

THE APPROPRIATION OF NEW CUSTOMS

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This article examines the origins of Valentine's Day and traces the history of its evolution from ancient times to the present day. It offers a comparison of the various customs associated with this day in different parts of Europe and the world. Describing in detail the process through which the contemporary rituals surrounding Valentine's Day were imported into Hungary, the article raises questions concerning the practice of transplanting customs from one culture to another.

Keywords: Valentine's Day, rose, heart, Cupid, love

Folklorists cannot help but feel fortunate when they find themselves in the unusual position of being able to examine, both in time and space, the first appearance of a particular set of customs and the process of their dispersion. It is another question whether we, as Hungarians, have anything in common with the customs in question and the tradition they represent. Are not the already existing occasions on which young people express their interest in one another sufficient? Is it necessary to transplant into our culture a new set of customs, one foreign to Hungarian – or Central European – traditions? This essay examines – though given its length not exhaustively – precisely these questions.

The most important and essential symbol of the customs surrounding Valentine's Day is the red heart, which appears in bouquets, in central spots on Valentine's Day cards, and, around the middle of February, in store windows as a crucial attention grabber. Folklorist Mihály Hoppál has written a significant article entitled *Tulip and Heart*, which deals with those symbols that occupy a prominent place in Hungarian folk art (Hoppál 1990). Of all the Valentine's Day symbols it is the heart that plays the most important role. We can find the explanation for this in the essay by Hoppál.

Naming the tradition

The day to which the customs described in this article are tied is February 14. It is dedicated to the memory of an old Christian martyr, Valentine. The corresponding name in Hungarian is “Bálint”, which has been used both as a first name and as a family name in Hungary. In 1522 it was, according to ecclesiastical records, the most popular name, but it remains popular even today (Bálint 1977: 220). In various regions of the country there are different traditions associated with this day. The four-volume work *Magyarság Néprajza* [Ethnology of the Hungarians] devotes only a short essay to this day, informing us that, “It is a good day on to which to have geese, ducks, chicken, etc. sit on their eggs, and also the day on which sparrows begin to mate.” (Szendrey 1933–1937: IV: 327) Sándor Bálint’s essay, on the other hand, gives a good summary of the customs and superstitions surrounding Valentine’s Day (Bálint 1977: 220–223).

In Christian history there are two (or rather, as we shall later see, perhaps three) significant Valentines: the Roman martyr and the Bishop of Passau. These two figures were often confused, particularly in territories where German was spoken. Hungarian traditions focus on the Bishop of Passau. Evidence for this can be found in calendars and missals from the Middle Ages. They observed his name day and attributed healing powers to him. This is why, for instance, the elderly women of Gyöngyöspata, who suffered from epilepsy, prayed to Saint Valentine. Those struck with this illness promised that for the rest of their lives they would fast on this day. We know of others who, on this day, did not feed their herds until noon, while the elderly stayed in bed until mid-day prayers. In other places Valentine’s Day was associated not with healing powers but rather with the power to preempt misfortune. In Hőgyész the stone masons attended mass, where they prayed that they not fall from the high scaffolds. In Cserszegtomaj farmers would walk around their vineyards in order to keep both thieves and birds away. In Elek not only do they not have geese, ducks, chicken, etc. sit on their eggs on Valentine’s Day, they refrain from doing this throughout the year on whatever day of the week Valentine’s Day happens to fall on that year. The people of Hangony say that on Valentine’s Day the wild dove returns, marking the coming of spring. In the village of Szil, in the region around the Rába river, the people believe that Valentine is the patron saint of sparrows, since it is around Valentine’s Day that the weather begins to improve. According to Croatian folk beliefs it is on Valentine’s Day that birds hold their weddings (Bálint 1977: 220–223). I have not come across any customs concerning fertility that are exclusive to Valentine’s Day. One searches our proverbs in vain for the significance of this name and day. The collection of Ede Margalits, which is based on András Dugonics’ novel *Etelka*, offers three sayings. The first is, “Fancy, like Valentine’s breeches”, which means frilly and pompous speech. The other two are “He fears it like sick Valentine fears for

