

How to Fall out of Love:

Psychotherapeutic Treatment for Love in the Days of Yore

Copyright © Donald Robertson, 2005.

The author gives permission for this article to be copied and reproduced on paper or electronically, providing that this copyright notice is included and the content is not altered. (Web: www.HypnoSynthesis.com)

Freud was not the first psychotherapist. Thousands of years ago, in Greece and Rome, a great many books and poems were written about techniques of psychological therapy. Among the most explicitly therapeutic philosophies were the two, great, rival, Hellenistic schools of Stoicism and Epicureanism.

It is curious to note both the differences and similarities between ancient and modern psychotherapy. One striking difference is that the ancients tended to focus their therapeutic endeavours on different maladies than the ones therapists nowadays are concerned with. One cannot read the Stoics, e.g., without noticing that they think of anger as being a much more common problem than anxiety or depression. However, it is to another, far more serious, preoccupation of the ancient philosopher-therapists that we now turn: *the treatment of pathological love*.

A Couple of Pagan Love Doctors

The ancients seem to have suffered terribly from love. Their poets rave about the misery it causes and its dangerous effects.



Pan sexually harassing Aphrodite, with Eros egging him on.

A Latin proverb, *amantes amentes*, roughly translates as "Lovers are not right in the head." Later, Christian authors on the subject of love can be a little insipid and unworldly, they tend to either idealise it or demonise it, as if it were mainly a question of opposing carnal sin to spiritual rapture. The pagans, on the other hand, are a much more visceral and down-to-earth bunch. For them, love is all flesh and blood; love is in the loins and simultaneously spiritual. We've all seen the pictures of the romping satyrs and the Bacchic women (*maenads*) at their orgies –and wondered how we get invited to one. When this sort of wanton exuberance gets out of hand it often becomes a matter requiring psychotherapy, hence, the English word "panic" which is what you experience if you get too carried away with the riotous shenanigans of the horny goat-hoofed god of nature, Pan, who presides over this sort of thing. The

medieval Christians frowned on it all, so they made the Bacchae and Pan into

witches and the Devil, and started burning them at the stake. Typical spoilsports!

Anyway, one of the most passionate and expressive authors on the theme of love-madness is the Roman poet Lucretius (c. 100-55BC). Lucretius, an Epicurean philosopher, wrote a lengthy and influential Latin poem called *De Rerum Natura*, *On the Nature of Things*. In it his mind ranges over a remarkable breadth of human concerns, from physics to psychology, and among them love, and the therapy for treating love.

Alongside him I place another Roman poet, Ovid (c. 43BC-17AD), who was born just after Lucretius died. Ovid wrote a series of poems about the techniques of acquiring love called *Ars Amatoria*, the *Art of Love*. Then as a counter-measure he published the poem *Remedia Amoris*, *Remedies for Love*,

Come ye then and hear what I shall teach, unhappy youths whom your mistresses have deceived. To you I taught the art of love. Now learn from me the art of curing love. (RA)

In setting out his aims, Ovid invokes that grand therapeutic cliché: to benefit from his therapy, you have to really want to change.

My brothers and sisters, hearken to my words. Give up all tragic, sinister passions. Take me for your pilot; your bark and its fraughting souls shall voyage in safety towards the haven. Ovid you doubtless read when you learnt the art of love. 'Tis Ovid again that you must read to-day. I am the public champion. I will remove that perilous stuff that weighs upon the heart. But let each and every one of you second the efforts I shall make on your behalf. (RA)

As you can tell, Ovid isn't shy of bragging. Anyway, this little poem is a neat example of the fact that "self-help" is, contrary to popular belief, one of the very oldest literary genres. Ovid's poem in particular has a clear therapeutic agenda,

My aim is practical: it is to extinguish cruel flames, and from love's fetters to free the captive heart. (RA)

Ovid opens his poem by invoking Apollo, the god of philosophy and the arts; in doing so he makes it clear that he is assuming the role of 'physician' or therapist.

Help thou in me the Poet, help the Physician, for I am both; and both these arts are under thy protection. (RA)

Poet-therapist-philosopher, then; quite a job description, and the same can be said of Lucretius. I make no apology, incidentally, for quoting Lucretius and Ovid extensively. They are two of the greatest poets of the ancient world, and deserve to speak for themselves where possible. These two poems complement each other beautifully; so I have intertwined excerpts from them which combine to make a new whole. Time has passed –two millennia– and sometimes what the poet says seems anachronistic, but not often, and where this is an obstacle I have helped him meet his modern audience by offering some simple commentary on his words.

The Psychopathology of Love

We often hear it said that so-called romantic love is a very modern notion, and something that would baffle our ancestors for many of whom marriage was essentially a business arrangement. I think that there may well be something in this, something about the modern notion of "romantic love," which is indeed rather peculiar.

Pagan philosophy is, in many ways, the Western equivalent of Buddhism. So, it's not surprising to find a contemporary Buddhist author, no less than the Dalai Lama himself, echoing Roman philosophical views in this regard.

