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The published version:

Annebella Pollen, "The Valentine has fallen upon evil days": Mocking Victorian valentines and the ambivalent laughter of the carnivalesque', *Early Popular Visual Culture*, special issue: Social Control and Early Visual Culture, Vol 12, Iss, 2, 2014, pp. 127-173, first published online August 21, 2014 can be found here:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/17460654.2014.924212?journalCode=repv20>

DOI: 10.1080/17460654.2014.924212

'The Valentine has fallen upon evil days':

Mocking Victorian valentines and the ambivalent laughter of the carnivalesque

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This article examines the social control embodied and enacted in the practices of sending and receiving mocking valentine cards in the Victorian era. Particularly popular in the period 1840-1880, cheaply-printed and cheaply-sold 'mock' or 'mocking', comic valentines were the inverse of their better-known sentimental print partners. Usually featuring a crude caricature, intended to represent the recipient, and a satirical accompanying verse, such cards had a much wider network than today's cards. Mocking valentines covered a vast range of 'types' and could be sent to neighbours, colleagues and members of the local community as well as to wanted and unwanted partners. Each was designed to highlight a particular social ill, from poor manners and hygiene to pretentiousness and alcoholism, sometimes with astonishing cruelty. As such, for all their purported comical intention, these printed missives critiqued behaviour that deviated from social norms, and could chide, shame and scapegoat. Within the context of a permissive festival atmosphere, the cards functioned as a kind of moral policing; in their anonymous character they could speak on behalf of many; under the cover of humour, they exercised a collective social control. This article will examine the particular historical conditions of such cards' production and consumption, with particular reference to a large case study of previously unanalysed examples. Examining debates about industrialisation – where emerging commercial print media would be accused of creating new immoral markets – against the pre-existence and endurance of popular customs of the carnivalesque and their 'licence to deride', this article applies ideas from Bakhtin, Zemon-Davies, Stallybrass and White to explore laughter as a social weapon in the transgressive space of the insulting valentine.

Keywords: Valentines, nineteenth century, greetings cards, popular print culture, caricature, carnivalesque, charivari, history of love, commercialisation, working-class, morality, social control

Introduction

Valentine's cards enjoyed enormous popularity in nineteenth century Britain (Lee 1953; Staff 1969; Schmidt 1993). New forms of industrial print production, the growth of literacy and the spread of the postal system each helped expand the feast day into a major date in the social and commercial calendar. According to one estimate, the annual quantities of cards sent expanded from approximately 200,000 in the 1820s to a peak of 1,500,000 by the 1870s (Vincent 1989). While abundant surviving examples of lacy, cushioned and perfumed valentine's cards act as tangible testaments to the appeal of the ritual to Victorian sentimental taste, a hugely popular aspect of Victorian valentine culture – the sending of cruel 'mock' valentines, which usually featured a caricature of the recipient and an insulting verse – remains largely forgotten. Fewer items exist in public and private collections and the tradition of sending insults on 14 February has not survived as a mass practice, unlike its sentimental counterpart. This article examines the rise and fall of this valentine phenomenon in nineteenth century Britain, using a case study of mock valentines from Royal Pavilion, Museums and Galleries, Brighton and Hove, as its central focus. It examines the visual and material culture of these cards, their production and consumption, subjects and styles, senders and recipients, alongside their reception and analysis in the contemporary British press. Through this, the article argues that mock valentines offer a distinctive viewpoint into Victorian attitudes to morality and decency, and indeed, their inverse. Whether teasing and winking in their gentler aspects, or kicking and wounding in their fiercer forms, insulting valentines acted not only to affect the recipient but also, as a wider practice, to police social norms. Through mocking, chiding and shaming, to a greater or lesser extent, such cards employed laughter as a weapon.

Valentines in historical and critical context

The history of Valentine's Day has been mapped by a range of authors (see, for example, Lee 1953; Schmidt 1995; Staff 1969), and indeed, in the nineteenth century, was the frequent subject of

reflection among those who sought to understand its mass revival. Broadly speaking, the date has its origins as a saint's day, although the saint who is commemorated is no longer precisely remembered. According to Schmidt, dozens of Christians named Valentine were martyred and attained sainthood in the early church, but two third-century St. Valentines were especially revered in the early medieval times and both were apparently executed on February 14. Schmidt also notes that 'until the late fourteenth century [...] St. Valentine was remembered for steadfastness in the face of a torturous martyrdom and for miraculous cures – not for any special affinities with earthly love' (1993, 210). Early associations were made between St. Valentine and mating birds by Chaucer, and this seems to have developed by the seventeenth century into the marking of the day by gift-giving – somewhere along the lines of the twenty-first century British 'Secret Santa' ritual – where gift recipients (in this case of verses and tokens) were secretly drawn by lot. The celebration was not confined to adult couples and could include wider members of the family and friends (Staff 1969).

The development of cut and folded paper valentine love tokens, which more obviously prefigure valentine's cards in their later dimensions, developed through the eighteenth century (Staff 1969). The shift from handmade to mass production, however, was a product of the early nineteenth, and progressive developments in the postal system also helped precipitate the huge rise in popularity. The valentine trade grew in size and variety throughout the nineteenth century, and the cards could exist in a range of forms, from single woodcut or lithographed sheets featuring a simply coloured image and verse through to elaborate confections of machine-manufactured silver and lace paper, silk and satin. They could be painted or printed, cushioned or perfumed, and take the form of knots, puzzles or gloves. They could include hearts, garlands and cupids as motifs, feature moving parts or come in ribboned boxes; contain gifts or be styled to look like banknotes. An 1872 trade list of 'ornamental, sentimental, fancy and comic' valentines from British manufacturers Dean and Co. of Threadneedle Street, for example, included a range from half a penny to a guinea in cost, with some named as particularly suitable for children and others for old maids and bachelors. These included valentines with 'white lace edges', 'oil colour centres', 'scalloped, coloured and embossed', 'tinted raised lace lifts', 'bird's nests and eggs, with real feathers of birds', 'green sprays, pearl-shells, real moss', 'heads of animals under a hat with sarcastic mottoes', 'encrusted butterflies on grass' (*Birmingham Daily Post*, 1872). The diverse material ranges of sentimental valentines competed for

novel construction methods, sometimes including precious stones, human hair and taxidermy among their component parts.

Despite Valentine's Day being best known as a day for instigating and celebrating love and attraction, the range of emotions covered by the nineteenth century valentine market was in fact remarkably comprehensive. An 1847 list of types advertised by A. S. Jordan, an American importer of British valentines, boasted:

Comic, Sentimental, Lovesick, Acrostic, Funny, Burlesque, Curious, Characteristic, Humorous, Beautiful, Heart-struck, Witty, Arabesque, Courting, Serio-Comical, Bewitching, Poetical, Heart-rending, Love-encouraging, Trifling, Caricature, Heart-piercing, Serio-tragical, Laughable, Silly, Spiteful, Original, Enlivening, Heart-aching, Despairing, Raving-mad, Heart-killing, High-flown, Lamprooning, Romantic, Look-out, Proposal, Espousal, Matrimonial, Hen-Pecking, Suicidal, and many other varieties (Staff 1969, 83).

This article is principally concerned with the satirical comic valentine cards that are commonly known as mock or mocking valentines, which might be variously described as lampooning, spiteful, heart-killing or suicidal in the above list.

While core work on the history of the British valentine card, including their insulting varieties, has been provided by Staff (1969), more recent critical interpretations of comic valentines, where they exist (Schmidt 1995; Shank 2004), have focused on the American market. While there are some shared similarities and some American cards were British-manufactured, the US market had particular geographical and political specificities (which can be seen in the mocking of ethnicities and of participation in the American Civil War, for example) and significant differences, not least that the comic valentine trade in America did not suffer a decline in the later years of the nineteenth century, as in Britain, but continued vigorously well into the twentieth. This article therefore contrasts British comic valentines, examining their rise and fall, and specifically their discussion and reception in the British press, where they were the cause of great moral anxiety. In relation to the theme of this special issue, this article debates and expands on a passing observation made by Schmidt who suggested that such cards may be read as a symbolic extension of cultures of charivari. Through

contextualisation and close observation of a previously unanalysed body of material, in relation to literature from Bakhtin (1984), Stallybrass and White (1986) and E. P. Thompson (1991), this article explores the potential and limitations of viewing the mock valentine as a space for carnivalesque transgression and as a means of social control.

Comic valentines: History and typology

Insulting, comic valentines have their own history, which varies according to different authors' accounts. In the US context, the archive of Hallmark cards has printed examples dating from 1809 but Ruth Webb Lee states that caricature cards 'prior to 1830 were very rare indeed' (1969, 76). Schmidt (1993, 233) goes further and argues that comic cards were 'a wholly commercial invention'. In Britain, comic valentine writers, which provided model verses to enable valentine senders to compose comic poems for their handmade cards, existed in the 1820s, and some undated examples in archival collections have been ascribed to this decade. Existing accounts and archival evidence indicates that comic valentines were most popular in print in Britain between 1840 and 1880, with particular prevalence during the latter part of the period where they may have made up half or more of all valentines bought and sent, although they represented a much smaller percentage of the financial value due to their cheaper price.

