"In praise of Bishop Valentine": The creation of modern Valentine’s Day in antebellum America

Brian Keith Geiger
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"IN PRAISE OF BISHOP VALENTINE":

THE CREATION OF MODERN VALENTINE'S DAY IN ANTEBELLUM AMERICA

A Dissertation

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of History

The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

by

Brian Keith Geiger

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APPROVAL SHEET

This dissertation is submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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Numerous other individuals also helped along the way. Early on, before I had done much writing at all, an interdisciplinary group of graduate students from the humanities and social sciences created a dissertation reading group. Over the years the various members of that group provided countless words of encouragement and advice. Though I don't have the space to name them all, I would like to thank, in alphabetical order, Tim Barnard, Dave Corlett, Stephen Feeley, Amy Howard, Beth Komski, Robert Nelson, Melissa Ooten, James Spady, Amy Speckart, and Andrea Westcot. Rob Nelson, in particular, read and critiqued almost every chapter of this work. I will forever cherish the intellectual and personal bond Rob and I formed during our time as graduate students. Toward the end of the dissertating process, several faculty members provided invaluable assistance and guidance. Scott Nelson read several chapters in their early stages, helped to steer me through the literature on the English middle class, and during the defense offered excellent ideas for rethinking some broad themes and issues. I am especially grateful to Ron Schechter for not only reading my dissertation, particularly the chapter on comic missives, but also for generously helping me through the process of applying for teaching jobs the first time I went on the market. I would also like to thank my outside reader, Stephen Nissenbaum, whose enthusiasm and suggestions for my work will inspire and guide me as I turn it into a manuscript.

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"In Praise of Bishop Valentine" is a cultural history of Valentine's Day in the American antebellum Northeast. By the middle of the nineteenth century, residents of England and North America had been observing February 14th with various folk customs for centuries. In the early 1840s, however, Northern businessmen and women discovered an enthusiastic and consumptive market for their ready-made valentines. Within a matter of years these merchants' efforts to sell printed cards fundamentally changed the way saint's day was marked. Valentine's Day had become one of the most celebrated holidays of the year and an occasion, specifically, for buying and exchanging manufactured sentiments.

New media and businesses helped to popularize February 14th, in the process taking a novel form of urban youth culture and rapidly dispersing it throughout the region. As it spread, Valentine's Day helped to define a new social category, youth, by working to guide young men and women through premarital sexual temptations and to accustom them to the emotional expressiveness that would soon define the Victorian marriage. The new holiday tradition of exchanging numerous missives riveted antebellum youthful interest for two basic reasons. By intentionally obscuring their mass-produced qualities in order to accentuate individual distinctiveness and convey a personal aura, ready-made cards provided young men and women with a way to use commercial goods to convey authentic, individual sentiments. Furthermore, so-called comic valentines, which soon rivaled sentimental notes in sales, vented youthful exasperation with middle-class sentimentalism, while simultaneously familiarizing individuals with certain middle-class values. Much of this unique, early-industrial February 14th commercial culture did not survive past the Civil War. But for more than a decade it remained an important product of and force in an increasingly industrial, market-oriented, and mobile Northern society.
"IN PRAISE OF BISHOP VALENTINE":
THE CREATION OF MODERN VALENTINE’S DAY IN ANTEBELLUM AMERICA
Like many other historical works, this study resulted in part from happenstance and serendipity. While searching for evidence of clandestine or illicit publications in the North during the decades before the Civil War, for an entirely different project I had just started to pursue, I made an unexpected discovery. Tucked away in the pages of a recent scholarly tome, whose title I have since forgotten, was a reproduction of what the author called a "vinegar valentine." As I recall, it featured an image of a woman lording over her cowering husband with a rolling pin and a short selection of insulting verse printed along the bottom. Months later I would learn that this was a typical "comic" card, as contemporaries termed them. At the time, however, I was surprised by what I saw, almost as startled, perhaps, as those individuals who had received such missives had once been. "This was Valentine's Day?" I thought. My curiosity piqued, I set out to quickly survey what had been written about the antebellum holiday and its printed ephemera.

I found very little. When I began my initial research, shortly before the start of the new century, there were two dated antiquarian works on Valentine's Day and one recent scholarly essay. The latter, by Leigh Eric Schmidt, had appeared twice just a few years earlier, first as a journal article and then again in a collection of essays subtitled "The Buying and Selling of American Holidays." As this quote suggests, Schmidt presents the holiday as a commercial invention that appeared quite suddenly and with great fanfare in the early 1840s. It is an eloquently written survey of the early saint's day, with number of compelling insights. I was left, however, with two unanswered and intertwined questions that seem fundamental to understanding the subject: why then and why so differently? Schmidt, in short, suggests that the holiday was a product of the
1840s and 1850s, but he never satisfactorily explains what it was about that period that made the commercial celebration suddenly relevant. Moreover, antebellum Valentine's Day as he paints it looked remarkably similar to our own February 14th, a portrait that struck me as odd after my initial encounter with comic missives.¹

Convinced that I had discovered an important but largely unexplored piece of Americana, I undertook the long process of research. Over the next few years, as I poured through primary sources, I kept close to mind the two broad questions my initial explorations had elicited. The antebellum saint's day was not utterly separate from what followed it, and we can indeed recognize parts of our own modern-day celebration in this early commercial holiday. Yet there were important differences, some subtle, others more apparent. I have sought to uncover and explore those variations, for in the process we can begin both to see some of the distinctive characteristics of the 1840s and 1850s and to recognize the reasons for the holiday's prominence during the period. Valentine's Day's popularity and, from our perspective, unfamiliarity formed the pieces to a shared puzzle, a peculiar rebus, so to speak, that I will endeavor to assemble and decipher in the pages that follow.

I began my research by examining the January to March editions of every newspaper that I could acquire from Boston and New York published between the mid 1830s and the mid 1860s. In part, I wanted to see whether Schmidt was correct. Did the holiday burst onto the scene in the early 1840s? What I discovered would eventually, years later, become the basis for chapter one. Advertising for February 14th goods did increase dramatically after 1840, but Americans had been familiar with the English commercial saint's day since it first developed around 1800, even though they did not purchase many holiday wares from across the ocean. In light of this finding, I started to

explore the social and cultural history of turn-of-the-century England, an endeavor that rather quickly landed me in the extensive secondary literature on the "making" of the English middle class. It was a fitting way to conclude my research and begin my story of antebellum Valentine's Day. For throughout this study I have emphasized that the new commercial holiday reflected and defined the values and outlook of a growing Northern middle class, a process that on the other side of the Atlantic had occurred almost fifty years earlier.

Pouring through hundreds of newspapers from Boston and New York, I soon noticed something distinct about holiday advertisements. The audience for February 14th printed ephemera did not seem to match my own expectations for who would buy and exchange cards. I associate holiday consumption with two separate age groups: adult couples, who buy one another missives and expensive gifts, and children, who exchange valentines in school with numerous classmates. In my experience, adolescents generally disdain manufactured notes, viewing them as commercial products with no connection to their own "real" sentiments. During the 1840s and 1850s, however, holiday merchants pursued youthful consumers almost exclusively with their newspaper ads. As my research expanded to include periodical literature and archived cards and letters, I realized young men and women were not just the imagined participants in this new late-winter ritual, they were in fact exchanging most of the cards around February 14th. The role of this age group in the commercial celebration became the focus of chapter three. Scholars have long recognized that Americans began to recognize youth as a distinct stage in human development—between child- and adulthood—in the first half of the nineteenth century. Valentine's Day, I would learn, not only helped to define youth as a social category, it also sought indirectly to guide them.

My exploration of antebellum newspapers also revealed that New York was the center of holiday commerce, not especially surprising given that Manhattan had become the largest commercial port of its day. This finding led me to two interrelated questions:
who were these businessmen who peddled holiday wares and what was their relationship both to their urban surroundings and to potential customers outside the city? To answer these questions I began by creating a database of all the merchants who advertised in papers, recording when, where, and how long they ran announcements. Next I researched each one of these individuals in the New York City directories from the 1840s and 1850s, adding information about where they were located and how long they stayed in business. Finally, I connected this database to geographic mapping software, which enabled me to see how the locations of holiday businesses in Manhattan had changed over time. By comparing this primary research to secondary works on the history of New York and its newspapers, I was able to piece together the varied business practices of Manhattan's Valentine's Day merchants. Almost all of them, as I detail in chapter two, pursued middle-class customers, both within the city and without, by relying on a new form of newsprint and an evolving postal system.

Having finished my explorations of holiday businessmen and participants, the next logical step was to investigate how young men and women used the new consumer goods that merchants marketed to them. Refining the question that I would ask of the primary evidence, and even deciding which sources to use, proved to be more difficult than I had expected. But with some intellectual guidance and prodding, I realized the most pressing issue for antebellum Northerners was how goods that were ready-made for February 14th could express authentic, personal sentiments. Two secondary works proved particularly useful as I explored this topic: Tamara Thornton's work on the cultural history of handwriting exposed the value contemporaries placed on script to reveal something of the self, and Meredith McGill's exposition of a "culture of reprinting" opened my eyes to a different perspective on copying and transcribing.² With these two

studies providing a backdrop, I looked anew at what were known as "valentine writers" and at extant cards young men and women sent one another. Inside the covers of holiday writers, which were small booklets containing dozens of poems that individuals could copy or peruse for inspiration, I unearthed evidence for a changing public opinion about the propriety of transcription for sentimental expression. On the fronts of both ready-made cards and homemade missives I noted an abundance of handwriting, evidence, I concluded, of the ability of script to transform store-bought goods into something more than mere commerce. These two related findings formed the basis for chapter four.

Finally, I returned to the topic and the images that had caught my attention years earlier. With literally hundreds of photocopies of comic valentines in my possession, I turned to two very different bodies of secondary literature for help understanding what these printed ephemera might have "meant" to their contemporaries. From studies of American graphic and print humor, I learned that these sheets had their origins in both satiric verse dating back to the colonial era and humorous illustrations popularized by the contentious politics of the Jacksonian era. The mocking and often caustic qualities of comic cards, on the other hand, reminded me of the early-modern carnivals that historians of Europe have studied. Like those earlier public festivals, ribald sheets provided a forum in which individuals, in this case youth, could rebel against community norms, while at the same time they also ultimately reinforced those same standards. Befitting the middle-class' veneration of the home, the crude and cheap prints that flooded the holiday market in the years before the Civil War functioned in private, behind closed doors, not in town squares or markets.

From raucous youth to enterprising businessmen, from the hazards of intimacy to the challenges of emotional expression in a commercial society, this is a decidedly and unabashedly eclectic study. Its diversity reflects the spirit and composition, I believe, of what has become an established academic field. Over the last decade or so the number of studies of holidays, rituals and celebrations has blossomed, even generating a yearly
conference that recently marked its tenth anniversary. There are now books on Halloween, Thanksgiving, civic holidays, and of course, Christmas. The subject of why and how people celebrate has attracted an interdisciplinary crowd, including literary scholars, anthropologists, historians, and others. I hope individuals with various interests and perspectives will find my own explorations of antebellum Valentine's Day as compelling and stimulating as they have been for me, even if they do not always concur with my conclusions or approaches.

Like many scholars who have studied holidays and celebrations, I have sought to use the saint's day as a lens with which to view a particular time and place. Throughout this study I have emphasized that the often variegated and occasionally puzzling story of the holiday's early commercialization must be understood within the period in which it occurred. The concern of the middle class for its youth, for example, or its perspective on how consumers should use valentines, may have imbued their holiday with a distinctive texture and composition, but they did not exist in isolation. The numerous issues the holiday exposed reflected larger events and developments sweeping over the North during the years before the Civil War.

At the same time, in the tradition of some of the best studies of its kind, I have also emphasized that antebellum Valentine's Day was an instrument, not just a barometer, of change. February 14th did not just expose middle class anxieties about youthful sexuality; it sought to lay claim to and sway them. Similarly, the commercialization of the saint's day injected a coarseness to the celebration, and thus to a part of middle-class life more generally, that had previously been absent. If antebellum Northerners' remolding of an established celebration reflected their own preoccupations and concerns,
the product of their efforts helped to shape the times in which they lived. The new
commercial holiday performed important and unique "cultural work," to borrow a phrase
I use throughout the text.

More generally, I hope this study will shed new light on what is frequently a
misunderstood or even overlooked time in American history. Too often the 1840s and
1850s are portrayed as the social and cultural coda to the Jacksonian period, or as the
political backdrop to the events of the early 1860s. Leafing through the dozen textbooks
on the shelves behind my desk, I find only two that dedicate chapters or sections
specifically to these years. Most incorporate the period into broad discussions of
movements and developments—such as various efforts to reform society and new kinds
of entertainment—that dated back decades earlier. And of course, almost all of them
have chapters on the gradual division of the union between North and South. I do not
wish to suggest that the two decades before the Civil War were somehow removed or
separate from what followed and preceded them. They of course were not. Yet they did
have a look and character all their own. It is this distinctiveness that I have tried to
impart with the story of Valentine's Day, and that continues to fuel my interest in the
subject.

Some of those who know me well might find it curious that I was ever drawn to
the subject at all. Apart from the provocative qualities of comic prints, the history of a
day dedicated to expressing love and affection is perhaps an odd (maybe even an
amusing) contrast to my own personality. I readily concede that I am not an especially
eotive person, though I do consider myself sentimental. I have been fortunate, I think,
that my interest in the history of Valentine's Day has come at a time when I have sought
to reevaluate my own emotional life. As I have worked to look anew at my temperament,
I have uncovered an era when people had a different perspective from our own on the
appropriateness of different emotions and their expression. My personal and intellectual
concerns have dovetailed. Perhaps discovering the foreignness of this seemingly self-
evident topic will inspire similar reflection in others. Let me be clear, however; I do not present the 1840s and 1850s as a model for our own time. Rather, if reading this work motivates others to look critically and openly at how and to what ends their own emotional lives might be regulated, I will have accomplished far more than I ever expected when I stumbled into this project years ago.
Chapter 1

Hearts Across the Ocean: An English Holiday's Circuitous Trip to America

1828 had the potential to be a breakout year for Valentine's Day in North America. In June, Sir Walter Scott's much-anticipated second installment in the Chronicles of the Cannongate series was published in England. Throughout winter and spring newspapers and magazines up and down the east coast had updated readers about the novel's arrival. Reprinting a story that appeared in numerous other papers, the Connecticut Mirror noted on March 24 that, "The admirers of Sir Walter Scott will learn, with pleasure, that another romance from his tragical pen is shortly to appear." Reversing the order of the book's final title, they continued, "It is to be entitled 'St. Valentine's Day, or the Fair Maid of Perth.'" Although the tale ultimately received mixed reviews in American publications—one reviewer remarked that though it was not as good as Scott's earlier works, "[it] will prove an acceptable treat to the lovers of light reading during the present warm weather, when the mind feels indisposed to engage in abstruse studies"—it sold well throughout the summer. From July to September booksellers from Maryland to Maine took out hundreds of ads in their local papers that they had copies of The Fair Maid of Perth in stock. At least one American publisher, Carey and Lea of Philadelphia, reprinted the novel within months of its release in England.⁴

Thanks to the introduction of store-bought valentines, February 14th had recently become one of the most prominent holidays on the English calendar when Scott began

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⁴ [Salter Scott; St. Valentine's Day], Connecticut Mirror, 24 March 1828, 3; "New Publications," The Souvenir, 25 June 1828, 418; I arrived at a rough estimate of the numbers of ads by searching in Early American Newspapers, Series 1, online.
penning the lines for his story in the 1820s, and his decision to include it in the title of his book revealed his hopes to cash in on the saint's day's popularity. For *The Fair Maid of Perth* was not really much of a Valentine's Day tale at all. Set in medieval Scotland, the epic began with a young woman, the fair maid, being courted by two noblemen on February 14th, but within a matter of pages it quickly evolved into a complicated tale of royal intrigue and revenge that over the next four hundred pages or so never returned to its short-lived reference to the holiday. Perhaps the *Connecticut Mirror* and other papers even got it right; Scott might have intended to put "St. Valentine's Day" before "Fair Maid of Perth" in the book's title, and then decided against it at the last minute when he realized how little the holiday actually figured in the storyline.

Despite his cursory treatment of the saint's day, the publication of *The Fair Maid of Perth* was a potential signal event for the holiday in North America, because Scott was one of the most "admired and widely read" novelists on both sides of the ocean.\(^5\) American magazines and newspapers had been publishing stories, usually short, about English enthusiasm for February 14th almost since it had started at the turn of the century. Yet Valentine's Day was not widely observed in America in the early nineteenth century, certainly not on a regional or national level. Scott had the renown to finally make Americans take notice of the holiday; the appearance of the saint's day in the title of one of his books could have generated widespread interest in what many Americans undoubtedly until that point had viewed as a peculiar annual English occurrence. Instead, February 14th continued along for another fifteen years much as it had for the previous twenty, celebrated in a few locales and sporadically throughout the Northeast but generally ignored by most residents, until it finally burst on the scene in the early 1840s.

The popularity of Scott's novel, but its failure to generate interest in the purported subject of its story, reveals a question central to the history of Valentine's Day in early

\[^5\] Mary Mahony, "Critical Evaluation of *The Fair Maid of Perth,*" in *Masterplots Complete 2000* (Online), 3.
America. *The Fair Maid of Perth* was just one of countless examples of the fact that, throughout much of the first half of the nineteenth century, Americans borrowed, copied and imported fashions, trends, and practices from the other side of the Atlantic. Despite political independence, in other words, they retained strong cultural ties to England. Yet Americans did not import Valentine's Day, at least not right away. Why this lag? Why did it take over three decades for the saint's day to establish itself stateside when other English institutions and goods made the trip quickly? Or, viewed from another angle, why did the holiday only become popular in the 1840s? Exchanging cards on February 14th, particularly ready-made varieties, became part of the English cultural fabric during a time of unprecedented economic and social growth and change, quickly replacing pre-existing holiday customs; decades later the "craze," as contemporaries often called it, crossed the ocean at a time when the Northeast was in the midst of its own economic and social boom.

**An English Holiday Before Mid-Century**

Valentine's Day was not new to England when Scott first decided to use it as the basis for a medieval love story. The holiday did not simply spring into existence in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The association between February 14th and a Catholic saint had its origins hundreds of year earlier, in the late 1300s. Over the next few centuries the late-winter celebration underwent at least two more substantial alterations, first becoming a day for playing various matchmaking games and ultimately an occasion for exchanging handmade and mass-produced notes. It was this last stage, the fashioning of February 14th into a time to trade missives, which caught the imagination of the English public and made the day a national phenomenon. The modern, commercial, card-centered saint's day had been born, and it was the product of
rapidly-expanding middle class's desire for the consumer goods that accompanied an industrial revolution.