I think that, leaving aside how the endless pursuit of romantic love may affect our deeper spiritual growth, even from the perspective of a conventional way of life, the idealization of this romantic love can be seen as an extreme. Unlike those relationships based on caring and genuine affection, this is another matter. [...] It's something that is based on fantasy, unattainable, and therefore may be a source of frustration. So on that basis it cannot be seen as a positive thing. (The Dalai Lama, *The Art of Happiness*, 83)

Love is real –I'd hardly get away with saying otherwise– but, if you'll pardon me for putting it this way, real love is not the love depicted on the cinema screen. Likewise, much "love" that happens in the real world is not really love at all, but something all too easily mistaken for it but polluted with mixed emotions. Our own Oscar Wilde, who knew a thing or two about disastrous love affairs, once remarked,

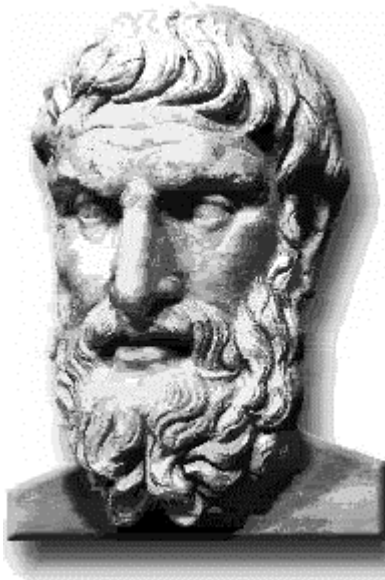
When one is in love, one always begins by deceiving oneself, and one always ends up by deceiving others. That is what the world calls a romance. (The Picture of Dorian Gray, ch. 4)

Likewise, the American psychiatrist and psychotherapist, Scott Peck, writes at great length about these issues in his best-selling self-help book *The Road Less Travelled* (1978).

Of all the misconceptions about love the most powerful and pervasive is the belief that 'falling in love' is love or at least one of the manifestations of love. (Peck, 1978: 89)

Really being in love, as opposed to the *feeling* of being in love, is something rare and misunderstood. Otherwise, we would love only once in our lives, and hindsight would not sometimes make us cringe, or even smile, as we re-evaluate our former romantic preoccupations. (Boyfriends and girlfriends, I mean.) Think about it. Peck elaborates,

Love is not a feeling. Many, many people possessing a feeling of love and even acting in response to that feeling act in all manner of unloved and destructive ways. On the other hand, a genuinely loving individual will often take loving and constructive action toward a person he or she consciously dislikes, actually feeling no love toward the person at the time and perhaps even finding the person repugnant in some way. (Peck, 1978: 124)



Lucretius sports the traditional long beard of an Epicurean Sage, or hippy.

It is worth bearing this point, one made by many others, in mind when we come to consider the ancient meditation exercises of love therapy. One way to test love would be to mentally rehearse the kind of challenging situation Peck describes. That is, to contemplate the beloved in a manner that should make them seem repugnant, and see what affect that has on our attitude toward them and the relationship. You will see what our pagan love doctors have to say on this matter shortly.

Anyway, to return to the poems, Lucretius explodes the myth that 80% of self-help books are bought by women; he tends to assume that he's talking to men. Ovid is marginally more politically correct, or possibly just hedging his bets.

And you, ye girls, list to what I tell you.
Whatsoever things I teach are as useful to you as
to your lovers. Arms we bestow on both opposing sides. (RA)

For Lucretius, and it has to be said, for many Roman thinkers, love is torture, a painful, sexual longing.

So, when a man is pierced by the shafts of Venus, whether they are launched by a lad with womanish limbs or a woman radiating love from her whole body, he strives toward the source of the wound and craves to be united with it and to transmit something of his own substance from body to body. (1018-1078)

The Romans, remember, had "funny ideas" about sex. A red-blooded man could, in good conscience and without fear of public censure, go after women one day and "lads with womanish limbs" the next. Sometimes even both at once, and that's just the tip of the iceberg. Anyway, Freud would not disapprove; and neither should we.

Unfortunately, however, it doesn't matter whether he was after Venus (ladies) or Cupid (boys). The Lucretian lover is a sight for sore eyes, all weak kneed and angst-ridden. The love-object –the beloved person– is seen as something akin to a virulent mental poison,

By clinging to it you assure yourself the certainty of heart-sickness and pain. With nourishment the festering sore quickens and strengthens. Day by day the frenzy heightens and the grief deepens. (1078)

Love is a disease; and, at this point –with a bit of luck– the romantic-types among you will be just about reaching a crescendo... Fret not! Lucretius does seem to concede that not all love is like this; it doesn't have to be a kind of sickness.

Do not think that by avoiding grand passions you are missing the delights of Venus. Rather, you are reaping such profits as carry with them no penalty. Rest assured that this pleasure is enjoyed in a purer form by the healthy than by the love-sick. Lovers' passion is storm-tossed, even in the moment of fruition, by waves of delusion and incertitude. (1078)

Phew! If only he'd said so earlier. Lucretius, therefore, makes a distinction between healthy and unhealthy love. One is natural and reasonable, the other pathologically obsessive, idealised, unrealistic, and destructive in its irrationality. The second kind is more interesting, so poets generally have more to say about it. Ovid makes this distinction clearer from the outset,

Let every man who loves a woman that requites his love drink deep of his delight and spread his sails to prospering breezes. But if he is a hopeless wight that groans in the thralldom of an unworthy mistress, let him receive the assistance of my art so that he may escape from the toils. Wherefore would you have some poor unfortunate devil go and hang himself by a rope from a lofty beam and die a miserable death; or another plunge a dagger into his bowels? (RA)

Obviously love-induced suicide is neither healthy nor natural, some poor souls really need help, so Ovid and Lucretius have carved out a legitimate niche for themselves as love doctors.