his hair” and “Valentine was overjoyed when his hair grew out”. The explanation for the last two lies in the tale of a certain Valentine who, after suffering a high fever, closed all the doors and windows for fear that his hair would fall out. (Margalits 1896: 45). In the collection of Gábor O. Nagy we find only the first two examples. (O. Nagy 1966: 68). All three sayings constitute observations drawn from a single story, and none of them has come into common usage. If we examine the various collections we see that, as has happened in many cases, these sayings have passed from one collection to another. They are absent, however, from the spoken language, and therefore cannot be said to constitute a part of the culture’s folklore. Based on these observations we could say that, although there is hardly an abundance of superstitions, customs, or habits associated either with the name Valentine or Valentine’s Day, it would nevertheless not be justifiable (though perhaps understandable) to give a new name to the new custom. There is considerable ambivalence concerning the proper Hungarian name for the new customs surrounding Valentine’s Day. There are those who use the Hungarian name, calling it simply it “Bálint Nap” (“nap” means day in Hungarian). In the monthly magazine *Gyöngy* (Pearl), for example, which appeals primarily to young women, one reads about “Bálint day pastries” (*Gyöngy* 2002: 2: 50–52). There are others, however, for example *Hölgyvilág* (Women’s World), who refer to it as “Valentin Nap.” It is perhaps indicative of the prevailing ambivalence that in the above cited edition of *Gyöngy* there is another article in which the word “Valentin” is used to refer to Valentine’s Day, instead of the Hungarian “Bálint” (*Gyöngy* 2002: 2: 45). The customs surrounding Valentine’s Day are spread throughout the English speaking world, and in English the word has come to be used not merely as a proper name but also as a noun, meaning beloved or lover. It is the intention of Ági Guba, the professional florist who brought this custom to Hungary, to popularize the name Valentine’s Day, since according to her the Hungarian Bálint Day refers to something else. However, as the aforementioned examples have shown, there is hardly unanimity concerning this question. People will use the name that suits their fancies best, that is when they bother to give any attention to these questions in the first place.

A short history of the customs

It is worthwhile to sketch an overview, even if only in broad strokes, of the various changes that this day, and the beliefs and customs associated with it, have gone through. The ancient Greeks, during the month of weddings, celebrated the goddess Juno on February 14, whom they thought of as the sanctifier of weddings. According to legend she held her wedding feast with Zeus on this day. In the familiar depiction of her she is shown holding a granite apple in one hand – the sym-

bol of fertility – while in the other she holds a king's scepter, on which sits a cuckoo bird, the bird that proclaims the coming of spring. The Romans held the celebration of Lupercalia on February 14, which was dedicated to welcoming the arrival of spring and with it fertility, renewal, and cleansing. This was the most important day of celebration for the Roman god Faunus. His priests would dress in goatskins and offer sacrifices in a sanctified cave on the hillside of the Palatines. This day, a joyful celebration of the coming of spring, then became the day of the martyred Saint Valentine. Ecclesiastical history tells of Valentine, who dwelt in Rome and was beheaded by Emperor Claudius II sometime between 268 and 270. According to the legend, Valentine wanted to convert Claudius to Christianity, but his attempts were unsuccessful, and he was handed over to Aster, one of the emperor's officers, to be executed. However, when Valentine cured Aster's daughter of blindness, not only did Aster accept the Christian faith, but so did his friends. This angered the emperor, who had them put to death. The legends tell of another Valentine as well, who, in the third century, suffered a similar fate. He is mentioned as the Bishop of the city of Interamna (today Terni). His miraculous powers of healing were famous far and wide. He is credited, for example, with healing the crippled daughter of the Greek scholar Craton, something which prompted Craton, as well as several of his acquaintances, his student, and even the governor of the city to adopt the Christian faith. He too was imprisoned for his faith and later executed on the order of a prefect by the name of Placidus. According to K. E. White several historians share the view that these two Valentines were one and the same person (White 1993: 27). Whatever the case, there are numerous legends associated with this (these) martyr(s) that not only tell of Valentine's miraculous healing powers but also attribute to him the role of the guardian of lovers. There is one legend according to which the bishop reconciles quarreling lovers with a rose. According to another story the bishop, awaiting his execution in prison, prays to God to restore the sight of the daughter of the prison guard. Valentine sends a farewell letter to the girl signed, "from your Valentine". He died on February 14, so this became Valentine's Day. When people give each other flowers and gifts on this day, they do it to express their love for one another. In the France and England of the Middle Ages this custom was particularly popular among lovers perhaps precisely because it fell in the middle of the second month of the year (February 14), the day on which according to folk beliefs birds began to mate. According to popular belief, the first Valentine's Day card was sent by Charles, Prince of Orleans, to his wife from the tower of London, where he had been imprisoned in 1314 in the wake of the battle of Agincourt.

