

The English in Love: The Intimate Story of an Emotional Revolution

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Claire Langhamer's hotly anticipated new book is part of a new wave of scholarship on romantic love, including Simon May's *Love: A History*, Lisa Appignanesi's *All About Love* and William Reddy's *The Making of Romantic Love*.⁽¹⁾ Langhamer has previously published several articles on the subject: 'Love and courtship in mid-twentieth-century England', 'Love, selfhood and authenticity in post-war Britain' and 'Everyday advice on everyday love. Romantic expertise in mid-twentieth century Britain'.⁽²⁾ The fundamental point driving these works is that 'Love has a history. It has meant different things to different people at different moments and has served different purposes'.

Langhamer's previous monograph *Women's Leisure in England 1920-60* focused on the same core time period, utilising feminist theory to explore women's changing leisure pursuits across the life-cycle. Certain topics are addressed in both texts, including the appropriate venues for courtship, the question of who should pay for dates, the issue of sexual activity before marriage, and the rise of the cinema and dance hall as leisure venues.⁽³⁾ Langhamer's new book takes this research further to integrate the experiences of men as well as women into these narratives, creating a social history of love. While her initial book is chiefly concerned with the experiences of Mary and Margaret, her second also gives Herbert and Harry a voice.

The English in Love situates itself amongst the burgeoning history of emotions, and broader social, cultural and gender histories. As emphasised in Langhamer's recent post '[Everyday Love and Emotions in the Twentieth Century](#) [2]' on the Queen Mary History of the Emotions blog, it also presents a rare history of love 'from below.' A history of love – and indeed emotions – based on the language used by 'ordinary' people to describe their experiences is particularly welcome, as the majority of sources such as letters and diaries were created by individuals with higher levels of literacy, and more money to invest in their education.

The book is rooted in the primary source material of the Mass Observation Archive at the University of Sussex, which 'specialises in material about everyday life in Britain'.⁽⁴⁾ The organisation was established in 1937 to catalogue 'the minutiae of daily life' using diaries and responses to a monthly questionnaire, or 'directive'. Participants in the project, and therefore the subjects of Langhamer's book, were predominantly

lower middle-class and upper working-class. The subjects studied are heterosexual couples engaging in relationships between 1920 and 1970, chiefly during the 1940s and 1950s.

The bold central argument of *The English in Love* is that an 'emotional revolution' took place in England in the years following the First World War. While more people married, at increasingly younger ages, there was a 'revolution in the value attached to emotional intimacy within heterosexual encounters'. From the middle of the century, romantic love became inextricably attached to sexual satisfaction, and was granted the power to transform individuals both personally and emotionally. By the end of the century, it was located at the heart of modern marriage, and was 'widely expected to determine the decision to commit for life'. However, as love achieved this new position in the making and success of marriage, it also became more difficult to sustain, as 'people generally expect more all round...including from each other'.⁽⁵⁾ This shift led to the decline of life-long marriages by the end of the 20th century.

Part one (chapters one to three) adroitly maps the changing nature of romantic love between 1920 and 1970. Chapter one utilises magazines, tabloid newspapers, advertisements, romantic fiction, non-fiction and films to argue for a new introspection after the Second World War. While singletons posting adverts in *The Matrimonial Post* in the 1920s and 1930s sought steady and homely partners, post-war adverts prioritised loyalty and affection, culminating in adverts for 'soulmates' by 1955. Shifting models of love sidelined practicality in favour of an all-embracing intimacy, which was imbued with a world-changing force. At the end of Langhamer's period, Mass Observation accounts were increasingly likely to cite a belief in 'true love' and 'love at first sight'.

Chapter two explores the problems arising from this valorisation of love. Individuals placed increased emphasis upon attempting to guarantee that they were *really* in love, rather than simply infatuated. The mark of 'true love' was seen as control over one's emotions, which distinguished love from passion. Just as women were thought to fall in love more easily than men, they were also responsible for controlling any lustful urges – particularly those of their partners – in order to safeguard a relationship. As so often in history, this gave women primary responsibility for abstaining from sex before marriage. It was not until at least the end of the 1960s that sex *before* marriage gained acceptance as 'a signifier of authentic love'. Meanwhile, sex *within* marriage, and female sexual pleasure, came to be seen as essential to the success of a union from the middle of the century.

