

Annotated Bibliography on Comic Valentines

By Elizabeth Donaldson

Adkins, Milton T. "In a Country Post-Office," *Godey's Lady's Book* 93 (September 1876): 247.

Adkins writes of being a post-office worker in Plunketville, a small country town of which he is not a native. He discusses St. Valentine's Day as a highlight of the year, at least from his perspective as a mailman. While he begins by discussing how young, unmarried women send sentimental Valentines to their sweethearts, he also gives cases of people buying comic valentines, including bitter old maids, married gossips, and jilted dandies. Adkins describes the situation as "fun," and cites arguments, physical fights, and accusations that result from receiving comic valentines. Crowds find the fights amusing, and Adkins mocks those who fail to get the joke and take the comic valentines as serious insults. While the text does not mention children reading or receiving comic valentines, Adkins does encounter two youths who have gotten into a brawl because of one.

Albany, August, "Ugly Caricatures in Shop-Window," *Pittsfield Sun* 56, no.2891 (14 February 1856): 2

The brief article condemns valentines, describing them as "indecent, sickly, sentimental method of communication" and arguing that they "have long ceased to be even respectable" (2). The article does not single out comic valentines, but the opening line, "ugly caricatures," suggests that they are included as evidence within the tirade against the holiday and its indecency.

Campbell, Charles H. "St. Valentine's Day," *Ballou's Monthly Magazine* 45, no. 2 (February 1877): 179.

Campbell talks about the history of Valentine's Day and ends his piece by saying that he hopes Valentine's Day will be preserved except in the case of "what are called comic valentines, and those we abominate and reprobate. They can only be used in the way of insult, reproach, or spite. They may make the witless laugh, but they make the judicious grieve, and they must inflict pain on whoever receives them" (2).

Cupid's Valentine Writer. New York : T.W. Strong, 1840.

The pamphlet consists of short verses and responses to them. Typically, they consist of either couples insulting each other, or a declaration of love and its rejection. For the most part, they consist of insults to personal appearance, intelligence, or professional competency. They are rarely overtly sexual, with only two exceptions: One verse comments on how attractive a woman's figure is, and a woman threatens to break a fiddler's "fiddlestick" in another verse.

Doesticks, Q. K. Philander, "Cupid in Cold Weather—Valentine's Day," *Doesticks: What He Says*. New York: Edward Livermore, 20 Beekman Street., 1855.

Doesticks refers to the comic valentines as "scandalous" and argues that "comic" (195) is a misnomer, citing that they consist of "some sickish, some nauseating, some satirical, some caustic, some abusive" (194). He finds the comic and sentimental ones both perplexing and states that the money spent on receiving them would be better served on a nightcap.

Dowd, M.C. "Manty's Valentines." *Messenger*. 46, no. 10 (7 March 1877): 6.

The piece is a fictional account of Valentine's Day. A group of girls send handmade valentines to their hunchbacked neighbor, Manty, who recently went away to school. The nasty "Belle" suggests sending him a cruel comic valentine, but ends up buying him an expensive sentimental one, and "Burt" accidentally gives Manty a comic valentine that makes Manty cry. The story suggests that celebrating Valentine's Day can be fun, particularly if one avoids comic valentines and makes one's own sentimental ones.

Eidolon, Colonel. "Saint Valentine's Day. Historical and Poetical." *The United States Democratic Review* 35, no. 1 (January 1855): 68-73.

The article is against the celebration of Valentine's Day and wild, drunken celebration of any holidays. He begins by contrasting the American "Saturnalia" the 4th of July to European festivals, which acted as respite from the "divine right" of rulers. He locates the celebration of Valentine's Day in the European festival tradition, citing, however, modern U.S. celebrations as a degradation of the holiday and disruption of the peace. Eidolon also laments the debasement of Valentine's Day by comic valentines, writing "Comic, indecent, and caricaturing Valentines fly like hail from a wintry sky. A lady fears to receive or open a missive of this nature, The evil is a great one, and cries for redress. There is no question that the senders of these things would be liable to an action for libel, if they could be discovered" (70).

"Filthy Valentines." *The Subterranean* 4, no.39 (February 1847): 2.

The brief editorial calls for banning comic valentines, citing a case in which a young woman killed herself after receiving a comic valentine from a man who had lead her to believe that he was interested. The writer also objects to "young and respectable women can be and are from day to day grossly insulted by the sending of this trash to them" (1). The tone is one of moral outrage.

"Local Intelligence: St. Valentine's Day. How the Day Passed." *New York Times* (Feb 15, 1866), 2.

The column refers to comic valentine purchasers as “the hydra-headed monster who gloats over distorted effigies of human nature and cruel cutting things in rhyme” (2). Comic valentines as “horrid things, which bring dismay to tender maiden hearts, despair to widowed ones, and have a fearful tendency to the development of swearing in males of all ages” (2).

[N.E.D] “Mrs. Scuggins’ Valentines.” *Spirit of the Times; A Chronicle of the Turf, Agriculture, Field Sports, Literature and the Stage* 19, no. 10 (April 1849): 113.

The character Mrs. Scuggins is an ignorant working class woman who speaks in dialect. She tells a friend about the three valentines she received, one of which is sentimental but insincere, and the other two are comic. The text suggests that the comic valentines insult her, one of which accuses her of living with a man to whom she is not married, and the other suggests that only a desperate man would like her. The text, however, makes it clear that she doesn’t get the joke while also making the joke clear to the reader.

