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When I use a word . . . Love drugs

Love potions, also called love-drinks and love philtres, are among the oldest forms of fictional drugs. The terms date from the 13th century (love-drinks) and the 16th and 17th centuries (love potions and love philtres respectively). Fictions that have featured love potions include: all versions of the legend of Tristan and Isolde, whatever the variant spellings of their names; the Prologue to the Wife of Bath's Tale in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*; Sir Philip Sidney's *Arcadia*; Donizetti's opera buffa *L'elisir d'amore* and W S Gilbert's burlesque based on it; other works by Gilbert, who was fond of the idea; and Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream*. The contents of love potions, in these and contemporary works, are generally unknown and in the case of *L'elisir d'amore* the love potion consisted of red wine, disqualifying it as a love potion. Some of the so-called love potions turned out to be poisons of one sort or another. Modern love drugs encompass drugs for erectile impotence and drugs with psychotropic actions. But would a drug that enhanced the chances of romance be ethical? There are, for example, doubts about the sincerity and durability of the expected outcome. There are also potential problems with medicinal regulation of love-inducing drugs. And similar concerns would apply to anti-love drugs.

Jeffrey K Aronson

Fictional drugs

For hundreds of years writers of fiction have imagined drugs that could be used to produce a range of outcomes. Here I discuss fictional love drugs.

Love potions

Love potions are among the oldest forms of fictional drugs. Other names under which they have been described include love drinks and love philtres. I distinguish here between fictional drugs of this sort and aphrodisiacs, actual compounds that enhance or supposedly enhance sexual desire and which deserve separate consideration.

According to their respective entries in the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*, the oldest of these terms is "love-drink" first recorded in a poem that was written at some time during the 13th century.¹ The first instances of "love potion" and "love philtre" date from the late 16th and 17th centuries respectively.^{2,3}

Love-drink

The earliest instance of "love-drink" is found in a poem about Tristan and Isolde.

The legend of Tristan (or Tristram) and Isolde (or Iseult) originated in the 6th century but wasn't written down until the 12th century, when it became exceptionally popular, spawning about 80 versions in the next 100 or so years.⁴ During the 13th century Thomas Learmonth (c. 1220–98), also known as Thomas of Erceldoune and Thomas the Rhymer, wrote a poem about the tragic lovers, titled "Sir Tristrem."⁵ Erceldoune was a small town in the Scottish Borders, now known as Earlston in Berwickshire.

Thomas's poem about Tristan and Isolde, or Tristrem and Isonde as he calls them, is in three Fits (sections), each containing about 100 verses, 304 in all. Here is verse LIV (54) in Fit Second:

He spoused hir with his ring;

Of fest no speke Y nought:

Brengwain with outen lesing,

Dede as hye had thought

Sche tok that love drink

That in Yrlond was bought

For Ysonde to the king,

Brengwain to bed was brought,

That tide:

Marke his wille wrought,

On bed Brengwain beside

This verse not only includes the term "love-drink" for the first time, it also more or less sums up the major events in the tale. King Mark of Cornwall is betrothed to the Irish princess Isolde or Iseult. He sends Tristan to fetch her and she comes with her nurse Brengwain. Isolde's mother has given them a love-drink for Isolde and Mark to take on their wedding night, but Tristan and Isolde drink it during the sea voyage to Cornwall and fall hopelessly in love. On Isolde's wedding night she sends Brengwain to substitute for her in the marriage bed. But King Mark is bound to find out what is going on.

There is another instance of "love-drink" in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. In the prologue to her tale, the Wife of Bath tells us a sad story (lines 752-6):

Lucia, likerous, loved hire housbonde so

That, for he sholde alwey upon hire thynke,

She yaf hym swich a manere love-drynke

That he was deed er it were by the morwe;

And thus algates housbondes han sorwe.

(Lucia, lecherous, so loved her husband

That, intending him always to think of her,

She gave him such a manner of love-drink
That he was dead before morning;
And thus husbands ever have sorrow.)

Love potion

The earliest recorded instance of the term “love potion” occurs in Sir Philip Sidney’s late 16th century prose romance *The Countess of Pembroke’s Arcadia*, commonly known as *Arcadia*, which Sidney dedicated to his sister, the countess in question. The plot is complicated. King Basilius of Arcadia seeks and receives a prophecy, which foretells, among other things, that his wife Gynecia will be unfaithful. Pyrocles arrives in Arcadia and, having fallen in love with the King’s daughter Philoclea, disguises himself as an Amazonian lady, anagrammatically calling himself Cleophila. Gynecia becomes enamoured of “Cleophila” and prepares a potion that she hopes will encourage reciprocity. But the thirsty King finds the brew and drinks it himself:

“But within a while that from his stomach the drink had delivered to his principal veins his noisome vapours, first with a painful stretching, and forced yawning, then with a dark yellowness dying his skin, and a cold deadly sweat principally about his temples, his body by natural course longing to deliver his heavy burden to his earthly dam, wanting force in his knees, which utterly abandoned him, with heavy fall gave some proof whither the operation of that unknown potion tended; For, with pang-like groans, and ghastly turning of his eyes, immediately all his limbs stiffened, and his eyes fixed, he having had time to declare his case only in these words, ‘O Gynecia, I die: have care.’”