The first important milestone in the history of Valentine’s Day occurred in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. Thanks to the work of Jack Oruch and Henry Ansgar Kelly, two medievalist scholars, we know that Geoffrey Chaucer was singularly responsible for associating Saint Valentine with what Kelly calls a “love cult.” Most notably, in *The Parlement of Fowls*, which he probably penned in the 1380s, Chaucer mentioned Valentine numerous times. First he associated the day with the mating of birds, writing,

> For this was on seynt Valentynes day, \n> Whan every foul cometh there to chese his make…

Later, toward the end of the poem and after several more references to pairing feathered fauna, Chaucer connected the saint’s day to bird songs and the coming of summer,

> Saynt Valentyn, that art ful hy on-lofte, \n> Thus syngen smale foules for thy sake. \n> Now welcome, somer…

Over the next twenty years or so, before his death around 1400, Chaucer composed several more poems with references to Valentine’s Day, mating birds and the arrival of spring.6

Both Kelly and Oruch point out that there had indeed been a St. Valentine in the early Christian church. In fact, Valentine was a common Roman name and numerous priests with that appellation were martyred and later declared saints. Two men in particular, a bishop from Terni and a priest from Rome, were later claimed by church scholars to have been executed on February 14th. In medieval Catholicism these two

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early Christians were venerated in numerous shrines and cathedrals throughout Europe and their relics, real or otherwise, were scattered across the continent. One church in England for example, not far from where Chaucer lived, claimed to possess Valentine’s head. Like other medieval saints, Valentine was, in Leigh Eric Schmidt’s words, “a model of holiness and divine accessibility,” a figure to call upon in times of need. In some areas he was believed to have the power to affect weather and crops, for example, and in other locales his assistance was sought to cure diseases. There is no record, however, that he was ever associated in medieval times with the power to induce amour or to pair lovers.7

Why Chaucer chose to connect this medieval saint with springtime, mating birds and lovers “remains something of a literary mystery,” Schmidt writes. Antebellum commentators often noted the absurdity of linking February 14th, which in both England and the Northeast clearly falls in late winter, with the arrival of spring and the pairing of birds. Both Oruch and Kelly make this conundrum central to their investigations of Chaucer. Oruch, whose article appeared first, points out the instability of medieval calendars, which often placed the first day of spring at various times from mid February to early March. He also argues that England was in the midst of a short-lived warming trend during Chaucer’s lifetime and that in fact birds might have mated in February. He concludes that, “Chaucer would have found…no more apt choice of a patron for the new season than the beautifully named St. Valentine.” Several years later Kelly offered a more complicated hypothesis. He suggests that Chaucer may have actually had in mind a Genoese St. Valentine, whom he would have encountered through various connections in Genoa and whose celebration occurred in May. Chaucer, who never mentioned any specific date for Valentine’s Day, Kelly argues, was playing with this Genoese tradition of a springtime saint’s day. It was his literary followers who, unfamiliar with this

Genoese St. Valentine, associated him with the more familiar saint’s day on February 14th. Regardless of their explanations, both Oruch and Kelly agree that Chaucer remodeled St. Valentine, making him the patron saint of love and his day an observance of matchmaking.\(^8\)

Chaucer had created a literary fashion. During the last decade or so of the fourteenth century through the first half of the fifteenth, more than half a dozen writers and poets paid tribute to the newly-crafted patron saint of love. This cadre of Valentine’s sonneteers included, among others, Charles D’Orleans, John Lydgate, Oton de Grandson and John Gower. For more than fifty years these authors helped to popularize the association of St. Valentine with matchmaking. Then, inexplicably, the odes to the saint ceased around mid century. I have found only one poem published after 1450 that mentioned St. Valentine, verse that was penned by the Scottish poet William Dunbar. For more than a hundred years English writers would largely ignore the figure whom Chaucer and his contemporaries had venerated.

All of these early poets of St. Valentine shared several things in common. Some of them, like Chaucer, praised the patron saint of love and connected his day to springtime and mating fowl. As time passed other writers began to refer specifically to human coupling, establishing a literary tradition that conflated the term “valentine” with “lover.” John Lydgate did both. In one poem he wrote,

\begin{quote}
Thus herde I foules in the morwenyng
Upon the daye of Saynte Valentyne synge.
\end{quote}

In another he versified,

\begin{quote}
O virgin Julyan, I chese now the
To my Valentyne, both with hert and mouth…
\end{quote}

\(^8\) Schmidt, 42; Oruch, 549-56, quote 556; Kelly, chapters 6, 7, and 8.
Charles D’Orleans, “even more than Lydgate,” Kelly argues, “established Valentinus in hieme,” linking February 14th to the selection of partners and using “valentine” to mean one’s amorous match for the day. What is important to note here is that all of these poets wrote of February 14th as a day for lovers or as an opportunity to choose a mate. They did not mention how one might go about selecting a partner. None of the holiday games or festivities, in other words, that would appear in later writings are evident in these early poems.

What happened to Valentine’s Day in the decades after about 1450 remains as much of a mystery as why Chaucer chose to venerate the saint in the first place. Schmidt suggests that the holiday developed along three separate tracts: “one religious or ecclesiastical, another popular or folk, and a third aristocratic or courtly.” We will assess the validity of the last two tracts momentarily. First, though, there is no indication that Valentine’s Day remained an important religious holiday in England after the mid fifteenth century. Schmidt’s primary evidence for claiming an “ecclesiastical path” for February 14th comes from the play A Tale of a Tub, penned by Ben Jonson around 1633. Jonson’s critique of holiday “carnality and self-indulgence” is worth quoting at length. Bishop Valentine, he wrote,

Left us example to do deeds of charity;
To feed the hungry; clothe the naked; visit
The weak, and sick; to entertain the poor;
And give the dead a Christian funeral;
These were the works of piety he did practice,
And bade us imitate; not look for lovers,
Or handsome images to please our senses.

In order to understand Jonson’s lambaste of February 14th, one must consider two of his personality traits. Ben Jonson was both a devout Catholic and, according to contemporary accounts, an irascible character. The excerpt from A Tale of a Tub

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9 Kelly, chapter 8, quote 152. I quoted Lydgate’s verse from Kelly, 143 and 145.
10 Schmidt, 42-43.
therefore should not be read as an example of one way in which Valentine’s Day was commonly commemorated, but rather as an attempt to rescue a Catholic day of devotion from an increasingly Protestant populace that had little interest in memorializing saints. It was also an intentional jab at Jonson’s literary nemesis Shakespeare, who had recently helped to popularize Valentine’s Day in two of his own plays.11

Ben Jonson lived and worked during a time when Valentine’s Day experienced a literary renaissance of sorts. After almost completely disappearing from English poetry and prose over one hundred years earlier, the holiday reappeared with gusto around 1600. Throughout the seventeenth century the saint’s day would appear in countless works, both published and unpublished. This was the second stage in the holiday’s development, and as we will see shortly, it extended through the early eighteenth century. Shakespeare was one of the first and most prominent writers to mention February 14th in his works, but he was not the only one by far. Dozens of authors would refer to the late-winter celebration during the course of the century.

Unfortunately, scholars have not examined the reemergence of Valentine’s Day as a theme in early-modern English literature, the way Oruch and Kelly have done for Chaucer. It is safe to say, however, that Shakespeare did not discover the saint on his own—he was preceded by several years by the poet William Fowler—nor did the famous bard and his successors reshape his story the way Chaucer had. Yet this seventeenth-century cohort did add a new twist to an established tradition. Many of the poems and plays picked up where Chaucer’s generation had left off. In A Midsummer Night’s Dream, for example, Shakespeare had Theseus announce the coming of mating birds:

Good morrow, friends. Saint Valentine is past.
Begin these woodbirds but to couple now?

Then in *Hamlet* he introduced something new to the holiday. Ophelia remarked that she had spent the morning in hopes of being Hamlet's valentine:

To-morrow is Saint Valentine's Day  
And in the morning betime,  
And I a maid at your window,  
To be your Valentine.

This was a reference to the practice of choosing as one's partner for the day the first person one saw on February 14\textsuperscript{th}. Over the next half century or so other authors would mention additional games or pastimes that people purportedly practiced in mid February, and in the process build on the holiday traditions Chaucer had helped to create.\textsuperscript{12}

The question is what was the relationship between these literary references and the ways in which people actually marked the holiday? Did literature draw from commonly-known customs or did it help to invent new ones? One of the main sources available to historians for examining life in early modern England, and certainly the most extensive, is the diary of Samuel Pepys, a man who rose from middling status to court-insider during the middle of the 1600s. Pepys was a diligent record-keeper: between 1660 and 1669 he rarely went a day without making an entry and his diary would eventually total over "one and a quarter million words." His collection of reminiscences has consequently provided scholars with an important and unusual insight into life during the second half of the seventeenth century.\textsuperscript{13}

On several occasions Pepys complained about the custom of choosing a valentine, noting that the women he selected expected gifts, usually expensive presents. In 1667, for example, he recorded, "But I am also this year my wife's valentine; and it will cost me five pounds." For Schmidt these entries are examples of the holiday's "aristocratic path,"


and he observes that there are few sources to indicate that individuals outside of courtly circles exchanged gifts in the seventeenth century. It is important to note also, however, that common people left precious few records about how they marked the holiday. It would be a mistake to conclude that people did not exchange gifts simply because the practice does not appear in the limited sources that have survived. Those who were not as wealthy as Pepys may very well have traded presents on February 14th, though their tributes would not have been as pricy or extravagant as his.14

Pepys's access to the English court, moreover, did not exclude him from what Schmidt terms holiday "folk expressions." In 1662 Pepys recorded that he had avoided the house of Sir Batten, "because I would not have his daughter to be my Valentine." That same year, he noted humorously, his wife had walked around most of the morning with her hands over her eyes, "that she might not see the paynters that were at work in gilding my chimney-piece and pictures in my dining room." Both Pepys and his wife were trying to avoid the custom that they first person they saw on February 14th became their valentine for the day. Several years later, in 1667, he noted that he had been introduced to a new holiday game to go along with the pastime, with which he was already familiar, of choosing a valentine by lottery. "Here I do first observe the fashion of drawing of mottoes as well as names," he recorded, "so that Pierce, who drew my wife, did draw also a motto, and this girl drew another for me."15

Samuel Pepys's reference to the "fashion of drawing mottoes" is particularly noteworthy, because it suggests that so-called folk traditions were constantly evolving. Rather than witnessing a divergence between folk and aristocratic customs, the seventeenth century was a period when the literary references from Shakespeare and his cohort and the customs that came to be associated with the holiday developed together.

Schmidt notes that there were numerous special days in early-modern England when young people might either select partners or attempt to discern future spouses, of which Valentine’s Day was just one. There were also numerous and eclectic practices for selecting or predicting a match, some of them associated with specific days and some not. When Shakespeare wrote of Ophelia waiting at the window to see her valentine for the day, he may have had a specific February 14th custom in mind. On the other hand, he might have picked a matchmaking-practice with which he was familiar and then applied it to the holiday. In any case, the association of Valentine’s Day with choosing a partner via any number of customs, in addition to its earlier link to mating birds and springtime, gained strength as the works of Shakespeare, Jonson and others were read and reread throughout the century, or performed repeatedly at theaters across the country. By the end of the century widely-known literary references to February 14th had helped to lift the day above others as a time for matchmaking and for observing games or pastimes that might help one find a partner.16

There are a couple of important points to note about this trajectory of Valentine’s Day during the 1600s and early 1700s. First, regional variations in the way the holiday was celebrated almost certainly remained prominent even at the end of the century, although we have few records of those variations. The fact that popular authors mentioned one holiday custom or another did not make those customs universally practiced, at least not to the exclusion of other traditions. Secondly, February 14th did not become the exclusive holiday for would-be lovers. It did develop into the most well-known day for love-making, but other holidays associated with amour continued to populate the English calendar. Nonetheless, due in part to the works of Shakespeare and

16 Schmidt, 43-44.
others, by the beginning of the eighteenth century Valentine’s Day was widely recognized and variously celebrated throughout England.\(^1\)

In the second half of the 1700s the day long ago named for a Catholic saint was reshaped once more. One of the first hints of this new way of celebrating February 14\(^{th}\) appeared in the 1780s in the form of what were known as valentine writers. Small, cheap, and generally short, these chapbooks provided examples of holiday verse that aspiring poets could transcribe for the day. We will examine this genre more closely in chapter four. It is important to note now that for about two decades they were available but not abundant, though it is impossible to know exactly how many rolled off of English presses at the end of the eighteenth century since most of the early versions did not contain imprint dates. Then around 1800 they began appearing annually in greater numbers, judging by dates of publication at least, and they remained common through the 1830s (see Appendix 2).

Valentine writers encouraged individuals to try their hands at penning verse for the saint’s day, and their popularity in part resulted from a more general vogue for letter-writing after mid century. Composing letters was not new, of course, but thanks in large part to interest in what became known as the "familiar letter," the practice spread quickly beyond aristocratic and business circles. Between 1750 and 1800 hundreds of publications, including dictionaries, penmanship manuals, and writing guides, encouraged and taught those of the "middling sort" to craft letters that were "conversational" and "natural," exchanges that reflected both the kind of communication two equals would conduct in person and the writers' personalities, while still conforming to certain norms of composition. Like these guides to composing familiar letters, valentine writers owed part of their success to their claims to help middling families demonstrate their refinement. Following the examples these works offered, individuals

sought to set themselves apart from mere commoners by adopting some of the cultural habits and standards of the English gentry. In this sense Schmidt is partly right when he claims a "courtly path" for the holiday, though the development of this tradition was hardly straightforward or linear. Late-century holiday versifiers fashioned themselves into amateur Chaucers and Shakespeares, penning scenes of mating birds, blooming flowers and anxious lovers, not in an effort to claim courtly status but to demonstrate their refined learnedness. Valentine's Day had become a time to both participate in the popular custom of sending letters to one's peers and, in the process, to present evidence of one's cultivation.  

If the appearance of holiday writers was a clue that February 14th celebrations had entered a new stage, the arrival of ready-made notes in the late 1790s was clear evidence that change was in the air. Paper manufacturers and stationers had been producing and selling fancy stock for years. Utilizing embossing, hand-coloring, and printing, they provided decorated sheets to customers looking to enhance the aesthetic qualities of their written exchanges, and in the process fueled the interest in familiar letters. It would not have been much of a stretch for these businessmen to produce distinctive paper specifically for Valentine's Day. By the early 1800s they were doing just that. Firms, most notably H. Dobbs and Company of London, aggressively marketed specially made "valentines" for the season. Within a matter of years they were manufacturing not just unique seasonal paper but also folded cardstock with various embellishments and designs.  

The enthusiasm for ready-made valentines quickly took on a life of its own. Whereas earlier holiday letter-writers might have penned a few notes for February 14th, by the turn of the century they were sending scores, and more people then ever were

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19 Staff, 40-42.
participating in the saint's day celebration. The fad was especially hot in London, a fact many Americans undoubtedly knew, because glimpses of the new seasonal sensation popped up in numerous American newspapers. Regional papers throughout the Northeast picked up and reprinted stories about the holiday from English rags. As early as 1805, for example, the Farmer's Register, out of Kingston, New York, noted that, "The number of letters put into the different Twopenny [sic] Post Offices on Valentine's Day...in London amounted to 80,000, which was 20,000 more than in 1804." Six years later the Connecticut Herald printed a story that had first appeared in a "London paper" three months earlier. "Yesterday being Valentine's Day," it noted, "the general two penny post-office was under the necessity of employing nearly 100 more sorters. It is calculated that there could not have been less than 300,000 of these inflammatory packets go through the post-office, within forty-eight hours."

The third and final stage of development of February 14th was in full swing, and it would continue for at least two more decades. By the late 1810s, if not earlier, the custom of sending ready-made notes had spread beyond London to become a national phenomenon, a development that the burdened Post Office noted often. The change in the holiday is readily evident in the etymology of "valentine" itself, as other scholars have pointed out. From the time of Chaucer through the early 1700s, writers had used the name of the saint to refer to the object of one's holiday amour or attention. In other words, one chose or was chosen to be a valentine for the day. By the early 1800s the term also referred to the note one sent, a usage that would become even more common with passing decades. The commercial, card-centered celebration quickly eclipsed other, often local, holiday customs and established February 14th as the single most important day for matchmaking.

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20 [Twopenny; Post Offices], Farmer's Register, 14 May 1805, 2; [Valentine's Day], Connecticut Herald, 14 May 1811, 4. See also, Frank, chapter four.
21 Schmidt, 50; Staff, 40-45; See also the Oxford English Dictionary entry for "valentine."
It is easier to discern how Valentine's Day changed in the late 1700s and early 1800s than it is to pinpoint the reasons for those changes. Yet even without a detailed examination of primary sources, or any scholarly works that rely on them, one can confidently suggest a connection between the new holiday custom of exchanging missives and two broad developments in English society.

First, the decades after about 1780 were marked by what some scholars have termed the "rapid expansion" of the middle class. Historians continue to debate how, when, and why the "middling sort" became a distinct class in England, or even whether those between the landed aristocracy and landless laborers constituted a class or classes before reign of Queen Victoria. Some point to London in the early 1700s as the birthplace of a recognizable middle class; at least one other to the political turmoil of the 1830s.22 Most agree that the middle strata were not a socially or politically unified national block in the early nineteenth century. On the local and regional level, however, the story was much different, and this is where much scholarly attention has turned in recent years. In the years after the French Revolution both the propertied capitalists—those often referred to as "bourgeoisie"—and new groups of professionals and managers—often identified as middle classes—were growing in both numbers and influence. They might not have been a national group, but in their local towns and jurisdictions they wielded increasing political and economic clout, and they developed social and cultural practices that helped bring them together both physically and figuratively. The turn of the century was a time of localized middle-class growth.23

It was also a period of profound economic change. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries Britain was in the midst of its industrial revolution. Recent research has questioned the extent of this revolution, pointing out that industrialization was protracted and uneven across the country. Some locales and sectors of the economy changed drastically and quickly, others very little or slowly.\textsuperscript{24} Yet, if scholars now downplay the transformative power of industrialization, they have paid increased attention to the products of economic growth. The turn of the century ushered in an era of unprecedented consumption. Some goods were made possible by new manufacturing processes, others by improvements in existing methods, and still others by an abundant British empire. Whatever their origins, consumer goods and services flourished, and spending on them continued largely unabated through at least the 1810s. Industrialization was just one part of a larger economic transformation, which by the early nineteenth century had led England to become, to no small degree, a nation of consumers.\textsuperscript{25}

Historians have recently begun to scrutinize and attempt to disentangle the relationship between this growing consumer society and an expanding middle class. Most would agree that a middle class identity derived in large part from consumer habits, rather than from a "relation to the means of production or the body politic." New modes of consumption did not, however, produce a nationally unified "class," at least not right away and not in a socio-political sense. A consumer society might have created "national cultural networks that weakened regional differences," but it also made room for numerous and distinct consumptive habits that contributed to continued economic and

\textsuperscript{24} Wahrman, 1-2.

\textsuperscript{25} The classic study on consumption is Neil McKendrick, John Brewer and J.H. Plumb, \textit{The Birth of a Consumer Society} (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), passim, though the authors focus on the origins of a consumer society rather than its expansion. More recently, see Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, \textit{Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850} (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 195-97 and passim.
geographic variation and thus the "formation and re-formation" of groups, or classes, within a larger middle-class culture.26

The rather sudden popularity around 1800 of exchanging ready-made cards on February 14th was certainly part of this process of middle-class cultural formation vis-à-vis consumption. Commercial missives did not develop out of any sort of technological innovation; many of these sheets were printed using equipment and techniques that were decades, sometimes centuries, old. Consumer demand shaped this new holiday custom. Part of the appeal of manufactured notes derived from the fact that, like the holiday writers from which they sprung and which remained popular, they provided a way for individuals to demonstrate their refinement. By choosing the appropriate image and sentiment, an individual could show off his or her discriminating taste for romantic verse.

More generally, the new custom of trading store-bought cards had clear connections to two of the defining characteristics of middle-class culture: the home and marriage. Earlier holiday traditions had often taken place in public settings or in large gatherings, for instance choosing as one's valentine the first person one saw on February 14th or trading names at a party. Utilizing postal delivery, the sending and receiving of valentines now occurred largely within and between family homes, a space in the middle-class imagination that provided protection and seclusion from the world outside. Pre-commercial celebrations had also revolved around matchmaking in general. Pepys, for example, more than once chose a woman other than his wife to be his valentine. The commercial holiday, however, as we will see in more detail later, focused specifically on amorous relationships, particularly coupling that might eventually lead to marriage. Home was the heart of middle-class culture; marriage its "economic and social building block." Ready-made valentines worked to strengthen both institutions.27

27 Davidoff and Hall, 322.
By the second decade of the nineteenth century the final stage in the development of Valentine’s Day was established. A holiday that had its origins in medieval literature and early-modern matchmaking customs had become a day for penning verse from printed booklets and mailing store-bought notes. Americans did not entirely ignore these developments. They too sometimes used the occasion to write and send poetry. And in at least a handful of towns in the Northeast, unique February 14th customs and celebrations appeared. Yet it would take an economic upturn before the card-centered holiday finally made a full appearance stateside.

Celebrating after a Depression

In the years after Sir Walter Scott's *Fair Maid of Perth* appeared in bookstores, one could visit cities large and small throughout the Northeast in mid February and only occasionally encounter a Valentine's Day celebration. The saint's day had become a regular part of the American popular calendar in the early 1700s, due in no small part to the efforts of the printers, the same trade that would popularize ready-made missives more than a hundred years later. Yet, if eighteenth-century colonists were aware of Valentine's Day, most of them did not mark the occasion. The holiday's plight improved somewhat in the early nineteenth century, as some people used the day to try out new matchmaking exercises and in a few locales distinct February 14th celebrations evolved. Yet the rarity and uniqueness of these early celebrations actually help to explain why it took three decades for the English commercial holiday to establish a foothold in America. After resting in the shadows for decades, the modern holiday, based on exchanging store-bought valentines, burst into the limelight in the early 1840s as the Northeast pulled out of an economic downturn and a growing middle-class flexed its cultural muscle.

The earliest surviving reference to Valentine's Day by a colonist comes from an unexpected source. John Winthrop was one of the founders of the Massachusetts Bay
Colony, its first governor, and one of its most prominent citizens. On February 14, 1629, just months before he set out across the ocean, Winthrop composed to his wife a letter that he closed with the line, “Thou must be my valentine, for none hath challenged me.”

