

Gunnarsson, Lena. *The Contradictions of Love: Towards a feminist-realist sociosexuality*. Pp.xiv+184. London and New York: Routledge, 2014. UK £85.00. ISBN: 9780415824118.

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Published in Routledge's 'Ontological Explorations' series, it is my guess that for most readers of this journal – as for myself – Lena Gunnarsson's book on love is one that might have passed them by were it not for this review.

This chimes with something I have become increasingly aware of recently: that is, the extent to which the social sciences, literary studies and philosophy talk past one another when it comes to research on love and romance. Indeed, I would go so far as to suggest that many of us working in the field probably consider ourselves more 'interdisciplinary' than we really are. True, we have regularly drawn upon psychoanalysis and 'continental' philosophers like Roland Barthes to help refine our thoughts on the mechanisms of love and the dynamics of intimate relationships, but it is rare that you see literary/cultural critics turn to the debates on love in analytic philosophy or, indeed, the work of sociologists like Gunnarsson who continue to work within a broadly Marxist-feminist tradition rather than 'cultural studies' pole of her discipline. This, in turn, suggests that literary/cultural theorists and critics may benefit greatly from the de-familiarization of love offered by these alternative scientific approaches: in which spirit I offer this short review of Lena Gunnarsson's recent book.

The Contradictions of Love explores the phenomenon of love through a 'critical-realist' theoretical framework with the feminist objective of answering the question of why "women continue to be subordinated to men through sexuality and love" despite their "relative economic independence from men" (1). Gunnarsson's commitment to the 'critical realism' of the post-Marxist philosopher Roy Bhaskar (2008 [1975], 1998 [1979]) nevertheless means that she answers this question in a very different way to those of us brought up in the shadow of poststructuralism: a movement which she regards her work as being seriously at odds with (see Part Two of the book: 'Challenging poststructuralist feminism').

Indeed, the poststructuralist's complacent acceptance that love, like gender, is best understood as a *discourse* whose historical baggage will inevitably lag behind social change

is, for her, *the* problem. To anticipate and effect change we need to attend the social structures of 'real-life' (how men and women are living, and negotiating their relationships in the material world) rather than the spurious 'materiality of discourse' that she ascribes to Judith Butler and her followers. In the book's Introduction, Gunnarsson makes clear that both she and her mentor, Anna Jónasdóttir, believe that love is a phenomenon that "exists independently of our knowledge of it" (16) and that while knowledge is, itself, part of reality "the former (reality) cannot be reduced to the latter (knowledge)" (11).

It is, of course, a measure of the orthodoxy that the poststructuralist tradition has assumed that Gunnarsson is nevertheless obliged to spend so much of the book analysing what she perceives Butler's work to stand for. Much of this is in the form of the 'common sense' (political) objections a non-specialist would bring to Butler's work (how can we improve relations between the sexes in the material world when sexual difference has been reduced to a position in discourse?), though it is arguable that her hard-line stance is compromised later in the book (Chapter Seven) when she embraces Roy Bhaskar's 'non-dualistic' model of loving as a way forward. Bhaskar's location of (true)love in 'metaReality' (see below) itself dispenses with the significance of gender in our personal relationships and sidelines patriarchy to the realm of a 'false-consciousness' that we need to move beyond (122-4).

As noted above, Gunnarsson's first inspiration was her supervisor Anna Jónasdóttir, and Chapter Three provides a useful and thought-provoking review of the latter's work. One of the most far-reaching consequences of Jónasdóttir's insistence on a 'critical-realist' approach to love, according to Gunnarsson, is that it challenges the recent tendency amongst theorists "to theorize sexuality as something separate from love and care" (17). By contrast, Jónasdóttir "sees our erotic-ecstatic and caring capacities as dialectically conjoined" (17) and invents the concept of "love power" (characterized by a dialectical interplay of care and erotic ecstasy) as "the basic motor in our existence as human beings" (17). Love, therefore, is best understood as an emphatically material socio-sexual phenomenon fuelled by necessity: "humans depend psychologically upon one another for their existence" (14).

Jónasdóttir's thesis 'Love power and political interests' was completed in 1991 and published as *Why Women are Oppressed* in 1994. In it she follows the principles established by the Marxist- and radical-feminists of the 1970s, but proposes that any explanation of women's oppression in an era of [relative] economic independence for [many] women in the West needs to shift its attention to "men's exploitation of women's love power" (44). For me, the most interesting part of Jónasdóttir's work as presented by Gunnarsson is the former's definition of love not only as a basic human need or necessity, but – at its best – as a profoundly creative *labour*:

What, then, do I mean by the 'production of life'? Much more than bearing, nourishing, and raising children, even though these activities are extremely important in their context. Women and men, in their total intercourse in pairs and groups, also create each other. And the needs and capacities that generate this creative process have our bodies-and-minds as their intertwined living sources. These needs and capacities must be satisfied and developed for the human species to survive, and for us individuals to live a good and dignified life. (1994:23)

The creative – and productive – nature of love is something I have explored in my own work (2007), and Jónasdóttir's account of this in explicitly Marxist terms offers an interesting perspective on why two individuals working together on a common cause (other than themselves) can be so rewarding (i.e., the need to produce, to labour, is intrinsic to human existence and is the key to a 'good life' providing we own 'the means of production' as, in our relationships, we do).