Comic cards came in a broad range of types. Usually featuring a simple woodcut or lithographed caricature image – designed to represent the recipient – above a few lines of letterpress doggerel, they tended not to boast the formal, material complexities of their more sentimental counterparts, and were most commonly produced on a single sheet of cheap paper. Nonetheless, there was still plentiful variety available; Dean and Co. of Threadneedle Street, for example, include 'comic coloured'. 'comic tinted' and 'black comic silhouettes' as separate categories in their list (Birmingham Daily Post, 1872). Rather than construction methods, however, comic cards' distinguishing variety was the broad range of options allowing particular specificity of address. Designed to be sent and received by both women and men, their coverage was broad but their aim was narrow. They could be directed towards particular professions and trades as well as a

comprehensive range of social and aesthetic shortcomings, from jilting lovers and hen-pecked husbands to snobs and flirts, alcoholics and fools.

While comic cards can be used as a convenient catch-all term to distinguish examples from their sentimental cousins, the range of effects that comics might achieve can also be broken down into a variety of purposes. An 1881 American Valentine catalogue by Stirn and Lyon, New York, offers a useful typology. They include seventy-two types of 'Refined Comics', described as 'delicate and intended only for the virtuous – those who have no small vices; refined people who cannot take large doses of satire. They are free from coarseness and vulgarity, but are keen in satire and artistic in execution'. A further category 'Ordinary Comics' totals five hundred, and they are described thus: 'We ought to have called these extraordinary comics, for they hit the mark every time; and if they do not mortally wound [...] they lop off moral excrescences and aid in the mending of a dilapidated character'. The final group of comics are entitled 'Hit-Em-Hard', and comprise 96 types. The catalogue states: 'If a two-year-old colt kicks, it hurts; but when a big ten-year-old mule strikes out, it is no laughing matter. These Hit-Em-Hards are our ten-year-old mules, and they kick straight at the weaknesses of poor humanity' (www.scrapalbum.com). A British article (*Newcastle Weekly Courant* 1891) also highlights four 'classes' of valentine: valentines of innocence, love, fun and malice. In both typologies, it is the latter category that is the focus here.

Comic valentines are much less well known than their sentimental partners, in part because fewer examples exist in public or private collections. There are two main reasons for this. The first is noted by Staff:

As a rule, they were used more by the lower classes, and by a section of society unable to keep souvenirs of this type over the years, unlike the more costly items which were put away and treasured for their sentiment and beauty by the more well-to-do and middle class families (1969, 66).

The second is that the nature of the card and its sentiment meant it was much less likely to be treasured than the expensive, elaborate and sentimental variations. As will be discussed below, for reasons of shame and anger, many cards were likely to have been destroyed by their recipients. That said, there are still substantial collections available for comparison. In the U.S., for example, the

Library Company of Philadelphia features 653 different examples of comic valentines, mostly dating from the 1840s-1860s, acquired as part of the 1886 deposit of more than 50,000 items of ephemera collected by antiquarian John A. McAllister. In Britain, the twenty archival boxes of the John Johnson collection of valentines, held as part of his larger collection of printed ephemera in Oxford's Bodleian Library, includes four devoted to nineteenth century comics, collected by Johnson between the 1930s and 1950s while he was a printer at Oxford University. Other significant collections in Britain include the comics that are part of the 1,700 valentines of the Museum of London, kept as samples produced for sale by the nineteenth century Islington stationer Jonathan King. Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery has a substantial collection of nineteenth century valentines that includes a stationer's album titled 'Comic Vals', dated 1871. All of these collections are tellingly composed of unsent cards, acquired by collectors or kept as sample stock by stationers, rather than used cards retained by their recipients.

The album of valentine's cards held in the Royal Pavilion, Art Galleries and Museum, Brighton and Hove, which is the central focus of this article, appears to share a similar origin (figure 1). Donated anonymously to the museum in 1940 and dated to approximately 1870, the album features numbered samples of cards priced per gross, indicating its function as a wholesaler's catalogue of wares; as such it offers a micro-historical view of the range of styles and sentiments available for sale at a particular historical moment in the south of England. Featuring hundreds of examples of ornate and sentimental valentines, there is also a sizeable selection in the sample book that could fall under the heading of comic or mock valentines. These distinctive examples, the very antithesis of the sentimental and ornate majority appear, notably, at the back of the album. Displayed in stapled pamphlets and in tiered mounts to show the variety available without taking up the space of the earlier, more refined and expensive samples, the album's comics fall into four sets. These include those that are gentle in their mockery (suggesting 'fun comics' or 'refined comics' in the classification systems above) to those that launch a more biting attack (as potential 'Valentines of Malice' or 'Hit-em-Hards').

The first and largest of these sets comprises 20 images, each printed in red and black on white paper with a caricature illustration above a title and a short rhyming verse (figure 2). The stationer's note states that these two sets are available in a total of 44 sorts. The next group comprises a set of

eight caricatures on coloured paper printed in two colours (red and blue), with simple titles beneath (figure 3). A third set of four caricatures has full-colour printed caricatures of their victims – singly or in pairs – arrestingly arranged on a black background above cutting titles (figure 4). A further set of four has a rich range of colours against a black background and features short verses as well as captions (figure 5). Cards such as ‘Love Me, Love My Dog’ gently alert the recipient to her over-enthusiastic affection for her pet, while ‘Love among the Roses’ amusingly represents a still-familiar scenario of covert affection being discovered. Each of these dig-in-the-ribs might raise a wry smile or mild consternation, whereas the more aggressive of the cards – particularly those in the largest, red-printed set – may well ‘kick straight at the weaknesses’ of the poor addressee. From their sarcastic and mocking tone through to their vindictive and cruel messages, to be pilloried as a drunk or a slattern or to be grotesquely figured as a ‘nasty old cat’ or a ‘stupid ass’ could rarely be intended, or received, as affectionate satire (figures 6-8).

The gender of derision

Schmidt has noted that ‘comic valentines provided people with the opportunity to mock [...] those who did not conform to expected gender roles, those who were seen as marginal or different’ (1993, 237). The gendered aspect of mock valentines is certainly intriguing. Historians of greetings cards are agreed that Valentine’s Day is a particularly feminine phenomenon – as with card buying and sending generally – and although there are no firm statistics for the nineteenth century, certainly it is known that in the twentieth century ‘nearly 80% of all greetings cards were bought and sent by women’ (Shank 2004, 6). In the nineteenth century, as historians have observed and the evidence shows, valentine manufacturers defined and addressed women as ‘the chief recipients, senders and keepers’ of the ornate cards (Schmidt 1993, 228). What is not so clear is the gender make-up of the market for vicious valentines. Clearly, judging by the cards themselves, they were made to be received by women and men, and to be sent by both genders. Insulting valentines thus seem to open a space for men to play a part in a feminised ritual while offering women license to misbehave, for even as the insulting cards reinforce social norms they also offer a release from conformity in the act of speaking out (figure 9). Within the Brighton Museum collections both genders are equally lampooned, but it seems from surveying larger collections such as the McAllister, that, as Schmidt has asserted, ‘women were a particular target of attack’ (1993, 228).

This is also an observation made in British press articles. In an article 'Low Comedy in Valentines' (1871), the author notes that 'the satirist' who authors such cards 'accuses the fair sex either of breaches of conjugal fidelity, or of scandal-bearing, or of personal uncleanness'. He continues:

Scandal-bearing is allegorically assailed, the woodcut representing either a snake with a human head, or a female Janus, or a virago with a red tongue of portentous dimensions. As for personal uncleanness, it is portrayed with a minuteness of detail, and with a keen venom of bitterness, which indicates experiences particularly harrowing. Men, however, are less virulently satirised.

It seems the liberating potential of the cards for women was bounded by their capacity to bite back. In both of the collections of red-printed valentines in Brighton Museum, for example, women are depicted as nags and scolds. In remarkably similar postures, the woman who bends to criticise and point in the card entitled 'A Scolding woman's tongue is a scorpion' has much in common with the woman in the sarcastic 'A married man's delights are doubled', although this latter is clearly to be sent to the harassed man as a victim rather than the woman (figures 10 and 11). In the former image the woman appears to hold a whisk as if to keep an animal in line, and the interjection of a comma in the line 'what a life, you'll lead your husband I'm sure' suggests that it is female dominance in particular that is the main cause for approbation. The McAllister collection has several cards that bear very similar motifs and sentiments to the cards in Brighton's collection, albeit from an earlier date. From 'Mrs. Disagreeable' to 'Scolding Wife', unpleasant, sour and poisonous wives are slated (figures 12 and 13). Each woman holds a domestic utensil as a weapon, figuring the wooden spoon / rolling pin / frying pan that is still used in popular comedy as the put-upon woman's blunt instrument of choice. The clenched fists and distorted faces in these cards signal that anger, ugliness and vociferous critical dissent are unacceptable and unfeminine behaviours creating undesirable valentines.

