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Love Poems for Valentine's Day

Next Tuesday is Valentine's Day – Happy Valentine's Day! [1]

Who invented Valentine's cards?

As readers of these Notes know, for the past year I have been on occasion exploring the history of the women's movement and 19th century American women who changed American culture. One of them invented Valentine cards. Well, she didn't invent them, but she perfected them as a handicraft artifact.

She was Esther Howland. The card depicted above is one of hers. Howland greeting cards are works of art. A sampling of them can be found at Wikimedia Commons here Search media - Wikimedia Commons. The story goes that while working in her father's stationery shop she received a Valentine card from a competitor. She thought it simple and unattractive. Saying to herself, "I can do better than this," she did. She set up a small factory in the third floor of her parent's home, hired some women she trained in the arts of papercutting and origami. She soon outgrew the space, opened a factory and in the process created the American greeting card industry.

Valentine's Day and poetry have been combined since almost the beginning. There is no record of any Roman writing verse celebrating the transformation of the Lupercalia into St. Valentine's Day, but by the late 14th century Chaucer in his ***Parliament of Fowls*** began the transformation of a religious feast day into a day celebrating lovers. In it Chaucer describes a conclave of birds that meet each St. Valentine's Day to choose their mates:

from The Parliament of Fowls

"for this was on Saint Valentine's day,
Whan every bird cometh there to choose his mate,
Of every kind that men thinke may;
And that so huge a noise they make,
That earth and air and tree and lake
So full was …" [2]

Thanks to Chaucer, St. Valentine's Day began its transformation from a religious feast day to a day – ***Valentine's Day*** – celebrating lovers.

I asked myself, what have the poets had to say about this? Well, I'm sure to no one's surprise, from just after the beginning, poets have waxed, no pun intended, romantic about Valentine's Day, love, and lovers.

So, today let's revisit a ***Book Notes Classic*** --#47 from February 11, 2021 – *"Valentine Verse: The Pause That Refreshes"*.

Happy Valentine's Day!

Although not a Valentine, the old-time Coca-Cola ad – "The Pause That Refreshes" – captures a bit of the Valentine spirit and one's need, after an intense month of political ***Book Notes,*** to hit the "Pause" button, to gather one's wits and to renew one's sense of life's possibilities.

How better to do that than to turn to poetry, Valentine poetry in particular?

So, savoring that pause that refreshes, here, in no particular order and with no particular thesis to advocate, is a sampler of Valentine poetry and the poetry of romance.

What's your favorite Valentine poem?

How about this from *Gammer Gurton's Garland or Nursery Parnassus*, an 18th century collection of children's rhymes compiled by John Ritson?

from Gammer Gurton's Garland (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. [1]

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*, which was held in a grove on the Via Flaminia. Men and women came in pairs or came singly and paired off. In huts made of boughs, they feasted under the open sky; a good deal of ribald singing, drinking, and amatory revelry took place. [2]

Shakespeare alludes to it in Hamlet, when Opheilia sings her *"Valentine's Song":*

"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 dupped the chamber-door,
Let in the maid, that out a maid
Never departed more."
Hamlet, 4, ii, ll. 48-55 [3]

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's Day. The names of a select number of one sex, are by an equal number of the other 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." [4] 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."

In a similar vein, but a bit more pointed about its intent (hint you need to listen to the play on the word *couple*) is Robert Herrick's 17th century:

<u>To His Valentine, on St. Valentine's Day</u>

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. [5]

Herrick hints at romantic, if not overtly erotic, love. Several of his poems, according to *The Poetry Foundation*, "are among the most popular of all time." [6] They include *"To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time," "Upon Julia's Clothes,"* and *"Corinna's going a Maying."* Helen Lowe in her blog "Helen Lowe … *on anything, really"* offers "*Upon Julia's Clothes"* for Valentine's Day. Of the poem, she writes, "I wanted to choose a poem that was both 'romantic' in tone, but also lighthearted." [7]

<u>Upon Julia's Clothes</u>

Whenas in silks my Julia goes,

Then, then (methinks) how sweetly flows
That liquefaction of her clothes.