Legends tell of another Valentine as well. He lived sometime between 430 and 475 AD, though the exact date is not known. According to the legend, it was his desire to settle in Passau in order to try to convert the people of the city. After being chased off three times he retreated to the Alps, where he died. Though we do

not know why, allegedly it was principally epileptics that believed in his healing powers. It was for this reason that in the Middle Ages many epileptics wore Valentine's crosses around their necks to frighten off the disease. In territories where Hungarian was (is) spoken it is this understanding of Valentine that became widespread. It is for this reason that one does not find among Hungarian superstitions and customs concerning this day tokens related to romantic love.

A description of the tradition

It is not my intention to give an exhaustive overview of this tradition. I intend only to examine its emergence and characteristics in Hungary. It would be interesting, of course, to look at the changes this tradition has undergone. The spread of this tradition to the farthest corners of the globe is not, presumably, due to the ever stronger need to express love, but rather to the increasingly commercial nature of our world. Indeed, it is hardly celebrated in the same way everywhere. In the United States schoolchildren give each other commercially printed cards – which are different both in size and quality of paper from “adult” cards. Boys give them to girls and girls to boys, though sometimes girls give them to girls, occasionally not revealing who it was who gave the card. A child's standing in the class is to an extent determined by how many Valentine's Day cards he/she receives. It is not only lovers who send each other Valentine's Day cards. Children give them to their parents and grandparents and vice versa. It is also customary to give flowers, chocolate, and small gifts. The red rose and red heart are indispensable accoutrements. In Japan they celebrate two Valentine's Days: one on which boys send cards to girls and another, a week later, on which girls send cards to boys. In Australia, as well as in France and the other countries of Europe, Valentine's Day has remained an occasion for young lovers. It has not spread to include family members. In Italy, especially in Sicily, as well as in England, Belgium, and other countries, the tradition is to greet the first person of the opposite sex you meet on that day as your Valentine and to exchange gifts with that person.

I mention as a side note that in Great Britain not only is the day of February 14 designated as a time for predictions concerning love, but the preceding evening is as well. In the northern parts of England and the southern parts of Scotland it is customary for an equal number of boys and girls to spend the evening of February 13 together. Everyone writes his/her name on a small strip of paper. They put the papers into two small bags, the names of the boys in one and the names of the girls in the other, and everyone pulls out a name. You then become the Valentine of the person whose name you pulled or who pulled your name. It is an unambiguous portent of marriage if two people pull each other's name. Sometimes they pull

names from the bags three times, and if someone draws the same name three times in a row it is a sure sign of marriage.

There is another well-known tradition concerning Valentine's Day eve. There are those who hold that before going to bed you must write the names of potential spouses on strips of paper. These you must throw into a pot of boiling water and whichever name you read first will be your Valentine the next day. In England February 14 is, according to tradition, the day on which birds begin to mate, which explains how this day became the day of lovers.

This poem from 1648 captures this idea:

Oft have I heard both youths and virgins say
 Birds choose their mates, and couple too, today
 But by their flight I never can divine
 When I shall couple with my Valentine

Herrick: Hesperides (Knightly 1987: February 13–14).

It is perhaps an indication of the popularity of this day that Shakespeare makes reference to it in *Hamlet*. Ophelia tells of what happens on this day:

To-morrow 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 clothes,
 And dupp'd the chamber-door;
 Let in the maid, that out a maid
 Never departed more.

Another superstition recorded in England was that the first person of the opposite sex to see you on Valentine's Day will become your spouse. However, should the person you encounter not be the right person you are allowed to close your eyes until the right person does come along (Knightly 1987: February 13–14). A similar popular tradition was that young girls could tell who their future husbands would be based on the birds that they saw on Valentine's Day. If a girl spotted a redbreast robin, her husband would be a mariner. If she saw a sparrow, he would be a poor man, but they would be happy. A goldfinch meant a rich husband, while a white dove meant a kind husband. The worst was a woodpecker, because that meant the girl would be an old maid.

In England traditions that have been practiced for centuries are still alive today. However, it is only in the last decades that these traditions have spread to other parts of the world. People are not always enthusiastic about these ever more prevalent customs. In India, for example, the leader of the Hindu nationalist party declared that his followers would burn Valentine's Day cards, just as they had done

the year before. In their view this new fashion stands in contradiction to the cultural and moral traditions of India and therefore should be condemned (*Magyar Hírlap* February 14, 2002, 16). They planned to disrupt open celebrations of Valentine's Day and to vandalize store displays. What actually happened on this day, the accounts do not mention any such activities. They mention only that despite these threats in Bombay balloons decorated with hearts and various other Valentine's Day decorations could be seen in virtually every storefront. The celebration of this day spread fairly quickly in part because in numerous cultures it is around this time of year that people welcome the coming of spring.

