

Love and the Patriarch: Augustine and (Pregnant) Women

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Theories concerning love in the West tend to be bound by the problematic constraints of patriarchal conceptions of what counts ontologically as “true” or “universal” love. It seems that feminist love studies must choose between shining light on these constraints or bursting through them. In this article I give a feminist analysis of Augustine of Hippo’s theory of love through a philosophical, psychological, and theological reading of his complicated relationships with women. I argue that, given the “embodied” nature of his many loves throughout his life, there is room in Augustine’s account of love for a gendered reading of love that is unconstrained by patriarchal notions concerning which gender is capable of which kind of love. Augustine’s theory of love is one that is not coldly universal but bodied and personal; indeed, although it is founded inside patriarchal historical constructions, it is capable of bursting out of these constraints and suggesting an egalitarian, nongendered view of love.

Augustine is read in several ways by feminist philosophers, psychologists, and theologians. Often the modes of reading Augustine are divided into two categories: one that is unforgiving, which places great blame for patriarchal oppression of women on his shoulders, and one that seeks to explore what Augustine might have to offer feminist readers. This article finds itself in the latter category. However, let us begin with the former. In the introduction to their *The Deepening Darkness: Patriarchy, Resistance, and Democracy’s Future*, Carol Gilligan and David A. J. Richards write, “Augustine played a pivotal role in the radical darkening of the view of human sexuality (beyond anything in Greco-Roman culture) that Christianity was to impart to the modern world, marking a major break by demonizing pleasure per se” (Gilligan and Richards 2009, 16). They see this role as the folding of Roman patriarchy into Christian theology, and thus into the fabric of the history of the West. Their argument concerning patriarchy’s effect on individuals is intriguing: patriarchy prevents “love between equals” (19); it “calls for and legitimates the traumatic disruption of intimate relationships and that the effect of such trauma on the human psyche is precisely to suppress personal voice and relationships in an identification with the patriarchal voice that imposed the disruption” (21). That is, we are

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taught in patriarchy to suppress our hearts and believe that the patriarchal voice was correct all along. Although their reading of the folding of Roman patriarchal practices into the Christian faith in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages is compelling, their primary means of doing so (that is, their critique of Augustine) leaves much to be desired. By looking to Augustine's autobiography, the *Confessions*, and seeing a template for Roman manliness placing itself in Christian thought, they not only do a disservice to Augustine but also to their own theory.

Gilligan and Richards critique Augustine for supporting the suppression of intimate, personal love, as it is a move that reinforces patriarchal society. I agree that the suppression of love is a result of life under patriarchy and that a study of the possibilities for opening up the gates of love is itself a political stance against patriarchal domination of hearts and minds. However, I disagree that Augustine's philosophical and theological writings on love support the assertions of Gilligan and Richards. Rather, in my reading, Augustine's account of love provides a way of understanding the transformative and transformable nature of love, specifically love for worldly things. In this article, I will focus on Augustine's account of his relationships with women as given in his *Confessions* in order to demonstrate the gendered, bodily side of love that is often glossed over in readings of Augustine on love. I begin by discussing what I mean generally by love and desire in terms of Augustine's *Confessions*. Then, I move to a discussion of two ecstatic visions Augustine recounts as well as Augustine's relationship with sex and continence. Finally, I discuss what I take to be the crux of understanding Augustine on love: the loving body. Augustine's view of the body as beautiful, God-made, and as naturally lovable as it is loving provides interesting answers to feminist questions concerning bodily love as well as a ground for contemplating the unnecessary philosophical and theological division between intellectual love (which is divine and perfect) and bodily desire (which is worldly and depraved).

LOVE (THAT IS) DESIRE



Figure 1 Statue of Cupid and Psyche; Temple of Love, Ostia Antica, Italy. Photograph by author.

There is a statue in Ostia that dates from 325–350 CE located in the Temple of Love, not too far from the first Christian Church built in Rome. The wings of the gods are now severed, their noses fallen away, but Cupid and Psyche once stood resplendent in their embrace in the same city at the same time that Augustine, before he was a bishop, even before he was a priest, had an ecstatic experience of divine grace together with his mother¹ as they leaned out of a window overlooking a garden. The proximity of their vision to this statue hints at the connection between the evolution of the relationship between Augustine and his mother and that between the two gods.² In the myth of Cupid and Psyche, which is recounted for the first time by the Late Antique writer Apuleius and which Carol Gilligan writes of in her book *The Birth of Pleasure* (Apuleius 1999; Gilligan 2002), we hear of the many trials of Cinderella-like Psyche and the great feats of love she had to perform to win back her hidden lover, Cupid. The myth ends with her clothed in immortality, their marriage, and the birth of their daughter *Vuluptas*, Pleasure. Thus Neoplatonist Apuleius places the emergence of pleasure in the human world with the successful recoupling of love and soul.