The weakness of men in permitting female dominance was also critiqued. As shown in the image of the married man sat holding the baby by the fireside while his wife, in outdoor clothes, takes the public role, the overly-domesticated man was seen to be emasculated and an easy target. Each of the images in the red-printed museum collection that feature men holding babies are

negative appraisals. Tending to infants is evidently seen by the senders of these cards as an indicator that the fast and easy life of a smart young man is over (figures 14 and 15). In the McAllister collection, much the same tropes are repeated. Two very similar images of fatherhood feature seated men with a baby on their knees, but the derision that frames these illustrations show that the feeding and care of infants by men was not seen as a necessary or even enjoyable part of the relationship between parent and child, but a contemptuous act, which is enough, in one case, to cause the sender of the card to call for the suicide of the wretched male 'wet-nurse'. 'The hen-pecked man' card continues this theme of male weakness, and holds the man complicit in his ill-fortune (figure 16). In all of these cases it is notable that other people's domestic arrangements are the target of public appraisal. These cards were not sent privately between lovers or married partners, as was the tradition for the doting valentine, but by members of the public offended by transgressions of marital propriety. As such, they constitute a community comment on the nature of love and its acceptable limits.

Dressing up and dressing down: Class and its control

Mock valentines frequently made mockeries of the vanity and pride of the over-dressed. Elaborate and impractical crinolines, bustles and bonnets of the day were mocked in a style that suggests continuity with longer traditions of satirical prints which lampoon fashion (Donald, 2002). Examples of comic valentines collected in *The Scrap Album*, for example, ridicule alarmingly over-sized bustles and head-dresses like coal scuttles to great effect, while the McAllister card, 'A slave to fashion's tyrant laws', shows a woman in exaggerated bizarre costume, whose dress 'provokes a pitying smile' (figure 17). The rhyme to accompany the image of a woman decorated with a grossly protuberant butterfly bustle and hair pin in Brighton's valentine album begins 'You are so gorgeously arrayed, A fellow almost seems afraid' (figure 18). This card gives with one hand and takes with the other, suggesting first that the recipient is delightful in appearance but then following with a curt rejection on the grounds of excess. The moral of the card is simply: tone down the gratuitously flamboyant fashion, and you may stand a chance with a suitor. These cards share a similar barb – that no-one will care to marry such a proud and showy person. It is interesting to see how despite the changing shape of the silhouette of women's fashions over time, the sentiment is constant (figures 19 and 20).

Indeed, the stock comic characters and familiar figures of fun suggest that while some variations in style and execution may be made over time, traditions remain. Indeed, the practical production of these valentines, as was observed in the press – while generally ‘executed by a class of artists who do not, as a rule, write R. A. after their names’, utilised print blocks which ‘have seen considerable service, having been in use for more than twenty years’. As the author notes, ‘this only proves the enduring popularity of the comic valentine’ (*The Graphic* 1872); old jokes last for a reason.

The dishonest practice of using dress to imply a social station not possessed is a recurrent feature of the cards, and applies equally to men and women. ‘It isn’t fine feathers that make fine birds’ shows a man attired in top hat, monocle and cane, with high collar, kid gloves and a flower in his frock coat buttonhole (figure 21.) In another example from the Brighton’s album, another top-hatted, high-collared and flowered figure is mocked for his pretensions (figure 22). With a fancy watch chain, gaudy striped trousers and carrying a cane finished in the shape of a bird’s head, the ostentation of the victim is an obvious target for attack:

*You’re as vulgar a cad as I’d wish to meet,
And yet you’re devoured with pride and conceit,
But I fancy before very long you’ll find out ,
That everyone thinks you’re an ignorant lout.*

The equally damning ‘Don’t imagine anyone will take you for a gentleman’ from the small coloured set of comic valentines in the Brighton wholesaler’s album uses flamboyant pattern and excess accessories in clothing (in this case red handkerchief, *pince-nez* and ribbons on shoes) along with body language (the swaggering gait of the confident and privileged) to highlight the disparity between the outward appearance and the inner character of the recipient (figure 23). The proud posture of a cigar-smoking gentleman is performed, but the pitted skin, red nose and ungroomed hair reveal the subject to be assuming a style he was not born into. Shank has observed that much of the impetus for comic valentines’ attacks comes from their context at a time of social and economic restructuring. As he puts it:

The disruptions of uncertain class status drove the popularity of comic valentines, producing a taste for the particular pleasures that one could derive from mocking the

ambitions, desires, and tastes of others competing for a meaningful place in an anxious world. (Shank, 2004, 43)

Just as the cards can be read for the subtle and not-so-subtle codes of practice in sexual relationships, as Shank has put it, 'they demand to be read as contemporary statements about social conflict' (2004: 42).

A cheap insult

While the sentimental valentines had originally entered mass production in the early decades of the nineteenth century as lithographed single sheets of paper that would be folded upon themselves and sealed rather than placed in an envelope, the development of lace paper manufacture meant that the embellished commercial valentines were able to imitate, and ultimately overtake, the lacy cut-work styles of existing, and long-standing, handmade valentines. The sentimental mass-produced designs became increasingly elaborate, layered and decorative, creating a wider distinction between the cheap comics and their refined cousins. The designs of comic valentines remained as a single printed sheet, sometimes very poorly executed, making them very cheap to produce and to buy. News reports during the nineteenth century price them variously at a halfpenny or a penny; one even notes that they retail at four for a penny (*The Newcastle Weekly Courant* 1857). The discrepancy in prices is evidenced by the Brighton museum sample book, where the red and black printed insulting valentines, for example, wholesale for six shillings per 144, whereas a fancy design with embossed and filigree paper sells for 42 shillings for the same quantity, or even for large and delicately coloured examples, 8 shillings a dozen. The material from which valentines were constructed can be read metaphorically for the emotional relationships they expressed.

As well as being cheap to produce and buy, the vulgar valentines were extremely cheap to send. In the days before postal prepayment, letters were paid for on delivery, and the paying recipient of such a valentine could have insult added to injury by having to pay for the privilege of being abused (Staff 1969, 43-44) As a first-hand example of how such valentines might be received and disposed of, Flora Thompson, in her thinly-fictionalised memoir of the late nineteenth century, recalls receiving a particularly vicious example. Featuring a crudely drawn printed caricature of a

postmistress (intended to reflect her occupation), the valentine included a cruel verse and personalised insulting inscription commenting on her perceived ugliness. Thompson notes, of her fictionalised autobiographical heroine:

Laura once took one out of the posting box addressed to herself, with the picture of a hideous female handing out penny stamps and some printed doggerel which began:

*You think yourself so la-di-da,
And get yourself up so grand*

and went on to advise her always to wear a thick veil when she went out, or her face would frighten the cows. Underneath the verse was scrawled in pencil: 'Wat you reely wants is a mask'. She thrust it in the fire and told nobody, but for some time all pleasure in her own appearance was spoiled, and the knowledge that she had an enemy rankled. (1977, 486-487)

Thompson also notes, writing about the late nineteenth century (long after the 1840 introduction of penny postage), that 'crude coloured prints on flimsy paper representing hideous forms and faces [...] with words, always insulting and often obscene, calculated to wound [...] passed through the village post offices in surprising numbers'. These, she says, were 'usually unstamped' (Thompson 1977, 486).

Manufacturing Cupid's revenge

Several of the historians who have considered the mock valentine suggest that its origins lie in the increasing vulgarity of the marketing of Valentine's Day, and imply, or directly state, that their existence is a by-product of the growing commodification of love. Shank states that 'Comic valentines had been a part of the valentine craze from the earliest years of its commercialisation' (2004, 32) and Schmidt argues that merchants promoted the use of paper caricatures to expand the commercial reach of the holiday to encompass 'annoying neighbours, exacting bosses, harsh schoolmasters, unattractive suitors and domineering wives' (1995, 71). Certainly the increasing specificity of the cards' address does suggest a broadening of card-giving opportunities, just as today's further

atomised market has greetings card shops catering for the ever more particular (Mooney and Brabant 1998).

However, the relationship between the traditional handmade valentine and the innovation of the mass-produced card is, as with much industrialisation of pre-existing craft manufacture, not a straightforward evolutionary trajectory where the one eradicates the other. In Brighton Museum, for example, a carefully handmade insulting valentine, dated 1830, antagonises the suggestion that cruel valentines were an invention and preserve of cheap manufacturing alone (figure 24). On a sheet of delicate paper that is envelope and card in one, a hand painted and inscribed message reads:

Indeed you are a little prig,
For whom I do not care one fig.

The delicate style of lettering and the circlet of forget-me-not flowers are unexpectedly tender, and act as a disarming foil to the bitterness of the message. Intriguingly sent on St. Valentine's Eve to a Miss C. Woodhouse in Coventry from an anonymous sender of unknown gender in Birmingham, this rather modest insult seems calculated to prick the conceit of the recipient, who would no doubt be anticipating an admiring valentine within the folded page. The museum's hand-made insulting card suggests then, that the desire to use Valentine's Day as an opportunity for anonymous post of a different sort predated the commercialisation of illustrated insulting missives, and was indicative perhaps of a pre-existing impulse for vengeance and attack that the market recognised and built upon rather than wholly invented.