The appearance of the tradition in Hungary

In Hungary this tradition has a fairly recent history. Its appearance can in fact be tied to one person. It was Ági Guba, the director of the Hungarian Professional Florists' Association, who decided to bring this tradition to Hungary. The first introduction occurred in 1990 in the Congressional Center in Budapest, where on February 14 a large exhibition was held that emphasized Valentine's Day decorations and the bouquets made for this occasion. Even on this first occasion the exhibition was attended by candy and chocolate vendors, as well as craftsmen, who peddled carved figurines and other gifts appropriate to Valentine's Day. Falling between Christmas and Women's Day (which was brought to Hungary under communism in an attempt by the regime to depict itself as progressive), February is an uneventful month from the point of view of giving gifts. There is little business for flower stores and gift stores are empty. Valentine's Day fills this otherwise slow period. It is a new occasion and a new opportunity for gift giving. However, it was not the founder's intention simply to increase sales and improve business for flower stores. According to Guba's conception, Valentine's Day should be an occasion when anyone can give a stem or a bouquet of flowers to someone else, creating joy and good will. With this in mind she decided that every year she would give a so-called "love bouquet" to someone whose actions, in her view, exemplify love. It was in 1991 that she gave the first such bouquet. I will not list all of the recipients, but the list ranges from President Árpád Göncz to U. S. Ambassador Nancy Goodman-Brinker, and includes such names as Róbert Koltay, György Faludy, and Gábor Presser, as well as Klári Tolnay and, in the name of all the victorious athletes of the Barcelona Olympics, Pál Schmitt. This "love bouquet" is always done in the name of the Hungarian Professional Florists' Association, but it is always Ági Guba who does it and who presents it to the recipient as part of a small celebration. Although this event always gets a great deal of publicity, this kind of gift-giving has not caught on. Valentines' Day trends, however, have caught on. Today they are familiar throughout the country. Valentine's Day

is less significant than Women's Day, the custom learnt under socialism according to which an employer or director at a place of work gives flowers to female employees (not a red carnation, just a simple snow-flower), but it is present, especially among those under the age of thirty-five.

How is this tradition practiced? Perhaps the most noteworthy aspect is that as of yet there is no established ritual in Hungary. There are, however, a few indispensable items, namely the red heart and flowers. To this one might add any number of other items, for example chocolate – if possible wrapped in the form of a heart or, if this is not possible, in paper decorated with red hearts, balloons decorated with red hearts, or other appropriate gifts, such as a coffee mug with a red heart on it and perhaps an inscription, a plush stuffed animal with its lips pursed to form a heart, a bear with red fur, a handbag for cosmetics, stationary, colored paper, and any number of other trinkets. What is essential is that it have a heart on it, indicating that it was both made and purchased for this day. Why is this heart motif so important? What does it signify today?

We give people gifts in order to bring them pleasure, but the objects that we give always bear some sort of meaning. As Károly Kós writes in regards to the old presses used to wash and iron clothes, “The principle characteristic of the objects in which the social life of the folk manifests itself is that it is personal and that each such object *wants to express* something” (quoted in Hoppál 1990: 7). What, then, do the many red hearts want to express on this day?

I agree with the celebrated writer Aladár Dobrovits when he says, “Nothing takes form in a culture on its own from one day to the next. Everything has an origin.” Dobrovits observes, perspicaciously, that “to invent symbols, create them from nothing, this is not possible” (Hoppál 1990: 50).

One can explain the phenomenon that virtually every Valentine's Day gift is in some way related to the heart by examining the meanings attributed to the heart by numerous cultures. Again, I cite Hoppál, who writes, “on the basis of cultural/historical information drawn from dictionaries of symbols the heart motif is clearly connected to the symbols of love. It is the emblem of love, but also of understanding, devotion, and joy in the most divergent cultures” (Hoppál 1990: 50). Therefore, it seems natural that this emblem would be essential on the day designated for lovers. In numerous cultures, for example in Hungary or in the United States, the flower is of similar significance. In particular the red rose is symbolic of love. It is commonplace in Hungarian folk poetry and in everyday speech for someone to refer to a lover as “my rose”, as Lajos Vargyas notes in the fifth volume of *Magyar Néprajz* (Hungarian Ethnology). According to him the vibrant color and strong scent of the rose explain its role as the emblem of love. One comes across the rose in many folksongs and sayings:

Hej rózsa, rózsa, ékös vagy,
 Hajnali csillag-fényös vagy,
 Egyenes vagy, rózsám, mint a nád,
 Néköm nevelt az édesanyád.