As Cupid and Psyche begin their relationship in blind physical love, so too does Augustine with his mother. His love for her begins as one of bodied grasping as an infant. As an adult he flees her cloying, desperate love, but he finally comes around. Both love stories involve the transcendence of physical ties through the tears and desperation of the female of the pair. Both stories involve the ascension of one of the pair to immortality: Psyche becomes a goddess and Augustine becomes a member of the Christian community. The completion of both of their tales shows a love that must be both bodily and spiritual, earthly and heavenly. These two loves, in Augustine's view, are the loves of *concupiscentia* and of *caritas*.³

Augustine's *Confessions*, written sometime between 397 and 400 CE shortly after he became Bishop of Hippo in North Africa, is dripping with the language of love. Augustine confesses his current love for God as well as the wild love of his youth. In her book *Desire and Delight: A New Reading of Augustine's Confessions*, feminist theologian Margaret Miles discusses the motive for such a rhetorical strategy: "the *Confessions* constructs its reader as voyeur in relation to an erotic text, a text full of partial disclosures, vivid sensual metaphors, tantalizing gaps, and earnest appeals for the reader's understanding and indulgence" (Miles 2006, 68). Love and desire are intertwined in the language of the text, and the reader is invited to participate in its affective nature—the text seeks both to inform the reader of the spiritual journey but also drag the reader into the experience of desire as grasping love. Augustine's use of sexual language is revealing of his conception of what the soul "at peace" in the body looks like: roiling, affective, and pouring outwards. For example, in Book X, after going back and forth seeking where God abides in his memory, Augustine evokes bodily imagery to demonstrate the conclusion of his search for God:

Late have I loved (*amavi*) you, beauty so old and so new, late have I loved (*amavi*) you. And see, you were within and I was in the external world

and sought you there, and in my unlovely state I plunged into those lovely created things which you made. You were with me, and I was not with you. The lovely things kept me far from you, though if they did not have their existence in you, they had no existence at all. You called and cried out loud and shattered my deafness. You were radiant and resplendent, you put to flight my blindness. You were fragrant, and I drew in my breath and now pant after you. I tasted you, and I feel but hunger and thirst for you. You touched me, and I am set on fire to attain the peace which is yours. (Augustine 1998, X.27.30, 201)⁴

An alternative translation to the last clause, “*tetigisti me, et exarsi in pacem tuam*,” is “you touched me, and I burned into your peace.” God was always there in his memory, but Augustine was not sensually engaging with the divine. God flashes and Augustine sees; God calls out and destroys Augustine’s deafness. Augustine uses the language of hearing, sight, smell, taste (both of food and drink), and, finally, touch to denote the final burning into peace Augustine achieves. The fruition of Augustine’s “coming to God” is not peaceful in the normal connotation of the word. Whereas Dido is on fire when she is abandoned by Aeneas, Augustine is on fire when he finally turns to God. Augustine’s conversion in his *Confessions* is apparently spiritual, but it is in no way peaceful in the sense of limpid pools—it is violent and loud and fragrant and intimately bodied.

Augustine’s overwhelmingly bodied experience of the presence of God in his memory is indicative of what he conceives of as love. Why, if Augustine’s conversion to Christianity (that is, to love as *caritas*) is a conversion to continence and celibacy, is there so much sexualized language in his *Confessions*? And what purpose does Augustine’s sexual language serve him philosophically? Miles claims that the sexualized language of the *Confessions* leads to a heavily gendered notion of spirituality. She writes in *Desire and Delight*:

I suspect that in spite of his loud and frequent disclaimers, Augustine learned more than he acknowledged from sex, that he learned “the deep and irreplaceable knowledge of [his] capacity for joy” from his sexual experience, and that it was precisely *this* experiential knowledge from which Augustine extrapolated his model of spiritual pleasure. (Miles 2006, 71)

Some scholars (feminist and otherwise) disagree with Miles’s account of the importance of sex in Augustine’s *Confessions*. In their introduction to *Seducing Augustine: Bodies, Desires, Confessions*, Virginia Burrus, Mark D. Jordan, and Karmen MacKendrick write:

If one accepts (both for example and for the sake of argument) that the *Confessions* supplies no positive “female subject position” yet seems everywhere to assume a “male sexuality,” does the text not nonetheless (even thereby) seduce our readerly “femininity,” emergent at that queer site where deep resistance meets deep responsiveness in a bursting-forth of joy that (momentarily) both reverses and undoes the binary between text and

reader, masculinity and femininity, activity and passivity? Put otherwise, is every absence or gap in a text as subtle and complex as the *Confessions* not potentially a lure or incitement, overflowing with possibility, every attempt at domination an opportunity to assert oneself in turn? (Burrus, Jordan, and MacKendrick 2010, 7)

They read Miles as closing off the possibility of love Augustine offers. Indeed, Augustine's use of the language of desire does not end with his supposedly chaste embrace of Lady Continence (more on his last wife below) at the time of his conversion. His *Confessions* is full of his struggles with passionate, libidinal love. Although Book VIII's final conversion scene seems to be the conversion of a wild, concupiscent love of the world and worldly things to the calmer, soothing love of God with a calming *caritas*, Augustine's prayers to God and his accounts of his relationship with the Divine—the prayers that he makes not only post-conversion but decades later—are rife with sexualized language. For example, in Book IX, having recounted his conversion experience and discussed his retirement from being a professor of rhetoric in Milan, he writes, "You pierced my heart with the arrow of your love (*caritate*)" (Augustine 1998, IX.ii.3, 156).