There are a couple of things worth noting about this quote. At the time Winthrop was living in London, where, as we know from the previous section, Valentine's Day was undergoing a renaissance of sorts due to the efforts of Shakespeare and other writers. Winthrop's request to his wife to be his for the day should be read in the light of his proximity to this literary movement while residing in the English capital. Second, Winthrop used "valentine" in the older, Chaucerian sense. He did not, in other words, mention any matchmaking games that were becoming associated with the saint's day.

Winthrop's reference to Valentine's Day was unexpected because, like most Puritans, he was bent on eradicating pagan and Catholic superstitions from the protestant calendar. And, in fact, once he arrived in Massachusetts Winthrop never again mentioned the holiday. Nor, for that matter, did any other seventeenth-century colonist. There is little evidence that the earliest English settlers in New England and the mid-Atlantic continued to celebrate the saint's day. Even those on the "margins," those settlers who did not hold the same beliefs as the more strict Puritan authorities, largely abandoned or forgot February 14th even as they struggled to retain other holidays and traditions in the face of legal prosecution and social pressures.

Almost one hundred years after Winthrop penned the letter to his wife, almanacs reintroduced Valentine's Day into colonial calendars. The first references to the saint's day in these inexpensive booklets actually appeared at the end of the century, in at least two publications from 1687 and 1697. Around 1720, however, name of the patron saint of love started to appear in almanacs with more regularity. For example, of the more than

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one hundred pre-1770 editions that mentioned the holiday, less than half a dozen were published before 1717. Most kept it short and simple by printing “Valentine” or “Valentine’s Day” next to February 14th. Occasionally a publisher would include a pithy rhyme or more lengthy suggestion for how to mark the occasion. In 1728, in the longest entry I have found, James Franklin advised his readers in two paragraphs at the bottom of the page for February of an "infallible" method for finding a lover. "In the evening of Valentine's Day," part of his suggestion read, "do you take two white oak leaves, and lay them across your pillow, when you go to bed, putting on a clean shift or shirt, and turning it the wrong side outwards, lay down and say these words out aloud, Good Valentine be kind to me, in dreams let me my true love see."30

There is no indication that large numbers of people followed Franklin's suggestion, or tried other customs on February 14th. It would be another two decades before references to the saint's day started to appear in unpublished sources. Esther Edwards, daughter of the famous evangelist minister Jonathan Edwards, noted in her diary in 1748, “This is what the world calls St. Valentine’s day, though I have been taught to think that all folly.” Edwards’s use of the phrase “the world” was a reference to those outside of evangelical circles. It may have also been an acknowledgement that some of her less-devout acquaintances celebrated the saint’s day, though if they did none of them left any record of it. In 1772 Anna Green Winslow recorded in her diary that she spent the day spinning yarn. “My valentine was an old country plow-joger,” she wrote bitterly.31 Though this pithy entry is difficult to decipher clearly, Winslow most likely meant that she had to choose a man she saw plowing a field because she was stuck at

30 For an estimate of how often "valentine" appeared in colonial almanacs, I searched Early American Imprints: Series I online. The Rhode-Island Almanack, for the year, 1729 (Newport: J. Franklin, 1729), [no page number]. David D. Hall, Cultures of Print: Essays in the History of the Book (Amherst, Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996), 70.

home on February 14th. Several years earlier, in 1768, Benjamin Carr copied some holiday verse into his "cyphering book." He wrote,

A heart of gold a friend of mine
I chuse you for my volentine
I first cast lots and then I drew
And fortain [fortune] said it must be you
Drew you out from all the Rest
The Reason was I love you best
Shure as the grape grose on the vine
So sure you are my volentine...
for lillys white and vilots blew
Crown Nation Sweet and so are you
Remember what their is to pay
A pair of gloves on yester day

Jennifer Monaghan notes that Carr had committed the lines to heart after hearing them orally, "as his rendering of 'carnation' suggests." It is also worth pointing out that there is no evidence that he actually sent the lines to anyone. His references to drawing lots and choosing a valentine for the day read more like recitations of established literary traditions than examples of customs he actually practiced.32

The entries from Edwards, Winslow and Car suggest that almanacs had successfully reacquainted colonists with the saint's day. By the middle of the century some people were even aware of, and might have participated in, English holiday customs like choosing the first person one saw on February 14th as a valentine or drawing lots at a party. Yet the rarity of these three entries is equally telling. There are undoubtedly other manuscript references to Valentine's Day hidden away in archives throughout the country, but they probably do not total more than several dozen. Taken together, these few eighteenth-century records suggest that while English customs had not been completely forgotten, they were not widely celebrated either. Most colonists

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32 Benjamin Carr, Cyphering Book, in Miscellaneous Manuscripts, 9001-C, Box 4, Rhode Island Historical Society. I am indebted to Professor Monaghan for her email exchanges about this poem.
recognized February 14th as Valentine's Day, but chose not to celebrate the day in any way.

As the eighteenth century came to a close, the holiday's fortunes began to change. Carr's poem for February 14th was an indication that at least some colonists had started to view the day as an opportunity to compose verse. Many other people began to create illustrated sheets or cards for the occasion. Often these notes took the form of what were called "love knots" or "puzzle purses." Made from large pieces of paper, usually bigger than modern-day letter-sized sheets, puzzle purses were decorated with images and verse and then folded so that their recipients opened them in a way that revealed their contents in an order designated by their senders (see figure 1). Love knots were hand-drawn images of loops and twists with verse or prose written inside. These homemade letters are common today in both archives and private collections, and their availability attests to the growing association of the holiday after 1800 with constructing cards. Like their counterparts across the Atlantic, Americans increasingly viewed a "valentine" as something one sent and wrote, not just a person one chose for February 14th.33

Ironically, this initial American fashion for constructing cards at home, especially on February 14th, might have been due, at least in part, to the success of commercial valentines in England. Schmidt notes that nearly half a century later the fad for store-bought missives throughout the Northeast would inspire many people to make their own, a trend that largely petered out during the 1850s.34 A similar process could have been at work around the turn of the century. We know from the previous section that Americans were aware of the craze for store-bought valentines in England; newspapers repeatedly reminded their readers of burdened British post offices and ballooning card sales on February 14th. Although these new commercial goods were not readily available

33 Staff, chapter 3; Ruth Webb Lee, A History of Valentines (Wellesley Hill, Massachusetts: Lee Publications, 1952), chapter 2; Schmidt, 47-56.
34 Schmidt, 52.
Figure 1: Puzzle Purse ca. 1800

Courtesy of the Hallmark Historical Collection
stateside, knowledge of their existence and popularity could have inspired some individuals to make their own. The impact of a growing consumer market overseas reached even those who were distant from it and did not participate in it directly.

Yet one must be careful not to exaggerate the popularity of making notes such as love knots for Valentine’s Day. First, puzzle purses and other kinds of intricately designed letters were not linked exclusively to February 14th. Collectors all too often lump these amorous homemade cards together, referring to them simply as valentines. Puzzle purses did sometimes include visual and written imagery associated with the holiday. The example in figure 1 includes drawings of Cupid, hearts, and pairing birds, for instance. But these notes were sent throughout the year, any time one wished to initiate courting or express loving feelings for someone else. Like the matchmaking customs of early-modern England that gradually became associated primarily with February 14th, at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries, handwritten sheets were often, but not solely, produced for the lovers’ holiday. Their popularity was due as much to the transatlantic vogue for letter-writing, as it was to interest in Valentine’s Day specifically.35

Secondly, substantial quantities of puzzle purses have survived in part because modern-day card collectors have coveted them, viewing them as artifacts of the holiday before it became corrupted by industrial production at the end of the nineteenth century. The numbers of extant love knots and puzzle purses certainly indicate that they were not uncommon in early America. In certain locales and at specific times they might even have been popular. But sending homemade notes was not necessarily a standard holiday practice in the first few decades of the nineteenth century, certainly not as widespread as mailing mass-produced sheets would become in the 1840s and 1850s.

35 Both Staff and Lee conflate “valentines” with handmade notes in general. See Schmidt’s critique, 322, note 36.
The limited impact crafting illustrated sheets had on Valentine's Day in early America is evident from the lack of references to the practice in newspapers and magazines and, conversely, from journalistic laments about the state of the holiday at home. I have encountered no contemporary published accounts that linked puzzle purses or love knots to February 14th. On the other hand, by the 1820s papers and magazines not only ran pieces about the numbers of cards exchanged in England during the season; they occasionally published opinion pieces that decried the lack of holiday celebrations at home. Connecticut's *Norwich Courier* proclaimed in 1828, after briefly describing the history of the holiday in England, "We have no popular festivals of this kind, in our degenerate days." More than half a decade later the *New York Mirror* lamented, "St. Valentine's day! I wish all these pretty, golden days, which, like the flowers in the sundial of Linnaeus, were wont so gaily to mark the flight of time, were not becoming so dim in our calendars." A sentence later the short op-ed piece ended, "I wish we were not making all things, of all sorts, so completely of a neutral tint." Such cries for mid-February celebrations did not reach anything near a fever pitch before the early 1840s. They ran only occasionally and in just a few Northern periodicals and papers. Nonetheless, their appearance indicated that in at least some locales and among some Northern residents the ground had become more fertile for saint's day festivities.36

Whether in response to these editorials, to accounts of card-giving in England, to particular local pressures, or a combination of all three factors, some locales and cities did develop distinctive holiday celebrations. As early as 1822 the *Saturday Evening Post* noted that, "It is the custom in many of the villages of New Jersey, to send the ladies a verse or two by way of compliment on Valentine's day [sic], expressive (of course) of affection and unalterable love." Almost a decade later, *The American Monthly Magazine* suggested that, "[Valentine's Day] is not universally observed as a holiday in our country,

and probably in many sections it is hardly known, but in some towns settled partly by English emigrants, it is sacredly kept." Needless to say, both of these accounts should be read with a critical eye. Their claims about gentlemen sending ladies cards, and English immigrants clinging tightly to holiday traditions, are suspiciously similar to stories about February 14th in England that American papers at the time were picking up and reprinting. They very well could have been less descriptions of actual events than the wishful thinking of their editors.\(^{37}\)

There was, however, one local festivity that we can be certain did exist, because accounts of it appeared in numerous sources. It was without a doubt the grandest holiday celebration in the Northeast before the 1840s, and perhaps the longest lived too. In 1825 the annual Bachelors' Ball of New York City, which had been held at least once already, was moved to Valentine's Day. That year the Salem Gazette, quoting from a Manhattan paper, noted, "We are pleased to learn that Valentine's day [sic], the 14th of February, is selected for the annual Bachelors' Ball, which it will be recollected was got up last year in a very splendid manner." The holiday ball would last for slightly more than fifteen years and eventually inspire imitators in other cities, such as Baltimore, along the eastern seaboard.\(^{38}\)

During the first few years of its existence, the Valentine's Day soiree was notably different from what it would become in the 1830s. For one thing, it was a decidedly exclusive affair. The event initially took place at the City Hotel. Established in 1796 and located along lower Broadway, the City Hotel had for years catered to Manhattan's economic and social elite. In addition to hosting dignitaries when they visited the island, the hotel was a regular meeting ground for the city's "wealthiest and most learned" citizens, as someone from the time put it. The annual soiree would be no different. "The

\(^{37}\) "For the Saturday Evening Post," Saturday Evening Post, 1.61 (September 1822), 3; "The Editor's Table," The American Monthly Magazine, 1.12 (March 1830), 870.  
\(^{38}\) "Bachelors' Ball," Salem Gazette, 8 February 1825, 3; "[Bachelor's Ball; Baltimore; Cupid]", Pittsfield Sun, 12 March 1840, 2.
managers" of the event, a local paper wrote, "are amongst the most respectable of unmarried men." These organizers not only invited only the well-to-do, they also restricted the size of the event. At least the first few were "limited to 300 gentlemen...with two ladies each," which, a local paper reassured its readers, "will make it sufficiently brilliant."\(^{39}\)

As this last quote suggests, the early Bachelors' Balls also reflected the interests of the city's male businessmen. They located the event in the commercial district, which as two historians of Manhattan note, was "on its way to becoming a separate male preserve" in the 1820s. Although the City Hotel itself offered a popular Ladies' Dining Room, in order to get to the ball female guests had to travel to a part of the island most of them did not visit regularly. Once they arrived, women might have outnumbered men at the holiday party—two to one if accounts were accurate—but they were there for the pleasure and benefit of their male hosts. One observer suggested that the bachelors in attendance, "who range from 30 to 60," hoped that the party might end their "single wretchedness." Whether or not they hoped to marry, most of the male hosts were there to see and be seen by "respectable" ladies, who used the occasion to "dress in the most becoming style." Once a year, then, well-to-do women entered this predominantly male space, both literally and figuratively, in order to attend a party the putative aim of which was to marry off some of the city's most well-known bachelors.\(^{40}\)

Sometime in the early 1830s the nature and composition of the holiday ball began to change. The first indication of this shift appeared in an article in the *New York Mirror* from 1832. Addressing those women who perused the paper, the editor wrote, "The balls managed by this society have always presented a fine display of fashion, and it is almost superfluous to commend them to the attention of our fair readers." He then continued,


\(^{40}\) "30 to 60" quoted from "Bachelor's Ball," *The Pittsfield Sun*, 14 February 1828, 2; "becoming style" quoted from "From Noah's National Advocate. Bachelor's Ball," *Boston Commercial Gazette*, 16 February 1826, 1; Burrows and Wallace, 461;
"Rumor is already busy touching the throngs of the young and the beautiful briskly preparing for the occasion." Whereas earlier commentators had referred to ladies and gentlemen more generally, and in at least one case to those between the ages of 30 and 60, the writer for the *Mirror* singled out young women specifically and youth more generally. This age group was becoming an important constituent of the annual party.

The event was not held in 1835, the bachelor's society noting simply that they, "deeply lament that circumstances beyond their control...have interfered with their arrangements for a Grand Ball." Around the same time the holiday party moved from the City Hotel to Niblo's Garden. In 1839 the *New York Mirror* reminded its readers, "St. Valentine's day [sic] will as usual be celebrated at Niblo's saloon, to be given by the old bachelors' club." Established in 1828 at the intersection of Broadway and Prince Street, Niblo's had become in a matter of years "the city's leading outdoor venue." The relocation of the ball to this complex was important, for it signaled how the event had changed during the '30s.

Consider the location William Niblo chose for his "outdoor garden." More than twenty blocks north of the financial district, the environment could not have been more different from that around the City Hotel. In 1828 it was considered "almost rural," but by the middle of the decade, as we will see in more detail in the next chapter, it "defined the northern boundary of the fashionable Broadway." This was the area where New York's well-to-do increasingly came to shop and to live, and Niblo's had become their most popular meeting place. Unlike the City Hotel, the garden and its environs were hospitable to "wealthy and well-bred ladies," who, along with their carriages, were a common sight along upper Broadway. And it was, furthermore, a place where "unchaperoned genteel couples" could enjoy "expensive food and urbane entertainments"
under the watchful eyes of respectable adults. It was also spacious. Combining a garden, theater, saloon and hotel in one setting, the complex could hold 3,000 people at a time. In its sheer size, Niblo's could accommodate far more guests than the purposely more restrictive City Hotel ever did. Yet the proprietor also assured that his clientele would be selective by charging "high entrance fees" and high prices for food. By eschewing both garishness and snobbery, Niblo had established a decidedly middle-brow complex, a place where numerous and varied members Manhattan's middle-class families could congregate together, without worrying about rubbing elbows with the city's poor.43

Throughout the late 1830s and the first couple years of the 1840s, every February 14th Niblo's was thronged. One can get a sense of both the size and composition of these holiday crowds from newspaper notices that appeared just before Valentine's Day. In 1839, for example, the "Managers" of the event instructed, "Carriages will set their company down with the horses heads towards Houston street, and take them up in reversed order. Gentlemen will discharge their carriages on arrival, and returning will take the first in line to prevent confusion." A similar but shorter notice appeared again in the Commercial Advertiser in 1841.44 The annual ball had become so large that the organizers had to direct traffic in order to limit congestion on the street when it ended in the evening. The well-to-do attendees not only arrived in carriages, they were instructed to park them facing up Broadway. After the party, these men and women did not head down toward the commercial district, but rather, as we will see in more detail in the next chapter, toward the growing middle- and upper-class neighborhoods north of Niblos'.

By the mid 1830s the established Bachelors' Ball had become largely an occasion for middle-class families, a subtle but important shift marked by the move from the City Hotel to Niblo's Garden. It was still organized by, as a local journalist observed, "the old

43 "defined" quoted from Caldwell, 84; "well-bred" and "unchaperoned" quoted from Burrows and Wallace, 585; "almost rural" quoted from Mary Ann Smith, "The Metropolitan Hotel and Niblo's Garden: A Luxury Resort Complex in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Manhattan," Nineteenth Century 5.4 (1979), 45.
bachelors' club" in order to "speedily...reduce their ranks." But it also now included large numbers of "younger members of the fraternity" and "fair townswomen." This decidedly age-mixed crowd gathered together every February 14th in a location that was equally hospitable to men and women, and that, in 1839 at least, "[provided] a more elegant and sumptuous entertainment than ever." The annual soiree was, to a large extent, an occasion for the grown children of the city's well-to-do to gather together in the company of adults. It was a telling precursor to the custom of trading valentines that would soon become popular.

Almost as quickly as the annual Bachelors' Ball made the transition to Niblo's Garden, it disappeared. By 1842 announcements for the event had stopped showing up in February editions of New York newspapers. Few, if any, journalists or writers would mention the popular soiree again during the next twenty years. It was largely forgotten, or perhaps ignored. Why did the ball vanish, becoming passé within a just a few years? The answer begins with one of the worst depressions Americans had experienced since declaring independence more than half a century earlier.

The so-called Panic of 1837 had numerous and complex origins, including President Jackson's monetary policies, land speculation in the west, and lending by British banks. What began as a speculative boom in 1835 and 1836 quickly turned into a debtor's nightmare in 1837, when thousands of banks around the country stopped exchanging specie (gold and silver coin) for paper money. Millions of Americans were then left with highly devalued paper money. Unemployment soared. People fortunate enough to find or keep work watched as their real wages declined by about a third before 1842. And investment ground to a halt. For close to five years after the initial collapse the economy crept along.46

45 "Bachelors' ball," The New York Mirror, 2 February 1839, 255.
Then in 1842 the country started to emerge from its depression. What followed was a boom era that lasted about fifteen years, until the next bust cycle in 1857. During most of the 1840s and 1850s economic expansion was visible just about everywhere. Western farmers turned to new forms of mechanization and technology to generate larger yields, while many of their eastern counterparts experimented with new agricultural techniques and practices. In both areas farmers increasingly produced goods for sale to distant markets. Much of their produce found its way to industrializing centers, particularly along the eastern seaboard. From Baltimore to Boston factories and shops prospered, due in large part to innovations, mechanization, and the availability of cheap labor as immigrants poured into the country. Helping to tie all of this economic growth together were rapidly expanding railroad and telegraph lines.47

It is important to stress that most of these economic and social changes were not new. Rather, they were accelerations of processes and developments that had existed before the downturn in 1837. Farmers did not suddenly become market-oriented in the early 1840s. Factories and manufacturing did not appear on the social and geographic landscape out of nowhere. Immigration peaked but did not begin in the 1840s and 50s. And, more generally, a pre-existing market economy picked up speed. Yet, despite the fact that the post-panic boom had numerous, deep roots, the scale and rapidity of change Americans experienced during this period was often unprecedented.

Perhaps most importantly, for Valentine's Day at least, the two decades before the Civil War witnessed the economic and cultural growth of the middle class. As with so much else in American society at the time, the middle class did not spring into existence after 1840 and one must be careful not to exaggerate its size or unity. Scholars have placed the "origins" of the middle class as far back as the Revolutionary War era, and

even during the economic upturn of the antebellum period, many middling families continued to struggle to get by from month to month or felt the impact of genteel culture indirectly or little at all. To borrow a phrase from the English context, however, the boom era was a time of "rapid expansion" of the middle class and of middle-class culture. Improvements in manufacturing lowered the costs of many consumer goods, making some of the comforts of genteel life affordable to ever more people. Trains and other forms of transport carried these goods further and cheaper than ever before. New media outlets, including magazines, newspapers, and books, became the voice of the middle class, conveying images of the good life far a field and stirring consumer demand. Even for many individuals who struggled economically, a middling lifestyle was a powerful dream, despite the fact that it might have often been a distant reality.48

How do all of these developments tie into a now-defunct holiday ball in central Manhattan? Antebellum New York became a microcosm, and in many respects, an epicenter for the changes gripping the rest of the Northeast. Its manufacturing base blossomed, its immigrant population ballooned, its retail trade took off, and of course, its middle class grew, both because of rising prosperity among native residents and the influx of individuals and families from the rest of the Northeast hoping for better lives in the city. By the early 1840s this heterogeneous group of New Yorkers had outgrown the bachelor's ball. In a literal sense their numbers had become too big for such get-togethers; in a more figurative sense, the February soiree no longer fit their collective cultural outlook as it once had. A dispersed, increasingly mobile, consumptive and market-oriented middle class cast about for a new way of celebrating February 14th.

