

Book Notes #88

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By Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence
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*From Roman Fertility Ritual to Hallmark Moment:
A Brief History of Valentine's Day &
Valentine Verse*

Part One



Did you know that while it is not an official holiday anywhere, Valentine's Day is celebrated in more countries around the world than any other holiday?

Did you know that every February more than 36 million heart shaped boxes of chocolate are sold and that Americans purchase about 58 million pounds of chocolate for Valentine's Day?

Did you know that every February men spend on average \$231 on Valentine's gifts and women \$101, but with the impact of COVID, spending is projected to be down in 2022 with average spending estimated at \$164.76?

Did you know that February 14 is the second largest card sending/sharing day

after Christmas with approximately one billion cards exchanged around the world? Eighty-five percent of cards are sent by women. Teachers receive the most followed by kids, mothers, wives, and girlfriends. Regarding the latter, a turn of the 20th century card cooed:



Did you know, although COVID also cut spending on flowers, that \$2 billion-plus will be spent on flowers and that each year approximately 18 percent of women send themselves flowers? Of course, roses are most popular. [1]



Where did this rose-hued-holiday custom of gift giving, card sharing, chocolate consuming courtship, and romance originate?

And why is it sometimes called St. Valentine's Day and others simply Valentine's Day?

Admittedly in a bit of a crooked path, did you know that our modern Valentine's Day descends from an ancient Roman fertility ritual?

Oh, and did you know that there was more than one St. Valentine, but Valentine's Day no longer refers to any of them?

What about that ancient Roman fertility ritual?



It was the festival of the Lupercalia celebrated on the ides of February – February 15. Honoring Faunus, the Roman god of the forest, plains, and fields, the Lupercalian (from *lupus* for wolf) Festival's roots reach deep into ancient Roman

history. Celebrated by priests called Luperci, it was conducted in the legendary cave on the Palatine Hill in which the she-wolf suckled Romulus and Remus, the founders of Rome. Goats and a dog were sacrificed. Their skin was then flayed into strips or thongs with which the Luperci, emerging naked from the cave, then ran around the Palatine hill striking women who had come to the festival seeking purification.

The festival served two purposes. In preparation for a new planting season, it purified the land ensuring its fertility. Similarly, any woman struck by a Luperci's thong was now believed to be pure and fertile; she would conceive and give birth within the year. The Luperci were called *Februtors* – those who purify – and the thongs *februa*, that which purifies. Their name is the source of the name of the month February, which derives from the Roman *mensis Februarius* – the month of purification. [2]

Although perhaps exotic sounding to 21st century ears, it was an established part of Roman culture. According to Plutarch, it was at the Festival of Lupercalia that Julius Caesar refused Antony's offer of the crown of Rome. [3] Shakespeare also has the Lupercalian purification ritual in ***Julius Caesar***. By Caesar's time it was considered a great honor to be chosen a Luperci and, when Mark Antony was so honored, Caesar in Act I tells his wife Calphurnia to stand directly in Antony's way as he runs his course and Caesar tells Antony to be sure to strike Calphurnia. [4]

from Julius Caesar

Caesar: Calphurnia.
Casca: Peace, Ho! Caesar speaks.
Caesar: Calphurnia.
Calphurnia: Here my lord.
Caesar: Stand you directly in Antonius' way
When he doth run his course – Antonius.
Antony: Caesar, My Lord.
Caesar: Forget not in your speed, Antonius
To touch Calphurnia, for our elders say
The barren, touched in this holy chase,
Shake off their sterile curse. [Act I, Scene 2, ll. 1-11]

OK, that's interesting, but what does it have to do with Valentine's Day? After the Emperor Constantine's conversion of the Roman Empire to Christianity in the 4th century, Christianity's hold on its position was tenuous. Julian the Apostate attempted to revive traditional Roman religions in the late 4th century and, though he failed, the old ways still had their adherents. So, less than a century later, in response to bad harvests and disease plaguing the empire, Rome's rulers attempted to revive the Lupercalia. They alleged that the old gods had been offended and responded by defiling the city. They needed to be appeased. The Romans revived the Lupercalia. In response, Pope Gelasius condemned the revival and declared February 14, the eve of the festival, to be a Christian feast day honoring St. Valentine. There is some debate as to whether Gelasius specifically founded the Feast of St. Valentine to counter the Lupercalia. The Venerable Bede, the 7th and 8th century Benedictine monk, sometimes called the father of English history, is the idea's source. [5]

So, who was St. Valentine?