If it seems technologically deterministic to suggest that cheap printing methods instituted emotional behaviour, it is certainly simplistic to blame such cards (and commerce generally) for the moral dereliction that they seem to represent. In assessing the emerging print and image culture that arose with nineteenth century advances in mechanisation and industrialisation of print technology, Patricia Anderson observes that 'the onset of a mass culture by no means signalled the passive acculturation of the people'. She argues that the appeal of new pictorial printed forms 'derived as much from the readers' long-held social, moral and aesthetic values as it did from the efforts and ideologies of publishers, editors, writers and artists'. She argues that:

From the early 1830s to 1860 the everyday experience of the people increasingly took in a diversity of cultural levels ranging from the traditional to radical, aesthetic to lurid. Thus the emergence of a formative mass culture – at least its visual forms – was not a process of wholesale repression or replacement. (Anderson 1991, 4)

Rather than the cards creating the feeling, it seems more likely that insulting valentines were part of a much longer tradition of social and moral policing of behaviour within one's close community. While Schmidt describes the sending of cruel valentines as 'rituals of insult that mirrored in modern guise long standing communal forms of mockery' (1993, 237) he draws attention, in passing, to pre-industrial customs of rough music and charivari. He concedes that the practices of sending insulting valentines and pre-existing popular justice did not have a direct lineage, stating:

Little foundation existed in the folk traditions of St. Valentine's Day for turning the holiday into a charivari, but that is where the market took it as merchants appropriated carnivalesque images of inversion, lewdness and insult, effectively commodifying pranksterism and practical joking. (1993, 233)

Nonetheless, in his notes he observes that there are examples in eighteenth century France 'that link St. Valentine's Day to charivaris mocking adulterers and to bonfires in which unfaithful valentines were burned in effigy' (1993, 233). Schmidt says that he has not been able to find rituals like this for the holiday in Britain and uses this lack of direct evidence as a signal that the insulting valentine habits were commercial constructions. In emerging industrial practices, however, it is difficult to deduce whether demand was catered for or created by the supply of new forms of goods. With such a controversial object as the mock valentine, embedded as it is in complex discourses of love and commerce, civility and transgression, tradition and novelty, it is worth examining whether the existence of such items can be accounted for by mercantile innovation alone.

A stab in the dark: Anonymous insults and rough justice

The charivari to which Schmidt refers is a French folk custom of 'mock serenading' for newlyweds, with origins in the Middle Ages but still in practice until at least the eighteenth century. Its closest British equivalent, described and analysed by E. P. Thompson, was known since the end of the

seventeenth century as rough music. As he puts it, this term denotes 'a rude cacophony, with or without more elaborate ritual, which usually directed mockery or hostility against individuals who offended certain community norms' (1991, 467). People of the local community, sometimes wearing disguise or masks, would gather to mock-celebrate a marriage, for example, usually one they regarded as questionable. They would gather outside the newly-weds' window and bang metal implements or other items to create noise to keep the couple awake all night. Other related customs included mounting their victims backwards on a horse or burning effigies of the offending parties. Charivari was sometimes used as a form of social coercion to force an as-yet-unmarried couple to wed, and it could be used as a form of protest against socially disapproved marriages, or transgressive marital roles, such as wife-beating.

The impulses behind these fascinating customs seem contiguous with the vicious valentine and certainly have much in common in its coercive and dissenting attitude, not least as their attentions were so frequently directed towards the social control of sexual behaviour within the community. The significance of scrutinising popular opinion on these matters, whether expressed through mob action or anonymous letter, must be that such incidences are, as E. P. Thompson puts it, 'a most sensitive indicator of changing notations of sexual norms or marital roles' (1991, 8). Thompson observes that the popular cultural forms of retribution and mockery may be used as 'tools to prize open the secrets of a community's moral codes' (1991, 510) and to provide 'evidence [...] of the ways in which even the most private or "personal" relationship is conditioned by norms and roles imposed by the society in which the couple acts, quarrels or loves. The society is the host, but the couples are hostages to opinion'. The enduring qualities of such activities, long after their decline as popular forms, were acknowledged in the British satirical press, where *Punch's* subtitle, after its French counterpart, was 'The London Charivari'.

The community aspect of sexual policing is particularly interesting for, while there is some similarity between the rough music rituals and the later sending of cruel letters, there are also marked differences. One of the key distinctions between the practices is the individual action of one and the group ridicule of the other. A bridge can be built with the long-standing custom of sending valentine's cards (both sentimental and satirical) anonymously. This tradition endured in the nineteenth century and was regularly noted in the press discussion of such cards. In an 1877 article

from *The Graphic* for example, it is noted that the majority of what passes under name of valentine includes 'coarsely scurrilous and cowardly weapons to be used anonymously, and are designed for no other purpose than to inflict pain and annoyance'. In another article, insulting valentines are described as 'a sting from a cowardly wasp that hides himself or herself while discharging the little venom dart' (*Newcastle Weekly Courant* 1891). The act of concealing and revealing could become part of the teasing and flirtatious play that the sentimental valentines supported with their imagery of love knots and their acrostic, encoded language. In sending an insulting valentine anonymously, peek-a-boo is not the aim, but rather concealing the malicious party. The invention of the postal system further enabled the guessing games of Valentine's Day to take on a new and sinister edge. The anonymity of a valentine's card could be charming and flirtatious yet also, with altered content, remarkably close to a poison pen letter.

In addition, in the sending of a letter that *nobody* has signed, there is an implicit suggestion that if *anyone* could have sent it, *everyone* could equally have done so. Anonymity expresses itself on behalf of all. Thompson has detailed how forms of rough music were sometimes 'ritualised to the point of anonymity or impersonality: occasionally performers are masked or disguised: more often they come at night' (1991, 487). As he observes, however, 'this does not mitigate in any way the disgrace: indeed it announces disgrace, not as a contingent quarrel with neighbours, but as judgement of the community'. Certainly the address of the doggerel of the red-printed mock valentines echoes this sentiment. Rather than simply one-to-one communication, the cards deploy the tactics of hiding the sender behind majority opinion. Cards state, with amplified cruelty: 'Everyone says...', 'People say...', 'They call you...', and one in particular is entitled, beneath a grotesque caricature, 'To see ourselves as others see us'. When the ten-year-old mule of the vicious valentine kicks hard, it does not kick alone. The whole pack joins in.

Parody, inversion, low comedy and dirty humour

St. Valentine's Day's earliest incarnation as a religious celebration of a saint's day seems a long way from Victorian rituals of insult. It is perhaps most productive to view the nineteenth century practice of sending rude letters not as a commercially-precipitated disjuncture in a festival with pure and

sacred provenance, but to understand it instead in the context of the long-standing traditions of carnival. Literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) has written, influentially, on what he describes as ‘the carnivalesque’; the potent, populist, critical impulse that existed in what Peter Stallybrass and Allon White call the ‘feasting, violence, drinking, processions, fairs, wakes, rowdy spectacle and outrageous clamour’ (1986, 176) of the Middle Ages that is his period of study. In Bakhtin’s view, the carnivalesque continues to exist – as, in fact, an indestructible force – even if the opportunities for its expression have been progressively legislated against since the seventeenth century. In this conceptualisation, carnival is more than the literal events with which we might immediately associate it. As Stallybrass and White state in *The Poetics and Politics of Transgression*, “On the one hand carnival was a specific calendrical ritual [...] On the other hand carnival also refers to a mobile set of symbolic practices, images and discourses which were employed throughout social revolts and conflicts before the nineteenth century’ (1986, 15). Both charivari and mock valentines, despite differences in time and in form, thus fall under the same designation.

Bakhtin’s larger project is to examine the peculiar quality of what he calls ‘folk carnival humour’ (1984, 4). More than fairs and market places, then, this much wider sense of carnival embraced ‘comic verbal compositions (oral and written) such as parodies, travesties and vulgar farce; and it included [...] curses, oaths, slang, humour, popular tricks and jokes, scatological forms, in fact, all the “low” and “dirty” sorts of folk humour’ (Stallybrass and White 1986, 8). As well as the popular language of the carnival having a strong connection with the language of the mock valentine, the popular imagery associated with carnival shares a similar typology. Bakhtin describes ‘that peculiar aesthetic concept which is characteristic of this folk culture’ (1984, 18) and calls it grotesque realism. Consisting of ‘ugly, monstrous, hideous’ exaggerated and degraded bodily forms, grotesques frequently feature ‘animal traits, bodily defects, foolishness, gluttony, defecation’ (Bakhtin 1984, 25, 430). While the bestial association clearly encompasses cat and ass characterisations seen in mock valentines, and the excessive could be said to include the character of the drunk and over-dressed depicted in the cards, none of the insults or imagery in the collection quite extend to include defecation. Bakhtin, however, notes that the throwing of excrement was a ritual part of the archaic feast of fools, and that this impulse translates into the modern term ‘mudslinging’ (1984, 18). Mock valentines certainly did this.

