

Of Chaucer, Spring Cleaning, and Werewolves

This is the strange and convoluted history of a holiday some people love, a lot of people hate, and everyone seems confused about: Valentine's Day.

Once upon a time, in ancient Greece, a secret ritual was held each May on the slopes of Wolf Mountain ([Lykaion](#), the tallest peak in Arcadia—the region lauded during the Renaissance as an unspoiled, harmonious wilderness, and in Greek mythology, home of the god [Pan](#)). The mountain was named for the Greek myth of Lycaon, king of Arcadia, who slaughtered and dismembered one of his sons (he had fifty, so I guess one was expendable, or maybe he just really pissed him off) and fed his son to Zeus, to see if he was truly omniscient. This upset Zeus, who transformed Lycaon into a wolf (*λύκος*, *lukos* or *lykos*, means “wolf”), restored the slaughtered boy to life, but killed all of Lycaon's other sons with lightning bolts.

The secret rituals of the Lykaia were essentially rites of passage for *epheboi* (adolescent males) that centered on the dual threat of cannibalism and werewolf transformation. Now, I'm not sure why cannibalism featured so prominently in Greek mythology, and I'm not sure why it was a threat: most often cannibalism was practiced during periods of extreme famine, or as a mostly ritualistic means of asserting dominance over a vanquished tribe or culture. We certainly cannibalize the art and practices of nearly every culture we come in contact with (usually to that culture's detriment), but I haven't grasped why actual cannibalism was such a strong tendency that a ceremonial prohibition against it needed to be instituted. The *epheboi* were often trained to be warriors; maybe it was a way of saying, “And when you win, don't eat the other combatants or they'll think you're no better than wolves!”

Now we move to ancient Italy. The month of February is named for Februa, a spring cleansing ritual held between February 13 and 15. It combined spring cleaning and washing (February is a rainy month in Italy) with the notion of ritual purification. The festival may have gotten its name from the Latin word *febris*, “fever,” since the sweating that often accompanies fevers were seen as purging bad substances from the body.

In Rome, the Februa festival gave way to the Lupercalia, or “Wolf Festival,” which came to be held on the same dates. This celebration was to banish evil spirits, purify the city, and bring health and fertility. The Lupercalia was named partly for Lupa, the she-wolf who suckled Romulus and Remus, and partly for the god Lupercus (also called Faunus), the Roman equivalent of Pan—who was worshiped in Arcadia, where the Lykaia were held.

The rites were directed by the *Luperci*, “brothers of the wolf”; they were naked except for goatskin loincloths, and served in the Lupercal temple, the cave where Romulus and Remus were raised and where, at the beginning of the

Lupercalia, two goats and a dog were ritually sacrificed. According to Plutarch, “[During the Lupercalia] many of the noble youths and of the magistrates run up and down through the city naked, for sport and laughter striking those they meet with shaggy thongs [which were called, interestingly enough *februa*]. And many women of rank also purposely get in their way, and like children at school, present their hands to be struck, believing that the pregnant will thus be helped in delivery, and the barren to pregnancy.”

Fast forward a few hundred years. The feast of Saint Valentine on February 14 was established in 496 CE by one pope, but deleted from the calendar of saints by another in 1969. So much for papal infallibility. No one is entirely sure which of the many Christian martyrs named Valentine were being honored; it was a popular name that derives from *valens*, which means worthy or strong, and there were three different Valentines who were named in various martyrologies in connection with February 14. Most think it was a Roman priest who was martyred sometime between 269 and 273 during the reign of Claudius II, a.k.a. Claudius Gothicus. Valentine was imprisoned for marrying Christian couples, which was against the law at this time, and while in prison, Claudius (shall we say) took a liking to him. Then Valentine made the tragic mistake of trying to convert Claudius to Christianity, so Claudius had him beaten with clubs and then beheaded.

The Feast of Saint Valentine was a minor festival in the ancient Church. But after 380, when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire (which was a shame, because when Constantine converted to Christianity in 312, he mandated that all religions in the empire be universally tolerated), the Church systematically established Christian feasts on the same days as the more ancient pagan ones—in a future post I’ll try to gather together an exhaustive list of them. In this case, the general pagan fertility celebration on February 13–15 was so widespread and prevalent that the Church needed to bring the feast a touch of religious sobriety. Happily, the paganish aspects of the day—people acting like goats and wolves, seducing everyone you can with the sort of abandon one might ascribe to the followers of Pan—have remained to this day, even though dear Geoffrey Chaucer and his circle did their best to make Valentine’s Day a paean to romantic love. In his love poem “Parlement of Foules” he wrote, “For this was on seynt Volantynys day / Whan euery bryd comyth there to chese his make.” (For this was Saint Valentine’s Day, / When every bird comes to choose his mate.) The problem, of course, is that Chaucer wrote it for the engagement of Richard II, which was on May 2—a date which celebrated a different Saint Valentine, an early bishop of Genoa.

But that didn’t stop others from piling on the Saint Valentine bandwagon. On February 14, 1400, in honor of Valentine’s Day, a “[High Court of Love](#)” was established in Paris to deal with love contracts, betrayals, and violence against women. Judges were selected by women on the basis of a poetry reading, and “valentines”—then short love poems—began to be circulated.

Since then it's been all downhill. The early 1800s saw the first valentine cards available for purchase, and by the mid-19th century they were all the rage. It wasn't until the second half of the 20th century that roses and chocolates and jewelry were added to the giving of cards; apparently some 190 million valentines are sent every year in the US, not counting valentine exchanges in elementary schools.

Sickly sweet sentimentalism, to my way of thinking. I say we go back to dressing in nothing but goatskin loincloths and getting in touch with our inner wolves.