love in the Western World*, 24). Notably, he points to similar notions articulated in Arab mystical poetry from Persia as well as Sufi traditions. He likewise highlights similarities between this cult of love or *cortezia* and Tantrism in India (ibid., 117). Either way, there appear to be non-Western stories that fit the narrative (e.g. the 'Butterfly Lovers' of Chinese origin).

35 *Oxford English Dictionary*, 'romance,' definitions 1, 5–7.

36 Parry, in Capellanus, *Art of Courtly Love*, 14–17.

37 Tennov, *Love and Limerence*, 9.

38 See Averill, "Social Construction," 91–94 ff.

39 A widely discussed question concerns whether emotions in response to what we take to be fictional should be classified as distinct from emotions in response to what we take to be real (see Walton, "Fearing Fictions"). We side with those who treat them as the same (e.g. Tappolet, *Philosophy of Emotion*, chap. 12). But our proposal doesn't hinge on this; it would still be plausible that people's ordinary emotional dispositions impact how they respond emotionally to fiction and vice versa.

40 Tappolet, *Philosophy of Emotion*, 224–5. For a detailed and empirically informed story about how this calibration might work, see Jenefer Robinson's *Deeper Than Reason*, especially her application of the notion of 'emotional memory' in chap. 4.

41 These observations apply most directly to works that invite users to respond similarly to how they would respond to similar happenings in the real world. Such fictions are what Shen-yi Liao and Sara Protasi ("Fictional Character") call *response-realistic*. They may not generalize to response-unrealistic genres (e.g. satire). See also Tappolet, *Philosophy of Emotion*, 224–5; Robinson, *Deeper Than Reason*, 159–60.

42 John, "Moral Learning," 739–40.

43 Although we are generally optimistic about the moral and epistemic value of literature, see Currie, *Imagining and Knowing*, for important challenges. That said, Currie allows that 'emotion is … provoked by representations of events as easily as by events themselves', even if, as he worries, 'there is no guarantee or even much indication of a correlation between the fictional representation and the real events themselves' (ibid., 186).

44 This is especially true if the stories tend to distill romantic love in a way that straightforwardly preserves and reveals what makes such love distinctively romantic.

45 Beyond the points that we have already observed, looking to fiction may prompt us to recognize, by way of memory, dimensions of our own romantic experiences that we did not previously notice. Cf. Peacocke, "Literature Expands." At the same time, looking to literature provides a check on our ahistorical assumptions and intuitions. In fact, we doubt philosophical judgments are immune from some of the same or related complications that Jenkins ("Knowing") raises regarding the role of self-report in psychological research on romantic love.

46 See also de Rougemont, *Love*, 282.

47 Ibid., 15.

48 Petrarch, "Sonnet 134," ln 7–8.
49 For a classical statement of desire's dependence on lack, see Socrates' discussion in Plato's *Symposium* at 200a-e. For desire as involving pain, see Plato's *Gorgias* at 496d.
50 Kaur, *Milk and Honey*, 87.
51 Spenser, *Amoretti*, 30, ln 2–4.
52 See Anne Carson's *Eros* for a similar reading of this lovesickness trope in classical poetry.
53 Spenser, *Amoretti*, 30, ln 5, 7.
54 Ibid., ln 12.
55 Lovesickness is similar to what Dorothy Tennov calls *limerence*. Like lovesickness, limerence involves obsessive, intense longing for a singular person (e.g. Tennov, *Love and Limerence*, 33–34, 114). As we argue elsewhere, limerence is plausibly the psychological basis for lovesickness. But they are not identical; lovesickness, unlike limerence, is only graspable in terms of the overall romantic narrative (or so we argue). Moreover, we agree with Lopez-Cantero ("Falling in Love," 121) that this 'limerent' attitude could likewise occur in friendships.
56 De Rougemont, *Love*, 145–6.
57 On this point, see ibid., 41.
58 Ibid., 42 (emphasis added).
59 Ibid., 52.
60 This can also be true for monogamous relationships, depending on the norms for emotional work that such lovers include in their model of love.
61 A reader might worry that the desire for obstacles makes paradigmatic romantic love perverse. We agree. But notice that the *desire* for obstacles isn't a non-negotiable element of romantic love. One could be in romantic love without this (e.g. provided they have exterior obstacles fueling desire and passion in the right way). However, if desiring romantic love is suspect, we probably shouldn't understand polyamory in such terms.
62 Dye, *Love and Death*, 7.
63 Keats, *Letters*, letter 139 dated 27 July 1819, 14.
64 Bly, "Holy Longing," 61.
65 Our claims are about the content of certain motivational states (hopes, desires, etc.) and actions/choices that they favor (i.e. make sense of or render intelligible). But how such motivations would play out empirically isn't a question that our methods are well positioned to answer.
66 See Brake, "Loving More," 207–9.
67 See Milona and Weindling, "Literary Essence."
68 Elizabeth Brake's articulation of amatonormativity might offer ethical and political reasons to embrace loving friendship as the model for polyamory rather than elevate romantic love. See also Jenkins, *Nonmonogamy and Happiness*, 18–19, 86–87. One complication, however, is that polyamorists might wish to temporarily keep the romantic label for political reasons. Since Western culture tends to deem romantic relationships more important, this descriptor helps the polyamorist convey the significance of their relationships. We thus acknowledge that there are reasons to talk in terms of romance as well as not to do so, and offer no final 'all things considered' view here.
69 hooks, *All about Love*, 170.
70 Ibid., 179, 182. See also Jenkins's similar concept of *eudaimonic* love in *Sad Love*.
71 hooks, *All about Love*, 183.
72 See Brake, "Recognizing Care."
73 See McKeever, "Friends-with-Benefits."
74 Arina Pismenny ("Amorality," 24) describes companionate love as a 'calmer emotional state, an acquired intimacy, understanding, and trust between the lovers' which is 'closely associated with friendship and involves shared values, strong and deep attachment, feelings of comfort, and a long-term commitment'.
75 Thanks to R.A. Briggs for helpful discussion on this point. See also De Sousa, "Love as Theater," for a similar proposal. We plan to further develop our model, which we only gesture at here, in future work.
76 See Liao and Protasi, "Fictional Character."

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