Carnival, in all of its manifestations, has been described as an 'unofficial culture', that is, 'an imaginary repertoire of festive and comic elements which stood against the serious and oppressive languages of the official culture' (Stallybrass and White 1986, 10). Traditional feast days, from Saturnalia to Mardi Gras are founded on an inversion of the usual rules. In *The Reversible World* (1977), Barbara Babcock describes it thus:

Symbolic inversion may be broadly defined as any act of expressive behaviour which inverts, contradicts, abrogates, or in some fashion presents an alternative to commonly held cultural codes, values and norms, be they linguistic, literary or artistic, religious, social and political.

When the world is turned upside down during such festivities, all is inverted. Bakhtin states that 'carnival celebrates temporary liberation from the prevailing truth of the established order; it marks the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions (1984: 18). Parody of, and opposition to, the normal state of affairs is part of the nature of carnival, and the mock valentines play their part in this by inverting and opposing all that the sentimental celebration of Valentine's Day represents. Whereas the sentimental card offers flattery, the comic card offers insult. Where the sentimental, lacy and delicate valentine is expensive, refined and vulnerable, the mock version is cheap, crude and bombastic. As Natalie Zemon-Davies has put it, 'Misrule always implies the Rule that it parodies' (1975, 100).

Taming the mudslinging impulse

If this festive character of carnival was indeed indestructible and was to survive what Stallybrass and White describe as 'literally thousands of acts of legislation' (1986, 176) introduced to eliminate popular festivity from European life, the carnivalesque would need to assume a different form. As Bakhtin states, in order to continue 'it had to be tolerated and even legalised outside the official sphere and had to be turned over to the popular sphere of the marketplace' (1984, 9). Commercialisation thus can be understood as a form of containment of carnival, rather than a source of its creation, as some writers on the mock valentine have suggested. Even the mob practices of the rough music rituals that Thompson describes are in some way channelled and controlled by the

custom that contains them, leading a 'displacement of violence' rather than violence itself. The rituals give socially unacceptable feelings a representation, and become a way of acting out, not upon the person of the victim, but in symbolic form' (Thompson 1991, 486).

Stallybrass and White have also observed that just when, within bourgeois culture, 'the realm of Folly was being [...] repudiated as a part of its own identity and disdained as a set of real life practices and rituals, so it seemed to become more and more important as a set of representations' (1986, 103). Mock valentines were not the only manifestation of grotesque bodies in this period: the graphic satire of Hogarth along with the caricatures of Thomas Rowlandson and George Cruikshank are obvious precursors and accomplished contemporaries of the illustrations on the crude, inverted valentine (Malbert and Jones 2000). Visual and textual representations were perhaps some of the few acceptable ways that carnival culture could circulate in restricted times. Arguably the repression of rude behaviour enabled new channels of expression to form using the technological means available, resulting in a dispersal rather than disappearance of the carnivalesque the nineteenth century.

Just as mocking valentines could operate as a form of community social policing, so too were mock valentines policed. Numerous press articles bemoaned that the police did not do more to tame their spread and content. As one put it, 'Is amatory poetry beyond the scope of Lord Campbell's [Obscene Publications] Act, or is St. Valentine's Day an English Saturnalia upon which no license is too great[?]' ('Low Comedy in Valentines', 1871) Similarly, it was argued in the *Nottingham Guardian*: 'The coloured daubs in hundreds of [stationer's] windows are often so atrocious and abominable that if the police did their duty they would instantly be condemned, and the hucksters who trade in them, by any magistrate who can read an act of Parliament' (*Nottingham Guardian* 1865). *The Graphic* (1877) pleaded: 'For the sake of St. Valentine the just and gentle, in whose names these abominations are perpetuated, cannot something be done at least to bring within decent bounds this peculiar branch of the "fancy" stationery trade [?]' *The Pall Mall Gazette* (1895) in an article entitled 'The Mock Valentine Annoyance', reported that two 'prepossessing looking girls' applied for 'summonses against the senders of uncomplimentary valentines', but notes 'the bench refused amid laughter'. The Post Office took a role in maintaining standards, nonetheless. In *The Graphic* (1880), an article about valentines stated: 'it is a rule of the Post Office to arrest the transit of all openly

offensive matter it receives for transmission, so that the delivery of such articles never takes place'. Another report attested, 'Attempts are every year made to transmit through the Post Office articles disgusting or loathsome, but when discovered, such communications are suppressed by the authorities' ('St. Valentine's Day in Liverpool', 1875). The police did intervene in the sale of valentines deemed too obscene for public consumption by arresting offending stationers. As noted in an article in the *Birmingham Daily Post* (1863), the valentines were described as 'indecent and disgusting', and the police expressed surprise that 'any person, calling himself or herself respectable, should expose such filthy pictures in their shop windows'. The magistrates concluded that such 'prints were really disgusting exhibitions, and it was very improper to expose them to public gaze'.

Carnavalesque on the page: New forms, old feelings

The rise of popular print culture and literacy in the 1800s was an unprecedented novelty, and it has been argued that its particular hallmark 'was its astonishingly pictorial character' (Anderson 1991, 2).

Patricia Anderson notes:

Rapid though it was, the expansion of popular culture and pictorial experience between 1832 and 1860 was not only a matter of change – of the new emerging and the old disappearing. Rather, side by side with all the artefacts of a transformed popular culture, [which could include printed valentines, street literature as well as mass-circulation magazines], there remained pictorial survivals with their origins in an earlier popular cultural experience. (1991, 175)

What she argues is that 'the transformation of popular culture did not come about through the repression or wholesale displacement of older cultural forms and experiences. The dynamic was more complex than that, involving continuity as well as change' (Anderson 1991, 175). The contemporary press complained that the practice of sending insulting valentines was symptomatic of the moral decline of the modern age. St Valentine's Day in the nineteenth century – 'the sober, intellectual, satirical nineteenth century' – was seen to have caused the problem: 'In our onward march of civilisation we have trampled the maypole under our feet, dethroned the pretty queen, and turned cupid out of doors' (*Bristol Mercury* 1864). However, it is more likely that mock valentines

were not the product of machines or modernity, but followed the pattern of earlier traditions. E. P. Thompson made a similar observation to Anderson regarding early printed literature. He states:

Where oral tradition is supplemented by growing literacy, the most widely circulated printed products such as chapbooks, almanacs, broadsides, 'last dying speeches' and anecdotal accounts of crime, tend to be subdued to the expectations of the oral culture rather than challenging it with alternatives. (1991, 8)

To claim that the insulting valentine was new was to disown it, rather than to recognise it as symptomatic of an ever-present impulse for mockery and misrule. Literacy, like the development of print culture, must build upon what already exists.

Laughter as a weapon

The crude appropriation of Valentine's Day for revenge and insult is enabled by its ceremonial date, but again, is not created by it. Like the permissive traditions of All Hallow's Eve or Leap Year, Valentine's Day provides a ceremonial conduit for the return of the repressed. Zemon-Davis has called carnival a 'licence to deride' (1975, 177) and Stallybrass and White (1986: 8) have observed that 'The "coarse" and familiar speech of the fair and the marketplace provided a complex vital repertoire of speech patterns excluded from official discourse which could be used for parody, subversive humour and inversion' (1968, 8). Zemon-Davis has shown the political implications of carnival and popular justice for the disenfranchised and 'so-called inarticulate' (1975, 122). Carnival laughter, however, is 'profoundly ambivalent' (Stallybrass and White 1986, 8). Praising and abusing in equal measure and toppling the privileged from their pedestals, it has been described as liberating and as a weapon of the people against those who hold power (Bakhtin 1984, 94). The problem with this apparently dissident and emancipatory practice is that, as E. P. Thompson has observed and the mock valentines evidence, 'carnival often violently abuses and demonises *weaker* not stronger social groups – women, ethnic and religious minorities, those who "don't belong"' (1991, 19). Rather than a heroic means of accessing truth, in this framing laughter becomes a form of bullying, of covert attack (not least when anonymous). Charivaris have been described as 'a scapegoating carnivalesque ritual'

(Stallybrass and White 1986, 24) and it seems as likely that they are as closely related to mob rule as they are to righteous uprisings.

While the transgressive space of a carnival or calendar holiday may provide the powerless and oppressed with a brief moment to stake their claim and be heard, with the mock valentines the contempt for moral weaknesses such as hypocrisy and vanity stands alongside contempt for those born without status or favourable physical characteristics. The elderly, the ugly and those of lowly social standing are equally pilloried by mock valentines, and this was critiqued extensively in the press of the time. The *Newcastle Courant* (1877), for example, noted: 'it is the pompous, the vain and conceited, the pretentious and ostentatious who are generally selected as butts for valentine wit' but 'neither high nor low, rich nor poor' are spared in this 'mad carnival revel'. *The Graphic* (1877) was even more detailed about the mock valentine's targets:

Mainly they are directed against ladies whose husbands have been but recently laid in the grave, and against elderly persons of either sex who from some unknown cause have never enjoyed the advantages of wedlock. But the brutal caricaturist who trades under cover of the cloak of St. Valentine does not find sufficient scope for his barbarous ingenuity in these subjects; he likewise regards physical deformity and affliction as fair game. [...] Once a year, during the whole month of February, indeed, ample facilities are offered to the ignorant and brutal-minded to insult and abuse with impunity all such unfortunate persons. [...] It is his business to run amuck amongst venerable spinsters, grey-haired and crippled perhaps with the increasing infirmities of honourable old age, and to place them at the mercy of any evil disposed person who has a mind for the pretty pastime of inflicting pain on the weak and senseless.