In the note that follows, Henry Chadwick points out that the symbol of Christ as Cupid was already common by the time Augustine wrote his proto-autobiography (Augustine 1998, 156, n. 3). It is historically satisfying that Augustine sees the activity of God's love in relation to Cupid's arrow, as the Cupid and Psyche myth is alleged to have originated in North Africa, but it is also philosophically satisfying—the god Eros becomes Cupid and, finally, is then transformed into Christ. As the root of *concupiscentia* is Cupid, it is not difficult to imagine the possibility of a positive, concupiscent love that is distinct yet in relationship with love as *caritas*.

Miles is correct in her description of the presence of sexual love language in the *Confessions*, but her notion of what counts as love ought to be fuller. Burrus, Jordan, and MacKendrick push toward a notion of relationality in the way in which Augustine writes of lust: "He prefers to convert lust into love, to promise fornications while in fact delivering friendships. Yet the translation of lust into love—the effective switching of the bait—only serves to erode the distinction between lust and love—to remind us of the lust secreted *within* love" (Burrus, Jordan, and MacKendrick 2010, 18). For Augustine, concupiscent desire is the expression of love for the beautiful things of the world (the things that God made, according to the "Late have I loved you" passage cited above), for bodily things, yes, but really for all the physical, external things. It shows up everywhere, even when the ascetic breaks her fast.⁵ Love is depicted in the *Confessions* as a spilling forth; concupiscent love is more like Onanism—a spilling forth of love onto things that cannot hold it, and *caritas* love is a spilling that leads to being filled in return. If the overwhelming love of God is a gendered sexuality, then it must be a gender that includes male, female, and in between; it fills, causes to overflow, and returns backwards. To take the metaphor home, wouldn't then the individual once filled with love of God and God's love

filled in turn go and spill her love on the ground in a more profound way? This second spilling is not *caritas* but *concupiscentia* perfected.

MOTHERS AND WIVES: LOVE, GRIEF, AND CONTINENCE

In the previous section I discussed the interplay between love and desire in Augustine's *Confessions*. In this section I will explore the different interplay between these connected emotions and affects in his *Confessions*. Augustine is a possible source for the infusing of Christianity with Neoplatonic notions of God as affectless, rational mind (or *nous*). Books VII and IX of the *Confessions* seem to offer some traction for these claims, as in these books Augustine offers descriptions of two out-of-body ecstatic experiences that led him to two different kinds of knowledge. Indeed, his experience in Book VII is predicated on his having read some books of the Platonists. Which books we do not know, but likely some selection from Plotinus's *Enneads*; what is significant is that he learned from these texts to conceive of God as nonmaterial and the relationship of humans to that nonmateriality. This vision, preceded chronologically by the excising of his wife⁶ of thirteen years from his side, is violently cut short by what he considers the crushing weight of his sexual habit. This is an important vision philosophically and religiously speaking: it leads him to a nonmaterial understanding of divinity and thus seemingly closer to his ultimate conversion to Christianity in Book VIII.

Gilligan and Richards take up this development as a further way to critique Augustine's anti-sexuality: "Why, once he arrives at a conception of an immaterial lover/God, does that lead to him associatively (certainly not logically or philosophically) to celibacy?" (Gilligan and Richards 2009, 110). They accept that Augustine conceives of the relationship with God as a lover–beloved relationship, but they find in Augustine's ultimate celibacy a neutering of the possibility of love and desire.

Augustine's second ecstatic experience occurs in Ostia and ends more gently than his first: he and his mother gradually come to their senses and back to the place where sentences have beginnings and endings (Augustine 1998, IX.x.24, 171). At the conclusion of this vision his mother declares,

My son, as for myself, I now find no pleasure (*delector*) in this life. What I have still to do here and why I am here, I do not know. My hope in this world is already fulfilled. The one reason why I wanted to stay longer in this life was my desire (*cupiebam*) to see you a Catholic Christian before I die. My God has granted this in a way more than I had hoped. For I see you despising this world's success to become his servant. What have I to do here? (Augustine 1998, IX.x.26, 172)

Thus Monnica expresses her acceptance of death, saying also that she no longer wished to have her body buried next to her husband.