Well, there were three. One was a saint in the Roman provinces of Africa, about whom very little is known, but the other two are key to our understanding of St. Valentine's Day. They are St. Valentine of Rome and St. Valentine of Terni. St. Valentine of Rome was martyred by the Emperor Claudius in 269 A.D. for refusing to convert to paganism. According to legend, Valentine converted his jailer, Asterius, by healing the jailer's blind daughter Julia. Allegedly, he wrote the first Valentine to Julia on the eve of his execution, signing it "Your Valentine." He was buried in the Via Flaminia on February 14. [6] The other St. Valentine is Valentine of Terni, who was martyred by the Emperor Claudius for marrying Roman soldiers who were forbidden to be married. According to legend, to remind the men of their vows and God's love, Valentine of Terni cut hearts from parchment and gave them to the soldiers. He wore an amethyst ring engraved with the image of Cupid. Amethyst became the birthstone for February and a symbol of love. He is also buried on the Via Flaminia, but not in the same place as Valentine of Rome. [7]

It is unclear whether Valentine of Rome, who for a time was Bishop of Terni, and Valentine of Terni are the same person. Because of this confusion, in 1969 the Roman Catholic Church removed them from the Calendar of Saints and no longer celebrates their feast day. They remain saints. [8] That there is a tomb in the Via Flaminia is not disputed. For centuries it was maintained by Benedictine monks. The Via Flaminia is also important in the evolution of Valentine's Day. For centuries near the Via Flaminia, Romans celebrated the Feast of Anna Perenna on March 15, which in the old Roman Calendar was the vernal equinox celebrating Spring's return.

The Festival of Anna Perenna is certainly erotic. Whether it is romantic depends upon one's point of view. There is no "Anna Perenna," which is a phrase created from the Latin words for year (*anna*) and perennial (*perenna*). It simply means the annual and perennial return of the new year. According to Ovid, it was held in a grove on the Via Flaminia. Men and women came in pairs or drew lots and paired off. They feasted in huts made of boughs under the open sky, did a good deal of ribald singing fueled by an abundant consumption of wine. Ovid quotes Martial, who said "The grove of Anna Perenna delights in virgin blood." [9] Jack Oruch quotes J.G. Frazer, who wrote *The Golden Bough*, the first encyclopedic study of ancient mythology: "It was a day of Valentine's and into the tents and leafy huts on the greensward of the grove many a girl may have gone in a virgin who came out a maid no more." [10]

Shakespeare has it in "Ophelia's Song" from *Hamlet*: [11]

Tomorrow is Saint Valentine's Day,
All in the morning betime,
And I a maid at your window,
To be your Valentine.
Then up he rose and donn'd his clo'es,
And dupp'd the chamber-door,
Let in the maid, that out a maid
Never departed more.

Hamlet [Act 4, Scene 5, ll. 48-55.]

So, from the very beginning, St. Valentine's Day was associated with religious love (both devotional and *agape* – selfless love) and erotic love, but not quite yet romantic love. What is the link to the romantic celebration of Valentine's Day?

In the Middle Ages for a time, there was a cultic collecting of saints' relics (bone fragments, shreds of clothing and other artifacts the saint might have possessed) as objects of veneration. In the 11th century, the Norman Queen Emma, wife of Aethelred the Unready, was a devout collector of relics. [12] When her son King Hardencanute was buried at Hyde Abbey Winchester in 1042, she donated the alleged head of St. Valentine of Terni to the monks that they might pray in perpetuity for her son. Two points about Hyde Abbey: 1) it was a Benedictine monastery (recall it was the Benedictines who tended the grave of St. Valentine in the Via Flaminia) and 2) Hyde Abbey was near the Tabard Inn.

It was from the Tabard Inn that Chaucer's pilgrims depart for Canterbury in ***The Canterbury Tales***. More importantly, because the monks frequented the Tabard Inn, Chaucer would have known the legend of St. Valentine. Chaucer's ***Parlement of Foules*** (1382) is the first association in English literature of Valentine's Day and erotic, domestic and romantic love.