Sentimental valentines extended only to the beautiful and loveable, suggesting that anyone without these attributes, whether by accident or design, may bear the brunt of the reverse valentine. The opportunity to tear strips off others was not always used justly, and their anonymous direction added cowardliness to the cruelty. In an example from the Brighton collection, the rolled up sleeves, apron and cap of the recipient emphasise her humble working position, underlined by the background of wash tub, steam, hearth and a kitchen cat; her plain features are signalled by an upturned nose (figure 25). The message is clear: the card is only sent 'for a lark', or more precisely, to wound. In a

comparative example from the McAllister collection with an earlier provenance, a 'Scrubbing Judy', sweaty and dishevelled as a result of her washing, is mocked: 'Oh you beauty!' (figure 26) Who would want such a working woman?

Savage passions: Love's ruin?

Condemned by the press, comic valentines were described in tones of moral outrage and variously labelled as 'filthy', 'hideous', 'grotesque', 'repulsive' and 'detestable'. Such cards were blamed for a number of ills and moral deprivations, including, most commonly, for taking over and ruining the feast day. High-flown and idealised notions of spiritual love may have once been dominant in printed valentines but twisted and burlesque versions outstripped the form they inverted as the century progressed. Extraordinary figures from *Hampshire Telegraph and Sussex Chronicle* (1887), in an article entitled 'Poetry by the Yard: Inside the Valentine Factory', included 2000 different comic designs in production figures of some 15,000,000, with sentimental versions only numbering 5 million.

There were strong and nostalgic feelings expressed that things should be different, and had once been. As *Hampshire Advertiser* (1862) put it: 'a valentine might generally be defined to be an offensive and vulgar piece of insolent familiarity addressed to young milliners and maid-servants. This is not as it should be, and certainly not as it always was'. Central to this criticism was that the degradation of the festival had been brought by those of low social standing and taste, from producers to consumers. The article continues: 'The world is changing and hardening. Valentines are only bandied to and fro in these latter years by the knight and the dames of the till and of the counter. There are no Queens of the May – we observe with similar regret – to be found anywhere except among chimney-sweeps'. The notion that coarse valentines belonged to coarse commoners is found time and again in the contemporary press. An article in *Nottingham Guardian* (1865) states it plainly: 'It is scandalous that a graceful and fantastic and wholly innocent folly, scattering among friends many quiet tokens of affection, should be taken advantage of by a class of miscreants who would trade in actual poisons if they dared, and, as they dare not, traffic in this detestable rubbish'. There are, however, some interesting instances of cross-class exchange that test out this alliance of rude valentines to rude folk. An article in the *Dundee Courier and Daily Argus* (1862), for example,

reports a case where a gentleman had received a valentine. Thinking 'it is intended for one of the servants', he was horrified to discover that the 'odious, insulting, gross, impertinent, vilifying, libellous, and mendacious concoction' was for him.

An article entitled 'St. Valentine's Wicked Brother' in *The Graphic* (1877) makes the link between the cards and class even more explicit, noting: 'Anyone who did not know better might suppose from these evidences that the gentle passion was quite unknown among poor people'. The author extends the connection by characterising the saint in the model of the senders and recipients of his cards:

Can it be that 'Sweet St. Valentine' is [...] a vampire of a sort? Is it possible that after he has passed a pleasant day, arranging and preparing for the glorious fourteenth at the various West End temples devoted to his worship, he slinks away, come night time, to the eastward of Temple Bar, and having cast off his chaste robe, attires himself in the most vulgar kind of fustian, and covers his hoary head with a cap of costermongerish cut and tucks a donkey-whip under his arm and revels for a spell in pastimes fit only for a rough and a rowdy?

The demise of valentine's cards was predicted even from the mid-nineteenth century. In an article entitled 'St. Valentine's Day in the Future' (1857), it was bemoaned: 'Saint Valentine has entered upon the broad path that leads to destruction. Like many another bold saint of bygone days, he has become, first popular, then common, then a trifle disreputable, and finally, perhaps, defunct'. That the valentine became vulgarised seems to be unanimously observed. As Vincent (1989: 25) notes, however, what is not clear is whether this debasement was a symptom or a cause of its fall from grace. For some, commerciality was its killer: as the above article put it, 'cheap stationery and rapid printing has almost ensured his ultimate destruction'. Another frequently-given interrelated reason was its adoption by all classes of the population, and its consequent expression of 'low comedy' (*Liverpool Mercury* 1871). In the later years of the nineteenth century the decline of the fashion for sending cards was as precipitous as its rise, and there are frequent articles in the British press with titles such as 'The Decay of the Valentine', 'The Valentine has fallen upon evil days' and 'Lost St. Valentine'.

The fact that fewer valentines were sent towards the end of the century was ascribed by some to 'the improved education of the people, through the medium of the School Board and otherwise' (*The Graphic* 1880). Others, noting the 'marked decrease in those ugly vehicles for veiled satire' suggested 'the world grows better and kindlier'. The same author attributes the shift to 'the advance of art' in shifting the focus to 'love and friendship, sylvan scenes, purling brooks, shepherds tootle-tooting on lutes, and images of fair women and brave men' (*North Wales Chronicle* 1877). Many noted that the cards would not be missed. As one author put it: 'We shall not be sorry to have seen the last valentine. Indeed, valentines have become as great a nuisance as burlesques or even comic songs, and – which is saying a great deal – fully as indecent'. The author continues: 'Certain rustic modes of courtship more vigorous than artistic have long since been driven back by the tide of common opinion to such obscure corners of the Principality. It is to be hoped that the custom of sending valentines has similarly seen its best days' (*Liverpool Mercury* 1871). An article in the *Sheffield and Rotherham Independent* (1866) echoed this point: 'I hope before long they will take their proper place with other relics of an uncultured age'.

Death and resurrection

For all the debate about the death of the insulting valentine, the evidence of examples in the Brighton museum collection and elsewhere show that the practice of using Valentine's Day as a means of exercising collective, anonymous social control was, as Bakhtin would put it, indestructible. While it fell from favour by the end of the nineteenth century, it can be seen again in the twentieth century forms of the comic picture postcard, especially in its seaside variation, where similar sentiments and stock comic figures reappear. In Brighton museum's collection, undated cards from the mid-twentieth century, showing similarities in drawing style with Donald McGill and other contemporary seaside postcard illustrators, show the longevity of the impulse to attack and to deflate on Valentine's Day. Despite the intervening years, the crimes depicted are the same – showiness, snobbery and unseemly social climbing.

In an example entitled 'Telling you on Valentine's Day' (figure 27), the verse reads:

It's really very funny the way you swank around.

As if you're the country squire and the rest of us worms in the ground.

Why don't you get some sense?

Don't be such an ass.

It's manners and brains that maketh man.

Not – **having a bit o' brass!**

The visual codes in the picture follow those of a century before – showy fabric patterns, attention-seeking accessories, disdainful posture, affected smoking style and jaunty hat. Cards that show working class women dressing beyond their station echo sentiments in the Victorian collection. The card entitled 'A Valentine's Message' (figure 28) carries the verse:

Swanking around in your finery

Strolling out on a Sunday,

Swank on my lass, We know you'll have the wash to do on Monday!

Its aim is to cruelly puncture the weekend fantasies of a woman whose life no doubt marked by drudgery rather glamour for the remaining days of the week. The sender of this valentine is again disguised behind the multiple 'we'.

Perhaps like the rituals of the mummer's plays so associated with folk carnivalesque, we might say that the valentine appeared to be dead only to be seasonally resurrected. To extend the metaphor further, the strong associations between *eros* and *thanatos* were written into the cards themselves as well as their effects. This was nowhere more evident than in the reports of violence in connection with the sending and receiving of mocking valentines. Throughout the late nineteenth century there are reports of fighting and physical assaults precipitated by the 'scurrilous lampoons' (*Dundee Courier and Argus* 1877). In one of the most serious of cases, boxes were delivered by post to several houses in Edinburgh on 14 February. As the press report noted, 'Thinking them to be mock valentines, the recipients open them only to find they contain gunpowder. The results include burnt skin and property, blown off windows and doors, and in one case a recipient looked likely to lose the sight in one eye' (*Aberdeen Weekly Journal* 1882). In another case, a William Chance was charged in Birmingham with attempting to murder his wife after receiving an insulting card. As the *Pall Mall Gazette* (1885) noted: 'The pair lived apart, and on St. Valentine's Day she sent him an offensive

valentine. In his anger he purchased a revolver, and meeting his wife last night shot her in the neck. The woman lies in the hospital in a critical condition’.