What they quickly discovered were ready-made valentines and the custom of exchanging them.

The modern, card-centered Valentine's Day had arrived on American shores, inaugurated and propelled by an era of prosperity. Residents of the Northeast had been aware of saint's day for at least a hundred years. By the early nineteenth century many of them had discovered, through stories in their local papers, both the popularity of the holiday across the ocean and the custom of buying and trading store-bought missives for February 14th. Knowledge of English pastimes might even have inspired residents of some locales to create celebrations of their own. It would take a reversal of fortune after a severe economic depression, however, to open the floodgates to commercial valentines.

During the 1840s and 50s, Valentine's Day followed a course similar to what it had charted in England close to half a century earlier. The popularity of exchanging commercial missives took root a large metropolis—New York instead of London—and quickly spread outward to the countryside and smaller cities. At first, sentimental cards ruled the day. Within a matter of years, however, they faced stiff competition from rude and insulting prints. In the larger picture, then, the commercial holiday was a form of Anglo-American middle-class culture, a transatlantic bourgeois pastime whose ocean-crossing was delayed but not prevented.

With no study of Valentine's Day in England available, it is impossible at this point to offer a detailed comparison of the holiday on both sides of the Atlantic. One can say for certain, however, that the saint's day was malleable enough to conform to the distinctive characteristics it encountered in the antebellum North. There is no evidence that store-bought valentines were widely popular in the South, particular outside of Richmond and Baltimore. The economic upswing of the 1840s and 50s extended below the Mason-Dixon line, but was not accompanied by the same social and cultural changes that the residents further north experienced. What follows is the unique story of a
consumer holiday born of and molded by an early-industrial Northern economy and society.

From their origins in urban print shops, commercial valentines quickly rode a wave of new print media out into the countryside, appealing to and helping to define a new group of consumers. At first they popularized the kind of sentimental language at the core of middle-class culture, in the process generating a distinct perspective on the relationship between commodities and authentic self-expression, but soon they also introduced a playful rebellion against sentimentalism. Shortly after Valentine's Day in 1838, *The New Yorker* noted briefly, "four bushels of love-letters, addressed to 'fayre ladyes,' were deposited in the Post-Office in this city." Within a few years this initial trickle would become a flood. If the history of the middle-class has largely been a history of what it buys, or hopes to buy, then the sudden popularity of store-bought valentines reveals some of the distinctive characteristics of Northern middle-class culture in the years before the Civil War.49

49 "On Wednesday...," *The New Yorker*, 17 February 1838, 765.
Chapter 2

Love in the City: The Business of Valentine's Day in New York

Most residents of the Northeast, even those living in Massachusetts, probably never heard of Esther Howland, despite that fact that her company in Worcester produced tens of thousands of valentines during the decade before the Civil War. It was not uncommon for antebellum Americans, caught in the midst of a market revolution, to be unfamiliar with the producers of their consumer goods. Yet some holiday companies did rise to regional or national prominence and, outside of central Massachusetts, Howland's was not one of them. Popular histories of the holiday have tended to exaggerate this young woman's importance among the early holiday businesses. Two books about Valentine's Day cards, for example, dedicate a chapter each to Esther Howland. And every February journalists around the country continue to recirculate the myth that "she somehow invented the American valentine [or] dominated the American market."

Esther Howland was a successful businesswoman who made a comfortable living producing Valentine's Day cards during the decades around the Civil War, but her efforts represented a small chapter in the larger story of the business of producing and marketing missives for February 14th in the 1840s and 1850s.

Despite Howland's fame among card collectors and antiquarians, little is actually known about her life or business activities. We know from public records that she was born on August 17, 1828, graduated from Mount Holyoke in 1847, and died in Quincy, Massachusetts in 1904. Most of the scant information that exists about her company comes from an interview she gave to the *Boston Globe* in 1901, just three years before her death. In it she claimed that she first discovered valentines in 1848 when her father, a printer and bookseller in Worcester, imported from England a small stock of them for sale in his store. Howland decided she could make similar cards, so she set up shop on the top floor of the family home, hired some young female employees, and the next year began producing her own notes. By the 1860s, Howland stated, she was selling between $50,000 and $75,000 of goods each year, to destinations as far away as California.\(^{51}\)

There is little reason to doubt Howland's financial claims. Examples of her valentines are abundant enough today in collections around the country to suggest that she did indeed establish a sizeable trade. Yet her success occurred largely behind the scenes. There were no advertisements for her cards in newspapers from Boston or New York; nor did merchants in those cities announce that they had the newest examples of missives from Worcester, like they did for valentines from England and Europe.

Amateur scholars of the holiday often make two claims for Howland's significance, one credible the other not. They point to the fact that she was one of the first American card manufacturers to produce "lace valentines," which were popular in England at the time and consisted of intricately cut and embossed paper. Often Howland's designs included colored-paper background and pasted-in colored images, as in figure 2. In fact, one reason for her financial success might have been that, at a time when most other American firms made wood-block or lithographed cards, she produced

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Figure 2: Esther Howland valentine, ca.1850-1859

Courtesy of the Hallmark Historical Collection
"English" valentines that were cheaper than imports. The only clue to the American origin of the her notes would have been a small red "H" on the back, something consumers could have overlooked easily or been unable to identify. Many holiday enthusiasts are also eager to identify a woman as the originator of commercial valentines and thus give Howland more attention and credit than she deserves. Howland, they argue, helped to introduce "feminine" sentimentality and sensibility to the business of card production. Such arguments reflect our own concern with the encroachment of commerce into our personal lives more, as we will see in the next few chapters, than the opinions and attitudes of antebellum Americans.52

In order to discover the origins and activities of Valentine's Day businesses, one must look not to the manicured streets and impressive early-Victorian homes of middle-class, small-town New England. Rather, the holiday's most visible and enterprising companies inhabited the crowded, bustling and often dirty streets of the urban northeast. New York City in particular became the center for commerce associated with February 14th. Philadelphia and Boston had their share of card dealers and manufacturers, but many of these individuals followed business practices similar to their counterparts in Manhattan or, in some cases, formed associations with companies on the island. As New York City became the financial and print capital of North America, it also became home to some of the most prominent firms that produced, marketed and sold goods for February 14th.

The saint's day that these businesses helped to shape, like the other great antebellum holiday, Christmas, was at its core a consumer celebration.53 Companies in Manhattan and elsewhere did not simply manufacture and sell products that they also made available throughout the rest of the year. Nor did they wait for customers to

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52 Staff, 91-98 and Lee, Chapter 4. See Schmidt's critique, 324, note 60.
venture to their stores so that they could craft goods to order. Retailers and producers created printed materials, particularly cards and chapbooks, which were unique to February 14th. They also actively sought to lure customers to their shops and to generate interest—what modern-day commentators might call "buzz"—for their merchandise among more distant shoppers. In the process these merchants revealed the ability of consumer capitalism to mold the ways participants experienced and participated in the modern saint's day, to extend a form of urban middle-class culture into the countryside, and even to shape existing institutions, in this case the Post Office, on which the holiday depended.54

Urban Growth and Holiday Business Expansion

By the time Esther Howland got her business off the ground in the late 1840s or early 1850s, merchants in New York had been promoting their holiday goods for almost a decade. Figure 3 represents the number of distinct companies that advertised in New York newspapers between 1840 and 1860. The first announcement for valentines appeared in 1842, when one business posted in the Sun. Over the next decade or so the number of merchants advertising each year increased and then began a slow decline after 1852. This growth of holiday advertising, and by extension commercial activity, occurred at a time when New York was in the midst of revived economic and physical expansion. During the twenty years before the Civil War, storeowners who sold valentines would both follow the city's growth up the island and create a centralized

54 I conducted the research for this chapter by reading the January and February editions between 1840 and 1860 of every Boston and New York newspaper available on microfilm, and some that I got in paper format through interlibrary loan. This amounted to almost all of the newspapers that have survived from those cities. I chose not to research Philadelphia papers both because of time constraints and, more importantly, I am convinced that the business histories of merchants there would resemble those in the other two more easterly metropolises.
Figure 3: Numbers of Businesses Advertising
holiday retail district to which they attracted customers with promises of abundance and excitement for February 14\textsuperscript{th}.

For New Yorkers, the economic downturn that followed the Panic of 1837 meant not only financial hardship, but also a temporary lull in their expansive settlement of the island. When Washington Irving penned his classic work, \textit{A History of New York}, in the first decade of the nineteenth century, almost all of the city's population was located south of City Hall Park. (In fact, when City Hall was refurbished between 1803 and 1812, the northern side of the building was finished in brick and the other three sides in marble because officials assumed most people would never see the back of it). By the time the Erie Canal was completed in 1825, city dwellers had been moving up the island for years, but during the next decade, from about 1825 to 1835, they pushed north out of the southern tip with increasing speed. Residential migration led the way. Many well-to-do families moved up Broadway, especially into the fifth and eighth wards. Poor inhabitants, meanwhile, settled in the neighborhoods along southern Bowery Street. Some businesses followed these two settlement patterns, but most remained in the area south of City Hall, which was the city's financial and retail center. Few New Yorkers lived or worked above Fourteenth Street (see figure 4).\textsuperscript{55}

During the hard times after 1837 New York's social geography changed little. Then in the mid-1840s and early-1850s the economy boomed and the city experienced a period of unprecedented physical growth and expansion. Observers remarked that the island seemed to be in a state of continual remodeling and construction. In the aftermath of fires in 1835 and 1845 much of lower Manhattan was rebuilt with elaborate Greek Revival style buildings. This area around Wall Street became the financial hub for not only the city but for much of the Northeast. Many of the commercial interests that had


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Figure 4: New York City circa 1832

Broadway travels due north, on the eastern edge of the 3rd, 4th, and 8th wards. Bowery takes a circuitous route along the eastern edge of the 6th, 14th, and 15th wards. Fourteenth Street is located at the top of the map. City Hall is located at the southern triangular tip of the 6th ward. Image taken from David H. Burr, *Map of the City and County of New York with the adjacent country* (Published by Simeon DeWitt, Surveyor General, pursuant to an Act of the Legislature, Second edition, 1832). The complete map can be found at davidrumsey.com
once occupied these same streets moved up Broadway or Bowery, settling in former residential buildings or constructing new retail structures. Broadway and the areas west of it in particular, especially from about City Hall to Canal Street, developed into Gotham's primary commercial district. Those who could afford to flee the increasing noise and congestion of this retail area moved their families further north. The streets around Fifth Avenue, between Washington and Madison Squares, became the city's fashionable residential enclave. By the end of the 1850s around forty percent of New Yorkers, primarily upper- and middle-class residents, lived north of Fourteenth Street. At the same time a swell of poor immigrants, many from Ireland, poured into crowded tenements along and near Bowery Street. Those poor families who could afford to moved up Bowery towards Tompkins square, away from the worse conditions at the southern end of the street, especially the areas near the notorious Five Points district.56

By the late 1850s New York's geography was more segregated by land use than at any previous time in its history—financial at the southern tip, commercial north of there, and residential further north and east. The evolution of the city's spatial layout during the 1840s and the 1850s presented merchants who sold holiday wares with a choice. They could settle into the emerging retail districts along Broadway and Bowery, or they could follow the movement of residents northward. The decisions these business owners made depended in part on the kinds of retail shops they owned and their aspirations for holiday sales.

There were, generally speaking, two kinds of stores that sold goods for Valentine's Day. The most prominent and often the longest-lasting were those owned by retailers who specialized in printed wares. These individuals distributed cards produced by others, manufactured and sold their own, or did both at the same time. In the city directories from the 1840s and 1850s these men called themselves many different things,
including stationer, printer, publisher, and bookseller. Often they would change appellation from one year to the next. Some of these shops lasted only a few years, but many of them survived throughout the 1840s and 1850s. These businesses also took to advertising most readily and aggressively. Of the 76 different merchants who placed newspaper announcements for valentines, 67 were print retailers and one, Adolphus Ranney, started his career as a grocer in 1849 but was a "bookseller" by 1853. Many of these men placed notices in several newspapers each year or advertised year after year.57

Thomas W. Strong was the most notable of this first type of retailer. An engraver, publisher and stationer, Strong started his company in 1843. By the early 1850s he was one of the largest "producers and promoters of valentines" in New York, if not in all of the country. His first advertisement for holiday goods appeared in 1843, when he placed notices in two editions of the Sun. By the early 1850s he was publicizing his cards in three of the penny dailies: the New York Herald, the New York Tribune, and the New York Times. Later in the decade he remained one of the few retailers still promoting his holiday wares in newspapers. Moreover, as Leigh Eric Schmidt points out, Strong exploited "all the forms he had at his disposal" to direct public attention to his store and his cards, including publishing handbills and catalogues and advertising in almanacs and periodicals. His own monthly publication, Yankee Notions, carried notices for his valentines during January and February throughout the 1850s and was just one of the ways Strong promoted his holiday business outside of Manhattan. As we will see in more detail later, he employed numerous means to distribute and tout his goods beyond the city's watery borders. He did this, in part, by making connections with distributors in other cities. In 1849, for example, T.W. Cottrell of Boston publicized in the Boston Daily

Times that he was the "branch depot of T.W. Strong's great importing and manufacturing establishments of New York." 58

Philip Cozans was a rival print dealer who stocked valentines every year in late winter, but he never matched Strong's size or reach. He was also in many ways more typical of stationers who sold holiday goods than was Strong. Cozans got into the game of February 14th merchandising rather late. He opened his print shop with Charles Huestis in 1851. That same year they began selling valentines, advertising their stock in the Tribune. The two men stayed in business together for only two seasons. It is unclear what happened to Huestis, but in 1853 Cozans announced that he sold cards in his own shop, the "successor to Huestis and Cozans." Like Strong, he continued to advertise his notes throughout the 1850s, often buying promotional space in two or three different newspapers each year. Unlike Strong, however, Cozans never produced his own cards. Throughout the 1850s the city directories referred to him either by his occupation, "stationer," or by the goods he sold, "books." He was never called a printer or publisher, nor did he describe himself as such in his advertisements. 59

Despite the fact that Strong produced his own cards and Cozans did not, their stores would have looked quite similar. The mid-century shopper who ventured into either one of these establishments would have encountered a world of printed materials: books, various kinds of stationery, perhaps some magazines and of course, in late January and throughout February, valentines. The stores of the second kind of holiday merchant,

58 See Schmidt's brief biography of Strong, 67. Strong's first two ads in the Sun appeared February 9 & 10, 1843, both on page 3. The cover of one of Strong's catalogues is reproduced in chapter 2. For examples of Strong's self-promotion see the ads in Yankee Notions 2.2 (February 1853): 64, 3.2 (February 1854): 64, 4.2 (February 1855): 32, and 6.2 (February 1857): 64. Strong was first listed as an "engraver" in Doggett's New York City Directory, for 1842-43 (New York: J. Doggett, Jr., 1842), 307; in 1851 he referred to himself as a "publisher," The New York City Directory (New York: Doggett and Rode, 1851), 514. Advertisement for T.W. Cottrell, Boston Daily Times, 9 February 1849, 3.
59 There is no published biographical sketch of Cozans. The quote is from his advertisement in the New York Herald, 8 February 1853, 5. Cozans was first listed in Doggett's New York City Directory, for 1850-51 (New York: J. Doggett, Jr., 1850), 122 with the description "books." In 1857 Trow's New York City Directory, for the Year Ending May 1, 1857 (New York: John F. Trow, 1857), 185, he was listed as a "stationer."
on the other hand, would have looked remarkably different. The men and women who ran these businesses were often general retailers who stocked a variety of merchandise. In addition to valentines they carried a wide assortment of effects, such as food, clothing, medicine, and even, in one case, fishing gear. In the city directories they listed their occupations in a number of ways, including grocer, druggist, and seedsman, or they described themselves by one of the goods they sold, such as pianofortes or glass frames. Antebellum Americans would have called these establishments "dry goods" stores. Quite often these businesses lasted only a few years, changed partnerships regularly, or moved from one location to another. They were also less likely than print retailers to advertise their valentines in newspapers. Of the 76 merchants who placed notices for holiday cards, only 8 were not print dealers. And although their announcements appeared from the late 1840s through the late 1850s, only one of these merchants, George Tuttle, advertised for more than one year, and most of them placed their announcements in only one newspaper.60

John Brown was typical of this group of dry-goods merchants. Located at 122, and later, 103 Fulton Street, Brown took out a notice for his valentines in the New York Tribune in 1847. The ad ran for a week, from February ninth to the sixteenth. He never advertised again that he had holiday cards for sale. That same year Brown described himself in the city directory as a purveyor of "drygoods." He had started his business two years earlier, listing it in the directory as a "hardware" shop. The next year, 1846, he was selling "hardware & fishing tackle." Beginning in 1850 he mentioned only fishing tackle in the directory. His business would remain open through 1856; after that it disappears from the New York City directories. It is impossible to know for sure whether or not

60 Edward Kent listed himself as a "chemist" in the city directories but he was in business with John Black who was a stationer at the end of the 1840s. Therefore I have not included him with the 8 other non-print retailers. See for example, "Edward Kent," Doggett's New York City Directory, for 1845-46 (New York: J. Doggett, Jr., 1845), 202 and "John Black," Doggett's...for 1848-49, 51. See ads for Tuttle, New York Herald, 12 February 1851, 3 and New York Daily Tribune, 10 February 1852, 1. For example, William Cary advertised once in the Evening Post, 10 February 1849, 3 and Thomas Dunlap appeared once in the New York Daily Tribune, 14 February 1852, 1.
Brown carried valentines before and after 1847. He probably decided to try to capitalize on both the "craze" for holiday missives at the end of the 1840s and his location in the Park Row area, a district east of City Hall that we will examine more closely shortly, by taking out a newspaper advertisement, and after 1847 concluded he could not sell enough notes to cover the cost of advertising. It is likely that he continued to stock valentines, at least through the mid-1850s when the fervor for the February wares began to cool, because such printed materials were relatively cheap to buy and stock. He may have even displayed them prominently in his store window for a few weeks, in effect using that public space as inexpensive form of advertising.61

John Brown and other dry goods retailers who advertised valentines for sale were located throughout the bottom half of the city. With a couple of exceptions, however, all of them were situated both outside of the chief shopping district along lower Broadway and south of the affluent residential areas near Fourteenth street. Brown's store was blocks from the intersection of Broadway and Park Row. Another merchant, William Cary, who specialized in "fancy goods," owned a shop in 1848 and 1849 near Wall Street. The rest of the retail establishments were along or near upper Broadway—the region north of City Hall and south of Canal Street—and Bernard McQuillan's "glass frames" outlet was situated at the lower end of Bowery Street.62


62 The addresses for general retailers were as follows; citations for their ads are in parentheses:
   Adolphus Ranney, 293 Broadway (Times, 11 February 1858, 5); Bernard McQuillan, 40 Catherine St. (Sun, 13 February 1857, 4); Charles Ring, 392 Broome St. (Evening Post, 13 February 1845, 2); Thomas Dunlap, 635 Broadway (Daily Tribune, 14 February 1852, 1); John Brown, 122 Fulton St. (9 February 1847, 4); Lewis Lyman, 377 Broadway (Daily Tribune, 10 February 1854, 1); George Tuttle, 345 Broadway (Daily Tribune, 11 February 1851, 1); William Cary, 245 Pearl St. (Evening Post, 10 February 1849, 3).
Undoubtedly there were other dry goods retailers across lower Manhattan who sold cards, some of them perhaps near City Hall or the well-to-do residential areas. One cannot know their numbers exactly because they did not publish newspaper notices. At the very least, however, it is a sure bet that there were more than the eight who chose to advertise. Like John Brown, many of these men and women probably decided that it was affordable and worth their while to stock at least some notes, even though most of them decided not to announce their selections in papers. They would have had no difficulty locating distributors of holiday wares or encountering financial encouragements to sell those firms' goods. Printers and booksellers regularly advertised to dry goods merchants that they could profitably carry at least some cards. Thomas Strong, for example, promised storekeepers that "an easy way to make twenty-five dollars is to send for one of Strong's ten dollar lots of valentines."63

Dry goods merchants kept a low profile during the holiday because they could not hope to compete with print dealers' sales. Whereas a general retailer might hope to move tens, perhaps hundreds, of cards each year, print shops sold hundreds even thousands of notes during late January and February. In 1851, for example, George Tuttle, owner of a "fancy goods" store on Broadway, announced only that he had "a splendid assortment" of valentines; whereas George Ives, a publisher located on Nassau Street, promised his costumers that he carried more than 250 different valentines, "ranging from 6 cents to $5 each." By the late 1840s stationers, booksellers and printers dominated holiday sales and advertising. Not all of these businesses advertised, of course, but many did. If the few ads from general retail stores suggest the ubiquity and easy availability of Valentine's Day cards during the period, the announcements from print dealers provide a clear view

of the locations of seasonal specialists in holiday goods and their responses to urban
growth.64

Like dry goods retailers, print dealers selling valentines could be found across the
city. Throughout most of the 1840s and early 1850s around half of the print shops that
took out newspaper advertisements were located outside of the region around City Hall.
In 1845 four of the eight cards stores that ran announcements were beyond the bounds of
Park Row and lower Broadway. Over the next decade or so this ratio remained about the
same: 9 of 14 in 1847, 4 of 7 in 1849, 4 of 9 in 1851, and 4 of 7 in 1853. Then in 1855
these numbers started to decline. That year only three of nine print dealers who
advertised were not situated near City Hall. In 1857 the ratio was one of four and two
years later Strong, whose shop was located in the Park Row district, was the only
businessman advertising (see figures 5 to 12).

