

The Dangers of Romantic Love

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Abstract

Is romantic love more dangerous for women than for men? I present some feminist views which agree, and then set out to explore the position for men. Using social contract theory to support the contention that masculinity and individualism are conflated, I show that the classic 'individual' is considered unemotional. This means most men are reliant on women for their own 'sex/affective needs'. Other aspects of masculinity that construct men as invulnerable prohibit men's acknowledgement that sex/affective needs are crucially important for them. Historically, romantic love has been a highly gendered but workable deal in which men provide women with social status and material goods while women provide men with sex/affective labour. Thus romantic relationships not only reinforce women's second class status but also reinforce men's lack of sex/affective autonomy, so that romantic love is equally dangerous for women and for men, though in different ways.

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Introduction

This essay in its current form considers the question "Is romantic love more dangerous for women than for men?" and was written for a university philosophy unit entitled "Love and Friendship", which was an introduction to philosophical approaches to romantic/sexual relationships and friendships.

In this essay I briefly review, and agree with, some feminist arguments that romantic love indeed presents dangers for women, and then ask what is men's view? In order to explore men's view, I propose that masculinity is significantly shaped by social contract theory, through which individuals are brought into being and given social positions. I set out the parameters of such masculinity, highlighting both its social goods and its sex/affective prohibitions, and suggest some of the psychodynamics that interact to produce these.

Then I argue that sex/affective resources are simply ordinary human needs, and that the sex/affective prohibitions implicit in individualist masculinity delegitimise any actions men may take to meet their own sex/affective needs, thus leaving men reliant on women for such needs. At the same time, I argue, other aspects of this masculinity that construct men as invulnerable prohibits men's acknowledgement that sex/affective needs are crucially important for them.

I conclude that, historically, romantic love has been a highly gendered but workable deal in which men provide women with social status and material goods while women provide men with sex/affective labour. Thus romantic relationships not only reinforce women's second class status but also reinforce men's lack of sex/affective autonomy, so that romantic love is equally dangerous for women and for men.

Some feminist positions

Simone de Beauvoir¹ uses quotes from literary figures to support her contention that romantic relationship is added to a man's pre-existing identity and social role but central to a woman's identity and social role.

Firestone² argues that romantic love is a device through which a man is encouraged to see a woman as higher or more valuable than the general "class" of "women" – which is generally second-rate to men. She contends that romantic love is based on an unequal balance of power, and this is the source of all problems for women in romantic relationships.

Friedman³ picks up both Beauvoir's and Firestone's ideas and also incorporates Benjamin's general thesis that, despite formal commitments to equality, romantic relationships still "are plagued by tendencies toward male domination of females."⁴ Friedman goes on to argue that women tend to put more effort into sustaining relationships than their male partners, suggesting that women "tend to be exploited in their sex/affective labour."⁵

Not only am I persuaded by these arguments, in addition they resonate with both my personal experience and with what I see and hear of others. But while these accounts represent women's experience and perspectives more or less well, I am interested in exploring their implications for men from a phenomenological perspective. In the following I hope to present a plausible framework that may support men to encounter their lived experience using a new filter that 'sees through' social conventions of masculinity and individualism by building on the above feminist perspectives in a new way.

Masculinity and Individualism

Following many feminist writers over the last 40 years, I contend that historically there is a significant conflation of masculinity with individualism to the extent that an individual is at first assumed to be male. I argue elsewhere that a creation myth for individualism is the social contract – it is essentially a 'political fiction'⁶ that constructs in all essential points the characteristics of the paradigmatic individual who becomes party to the social contract, whereby he is empowered and legitimated to occupy a place in the social arena. The earliest telling of this fable is by Thomas Hobbes in the 1640s, and despite many major retellings of the story (the most recent being Rawls in 1971) Seyla Benhabib considers his story most accurately reflects existing underlying social conventions of individualism and masculinity⁷.

Hobbes' story says that, prior to society existed a 'state of nature', a chaotic cutthroat world in which every man was at war with every other man in order to protect his property, and man's life was "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short". This situation was one of constant wariness and defensiveness, in which men did not have the time or security to build for the long term, to produce things of beauty, or to garner wealth or comfort. The unpleasantness was resolved by everyone (i.e. all men) coming together and collectively agreeing to form a 'commonwealth' – a

¹ 'The Woman in Love', selections from *The Second Sex*, trans H.M. Parshley. Toronto: Bantam, 1961.

² Shulamith Firestone, 'Love' in *The Dialectic of Sex*. New York: Bantam, 1970.

³ Marilyn Friedman, 'Romantic Love and Personal Autonomy', in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy, Vol 22: The Philosophy of Emotions*, eds PA French and HK Wettstein. Notre Dame IN: Uni of Notre Dame Press, 1998.

⁴ Friedman, p174.

⁵ *ibid.* p 175.

⁶ Carole Pateman. *The Sexual Contract*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988. p 5.