Langhamer's third chapter addresses the issue of suitability. The perfectly suited couple were from the same social class, with a similar education, outlook on life, and less than five years age difference between them, ideally with the man as the elder party. Religion, nationality and ethnicity were also key. Explicit references to religion ('not a Jew') in publications such as *The Matrimonial Post* became rarer after the war, with mixed-faith marriages growing throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Advice manuals on the essential qualities of husbands-to-be were widespread. As one member of the Women's Auxiliary Air Force argued in 1942, 'The decisive qualities are rank/wings; looks; money; youth in that order'.⁽⁶⁾

Part two of the book, on 'Courtship' (chapters four to six), opens by exploring the myriad spaces in which couples could meet. The evolution of courtship as a leisure activity was guided by the emergence of dance halls and cinemas from the 1920s as venues for 'picking up'. Intimacy was encouraged by the romantic music, soft lighting and physicality of the dance hall, with the 'superheated' atmosphere remaining a source of unease over the century. The cinema was also described by school leavers as 'a good place for flirting'. Once again, the Second World War marked a sea change as young people such as factory workers revelled in the anonymity and freedom of cities. Dances and films could facilitate encounters at Army NAAFI Clubs, while pubs became more acceptable venues for women to socialise and meet men. The post-war decades also saw the emergence of coffee bars and Americanised milk bars and fast food chains such as Wimpy specifically tailored to young consumers. These provided an exciting range of locations in which young people could meet, socialise and flirt, away from the parental gaze. Nonetheless, older notions of suitability and class were by no means swept away, with 63 per cent of Oxford-educated women in 1965 marrying Oxford-educated men.

Chapter five questions the degree of privacy which couples enjoyed. Since the majority of young people continued to live with their parents before marriage, finding time alone during courtship was no easy task. The desire to avoid indecency at home drove many young couples into sexual encounters in public spaces such as darkened doorways, parks or bushes. The chapter outlines a curious shift whereby courtship became simultaneously *less* private (taking place in public venues such as dance halls and cinemas) and yet *more* private (with diminished community and parental control). Degrees of privacy varied according to class, with the motor car providing a measure of 'mobile privacy' for those who could afford it. Furthermore, parental permission remained important, with working-class men still required to visit a girlfriend's home to meet their families for dinner. Again, the Second World War marked a significant shift as 'love-making had often to be done hurriedly' in ad hoc situations such as blackouts.⁽⁷⁾

The negotiation of issues such as money and sex is the subject of Langhamer's sixth chapter. Men were expected to be the primary breadwinners, partly due to their higher wages. As in preceding centuries, they were also expected to purchase gifts for their sweethearts. While Langhamer argues that the quality of these gifts represented a man's eligibility and moral character, the specific items possessing these qualities beyond the 'going steady ring' are given surprisingly little attention. Practices could vary in relationships of unequal wealth, where wealthier fiancées may have felt compelled to pay their share. It became more common for women to contribute financially to dates from the 1940s – albeit behind closed doors – with the *Woman's World* agony aunt advising women in 1948 to pay suitors beforehand in private.⁽⁸⁾ Covering some of the expenses of courtship allowed women to exercise greater control over men's expectations for sexual activity in return for gifts and expensive meals.

The chapter again reinforces how the established rituals of courtship were disrupted during wartime with the arrival of uniformed American GIs, where 'no one knew which rules to follow any more'. The disturbances of the Second World War provide a recurrent theme in each chapter, where the spaces, rules and rituals of courtship were subject to colossal change. Langhamer repeatedly describes how 'established matrimonial rituals' were 'destabilized' and 'dissipated'. One wonders whether the upheavals of romantic love (and loss) during wartime could have merited a study in their own right. Nonetheless, they are essential to Langhamer's aim of mapping the changing nature of romantic love across the 20th century.

