

St Valentine, Early and Lately

by

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St. Valentine survives and even flourishes long after the namedays of most of the saints have been forgotten. Our heroes may be mythological but remain relentlessly of this world. Madonna is not “my lady” or Our Lady, the most sacred woman in western history, but a strutting coquette who sings like a lark and dresses like a harlot.

The reason Valentine survives is that love springs eternal in the human breast. **AND** Hallmark sees something to be made from our loveable weakness. Certainly St. Valentine's was the day on which all the birds assembled in the Middle Ages to choose their mates, with more bickering than cooing to be sure, at least as recorded in Chaucer's charming poem *The Parliament of Fowls*. There is a lot of old talk in Chaucer's Parliament, as there is in most other parliaments, but the lovetalk is done mostly by birds of the ruling class who liked to make speeches and dominate parliamentary gatherings then as now.

But we know that St Valentine was also the patron of *human* lovebirds in the more practical world of the later middle ages, for we have proof in the famous collection known as **The Paston Letters**. Among them are two delightfully touching missives from Marjory Brews to John Paston written in February 1477 (two letters in one month! On expensive paper or parchment!). "Unto my right well-beloved Valentine, John Paston Esquire" is the address on the first one, and the salutation that begins the letter is a wonderful unmodern mixture: " Right reverend and worshipful and my right well beloved Valentine". The first half of that is worthy of a bishop at least.

Her father, we find, is a cheapskate, willing to give only about £100 for her dowry, not as much as her Valentine wants. Not too much romance in this fellow.

But, she pleads with John, "if you would be content with that good, and my poor person, I would be the merriest maiden on ground," a phrase with more genuine poetry than any in the limping verse she has composed for the occasion to reveal and relieve the feelings of "your Valentine, Margery Brews."

Margery got her Valentine alright, for her next letter to John is dated December 18, and both the address and salutation begin "right reverend and worshipful *husband*." She is writing because he is away in London. She asks him, among other things, to wear her ring in remembrance, closing with the sly remark: "You have left *me* such a remembrance that maketh me to think upon you both day and night when I would sleep. Yours, M.P. " In 1482 he is still "Mine own sweet heart". About 5 years later around the time of his knighthood, he is "Right reverend and worshipful sir", with a hint in a P.S. that other ladies have been absorbing some of his attention . The last letter from Margery, 12 years after the first, is, like many of the Paston letters, all business -- economic and political. It is dated very precisely "the 10th day of February" (1489) but, alas, there is no reference to Valentine.

The Pastons were wealthy country gentry. What did simple folk do? For a glimpse of terms of endearment among the lowlier people of the later Middle Ages we must go back to Chaucer's *Miller's Tale*, a pleasant enough return for all lovers of a good bawdy yarn. Nicholas a young lodger in the house of John Carpenter, has concocted a daft story about a new Deluge, a tall tale that simple John believes; he fears for the safety of his young wife Alison, his "honey dear," who is described by the poet with lip-smacking delight as "a primerole, a piggy's eye." John has reason to fear for Alison alright, but the danger is not from the Flood but from the boarder, randy young Nick, who has a good deal in common with Old Nick.

While Alison and Nicholas are making "melody" in the carpenter's bed, she is serenaded by another young would-be seducer, Absalom.

What do you honeycomb, sweet Alison,
My fair bird, my sweet cinnamon!
Awaketh, lemman mine, and speak to me

You may have been lucky enough to be called "honey", or "darling", but probably not "*honeycomb*" or "*cinnamon*", delicious though they are. *Lemman* means "darling" or "dearling", as he later puts it.

Lemman or *leman* is totally gone now, probably for a good reason — because even in Chaucer's day the connotations were beginning to crumble at the edges; the word had become "*knavish*". *Lemman* meant literally "loved one", "dear one", but Chaucer's rather sardonic comment on its class use is revealing. One of his characters says that he doesn't see much difference between the sexual misbehavior of an aristocrat and that of an ordinary woman except for what they are *cleped* (called):

the gentle(woman) in estate above
She shall be cleped [called] his "lady" as in love;
And for that other is a poor woman,
She shall be cleped his "wench" or his "lemman".
(*Manciple's Tale*, 217-220)

So *leman* was clearly a word on the way down and out. Although it was used by early English writers even in religious contexts, it never occurs among the terms of endearment in the version of the *Song of Songs* in the King James Bible (1611), presumably because by then it had become a confirmed "knavish term."