Both of these visions seem to align with readings of Augustine as one who sees soul and mind as separate from flesh, and yearning for the divine. Augustine's

account of love as double, as bifurcated into quiet *caritas* and wild *concupiscentia* seems to support this claim as well. After all, wouldn't a proper transformation of "fallen" flesh to "resurrected" flesh lend itself to a world without *concupiscentia*? But Augustine is no immaterialist denouncer of the flesh: the perfection of human love at the time of resurrection (or through the grace of God in this world) does not involve the destruction of *concupiscentia*, but its transformation. A robust understanding of *concupiscentia* lends itself to an understanding of human interaction and desire as one that is always stretching outward from itself.

A believer in Porphyry's biographical exposure of Plotinus's shame for his bodied existence may look to Augustine's ecstatic flight in Book IX of the *Confessions* as one of Neoplatonic triumph over flesh.⁷ However, Augustine and his mother were intimately connected, both spiritually through their faith and bodily through their mother/child relationship as well as through cohabitation. As Catherine Conybeare points out in *The Irrational Augustine*, Monnica is presented in *The Happy Life* (*De beata vita*) and other early dialogues as not just a mother or a philosophical conduit for the words of God. When Augustine (both as interlocutor within the texts and as writer of the texts) ascribes the category of "Mother" and "Church" to Monnica, Monnica herself reminds her son that she is a "little woman" (Conybeare 2006, 74). By reminding Augustine and his crowd of friends and students of her gender, Monnica deepens the connection between reason and embodiment. She is not a special spiritual conduit of God's words; she is an embodied creature who reasons. The flight Augustine takes with his mother in Book IX of the *Confessions* is intimately bodied—both must remain tied to their flesh as their flesh.

Augustine does examine his relationships with women in his *Confessions*, but his discussion of his friendships focuses only on his friendships with men. Yet "Friendship can be a dangerous enemy, a seduction of the mind lying beyond the reach of investigation" (Augustine 1998, II.ix.17, 34); "Tongues that appear to be offering helpful advice can actually be hostile opponents and, in offering love, may devour us in the way people consume food" (Augustine 1998, IX.ii.2, 156). Augustine uses the language of seduction and love to discuss friendships—loving others is a dangerous activity when one's affections of soul are relegated to base *concupiscentia*. This danger is because those other humans are not like the other "beautiful things" of nature, which are good insofar as they are creations of God. Other humans are goods in themselves, to be sure, but they also have their own desires and motivations, and can be a cause for corruption in others: Augustine wrote the first quotation above in connection with the famous pear tree incident, in which he and his friends stole inedible pears that they had no intention of eating, sinning for the sake of sinning.

By his own account, Augustine himself is a far worse friend than any of those he allowed to corrupt him in his youth. In Book IV of his *Confessions* Augustine speaks of an unnamed friend whom he convinced to join him in the Manichean cult. This friend then fell into a fever and converted to Christianity on his deathbed, casting Augustine from his presence. When the friend died shortly thereafter, Augustine was inconsolable. Augustine's language of this time of his life is florid and heart-wrenching: "I was in misery, and misery is the state of every soul overcome by friendship

with mortal things and lacerated when they are lost" (Augustine 1998, IV.vi.11, 58). Augustine himself asks, "Why do I speak of these matters?" (58). Because this wrapping of himself in misery is the consequence of his concupiscent communion with worldly things, Augustine is "lacerated" by the death of this friend, and wraps himself up in this wound as if he could never be healed.

Excessive grief, for Augustine, comes from the connection of oneself with *concupiscentia*, from loving the world with eyes of lust. As a youth he wept for Dido and learned the joy of weeping (Augustine 1998, I.xiii.20, 15). With the death of his unnamed friend he was finally able to enact on a closer object that bitter grief he felt for Dido, weeping desperate tears and being so miserable that he had to leave town. Excessive grieving, too, is a kind of *concupiscentia*, for it comes from perverted love:

What madness not to understand how to love (*diligere*) human beings with awareness of the human condition! How stupid man is to be unable to restrain feelings in suffering the human lot! That was my state at the time. So I boiled with anger, sighed, wept, and was at my wits' end. I found no calmness, no capacity for deliberation. I carried my lacerated and bloody soul when it was unwilling to be carried by me. I found no place where I could put it down. (Augustine 1998, IV.vii.12, 59)

Augustine's weeping for Dido was unreal: his pain was based upon something ephemeral. However, that is what it is to base one's love on something that is mortal. He writes of his grief at the death of his friend, "The reason why that grief had penetrated me so easily and deeply was that I had poured out my soul on to the sand by loving (*diligendo*) a person sure to die as if he would never die" (Augustine 1998, IV.viii.13, 60). Augustine here likens concupiscently loving a mortal other to Onanism, spilling one's seed onto the ground. The mortal other is not the proper receptacle of love. Instead, the only way to love properly is to love the fitting object. Like Diotima's ladder suggests, the ultimate object of desire, for Augustine, is to be filled with love and to spill forth with love. Truly, proper love of an object is to be pregnant with love and to spill forth that love without being depleted.