Next, when I cast mine eyes, and see
That brave vibration each way free,
O how that glittering taketh me! [8]

A snippet or two from the more familiar:

from To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time

Gather ye rose-buds while ye may,
Old Time is still a-flying;
And this same flower that smiles today
Tomorrow will be dying …
Then be not coy, but use your time,
And while ye may, go marry;
For having lost but once your prime,
You may forever tarry. [9]

and

from Corinna's going a Maying

Come, let us goe, while we are in our prime;
And take the harmlesse follie of the time.
  We shall grow old apace, and die
  Before we know our liberty.
  Our life is short; and our dayes run
  As fast away as do's the Sunne:
And as a vapour, or a drop of raine
Once lost, can ne'r be found againe:
  So when you or I are made
  A fable, song, or fleeting shade;
  All love, all liking, all delight
  Lies drown'd with us in endlesse night.
Then while time serves, and we are but decaying;
Come, my *Corinna*, come, let's goe a Maying. [10]

Herrick, Shakespeare, even “Gammer Gurton” hint at romantic love’s erotic undertones, but this next poem – whose first line almost everyone knows but very few know the poem in its entirety – speaks to romantic love maturing into a deep domestic love of selfless merging. It is Sonnet #43 from Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s collection *Sonnets from the Portugese*. Thinking the poems too

personal, she was reluctant to publish them. Her husband, the poet Robert Browning, encouraged her to do so because he thought them the best sonnet sequence in English since Shakespeare. She chose the title because she wanted it thought they were translations and not her personal sentiments.

Anyone would love to be loved as Elizabeth Barrett Browning loves her husband Robert Browning:

How Do I Love Thee? (Sonnet #43)

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight
For the ends of being and ideal grace.
I love thee to the level of every day's
Most quiet need, by sun and candle-light.
I love thee freely, as men strive for right.
I love thee purely, as they turn from praise.
I love thee with the passion put to use
In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith.
I love thee with a love I seemed to lose
With my lost saints. I love thee with the breath,
Smiles, tears, of all my life; and, if God choose,
I shall but love thee better after death. [11]

Elizabeth Barrett Browning was famous before her husband. Since she was an established figure in English literary life, Elizabeth's father thought Robert, the son of a bank clerk who lived at home with his parents trying to write scribbling poetry, an unfit suitor for his daughter. Elizabeth and Robert carried on a clandestine relationship before finally eloping to Italy in September 1846. Elizabeth never saw her father again. This poem by Robert Browning shares the tone of their courtship:

Meeting at Night

The grey sea and the long black land;
And the yellow half-moon large and low;
And the startled little waves that leap
In fiery ringlets from their sleep,
As I gain the cove with pushing prow,
And quench its speed i' the slushy sand.

Then a mile of warm sea-scented beach;
Three fields to cross till a farm appears;
A tap at the pane, the quick sharp scratch

And blue spurt of a lighted match,
And a voice less loud, through its joys and fears,
Than the two hearts beating each to each! [12]

My colleague and fellow Yeats aficionado at the Jefferson Educational Society, Vice President Ben Speggen, asked me to share with you William Butler Yeats' poem:

Aedh Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven

Had I the heavens' embroidered cloths,
Enwrought with golden and silver light,
The blue and the dim and the dark cloths
Of night and light and the half light,
I would spread the cloths under your feet:
But I, being poor, have only my dreams;
I have spread my dreams under your feet;
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams. [13]

The poem first appeared in Yeats' collection ***The Wind Among the Reeds.*** The title is sometimes given in collections of Yeats' work with the generic "He" and other times with "Aedh." The *Everyman's Library* edition quoted here has it as "He," but I prefer "Aedh." Aedh was one of three characters or alter-egos Yeats employed in his early Celtic mythic poetry. The others were Michael Robartes and Red Hanrahan.

Yeats described Aedh as "the myrrh and frankincense that the imagination offers continually before all that it loves." [14] Aedh's love can be read as a selfless offering of himself to his beloved. But it also hints at love's, at desire's danger zone. The danger that it might not be reciprocated, for the last line "Tread softly because you tread on my dreams" hints at rejection. Or, if reciprocated, it might be so all-devouring that the lover disappears within the beloved's pitiless and selfish embrace. It is the theme of *la belle dame sans merci*, the *femme fatale*, for whom the price of loving, like the black widow, is the lover's life. It has inspired many a poet, none more famously than John Keats.

from La Belle Dame sans Merci

I met a lady in the meads,
  Full beautiful – a faery's child,
Her hair was long, her foot was light,
  And her eyes were wild ...

She took me to her Elfin grot,
  And there she wept and sighed full sore,

And there I shut her wild wild eyes
  With kisses four.

And there she lullèd me asleep,
  And there I dreamed – Ah! woe betide! –
The latest dream I ever dreamt
  On the cold hill side.

I saw pale kings and princes too,
  Pale warriors, death-pale were they all;
They cried – 'La Belle Dame sans Merci
  Thee hath in thrall!' …

And this is why I sojourn here,
  Alone and palely loitering,
Though the sedge is withered from the lake,
  And no birds sing. [15]

More positive, capturing some of Herrick's flavor and the tone of Andrew Marvell's *To His Coy Mistress* – time is fleeting, we must act now – Christopher Marlowe's *The Passionate Shepherd to His Love* is not about transient pleasure or the danger the beloved would annihilate the beloved by subsuming him or her in a selfish, devouring passion. No, while vaguely erotic and a bit teasingly coy, it is ultimately about lasting commitment one to one, one to another. Its opening line is one of the most famous in English and the poem has inspired generations, if not centuries, of poets to reply on the beloved's behalf.