These numbers, however, tell only part of the story. Print shops located outside
of lower Manhattan were generally situated further north than were dry goods retailers.
In 1845 these businesses could be found along lower Bowery Street and within blocks of
Washington Square, just below the growing wealthy residential neighborhoods (see
figure 5). Until 1849 this picture remains about the same, with the addition of several
stores along the northern end of Broadway. Then in 1850 two merchants, Hugh Dunn
and William Jones, both book dealers, began selling valentines near Fourteenth Street, in
the heart of expanding middle-class neighborhoods (see figure 8). By 1855 Dunn had
moved further north and east (see figure 10). In other words, a number of print dealers
who carried cards decided to follow the movement of residents north in order to attract
holiday shoppers who might otherwise have ventured down to the commercial
establishments along and near southern Broadway.

64 Advertisement for "Tuttle's Emporium of Fancy Goods," New York Daily Tribune, 11 February 1851, 1;
ad for George H. Ives, New York Tribune, 12 February 1851, 1.
Figure 5: Print shops advertising in New York newspapers in 1845

The red line is Broadway, the green Bowery Street, and the blue 14th Street. The triangular area at the southern end of Broadway is City Hall Park. Washington Square is located just above the northern most retailers. Store locations marked by purple shapes. Maze and Crowen's shops are just south of Washington Square.
Store locations marked by red shapes. Robert Elton's shop is the red circle at the bottom of Bowery Street, which is marked by a green line.
Figure 7: Print retailers advertising in New York papers in 1849

Store locations marked by purple shapes. Berford's store is at the northern end of Bowery.
Figure 8: Print retailers advertising in New York papers in 1851

Store locations marked by light purple shapes. Dunn's shop is north of 14th Street, Jones just south of it.
Figure 9: Print retailers advertising in New York papers in 1853

Store locations marked by dark blue shapes.
Figure 10: Print retailers advertising in New York papers in 1855

Store locations marked by light blue shapes. Dunn's store was now northeast of the Broadway-14th Street intersection.
Figure 11: Print retailers advertising in New York papers in 1857

Shop locations marked by light green shapes.
Figure 12: Print retailers advertising in New York papers in 1859

Strong's shop is marked by the green circle south of City Hall Park.
These holiday merchants, however, had neither the staying power nor the visibility of their counterparts near City Hall. Robert Elton and Hugh Dunn were the two exceptions. Elton, otherwise known as "Comic Elton" in his advertisements, was one of the most prominent card dealers of the 1840s, publishing announcements for his valentines from 1844 to 1850, even though his business remained open near southern Bowery Street until 1855 (see figure 6). Hugh Dunn ran newspaper ads from 1850 to 1856. The rest of these businesses outside of the dominant commercial district generally advertised their cards for just a couple of years. Thomas Crowen published notices in 1845. Abraham Maze, whose store resided at 237 Bleecker Street from 1843 to 1859, appeared in one newspaper in 1845 (see figure 5). And Richard Berford, who remained in business from 1848 to 1858, ran ads in only 1848 and 1849 (see figure 7). Moreover, with the exceptions of Elton and Berford, most of these merchants limited their exposure in newsprint. Dunn, for instance, posted notices in several papers, including the *Times*, *Tribune*, and *Herald*, but his ads only appeared for a couple of days around February 14th. Others, like Crowen and Maze, appeared in only one paper for just a few days in the week prior to Valentine's Day.

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The print dealers who dominated holiday advertising and who became the most prominent Valentine's Day merchants were all located in the area around City Hall. Thomas Strong, as we have already seen, was the most notable of them all. His shop was located at 98 Nassau Street throughout the 1840s and 1850s. At various times during this period more than half a dozen other print shops along Nassau Street joined Strong in announcing the availability of their cards. Philip Cozans moved from one location to another along Nassau Street, advertising throughout the middle and late 1850s. William Graham, who published *Graham's Magazine* from the "Tribune Buildings," took out announcements in 1846, 1847 and 1848. Most of the other holiday businesses in this area were situated on the lower end of Broadway, just south or west of City Hall Park. James Stringer, for example, first in partnership with Wesley Burgess and later with William Townsend at 222 Broadway, posted notices for his valentines from 1844 to 1850.67

All of these merchants occupied some of the most desirable and visible real estate on the island. This area around City Hall Park was not only the commercial hub of the city; it had become the metaphorical, if not literal, center of New York. City Hall itself, of course, was the focus of the metropolis's politics. By the 1850s lower Broadway, according to Mike Wallace, "had become the busiest boulevard in the world." At the southern end of the park, at the intersection of Broadway and Park Row, sat Phineas Barnum's famous American Museum. Opened in 1841, Barnum's theater attracted throngs of visitors daily with its array of attractions, including a "mermaid" from Fiji and a twenty-five-inch tall dwarf named General Tom Thumb. A little further up Broadway, at the northern end of the park, shoppers could find Alexander Stewart's department store. Completed in 1846 and expanded in the 1850s, this so-called Marble Palace was not just

an architectural marvel, it offered a variety of goods at reasonable prices under one roof and provided a space where fashionable shoppers, especially women, could see and be seen. Further east, across the park, was the Park Row area. During the 1840s this section of New York became the focus of the city's printing industry. All of the major daily newspapers were located here. A number of magazine publishers, including Graham, set up offices on or near Nassau Street. And, as we have seen, book dealers, stationers, and printers were found in abundance along the streets east of Park Row (see figure 13).  

The merchants around City Hall lead the way in February retailing. By clustering together in Park Row and along lower Broadway, they effectively created a Valentine's Day shopping district. New Yorkers might venture to their local dry goods retailer or print shop to quickly pick up a few cards. But in order to find substantial collections of notes, they had to travel down to the City Hall area, where they would encounter a variety and abundance of valentines unavailable elsewhere in Gotham. In 1849 for example, if holiday shoppers did not like any of the 250 different cards they found at George Ives's store, they could walk a couple of blocks up Nassau Street to Dewitt and Davenport, who had "all sorts, to be had at the great depot." If they were still not satisfied, they could venture over to Broadway to Spalding and Shepard, who claimed "our assortment (we believe) will equal any in the city, and as great a variety as we ever had," or to Stringer and Townsend who carried "the choicest beauties from the London and Paris repertories." Of course, there was always Thomas Strong's store, which stocked "three thousand kinds of sentimental valentines" and manufactured "fifty thousand dollars worth" of cards.  

Merchants outside of this shopping district sought ways to compete with these businesses. Robert Elton, whose establishment was located about ten blocks north of

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Nassau Street is one block east of Broadway and Park Row. Strong's store was at the corner of Fulton and Nassau streets. Locations of penny presses indicated by orange circles. The other colored shapes indicate the locations of print retailers who advertised valentines for sale in 1847 and 1849. Circles represent advertisements in the Herald, squares the Tribune, triangles the Evening Post, and circles with dark outlines the Commercial Advertiser.
Park Row, stayed open "from six in the morning until midnight" and promised that "a few dollars may be saved" by shopping at his store instead of downtown. In the same ad, however, he also acknowledged the importance of the holiday shopping district, telling potential costumers "know what's down town, and what they charge, and then come up to 18 Division Street."\(^{70}\)

Merchants in the holiday retail district played an important role in refashioning the late-winter festival into, as Schmidt describes it, a "new holiday centered on shopping." By the mid-1840s people increasingly marked Valentine's Day not just by sending and responding to messages, but also by perusing and buying printed cards in the days and weeks before February 14\(^{th}\). An advertisement by Thomas Strong from around 1848, reproduced in figure 14, includes one of the only images we have of a card dealer's store. The picture revealed the importance Strong placed on window displays. By hanging prints in the front on his shop he believed he could attract a crowd, some of whom, like the man and the woman on the left of the image, would then venture into the store to peruse some more and, he hoped, make a purchase. As we have seen in the case of the dry goods retailer John Brown, businesses across the city would have used similar displays for the same reasons, but in the City Hall area shoppers would have found the densest collection of window advertising. In 1846 Chauncey Shepard, whose store was situated along Broadway two blocks south of Park Row, boasted that, "customers stand reaching over each other's shoulders, trying to supply themselves with some of the varieties found on his counter." Such claims may have been puffery, but they do suggest the growing interest in printed cards and they reveal the efforts of businessmen to spur holiday shopping. In 1848 the Evening Post estimated "that from 50 to 100,000 dollars worth of valentines are annually sold in this metropolis." Although card sales, as indicated by newspaper advertising, declined in the mid-1850s, by that time shopping had

\(^{70}\) Advertisement for Comic [Robert] Elton, New York Herald, 10 February 1845, 3.
Figure 14: Ad for T.W. Strong circa 1848

Oh, Ho! St. Valentine's Day!

VALENTINES! VALENTINES! — All varieties of Valentines, imported and domestic, sentimental, humorous, witty, comic, serious, local, and national, get up in the most superb style on lace paper and gold, without regard to expense. Also, Envelopes and Valentine Writers, and everything connected with Valentines, to suit all customers' tastes, varying from six cents to ten dollars; for sale wholesale and retail at

98 WHOLESALE & RETAIL, 98

T.W. STRONG,
PUBLISHER & ENGRAVER

Great Depot of Valentines, 93 Nassau street.

Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society
become an entrenched part of Valentine's Day festivities, thanks in large part to the efforts of merchants in Park Row and along lower Broadway. In 1855 the Herald encouraged its readers that, "the result of [these merchants'] exertions can be seen by taking a peep at the windows in Broadway, Nassau street, the Bowery [or] Canal street." \(^71\)

Perusing for and purchasing cards became an important part of the holiday, not coincidentally, during a time when the nature of shopping itself was changing. Valentine's Day retailers, particularly those near City Hall, helped to transform stores from "places of grubby market exchanges" to sites of excitement and adventure by associating them with fantasy, desire and abundance. They did this in part by highlighting the wealth and excess made possible by a market economy during a period of economic growth. Strong, for example, proclaimed in 1846 to have "a valentine of glory...a ONE HUNDRED DOLLAR VALENTINE." "Run right down and look at it," he told his readers. Other merchants around City Hall followed the example of Barnum's theater and Stewart's department store by emphasizing that their premises were full of wonder and awe, not just market goods. String and Townsend announced that they had a "California Valentine." "Roll up, tumble up, but don't come all at once" to see it, they warned. In 1846 Philip Cozans announced that his store on Nassau Street had opened "for exhibition" and Strong repeatedly referred to his business as not just a store but as a "temple" of consumer goods. If all of this was not enough for the reluctant shopper, merchants sometimes tied their shops to the supernatural or fantastic. Cupid himself, they claimed, had personally designated their stores as his official outlet. This association of shopping with adventure and entertainment, creating needs consumers did

not know they even had, would accelerate in the years after the Civil War, but it clearly
had its origins, in part, in the activities of antebellum Valentine's Day retailers.\textsuperscript{72}

Holiday merchants also sought to attract both male and female shoppers. Thomas
Strong's depiction of his storefront includes an image of one female customer. Moreover,
as we will see in more detail in the next chapter, retailers targeted their newspaper
advertisements to both young men and women. Some scholars have argued that during
the 1850s shopping increasingly became a female preoccupation, especially among
middle-class women who spent substantial portions of their days shopping for themselves
and their families. Valentine's Day card dealers, however, sought to attract as many
customers as they could, regardless of their sex. On the streets in Park Row and along
Broadway, during the days before February 14\textsuperscript{th} one would see throngs of men and
women searching for cards, as the \textit{Herald} put it with some exaggeration, "to suit
customers of every rank in life, of every variety of taste, and of almost any caliber of
purse."\textsuperscript{73}

Valentine's Day print retailers around City Hall responded to their city's growth
by creating a holiday retail district, and they sought to draw customers downtown through
the promise that shopping could be an event that excited one's imagination and fancy, not
just a task one did to fulfill material needs. Meanwhile, dry goods stores and print shops
further north expanded out to reach customers in growing residential areas, attempting to
garner business by creating locations that were convenient as well as exciting. In the
process, all of these merchants helped to make shopping for manufactured cards an
integral part of the holiday. None of them, however, could hope to expand sales for

\textsuperscript{72} Quote from Schmidt, 65; advertisement for Strong, \textit{New York Herald}, 12 February 1846, 3; ad for
Herald}, 11 February 1856, 8; see for example Strong's advertisement, \textit{New York Herald}, 13 February 1854,
4.

\textsuperscript{73} One might argue that the woman in Strong's depiction is tellingly escorted by a man. Images of
bookstores after the Civil War, however, clearly show women shopping by themselves. There is no
evidence from the antebellum period that men were expected to accompany women who shopped for cards.
See for example Spann's description of women shopping at Stewart's department store, 97. "City
February 14th solely through the use of attractive window decorations or by word of mouth. They had to find a way to attract the attention of large numbers of potential customers, including those outside of Manhattan, and by the late 1840s they increasingly did so by placing ads in a new type of newspaper.

**Holiday Advertising and the Rise of the Penny Press**

Antebellum New Yorkers used the term "penny press" to describe the *Sun*, *Herald*, *Tribune*, and *Times* because a copy of these publications generally sold at one or two cents, or about one-third the price of traditional commercial rags. The low cost of these periodicals meant that they were affordable to people of various incomes and contributed, in the words of one scholar, to the creation of "America's first mass medium." While the stories and opinion pieces these dailies published might have constituted a new type of investigative and provocative journalism, the advertisements they ran were an equally important ingredient, often occupying more than half the pages of any edition. Valentine's Day businesses knew they could reach a vast audience with announcements in low-cost newsprint. They relied on notices in these papers not only to attract people to their stores and generate interest in their goods among local residents. They also hoped to reach potential customers far removed from the watery borders of Manhattan. Holiday merchants' dependence on far-flung interest in the new penny rags extended a form of urban, middle-class culture to the countryside, while at the same time,

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like a spider on a web, luring readers—figuratively but not usually literally—back to shops in Gotham.\footnote{For analysis of the development of a distinct middle class in mid-century metropolises, see Stuart M. Blumin, \textit{The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760-1900} (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), passim.}

In the mid-1840s holiday firms took out ads in a variety of newspapers. As one can see in figure 3, every season between 1846 and 1849 notices appeared in at least four different titles. During these years three of the penny dailies carried announcements, but so did their commercial rivals like the \textit{Journal of Commerce} and the \textit{Commercial Advertiser}. These later two periodicals catered primarily to business interests by printing accounts of commercial and financial news. Then in 1850 the holiday advertising landscape changed abruptly. That year the \textit{Commercial Advertiser} ran promotions for two businesses. It never again carried any notices for February 14\textsuperscript{th} cards. Throughout the 1850s only the \textit{Herald, Tribune,} and \textit{Times} publicized the availability of Valentine's Day goods, with the \textit{Sun} making an occasional appearance.\footnote{The \textit{Sun} probably carried numerous ads in the 1850s, just like the other penny dailies, but I was unable to locate many copies of this paper later than 1850.} Moreover, even during the 1840s penny newspapers dominated holiday advertising. Every year there were as many or more of them running notices as there were commercial papers. And with the exception of 1847, when the \textit{Commercial Advertiser} claimed the most number of merchants appearing in its pages, throughout the 1840s penny rags had an equal or greater number of holiday firms paying to appear in their sheets. Despite some competition from commercial newspapers in the 1840s, the inexpensive dailies were already laying claim to advertising for February 14\textsuperscript{th}.

The penny papers' dominance of Valentine's Day advertising, and the competition between them for holiday business, is even more evident when one compares the number of distinct companies that purchased newsprint space in the twenty years before the Civil War. The two main commercial gazettes attracted fewer businesses in total than any of the penny dailies did by themselves. The \textit{Journal of Commerce} carried one
announcement, for Wheeler, Wood, and Company in 1848, and the Commercial Advertiser, before ads for February 14th disappeared from its pages in 1850, managed to lure sixteen holiday firms.77 Meanwhile, the Sun, which hosted the least number of companies of all the inexpensive periodicals, printed promotions for somewhere around twenty different shops. The New York Times, which started publication in 1851, managed to pull in eighteen advertisers before 1860, and the Herald twenty-seven. The Tribune stood head and shoulders above any of them. It printed announcements for forty-seven different holiday companies in the 1840s and 1850s, a fact we will examine more closely later.78

One could say that the penny press and Valentine's Day advertising developed together. The 1840s witnessed the unprecedented growth of inexpensive newsprint. When newspaper announcements for holiday cards first appeared in 1842 there were three low-cost dailies available on the streets of New York. The Sun got out of the starting gate first, going into print in 1833. Two years later James Gordon Bennett established the Herald. In 1841 Horace Greeley issued the first copy of the New York Daily Tribune. And in 1851 the New York Times joined these three titles. Exact circulation numbers for any of these periodicals are impossible to come by because no independent agency collected them before the Civil War and because their publishers were notorious for exaggerating them. During the 1840s the quotidian circulation of commercial publications probably numbered in the thousands. Two studies of these

77 Ad for Wheeler, Wood & Co, Journal of Commerce, 12 February 1848, 2. The firms that advertised in the Commercial Advertiser are the following, with citations for some of their ads in parentheses: Burgess, Stringer & Co. (4 February 1848, 2), Shepard's (9 February 1847, 2), Clark & Austin (2 February 1847, 2), C. Holt Jr. (11 February 1847, 2), Wm. Taylor & Co. (5 February 1847, 2), Berford & Co. (14 February 1849, 2), Stringer & Townsend (14 February 1850, 2), Spalding & Shepard (14 February 1849, 2), L.H. Embree (12 February 1849, 2), Emporium of Art Rooms (13 February 1846, 2), Clark & Austin (2 February 1847, 2), Saxton & Huntington (14 February 1846, 2), Jansen & Bell (13 February 1846, 3), Tiffany, Young & Ellis (14 February 1845, 1), W.H. Graham (3 February 1847, 2) and H. & S. Raynor (3 February 1847, 3).

78 I counted 12 different businesses advertising in the Sun, but since I was unable to locate copies of the paper for most of the 1850s, I have estimated its total at around 20. I think this is a good guess since advertising declined after 1850. See Appendix 1 for the tallies of companies that posted notices in penny papers.
papers have estimated that fewer 2,000 copies of each title were sold on any given day. The penny rags, meanwhile, each circulated tens of thousands of copies daily. Bennett boasted in 1836 that he sold 40,000 of his *Herald* everyday. Such claims were almost certainly inflated. During the early 1850s the total per diem circulation for all the pennies was probably just over 100,000. By the end of the Civil War, however, both the *Tribune* and the *Herald* most likely sold more than 100,000 copies a day each, as both their editors claimed.\(^{79}\) Despite the lack of clear circulation figures, by the 1850s the cheap chronicles clearly commanded sales of Manhattan's newspapers.

