

## ARTS &amp; LETTERS

*The First Valentine*

"St. Valentine, Chaucer, and Spring in February" by Jack B. Oruch, in *Speculum* (July 1981), The Medieval Academy, 1430 Massachusetts Ave., Cambridge, Mass. 02138.

Every February 14, candy and flower shops prosper as Valentine's Day sweethearts celebrate a love feast usually traced by historians to pagan Roman traditions. But the shopkeepers should thank English poet Geoffrey Chaucer (1340?-1400) instead, asserts Oruch, a University of Kansas English professor.

Modern academics believe that St. Valentine was a churchman who cured a crippled child through prayer, inspired conversions, and was beheaded by Roman authorities circa February 14, around the year 270. Eighteenth-century scholars postulated that, some two centuries after Valentine's death, Roman churchmen decided to Christianize a February pagan mating festival called the Lupercalia. They allegedly replaced the custom of pairing lovers by lottery with a contest involving saints' names and transformed the rite into a festival marking Valentine's death. A 20th-century version of this tale holds that a fifth-



*The first Valentine poem, penned by Geoffrey Chaucer in the 14th century, celebrated the pairing off of birds, not people.*

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century pope, Gelasius, replaced the Lupercalia with a festival celebrating the Purification of the Virgin Mary, and that Valentine thus became associated with fertility. Oruch dismisses both theories. The Lupercalia, he argues, never involved the pairing of lovers. And Gelasius sought to abolish the festival, not Christianize it. While Valentine was venerated throughout Europe by the 14th century, Oruch has found no sign of the saint in any European love poem.

The first linking of St. Valentine with romance occurs in Chaucer's "Parlement of Foules." In the poem, Nature convenes the birds on "seynt Valentynes day" and commands them to choose mates. Twentieth-century lovers might view this celebration of spring in

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mid-February as premature, but the date suited Chaucer's poetic purposes. Some calendars of his era marked spring's debut on February 7, and several English birds do mate in mid-February. Moreover, during February, winter is still a threat, and summer barely a hope and memory; the fickle climate mirrors love's inconstancy.

Thanks to Chaucer and his literary followers, St. Valentine was on his way to becoming the "Christian Cupid" by the end of the 14th century.

*W. A. Mozart,  
Democrat*

"Social and Philosophical Outlook in Mozart's Operas" by Christopher Ballantine, in *Musical Quarterly* (Oct. 1981), Circulation Office, 48-02 48th Ave., Woodside, N.Y. 11377.

The world's most sinful composer is how Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard once described Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–91). Yet in such comic operas as *Don Giovanni* and *Così fan Tutte*, Mozart never exactly glorified evil, notes Ballantine, who teaches music at the University of Natal in South Africa. Rather, he vested it with verve and humanity in a show of sympathy with the revolutionary notions then sweeping 18th-century Europe.

Mozart frequently depicted social class and convention as masks, which he ultimately exposed. Thus, in *The Abduction from the Seraglio* (1782), he debunks the power of tyrants by emphasizing their inability to rule human emotions. In *The Marriage of Figaro* (1786), a web of charades and disguises reveals a world where pretense is the norm and where apparent untruth contains hints of truth. When Figaro, a mere valet, proclaims his love to the Countess (whom he recognizes as his wife in disguise), the music—direct and only superficially insincere—suggests that in other circumstances he *could* love the Countess.

Mozart, writes Ballantine, believed that "without the darker sides of human experience, the brighter are not possible." Nowhere is this view clearer than in *Don Giovanni* (1787). A murderer and a seducer, Giovanni is nonetheless the most dynamic character in the opera, and his escapades subvert the social order. He sings in a populist buffo style. He is creative, a great improviser under stress. And, by stirring peasant and rich man alike to frantic action, he exposes their common humanity.

Mozart forgave human imperfection. Such pardon could be personal, as when Elvira excuses Giovanni for duping her, or political—as when Selim wins the admiration of his subjects by setting his prisoners free, in *The Abduction*. Self-pardon is equally important—in *Così* (1790), Fiordiligi acknowledges her infidelity and forgives it.

Reconciliation on a grander scale—the end of religious and nationalistic prejudices, an emphasis on universal brotherhood—were major goals of Enlightenment thinkers. By using his art to subtly undermine the *ancien régime*, Ballantine concludes, Mozart "aligned himself with the progressive social tendencies of his day."