But you who, sick at heart, would fain unlearn to love the woman whom you love; but cannot; and yet still would –you shall be my pupil. (RA)

To his critics, who presumably accuse him of cynically destroying something precious and beautiful, he retorts,

It could hardly be said that my treatment was too severe, seeing that I make it my object to reconcile pleasure and good sense. (RA)

In other words, Ovid claims he's only trying to balance love with a modicum of rationality and common sense. Without reason or perspective, so-called "love" easily degenerates into something ultimately neurotic and unworthy of such a lofty name.

Lucretius is especially concerned about the obsessive nature of the lover's thoughts and fantasies. Once we fall in love with someone there's no escape from them; once they're in our heart, they get into our head.

Though the object of your love may be absent, images of it still haunt you and the beloved name chimes sweetly in your ears. (1078)

We tend to obsess about the loved one, especially when we are parted from them for any length of time, or if we have jealous or suspicious thoughts preying on our mind.

Lucretius also –and Freud would no doubt have a field day with this– thought that obsessive love was essentially ambivalent, or rather sadomasochistic,

They cannot make up their mind what to enjoy first with eye or hand. They clasp the object of their longing so tightly that the embrace is painful. They kiss so fiercely that teeth are driven into lips. All this because their pleasure is not pure, but they are goaded by an underlying impulse to hurt the thing, whatever it may be, that gives rise to these budding shoots of madness. (1078-1079)

More recently, the existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, rather cynically one might think, suggested that love was inherently sadomasochistic. Our poets don't go quite that far; they just think *most* love is sadomasochistic.

Anyway, if it hurts it's not love, is what the philosopher is trying to say; although he says so in a way that suggests that most, if not all, "love" is not love. Perhaps he's right. If that seems pessimistic remember the saying: "All good things are as difficult as they are rare." Truly enlightened love, for our poet-philosophers, is both rare and difficult to achieve; but worth the effort, one thinks. (Though most people probably don't.) Anyway, as another Latin proverb puts it, *amare et sapere vix deo conceditur*, "to be in love and wise is scarce granted even to a god." Have a meditate on all that and continue when you feel ready, gentle reader.

Lucretius is also concerned that obsessive love seems insatiable, it never leads to satisfaction or contentment.

When a thirsty man tries to drink in his dreams but is given no drop to quench the fire in his limbs, he clutches at images of water with fruitless effort and while he laps up a rushing stream he remains thirsty in the midst. (1079)

This is his simile for obsession, the love is ambivalent and unreal, so it never finds genuine fulfilment because of its contradictions.

Just so in the midst of love Venus teases lovers with images. They cannot glut their eyes by gazing on the beloved form, however closely. Their hands glean nothing from those dainty limbs in their aimless roving all over the body. Then comes the moment when with limbs entwined they pluck the flower of youth. Their bodies thrill with the presentiment of joy, and it is seed-time in the fields of Venus. (1079)

I feel we should pause there; if only to catch our breath. He's talking about sex (flower plucking) and "seed-time in the fields of Venus" is a quite remarkable phrase, worth repeating... Let's continue.

Body clings greedily to body; moist lips are pressed on lips, and deep breaths are drawn through clenched teeth. But all to no purpose. One can glean nothing from the other, nor enter in and be wholly absorbed, body in body; for sometimes

it seems that that is what they are craving and striving to do, so hungrily do they cling together in Venus' fetters, while their limbs are unnerved and liquefied by the intensity of rapture. (1079-1140)

You'd think that love is sated in the climax, but not really. Sexual fulfilment is pretty temporary, and it doesn't satisfy the love-desire itself.

At length, when the spate of lust is spent, there comes a slight intermission in the raging fever. But not for long. Soon the same frenzy returns. The fit is upon them once more. They ask themselves what it is they are craving for, but find no device that will master their malady. (1140)

Not surprisingly, the prognosis for these poor souls is grim,

In aimless bewilderment they waste away, stricken by an unseen wound. (1140)

It's not pleasant; I've seen it happen. And by the way, Lucretius has barely got started,

Add to this that they spend their strength and fail under the strain. Their days are passed at the mercy of another's whim. Their wealth slips from them, transmuted to Babylonian brocades [or designer handbags]. Their duties are neglected. Their reputation totters and goes into a decline. (1140)



Orpheus being beaten to death by orgiastic Bacchae.
Beware of Greek women.

Time, energy, and money are squandered on the beloved, all to no avail. In obsessive love there is no happy fulfilment, it is toxic from the start with ambivalence simply because it is not real love after all, but only a self-deceiving facade which struggles to maintain the lie.

