

Saint Valentine's story has an unexpected twist

by Sabine Eiche

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On February 14th more than 12 saints line up for their feastday. Of this dozen or so, the Roman Catholics and Episcopalians commemorate Cyril and Methodius while the Anglicans and Lutherans celebrate Valentine, universally recognized as the patron saint of lovers.

But how did Valentine, martyred in the 3rd century, come to represent the matchmaker par excellence? For over 250 years, we've been entertained with the story that the romantic associations of Saint Valentine's Day were inherited from Lupercalia, the ancient Roman festival of purification and fertility celebrated at this time of the year – but that turns out to be just an enticing fruit of the imagination.

Instead, Saint Valentine as we know him seems to have been a creation of the 14th-century English poet Geoffrey Chaucer, the result of some felicitous confusion. The earliest linking of Saint Valentine and love or mating occurs in Chaucer's poem "The Parliament of Fowls," which describes the dream vision of a great assembly of birds gathered on Saint Valentine's Day, when every bird chooses its mate. The problem here is that mid-February in England is too cold for nesting and breeding.

Could Chaucer have been thinking of another Valentine, honoured during a warmer month? Among the approximately 15 saints named Valentine, their feastdays sprinkled across the calendar, there's one Chaucer is likely to have known about – Saint Valentine, first bishop of Genoa, who is commemorated at

the beginning of May, a time of year long associated with various amorous pastimes of birds and humans alike.

So when Chaucer wrote about avian matchmaking happening on Saint Valentine's Day, he was mentally placing it in May. When Chaucer's contemporaries imitated him in their poetry, linking Saint Valentine and the springtime mating of birds, they had the better-known Valentine in mind, and recognizing that February 14th was too early for such activities, they simply got rid of most of the specific allusions to the season. Later poets continued the inherited mix of traditions.

Saint Valentine didn't stay confined to poetry for long. By the early 15th century, Valentine referred to the person selected on February 14th to become one's sweetheart for the ensuing year. Then people started to send letters or cards – called Valentines – on Valentine's Day, a custom that gained momentum in the 19th century. It must have begun innocently enough. Jamieson in his 1808 dictionary of the Scottish language defines a Valentine as “a billet which is folded in a particular way, and sent by one young person to another on St. Valentine's Day.” But by the late 19th century, Valentine cards had become vulgar and buffoonish and were exchanged mainly by the lower classes.

They were still buffoonish when I was in elementary school. We had booklets full of Valentines to cut or punch out. Send one to each child in the class, the teacher told us. They were silly and embarrassing. “My heart pants 4 U,” with pictographs for heart and pants, sticks in my mind.

And yet, the name Valentine lends itself wonderfully to rhyme – mine, thine, fine, pine, all words with lots of romantic potential. Just think how poets would have despaired if Chaucer had linked love and mating to Cyril or Methodius.