It is no wonder Miles and others criticize Augustine for a conception of love and soul that is overly rife with masculine sexual imagery—even excessive grief is the result of a wasted orgasm. The lesson to be learned from Augustine's excessive grieving is: "If physical objects give you pleasure, praise God for them and return love to their Maker lest, in the things that please you, you displease him. If souls please you, they are being loved in God; for they also are mutable and acquire stability by being established in him" (Augustine 1998, IV.xii.18, 63). Plato's Diotima ascends the ladder and gives birth in Beauty, but Augustine ascends it and is able to spill out his "love" continuously without being depleted, and instead is in turn filled with the love of God.

The death of Augustine's mother, which occurred in Ostia not many days after their shared vision, warrants many pages of the *Confessions*, even though he wept for her for only fifteen minutes. The loss of his wife of thirteen years, with whom he produced his only child, Adeodatus, who stayed in Milan while his mother went back to Africa alone, covers fewer pages in the text but left a wound that took some time to heal:

Meanwhile my sins multiplied. The woman with whom I habitually slept was torn away from my side because she was a hindrance to my marriage. My heart, which was deeply attached, was cut and wounded, and left a trail of blood. . . . But my wound, inflicted by the earlier parting, was not healed. After inflammation and sharp pain, it festered. The pain made me as it were frigid but desperate. (Augustine 1998, VI.xv.25, 109)

Readers of Augustine (*especially* feminist readers of Augustine) are often caught in a particular kind of reading of his personal sexual relationships with women. It is difficult to pass some passages without thinking of Augustine's problematic position as patriarch:

she was the only girl for me, and I was faithful to her. With her I learnt by direct experience how wide a difference there is between the partnership of marriage entered into for the sake of having a family and the mutual consent of those whose love is a matter of physical sex (*libidinosi amoris*), and for whom the birth of a child is contrary to their intention—even though, if offspring arrive, they compel their parents to love them. (Augustine 1998, IV.ii.2, 53)

There is much in this passage that is open for feminist critique. Perhaps Augustine lingers on the sexual possibilities of the original human pair in Eden in so many of his works because he himself had a personal problem with sex, though there is some back and forth in Augustine scholarship whether modern psychological terms like “sex-addict” ought to be applied to him.⁸ This anachronism seems to explain much of Augustine's pathology concerning women: he cannot have sexual relationships in which he considers the woman to be on his level or at least on the level of his male companions, of whom he says: “without friends I could not be happy even when my mind was at the time a flood of indulgence in physical pleasures (*carnalium voluptatum*). My friends I loved (*diligebam*) indeed for their own sake; and I felt that in return they loved (*diligi*) me for my sake” (Augustine 1998, VI.xvi.26, 110).

As Miles points out, Augustine has no problem with having intimate life-long friendships with men, but balks at the possibility of having such companionship with a woman (Miles 2006, 89). That is, Augustine, who lived with his wife for thirteen years and with his mother until her death when he was thirty-three, could not conceive of a good friendship relationship between men and women that would not be hampered by sexual desire. Miles claims that Augustine's representation of women in his *Confessions* omits their feelings and points of view—“What did she *feel*, returning to Africa, swearing permanent celibacy, while Augustine chooses a more advantageous marriage? What did she feel, leaving her son—perhaps forever, as she sailed off to her new solitary existence?” (Miles 2006, 78). He represents the two women in his *Confessions*, his common-law wife and his mother, in a certain light, but really obsesses over only *his* feelings about them.⁹ He was wounded at the loss of his life-companion due to his mother's and his own political aspirations, deeply wounded, but this did not stop him from taking another lover.¹⁰ It is possible to end one's

reading of Augustine on love with this fact, but Augustine is writing of his spiritual journey and includes these women as representative of the interplay between *caritas* and *concupiscentia* in his loving life.

There is a way in which Augustine's wife is herself resurrected in his *Confessions*: during the famous conversion narrative of Book VIII, Augustine's lover is transformed. Lady Continence¹¹ arrives, surrounded by her progeny, swollen with her fecundity:

there appeared the dignified and chaste Lady Continence, serene and cheerful without coquetry, enticing me in an honourable manner to come and not to hesitate. To receive and embrace me she stretched out pious hands, filled (*plenas*) with numerous good examples for me to follow. There were large numbers of boys and girls, a multitude of all ages, young adults and grave widows and elderly virgins. In every one of them was Continence herself, in no sense barren but "the fruitful mother of children" (Ps. 112:9), the joys born of you, Lord, her husband. (Augustine 1998, VIII.xi.27, 151)

On the surface, her arrival is a call to chastity and a turn to God (and certainly readers of Augustine such as Gerald Schlabach take this chastity at face value [Schlabach 1998]): "Why do you try and stand by yourself, and so not stand at all? Let him support you. Do not be afraid. He will not draw away and let you fall. Put yourself fearlessly in his hands. He will receive you and will make you well" (Augustine 1998, VIII.xi.27, 151). However, her words require a deeper understanding of what Augustine is playing with in his conception of love.