From the very heart of the fountain of delight there rises a jet of bitterness that poisons the fragrance of the flowers. Perhaps the unforgetting mind frets itself remorsefully with the thought of life's best years squandered in sloth and debauchery. Perhaps the beloved has let fly some two-edged word, which lodges in the impassioned heart and glows there like a living flame. Perhaps he thinks she is rolling her eyes too freely and turning them upon another, or he

catches in her face a hint of mockery. (1140)

Let me translate. Obsessive love is pathological because it is rooted in compulsive idealisation. It therefore seeks to deny that the beloved is not perfect. It does so by ignoring negative things, i.e., frustrating contradictions to our romantic vision of the beloved and our relationship with them. It's a proverb because it's true: *credula res amor est*, "A gullible thing is love." In other words, (pathological) love is blind.

As the poet notes, then, they mock or insult us, or show signs of straying. In doing so they show that they do not fully reciprocate our love, and we are mad to deny it, as all lovers do when the situation arises. Alternatively, we recognise that we do not love our life with them ("sloth and debauchery"), but seek to hide this from ourselves. Nowadays we call this kind of self-deception "denial"; and when a man lies he murders some part of the world, and himself.

We can't entirely succeed in denying these challenges to our love. Perhaps we know at the back of the mind, and so the torment of trying to maintain the illusion fills us with painful ambivalence, which is to say unconscious resentment and "love-hate" feelings. As another poet, Catallus, writes, *odi et amo*, which is to say,

I hate and I love. Perhaps you ask why I experience this. I do not know, but I feel it happening and I am in torment. (Catallus, lxxxv.1)

Of course, that's when some relationship actually forms, albeit an unhealthy one; in cases of unrequited love the damage is conscious from the start and easy for others to see.

And these are the evils inherent in love that [superficially] prospers and fulfils its hopes. In starved and thwarted love the evils you can see plainly without even opening your eyes are past all counting. How much better to be on your guard beforehand, as I have advised, and take care that you are not enmeshed! (1141)

Virgil said it well, *improbe Amor, quid non mortalia pectora cogis?*, "Cruel love, to what extremes to you not drive our mortal hearts?" (Aeneid, iv.412).

As you can tell, this is bad news, and strong medicine is in on the menu (if that makes sense). So it is to the answer, the various psychological "love remedies" of the pagan therapists, that we now turn. Brace yourself, sweet reader!

Love Therapy I: Beginning the Treatment

It's not all doom and gloom. As you will see, Lucretius and Ovid, like other ancient pagan therapists, seem to be old hands at curing love-sickness. It's not easy, you have to want to change, but there are things you can do to help yourself.

To avoid enticement into the snares of love is not so difficult as, once entrapped, to escape out of the toils and snap the tenacious knots of Venus. And yet, be

you never so tightly entangled and embrangled, you can still free yourself from the curs unless you stand in the way of your own freedom. (1141)

Ovid agrees, you have to nip these things in the bud,

If you repent you of your love, stop on the threshold while you yet are able and ere yet your heart has been too deeply stirred. [...] Consider, in a rapid mental inventory, what it is you love, and withdraw your neck from the yoke that is bound one day to hurt you. Fight against it at the beginning. It is late in the day to make up physic when delay has given the disease time to get a hold on you. (RA)

His job isn't easy if pathological love has already taken root, but there is still some hope,

If once the favourable moment has gone by, if Love has taken firm root in the heart, the physician's task is a far less easy one. But because I've been called in at a late hour, I must not for that reason leave the patient to his fate. (RA)

In cases like this any remedy will have to wait until the fever of love has passed its peak, and the time is right to begin treatment.

Endeavour, if you can, to master the fire at the outset, or, if you cannot, wait till it has burnt itself out. When the fit of madness is at its height, wait for the fit to pass. It is difficult to stop it in mid career. [...] An impetuous spirit, a man who, as yet, is impatient of treatment, utterly refuses to listen to advice. Wait till he will let you examine his wounds; wait till he will listen to reason. (RA)

Hence, timing is everything; there's no point trying to force someone to reconsider their love when they are so intoxicated by emotion that they won't even listen to reason.

The art of medicine, one may almost say, is the art of choosing the moment to intervene. Given at the proper time, wine is beneficial; otherwise it does harm. If you don't undertake your treatment at the due and proper stage, you do but inflame and aggravate the malady. (RA)

So, short of brain surgery, what kind of therapy is on offer? How did the pagan sages of yore exorcise love?



Pan venting his seed by performing *coitus a tergo* with a goat.

If you find yourself thus passionately enamoured of an individual, you should keep well away from such images. Thrust from you anything that might feed your passion, and turn your mind elsewhere. (1078)

That basically means think of something else; and this means sleep around...

Your only remedy is to lance the first wound with new incisions; to salve it, while it is still fresh, with promiscuous attachments; to guide the motions of your mind into some other channel. (1078)

Lucretius generally recommends finding some other outlet for the libido,

Vent the seed of love upon other objects. (1078)

I'm not sure whether he means one should "vent" upon other people, or something inanimate. Perhaps either will do.

In a similar vein, Ovid suggests, that as a precaution, it's a good idea to always have two or more lovers on the go at any given time.

