

Love à la française

Interview with Marilyn Yalom

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Books & Ideas: French love vs American love?

Marilyn Yalom: The French, as I have observed, have a mixture of body and heart. Heart, by the way, was also invented by the French in the Middle Ages. I think we forget that before the twelfth and thirteenth century, the heart did not represent love. But, if you look at manuscripts from the twelfth and thirteenth century, you see the transitions from the heart as a vital organ, to that symmetrical heart, which we all know represents love. The French have never denied the value of the emotions represented by the heart. At the same time, they have never denied the importance of the body and the sexual experience. When I look at love in America, I would say that there is, even today, a certain *méfiante*, a certain suspicion of sexuality. The emphasis is more upon the emotional connection, a connection of understanding between two people sharing similar values and romantic love – that is true love – is not considered necessarily for the entire union or the entire marriage.

Books & Ideas: Was love invented love by French women?

Marilyn Yalom: Women have played a significant role in the invention of love French style and in reinventing love French style. From the very beginning, there were troubadours who were women, there were writers who were women, like Marie de France, and there is a whole line of women through the Renaissance, the seventeenth century, the eighteenth century, nineteenth and twentieth, who have written about love and who have made their contribution to the idea of love. In addition to that – since most writers, at least up until almost the present, were men – women were put at the center of their writing and this was something new, something that we can call “a new conceptual paradigm”. The woman was at the center, she was there to be served – that was at least the ideal –, the spotlight was on woman and it has remained such until our own time.

We have always learned how to behave, especially as lovers, through literature more recently through film and even through the Internet. I subscribe to René Girard’s theory of mimetic desire in that we read a book when we are young and we get an idea of how we want to be as an adult person. In the case of *Madame Bovary*, she had read many romantic novels and so, when the time came, she looked – consciously or unconsciously – for a lover and when he came along, she says in the book: “Finally, it’s happened, I have a lover” which correspond to that old myth, going back to the twelfth century, of the husband, the wife, and her lover. We look to films today – which are in my opinion, the real home of love rather, at least, than the French novel – to form our ideas of “how we want to behave”, “what we want to find in a lover”, “what we want to have in a love relationship”. That is changing too because, with the

Internet, instead of being struck by “*le coup de foudre*”, by love at first sight, we establish a list of qualities which we want to find in a lover and then “match.com” will put you together with that person. Then, it is up to you to fall in love. The whole period of crystallization around a lover takes on a very different form when all the good qualities are out there – at least in writing – and you have the possibility either of crystalizing around that person in your imagination or of becoming disillusioned.

Books & Ideas: The breast between erotica, motherhood and politics.

Marilyn Yalom: I would say that the breast has a history and that its meaning changes from one particular moment and place to the other. Certainly, the two aspects of the breast – the nurturing aspect and the erotic aspect are always there. But, depending on the time and place, other elements become prominent and dominant. So that, if you look at the breast in earlier eras – I mean antiquity – you have a sacred breast. That sacred breast, say in the seven century BC, in what is today Syria or Israel, are in a form of little clay figurines where the female figure has her hands under her breast as a kind of divine offering. Or, you have the nursing Madonna in the fourteenth century where the Idea of nourishing the baby Jesus is a spiritual form of nourishment, which can then become symbol for the nourishment of all Christians. I continue in this vein in my book on the breast and, certainly, in the eighteenth century, the breast became politicized at a time when upper class women where not nursing their babies, you have Rousseau asking for a return to Nature. That should include having women nurse their own babies instead of sending them out to wet nurses. The same idea of the political breast asserts itself in the twentieth century when feminist demonstrators walked on Fifth Avenue with their breasts uncovered as a form of protest and also to encourage research on breast cancer and other aspects that pertain specifically to women.

Books & Ideas: Is there a specific form of violence against the breast?

