

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



Conceptions of Love and Death in Early Modern Literature

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As Michael Neill has argued, “‘death’ is not something that can be imagined once and for all, but an idea that has to be constantly re-imagined across cultures and through time; which is to say that, like most human experiences that we think of as ‘natural’, it is culturally defined” (2). We might, of course, argue that the same is true of “love” and “desire”. Philosophical, theological, medical and literary discourse all help to shape understandings of both love and death in different places and different periods. This special issue, arising from a one day conference held at the University of Leeds under the auspices of the Northern Renaissance Seminars, seeks to explore the cultural constructions of “love” and “death” in the early modern period, and in particular how these topics inform the representation and understanding of each other in early modern literature. Moreover, our contributors are concerned with the ways in which images of love and death provide opportunities to reflect upon broader religious, political and cultural concerns of the period.

As Neill’s argument suggests, constructions of love and death are not unchanging. However, they also do not merely appear spontaneously. Each of the essays in this special issue engages not only with the immediate contexts of the texts under consideration, but also, to a greater or lesser extent, with earlier understandings and constructions, such as biblical argument and story, classical philosophy, epyllion, confession, complaint and Petrarchan tropes of love. Classical epic and lyric, admired and imitated by many early modern poets, offered myths which linked our two main topics in desire that leads to death. Paris’s abduction of Helen in *The Iliad* brought about, directly or indirectly, the death of great Greek and Trojan heroes; Aeneas’s abandonment of Dido in Book IV of Virgil’s *The Aeneid* brings about her suicide; Ovid’s Narcissus’s rejection of Echo leads to her fading away to only a voice and shows

his own death as a consequence of unfulfilled desire, albeit for himself. Such tales act not only as the basis for retellings but offered early modern poets, playwrights and authors opportunities to use such well known tales for their own purposes. In Elizabethan erotic poetry such as Marlowe's *Hero and Leander* and Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*, "The potential of classical narrative was untapped to explore the transformative powers of sexual desire, the limits of artistic convention, gender and power roles, and to negotiate for the author the privileged status of creator of a world, not only reflecting but informing real life, a synaesthetic reality, whose laws are exclusively in the artist control of the master" (Sokolova 401).

Two of our essays, by Sarah Carter and Will McKenzie, examine Shakespeare's longer poems in relation to these "transformative powers" and responses to love and desire in and through death. In McKenzie's essay on Shakespeare's *A Lover's Complaint*, desire is necessarily masochistic and feminine, and leads to murderous and suicidal urges in the poem. The literal and metaphorical conceit of "Echo" is foregrounded as McKenzie examines the shift from violent eroticism between women to their self-destructive tendencies towards the end of the poem. This poem, in McKenzie's view, reconstructs gender distinctions precisely at the points where it seems to be tearing them apart. Echo is at once feminine and "the basis of a new mode of confession for sexual transgression". This confessional mode is at the very centre of the poem's representations of love and can lead to self-forgiveness and suicide. As McKenzie tells us from the outset, "the poem finds death in the heart of love itself". In contrast, Carter's essay – a classically-informed close-reading of *Venus and Adonis* – examines the actual and metaphorical functions of death and dying in Shakespeare's poem and argues that it is through its manipulation of Ovidian mythology that the language of death is used as an expression of love and physical desire. Shakespeare's departure from Ovidian tradition is key to the poem's ironies and, here, metaphors of death are "both unstable and contradictory", whilst love "is synonymous with life itself". Our themes of love and death are inseparable in Carter's account as she explores the conventional trope of achieving immortality through sexual love and procreation. Conversely, death is a consequence of denying love to others. This paper positions death as the central theme here, but, according to Carter, in *Venus and Adonis* mortality is linked to the very essence of life: love and sexual desire.

Beyond classical models, early modern literature also exploited cultural ideas that linked love with sickness. As Marion Wells notes, there is an "intriguing leakage between the medical and literary traditions [that] moves in both directions" when it comes to love sickness (3). Indeed, the Third Partition of Robert Burton's *The Anatomy*

of *Melancholy* (1621) is given over to the discussion of “Love Melancholy” despite Burton’s acknowledgement in the Preface to this Partition that:

There will not be wanting, I presume, one or other that will much discommend some part of this treatise of love-melancholy and object (which Erasmus in his preface to Sir Thomas More suspects of his) ‘that it is too light for a divine, too comical a subject’ to speak of love symptoms, too phantastical, and fit alone for a wanton poet, a feeling young love-sick gallant, an effeminate courtier, or some such idle person. (Third Partition 3)

In response to such objections, Burton claims that older, more serious men are better qualified to speak of love because of their experience, and “[b]esides, *nihil in hac amoris voce subtimendum*, there is nothing here to be excepted at; love is a species of melancholy” (Third Partition 4). In claiming that love-sickness is thought to be a fit topic only for the “wanton poet”, however, Burton’s comments highlight the “leakage” between literary and medical discourses that Wells notes. Whereas for Burton such sickness is real, though, for poets and playwrights it is often metaphorical, as Shakespeare’s Sonnet 147 illustrates:

My love is as a fever, longing still
For that which longer nurseth the disease,
Feeding on that which doth preserve the ill,
Th’ uncertain sickly appetite to please:
My reason, the physician to my love,
Angry that his prescriptions are not kept,
Hath left me, and I, desperate, now approve
Desire is death, which physic did except.
Past cure I am, now reason is past care,
And frantic mad with ever more unrest;
My thoughts and my discourse as madmen’s are,
At random from the truth vainly expressed:
For I have sworn thee fair, and thought thee bright,
Who art as black as hell, as dark as night. (Shakespeare 411)

Shakespeare begins with a simile, drawing attention to the comparison between love and sickness we have already raised. However, simile soon gives way to metaphor as the speaker becomes increasingly caught up in his love-sickness, eliding the distinction between fiction and reality. In this sonnet there is, it seems, a natural progression from love as a kind of fever to desire as death; as the passions intensify, so it seems do the

associated dangers. In our next essay, Jessica Dyson explores such differences between love and uncontained desire in John Ford's play *The Broken Heart*, reading Ford's reworking of Petrarchan metaphors of suffering and dying in love as highly politicised in a Caroline courtly context. Images of love deployed for political purposes are not, of course, new to the Caroline court.¹ The neo-Platonic ideals which occupied Charles I and his Queen form the backdrop to Dyson's argument as she reconsiders representations of chaste love, true love and desire to examine the ways Ford's play "negotiates between literary, courtly and court-based discourses of love and authority to make its own political arguments". The tyranny of desire stands alongside the abuse of patriarchal and monarchical power here, and both are forced to confront Shakespeare's sonnet's physician, reason, in the form of chaste love representing established law.

Whilst Dyson's essay explores Ford's literary, historical and political contexts, Unhae Langis's essay offers a philosophical take on love and death in her reading of Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* which presents an extensive overview of Aristotelian and Thomist ethics. Here a series of syllogisms link love, lust and desire with disease, war and death in the play. Langis is particularly interested in phenomenology, a philosophical approach she reconsiders in the early modern period and uses to investigate the decay of heroic values in the play, or, in the author's words, "to move us in thoughtful reflection beyond moral didacticism". For Langis "vicious rather than virtuous desire" is key to the power struggle that exists in the pursuit of honour, whilst essential to Shakespeare's play are also the "nuanced and complex dramatizations of the Aristotelian concept of virtuous action". Langis leads us carefully through the play towards a romantic destiny for Troilus and Cressida emerging from their decadent and subversive society, whilst highlighting the moral subtleties evident in the tragic situations the play presents.

To close this special issue we must address what might seem, so far, a notable oversight in our early modern explorations of love and death in turning to spiritual devotion. In the heavily religious sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the death of Christ might be seen as the ultimate combination of love and death in self-sacrifice for others. However, the spiritual upheavals of the Reformation, Counter-Reformation and the Elizabethan settlement, along with later challenges to the officially recognised Church, also led people to reassess what death itself might mean. This, of course, affected not only the dying in concerns over what death might mean for their souls, but also the living in

¹ Diana Henderson discusses the potential for political rhetoric in love poetry at the court of Elizabeth I (378, 384)

showing their love for the deceased in the practices of mourning and remembrance.² For some individuals, however, love for God – or love for what they believed to be the true religion – also led to death in this turbulent period. Our final essay is concerned with just such an individual: the Catholic martyr, Robert Southwell. Lilla Grindlay's essay addresses the idea of spiritual devotion in Elizabethan Catholic poetry, in particular in Southwell's poem, "The Assumption of Our Lady". Offering a close reading of this lesser known writer's work, Grindlay does much to contextualise Mariology in the earlier decades of the Renaissance. By focussing on images of the Assumption and Coronation, she argues for a political reading of Southwell's poetry, explored through the reality of his own death and martyrdom. Reflections on the Crucifixion (and predictions of Southwell's execution) – "images of fragile human flesh, mutilated and broken" – stand in opposition to the Virgin's sexual purity. Thus Grindlay's essay explores how, "mapped onto the narrative of the Assumption of the Virgin is the language of love as well as death".

In closing with this essay, we have in some ways returned to the beginning in ideas of love, death, re-birth and self-sacrifice. Each of the essays that follows offers a time and culture-specific re-reading of early modern literature that re-imagines death in the light of love and love in light of death. This special issue can, of course, only scratch at the surface of the multiple layers of meaning engendered by such conceptions of love and death. We hope, though, to have offered in this selection of essays a range of approaches to this topic that highlight the richness of metaphor for political, spiritual and cultural exploration their intermingling provides.

² See Thomas Rist's *Revenge Tragedy and the Drama of Commemoration in Reforming England* for a discussion of the (often slow) changes in forms of commemoration and memorialisation. For showing love through paying for prayers for the soul in purgatory or offering prayers in thanksgiving, see pp. 5-6 in particular.

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