I would counsel you also to have two mistresses at a time. If you could have more, it would be still better. When your heart is thus divided between two loves, the two passions mutually moderate each other. [...] But if you have been so rash as to confine your affections to a single mistress, lose no time now in adding to the number. (RA)

This gives Ovid a great opportunity to plug his other books,

You ask me where you are to find them? Go read my *Art of Love*, voyage on, confident and fearless, and soon your bark shall be laden with pretty women. (RA)

There's also the option of diverting ourselves with day-to-day business. This is certainly what Ovid advises,

Love flees from toil; if, then, you would banish love from your heart, find some work for your idle hands to do and then you will be safe. (RA)

Ovid recommends political debate, fishing, farming, hunting and other manly pursuits as a means of diverting the attention from the beloved.

'Tis by such means as these, or others like them, that you may beguile your time, until you have unlearned the art of love. (RA)

His next recommendation is closely related: *run away!*

Above all, go far away; however strong the bonds that hold you back, leave the place. Go on a long journey. You will weep at the very thought of your mistress's name; you will stay your steps ere you have gone halfway. Never mind, the less you may wish to do so, the more resolutely you should hasten your flight. Keep on; force your reluctant feet to run. (RA)

And don't come back. Stay away until you are sure that you're love-sickness has burned itself out.

But do not imagine it is enough to go away. You must stay away, in order that the fires which consume you may be extinguished and no spark lurk beneath the embers. If you are too impatient, if you return again before your mind has recovered its poise, Love will undo your efforts; all his dreadful might he'll turn against you anew. (RA)

That said, it is important to avoid solitude, being alone means you will risk morbidly dwelling on the relationship in your mind.

Lover, whosoever thou art, shun solitude: solitude for you is dangerous. Wherefore shouldst thou avoid it? Because you will be safer amid the throng. 'Tis not well for you to be alone. Solitude increases the torments of love. You will find it will ease the burden of your heart to mix freely with your fellows. If you remain alone, melancholy will descend upon you. The vision of your forsaken mistress will be ever present to your eyes; you will imagine that you see her more than in the flesh. That is why the night is sadder than the light of day. There is no company about you then no troops of friends, to help you banish your sorrows. Do not shut yourself up indoors; do not go and hide your tear-stained visage where none may see it. (RA)

Get clear of any reminders, stay away from any mutual friends or acquaintances,

When, after a deal of buffeting, you're just getting into harbour, it is not enough to give up your mistress, you must likewise keep out of the way of her mother, her nurse, her bosom friend; in short, of anyone and everyone connected with her. (RA)

Likewise, keep your mouth shut; don't listen to any gossip, or get caught up in gossip and mud-slinging yourself.

Mind some slave or servant-girl doesn't come with some message to you, and sham weeping as she delivers it. And don't, out of curiosity, inquire how she's getting on. It's dangerous. Hold your tongue: it will pay you. And don't go counting up the reasons you have had to break with your mistress. Give up accusing her. Silence will be the best way to pay her out; so keep silence till you don't care any more about her. (RA)

Whatever happens, avoid bad-mouthing your ex; don't let the pendulum of ambivalence swing from insane love to equally insane hate.

It's a brutal thing to hate a woman one day whom you worshipped the day before. To make such a sudden change as that, you'd have to have the heart of a barbarian. Just give up paying her attentions; that's enough. If a man finishes up by hating a woman, he's either really still in love with her, or else he's in a frame of mind for which he won't easily find a cure. It is a disgraceful thing that a man and a woman, who were but lately head over heels in love, should suddenly become at daggers drawn. [...] When love leaves no resentment in its train, it departs quite quietly and peaceably. (RA)

Moreover, steer clear of other lovesick types, they will just provoke your feelings. That includes romantic plays and poetry.

Whoever you may be, if you would recover from your malady, keep clear of other people who are suffering from it. It is horribly contagious: you've only got to look at some other sufferer's wounds, and you feel as if you had been hit yourself. (RA)

These are the practical lifestyle changes that are recommended from the outset. However, they are followed by a number of more purely "psychological" methods, of the sort called *exercitium spirituale* in ancient times, "spiritual exercises," or what you and I might call "meditation techniques."

Love Therapy II: Psychotherapeutic Meditations

Let's begin by looking at what to do for the idealisation thing and all those obsessive thoughts.

First, you should concentrate on all the faults of mind or body of her whom you covet and sigh for. For men often behave as though blinded by love and credit the beloved with charms to which she has no valid title. (1141)

This is the essence of ancient love-therapy, dear reader, so we both better pay attention –no dozing off. Lucretius, remember, is mainly talking about the unhealthy, irrational, idealised sort of love, i.e., romantic fixation. He has already noted that it is polluted with ambivalence. The mixed feelings that torment us show that we are somehow mentally conflicted about the beloved, we sense something is amiss.

The exemplary illustration of this is the woman –or sometimes even man– who loves someone who beats, or rapes, or bullies in return. Perhaps a more common example is that of simple unreciprocated love or even infidelity: I love you, but you don't really seem to love me back. Lucretius, if you look closely, is really saying that we only truly love someone if we can accept everything about him or her, the whole truth, and still feel the same feelings of love. If we "love" someone but hate the things they do, we don't really love them at all. Ovid recommends the same cognitive method,

Often revolve within your breast the deeds of your erring mistress; and keep before your eyes the losses she has caused you. Say to yourself, "She has filched from me this thing and that and, not content with larceny, her extravagance has compelled me to sell my patrimony. What vows she made, and how often has she broken them! How often has she left me lying before her door! To others she gives her love, to me only her disdain. A common broker enjoys with her the nights of love which she refuses me." Let all these grievances embitter your feelings towards her. Recall them incessantly to your mind, and let them sow the seeds of hatred in it. (RA)

Idealisation is like quoting out of context, it mutilates the meaning of a thing. When we idealise someone we take our glowing image of them out of context, by ignoring all the bad things about our relationship with them, all the things we don't like. If we can undo the denial, put the person back in the context of their actual behaviour, and acknowledge the whole truth, the bigger picture, and still feel the same love, then perhaps our love is real. Otherwise it is a dangerous and tragic lie that we tell ourselves.