The penny press rose to prominence in the 1840s for several reasons. Most obviously, publishers tapped into the city's growing population by offering newsprint that a majority of New Yorkers could afford to buy, at least occasionally. But they also had to provide publications that people would want to purchase. Most scholars of nineteenth-century journalism argue that men like Bennett and Greeley succeeded where others failed because they helped to found a new kind of reporting. Whereas older commercial rags recounted events, the penny papers made news. Most notably, following the murders of a prostitute in 1837 and a printer in 1841, the inexpensive periodicals did not just relate how they had died and who had killed them. They investigated the lives of the victims and the background of the murderers, provided lurid and even salacious descriptions of the crime scene, and took their readers inside the courtroom trials of the accused, all the while offering opinions on who did it, why, and how they should be punished. In the early 1840s, during the so-called Moral Wars, the penny editors even went at each other, using editorials to critique and impugn their rivals' ethics and morality. All of this made for exciting, engaging and galvanizing newsprint. New Yorkers poured over the newest details about a murder, debated the "facts" about a

\(^{79}\) Schiller, 13-14; Crouthamel, 37 and 54; Tucher, 228, note 13.
case, took sides in the disputes between publishers, and in the process drove up sales of the cheap dailies.\textsuperscript{80}

The penny editors also succeeded because they devised new, creative ways of generating profits. Commercial publishers had relied on two sources of revenue. They sold their titles as yearly subscriptions and they charged companies an annual fee to advertise. Both of these measures insured some financial security, but they also made the newspapers and their advertising space prohibitively expensive for many New Yorkers and businesses. Penny publishers continued to sell their periodicals on subscription, especially to readers outside the city, but they also developed two new innovations. First, they hired newsboys to hawk individual copies on the street, providing New Yorkers access to the news without making them commit to pricey subscriptions. Second, publishers allowed companies to buy advertising space for a set period of time and they insisted on cash payment in advance. The \textit{Herald}, for example, charged around fifty cents a day for eight to twelve lines. These policies allowed smaller shops, like general retailers, to run announcements for only a few days around February 14\textsuperscript{th}, while larger stores might advertise for more than a month. Commercial editors eventually adopted these innovations, but by then it was too late. Daily editions of penny newssheets remained cheaper than their commercial rivals, which became known as "sixpenny" newspapers, and the inexpensive chronicles came to dominate print advertising all year long by the 1840s.\textsuperscript{81}

From our perspective all the Valentine’s Day announcements the penny papers carried during the 1840s and 1850s look similar and rather bland. Holiday ads were rarely accompanied by images. With a few exceptions they contained only printed letters

\textsuperscript{80} The most complete study of the murders and the Moral Wars is Tucher, passim. See also, Crouthamel, chapter 2 and Schiller, chapter 2.

\textsuperscript{81} Tucher, 9; Schiller, 12-13; Crouthamel, 51-52. During the 1840s many penny papers used cryptic notes at the bottom of ads to indicate how long they should be printed. For example, "f11 is to 15" meant that the ad for Tiffany, Young and Ellis’s valentines ran from February 11 to 15, including the Sunday edition (\textit{New York Herald}, 12 February 1844, 3).
and numbers. Many of them were also short, half-an-inch to an inch in length. This uniformity resulted largely from the policies of newspaper editors. Publishers began using illustrations as accompaniments to stories in the 1830s, and by the 1840s images occasionally appeared in advertisements. But producing and printing wood block illustrations was expensive, and when holiday businesses did include them, they generally consisted of small, crude reproductions of cupids, hearts or generic decorations. Thomas Strong's impressive rendition of his storefront in the ad reproduced in figure 14, in other words, was unusual. More importantly, though, even businessmen, such as Strong, who could afford to include elaborate images faced opposition from newspaper editors who wanted to conserve space. By the early 1840s, James Crouthamel notes, "advertising was causing a space problem" for many cheap dailies. Bennett and other editors responded by limiting the length of notices to eight or twelve lines, allowing only small illustrations, and printing the entire section in small font. Holiday newspaper advertising would get more vibrant and elaborate only after the Civil War, in part because of the adoption of lithography in place of woodcuts and because advertisers generated increasingly larger revenues for papers. 82

Despite the apparent sameness of Valentine's Day print announcements, businesses found creative ways to attract the perusing reader's attention. Some of the work was done for them. In 1846 the Tribune became the first paper to place all the classifieds for valentines together on the same column and page. Readers no longer had to browse through the entire periodical to find announcements for cards. Within a few years the rest of the penny papers had followed suit, many of them printing "Valentines" in large letters at the top of the section. Companies sought to capture consumers' notice by emphasizing the uniqueness or size of their stock of cards or the fantastic qualities of their shops. Many of them also used poetry, instead of or in addition to prose, to promote

82 Crouthamel, 34, 51-52; Tucher, 152 and 199-200.
their wares and differentiate their space from other, smaller ads. Thomas Strong was particularly apt to use this technique. In 1858, for example, he ran a notice, about three inches long, that started:

Valentiniana
Doves once, 'tis said, bore Cupid's mails,
Tied to their necks and wings and tails,
And without charge their little bills
Presenting at the window sills:
Awoke fair maids, who cut the twines
That joined the bird and Valentine.

Finally, some businesses manipulated the appearance of the text on the page in order to grab the reader's eye. One method they used was to separate short paragraphs with pithy lines or single words. In 1845 Chauncey Shepard cut his ad into four sentences using the words "Valentines," "Shepard's," and "43,999" (see figure 15). Other companies ran the same text, usually only several sentences long, repeatedly in the same column, hoping that repetition would make the notice difficult to overlook. Such techniques, though crude by later standards, were nonetheless creative forms of advertising within the strictures of mid-century newsprint.83

Perhaps most importantly, by the late 1840s advertisers increasingly employed, and editors insisted on, fresh copy. Bennett and his competitors believed that "advertising columns were news," providing a "panoramic view of life" in the city, and that like entertainment or news stories they should be up-to-date. In 1847 Bennett began limiting notices to two days in duration, hoping they would be changed more often rather than run for weeks at a time. Valentine's Day was perfectly suited to this new approach to advertising. Because it was seasonal, the holiday provided a dependable, climatic form of publicity for newspapers and businesses alike. Every year readers turned to the penny

ST. VALENTINE'S DAY is near at hand, and it's time
to be looking round for a supply. Have you seen
SHEPARD'S
Window dressed out with some of the finest
VALENTINES
to be found in this country.
It is expected that there will be sold in this city alone, to
say the least,
43,999.
And a liberal share of patronage is solicited for the store
where a little money will buy a great many Valentines, and
it well known that the place for that is at
77 SHEPARD'S, 191 Broadway, opposite John-st.
rags to see how advertising for February 14th would unfold that season. Who would advertise where and for how long? When would new notices appear and when would new businesses post announcements? Though it lacked much of the sensationalism and intrigue of a good crime story or heated editorial debate, like those standards of the new cheap dailies, advertising for February 14th generated interest and built to a pitch, plus it had the added advantage that it recurred every year.  

Posting announcements in the penny papers was an effective means of reaching large numbers of potential customers. The question remains, though, did holiday businesses advertise in these periodicals in order to target specific kinds of consumers? For example, were they primarily interested in middle-class shoppers? Or did they hope to attract working class men and women? Scholars have long debated the political leanings of the inexpensive dailies. In his pioneering work, Michael Schudson argued that these publications reflected the values of "an increasingly varied, urban, and middle-class society." Several years later Dan Schiller countered that, in fact, the working class "formed the primary public for the cheap press." More recently and more convincingly Andie Tucher has concluded that the audience for inexpensive dailies was neither fixed nor static; it changed over time, varied between papers, and often ebbed and flowed within any one title as editors sought to generate interest or attract readers. All of these studies rely on examinations of the style and content of newspaper stories and editorials. By examining Valentine’s Day notices, one can get a sense of how merchants themselves identified the audience for their promotions in affordable newsheets.

There are several ways of exploring the relationships between holiday notices and newspaper readership. One can look for associations, or lack thereof, between the physical locations of businesses and the periodicals in which they chose to advertise. In other words, one might expect shops along Bowery Street, located in the midst of

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84 Crouthamel, 52-53.
85 Schudson, chapter 1; Schiller, passim, esp. 1-11; Tucher, 1-4 and 211-212.
working class neighborhoods, to appear in different titles than did businesses near Fourteenth Street, which was the growing middle-class district. In fact no clear relationship existed. Stores in the Bowery advertised in the *Herald, Tribune*, and even the *Commercial Advertiser*, as did their counterparts at the northern end of Broadway, in and around the Fifteenth Ward.86 Businesses near City Hall Park, meanwhile, purchased space in all the penny papers (see figure 13). Merchants probably assumed that New Yorkers read all of the cheap dailies and then guessed how best to reach the largest numbers of potential customers. Some of them experimented with different publications. In 1843 Strong advertised in the *Sun*. The next two years he posted in the *Herald*. In 1846 he appeared in both papers, in 1847 just the *Herald*, and 1849 the *Tribune*. Finally, in 1851 Strong decided to purchase space in both the *Herald* and *Tribune*, and tactic he used the rest of the decade.87 Strong and the other holiday merchants evinced no widely accepted understanding of the appeal of particular papers to specific residential areas. Each businessman had to determine on his own how to use the low-cost dailies to generate business.

In order to examine Valentine's Day ads and newspaper readership, one can also look closely at the announcements businesses printed. Did notices for cards look different in the various papers? Did merchants try to appeal to particular readers in one cheap daily and others in another? As we will see in more detail in the next chapter, shops selling holiday goods sought primarily to attract youthful consumers. Most of them also publicized that their merchandise was affordable to people of all incomes. None of these blurbs were more likely to appear in one paper rather than another. In

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86 H. & S. Raynor, located at 76 Bowery Street, advertised in the *Commercial Advertiser*, 3 February 1847, 3 and the *Tribune*, 13 February 1845, 3. "Comic" Elton, at 18 Division Street, advertised in the *Herald*, 6 February 1847, 3. William Taylor, located just blocks east of Washington Square, posted in the *Commercial Advertiser*, 5 February 1847, 2; T.J. Crowen, at 613 Broadway, in the *Herald*, 11 February 1845, 3; and Abraham Maze in the *Tribune*, 11 February 1845, 3.

1851, for instance, Strong ran the exact same announcement in both the *Herald* and *Tribune*. Other merchants also bought space in more than one title, without targeting specific consumers in their different ads. During the twenty years before the Civil War, New Yorkers could browse through a number of their local cheap dailies during February and see many of the same or similar ads for Valentine's Day cards.\(^8^8\)

Holiday merchants did use the penny press to target one group of readers, but it is not a group one would detect by looking at the locations of businesses and it is even easy to overlook in the notices they wrote. In 1847 Turner and Fisher placed a short announcement in the *Tribune* that read, "Valentines! Valentines! Just published and now ready. Dealers out of the city by remitting can have assortments, small or large, sent them, with show bills." Notices to retailers outside of New York were often similarly pithy. Sometimes, as with this example from Turner and Fisher, they constituted separate advertisements. More often they appeared at the end of long paragraphs. George Ives, for example, in 1850 ran a promotion twelve lines long, the last sentence of which read simply, "The Country Trade supplied on liberal terms." These efforts to attract rural dealers might not seem substantial to our eyes, but New York merchants knew that they first had to call attention to their stores or their stocks of cards, before they tried to secure the business of country shops. The out-of-city trade was important enough to merchants that they pursued it year after year. Throughout the late 1840s and 1850s pitches to rural businesses appeared regularly in the all of the penny papers. Such announcements, however, never made the pages of either the *Commercial Advertiser* or the *Journal of Commerce*. City merchants deliberately used the penny press to expand their sales of valentines into the hinterland.\(^8^9\)

\(^8^8\) Advertisements for T.W. Strong, *New York Tribune*, 8 February 1851, 1 and *New York Herald*, 8 February 1851, 5. The ad in both newspapers read, "Who has the only large lot of VALENTINES imported this season? / STRONG! / Who manufactures Fifty Thousand Dollars worth of Valentines this year? / STRONG! / ...Who offers Valentines at the lowest prices? / STRONG! / Then on whom should you call to select your Valentines? / STRONG!"

The aspirations of businessmen, particularly printers, to reach distant customers helps to explain a fact we saw earlier: more advertisements for Valentine's Day appeared in the Tribune than in any other newspaper. Why this preference for Greeley's chronicle? As Tucher points out, though the Tribune had a smaller circulation within Manhattan than either the Herald or Sun, its readership outside of the city was greater than either of these other two titles. Merchants, then, knew they could rely on Greeley to put them in contact with rural holiday shoppers. In order to understand how the Tribune became the dominant mouthpiece for Manhattan news outside of the city, and why it was such a good fit for holiday advertising, one must examine why, as Tucher tersely notes, "Horace Greeley hated and feared the city."90

The Tribune was not the only penny paper available in what were termed "country" editions. James Gordon Bennett, and for a while Benjamin Day of the Sun, also published weekly versions of their rags that offered condensed versions of recent news and some of the drama of New York for a rural audience. By the mid 1840s, though, Greeley and Bennett were the two dominant players in a heated contest to win over the hearts and subscriptions of non-native readers. Both men sought to bring in members of the large and influential middle-class. Bennett took the moral low ground, offering his readers sensationalism, amusement, crime and glimpses of the pleasures of the city. In short, he presented to non-New Yorkers what they loved to hate about the city and to local residents details about metropolitan life without condemnation or moral indignation. His success at attracting readers inside and outside of Manhattan—where he never equaled Greeley but still maintained a large presence—provided holiday businesses a vehicle with which they could reach a mass and varied market of customers. Every February the Herald drew people of disparate social and regional backgrounds into an expanding form of middle-class culture.91

90 Tucher, 136-38, quote 133.
91 Tucher, 112-114.
Horace Greeley took a different tack. He hoped to attract middle-class readers by offering a paper that was morally superior to other cheap dailies, would educate the public, and would help reform society, especially Manhattan and other urban areas. Many New Yorkers who considered themselves modest and respectable had mixed feelings about the Tribune. On the one hand they often agreed with Greeley's distaste for what they considered to be the disordered and dirty parts of their city. On the other, they were just as often repelled by his criticisms of and disdain for Manhattan, not to mention by some of the eccentric reform movements he advocated. Readers outside of the city by and large did not share those concerns. Greeley, who himself hailed originally from rural New England, presented this audience with a reform-minded, moralistic vision of a city many of them had come to distrust. His paper, then, was the perfectly suited to the task of holiday advertising. Merchants knew that they could use the Tribune to reach large numbers of middle-class customers who resided outside of their city's borders, and even many who lived inside them. Moreover, the cultural work of Valentine's Day, as we will see in more detail in the next few chapters, had much in common with the reform-minded pages of Greeley's chronicle.

It is impossible to know how many cards city merchants delivered to country dealers, or even whether those sales increased over time, because they never mentioned in their promotions how many notes they had distributed the previous year or hoped to sell during the current season. Regardless of the amount of wholesale business, however, the efforts of New York companies to expand into the country trade had substantial repercussions for Valentine's Day celebrations. For one thing, their notices helped to popularize throughout the Northeast the custom of sending printed cards. What began as a late-winter fad in urban areas in the early 1840s quickly traveled outward from these metropolises. Even if consumers could not easily buy manufactured valentines in rural locations, they had heard about them, in part, during their encounters with the penny papers. There were other conduits, of course, that scattered the new practice across the
countryside, for example word of mouth or written exchanges. Esther Howland claimed that she first discovered printed cards for February 14th when her father imported one from England. While there may be some truth to this story, by the early 1850s Boston merchants were advertising to rural dealers just like their New York counterparts and Howland's father, a book dealer, would have almost certainly come across valentines during his dealings with printers and publishers in the state's largest city during the late 1840s. Esther Howland and her peers may not have always first learned about exchanging printed notes from penny press ads, but those same announcements were repeated reminders of the custom's popularity among their urban counterparts and of the availability of some manufactured cards throughout the countryside. By the late 1850s, Strong boasted in the penny papers that he would deliver "to any city, town or village in the United States or Canada."92

The abundance of ads in the cheap dailies also helped to spread the popularity of shopping for February 14th. This was true, of course, for both urban and rural residents. The difference, though, was that city dwellers came into contact with holiday commerce in print and on the streets. Merchants used both window displays and newspaper space to lure customers to their shops and increase demand for their wares. Young people in the country, on the other hand, had fewer opportunities to encounter print valentines in person. New York businesses approached the country wholesale trade from two directions with the notices they placed in penny papers. Most obviously they tried to spur rural stores to buy their wares. At the same time, they hoped that their ads would indirectly drive sales by generating interest among rural shoppers for goods they might not have even known about. Indeed, Strong might have hoped that the depiction of his storefront, as seen in figure 14, would pique the interest of rural buyers unaccustomed to

92 For examples of Boston merchants soliciting rural retailers, see the ads for James French, Boston Courier, 11 February 1852, 4 and Fisher and Brother, Boston Daily Times, 11 February 1850, 3; advertisement for T.W. Strong, New York Herald, 8 February 1858, 8.
seeing so many printed goods in one place. Young people in the countryside, as they perused the penny papers, would read about the excitement and demand for manufactured cards in the city and then encourage their local stationer or book dealer to carry them. By the mid-1850s Valentine’s Day throughout the region had become inextricably tied to shopping for and sending printed missives.

Finally, marketing valentines in the penny press, as Schmidt points out, "expanded the festival’s time frame" for rural and urban participants alike. As early as 1843 Lowe and Company were promoting their cards in the Sun for a full month, from mid-January to mid-February. By the late 1840s this was a common practice, especially for prominent merchants like Strong and Cozans. Often New York companies would target rural, wholesale buyers in late-January and early-February, and then local retail customers in the weeks before February 14th. By the early 1850s notices for cards even appeared in the cheap dailies all the way until early March, and merchants marketed specific "return valentines" after the saint's day. On February 17, 1856 Strong declared, "Never too late. Those lovers and sweethearts who have not yet sent or answered their valentines are notified that the assortment is still large." People began referring to the holiday as not just a day, but as a month or a season. This expansion of Valentine's Day into a celebration that lasted for weeks or even months had no basis in folk traditions. It was a "commercial contrivance" designed to lengthen the duration of holiday shopping.93

In a larger sense, advertising for February 14th in the penny papers represented an early example of what has become one of the defining features of modern-day consumer capitalism. The dilemma for antebellum printers, publishers and storeowners was how to get noticed by consumers in a market filled with more and more choices. Saint Valentine's Day had been an annual occurrence for centuries, of course. But now

93 Schmidt, 70-71. See the advertisement for Lowe and Company, Sun, 10 February 1843, 4, which contains a small note at the bottom "j17 1m," indicating the ad would run for one month beginning with January 17. Advertisement for T.W. Strong, New York Herald, 17 February 1856, 5.
businessmen seized on the seasonal nature of the holiday and sought to profit from it. Every year in late winter they worked to focus consumer attention on the holiday and in the process empty shoppers' pocketbooks as they increased their sales of newspapers and cards. Businessmen could also hope, often in vain, that the recurring celebration might buffer them from the worst of the boom and bust cycles of capitalism, which were especially common in the nineteenth century. No matter how bad things got, in other words, at least they could depend on Valentine's Day to increase sales of their printed goods. It is a sentiment that has been handed down to the present, though our own consumer calendar contains many more occasions for such utterances.

St. Valentine's Day announcements in penny papers also began to shape commercial relations between city and countryside in ways that would become more pronounced in the decades after the Civil War, when the train would speed up the process of bringing rural consumers downtown to shop and taking city goods in mass out to the countryside. Newsprint did not literally transport shoppers into the city, of course, but in a figurative sense it did. Merchants marketed their retail trade almost exclusively to local, urban residents, telling them to "rush down" to their shop or hurry up and see their stock before it was gone. They did not encourage rural readers to come into the city, nor is there any indication that many made the journey specifically to buy cards. Yet consumers outside of New York learned about holiday shopping from the ads they saw in the cheap dailies, and they came to associate it with the abundance and excitement those notices highlighted. They might not be able to travel into Manhattan for February 14th, but they could encounter the wonders of holiday shopping vicariously, through print, and they could try to recreate that experience, in some small way, in their local stores. Valentine's Day commercialization did not just radiate out from metropolitan settings, it maintained city shopping as its reference point.

It is telling that, by the early 1850s, New York merchants near City Hall were generally more likely than their rivals elsewhere in the city to advertise in the *Tribune*
and always more likely to run announcements in the any of the penny papers. Businesses inside lower Broadway and Park Row knew that through cheap newsprint they could capture the attention of both resident and non-resident shoppers. They used these periodicals to bring city dwellers down into their February retail district and generate sales. But they also used those papers to capture the attention, and the purses, of rural customers. They might not bring people into the city, but they could try to make them desire some of what urban commerce had to offer. Just like trains and railroad cars would bring people into downtowns to shop years later, during the decade before the Civil War cheap newsprint helped to create a holiday shopping district that marketed itself as much to non-residents as to New Yorkers themselves.