The King’s body is laid out, and a couple of days later a miracle occurs: “From under the velvet wherewith he was covered a great voice of groaning [was heard]. ... the Duke lived. For so it was, that the drink he received was neither, as Gynecia first imagined, a love potion, nor, as it was after thought, a deadly poison, but a drink made by notable art, and, as it was thought, not without natural magic, to procure for thirty hours such a deadly sleep, as should oppress all show of life.”

One wonders if Shakespeare borrowed the idea of such a draught when he wrote *Romeo and Juliet*, which was first performed in 1597, only a few years after the publication of *Arcadia*. Be that as it may, the first love potion to be so called was not a love potion at all, but what sounds like a hepatotoxin.

Love philtre

The Greek word φιλτρον meant a love potion or a spell, from the verb φιλεῖν to love. It entered English, via the French philtre, in the 16th century. The first recorded instance is in what has been described as the first English novel, *Beware the Cat*, by William Baldwin (1570).⁶ However, the potion described therein is one used to enable the author to understand what birds and animals are saying.

Nevertheless, by 1586, Thomas Newton, in his translation of a text by the Flemish theologian Andreas Gheeraerdt, known as Andreas Gerhard Hyperius (1511–64), titled *The True Tryall and Examination of a Mans owne selfe*, was writing of “drinkes, drouges, medicines, charmed potions, amatorious Philters, figures, characters or any such lyke paltring instruments, devises or practises thou hast gone about to procure others to doate for love of thee.”

The variant “philtrum” was also in use. For example, Bishop William Barlow, the then Bishop of Lincoln, in *An Answer to Catholike*

English-man (1609), inveighed against “the Whore of Babylon, ... with her Philtra, her filthy Love-Drugs.”

The extended phrase, “love philtre,” appeared later in the 17th century, in a story by John Crowne, *Pandion and Amphigenia: or, The History of the Coy Lady of Thessalia* (1665), in which he writes of “a lip-sick Lover, who with quaint Rhetorifications can paint his Mistress face, and curl her hair with better art than she herself, and think her tears love philters [sic], each sentence a heart-charming Exorcism, and every frown to dart a death.”

W S Gilbert

W S Gilbert was fond of introducing magic potions of some sort or another, some of them love potions, into his works.

Gilbert and Sullivan’s two-act operetta *The Sorcerer*, was based on the plot of a story that he had written for the *Graphic* magazine, “An Elixir of Love” in 1888.⁷ It described the effects of a love potion sold by a London firm of magicians to a country curate, who distributed it, disguised as sherry, among his parishioners. The same theme is found in Gilbert’s first play, *Dulcamara*, with characters based on Gaetano Donizetti’s opera *L’elisir d’amore*. And also in one of his poems, “The Cunning Woman.” Having failed to persuade Arthur Sullivan to collaborate with him on a story about a magic lozenge, Gilbert later came up with libretto on this theme for another opera, *The Mountebanks*, with music by Alfred Cellier and Ivan Caryll.

In *Dulcamara* Adina sings of:

“His philtre! sold in little bottles black —

Invented by my pa! — a famous quack?

He called it ‘Love’s Elixir’”

.... at which *Dulcamara* interjects “I did rather!” and Adina replies “Then you must be — ha! ha! My long lost father!”

Gilbert’s poem “The Cunning Woman” also features a magic potion, but this time an anti-love potion. In love with Bill, Jane fears that the Lord de Jacob Pilliloo will fall in love with her. Wanting to avoid this, she visits a sorceress, MacCatacomb de Salmon-Eye, who gives her a mystic phial, whose liquor she is to rub into her head before bed; it will make her appear plain to Lord Pilliloo while retaining her beauty.

Routes of administration

All the potions that I have described so far were intended to be drunk. But Bishop Barlow’s reference to “love-drugs” is a reminder that other routes of administration are possible. The term “love-drug” goes back to the early 17th century.⁸ In modern times it has been used to refer to recreational drugs, such as 3, 4-methylenedioxy-phenyl-iso-propylamine (MDA), and also drugs for erectile impotence.

An early example of a fictional love drug that is delivered by a route other than the peroral one is the plant called love-in-idleness, which Oberon, in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, instructs Puck to find, and whose juice, when squeezed into the eyes of the sleeping lovers, makes them love the first thing they see on awakening. Oberon applies it to Titania’s eyes, and she falls in love with the ass-headed Bottom. Applying a love drug to the eyes seems logical. Incidentally, there is a plant called love-in-idleness, but there is no evidence that it has an effect like that described by Shakespeare.