Part three of the book (chapters seven to eight) turns to focus on the meaning of commitment. Chapter seven outlines how marriage was an aspirational goal for young men and women by the middle of the century, with over three-quarters of brides in 1959 under the age of 25.⁽⁹⁾ The purchase of an engagement ring was an important rite of passage, which brought 'peer group acclaim' and 'could enhance status at home', such as leading to more flexible evening curfews. The ring also sanctioned closer sexual intimacy, with numerous women writing to agony aunts describing escalating pressure to 'do something which I know is wrong' before marriage.⁽¹⁰⁾ Whilst *Woman's Own* warned engaged women against giving in entirely to male pressure before their wedding day, they were also advised to acquire 'adequate knowledge' of sex by

consulting guides such as *The Way to Healthy Womanhood* and *The Way to Happy Marriage*. In a change from the preceding two centuries, suing for breach of promise was no longer a viable option when an engagement was broken off, and had become viewed as an 'expensive and undignified' act.⁽¹¹⁾

The eighth and final chapter explores the nature of married life and the rise of divorce. After the Second World War, enormous social, economic and cultural changes precipitated a 'marriage crisis' characterised by spiralling divorce rates. Langhamer argues that the growing importance of romantic love acted as a destabilising force, not least because the fusing of love and sex from the middle of the century made sex a fundamental part of a loving marriage. As noted in the previous chapter, courting couples were urged to abstain from sex, meaning that their sexual compatibility ultimately remained untested before their wedding day. Perhaps inevitably, during the 1940s and 1950s 'higher expectations bred greater disappointments'. The notion underlying the divorce reform movement in the 1960s was that individuals should not be forced to endure loveless marriages, but should be permitted the opportunity to form happier ones. Realising the dream of 'true love' could provide a way to justify acts such as adultery and bigamy, so long as a couple 'feel that they are in love'.⁽¹²⁾ The Divorce Law Reform Act was passed in 1969, becoming effective on 1 January 1971, allowing irretrievable breakdown after a period of separation to serve as grounds for divorce.

Throughout history, romantic motivations have been balanced with practical ones in the making of marriage. Historians such as Amanda Vickery have firmly established that 18th-century women married for a variety of reasons; 'A good match satisfied a range of criteria, including family advancement, the ideal of parity, character and affection'.⁽¹³⁾ In a similar vein, Langhamer recognises that certain working-class women in the 20th century prioritised domesticity over romance. Practical considerations could prove particularly important during wartime, such as marrying to avoid war work. As today, the majority of couples came from similar socio-economic backgrounds, as parents 'shaped the romantic opportunities available to their children'.

Gender provides *The English in Love* with a useful prism through which to view shifting attitudes to love in history. As Faramerz Dabhoiwala recently argued in *The Origins of Sex: A History of the First Sexual Revolution*, it was from the 18th century that 'sexual ignorance and passivity came increasingly to be valued as essential components of respectable femininity and heterosexual love'. In contrast, men were expected to 'take the initiative' and be 'sexually knowledgeable'.⁽¹⁴⁾ Similarly, Langhamer's 20th-century women were expected to control wayward passions in order to safeguard their love. This chiefly involved policing their lustful male partners, where 'it is up to the girl to keep them sensible'.⁽¹⁵⁾ Within Langhamer's overarching picture of change, it is sometimes striking how little gender roles during courtship appear to have changed from the previous two centuries. One phrase from chapter six would be equally at home in any early modern study of love; 'Men invested money in courtship; women invested emotion while safeguarding their sexual reputation'. Certain reviews have described how in focusing on the social rituals of courtship Langhamer 'rarely gets very close to emotional experience. There's no sense that actually being "in love" felt any different in 1920 than in 1970'.⁽¹⁶⁾ However historians of emotion will recognise that it would be impossible for any scholar to discover a 'true' *feeling* of love in history unmediated by the accepted language and customs used to express it. Readers cannot fail to be drawn in to the emotional worlds of young women in the 1940s asking the *Woman's Own* agony aunt, 'Is love real?'

'I am engaged to a boy who is very passionate and, though he has never tried to do anything wrong, his life seems to be one long fight against temptation. Are all men like this? It makes me feel that love is nothing but desire'.⁽¹⁷⁾

The key strength of this ambitious book is Langhamer's ability to skilfully trace a number of complex emotional shifts decade by decade across her chosen time period. *The English in Love* leaves readers with a lasting impression of the shifting and changeable nature of romantic love in history. Readers are never in doubt how the emotional landscape looked in 1920, how it changed in the 1940s, and how it ended up in 1970, all the while situated against the rich backdrop of the Mass Observation archive.