By the end of the 1850s the rise of the penny press had transformed Valentine’s Day. Advertising became an integral part of the holiday, which now lasted for weeks on end, merchants were able to reach both an expanding urban populace and a dispersed rural population, and what had started as an urban "craze" had quickly spread, taking with it a form of middle-class culture throughout the Northeast. The so-called "penny revolution" may have helped to popularize the exchanging of manufactured cards, but mailing holiday notes of any kind would not have been possible without an adequate postal system. During the two decades before the Civil War, Valentine’s Day merchants rode the tide of an expanding and changing United States postal service.

94 These are the numbers for merchants advertising in the penny press between 1849 and 1855:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Tribune City Hall</th>
<th>Tribune Elsewhere in NY</th>
<th>All Papers City Hall</th>
<th>All Papers Elsewhere in NY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1849</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>1851</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1853</td>
<td>3</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1855</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Valentine's Day Exchanges via the U.S. Mail

By the mid-1840s the U.S. Post Office had reached a crossroads. The federal government had created the department responsible for delivering mail throughout the states in 1792. Fifty years later the Post Office continued to operate much as it had in the early years of the republic. But the laws and policies that had been created to serve the needs of a nation stretched along the Atlantic coast were ill-suited for a population that was growing rapidly and moving westward. During a ten-year period, from the mid-1840s to mid-1850s, Congress and the Postmasters General dramatically restructured mail delivery and postal rates. The success Valentine's Day merchants enjoyed might not have been possible without these changes, but the demand for their holiday goods also helped to spur the expansion and reorganization of governmental postal delivery.

At the start of the 1840s postage rates were so high that few Americans communicated through the postal service. The law of 1792, which was amended slightly after the War of 1812, had created a system in which postage was computed "using a complicated formula based not only on the distance that a given letter was to travel, but also on the number of sheets it contained." Richard John estimates that it would have cost 25 cents to send a single sheet of paper from New York to Buffalo; 75 cents if the note contained two enclosures. At a time when the average laborer made less than $1.00 a day, mailing paper was "an expensive proposition." Some people got around the law by sending written messages through friends or private couriers. Nonetheless, according to John, by the 1830s the average American relayed only one letter a year through the postal system. Even if one includes other forms of conveyance, the total per person probably would not have been much higher.95

When the Valentine's Day "craze" started in the early 1840s, February correspondents throughout the urban Northeast had several choices for sending their notes. They could utilize the postal service. In 1844 the Postmaster Master of New York City, John Lorimer Graham, announced in the local papers that, "In consequence of the near approach of St. Valentine's Day extensive arrangements have been made, and every precaution has been taken to insure a prompt distribution of these annual 'Tokens.'"

Despite Graham's best efforts to procure holiday business, however, he was hindered by the fact that it remained expensive to send letters through the U.S. mail. The editors of Boston's *Daily Evening Transcript* observed of Graham that year "that the Postmaster of Great Gotham does not intend to be beaten in his arrangements for distributing the missives suggested by the anniversary of St. Valentine, whatever may have been his ill fortune with the foreign mails."  

The editors of the *Transcript* used the term "foreign mails" to refer to independent, private couriers. Though technically illegal, these businesses existed in most large Northern cities during the thirty years before the Civil War and often carried mail at a cheaper rate than the U.S. Post Office offered. Most of these "private city deliver firms," such as Manhattan's Penny Post Association, operated throughout the year. In addition, every February some holiday merchants delivered cards purchased at their stores for free or for a small addition fee, usually one or two cents. In 1847, for example, Charles Holt advertised that "He has made such arrangements with letter carriers that he will deliver, postage free, all Valentines purchased of him." Years later, in 1853, James Harriott specified that he would transport notes bought at his store "to any part of the city south of Thirty-fifth street, free of postage." There are no surviving statistics to indicate how many valentines these private couriers carried, but clearly Post Masters like Graham were on the defensive. Richard John estimates that throughout the

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year city delivery firms transmitted "nine times the volume of letters" as the federal government. In the early 1840s, as it became popular to send valentines to more than one recipient, urban holiday participants had obvious financial incentives to choose local, private delivery rather than the federal post.\textsuperscript{97}

In 1845 the U.S. Post Office fought back. That year the federal government passed the first of several laws designed to reform postal delivery. Among other things, the Post Office Act of 1845 "all but eliminated the cumbersome zone system and based new rates on weight rather than on the number of sheets in a letter." It now cost five cents to send a letter weighing less half an ounce up to 300 miles. Over the next decade the rate would drop further. The new law was not a direct result of the popularity of sending valentines in large urban areas, although it was intended to undercut the success of private firms.\textsuperscript{98} Over the next decade, however, the U.S. Post Office found that February was one of its most profitable months and that card-writers took advantage of its competitive rates. In 1845 the \textit{Niles National Register} estimated that between twenty and twenty-five thousand valentines were "deposited in the New York post office" that February. Three years later the \textit{Weekly Herald}, Bennett's edition for rural subscribers, claimed that sixty thousand passed through the post during the week of February 14\textsuperscript{th}. At the end of the decade the \textit{Weekly Tribune} spoke for New York's Post Master, noting that the "Post Office Department blesses [the holiday] for an enormous increase of revenue."\textsuperscript{99}

The new lower rates were a boon to the profits of urban post offices, which handled large quantities of mail, but these same departments still struggled to match some


of the services that private couriers offered. For instance, throughout the antebellum United States mail was usually delivered to the local post office, where recipients then picked it up. Those who were wealthy enough could purchase boxes where their papers were deposited. Most people, however, had to wait in line and receive their correspondences at the counter. For all residents, regardless of whether or not they could afford post office boxes, picking up the mail was, at the very least, a chore and could become a time-consuming and inconvenient task.100

Independent private firms eliminated the hassle of traveling to the local post office by delivering valentines directly to recipients' homes or offices. During the month of February these companies often had to hire additional help. A week before February 14, 1849 Towle's City Despatch Post of Boston announced in local papers, "Wanted, 25 or 30 Young Men acquainted with the city, for a few days, to deliver letters and Valentines." The New York Herald observed that penny posts, the term city residents used for private delivery companies, "established special deliveries on the day, to...despatch scores of thousands of little billet doux and large cards." Holiday merchants who offered to convey cards purchased at their stores devised two ways of delivering them. Some, like Charles Holt of New York, made "arrangements with letter carriers." Larger stores may have hired their own delivery boys, though no help wanted ads from holiday merchants, like the one from Towle, appear in Boston or New York newspapers. All of these private interests made it convenient for letter-writers to deposit their notes. Towle noted that he had 100 boxes "at various parts of the city...and at the principal Literary Depots." Many merchants, of course, collected cards bought at their

100 Large cities were some of the few profitable areas for the U.S. Post Office which, though it was supposed to be self-supporting, continued to rely on government aid through the antebellum period. Fuller notes that the Post Office only turned a profit during the Civil War, when it no longer had to subsidize rural delivery in the South with profits from the urban Northeast. After the war, it once again went into deficit. (see Fuller, 66-71). Richard John emphasizes that post offices became places of community, like saloons or Masonic lodges, for the expression of white male solidarity where women and people of color often felt unwelcome (161-67). I have found no examples of such treatment at New York or Boston post offices during Valentine's Day celebrations.
store and conveyed them throughout the city. The services of these private interests offered made it easy for holiday participants to leave their notes at a local box or store and then wait for them to be delivered directly to the doors of their intended recipients.\textsuperscript{101}

The U.S. Post Office would not establish a nationwide city delivery service until the start of the Civil War. In the early 1840s Manhattan's Post Master created the U.S. City Despatch of New York and became the first city post office to offer home delivery. Between 1842 and 1846 John Graham published numerous newspaper announcements advertising his new service and directing residents how to use it. In 1845 he noted, "Tomorrow being 'St. Valentine's Day,' an increased force will be added for the occasion to insure the speedy delivery of the great number of additional letters usually deposited." He continued, for those unfamiliar with home delivery, "to prevent mistakes letters should be fully and intelligibly addressed, and the number and street distinctly stated." Unfortunately for Graham, the Act of 1845 killed his experiment in city delivery by adding a two-cent "drop fee" to the two-cent carrier fee already in place. His dispatch post ceased operation on November 28, 1846. For the next fifteen years holiday correspondents in the urban Northeast had two options for sending their cards. They could use postal delivery and have their notes picked up at local post offices, or they could employ private couriers to transport their messages directly to their intended recipients. They did both. Private delivery continued to prosper from holiday business throughout the 1850s, but local post offices also benefited from the February boom. On February 15, 1850 Boston's \textit{Daily Evening Transcript} noted simply, "a very large number of valentines passed through the post office yesterday, or were distributed by the penny postmen."\textsuperscript{102}

\textsuperscript{101} Advertisement for Towle, \textit{Boston Daily Times}, 9 February 1849, 3; "City Intelligence. St. Valentine's Day," \textit{New York Herald}, 14 February 1849, 1; Ad for C. Holt, Jr., \textit{New York Daily Tribune}, 8 February 1847, 3. For a discussion of private home mail delivery, see Scheele, 71-73. Note: during the antebellum period "dispatch" was usually spelled "despatch."

That same article from the *Daily Evening Transcript* made one other observation. In 1850 "upwards of 400 valentines [were] rejected [and] returned to the post office." Until the mid-1850s the U.S. Post Office struggled to compete with private firms for one additional reason. By the 1840s penny posts had introduced prepaid postage through the use of stamps. Customers could purchase individual stamps for three cents each, or packets of one hundred for $2.50. After affixing a stamp, they could drop the letter in a post box and be fairly certain that it was both delivered and accepted. Not all private mail was conveyed this way, but by the early 1850s it was increasingly common for customers to use stamps and some companies insisted that they do so.¹⁰³

Prepaid postage, of course, is the standard form of mail delivery today. In the 1840s and early 1850s, though, the federal postal service generally relied on recipients to foot the bill for mail delivery. Individuals traveled to their local post office and paid for the packages waiting for them. This might not have been a problem when only a few letters were involved or when the recipient knew the sender. During February, however, individuals could receive tens of missives, sometimes from people they did not know well or at all, or in unmarked packaging. In 1855 Q.K. Philander Doesticks commented that he had received seventeen notes, "all unpaid, and all from 'Valentine.'" Not only could February delivery become expensive for recipients, they might end up paying for paper they did not want. As we will see in more detail in chapter five, part of the pleasure of sending vinegar valentines came from making people pay for the delivery of cards that insulted them. By the early 1850s many New Yorkers refused to accept valentines of any kind unless their postage was prepaid. The *New York Journal of Commerce* wrote in 1848, "There are those who have to economise, and cannot afford money to pay the tax which the receival of Valentines subjects them [sic]." James

Holbrook observed that even those who could afford to pay for postage often "indignantly refused to take [valentines] from the office."\textsuperscript{104}

Rejected letters represented a financial loss for the U.S. Post Office. The government was forced to foot the bill for mail that was delivered but never received and whose conveyance was never paid. The crisis was especially acute during February when hundreds or even thousands of unclaimed notes had to be destroyed. Congress first issued postage stamps in 1847, but they "were not used in great numbers." In 1851 it lowered postal rates further and made stamped, prepaid mail cheaper to send then "collect" letters. Finally, in 1855 prepayment of postage become compulsory.\textsuperscript{105} The U.S. Post Office now offered the same prepaid service that city delivery firms had used for over a decade and it no longer had to worry about hefty losses in late winter. The financial blow the government incurred each February from rejected cards along with customers' increased disdain for "collect" valentines undoubtedly contributed to the Post Office's decision, albeit sluggish, to convert to paid delivery.

The U.S. Post Office continued to face competition from private interests, especially during the peak month of February, but by the early 1860s most of these companies had gone out of business. The establishment of home delivery by urban post offices at the start of the Civil War finally denied private businesses their last advantage over the federal post. For almost two decades, though, Valentine's Day deliveries by penny posts and holiday merchants had helped to popularize "many of the innovations associated with the modern postal system." New York card dealers had it both ways. During the 1840s and early 1850s their trade prospered, in part, because their customers could use independent couriers to cheaply send prepaid valentines to recipients' homes. After 1855 no shops announced that they would collect and transport cards. Their

\textsuperscript{104} Q.K. Philander Doesticks, Doesticks, What He Says (New York: Edward Livermore, 1855), 196; "Evils of St. Valentine's Day," New York Journal of Commerce, 12 February 1848, 1; James Holbrook, Ten Years Among the Mail Bags; or, Notes From the Diary of a Special Agent of the Post-Office Department (Philadelphia: H. Cowperthwait & Co., 1855), 372.

\textsuperscript{105} Scheele, 73-76, quote 74; John, 160-61; Cullinan, 69-73; Fuller, 65-67.
By the end of the 1850s merchants in New York and other Northern cities had helped to lay the foundations for a modern, consumer-oriented St. Valentine's Day. Every year, like clockwork, they advertised their goods in the flourishing penny newspapers, and thereby linked the late-winter festival to shopping for and exchanging printed missives. Their promotions also stretched the duration of the holiday, encouraging people to shop for and purchase cards during the weeks before and after February 14th. And these businessmen directly and indirectly fueled competition with the U.S. Post Office, improving services by which Americans sent their holiday messages and ultimately encouraging changes to federal mail delivery.

The figurative heart of this antebellum commercial holiday was New York. Manhattan merchants both moved their stores up the island to maintain contact with an expanding urban middle class and clustered together in order to draw customers down to a new Valentine's Day retail district. By the end of the 1840s the storeowners in this Park Row area in particular had transformed preparing for the holiday into an event marked by excitement and wonder, and they were exporting this experience beyond the City through
their promotions in the pages of the inexpensive dailies. Within a matter of years metropolitan companies were selling their printed notes throughout the Northeast and had tied those goods to an urban craze most rural consumers had only read about in the penny press.

Antebellum merchants' promotions of their valentines were certainly not as sophisticated as they are today. Retailers and printers did not have consultants telling them what demographic they should target or how they could best promote their goods to specific groups. Nonetheless, men like Thomas Strong and James Fisher did not just advertise willy-nilly or haphazardly. They specifically sought to sell their printed wares to a specific group of potential customers. In the process, the commercial holiday these merchants helped to create and popularize contributed to the coherence of a social category that before mid century had been defined only vaguely.
Chapter 3

Heart in Hand: Augusta Babcock and Her Generation Exchange Valentines

Augusta Babcock was nineteen years old when she received one of her first valentines in 1843. Over the next five years she got at least thirty more. Had she preserved all of the notes she received, or left a record of how many she wrote in return, the assortment she left to posterity would be even larger. The bulk of the cards she did keep are from 1845 to 1847, when she was between the ages of 21 and 23. During those three years Augusta saved fifteen dated cards: five in 1845, four in 1846, and six in 1847. Her billets-doux, as they were often called at the time, included avowals of friendship, declarations of love, and several letters in French. Augusta's collection is a testament to the fact that she and her friends relished the saint's day. They had discovered a late-winter pastime that was particularly well suited to their station in life, and along with thousands of their peers, they participated in and helped to popularize Valentine's Day, a commemoration that had been familiar to but not widely celebrated by their parents' and grandparents' generations.

Born on November 16, 1823, Augusta Babcock lived her entire life in New Haven, Connecticut, until her death on May 15, 1888. She was the daughter of Sidney and Susan Babcock. Almost nothing is known about her mother, who died in 1864. Her father was born in 1797 in Hartford and was the son of John Babcock. Augusta's paternal grandfather John was a printer and bookseller in the late 1700s and early 1800s, when he lived in various cities in Pennsylvania and New York. In 1815 John settled in New Haven and established with his son Sidney, Augusta's father, a publishing firm named "John Babcock and Son." Over the next few decades the company grew steadily. By the
mid 1840s, when Sidney ran the firm, he was "printing children's books and textbooks by
the thousands." Augusta's family was part of the growing middle class. Relying on
kinship networks—especially family members in Connecticut, South Carolina, and
Virginia—her father was able to expand his business and distribute books as far south as
New Orleans. By the 1830s Sidney Babcock had moved out of his father's trade of
printing and into the "white collar" profession of publishing.108

At about the same time that her father was contracting with the popular author and
Yale professor, Denison Olmsted, to be the sole publisher for a number of his works,
Augusta received her first set of valentines.109 It was an opportune moment for her to
send and receive cards. She was young and single. She also lived at 37 College Street,
just blocks from Yale, and many of her notes came from young men at the college.110
Now in her early twenties, she had reached marrying age and there were a number of
eligible and interested men not far from her front door. In an undated note, for example,
J. Henry Bascom expressed his love for Augusta, ending with a request for some kind of
commitment. He pined,

"But now my dear, oh darling dove!
I freely here confess my love:
And if thou art of the same mind,
Accept me as thy valentine?
Shouldst thou prefer some other's love
Then write me word my darling dove
But
If for me the chances are
Augusta, 'will you ask your ma'?

107 Francis James Gagliardi, "The Babcocks of New Haven, Connecticut: Printers, Publishers and
108 More detailed background on Sidney's life and business is available in Gagliardi, Chp. 6. For
information on publishing in early America see Rosalind Remer, *Printers and Men of Capital:*
Winship, *American Literary Publishing in the Mid-Nineteenth Century: the Business of Ticknor and Fields*
109 Details of the contract are in Gagliardi, 95.
110 "Augusta Babcock's Valentines," H4.11, Hallmark Historical Collection, Kansas City, MO.
111 Letter from J. Henry Bascom to Augusta Babcock, undated, H4.11A: Manuscripts, Augusta Babcock,
Hallmark Historical Collection.

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If Augusta ever asked her mother about Bascom, we will probably never know. We do know, however, that she never married him, or anyone else for that matter. Augusta remained single for the rest of her life. Unfortunately, she did not leave any record of whether she ever wanted or planned to marry. By the time she had reached her late twenties she had largely disappeared from the historic record.

The collection of missives that Augusta saved and then preserved for the rest of her life, though limited to just a few dozen items and spanning only about half a decade, provides an extraordinary window into one person’s involvement in the early formation of the modern saint’s day. Indeed it is one of the only surviving examples from this period of the cards sent by or to someone over a number of years. By combining her collection with other evidence from the period one can discern who participated in the antebellum holiday, how and why. Young and well-to-do, if not wealthy, Augusta was a typical celebrant. The February 14th holiday that emerged in the mid 1840s was a youthful celebration, a time for men and women coming of age to try their hands at new courtship rituals and an opportunity for middle-class adults to guide, often obliquely, that same wooing.

A Commercial Holiday for Youths

Augusta Babcock and her friends were among a vanguard of those who sent valentines in mid February. Almost as soon as manufactured cards became popular in New York in the early 1840s, she and her circle were trading both ready-made and homemade missives. Her collection testifies to both the success of merchants in reaching consumers and the speed with which their efforts spread the holiday throughout the

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112 Augusta’s cards are now housed in the Hallmark Historical Collection. There are no collections like it at the American Antiquarian Society, the Smithsonian, or Winterthur.
Northeast. Augusta may have stopped exchanging notes in the late 1840s, but we know from the previous chapter that many others did not. Holiday fervor, in fact, reached its zenith around the turn of the decade and then began to decline in the mid 1850s. For over ten years successive waves of men and women in their late teens and early twenties—Augusta's age when she saved her cards—continued to celebrate the saint's day. Recognizing the general age of Valentine's Day participants is essential for understanding the holiday's popularity. Young men and women in the antebellum North participated in a new, late-winter commercial youth culture that provided them an opportunity to play at courting.

One does not have to look long or hard to discover the cohort most likely to mark February 14th. The approximate age of those who celebrated the saint's day is readily apparent in the numerous accounts antebellum observers published. In 1847, for example, the editors of the *New York Daily Tribune* emphasized participants' youthfulness, observing that, "we know a dozen young people...who think nothing of sending a flaming Valentine...to as many persons as there are days in the week." A decade later, in 1858, "Our Quiet Man" editorialized in the *Boston Daily Courier* that people his age had been so unfamiliar with the current practice that "the custom of honoring the holiday by sending written missives called 'Valentines'...was Greek and Hebrew to us." He went on to recommend that youth continue this newly created fashion, writing "I have seen too much innocent pleasure enjoyed by the young people in the receipt of them, to be at all 'crusty' on the subject; however old a bachelor I may be."113 Almost all serialized fictional accounts of February 14th, as we will see in more detail shortly, also portrayed the day's participants as men and women of or near marrying age. Magazines such as *Harper's* and *Graham's* published numerous short

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stories that depicted individuals on the cusp of adulthood trading missives on or otherwise celebrating the saint's day.