There is very interesting research pertaining to the specific nature of Augustine's conception of continence (Schlabach 1998), but what is significant for my argument is the parallel between the unnamed woman who was once his wife and Lady Continence: both figures are the lone representatives of Augustine's relationships with women other than his mother. It is fruitful to ponder the significance of a gendered Continence who comes to Augustine at a crucial time personified as a pregnant woman surrounded by her children (*nequaquam sterilis, sed fecunda mater filiorum gaudiorum de marito te*). I read Lady Continence as pregnant not because her hands are full (*plenas*) with her existing children: she is pregnant with Augustine himself, for it is through her figurative body that Augustine himself must emerge in order to be born into Christianity. Contra Miles, Gilligan, and Richards, Augustine's conversion to Christianity and to celibacy is not a denial of feminine bodies, sexuality, or gender. Rather, it is an embracing of them. When Augustine is able to clasp Lady Continence while seeing her not just as a bodied site at which to have his needs met (sexually or filially), he is able to move past his patriarchal conception of loving relationships with women and into a new way of thinking about love.

LOVE AND AUGUSTINE

There are not many women in the *Confessions*, but those who are present are powerful and are represented not just as watery figures but as adult, fertile women who have

given birth. It is necessary to read Augustine on love in terms of these relationships, as the desire that Augustine “suffers” from in his early life is related to these women. *Concupiscentia* is a kind of love (*amor*) that does not offer what one really wants; rather, it is a kind of love that desires things of the world. It is a love that is bodied and seeks bodies. In her dissertation, *Love and Saint Augustine*, Hannah Arendt contrasts the love of *caritas* with the love of *cupiditas*¹² in a manner that is representative of what I read as the common negative philosophical and theological reading of Augustine on love. The dissertation is composed of three parts (none of which discuss the women in Augustine’s life). The first part lays out Arendt’s reading of Augustine on love as craving for fulfillment and stability; in this section she claims that, for Augustine, there is a stark divide between *caritas* and *cupiditas*, which she correctly reads as forms of love that have different foci and only one of which is stable. She reads *cupiditas* as causing a constant estrangement from the individual from herself and claims that Augustine calls for its dissolution in favor of stable *caritas* (Arendt 1996, 23).

In the second part, Arendt lays out Augustine’s reading of *caritas* as the loneliest form of human love and the seeming impossibility of neighborly love. The final part is concerned with making space for neighborly love and distancing *caritas* to co-habit. She writes in the final section,

Man is the other, whether he understands himself as an isolated individual or as conditioned and essentially constituted by the fact of belonging to the human race. . . . Although we can meet the other only because both of us belong to the human race, it is only in the individual’s isolation in God’s presence that he becomes our neighbor. (Arendt 1996, 112)¹³

In this final part Arendt must make room for social life in a perfected form of human existence sans *cupiditas*. In a footnote to her discussion of Augustine’s account of the human temporization of the world as separate from the godly creation of the world, she quotes Augustine’s Sermon 76, 9: “The world only knows how to devour its lovers, not to carry them” (Arendt 1996, 69, n. 93). On Arendt’s reading of Augustine, this world (“constituted by men,” not “the world as heaven and earth” [Arendt 1996, 69]) cannot but destroy those who love it, a confirmation of *caritas* as sterile, isolated love between spirit and divine and *cupiditas* as wild, all-consuming desire for the world. This is a fundamental misreading of Augustine’s thinking on the relationship between the human and her world.

In his later masterwork *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, Augustine writes that the nature of “carnal concupiscentia” is not “in the soul alone, much less in the flesh alone. It comes from both sources” (Augustine 1982, X.xii.20, 110). Although Arendt does indicate that pleasure is felt by the soul, she neglects to fully comprehend the significance of the fact that, for Augustine, pleasure is natural, felt by the soul, and *desired* by the soul in all forms of human existence (before the Fall of the first pair, in the world that is to come, and now) and that “carnal pleasure,” though felt by means of the body, does not arise from the body (Augustine 1982, X.xii.20, 111). Readers of Augustine who repudiate *concupiscentia* and worldly love in general tend to gloss over the famous

“Late have I loved you” passage quoted above: “*The lovely things kept me far from you, though if they did not have their existence in you, they had no existence at all.*” The world itself is not the source of the problem of human disorderliness, and a disavowal of the world and other humans is not the way to transcend disorder or to get away from disorder and closer to God. It is not merely the choice of objects that causes the lover to be destroyed, for those objects are lovely; it is how the lover loves. If the lover loves the things in the world as if she could consume them and be made whole by them, the lover can only be devoured in turn. The world degrades, and in the death of the object of one’s love one’s own world unravels as well and must be reknit.