That said, Ovid takes things a bit further than Lucretius by suggesting that we should not only acknowledge the beloved's faults, but make up some interesting new ones. I suppose desperate times call for desperate measures, and Ovid tells us how he felt forced to use this method himself,

I was of late much occupied with a certain wench. She was not, however, suited to my temperament. [...] I was for curing myself with my own herbs, and I confess that for a doctor I was a disgracefully bad patient. I derived considerable benefit from continually harping on the defects of my mistress. I persevered with this treatment and it unquestionably did me good. "What poor legs the girl has," I kept saying. Yet truth to tell, they were nothing of the sort. "How very far from beautiful are her arms." Yet truth to tell, they were beautiful. "How squat she is." She wasn't. "What a lot of money she wants." And that was, indeed, the main count in the indictment. (RA)

Ovid's excuse for this, and you may or may not agree, is that there is a thin line between good and bad anyway, and so it's quite easy to turn a virtue round and see it as a vice, etc.

The good is often so near neighbour to the bad, that we often confound the two and condemn as a fault what is, in reality, a virtue. So far as you can, depreciate the qualities of your mistress and warp your own judgment by crossing, to her prejudice, the narrow limit betwixt good and bad. If she's plump, say she's stodgy; [...] if she's slim, say she's a skeleton; if she's not coy, say she's brazen; if she's modest, say she's a bumpkin. (RA)

As if that wasn't bad enough, Ovid goes further again and suggests that, where possible, we should actually engineer situations where her worst features are thrust to the fore.

Nay, further, endow her with accomplishments she conspicuously lacks, ask her, in the most persuasive manner in the world, to display them. If she has no voice, urge her to sing. If she can't move her arms with grace, beseech her to dance. If her speech is uneducated, make her keep on talking to you. If she can't play a note, beg her to play. If her breasts are covered with pimples, let there be no scarf to conceal them. If her teeth are bad, tell her something to make her laugh. Has she got watery eyes, tell her something to make her cry. It is also of service to appear before her suddenly, in the morning, before she's had time to complete her toilet. (RA)

Moving along now to other hints and tips, Lucretius notes the basic psychological fact that other people's lapses of judgement tend to be more obvious to us than our own. Our own mistakes are too close to home, and too familiar, we tend to overlook them in our complacency. As the Bible says, you can see the little skelf or splinter in your brother's eye, but not the whopping great beam of wood in your own. In other words, we can spot small flaws in other people's point-of-view, but we miss the more obvious errors in our own. Reminding ourselves of this fact is therapeutic, and a kind of reasonable humility comes from acknowledging it.

How often do we see blemished and unsightly women basking in a lover's adoration! One man scoffs at another and urges him to propitiate Venus because he is a victim of such a degrading passion; yet as like as not the poor devil is in the same unhappy plight himself, all unaware. (1141)

Lucretius generally seems more concerned with the terrible danger of sleeping with ugly women than with the more serious kind of relationship problems. To be fair, he is trying to entertain as well as educate, so he tends to focus on the more trivial concerns. Some of his examples of self-deception are quite amusing, if you can cope with the anachronisms,

A sallow wench is acclaimed as a nut-brown maid. A sluttish slattern is admired for her 'sweet disorder.' Her eyes are never green, but grey as Athene's. If she is stringy and woody, she is lithe as a gazelle. A stunted runt is a sprite, a sheer delight from top to toe. A clumsy giantess is 'a daughter of the gods divinely tall.' She has an impediment in her speech –a charming lisp, of course. She's mute as a stockfish –what modesty! A waspish, fiery-tempered scold –she 'burns with

a gem-like flame.' She becomes 'svelte' and 'willowy' when she is almost too skinny to live; 'delicate' when she is half-dead with coughing. Her breasts are swollen and protuberant: she is 'Ceres suckling Bacchus.' Her nose is snub –



Ovid gets distracted while working on his love remedies.

'a Faun', then, or 'a child of the Satyrs.' Her lips bulge: she is 'all kiss.' It would be a wearisome task to run through the whole catalogue. (1141-1199)

Well, can you imagine the terrible ordeals in love endured by the man who wrote that! One gets the impression that "venting the seed of love upon other objects" might have something going for it after all.

Seriously though, there is another therapy technique implied here: reframing. Ancient therapists would practice stripping away emotive language, metaphors, and value-judgements, and describing things in terms of the bare facts. This was sometimes called *phantasia kataleptike*, roughly translated this means "objective (verbal) representation." So, you see, the lover who says "She is all kiss" would be advised to contemplate the objective fact that that just means her lips are rather big,

etc., etc. Note the irony: Lucretius is using a poetry to tell us to be more factual and less, er, poetic. "Stick to the facts," we say nowadays, or even "cut the crap!"

