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Opinion

'Romeo and Juliet' has led us astray

Romantic love, love at first sight -- it's great theater but disastrous dating advice.

February 14, 2010 | By Andrew Trees

What if Shakespeare had it wrong about love in "Romeo and Juliet"? In fact, what if all of us have it wrong and our ideals of love and romance are hopelessly awry? Although we are supposed to be celebrating our love for that special someone on Valentine's Day, perhaps the time has come to reconsider the concept of romantic love, at least as it has been conceived in Western societies.

As we busily track down red roses, the best chocolates and the finest champagnes, we need to ask whether, in the pursuit of the perfect romance, we haven't declared war on true love. Cupid's arrow does strike often, but with the U.S. divorce rate near 50%, one has to wonder whether the wound is particularly deep or long-lasting.

As I found when researching my book on the science of human attraction, our typical romantic beliefs are quite often wrong. For instance, even couples who are blissfully happy together can't count on a happy ending. The PAIR project, a long-term academic study of couples, found that those most in love when they marry are also the most likely to get divorced.

And the chemical attraction that many people rely on to choose a partner has been found to fade "to neutrality" in two to three years. That's right, neutrality, which might work well for Switzerland but is deadly for a marriage.

Perhaps most damning of all, I discovered that wife murderers tend to be strong subscribers to the romantic ideal. Take that, Romeo and Juliet.

Love and romance did not always rule the roost. As recently as the 1930s, American men ranked mutual attraction as only the fourth most important quality for a relationship, while women had it even lower, placing it fifth (in a 1956 survey, women dropped it all the way to sixth). But in recent decades, love has climbed to No. 1, accompanied by a rise in the importance of looks, which suggests that our romance with romance is long on style and short on substance.

I hate to sound unromantic on this day of all days, but perhaps it's time to place less emphasis on romantic attraction as the key to finding a partner. What can shoulder some of the load? I would suggest that we rely a little more on what science has discovered about human attraction.

For instance, some researchers can now predict whether a couple will stay together with far more accuracy than the couple themselves. And it has less to do with the things we might think, such as fighting, and far more to do with the things we take for granted, such as asking your spouse about his or her day.

That doesn't mean we need to jettison every aspect of chemical attraction. Several studies have found that for women, a man's body odor is a helpful guide to finding a good genetic match (but only if the woman is not taking an oral contraceptive, which reverses her usual smell preferences). Body odor doesn't sound very romantic, but perhaps the better question to ask is: How did our narrow ideal of romantic love come to hold such complete sway in the first place?

Imagine a dating world turned on its head, in which people were not given the freedom to opt into or out of a relationship -- such as a culture that practices arranged marriages. What researchers have found will be shocking to Westerners weaned on the idea of romantic love.

According to a 1982 study by two Indian researchers, the level of self-reported love in arranged marriages increased over time until they surpassed the level of self-reported love in marriages that were freely chosen. Incredible as it sounds, people with a very limited say in choosing their own spouses eventually became happier with their relationships than people with the freedom to choose anyone they wanted.

Although we almost always read "Romeo and Juliet" as the quintessential story of love at first sight, Shakespeare actually offered his own sly critique of romantic love at the beginning of the play. Romeo is pining away for love -- but not for Juliet. There is another fair damsel who has rejected Romeo's advances, and he declares himself inconsolable. He disdains finding someone else and tells Benvolio, "Thou canst not teach me to forget" -- which is, of course, precisely what happens a few scenes later when Romeo meets Juliet and realizes that he was completely wrong before and only *now* has discovered true love.

We never remember that part of the story, though, because if we think of "Romeo and Juliet" from that perspective, the whole play starts to skew in ways that contradict our usual romantic notions.

Perhaps the time has come for us to take a skeptical view of romance, particularly the over-the-top variety peddled so effectively on Valentine's Day. We should throw off the shackles of our reigning romantic orthodoxy and realize that "Romeo and Juliet" and its many

cultural offspring have led us astray. Shakespeare's story may be transcendent entertainment, but it is disastrous dating advice.

Andrew Trees is the author of "Decoding Love."