In some respects my reading of Augustine on love is an attempt to rescue *concupiscentia* from its negative connotations. *Concupiscentia* is how we love the things of the world; however, for Augustine, *concupiscentia* also exists in a space between soul and body, human and human. In some ways love is considered as an abstract (and therefore impossible) idea or as an affect: the result of a great burden of cerebral chemicals. By bifurcating *amor* into *caritas* and *concupiscentia*, Augustine makes way for discussions of love that are polyvalent and burgeoning with potentiality. In her dissertation, Arendt focuses on the dual nature of love in Augustine’s thought, and her conclusions involve a falling away of *concupiscentia* in favor of *caritas*, the proper love of God. She strips from this new love anything resembling passion (bodily or psychological) and makes it intellectual, cutting off the possibility of neighborly love in the process. Even though she ends her dissertation on social life after *caritas*, there is no clear room for interconnectedness in Arendt’s reading of Augustine’s *caritas*. Hers is a provocative misreading of Augustine on love; for Arendt, the turn from *cupiditas* to *caritas* is a turn to otherworldliness. This turn is impossible—Augustine requires more of love than just being awash in the presence of God.

On my reading, in contrast to Arendt’s, “The world only knows how to devour its lovers, not to carry them” should be read as claiming that the object of *concupiscentia* is not something that can be reciprocal, because the desire of *concupiscentia* is to consume and make one, while not being consumed in turn. In contrast, the transformation of love that comes from a gift from the heavens is not a doing away with bodied desire, a cancelling of *concupiscentia* in favor of stable *caritas*, it is the stabilization of all forms of love.

The central question of Gilligan and Richard’s text is also their last one: “Why is the love of equals unmanly?” (Gilligan and Richards 2009, 267). In her inspiring work *The Birth of Pleasure*, Gilligan defines patriarchy as

an order of domination, privileging some men over others and subordinating women. But in dividing men from men and men from women, in splitting fathers from mothers and daughters and sons, patriarchy also creates a rift in the psyche, dividing everyone from parts of themselves. . . . The sacrifice of love is a common feature of patriarchal religions and cultures. (Gilligan 2002, 7)

It is surprising, given this reading of patriarchy, that Gilligan and Richards find the origins of patriarchal oppression of the individual expression of love as between

equals in the work of Augustine. In contrast, I have maintained that the Gilligan and Richards reading of Augustine as “father” of the problem of patriarchy in the West is much too simplistic. This kind of misreading presents Augustine as a “punching bag” for readings of the negative effect of patriarchal norms on the capacity for love in the human psyche, while ignoring the opportunity his readings of sexuality give us to explore the gendered, fluid nature of love and desire.

What should be of most interest to feminists in my reading of Augustine on love is the way I have complicated the image of Augustine as a patriarch. St. Augustine of Hippo is, after all, considered a Father of the Catholic Church and was in his lifetime a male leader of his city; it is in this very capacity as patriarch that Augustine’s analysis of love so powerfully unravels patriarchal constraints on love. A reading of Augustine that leaves him as a patriarch hell-bent on folding patriarchy into Christianity and nothing more is problematic and not as plausible as my own reading, which focuses on what Augustine’s reading of the fate of love has to say about what it is to be human. The biggest crime against love in Western thought, I think, has been the misreading of Augustine on love, which makes *caritas* sexless and *concupiscentia* Godless: *caritas*, for Augustine, is not passionless and bodiless, and *concupiscentia*, though wild, is not unnatural. What transformations might be possible in folding together these two concepts, bringing love back to love? Augustine does discuss the prospect of the healing transformation of immoderate *concupiscentia* into moderate *concupiscentia*. However, the fact that this transformation can happen only after death and outside of time indicates not the evil and unnaturalness of human bodily love, but its naturalness. For Augustine, bodily love is transformed not into dispassionate, divine love but into a more stable form of itself. The object of *concupiscentia* remains bodily things. Ultimately, a careful reading of Augustine’s understanding of *concupiscentia* and *caritas* as well as his personal relationships with women offers feminists not an understanding of the necessary transformation of earthly love into divine love, but a way of viewing love in its many forms as natural, though not perfect, in its present state: it is in the nature of humans to love not just God, but each other.

NOTES

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1. Augustine’s mother, Monnica, is the patron saint of mothers. I choose to use the less common spelling “Monnica” rather than the more common “Monica” as I believe it more adequately reflects her North African, possibly Berber, heritage.

2. I am not the first to discuss the Apuleian tale of Cupid and Psyche in terms of Augustine’s relationship with Monnica. In *The Sex Lives of Saints*, Virginia Burrus notes

the importance of the life story of Monnica given in her son's autobiography as being related to Apuleius's *Golden Ass*, in which is first told the story of Cupid and Psyche. On Burrus's view, Monnica plays not Psyche but Venus to Augustine's Cupid (Burrus 2004, 83). Burrus and Catherine Keller take up this theme as well in "Confessing Monica" (Burrus and Keller 2007).