⁷ Benhabib, Seyla. "The Generalised and the Concrete Other", in Benhabib and Cornell (eds) *Feminism as Critique*. Minneapolis MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1987, p 85.

kind of governing body. To this governing body was given, by willing consent, more power than any individual or group of individuals, in order that there be some force empowered to 'keep the peace' by force if necessary so that individuals could prosper in safety. Thus the modern society with its government and its democratic power came into being.

Hobbes (and in fact most other significant contractarians, e.g. Rousseau and Locke) built upon pre-existing gender norms in this story: he simply assumes that it is men who are property owners, at war with each other, desirous of security, and parties to the social contract. The implications of these pre-existing gender norms for women are quite rightly named and critiqued in the feminist accounts of romantic love I review above. Based on my contention that social contract stories have specified and legitimated some central parameters of masculinity in its modern Western guise, I turn now to look at the implications for men of both the gender norms in the 'state of nature' and in the social arena subsequently created through the social contract.

A core implication for the shape of masculinity is the habitual emotional stance that the story suggests is appropriate for men. In the chaos of the state of nature, the most sensible emotion is one of fear, since I may be attacked at any moment. At the same time, however, in order to survive (even if that only means a solitary, poor nasty, brutish and short life) I must be continually prepared to attack in order to defend my position. Thus in the state of nature those who are property owners and thus have positions to protect (i.e. men) must continually fear attack, be wary and on the defensive with other men, and ready to attack at a moment's notice. The social arena brought into being by the social contract does not remove this position but rather provides a bulwark of enforced peace. The emotions are not resolved and affectionate, co-operative relationships are not formed – rather, a central government is licensed to be stronger than any individual.

In other words, the social arena is characteristically peopled by individuals (i.e. men) who are fearful, defensive and wary of each other, who get on with each other simply because they are threatened by an even greater force if they do not, whose primary interest remains the protection of their property, and who engage with each other primarily because they have to by force of circumstance rather than any active desire to form relationships and enjoy the creative benefits of human synergy. Into this intolerably bleak view of social life for individuals (i.e. men) is inserted women, who, through their romantic relationships with men, become co-opted as suppliers to men of all the simple human aspects of life that the social arena denies or prohibits: the emotions necessary for togetherness, relationship and co-operation, the opportunities for bodily pleasures, affectionate touch, relaxation and receptivity to sensuous inputs, and all the social/cultural operations of reproduction and child-rearing – all the things I suggest Friedman sums up under the rubric "sex/affective labour".

On this account then, I support the feminist contention that social contract and romantic love position women as the both the holders of sex/affective resources and the suppliers of those resources to men. In addition and at the same time, as many other feminists point out, social contract and romantic love construct a hierarchy of status: men/individuals are actually real people while women are chattels, second class people, handmaidens to the "important" people, and so on. Firestone quite rightly points out how a major operation of romantic relationships is to effectively raise women's status, and I fully agree with Firestone that entering into a romantic relationship supports women to remain second class citizens by reinforcing their dependency on men for social status.

Men's vulnerability and invulnerability

But while this is happening, what is happening for men? Are men simply the powerful and self-satisfied recipients of women's sex/affective labour? Are they

tyrannising women with a whip, demanding sex/affective service as the price for them staying their hand? Hardly. Firestone in her cynicism gives the game away by characterising men's attitude to sex/affective expression and enactment as living their sex/affective lives "on the sly" through women.⁸

Firestone's comments point to a fundamental difficulty for men in romantic relationships: their vulnerability to women's supply of sex/affective labour. Perhaps this vulnerability is of recent date: one feminist argument states that men through superior physical power conventionally are in a position to forcibly extract women's sex/affective labour via rape, or domestic violence especially of the psychological kind, or can use their economic power to gain women's sex/affective labour via prostitution, therapy and commercial child care. Clearly this argument is valid, suggesting that men perhaps have only recently experienced a vulnerability to women's supply as feminism has challenged women's acquiescence in that supply.

I want to suggest however, alongside this feminist claim, that there may be another reason for men's violence in this area. I argue above that individualism and masculinity are constructed in such a way as to disavow men's sex/affective capacities and prohibit men from sex/affective expression in their own right. One result of this for men is that men are totally reliant on women for these sex/affective areas: reproduction, sexual and other bodily pleasure, and emotional/affectionate expression both giving and receiving. That men are dependent on women for these very basic and common human needs and activities surely can easily give rise to anger if women withhold such labour, or even threaten to. Conventionally, women are in fact strongly encouraged to maintain the position of gatekeeper to these areas for men, a very common example of which is that men's apparently constant desire for sex enables women to be in the position of saying yes or no.

My argument here hangs on the assumption that men consider women's sex/affective labour to be enormously valuable for themselves, since if men did not value women's sex/affective labour, it would be of little moment for men whether women came through with supply or not. At first glance it appears the assumption I make is not tenable. Conventionally, women's sex/affective labour has not been highly valued as a social good in its own right, and men rarely publicly express appreciation or value for it. This convention is in fact part of the social structure that reinforces women's second-class status – i.e. the things women do are not terribly important or valuable, ergo women are not terribly important or valuable. It appears, then, that women's sex/affective labour is not of value to men, so I must support my assumption.