After his humiliating rejection by Alison, Chaucer's serenading Absalom gave up "*paramours*", a word whose range of reference from an early stage was wide: from a spiritual lover of Christ or the Virgin, through ordinary boyfriend /girlfriend relationship, to sexual loving. I had labeled it archaic if not quite obsolete until I heard it used recently in a New York elevator. I guess it is still in much the same place as it was when Sam Johnson said in his famous **Dictionary**

(1755) that "*paramour*" was no longer much used "though not inelegant or unmusical."

The love-words in Absalom's serenade were still common enough in the mid-16th century to be denounced by some puritan as "wanton terms" along with other unbecoming intimacies such as "sweetheart" and "truelove". The puritan sounds like a sour Bible-reader who had not yet read the **Song of Songs**, that marvellous Old Testament poem we have mentioned, which is so embarrassingly full of "wanton terms", some of which still survive in one way or another.

"If music be the food of love, play on" said someone in a Shakespeare play. But many of our terms of endearment derive not from music, but from something much more basic, the love (or need) of food. Perhaps that is why we sometimes refer to sexual appetite. At any rate, it is striking how many of our terms of endearment are food words: *cookie, sugar, sweetie, honey*. We have seen Chaucer's carpenter fear for Alison, his *honey*, a meaning the **Oxford English Dictionary** referred to curiously as "now chiefly Irish." But that was around 1900; the Supplement corrects that misconception: "Now common in N. Amer whence also Britain and elsewhere."

Terms of affection that are not of food, tend to the diminutive: *doll, poppet, pet, baby* (a diminutive of *babe*, believe it or not). An older term, *poplolly* probably suggests to most of us an affectionate or childlike inversion of *lollipop*, but apparently it comes from a "*poplet*" (from French "*poupelette*", a little doll) crisply defined by the **Oxford English Dictionary** as "A female favorite, a light woman, a wench. So 'poplolly', a mistress".

The oddest extended use of this sort of affectionate diminutive in writing is probably in Jonathan Swift's "little language", a kind of nursery terminology and cryptic alphabet game the great Dean used frequently in his **Journal to Stella**, a

series of letters written to a female friend and her companion. (Swift's relationship to these two women has always been a source of speculation). The "little language" is highly personal and idiosyncratic, like everything else about Swift. On February 14, 1711-12, St Valentine's Day, he ends his daily letter to both ladies without any reference to St. Valentine, but with this sign-off: "Nite my deelest Rives MD" which seems to be his little language for "Good night, dearest wives" though neither of them was his wife. The "MD" is, oddly enough, the most common term in his "little language", and it means, the experts tell us, "my dear" or "my dears". The "little language" sometimes indulges in the kind of mildly insulting usage that men often use with each other but not generally with women. For example : "You scrambling, scattering sluttekin" (September 8, 1711). "Saucy jades" or "naughty girls" are two of his favorite terms of affection in the **Journal**. Strange man. Great, but definitely strange.

One of my favorite terms of endearment since I came across it in Johnson's **Dictionary** has been *bellibone*, which appears to have meant a girl both beautiful and good (French *belle et bonne*), an almost impossible combination, which explains in part why, as Johnson says, it was not much used. Not to mention the infelicitous suggestion of the **sound** of *bellibone*.

Surely the most delightful gathering of modern terms of endearment, is the wonderfully inventive lyric by Cole Porter *You're The Top*, a kind of secular litany, a modern Song of Songs, breathing vibrant new life into an old convention.

You're the top ...
You're the nimble tread of the feet of Fred
Astaire
You're an O'Neill drama
You're Whistler's mama

You're Camembert.
You're a rose
You're Inferno's Dante
You're the nose
On the great Durante ...

You're an angel, you're simply too too
diveen
You're Botticelli
You're Keats
You're Shelley
You're Ovaltine
You're a boon
You're the dam at Boulder
You're the moon
Over Mae West's shoulder
You're the top

And so, gloriously, on.

But the shortest and most affirmative word of endearment is Molly Bloom's last great monosyllable in the wonderful breathless unpunctuated torrential rush of syllables at the end of James Joyce's **Ulysses**

and then I asked him with my eyes to ask again yes and then he asked me would I yes to say yes my mountain flower and first I put my arms about him yes and drew him down to me so he could feel my breasts all perfume yes and his heart was going like mad and yes I said yes I will Yes.

Note:

For a lot more on Valentine see Henry Ansgar Kelly's book **Chaucer and the Cult of St Valentine**.

For the first two Margery Brews letters see #388 & #389 in Everyman edition numbering of the **Paston Letters**. The 1482 letter is # 438.

See **Oxford English Dictionary** under "*Honeycomb*" 2 for the "wanton terms" denounced by the Puritan. For baby as diminutive of "*babe*" and for examples of "*honey*" see quotations in **OED**, including Supplement..