<u>The Passionate Shepherd to His Love</u>

Come live with me, and be my love;
And we will all the pleasures prove
That hills and valleys, dales and fields,
Woods, or steepy mountain yields.

And we will sit upon the rocks,
Seeing the shepherds feed their flocks
By shallow rivers to whose falls
Melodious birds sing madrigals.

And I will make thee beds of roses,
And a thousand fragrant posies;
A cap of flowers, and a kirtle
Embroidered all with leaves of myrtle;

A gown made of the finest wool

Which from our pretty lambs we pull;
Fair linèd slippers for the cold,
With buckles of the purest gold;

A belt of straw and ivy-buds,
With coral clasps and amber studs:
And, if these pleasures may thee move,
Come live with me, and be my love.

The shepherd-swains shall dance and sing
For thy delight each May-morning:
If these delights thy mind may move,
Then live with me, and be my love. [16]

A contemporary of Shakespeare, Marlowe died young in 1593 at age 29 in mysterious circumstances. He may have been involved in espionage or in some court intrigue. It is a mystery enticing both amateur and historical minded sleuths for almost a half millennium. Regardless, Marlowe was one of the great artists of his time. His *Doctor Faustus, The Jew of Malta* and *Tamburlaine* are among the greatest of Elizabethan dramas. But it is his "passionate Shepherd" most remembered today.

Among those generations of poets inspired to respond on behalf of the beloved, the first was Sir Walter Raleigh. Older and more experienced than Marlowe, Raleigh criticizes him for being naïve and juvenile in his thoughts about love.

from The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd

If all the world and love were young,
And truth in every shepherd's tongue,
These pretty pleasures might me move
To live with thee and be thy love ...

The flowers do fade, and wanton fields
To wayward winter reckoning yields;
A honey tongue, a heart of gall,
Is fancy's spring, but sorrow's fall.

Thy gowns, thy shoes, thy beds of roses,
Thy cap, thy kirtle, and thy posies
Soon break, soon wither, soon forgotten:
In folly ripe, in reason rotten ...

But could youth last and love still breed,
Had joys no date nor age no need,

Then these delights my mind might move
To live with thee and be thy love. [17]

Others who replied to Marlowe include William Carlos Williams, who rejected the ideal of a rural, back-to-nature retreat. For, as he said in *Raleigh Was Right:*

from Raleigh Was Right

We cannot go to the country
for the country will bring us
no peace
What can the small violets
tell us that grow on furry stems
in the long grass among
lance-shaped leaves? [18]

Dorothy Parker, as only she could, cracked wise in her reply in *The Passionate Freudian to His Love:*

from The Passionate Freudian to His Love

Our desires shall be from repressions free—
As it's only right to treat them.
To your ego's whims I will sing sweet hymns,
And *ad libido* repeat them.
With your hand in mine, idly we'll recline
Amid bowers of neuroses,
While the sun seeks rest in the great red west
We will sit and match psychoses.
So come dwell a while on that distant isle
In the brilliant tropic weather;
Where a Freud in need is a Freud indeed,
We'll always be Jung together. [19]

OK – enough of the passionate shepherd to his love; what have women had to say to men about love? Noodling around the internet, I found this post – *Top 10 Love Poems for Men Written by Women* – on a South Asian Indian website, **Topyaps.com**. [20] It seems to compile lists of "The Top 10 'whatevers'" you might want to consider. So, I make no claim for its aesthetic accuracy, but I found the choices interesting. They ranged from, at #10, Elizabeth Akers Allen's *"At Last"* to #7's Margaret Atwood's *"Love"* to two I want to share with you – #3's *"To My Dear and Loving Husband"* by Anne Bradstreet and at #1 Emily Dickinson's *"My River."*

One of the originators of American literature, Bradstreet was among those who founded the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1630. Married at 16, mother of eight, the most accomplished American poet of the 17th century, her themes explore motherhood, her role as spouse, and the sufferings of colonial life all colored by her Puritan faith.

To My Dear and Loving Husband

If ever two were one, then surely we.
If ever man were loved by wife, then thee;
If ever wife was happy in a man,
Compare with me ye women if you can.
I prize thy love more than whole mines of gold,
Or all the riches that the East doth hold.
My love is such that rivers cannot quench,
Nor ought but love from thee give recompense.
Thy love is such I can no way repay;
The heavens reward thee manifold, I pray.
Then while we live, in love let's so persever,
That when we live no more we may live ever. [21]

Emily Dickinson's *"My River Runs to Thee"* has overtones of both a nature poem and a poem of courtly love, if not even an erotic poem, with the lover wanting to be taken by the sea.