What did love potions contain?

Rarely are we told what love potions referred to in fictions actually contained. The witches in *Macbeth* give us a detailed account of

the ingredients of their cauldron, but they hardly made up a love potion.

In 2003 Gunther Weitz published a paper in *The BMJ* in which he suggested that the love potion in Wagner's opera *Tristan und Isolde* contained compounds with anticholinergic properties, and that Wagner's descriptions of the lovers' behaviours was consistent with that.⁹ For example, when they clutch convulsively at their hearts, that suggests tachycardia and when their eyes seek out one another and are cast down in confusion, that suggests blurred vision and therefore pupillary dilatation.

The BMJ asked me to comment on this, and my response⁴ was that I thought it unlikely that Wagner had paid any attention whatsoever to whatever pharmacologically active ingredients the love potion might or might not have contained. A more common-sense interpretation would be that the lovers, who after all think that the potion they are about to drink is poisonous, are in fact already in love, and the drinking of the potion opens their eyes to the fact. All the behaviours that they then evince are signs of their intense love, endogenous pharmacology rather than exogenous pharmacology.

A love potion identified

In Donizetti's opera buffa, *L'elisir d'amore*, with a libretto by Felice Romani, we unusually learn exactly what Dr Dulcamara's elixir of love is—Bordeaux wine (“E Bordò, non elisir” as he says in an aside). The story is also unusual in that the elixir is not given to someone to make them fall in love but is taken by someone to make others fall in love with them.

A peasant, Nemorino, is in love with Adina, a landowner, who shows no interest in him. Nemorino hears Adina telling the story of Tristan and Isolde, and decides that he needs a magic potion to make her fall in love with him. Along comes Dr Dulcamara with the answer, the elixir of love, a bottle of which he sells to Nemorino for one zecchino, all the money Nemorino has. Dulcamara, of course, is a quack, who knows perfectly well that his elixir is ineffective, since it is nothing more than red wine. However, when Nemorino drinks it all the girls in the village start to show interest in him. Does the elixir work? What Nemorino doesn't know is that he has been left a large amount of money in his late uncle's will, and the girls have heard the news before he has. Dulcamara tells Adina about Nemorino's purchase and the reason behind it, and she falls in love with him. Does the elixir really work? No placebo effect necessary?

The dangers of love potions

Apart from the risk of ingesting a poisonous substance, while thinking that the love potion is entirely beneficial, there is a more nuanced problem with the idea that a medicine could make someone fall in love with you. The main problem is that you can't be sure that their love is sincere, since it was pharmacologically induced. And there are many other problems.

Let us suppose that an effective love potion was available, guaranteed to make someone else fall in love with you. How would you feel about it? You might at first be thrilled, especially if it was someone whom you yourself loved. Then doubts might start to creep in. Is their love genuine? Even if it is, is it the same kind of love as the emotionally produced variety? And will it last as long? What is the pharmacokinetic half-life of the potion? Does it have a long lasting effect, even when the active ingredient has disappeared from the body? Is that effect permanent or does it itself have a pharmacodynamic half-life? And if so, what is it? Are there any long term adverse effects? And, if so, what are they? Is the beneficial effect selective or might the individual fall in love with others as a result of taking the potion? Is an antidote available? Might the potion

be misused, like a date rape drug? What would the drug regulators have to say about such a product? And what about an anti-love drug¹⁰ to help erase romantic memories or stop you forming them altogether?

Some have suggested that drugs could be designed that could initiate or strengthen and maintain feelings of love for others, and not too far in the future at that. Already, they point out, there are drugs that appear to affect emotional attachments. However, there is evidence that when lay people are asked to contemplate the possible use of love drugs with such properties, they consider them to be more morally problematic than psychological therapy with the same aims, and that this is partly because the love that might result from the use of love drugs is perceived as being potentially less authentic, less intense, and less durable.¹¹

My own view is that nootropic drugs, drugs that are thought to enhance cognitive functioning, perhaps making you more aware of the possibilities of love, actually fool you into thinking that your cognitive powers have improved, whereas the opposite is more likely. Consider, in this context, the following story, once related by Arthur Koestler:

“A friend of [George Orwell], while living in the Far East, smoked several pipes of opium every night, and every night a single phrase rang in his ear, which contained the whole secret of the universe; but in his euphoria he could not be bothered to write it down and by the morning it was gone. One night he managed to jot down the magic phrase after all, and in the morning he read: ‘The banana is big, but its skin is even bigger’.”¹²

And one has to admit that Orwell's friend's conclusion is arguably correct.

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