The ***Parlement of Foules*** was written to honor the engagement of Richard II of England to Anne of Bohemia. In it, the birds, having migrated north for the return of Spring, gather on St. Valentine's Day in a parliament to choose their mates. The poem is rare for giving a woman, in this instance the *formel*, a female eagle, the right to refuse and choose a mate for herself. But all the other male birds choose their pliant mate. In the verses below, note the male is the doer of the verb's action. Chaucer writes:

For this was on Seynt Volantyn's day
When euvery byrd comtyh there
To chese his make (309-310)

Ye knowe wel how, Seynt Valentynes Day
By my statut and thorough my governance
Ye come for to chees – and fye youre wey –
Your makes [386-389]

Saynt Valentyn, that art ful hy on-lofte
Thus syngen small foules for thy sake:
Now welcome, somer ... (683-685) [13]

Thus begins, in the English-speaking world, the long and winding, actually not all that winding, road to selling 36 million heart shaped boxes of chocolate treats!

Some critics allege that Chaucer, by giving the *formel* the power to refuse, wrote in opposition to the reigning notions of courtly love. Perhaps, but during the high Middle Ages, Valentine's Day became inextricably intertwined with the cult of courtly love. First formalized as a creed by Chretien de Troyes in the 12th century, courtly love was a philosophy of love that allowed the elite trapped in loveless politically and economically arranged marriages to find emotional and romantic succor outside of marriage.

In short, it legitimized adultery.

In de Troyes ***Lancelot, The Knight of the Cart*** and Andreas Capellanus' ***The Art of Courtly Love*** the fundamental tenets stated knights declared themselves vassals to their lady, the ideal was a lady of higher status, only those who were

noble could engage in courtly love. It referred to both the emotion of loving and to sexual love. It asserted a true lover considers nothing except that which will please his beloved and that nothing prohibits one woman being loved by two men or one man by two women.[14]

Chaucer published *Parlement of Foules* in 1382. By 1400, Charles VI of France published the earliest description of February 14 as an annual celebration of love. It was called the *Charter of the Court of Love*. It included feasting, amorous songs and poetry, competitions, jousting and dancing, and the pairing off of couples. Disputes between lovers would be heard and ruled upon by the attending ladies. [15] Not the same Charles, Charles D'Orleans, while imprisoned in the Tower of London after a losing battle with the English, penned one of the earliest Valentine's poems: "Je suis desja d'amour tanne'/Ma tres douce Valentinee." Loosely translated, the medieval French means "I am already sick of love, my very gentle Valentine". [16] As the custom grew, it became domesticated, as seen later in the 15th century, when Margery Brewes wrote to her husband John Paston "... My right well-beloved Valentine ..." [17]

In the 16th and 17th century, Edmund Spenser, Ben Jonson, and Sir Thomas Wyatt the Elder elevated Valentine poetry to high art. In *The Fairie Queene* (1590), Spenser wrote "She bathed with roses red, and violets blew,/and all the sweetest flowers, that in the forest grew." [18] In his "Song to Celia," Ben Jonson sang:

Drink to me only with thine eyes,
 And I will pledge with mine;
Or leave a kiss but in the cup,
 And I'll not look for wine ...

I sent thee late a rosy wreath,
Not so much honouring thee
As giving it a hope, that there
It could not withered be. [19]

In one of Renaissance England's great love poems, "In They Flee from Me" Wyatt sang of Anne Boleyn:

They flee from me that sometime did me seek
With naked foot, stalking in my chamber ...

Thanked be fortune it hath been otherwise
Twenty times better; but once in special,
In thin array after a pleasant guise,
When her loose gown from her shoulders did fall,
And she me caught in her arms long and small;
There withall sweetly did me kiss
And softly said, "Dear heart, how like you this? [20]

Cult of courtly love or not, wife of a jealous Henry VIII, it cost Boleyn, mother of Elizabeth I, her head. Proving, as always, it helps to have friends in high places, Wyatt, a courtier of Henry VIII and an ally of Thomas Cromwell, was only exiled.