The consequences of these supposedly amusing cards could be deadly serious. Chance’s reaction may be an extreme one, but given the ferocity of some of the valentines’ attacks, it is not hard to understand. A breathtakingly brutal insulting valentine can be found in Robert Opie’s collections (1999), titled ‘A Suggestive View (Designed especially for you)’. The image depicts an oncoming train and a warning sign: ‘NOTICE: Persons attempting to cross the line render themselves liable to severe punishment’. Underneath the drawing runs the verse:

*Oh miserable lonely wretch!
Despised by all who know you;
Haste, haste, your days to end – this sketch
The quickest way will show you!*

Conclusion

Death threat, letter bomb, hate mail, suicide note and anonymous poison-pen letter – mock valentines could be all of the above. To gently chide, to kick in the teeth, to push from a cliff – insulting valentines could fit every occasion and police every social ill. The growth of literacy and the penny post had been perceived in the nineteenth century as forces for the edification of the nation (Vincent 1989). The sending of letters could be perceived as a cultured, refined and sophisticated act but, considering the growth of dark-hearted cards, it could equally be appraised as debased, corrupt and monstrous. Addressing a historian of the future, the author of an article in *The Newcastle Weekly Courant* (1857) declared:

The observer of nineteenth-century customs (quite as interesting and curious as those of past ages, which antiquaries trouble themselves so much about) will notice that the stationers’ shop windows are full, not of pretty love-tokens, but of vile, ugly, misshapen caricatures of men and women, designed for the special benefit of those who by some chance render themselves unpopular in the humbler circles of life.

For all their apparent novelty in the nineteenth century, however, their mocking purpose was ultimately nothing new.

Print historian Brian Maidment has argued that popular, vernacular and commonplace images, which may derive, as he describes it, 'from crudely held graphic conventions and social stereotypes' can nonetheless offer 'a better understanding of widely held cultural assumptions and values' than those offered by the more aesthetically sophisticated, apparently complex messages of better known graphic artists (2001, 7). Additionally, Maidment notes that prints 'are essentially ideological formations which, whether consciously or unconsciously, are shaped by the cultural values and social aspirations of both maker and audience' (2001, 11). Especially in relation to prints that are 'critical in inspiration and satiric in method', Marcus Wood has noted that such works 'were the primary visual means by which Western society commented upon itself' (1989, 13). As a form of popular commentary on a range of social concerns – from gender roles and marital relations to alcoholism and class mobility – mocking valentines may be read as revelatory of popular ideologies of social acceptability, both inside and outside romantic relationships.

Notes on contributor

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Fig. 1
Sample spread from stationery wholesaler's book of wares.
Source: Royal Pavilion and Museums, Brighton & Hove



Fig. 2

The first and largest of comic valentine sets comprises 20 chromolithographed images, each printed in red and black on white paper with a caricature illustration above a title and a short rhyming verse.

*Here's a pretty cool reception,
At lease you'll say there's no deception,
It says as plain as it can say,
Old fellow you'd best stop away.*

Source: Royal Pavilion and Museums, Brighton & Hove



Fig. 3
From a set of eight caricatures on coloured paper printed in two colours
with captions beneath.
"Wait a Little :onger."

Source: Royal Pavilion and Museums, Brighton & Hove



Fig. 4
Full-colour printed caricatures
arrestingly arranged on a black background above cutting titles.
"Love Me, Love My Dog."
Source: Royal Pavilion and Museums, Brighton & Hove



Fig. 5

Set of comic valentines with a rich range of colours against a black background featuring short verses as well as captions.

*Love Among the Roses:
After dinner 'pa repose,
Then 'tis sweet among the roses.
To meet your lover, but suppose
'Pa wakens up. Ah! Then who knows.*

Source: Royal Pavilion and Museums, Brighton & Hove

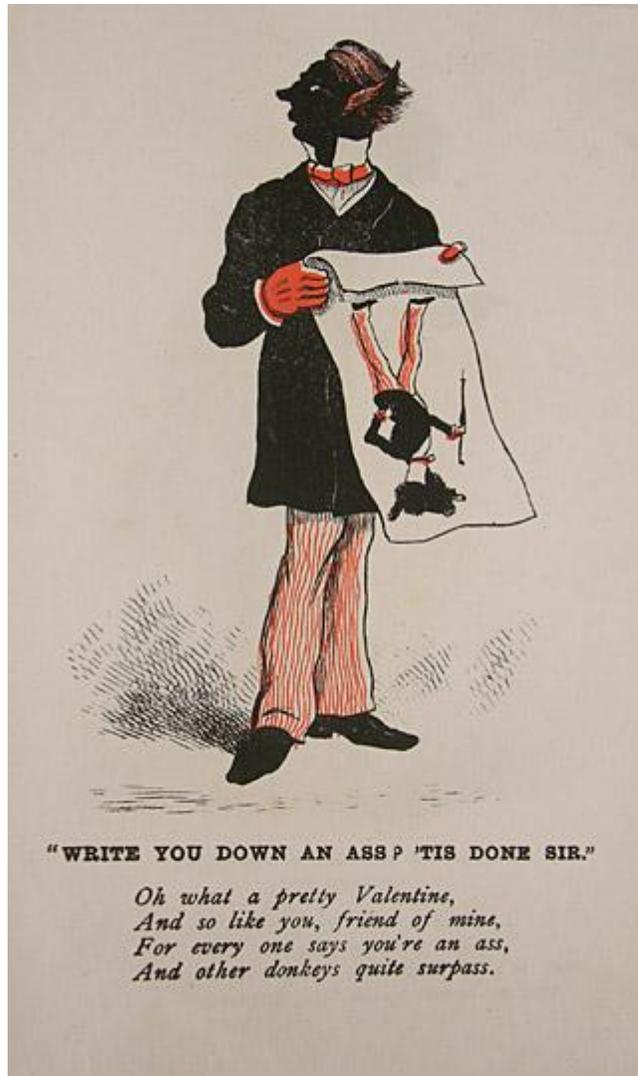


Fig. 6

Write you Down an Ass? 'Tis Done Sir.

*Oh what a pretty Valentine,
And so like you, friend of min.
For every one says you're an ass,
And other donkeys quite surpass.*

Source: Royal Pavilion and Museums, Brighton & Hove



Fig. 7

*Why do they call you a nasty old cat,
And say many things a deal ruder than that,
'Tis from envy perhaps of your manifold graces,
How would it not please you to claw well their faces.*

Source: Royal Pavilion and Museums, Brighton & Hove



Fig. 8

*The kiss of the bottle is your heart's delight,
And fuddled you reel home to bed every night,
What care you for damsels, no matter how fair?
Apart from your liquor, you've no love to spare.*

Source: Royal Pavilion and Museums, Brighton & Hove



1 and 2. Unwelcome Valentine.

3. "I wonder who sent it!"

VOTARIES OF ST. VALENTINE.

Fig. 9

"Votaries of Saint Valentine" *The Penny Illustrated Paper and Illustrated Times* (London, England), February 10, 1883. (c) The British Library Board



Fig. 10

"A Scolding woman's tongue is a scorpion"

*If you should ever be a wife,
Oh dear imagine what a life,
You'll lead your husband, for I'm sure,
Your tongue not many would endure*

Source: Royal Pavilion and Museums, Brighton & Hove



*A married man's delights are doubled,
His life's so smooth he's never troubled,
His missus never scolds.—Oh never,
But wears a smiling aspect ever.*

Fig. 11

*A married man's delights are doubled,
His life's so smooth he's never troubled,
His missus never scolds. — Oh never,
But wears a smiling aspect ever.*

Source: Royal Pavilion and Museums, Brighton & Hove



Fig. 12

Mrs. Disagreeable.

*'Tis my belief that God created wives
To sweeten all the troubles of men's lives'
But surely, you exert your utmost power,
To poison his best joys and turn them sour.*