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! [22]

There are literally hundreds, no thousands, of Valentine poems that, if extended to include all love poems, probably climbs into the millions. So, we'll bring this refreshing pause to a conclusion with two more. One by a contemporary 21st century poet and one by the master – *"ole Billy"* Shakespeare. First, Carol Ann Duffy's *"Valentine."* A British poet, Dame Carol Ann Duffy was Poet Laureate of Great Britain from 2009 to 2019.

Valentine

Not a red rose or a satin heart.

I give you an onion.
It is a moon wrapped in brown paper.
It promises light
like the careful undressing of love.

Here.
It will blind you with tears
like a lover.
It will make your reflection
a wobbling photo of grief.

I am trying to be truthful.

Not a cute card or a kissogram.

I give you an onion.
Its fierce kiss will stay on your lips,
possessive and faithful
as we are,
for as long as we are.

Take it.
Its platinum loops shrink to a wedding ring,
if you like.
Lethal.
Its scent will cling to your fingers,
cling to your knife. [23]

Frequently cited among the world's greatest love poems, Shakespeare's Sonnet #116 – "Let me not to the marriage of true minds …" – might, in fact, be misread. Helen Vendler, in her ***The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets***, argues that it is a rejoinder to a previous utterance and not necessarily the ultimate definition of true love. [24] She might be right, to which I reply "So what?" Authorial intention is interesting, but not in itself definitive. For almost a half millennium, readers have found it love's consummate expression. It is one of my wife Judy's and my favorite poems.

So, concluding our refreshing tour of romantic and Valentine poetry, here is Shakespeare's last word on the subject:

<u>Sonnet #116</u>

Let me not to the marriage of true minds

Admit impediments; love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove.
O no, it is an ever-fixed mark
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
It is the star to every wand'ring bark,
Whose worth's unknown, although his heighth be taken.
Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle's compass come;
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.
    If this be error and upon me proved,
    I never writ, nor no man ever loved. [25]

Happy Valentine's Day! Take that pause that refreshes …

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End Notes

1. I've discussed Valentine's Day in several previous ***Book Notes*** and in my ***American Holidays*** series, all of which can be found here:
    - ***Book Notes #88*** Book Notes 88 From Roman Fertility Ritual to Hallmark Moment.pdf (jeserie.org)
    - ***Book Notes #89*** Book Notes 89 Part Two - From Roman Fertility Ritual to Hallmark Moment.pdf (jeserie.org)
    - ***American Holidays "Valentines Day"*** American Holiday Series - Jefferson Educational Society (jeserie.org)

2. Chaucer, Geoffrey. *The Parlement of Fowls* (PDF, ll. 309-314, p. 8) at **California State University Northridge** available at 08Fowls_1_17.pdf (csun.edu) accessed January 30, 2023.

Original End Notes

1. *"Roses Are Red,"* in **Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia** available Here accessed February 3, 2021.
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4. Houghton Mifflin Co, 1974), p. 1173.
5. Bourne is quoted in Schmidt, Leigh Eric. **Consumer Rites: The Buying and Selling of American Holidays**. (Princeton, N.J,: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 45.
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7. *"Robert Herrick",* at **The Poetry Foundation** available Here accessed February 3, 2021.
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17. Marlowe, Christopher. *"The Passionate Shepherd to His Love,"* at **Poets.org** available at Here accessed February 3, 2021.
18. Raleigh, Sir Walter. *"The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd,"* in **The Poetry Archive** available at Here accessed February 4, 2021.
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20. Parker, Dorothy. *"The Passionate Freudian to His Love,"* at **Poets.Org** available at Here accessed February 4, 2021.
21. Thakur, Arun. "Top 10 Love Poems for Men Written by Women," at **Topyaps.com** available at Here accessed February 4, 2021.
22. Bradstreet, Anne. "To My Dear and Loving Husband," at **Poets.org** available at Here accessed February 4, 2021.
23. Dickinson, Emily. "My River runs to thee," at **Americanpoems.com** available at Here accessed February 4, 2021.
24. Duffy, Carol Ann. *"Valentine,"* in **Scottish Poetry Library** available at Here accessed February 4, 2021.
25. Vendler, Helen. **The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets**. (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1997), pp. 487-493.
26. Ibid., p. 487.

In Case You Missed It

Be Well | How Do You Measure Up? written by health and wellness expert **Debbie DeAngelo**

Book Notes #130 | Happy Groundhog Day! written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Dr. Andrew Roth**

Sam Jethroe: Rock Star Appearances at Bayview Field written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Dr. David Frew**

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