However, this model of love at its creative best is, according to Jónasdóttir, extremely difficult to achieve in patriarchal society on account of the fact that men and women are differently positioned in terms of both their needs and expectations and this has resulted in a division of labour (women care in order to 'earn' the love and respect of their men, while men enjoy 'erotic ecstasy' but miss out on the positive experience of care). This is an arrangement which ultimately disadvantages both parties and prevents them finding fulfilment in shared 'creative productivity' beyond themselves.

For Gunnarsson, it is the diminution of the men's experience of love that is of particular concern and which fuels her enquiry in Part Three of the book. Following a chapter [Chapter Six] in which she draws upon the ethnographic research of Wendy Langford (1999) and Carin Holmberg (1993) to further theorise how, and why, women continue to 'sacrifice' themselves for love, her attention shifts to how we might re-conceptualize the practice of love in such a way that both men and women share in the rewards of caring and erotic ecstasy. This is where Roy Bhaskar's work, mentioned above, is invoked to carry her thesis forward and Gunnarsson is to be commended on the challenging theoretical task she sets herself in aligning Jónasdóttir's focus on "the historically specific configuration of practical human love in contemporary western societies" (122) with Bhaskar's transcendent vision. For although Bhaskar is the scholar credited with inventing the methodological practice of 'critical realism' (see references in my opening paragraph above), his subsequent presentation of metaReality (2002) as "absolute reality" (115) (in contrast to what he terms 'relative reality' and 'demi-reality') moves 'true love', among other things, to a transcendental realm that would presumably be of little interest to Jónasdóttir.

The love that we might hope to find in metaReality is, according to Bhaskar, "the totalizing, unifying, healing force of the universe" (Bhaskar 2002) (120). Key to love's power, moreover, is its intrinsic 'non-dualism': "If we are in touch with and affirmative of the non-dual level of being at which the 'outside world' is part of us, unconditional loving will be the spontaneous attitude towards the world" (120). Such an unconditional outpouring of love, reminiscent of how Agape is characterized within the Christian tradition, is necessarily oblivious to gender difference and, unlike Jónasdóttir's critique of hetero-patriarchy, would presumably extend to all sexualities and all expressions of love.

In attempting to square the interests of Jónasdóttir and the (post-millennial) Bhaskar, Gunnarsson focuses on the fact that both nevertheless "conceptualize love as a creative, energizing power or force" (122) and locates the dysfunctionality that preoccupies Jónasdóttir in Bhaskar's illusory 'demi-reality':

Male authority, female sociosexual poverty and the exploitation which they both depend on and sustain are real inasmuch as our collective belief in them informs our practices, which construct the reality in which we must act. Yet,

they are only half-real, since they negate necessities on which they depend.
(123)

Moreover, Gunnarsson discovers in this slippage between demi- and meta-reality the clue to why women “generally enjoy loving men even when it deprives them of their strength and dignity” (123); that is, because at its most basic level “love is fundamentally unexploitable” (123).

Regardless of how persuaded we are of this rationale – and, indeed, whether we think it adds anything to other well-known explanations of why women appear to ‘love too much’ – credit must be given to Gunnarsson in effecting a difficult philosophical move. In the subsequent chapter, ‘Men in Love’, she explores further what confinement to the realm of ‘demi-reality’ means to men and speculates on what form male emancipation, following Bhaskar’s model, might take. In this chapter, too, she engages with the work of Jessica Benjamin (1988, 1998) and some masculinity scholars; this provides a welcome (if belated) orientation of her project in theories and debates with which readers of this journal, like myself, will be more familiar.

More generally, it difficult to gauge how much of interest literary/cultural critics are likely to discover in Gunnarsson’s study. For anyone working in the field of romance studies, *all* new definitions of love are, of course, welcome and thought-provoking, and Bhaskar’s transcendental ‘non-dualism’ may appeal to critics and theorists who are persuaded by the notion of love’s creative and generative power. Gunnarsson’s starting point in Jónasdóttir’s theory is, however, likely to have rather less appeal to readers of this journal; not necessarily because they/we are all poststructuralists (!), but because the Marxist-/radical-feminism which motivates her project will seem dated and, conceptually, familiar to most of us (notwithstanding the new direction she claims for her investigations). This last point also raises an issue with Gunnarsson’s sources (both theoretical and ethnographic) in general, which is that many are over 20 years old. Inasmuch as her philosophizing of this material is new, its historical nature should not necessarily matter; however, the assumption – stemming from Jónasdóttir’s work – that patriarchy in the Western world is an institution that has not evolved or adapted at all does seem problematic. This is not to say, of course, that things have necessarily been getting better (in some respects they may be getting worse), but patriarchy is clearly not an a-historical monolith and relations between the sexes have been liable to all manner of social, as well as cultural, change over the past quarter-century. This said, there are plenty of moments in this tightly-argued book that will, I’m sure, prove thought-provoking to *JPRS* readers and encourage us to extend the reach of our interdisciplinarity.

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