Notes

1. Simon May, *Love: A History* (New Haven, CT, 2011); Lisa Appignanesi, *All About Love: Anatomy of an Unruly Emotion* (London, 2011); William Reddy, *The Making of Romantic Love: Longing and Sexuality in Europe, South Asia, and Japan* (Chicago, IL, 2012). Previous noteworthy works include Luisa Passerini, *Europe in Love. Love in Europe. Imagination and Politics in Britain between the Wars* (London, 1999); *idem*, 'Europe of love: re-centring intercultural affairs', *European Review of History*, 11, 2 (2004), 171–84 ;and Marcus Collins, *Modern Love: an Intimate History of Men and Women in Twentieth-Century Britain* (London, 2003).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Claire Langhamer, 'Love and courtship in mid-twentieth-century England', *The Historical Journal*, 50, 1 (2007); *idem*, 'Love, selfhood and authenticity in post-war Britain', *Cultural & Social History*, 9, 2 (2012); *idem*, 'Everyday advice on everyday love. Romantic expertise in mid-twentieth century Britain', *European Journal of Feminist History*, Special Issue on *Romantische Liebe* (all other articles in German), ed. Ingrid Bauer and Christa Hämmerle, 24, 1 (2013), 35–52.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. In particular see chapter four, "'Do you come here often?'" Courtship, sex and leisure' in Claire Langhamer, *Women's Leisure in England 1920–60* (Manchester, 2000), pp. 113–32.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. See <<http://www.massobs.org.uk/index.htm> [3]> [accessed 26 November 2013].[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. *Marriage Today. A Social Institution*, BBC2, 16 September 1964, (cited in *The English in Love*, p. 189).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Mass Observation Archive (MOA), TC32, 'Women in wartime, 1939-45'; 32/3/E, 'WAAF: reports from an observer 1941–2. The great Digby man-chase', 28 December 1941, 2 (cited in *The English in Love*, p. 64).[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. MOA, FR3086, 11, (cited in *The English in Love*, p. 117).[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. *Woman's World*, 11th December 1948, p. 20, (cited in *The English in Love*, p. 131).[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. Rachel M. Pierce, 'Marriage in the Fifties', *The Sociological Review*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (March 1963), 217, (cited in *The English in Love*, p. 151).[Back to \(9\)](#)
10. *Woman's Own*, 26th January 1950 (cited in *The English in Love*, p. 156).[Back to \(10\)](#)
11. *Woman's Own*, 20th August, 22 (cited in *The English in Love*, p. 161).[Back to \(11\)](#)
12. MOA, TC 12, 'Sexual Behaviour', Box 11, File A, no. 564 (cited in *The English in Love*, p. 198).[Back to \(12\)](#)
13. Amanda Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter: Women's Lives in Georgian England* (London, 1998), p. 41.[Back to \(13\)](#)
14. Faramerz Dabhoiwala, *The Origins of Sex: A History of the First Sexual Revolution* (London, 2012), p. 354.[Back to \(14\)](#)
15. *Woman's Own*, 9 May 1936, 188 (cited in *The English in Love*, p. 139).[Back to \(15\)](#)
16. <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/aug/09/english-love-claire-langhamer-review> [4][Back to \(16\)](#)
17. *Woman's Own*, 6th January 1940, 3, (cited in *The English in Love*, p. 43).[Back to \(17\)](#)

The author would like to thank the reviewer for her detailed and generous assessment of the book.

Other reviews:

Guardian

<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/aug/09/english-love-claire-langhamer-review> [4]

Times Higher Education

<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/books/the-english-in-love-the-intimate-story-of-an-emotional-revolution-by-claire-langhamer/2006209.article> [5]

Blogcritics

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[4] <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/aug/09/english-love-claire-langhamer-review>

[5] <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/books/the-english-in-love-the-intimate-story-of-an-emotional-revolution-by-claire-langhamer/2006209.article>

[6] <http://blogcritics.org/book-review-the-english-in-love-the-intimate-story-of-an-emotional-revolution-by-claire-langhammer/>