3. Many words concerning love are seemingly interchangeable in Augustine's vocabulary. For the purposes of this article I have chosen to use *concupiscentia* (concupiscence) to represent bodily love. I will unpack below what this means in terms of Augustine's thinking on love. Lust, cupidity, and concupiscence are all rolled up into this term. This kind of love is often burdened with negative connotations, both by interpreters of Augustine and by Augustine himself. In this article I seek to clarify this concept by arguing for its complexity in Augustine's thought. *Caritas* is love that is directed toward God and is considered the perfected form of love. Augustine sometimes uses the more overarching term *amor* to denote this specific aspect of love as well. For clarity I have chosen to discuss *concupiscentia* and *caritas* to represent two major aspects of *amor*, which encompasses both. An interesting discussion of these two loves can be found in Babcock 1993.

4. For the purposes of this article I have used a common English translation of Augustine's work unless otherwise stated. When possible and relevant, I have provided the Latin terms for love for many of the Augustine quotations in this article.

5. See Book X of the *Confessions* in which Augustine spends an extended amount of time discussing his problematic delight in eating. "It is not the impurity of food I fear but that of uncontrolled desire" (Augustine 1998, X.xxxi.46, 206).

6. There are contrasting views as to the nature of Augustine's relationship with this woman. She is considered by many his concubine, others call her his companion, still others his common-law wife. I have used "wife" to denote their relationship as I think their relationship reflects the weight of the term in common English usage today. On Augustine's seemingly careless taking up of another sexual partner, Burrus says, "Bereft of his soul mate and cleaving to alien flesh, Augustine suddenly finds his own sinfulness nakedly revealed" (Burrus 2004, 84). Kim Power discusses the relationship between concubinage and marriage in the case of Augustine's relationship in her *Veiled Desire: Augustine on Women* and gives a very compelling argument that Augustine never quite got over his grief about the loss of his wife: "Perhaps it was only when he took another woman that he fully realized that whilst another could take her place in his bed, she could not do so in his heart. From now on, only God's love will offer the sanctuary he seeks, the guarantee that what he loves can never be refit from him again" (Power 1995, 102).

7. John Kevin Coyle claims that it is possible that Monnica takes this flight alone (Coyle 1982).

8. Miles seems to be on the anachronistic side, whereas others like David Hunter suggest a contextualization of Augustine's writings within his theoretical and historical framework (Hunter 2003). Augustine, of course, still pops up from time to time in popular articles and blog posts concerning sex addiction, as in Gilkerson 2013.

9. In "Not Nameless but Unnamed," Miles discusses two women whom I neglect in this essay: Augustine's short-term bedfellow between his wife and his conversion, and the young girl he was supposed to marry (Miles 2007, 174). These women are not fertile in

the text and therefore, in my view, hold less weight in Augustine's theory of love except insofar as they are representatives of the extremes in which *concupiscentia* perverts human relationships. The inclusion of these women is significant in consideration with Burrus's discussion of the possible sarcasm of "lawful" marriage in Burrus 2011, 12–13.

10. Danuta Shanzer makes a compelling argument that the wound at Augustine's side caused by the loss of his wife is a direct reference to Adam's loss of a rib. Adam loses a rib and gains a help-mate, while "Augustine, instead of gaining a wife, loses a bed-mate. . . . And instead of emerging miraculously intact from the process, he is left with a bleeding wound that will not heal" (Shanzer 2002, 159).

11. Lady Continence is a contentious topic among Augustine scholars. Burrus, Jordan, and MacKendrick turn to her again and again. In "Secrets and Lies," Burrus discusses Lady Continence as not an actual woman but a "card-carrying *female figure*" and connects Augustine's choice of *her* with his choice of Wisdom and Scripture (Burrus, Jordan, and MacKendrick 2010, 23). In "The Word, His Body," Jordan emphasizes her facelessness and bodilessness (54). In "Freedom in Submission," MacKendrick mentions the difficulty in the choice of Continence over indulgence (63) and points to the possible necessity of taking oneself outside of the realm that requires the choice (78). In "Monica: The Feminine Face of Christ," Anne-Marie Bowery discusses the possibility of Lady Continence as a stand-in for his mother Monnica, who has represented Mary, the Church, and Christ in Augustine's works (Bowery 2007, 85).

12. Arendt, like many other readers of Augustine, prefers to use the term *cupidity* in contrast to *caritas*. In this section I use her original terminology, switching back to *concupiscentia* when I give my own reading.

13. There is disagreement on whether Arendt's dissertation influenced her later work, *The Human Condition*, as well as her theory of natality. George McKenna gives a compelling argument in his review of the new translation of Arendt's dissertation (Arendt 1996) that in fact Arendt's dissertation *did not* influence her thought, rather her thought developed in such a way as to be incongruous with her earliest work. On McKenna's view, although natality is indeed seemingly derived from her reading of Augustine, it is not something that is supported in this text (McKenna 1997).

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