As we noted, the same principle clearly applies even to non-ugly women, and Lucretius is aware of the wider applications of his therapy.

But suppose her face in fact is all that could be desired and the charm of Venus radiates from her whole body. Even so, there are still others. Even so, we lived without her before. Even so, in her physical nature she is no different, as we all know, from the plainest of her sex. (1199)

Bit of a flurry of techniques in this passage, three in all.

i) Remember that there are billions of other people in the world that you could meet and fall in love with. Despite what romantic books and movies say about "the One" or your "soul-mate", the fact is that you've only ever met a very tiny fraction of the people in the world. Reality check: there are probably other people out there as good for you, if not better. (Skip this one if you're getting really old, it probably doesn't apply.)

ii) Remember that you got by all right before she came on the scene. You don't "need" anything or anyone that you managed to survive without before.

iii) She's only human. She breaks wind and goes to the loo. The real Venus doesn't. Remember that she has the same less-appealing human qualities as everyone else; nobody is perfect.

This isn't going to make Lucretius any more popular with feminists than he probably isn't already, but he spends some time dwelling on the latter point and his main contemplative exercise is the notion that women's personal regimes are disgusting.

She is driven to use foul-smelling fumigants. Her maids keep well away from her and snigger behind her back. The tearful lover, shut out from the presence, heaps the threshold with flowers and garlands, anoints the disdainful doorposts with perfume, and plants rueful kisses on the door. Often enough, were he admitted, one whiff would promptly make him cast round for some decent pretext to take his leave. His fond complaint, long-pondered and far-fetched, would fall dismally flat. He would curse himself for a fool to have endowed her with qualities above mortal perfection. (1199)

I had heard it suggested that the appalling mysteries of Venus had something to do with ancient man's rather childish horror at the facts of menstruation. However, Ovid seems more afraid of cosmetics and beauty preparations.

A pretty dress delights us, gold and jewellery cover a host of imperfections, and what one beholds of a woman is the least part of her. Amid all her extraneous adornments, it's no easy matter to find the genuine attractions. With the ægis [cloak] of wealth does Love deceive the beholder. Take her unawares. You may do so with safety to yourself. Her defects will suffice to dethrone her in your eyes. But that is not always so, for it often happens that "beauty unadorned's adorned the most" and captures many lovers. Moreover, there is no offence against decency in your putting in an appearance while she is smearing pomade on her face. You'll find she's got boxes containing concoctions of all the colours of the rainbow, and you'll see the paint trickling down in warm streams on to her breasts. The whole place stinks like Phineus' dinner-table, and I've often felt as if I was going to be sick. (RA)

He does mention elsewhere, with feigned embarrassment, that one could meditate upon what happens on the lavatory.

Well, let the winged boy [Cupid, of course] bend his bow more fiercely; then, more sorely stricken you'll come in multitudes to beg for stronger medicine. What shall I say of him who hides that he may behold his mistress performing her natural needs, and see those things which decency forbids that we should look upon? God forbid that I should counsel anything so vile as that. Even were they effectual, such means should never be essayed. (RA)

Whatever the foul-smelling and disgusting secret activities of Roman women –we may never know the whole truth– Lucretius is clear that we should remember these things.

To the daughters of Venus themselves all this is no secret. Hence they are at pains to hide all the back-stage activities of life from those whom they wish to keep fast bound in the bonds of love. But their pains are wasted, since your mind has power to drag all these mysteries into the daylight and get at the truth behind the sniggers. (1199)

Lucretius seems to have forgotten about "lads with womanish limbs", but I suppose the same principle applies. Maybe he imagined them sitting on the loo or something.

Ovid also recommends something similar, that we should confront all the physical defects present in the beloved and hold them fast in mind.

Rare is the woman who tells herself the truth. They deem themselves beautiful in every aspect. I bid you, too, fling open wide the windows of her room, and in the broad light of day, observe the blemishes of her body. But when you have attained the goal of pleasure; when you are o'erwearied both in body and in spirit; when your heart is heavy; when you are wishing you had never touched a woman, and deem it will be long ere you embrace another –then note in the tablets of your brain all the defects that you observe in her, and long let your gaze linger on her imperfections. (RA)

Why not compare her to someone out of her league while you're at it? Helen of Troy, the Queen of Sheba, or the goddess Venus herself.

In the same way, let everyone of you compare his mistress with the illustrious beauties of the world, and he will blush for her. [...] And don't think merely of the face. Take character and accomplishments into account. And don't let love blind your judgment. (RA)

To some these will seem like simple tricks of no long-term benefit. That is always the case with such things. The poet knows that patient application his various medicines will eventually effect the desired cure.

"Feeble resources these," someone perchance will say. But means which, taken singly, are of no avail are potent when conjoined. The bite of a tiny adder will lay low a bull. Often a hound of modest size will hold a boar at bay. Gather all these remedies together; numbers will win. (RA)

Ovid, incidentally, was exiled from Rome, quite possibly because of the rather audacious nature of his poetic advice. For instance, he recommends two techniques to be employed during sexual intercourse.