“New York, Boston,” *The Semi-Weekly Eagle* 3, no. 58 (February 2 1850): 2.

The text reads “Some excitement has been caused in New York and Boston by the abuse of the custom of sending ‘valentines’ -- base rascals having taken the opportunity to offer shameful insults to ladies of respectability”(2). The short piece finds fault in such habits, condemning comic valentines as insulting to honorable women.

[N.Y. Cour. & Enq.], “A Fatal Valentine,” *Morning News* 3, no.95 (1847), 2.

The brief notice accounts for the death of Margaret Craig, who committed suicide after receiving a mean valentine. The event is referenced in later anti-comic valentine articles, but the notice does not mention whether or not it was a comic valentine. It does, however, note that she intentionally overdosed on laudanum and curled her hair before doing so. A later notice on her death states that she was a servant in NYC. Another “fatal valentine” incident occurred later, but appears largely fictionalized and deals with an upper-middle class woman dying after her lover breaks up with her.

Pollak, Vivian A., “Emily Dickinson’s Valentines.” *American Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (March 1974): 60-78.

Pollak argues that “abusive comics are the pornography of valentine verse,” and cites one of the suffragette valentines as showing the suffragette as “a whore”(65).

“The Postman’s Mistake; or St. Valentine’s Day,” *Yankee Notions* 4, no. 2 (February 1855): 48-9.

The comic poem features a case of switched valentines. The illiterate maid, Biddy, receives two valentines on Valentine's Day and mistakenly gives her mistress the abusive comic valentine meant for the bidy and keeps the mistress's sentimental valentine for herself. The mistress is deeply offended by the comic valentine, but the situation is corrected in the end, and the bidy is amused by her comic valentine, while the mistress is touched by her sentimental one. The text makes a clear classed connection between working class people and vulgar comic valentines and upper classed women and sentimental ones.

Schmidt, Leigh Eric. "Valentine's Day Greeting," *Consumer Rites*. Princeton, NJ : Princeton University Press, 1995.

Schmidt's analysis of comic valentines does refer to "ribaldry and phallic innuendo" (80).

Stevenson, Katharine Lente. "Mary Ann's Valentines." *Zion's Herald* 70, no. 6 (10 February 1892): 46.

The didactic story focuses on a group of girls attend an elite girls' school. They send a handwritten comic valentine mocking Mary Ann, their smart, poor, and awkward classmate, for being tall and growing out of her uniform quickly. Mary Ann sobs when asked about it and makes her own revenge comic valentines that mock her classmates. The speaker gives them to a teacher, who finds them funny and well-executed, and asks the class what provoked the valentines. The speaker confesses what the class has done to Mary Ann. The speaker later marries the teacher, and Mary Ann becomes an artist. The story convinces the speaker's nieces not to play a joke on a classmate.

"St. Valentine's address to the fair of the ladies' sewing circle" Canton, Mass?: s.n.,1848.

The text is a proem about Valentines and single older women. While it mostly stresses that the women laugh together as a group, there is talk of parsons not being present, and it argues that women deserve to "play" as much as men. In context, it means verbal not sexual play, but the verbal is spoken of as playfully naughty (as opposed to completely vulgar). The text ultimately urges marriage over remaining single or engaging any sort of premarital sex.

"Valentines," *Ballou's Monthly Magazine* 41, no. 2 (February 1875): 200.

A series of cartoons depict people receiving comic valentines that characterize each recipient. One laughs, a bidy is happy, a woman is indigent, and another woman crushes the valentine.

"Valentines" *The Christian Observatory: A Religious and Literary Magazine* 4, no. 3 (March 1850): 144.

The brief article refers to comic valentines as “grossly vulgar and indecent,” and “vehicles of much low and cowardly insult to persons of either sex”(144).

“Valentines Delivered in Our Street.” *Harpers New Monthly Magazine* 12, no. 69 (February 1856): 429.

The cartoon shows different stock characters’ reactions to receiving comic valentines. A doctor gets a “quack” comic valentine and states “I consider that personal;” a lawyer says “What can the fellow mean?”; a single woman says “What impudence! Well I never!”

“Valentines: Interesting Statistics of the Trade--The Practice of Sending Valentines Extending.” *New York Times* (4 February 1867): 5.

The author refers to comic valentines as “just as coarse in sentiment and design as ever they were; and a very good reason for this is the fact that many of the same verses do duty now which have been used for the last eight, ten, or twenty years”(5).

A note on Valentine advertisements:

Typically, advertisements list other objects with which the valentines are sold, most of which are sentimental valentines, other printed materials (e.g. books, stationary, ballads) or household objects. L. Prang & Co. refers itself as an “art and educational publisher” in an ornate, colored advertisement which lists valentines along with “American Text-books of Art Education.” Sentimental and comic valentines are advertised together in newspaper ads.

A New York Times display ad (1/28/1863) for the American Valentine Company advertises sentimental and comic valentines under the heading of “NEW-RACY-SPICY-SPARKLING!” advertising new comic valentines, including a new line of “Friendly comics” that will be available. The ad suggests that by 1863, many of the jokes had become cliché or tired. Another ad by the same company (1/30/1863; 1/31/1863) lists various kinds of valentines, offering ultimately “Valentines that will suit everybody.”