Constructions of Love and the Emotions of Intimacy, 1750-1850

The Constructions of Love and the Emotions of Intimacy, 1750-1850 conference was held at the University of Warwick on the 9th of February 2019. This interdisciplinary conference was organised with the intention of bringing together scholars from different fields who all study love, emotions, and intimate relationships from the mid-eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century – a watershed between the early-modern period and modernity. Our speakers included postgraduate students and professors who came from a range of different disciplines, including history, English, modern languages and philosophy, and from universities across the UK and the world, including Finland, Germany and the United States.

The conference was opened by our first keynote speaker, Sally Holloway from Oxford Brookes University, who gave us a wonderful lecture about ‘the progress of love’ in Georgian courtships. She discussed the commercialisation of love and showed us a fascinating array of objects that courting couples used to make and break their relationships. She also demonstrated the effectiveness of combining methodologies from material culture studies and the history of emotions, and persuasively argued that we should view ‘Love’ as a practice, something that we ‘do’. Our second keynote speaker, Professor Daisy Hay, from the University of Exeter, talked about her work on the unorthodox love story of Benjamin and Mary Anne Disraeli. Her talk explored the significance of conflicts between class, social expectations and the emotional self that individuals had to negotiate in their romantic lives. She also discussed the methods of biography and gave some helpful suggestions about how to overcome the challenges of writing about love and intimacy across a historical distance.

Alongside the two keynotes, we had three panels of ten speakers. The papers covered a variety of topics, including: how love and intimacy were negotiated in courtships, marriages, friendships, and adulterous relationships; romantic practices; the role of material culture; issues surrounding sex and consent; the influences of cultural shifts like politeness and romanticism; and interpretations of ‘love’ from contemporary philosophers, courts, religious figures and novelists. Audience participation in the Q&A sessions after each panel was lively and constructive, and many discussions were continued over lunch and at the wine reception at the end of the day. It was an excellent event for networking with several delegates making new friends whose research interests were similar to their own. Many supportive discussions have also continued on Twitter between senior academics and doctoral students.

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