By the late 18th century, Valentine's Day was so embedded in the culture, that Valentine's verse was included in John Ritson's collection of children's rhymes

Gammer Gurton's Garland's (1784):

The rose is red, the violet's blue,
The honey's sweet, and so are you.
Thou art my love and I am thine;
I drew thee to my Valentine:
The lot was cast and then I drew,
And fortune said it should be you. [20]

The “**lot**” in *Gammer Gurton's Garland* refers to the very old custom of drawing one's Valentine, i.e. lover or special friend, by lottery. From the most recent pre-school children's party back to ancient spring festivals, choosing “valentines” by lot is an established tradition. Valentine's Day lotteries' roots reach back to the English but also more generally ancient European folk custom of festivals on or near St. Valentine's Day celebrating winter's end and the approaching spring. It goes back to the Roman festival of *Anna Perenna* mentioned earlier. [21]



Although it was not the only holiday associated with lover's lotteries (St. Agnes Eve on January 20, May Day and the tradition of dancing round the maypole, and St. David's Day on March 1 also included picking lovers by lot), as an 18th century observer, Henry Bourne, noted “it is a ceremony, never omitted among the vulgar, to draw lots, which they term ‘Valentines,’ on the eve before Valentine-Day. The names of a select number of one sex, are by an equal number of the other are put into some vessel; and after that, every one draws a name, which for the present is called their ‘Valentine’ ... (the partying was) tinged with festive indulgence and sexual scandal, and sometimes ruin. ...” [22] The drawing of lots during early Spring folk festivals ensured three things: 1) that everyone got a “Valentine,” 2) reduced jealousy between competing suitors, and 3) stifled post-celebration gossiping about the holiday's revelries. In a sense, it was an antique precursor of “what happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas.”

By the 17th and 18th centuries, the religious aspect of St. Valentine's Day had largely disappeared. The holiday was entrenched in the culture as a celebration of love and an occasion to exchange gifts, to feast, and to frolic with the opposite sex. In the early 17th century in *A Tale of the Tub* (1633), a play set on St. Valentine's Day and featuring several wooing males' comical attempts to marry Audrey Turfe, Ben Jonson was moved to lament:

Let us example to deeds of charity,
To feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit
The weak, and sick, to entertain the poor,
And give the dead a Christian funeral,

These were the works of piety he did practise.
And bade us to imitate, not look for lovers,
Or handsome images to please our senses. [23]

It did little good. As the poets sang, Valentine's Day was no longer, if it ever was, about good deeds; it was love, romance, and sex and not necessarily in that order. Among the genre's best are Robert Herrick's coyly sexy verses. For example, you need to pay attention to the clever playing upon words, as in his double-entendre use of "couple" as both a noun and a verb in "To His Valentine on St. Valentine's Day" attests:

Oft have I heard both Youths and Virgins say,
Birds chuse their Mates, and couple too, this day:
But by their flight I never can divine,
When I shall couple with my Valentine. [24]

Herrick hints at romantic love's erotic energy in several of his poems, including "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time," "Upon Julia's Clothes," and "Corinna's going a Maying."

John Donne, the reformed rake who became Dean of London's St. Paul's Cathedral, added a tamer domestic tone to the era's love songs in "Marriage Song" (1613):

... the day more cheerfully than ever shine,
This day, which might inflame thyself, old valentine. [25]

By the late 18th century, Valentine's Day among both the common folk and the aristocracy had become a near universal holiday. Among the aristocracy it had also become the foremost holiday for exchanging gifts, what Leigh Eric Schmidt calls "elaborate ceremonies of consumption." [26] Although one might argue about how elaborate contemporary Valentine's gift exchanges are and whether or not they qualify as "ceremonies of consumption," Valentine's Day remains a major gift giving day. Simply check the statistics at the beginning of this **Book Note**. As this year you give your Valentine a token of your affection, you might ask yourself does it match what Samuel Pepys, the compulsive diarist, gave his wife in 1667. Pepys boasted to himself that "... this evening, my wife did with great pleasure show me her stock of jewels increased by ... my valentine's gift this year, a turkey-stone set with diamonds." [27] A turkey-stone is an oblong brooch or ring; in this case a ruby surrounded by diamonds.