Marilyn Yalom: At one end of the spectrum, you have pornography. I have looked at magazines and I have seen pornographic films where men attack women’s breasts with needles, sometime with chains. It is revolting because you there have a real combination of sexuality and violence against women through their breasts. And that, for me, is the definition of pornography: sexuality with violence. Without the violence, it can be erotic literature, erotic film but it is not necessarily pornographic. In the United States, sometimes, just the fact of seeing a nude woman’s body or lovers who are nude, might be called pornography but I say, I make that distinction: You have to have violence so that it can be considered – in my opinion – pornography. As for the other issues, wearing a brassiere is not – in my opinion – a form of violence. It was one of the first objects that feminists protested against in the late sixties. That was because the kind of bras that were wore at that time looked like missiles and it was a form of packaging of the breast that feminists protested against. By the way, initially they did not burn their bras; they took them off and threw them in the trashcan along with other objects. But some clever journalist picked up the idea of burning the bra (like burning the American flag) as a form of protest – afterwards feminists of that period were called “bra burners”. I know there has been some research saying that bras are dreadful mental (?) to women (I think that is some French research). I don’t believe it personally. There are all kinds of bras, there are simple jogging bras, there are bras without wires and of course, there are some bras with padding and wires because that gives to some women a more imposing breast.

Next step is the issue of surgical implants. Although the statistics say that surgical implants to enlarge the breast don’t leave permanent negative effects, I don’t believe that, there are

enough – at least anecdotal – evidences to say that one loose is the feeling in the breast, your difficulty breast feeding. So, personally, if anyone asks me, I say “stay clear of any implants and any breast surgery” unless you are restoring a breast that has been removed because of cancer, or in the case of women who have very very heavy breast and who want to have the size reduced so that their backs are not constantly carrying a very heavy load.

Books & Ideas: Do motherhood and old age alter sexual desire?

Marilyn Yalom: First, let’s talk about the distinction between a French woman and an American woman in marriage when that woman becomes a mother. I do believe that French women make an effort – that’s perhaps a substantial effort – to keep a romantic element in the marriage, even after they become mothers. It is a difficult balancing act because the baby is there and the baby is demanding. One has to be there for the baby but also for the husband. That situation is changing somewhat with husbands taking on more of the responsibility of caring for children. So perhaps there is a little more understanding that the wife has to give more to the baby and somewhat less to the husband. But, on the whole, compared to American women, I think that French women make a very big effort to keep romance within their couple. We don’t even use that expression in English. We don’t speak of “our couple”; it would sound strange in English. Usually what happens for better or for worst is that an American woman, once she becomes a mother, tends to privilege motherhood over the couple. That causes real problems because the husband in particular – who has coming to marriage with the expectation of romance and erotic relationship – sometimes feels very neglected, and then tends to look elsewhere. I want to mention two books; one, an American book that has been around for about twenty years in which the author refers to American women as “strong mothers, weak wives”. In a nutshell I think that that has been the case. An other incident, very recently, of a woman who is a writer – her husband is Michael Chabon, a fairly known writer in the United States; they have something like four children – who said that she loved her husband more than her children and that was a real explosive statement in the United States.

The second question, which has to do whether the sexual quality – the erotic quality of the relationship – diminishes as one gets older. Well, I think that Americans accept that more easily. There was the probe (?) I cite in my book, addressed to people aged fifty to sixty-four, asking whether true love exists without a radiant sex life. You could well imagine the difference in response. The French said – for the most part – “No, it can’t exist without this sexual radiance”. Their response was something like a third who would accept a relationship without good sex whereas Americans – up to eighty seven or eighty nine percent – at that age were willing to accept a good relationship, true love even, without a sexual component. I do think one has to accept the fact that, as you get older, the hormones are not racing around as they once were and the body is not as beautiful and as firm. So, the erotic aspect of love diminishes but it does not mean that it disappears and that even in one’s later years, if one cannot have the same kind of frequent sex that one had as a young person, there are other ways of showing affection and creaturely contact – which we always need.

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