Hey rose, rose, you are a jewel
 A glittering dawn star you are
 You are straight, my rose, like the reed
 Your mother raised you for me.

Or as the symbol of love:

Déltől estig nyillik a piros rózsa,
 S bárcsak eddig se szerettelek volna!
 Jobb lett volna az én árva szívemnek:
 Hadtam volna békit a szerelemnek.

From dawn till eve opens the red rose,
 If only I hadn't loved you at all!
 It would have been better for my orphaned heart
 Had I but left love in peace.

These two examples explain the role of these symbols on Valentine's Day (Vargyas 1988: 477–478).

There are two additional items that are not indispensable, but are common accoutrements on this day. One is the balloon, the other the figure of Cupid, who may appear as a small figurine or merely as a decoration on a postcard or on wrapping paper. For the Romans Cupid was the god of love, depicted as an attractive youth or child with wings, lute, flowers, bow, and arrows. His appearance on this day dedicated to love is therefore not unusual. Perhaps less relevant or appropriate is the balloon, which is one of the conspicuous and slightly childish elements of ever-more Americanized popular culture. A decade ago the balloon was associated with the amusement park, a farewell scene, or perhaps the marketplace. Now it has become part of the everyday, not only as part of birthday celebrations – where, ten or fifteen years ago, it wouldn't have occurred to anyone to have balloons – but even as part of an election campaign. Old women sit on benches holding ten or fifteen balloons in their hands that read, “A woman is capable of more,” something which could even serve as a slogan for Valentine's Day (*Magyar Nemzet* September 2, 2002: 1). On Valentine's Day balloons appear in store windows to grab the attention of passers-by, but, as in the United States, they can be found ever more frequently accompanying flower bouquets, often in the shape of a heart but always decorated with something, red hearts or perhaps small figures. It seems significant that, in this tradition, which is even now taking form, individual tastes have not yet been relegated to the background to the same extent as in an

established tradition, yet those giving the gifts still feel it necessary to use these symbols. This is natural, however, since the individual, by seeking precisely those symbols that have been created by a community, becomes part of a symbolic system used by many and can feel him/herself part of that community. The symbols used by this person gain significance because there is a larger group, a larger community, that allows them to be their own (Bodó 1987: 61).

This tradition is, in itself, little more than another occasion to exchange gifts. In Hungary it is only young married couples or young lovers who exchange gifts on this day. We have little data suggesting that those above the age of thirty-five purchase anything for each other. Men can choose to give, along with flowers of course, perfume or one of the previously mentioned trinkets. Younger people prefer cheerful or amusing gifts, while those who are slightly older prefer slightly more serious gifts, perhaps books. Girls tend to give presents to those boys with whom they are already in a more serious relationship. They may give any sort of smaller gift. Particularly popular is the small stuffed animal, though books often provide a surprise. A young husband may get a bottle of some alcoholic beverage.

Electronic and print media play a decisive role in the evolution and dispersion of the customs associated with Valentine's Day. Daily papers write only briefly about this day, primarily about its history and dispersion (*Magyar Hírlap* February 14, 2002: 16), while in the magazines targeting the young there is an abundance of material concerning Valentine's Day. These magazines do not touch on the cultural and historical background of this day. Instead they offer personal stories, as well as tips and suggestions concerning gifts and activities. Among these are Valentine's Day recipe suggestions. In this too the heart is the central motif. The opening lines of an article entitled *Heart to Heart* cite the commonplace "the way to a man's heart is through his stomach", and just to ensure that the significance is clear the recipe suggests that the baked goods be prepared in the shape of a heart (*Gyöngy* February 2, 2002: 50–52). We find the same thing in the magazine *Hölgyvilág* (Women's World), which targets girls, where an article entitled *Szívesen kínáljuk* ("It is our pleasure to offer it to you" – a play on words in Hungarian since the word "szívesen" (gladly or with pleasure) is derived from the word "szív", meaning heart) offers recipes for heart shaped deserts (*Hölgyvilág* February 14, 2002: 20–21). The magazine entitled *Gyöngy* also offers gift suggestions, ranging from CDs of light music or the songs of Hungarian performers to books telling the tales of the world's most infamous lovers (*Gyöngy* February 2, 2002, 45).