And now I'll tell you how to act when you're in the paroxysm of your pleasure. For Love, if you're going to win, must be attacked on every side. There are some details, however, which modesty will not permit one to describe; but you will be clever enough to fill up the blanks. (RA)

First of all, have sex with someone else first, before visiting the one you wish to fall out of love with. "Don't go out with a loaded weapon", I think, was the advice in the film *Something About Mary* –perhaps written by fans of Ovid.

When you are called to taste the delights of love and youthful dalliance, when the night of promised bliss approaches, then, lest you should have too much joy of your mistress if you go to her with a full quiver, find another charmer with whom you may blunt the edge of your attack. The love that follows love is not so fierce. But sweeter than any is the love for which we have waited long. (RA)

Second, he goes further, suggesting the curious idea that one should get the other to assume the most unflattering position possible during sex.

I blush to say it, yet I will say it; when you're about the act of love with your mistress, take her in the posture that becomes her least. That will be easily accomplished. (RA)

Ovid acknowledges that tastes and aversions differ from person to person. He therefore urges his readers to figure out what sorts of things appal them and design their own programme of aversion therapy. And if observing simple facts of nature, no matter how unpleasant, is successful it only goes to show that the love could not have been particularly robust in the first place.

Some men have known their ardour checked because they've seen unveiled those parts which modesty should hide; others because, leaving the bed wherein they've had their joy, they have perceived the unclean traces of the fray. Ye who could be deterred by trifles such as these, your love was but a jest: feeble the flames that warmed your breasts. (RA)

In any case, this is just another illustration of the more basic point, that undoing idealisation is about meditating on and accepting the less-appealing facts about the loved one. If we can incorporate those things into our image of them we can transform obsessive idealisation into normal love, or dissolve it completely if it has no real enduring substance.

The good news is that if you can face the whole picture, warts and all, and your love remains untarnished, then you may just have found someone who you genuinely love, in a healthy and realistic manner, free from idealisation or romantic obsession.

Then, if the lady is good-hearted and void of malice, it is up to you in your turn to accept unpleasant facts and make allowance for human imperfection. (1199)

Finally, Ovid suggests that when all else fails, the old trick of pretending that you feel a certain way until it finally takes hold for real should work.

Love steals into our hearts, as it were, by habit; by habit also we can school ourselves to forget it. If you can pretend you're cured, cured you will be indeed. (RA)

In other words,

If my precepts are of any avail, if, by my voice, Apollo teaches aught that may be of use to mortal men, when your despairing heart is consumed with a passion fiercer than the fires of Ætna, act in such a manner that your mistress may deem you colder than ice. Pretend that you are cured, and if your heart still bleeds, never let her suspect it. Let laughter be upon your lips, though tears be in your heart. I do not bid you break with her in the very height of your passion. I lay upon you no mandate so severe as that. But learn to dissemble. Assume a calmness, if you have it not, and soon you'll really be as calm as now you feign to be. (RA)



The procession of Bacchus or Dionysus, the god of wine and sexual revelry. Easy to see why he had to fend the girls off.

Lucretius concludes that even if she isn't a supermodel who sweeps you off your feet at first sight, a mature and balanced love can grow steadily by a kind of protracted drip-drip effect.

Lastly, it is by no divine intervention, no prick of Cupid's darts, that a woman deficient in beauty sometimes becomes the object of love. Often the woman herself, by humouring a man's fancies and keeping herself fresh and smart,

makes it easy for him to share his life with her. Over and above this, love is built up bit by bit by mere usage. Nothing can resist the continually repeated impact of a blow, however light, as you see drops of water falling on one spot at long last wear through a stone. (1287)

Once again, it's reassuring to find the poets do find some place for real love –even for women “deficient in beauty”– in their respective systems. Though he doesn't say so, one suspects that Lucretius means that love which has grown slowly and steadily, despite the acknowledgement of the loved one's flaws, is something more real and therefore more precious than the intense but illusory love of those tormented by lovesick feelings. After all, love is not merely a feeling, no matter how intense; it is a whole way of being, toward another person, and all that that entails.

Conclusion & Summary

Well, there you have it. That's the prescription you would get from the love doctor in the old days. As we've covered a lot of ground, here's a list of some of the key techniques discussed by Ovid and Lucretius.

Practical and lifestyle changes:

- Seek diversion in other pursuits.
- Seek diversion in other relationships.
- Get a change of scene.
- Avoid solitude and morbid rumination.
- Eschew mud slinging and gossip about the relationship once it is ended.
- Avoid "romantic" plays, poems, novels, music, people, etc.

Meditation and visualisation exercises:

- Mentally review and contemplate her defects.
- Engineer situations where you can encounter her at her least appealing or, perhaps more realistically, imagine what you would see if you did this.
- Avoid emotive language in your thought and speech, be objective and realistic in speech and thought and your feelings will be naturally moderated.
- More controversially, adopt a more negative and critical perspective by reframing her good qualities as if they were flaws.
- Act as though you have moved on, if you wholeheartedly pretend to be calm and detached you will eventually entrain those feelings in yourself.
- Compare her to the notion of a perfect woman with the aim of mentally highlighting her shortcomings.

I'm sure there are other useful pieces of advice that the ancients could offer, but it's getting late gentle reader, and time to draw our little treatise to a close. That should be more than enough for you to be getting on with, so I leave you to your meditations... and to falling in and out of love.

Ω