And, as we have seen, it was no longer St. Valentine's Day, but simply Valentine's Day. The meaning of the word "Valentine" had evolved from a martyr and saint's name to mean the name of one to whom a person was romantically and/or erotically attracted. "Valentine" no longer venerated a saint but described the object of one's affection and desire.

Next week in Part Two we'll explore how, between 1790 and 2022, the word's meaning changed yet again to mean a letter, a post card, a greeting card, or some other token of affection sent to everyone from teachers to children to wives to lovers. In tracing that evolution we'll ask what did Charles Dickens mean by

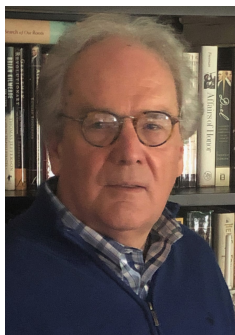
“Cupid’s Manufacture,” who was Esther Howland and Joyce Hall, and how did chocolate become the universal lover’s gift?

This week, however, we’ll close with a poem that has aspects of a nature poem, a poem of courtly love and perhaps even an erotic poem with the lover wishing to be taken by the sea – Emily Dickinson’s “My River Runs to Thee.”

My River Runs to Thee

My River runs to thee –
Blue Sea! Wilt welcome me?
My River wait reply –
Oh Sea – look graciously –
I’ll fetch thee Brooks
From spotted nooks –
Say – Sea – Take Me! [28]

For a more complete Valentine experience, replete with numerous photos and a bit of romantic music, you’ll want to visit the **Jefferson Educational Society’s Facebook** page on Monday, February 14, at noon for a Livestream presentation of my **American Holidays** series **Valentine’s Day: A Not So Short History**.



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Lotz: “Peasants Dancing” at [Wikicommons](#) available [here](#).
Turkey Stone Ring from [here](#).

End Notes

1. “*St. Valentine*” in **Saints and Angels** at **Catholic Online** available [here](#) accessed February 1, 2022.
2. “*St. Valentine*” in **Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia** available [here](#) accessed February 1, 2022.
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5. Ibid.
6. Shakespeare, William. **Hamlet**, in **The Riverside Shakespeare**. Ed. G. Blakemore Evans. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1974), p. 1172.
7. “*Emma of Normandy*” in **The British Library** available [here](#) accessed February 1, 2022.
8. Chaucer, Geoffrey. “*The Parlement of Foules*” in **The Parliament of Fowls** at **Librarius** available [here](#) accessed February 1, 2022.
9. For a discussion of courtly love, see Oruch, Jack. B. “*St. Valentine, Chaucer and Spring in February*,” **Speculum** (Vol. 56, No. 3, July 1918) pp. 534-565; C.S. Lewis’s **The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition** (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013); and Andreas Capellanus’s **The Art of Courtly Love** in **Medieval Sourcebook** at Fordham University available

- [here](#) accessed February 1, 2022.
10. "Court Amoureuse in the Defense of Woman" in **Girl Museum** available [here](#) accessed February 1, 2022.
 11. See Charles d'Orleans, "One Hundred Selected Ballades and Rondeaux" at **Poetry in Translation** available [here](#) accessed February 1, 2022.
 12. "The Paston Letters" at **Luminarium: Anthology of English Literature** available [here](#) accessed February 1, 2022.
 13. Spenser, Edmund. "Canto VI, Stanza 6" in **The Fairie Queene** at **Google Books** available [here](#) accessed February 2, 2022.
 14. Jonson, Ben. "Song: To Celia" in **The Norton Anthology of Poetry**. Ed. Arthur Eastman. (New York: W.W. Norton Co., 1970), p. 249.
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 16. from **Gammer Gurton's Garland, or The Nursery Parnassus: a choice collection of pretty songs and verses for the amusement of all little children who can neither read nor run** a full text edition at **Internet Archive** available [here](#) accessed February 1, 2022.
 17. Schmidt, Leigh Eric. **Consumer Rites: The Buying and Selling of American Holidays**. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 44.
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 21. Schmidt cited above.
 22. Schmidt cited above, p. 46.
 23. Dickinson, Emily. "My River runs to thee", at **Americanpoems.com** available [here](#) accessed February 1, 2022.

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