Source: <http://lcpdams.librarycompany.org>

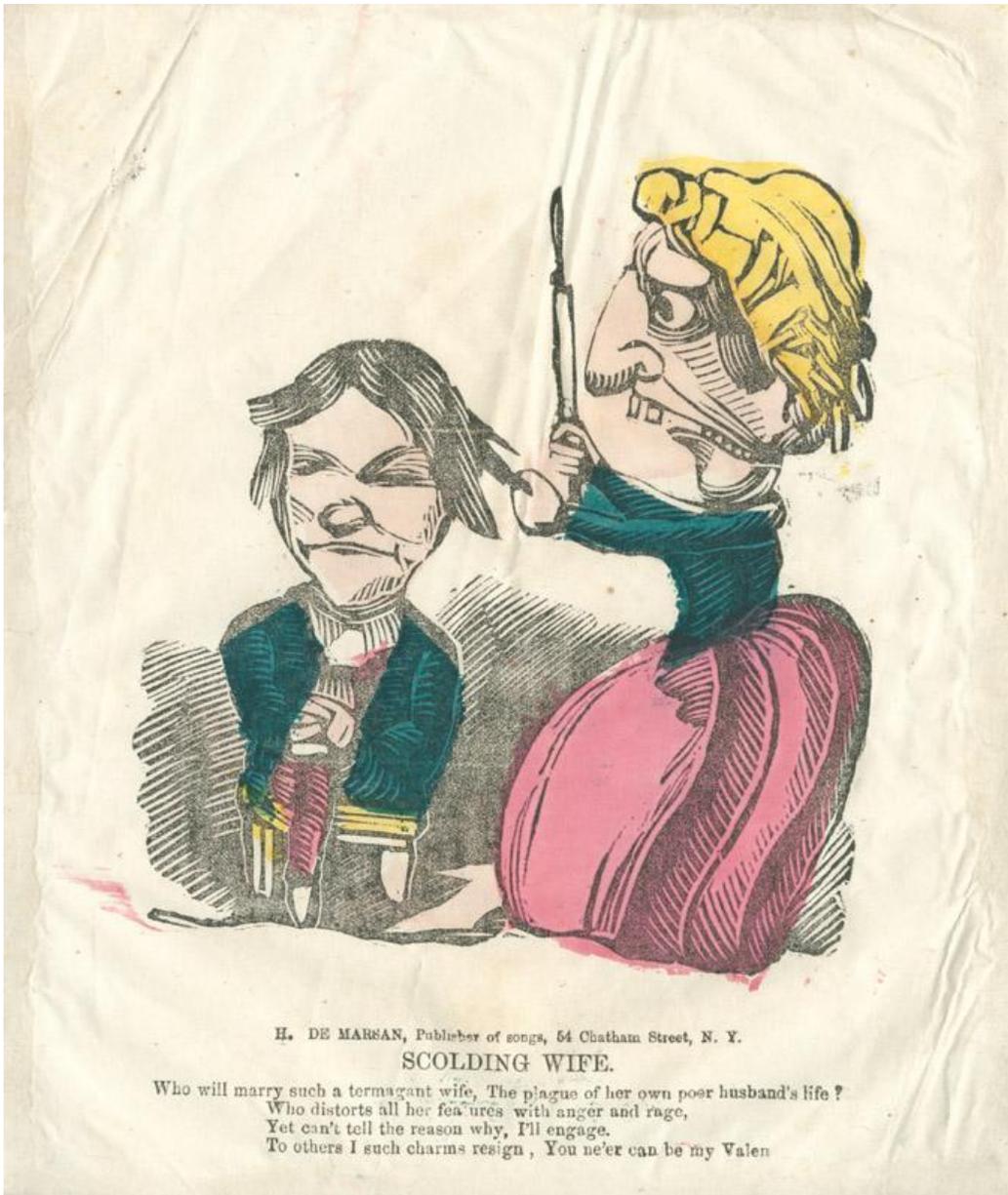


Fig. 13

Scolding Wife.

*Who will marry such a termagant wife, The plague of her own poor husband's life?
Who distorts all her features with anger and rage,
Yet can't tell the reason why, I'll engage.
To others I such charms resign. You'll never be my Valentine.*

Source: <http://lcpdams.librarycompany.org>



Fig. 14

"How gratifying to be the envy of our friends."

*Who'd ever think, as you sit there,
That once a smart young man you were?
Well, never mind what people say,
For every dog has had his day.*

Source: Royal Pavilion and Museums, Brighton & Hove



Fig. 15

*Your lines are cast in pleasant ways,
Right merrily you pass your days,
Your life must be, one round of bliss,
What joys poor single fellows miss.*

Source: Royal Pavilion and Museums, Brighton & Hove



The Hen-Pecked Man.

You perfect Judy—you Miss Nancy—
Just such a thing as your wife did fancy ;
She wanted a man that she could handle ;
You suited, for you're just the *thing* to dandle.

MORAL.—He who would be a woman's tool,
Will find himself a *henpecked* fool.

Fig. 16

"The hen-pecked man"

Source: <http://lcpdams.librarycompany.org>



Fig. 17

*"Could we but gaze unseen."
You are so gorgeously arrayed,
A fellow feels almost afraid,
As you advance and sweetly bow,
Egad he feels just anyhow.*

Source: Royal Pavilion and Museums, Brighton & Hove



A slave to Fashion's tyrant laws,
You court each silly fop's applause;
Did you but know what I can see,
How shocked, I fancy, you would be.
You will, I hope, leave off this style,
Your dress provokes a pitying smile.

Fig. 18

*A slave to fashion's tyrant laws,
You court each silly fop's applause;
Did you but know what I can see,
How shocked, I fancy, you would be.
You will, I hope, leave off this style,
Your dress provokes a pitying smile.*

Source: <http://lcpdams.librarycompany.org>

Fig. 19

“Waiting for an offer”

Source: Royal Pavilion and Museums, Brighton & Hove



Fig. 20

"Waiting for an offer" II

<http://lcpdams.librarycompany.org>



*Waiting for an offer, few indeed the chances;
These are not the times we read of in romances;
Men want wives with good sense, or with flowing coffers,
And are very careful to whom they're making offers.*



Fig. 21

"It isn't fine feathers that make fine birds"

Source: Royal Pavilion and Museums, Brighton & Hove



Fig 22

"An ignorant lout"

Source: Royal Pavilion and Museums, Brighton & Hove

"Pride will have a fall."

*You're as vulgar a cad as I'd wish to meet,
And yet you're devoured by pride and conceit,
But I fancy before very long you'll find out,
That everyone thinks you an ignorant lout.*

Fig. 23

“Don’t imagine anyone will take you for a gentleman”

Source: Royal Pavilion and Museums, Brighton & Hove



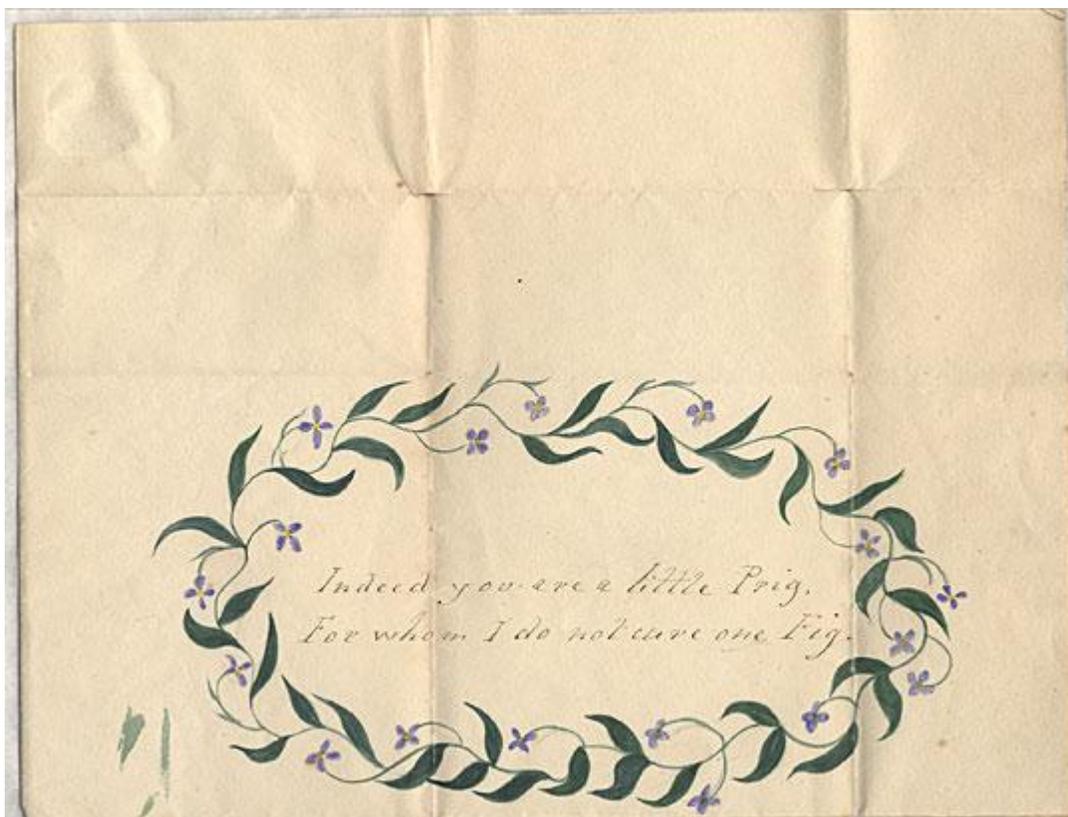


Fig. 24
Hand-painted valentine from 1830.

*Indeed you are a little Prig
For whom I do not care one Fig.*

Source: Royal Pavilion and Museums, Brighton & Hove



*Here's a heart pierced through and through,
I'm sure that greatly pleases you,
But listen—only keep it dark,
Some fellow sent it for a lark.*

Fig. 25

*Here's a heart pierced through and through,
I'm sure that greatly pleases you,
But listen – only keep it dark,
Some fellow sent it for a lark.*

Source: Royal Pavilion and Museums, Brighton & Hove



Fig. 26

*Scrubbing Judy, Oh you beauty!
All your curls are steamed to strings—
Swash and spatter in your duty,
Soft-soap well the pesky things;
Rubbing, scrubbing, Judy sings,
As the soap-suds out she wrings.*

Source: <http://lcpdams.librarycompany.org>

Fig. 27
"Telling you on Valentine's Day"

Source: Royal Pavilion and Museums, Brighton & Hove



Fig 28

"A Valentine Message"

Source: Royal Pavilion and Museums, Brighton & Hove