To do so, I make two points. The first is: men are humans, and humans are highly affective, relational and social creatures who depend on each other to share resources. A widely accepted anthropological belief says that humans evolved a wide range of affective capacity in order to enhance our capacity to relate, and affective capacity became of evolutionary consequence precisely because our capacity to relate is so crucial to our survival as a species. For example, Harlow's experiments conclude that, for human babies (as for some other primates) the most important effect of breast feeding is not the nutrition in breast milk but rather the affectionate relating and touching. Thus the idea that sex/affective expression is not of value to men arises either from a breathtaking misandry that leaves Scrooge looking like Mother Theresa, or it arises from a social operation. I prefer to believe the latter.

This conclusion leads to my second point, that social/cultural myths and norms such as social contract characterise men as essentially isolated and not needing sex/affective expression. At the same time as men are vulnerable to women doing

⁸ Firestone, p 127.

their sex/affective work for them, social contract implies that individuals (i.e. men) should be invulnerable – i.e. proper or “successful” men should be able to resist attack and should be able to maintain control of their property. In order to support this implication, social contract creates an entire social apparatus focused solely on supporting men to maintain this control. Social contract thus implicitly supports men to experience any vulnerability as an assault upon their property which should properly be met with anger, defence and attack. On this account it makes perfect sense that men respond violently when vulnerable, since there is no other more constructive legitimated way for a man to acknowledge his vulnerability.

But men do actually receive women’s sex/affective labour, and most men for at least some part of their lives receive this labour without responding violently. How then can this take place? An important corollary of the directive to appear invulnerable is that if a man is in a situation in which he believes he is invulnerable and the people around him support his invulnerability, he can relax – a little. In other words in order to receive, express or experience any sex/affective energy a man must be in a carefully constructed place of safety over which he has a lot of control. The legitimated place for this is his relationship with his partner in romantic love. This corollary is supported by Beaviour’s contention that for men romantic relationships are in addition to a pre-existing identity: “losing oneself” in romance risks losing one’s identity and status as a contractarian masculine individual by admitting vulnerability, so that men are highly motivated to retain control of a consistent identity throughout the experience of falling in love and building a romantic relationship.

Conclusion

My argument here suggests that romantic love for men is constantly fraught with a painful tension: Masculinity is experienced subjectively as an ongoing conflict between keeping a safe distance from others in order to defend oneself and receive social acclaim, by denying one’s sex/affective desires which constantly impel one to be affectionate and together with others. One way to resolve this tension is via the landscape of heterosexual romantic love, which supports a view that while men are legitimately dangerous and have to be kept at bay, women are legitimately available for men and OK to get close to. This resolution of the tension is only contingent, however: romantic relationships are designated as ‘private’ and thus not terribly important, in contrast to contractarian interactions with other individuals/men which are the ‘real’ stuff of society. The privileging of social interactions with other men supports men to be prepared to drop the sex/affective pleasures of romantic relationships at a moment’s notice when public life calls, reinforcing the appearance that sex/affective labour is not of great value for men. Thus even though romantic relationships and their associated benefits are intensely important for men, masculine individualism supports men to deny this to themselves, to women, and to other men, iteratively reinforcing both men’s vulnerability to women’s supply of sex/affective labour and reinforcing social constructions of masculine individualist identity as invulnerable and in control.

In this essay I started with some feminist views of romantic love and then, using social contract theory as a window into masculinity, built a framework through which to combine these feminist views with men’s experience of romantic love. That the dynamics and experiences in romantic love are quite different for men and women leads me to conclude that, at base, romantic relationships conventionally have been a highly gendered but reasonably workable deal, in which men got access to the centrally important sex/affective resources denied to them by individualism and masculinity, while women got access to social position and material resources denied to them in their own right by gender norms and social contract.

Feminists are certainly doing women a positive service by analysing women's experience of this deal and rejecting the terms of the deal as being deleterious to full autonomy as individuals – in fact dangerous to women's self respect. Feminists quite justifiably assert that women should be given social standing in their own right and on their own terms. But in portraying men purely as beneficiaries of the romantic deal by getting women's sex/affective labour and giving nothing in return, feminist views reinforce central aspects of individualist masculinity (and thereby reinforce major social structures that define women as second class citizens), by accepting the dynamics of individualist masculinity that prohibit men acknowledging women's sex/affective labour as valuable. Women clearly know that men are vulnerable to women's supply of sex/affective labour – Firestone says as much: “love is the weak spot of every man...Women have always known how men need love, and how they deny this need”⁹. But rather than using this as a point of departure, Firestone uses it to deride and ridicule men about their vulnerability – hardly a tactic likely to disrupt the masculine precept to be invulnerable to attack.

Perhaps Firestone's tactics were useful in 1970, when the costs to women of the romantic deal were only just being broadcast, and men's indignation was rising. Be that as it may, my intention in this essay has been to answer the question about the relative dangers to men and to women of romantic love. While I fully accept the dangers to women, I hope I have shown that the dangers to men are no less great, no more visible, and no less fiercely denied.

⁹ Firestone, p 127.