The gift-giving customs associated with Valentine's Day do not allow for much imagination, especially from the man's perspective, since the list of obligatory or appropriate gifts is fairly strictly defined. There is, however, another aspect to Valentine's Day about which I have not yet spoken, namely the question of Val-

entine's Day greetings. The magazine *Hölgyvilág*, in which the writers make use of both "Valentin" and "Bálint", offers pages of suggestions concerning Valentine's Day greetings. In order to spark the reader's interest, they begin by asking well-known artists the question, "from whom are you expecting to receive a Valentine's Day card?" They receive unexpected answers to this question. For example, Iván Markó claimed to be expecting something from "the good Lord himself" (*Hölgyvilág* February 14, 2002: 5). More interesting perhaps are the some 800 greetings found printed in small letters on six pages of this magazine. These greetings are under the heading "Thank you for being mine", and they imply numerous possible relationships between the sender and the receiver, not merely that of lovers. Perhaps the most surprising is one from a five month old "Little Baby Kitti", who sends her Valentine's Day greetings to her mother. There are several greetings from grown women to parents, for example, or from a grandmother to her grandchildren. Most of the greetings, however, are intended from lovers to one another. There are ones addressed to a specific name, others with a word or phrase suggesting who the recipient might be, and still others about which it would be hard to say whether or not it will even reach the person for whom it is intended, for example, "You are the world's best man! First prize! Code Name: Blue Eyes". A similar greeting contains an element of humor: "I wish you a happy Valentine's Day my dear. To the world's most adorable blue-eyed real man! Your little sex mouse." The one who refers to himself as "Prince Imre" looks down a little at his lover: "I send word to the country hag that I love her". One comes across sugar-coated greetings, such as, "I wish my zsebröfi [pocket piggy] a joyous future, from his ever-loving zsebcicája [pocket kitty]". "Chocolate" is a little more realistic: "Eve! Watch your weight!"

Space limitations do not allow me to analyze all of these various greetings – that must wait until later – but one can observe that these texts extend far beyond the boundaries of traditional modesty, indeed, often beyond the boundaries of good taste. It is not journalistic style that creates this tone, but, more probably, general changes in common speech, a sort of affectation of promiscuity that occasionally makes the reader recoil. But this is merely part of the phenomenon. The greetings found in these magazines are not part of a tradition. The writers have nowhere to turn for models. There is no governing mechanism that might channel these writings provoked by emotion, the need to communicate, and the desire to participate. These greetings have nothing in common with the written or oral traditions of the peasantry. In this case we are dealing with an entirely new genre, and compared to this even the commonplaces inscribed on the hangings used by peasants in their kitchens (what in Hungarian is referred to as "falvédő költészet") was *literature*. The reason for this is perhaps the fact that the entire phenomenon of Valentine's Day has, in Hungary, no roots in tradition; and although the media and

the world of marketing try to tell the consumer what he/she should buy on this day, they do not say what he/she should write. We can, to an extent, consider this as something positive, since in the United States for example one can hardly find a greeting card without a text already inscribed into it. They all have some sort of text, sparing the buyer the task of having to think up something to say to his lover, mother, grandmother, etc. At the same time, however, we may find in this absence of tradition an explanation for why people don't know what or how to write on this day, because they don't know why we have these customs in the first place. The culture of any community is the sum of the information deriving from its own traditions and from foreign cultures. Presumably the preferable situation is a balance between tradition and innovation. If a civilization turns in on itself excessively, rejecting outside influences, it becomes rigid and eventually exhausts its reserves. On the other hand, if it rejects its own traditions and accepts only outside influences, it paves the way to self-surrender (Keszeg 1991: 255–258). For this reason alone it is worthwhile to give some thought to the adoption of this custom. The folklorist knows that folk poetry, and indeed all of traditional peasant culture, is the history of innovation and the adoption of new influences. Here, simply, the question becomes one of *what* and *how*. Is there not in Hungarian traditions a custom appropriate for renewal and use? Is peasant culture really “in-consumable” (to use Vilmos Keszeg’s term)? Do we indeed need – it seems we do – the deluge of gaudy tripe that this custom has brought upon us in order to express our love for one another?

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