If antebellum Valentine's Day was a youthful holiday, the question remains, why was it primarily associated with and celebrated by people in their late teens and twenties? In order to begin to understand this relationship between a particular age group and the holiday, one must first consider how, in the decades before the Civil War, "youth" was both perceived and experienced.

Prior to the early 1800s, residents of the northern colonies, and then states, generally did not make strong distinctions between terms like child and youth or children and young. Someone in his or her teens might be called a child in one context and a youth in another. "One is left with a feeling," Joseph Kett has argued, that people "used 'youth' more as a noun than as a concept." This indistinct language mirrored an understanding of the maturation process as being markedly fluid. Children were viewed as both physically and mentally underdeveloped adults. Sometime around the age of ten, a person entered, according to John Demos, "a period of gradual preparation for adult responsibilities, with few sharp twists and turns along the way." Over the next couple of decades one slowly matured into adulthood. There were few signposts on what contemporaries called this "highway of life" that would indicate the passage from one stage to the next.

This general outlook on human development began to change in the early nineteenth century, when people started to divide life into separate stages of growth. First came childhood. By the 1830s many, but certainly not all, northerners had started to

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see kids in a fundamentally different light than their forebears had. Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century colonists had emphasized juvenile sinfulness and "viewed childhood as a condition to be worked off with all due speed." They encouraged boys and girls to act like adults. Antebellum northerners turned this logic on its head. It was in fact children who provided a model for grownups to emulate. If adults sinned, it was because they had been corrupted by society's ills. Children, on the other hand, had not experienced enough of the world to be adversely influenced by it. Increasingly after the 1830s, writers and artists stressed and celebrated the innocence of children. Adults should strive, they argued, to regain some of the juvenile guilelessness they had lost. Parents had a responsibility to protect kids from corruption, and in the process, would learn from their unspoiled perspective on the world. By the 1860s, this "modern" romantic cultural understanding of childhood had transformed the way northerners, especially those from the middle class, viewed and raised children.116

The perspective of childhood that emerged by mid century would play an important role in the creation of Valentine's Day imagery, a theme that will come up again later. The changing cultural outlook on boys and girls also affected how people viewed youth. Augusta's peers were caught in a transitional period. Not quite adults, they were also no longer children. As juvenile innocence was increasingly celebrated, the potential loss of that incorruption during youth made the time wrought with uncertainty and stress. The possible dangers that maturing men and women faced took a variety of forms in popular discussions about the age group. For instance, individuals might succumb to sexual temptation; they might befriend the wrong type of people, being duped in bad business deals, or worse, becoming criminals; or they could be tricked into joining religious cults. Of course, popular stories about youthful waywardness do not

necessarily mean that large numbers of young adults were actually delinquent or that they experienced the transition out of childhood as a time marked solely or even primarily by fear and anxiety. Such tales do indicate, however, that the road into adulthood was no longer viewed as smooth or unremarkable, as it generally had been in early America. For the generations growing up after the 1830s, the period of youth was often perceived to be "disjunctive and problematic."\textsuperscript{117}

This relatively new view of individual development—growing out of childhood into youth and finally into adulthood—reflected changing social experiences. In the largely agricultural communities of the eighteenth century, teenage boys and girls generally followed a similar path into independent, family life as their parents and grandparents had. True, many individuals and couples picked up and moved off of familial land, either out of necessity or hope for a better life. But even in those cases, men and women usually found themselves pursuing the same occupations they had known all their lives. One generation followed patterns similar to those set by previous generations.\textsuperscript{118}

By the second quarter of the nineteenth century an increasingly market-oriented, mobile and industrial North had disrupted this traditional transition into adult life for countless individuals. Many young men left rural areas and headed for cities, hoping to find more opportunities and a better life in metropolises large and small. Increasing numbers of young women left home for a few years to work in factories like Lowell, or more often, took in work to earn some extra money and financial independence. More and more youth of both sexes, including many of Augusta's friends and Esther Howland, spent their late teens and early twenties in school. Most importantly, for Valentine's Day at least, both sexes were delaying marriage. Antebellum men waited until their mid or

\textsuperscript{117} Quote from Demos, \textit{Past}, 99; Kett, 286-87.
late twenties to marry, and "women went to the alter only a few years younger."

"Questions which, in traditional communities, had been more or less decided for young people," Demos has written, "were increasingly matters of individual resolution." Youth was a time of independent, or quasi-independent, singleness, a period characterized by choice before one established a home of one's own.119

If scholars have long recognized how changing perceptions and experiences of individuals of a certain age group helped to define youth as a social category, they have largely overlooked the fact that young men and women were also a new and important marketing category. Allowed to make many of their own decisions, and with at least some discretionary income, Augusta and her peers were a potential windfall for astute businessmen. By the 1840s enterprising merchants were actively vying with one another for the attention and pocketbooks of young consumers, and their efforts contributed to the growing recognition of youth as a distinct group. Nowhere was this more evident than in Valentine's Day advertisements. Every year antebellum newspapers, especially the penny rags we examined in the previous chapter, carried hundreds, sometimes thousands, of ads that specifically targeted the cohort. Some companies merely described in their "notices" that men and women of a certain age sent valentines. Jordan and Wiley, for example, one of the largest holiday firms in Boston, remarked in an ad from 1847 that "every young lady is pretty sure to receive a Valentine, and some will receive a great number." They went on to assure their readers that they had "the largest assortment [of valentines] ever had in this city." Other businesses sought to entice young shoppers with claims that their products were somehow special or unusual. In 1855, Thomas Strong of New York promised "young ladies and gentlemen" that his were the "only valentines which have received the correct stamp of Cupid." Further north, in Boston, Redding and

119 Quote from Demos, Past, 102, also 99-100; Kett, 297; quote on female marrying age from Karen Lystra, Searching the Heart: Women, Men, and Romantic Love in Nineteenth-Century America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 164.
Company announced to "the youth of both sexes" that their cards provided guides to those "'Who tempt with wandering feet / The dark unfathomable abyss' OF LOVE."\(^{120}\)

Merchants' efforts to lure members of Augusta's age group to their wares were not limited to newspaper advertisements. Illustrations, as we know from the previous chapter, were uncommon in papers. Nonetheless, young people encountered numerous visual representations of themselves participating in the holiday. Take, for example, one of Augusta's cards, part of which is reproduced in figure 16. It depicts a young man and woman locked arm-in-arm, walking in a park or street.\(^{121}\) Similar images of young people, alone or together, were common in cards from the period. Holiday businessmen believed that young people would be drawn to notes that visually represented their age group. These illustrations helped to link the holiday to youth and encouraged men and women to celebrate the saint's day by buying ready-made goods.

Merchants did not ignore children and adults, but neither group was the focus of the celebration before the 1860s. When adults appeared in the context of the saint's day, they usually showed up in stories printed in popular magazines in which they observed youths during the month of February. There were few examples of adults giving one another valentines or ads that targeted them specifically. Nor were there many descriptions of children exchanging notes. Portraits of children were common during the holiday, but usually they were drawn as cherubs or as Cupid, both of which will be examined in more detail later. A few companies produced cards for girls and boys. In his "Valentine Advertiser" for 1847, an eight-page booklet that listed his printed goods, Strong had a separate category for "Children's Valentines." This short section, however, came at the end of the advertiser, after five pages listing the categories of his "sentimental valentines." And the cover of his booklet was adorned with an image of a young woman,


\(^{121}\) H4.11A: Augusta Babcock's Valentines, [1845], Hallmark Historical Collection.
Figure 16: Card from Augusta Babcock's Collection

Courtesy of the Hallmark Historical Collection
which is reprinted in figure 17. Advertisements for "juvenile" or "children's" valentines appeared occasionally in newspapers, but most ads that mentioned age were directed to young purchasers. Businesses would only begin to aggressively target children as potential card buyers after the Civil War, in the early 1870s.

Holiday merchants pursued youthful shoppers with a simple and consistent message: their printed goods would help a would-be lover find a match for February 14th. T. Wiley's notice in the Boston Post of 1848 was typical. After proclaiming that he sold "VALENTINES! Many of which are entirely new varieties," Wiley addressed "ye young men," telling them that "you are warned not to omit this necessary auxiliary to the realization of your fondest hopes." In New York City George Ives claimed that he carried "The most splendid collection ever exhibited in the United States...to suit all true lovers, no matter how desperate may be their case." Redding and Company kept it short and to-the-point, noting that their valentines "are intended as AIDS TO MATRIMONY." Newspaper editors came to the aid of the holiday merchants advertising on their pages by making similar pronouncements. In 1845, the New York Daily Tribune argued, "A good 'Valentine' has often been the means of opening an apparently locked-up heart." Ten years later, the New York Herald opined that "the annual predominance of [really true attachments], and the many happy unions brought about by valentine writing, formed, it is presumed, the reasons which induced our forefathers to dedicate the day to Saint Valentine."

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122 T.W. Strong, Strong's Annual Valentine Advertiser for St. Valentine's Day, Feb. 14, 1847 (NY: Strong's Valentine Depot, 1847). This rare advertising supplement, the only surviving one of its kind, is now held at the American Antiquarian Society.
123 Leigh Eric Schmidt, Consumer Rites: The Buying and Selling of American Holidays (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 74-76. Schmidt emphasizes "the role of children in the holiday," but his evidence for children's cards comes from the 1870s and 1880s. Hence, he overlooks an important "refashioning" of the holiday towards juvenile participants after the Civil War, a phenomenon that came after the period covered by this study.
124 Advertisement, T. Wiley Jr., Boston Post, 12 February 1848, 2; advertisement, George H. Ives, New York Herald, 14 February 1850, 3; advertisement, Redding and Company, Boston Daily Evening Transcript, 5 February 1845, 3.
Figure 17: T.W. Strong's Advertiser from 1847

Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society
The connection that businessmen and commentators made between valentines and youthful love-making, as it was often called, might seem self-evident, or "readily intelligible" in Schmidt's words.\footnote{Schmidt, 77.} The saint's day, after all, had been connected to love for centuries, and in the Northeast to match-making since at least the late eighteenth century. But in order to understand why ready-made notes became so popular so quickly—and why tying them specifically to youthful wooing was a successful advertising strategy—one must consider how courting had changed by the 1840s.

As late as the early nineteenth century courtships generally evolved from established relationships. Young couples had usually known one another for years, often growing up together in the same town or area. Consider for example the children of Martha Ballard, who lived their entire lives in rural Maine and whose experiences Laurel Thatcher Ulrich has intricately documented. Martha’s two daughters and one son all married in the early 1790s. The three of them wed individuals with whom they had been acquainted for years and whose families the Ballards had known just as long. Their weddings were preceded by weeks, even months, of courting, during which time the young couples spent time alone, but under the watchful eye of the community, getting to know each other. The children’s engagements underscored extensive ties, connections between them extending back before they began wooing and linking them and their families to the larger community.\footnote{Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, A Midwife’s Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785-1812 (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), 134-46. See also, Nicole Eustace, "Passion is the Gale": Emotion and Power on the Eve of the American Revolution" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2001), 91-92.}

The nature of courting practiced by the Ballards and other young people was reflected in the "love knots" and "puzzle purses" that were popular at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries. Schmidt has argued that, "The very complexity of the puzzle purses suggested something of the intricacy of courtship itself." It is also worth noting that few of these folded letters that have survived contained
postage; they were delivered by hand, either by the people who made them or, among the well-to-do, by their servants. In addition, their complexity would have made it difficult for someone to produce more than a few each season. The exchange of these love knots and puzzle purses, in other words, reflected the fact that courting in early America typically was face-to-face, took place in limited geographic region, and generally involved two individuals who had known one another for a long time.128

Even the Bachelors' Ball in New York that we examined in chapter one, which lasted through the 1830s, had more in common with early nineteenth-century courting practices than with later commercial valentines. It was certainly much larger than earlier customs, involving thousands of individuals at once. Nonetheless, it brought together young people from within the city, and often from the same neighborhoods. In that defined setting young men and women saw firsthand the interfamilial connections that helped to define Gotham's middle and upper classes and were reminded of the importance of those connections.

This pre-industrial form of courting, one might term it, did not simply disappear in the 1840s. Many men and women continued to court individuals they had known for years, if not their entire lives, and whose families were closely connected to their own. In an increasingly mobile and market-oriented society, however, young people were more likely than ever to know a number of eligible and interesting potential partners, to conduct correspondences at a distance, and to encounter regularly new individuals of their own age. Even Augusta, who spent her whole life in the same town, came into contact with a transitory population of young men because of her proximity to Yale. She may have grown up with some of the men who sent her valentines, but most likely many of them had arrived recently in New Haven to attend college.

The ready-made notes that holiday merchants marketed throughout the Northeast were perfectly suited to the needs of Augusta and her contemporaries. They were neither difficult nor time-consuming for their senders to assemble. In roughly the same amount of time that it might have taken earlier generations to produce one or two puzzle purses, a young correspondent could purchase many cards, personalize them with handwriting, the importance of which we will investigate closely in the next chapter, and then send them off to several or more acquaintances. Even those who chose to forego mass-produced sentiments and write their own letters, as did many of Augusta's correspondents, generally penned poems that, though sometimes lengthy, were no where near as intricate or detailed as a puzzle purse. Like earlier love knots, store-bought and handmade missives were usually folded and sealed with wax, or more often, placed in envelopes. Antebellum cards, however, contained postage. Together with an improved postal system, they allowed young lovers to convey messages across distances not easily covered by foot.

Perhaps most importantly for a generation that was putting off marriage for years, commercial valentines, and the homemade versions they inspired, allowed them to play at courting. Some cards contained specific wooing language. Almost all the cards Augusta kept fit this category. In fact, one could speculate that she did not preserve until her death the more playful missives she had received, and that would have been more typical for the holiday, because as a spinster she wanted to remember her youth as a time of courting. In any case, the poem from Henry Bascom, which was cited earlier, was an obvious example of someone pursuing her. Another admirer, this time anonymous, wrote to her in 1845, suggesting he was ready to establish his own household:

My heart went pat-a-pat to see,
Such tender things addressed to me
I fancied I was a nice lad
Just old enough to leave my dad!^{129}

Many notes did not address courting so directly. Some hopeful lovers gingerly expressed their desires for the future. Sometime in the 1850s, "TJ" wrote to a young woman:

\begin{verbatim}
Tis yours this present to improve
Its worth depends on you;
A trifle if you do not love
A treasure if you do.
\end{verbatim}

Other writers focused on friendship, leaving the potential for something more unsaid. In 1854 "Sam" sent a card to "Agnes," part of which read:

\begin{verbatim}
Prosperity attend thee
My fair and gentle friend…
And peace and comfort send thee
In life and death, my friend.\^{130}
\end{verbatim}

Most valentines, in other words, were not strictly courting letters. They might contain allusions to courtship, and all of them maintained marriage, or "really true attachments" as the Herald editor termed it, as their ultimate reference point, but few of them were meant to lead to weddings or even long-term commitments. In this sense, when Augusta's anonymous admirer pronounced that he "fancied" himself ready to leave his dad, he may have had more hope than money to start a home and was probably trying to imagine life on his own. Like other young people who traded missives with many different people, Augusta and her anonymous friend were testing the waters, starting the process of locating a possible partner or determining what qualities he or she should have. Their swapping of notes around February 14^{th} represented a type of imaginative play, a time when young men and women looked ahead to a period of wooing and eventually partnering. It was, in Schmidt's words, "a ritualized exchange through which

^{129} Anonymous card to Augusta Babcock, H4.11A, Hallmark Historical Collection.
^{130} Valentine from TJ to unknown recipient, Early Valentines Small, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, MA; Valentine from Sam to Agnes, Box 11: Fringed and Prange, American Antiquarian Society.
Youthful exuberance to experiment with courting around February 14th, combined with merchants' realization that youth could be a lucrative market segment, had important repercussions for Augusta's generation. Exchanging missives gave this mid-century grouping a common cultural reference, a set of experiences and interests that individuals throughout a broad geographic region shared. Not only did young people across the Northeast engage in a similar ritual every February; thanks to advertising, editorials, and magazine stories, they knew that their peers were doing the same. This was not the first generation to share a common bond. At the very least, the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812 had created a sense of generational sacrifice and purpose that extended for decades and across much of the country. The antebellum saint's day, however, was different. It fostered a sense of commonality for those who participated in the holiday not because of individual duty or service. Rather, it helped to define a generation by connecting individuals through their involvement in the market economy. Valentine's Day, in short, was an early form of commercial youth culture. Much like the hula hoop and rock and roll more than a hundred years later, though certainly not to the same extent as those two phenomena, the antebellum, commercial holiday helped to define a mid-century cohort.132

By the time youthful enthusiasm for the saint's day began to wane in the mid-1850s, the late-winter festival had left its mark on a generation. Thousands of men and

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131 Schmidt, 92. See also Lystra, 157.
women had used opportunity to experiment with and look ahead to courting. Businessmen from New York, Boston and other cities large and small had identified a lucrative market segment, and in the process, helped to define the relatively new social category of youth. Many of these same merchants were also determined to do more than merely profit from February 14th or to leave adolescent forays into maturity to chance. Together with the holiday they helped to create, they would endeavor to guide the choices young men and women made.133

Directing Adolescent Courting

August Babcock's collection provides excellent examples of the kinds of cards that young people not only traded, but also valued. All of the three dozen or so she kept were what her contemporaries called "sentimental valentines." These commercial missives launched the modern saint's day in the early 1840s and remained popular through most of the 1850s. They also helped to promote a distinctive holiday culture, one that many merchants had a clear interest in supporting. From its very start the antebellum saint's day reflected the hopes of middle-class adults that the popularity of ready-made notes could help to ensure the propriety of youthful experiments with courting.134

The term "sentimental valentine" appeared already in an earlier discussion of Thomas Strong's advertiser and it is important to clarify what it meant in the mid nineteenth century. Whether they were printed, made by hand, or a combination of the

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133 Another important decision young people faced was what religious outlook to choose. Joseph Kett has argued that the Second Great Awakening arose, in part, to "fix religious character early in life" and thereby guide the "choices" youth made. See his, "Adolescence and Youth," passim, esp. 297-98. I have purposely avoided the term "adolescence." The concept of adolescence became common only at the end of the nineteenth century. As it was used then, the term implied an idealism and postponement of choice that was uncharacteristic of discussions about youth in the antebellum North.

134 David Paul Nord has made a similar argument for religious publishers using the press to stymie what they saw as the noxious influence of popular literature. See his Faith in Reading: Religious Publishing and the Birth of Mass Media in America (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), passim.
two, these ephemera contained expressions of feelings such as love, devotion, friendship or commitment. From our perspective, combining "sentimental" with "valentine" might seem redundant, because almost all modern-day February notes incorporate similar language. In the antebellum North, however, these cards existed alongside what were known as "comic" valentines. These latter ribald prints, which poked fun at people for countless reasons, represented the darkly humorous underbelly of the holiday, and by the mid 1850s rivaled the romantic variety in popularity. Comic valentines, and reactions against them, will be explored in detail in chapter five. For now, it is important to point out that not only did sentimental missives contrast with the comic variety that gained in popularity after mid century, more importantly they defined the holiday.

The centrality of sentimental valentines to the antebellum saint's day is readily apparent from the cards people chose to keep. If Augusta sent and received ribald prints, she did not preserve them. Thousands of other young people did exchange insulting messages, especially in the 1850s, but did not hold onto them either. One has to search hard today to find examples of comic valentines from the period. Not only do romantic notes dominate the collections of most modern-day repositories, including the American Antiquarian Society and the Hallmark Historical Collection; almost all comic sheets that have survived and found their way into these archives are in original, unused condition. Young men and women cared to remember the romantic side to their holiday. They saved sentimental cards because they treasured them. These were the letters they looked forward to receiving, the ones that most often elicited replies, and the ones that could possibly evoke connections between sender and recipient.

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135 Schmidt, 78-80.
136 The most extensive collection of comic valentines is held by the Library Company of Philadelphia. There are very few examples in any repository of comic cards that were actually sent, as indicated by folded paper, addresses, or handwritten notes. This phenomenon reflects in part institutions' collecting policies. More importantly, though, antebellum Americans did not care to save vinegar valentines like they did the sentimental variety.
Newspapers and magazines drove home to Augusta and her peers the link between sentimental exchanges and Valentine's Day. Almost all of the dozens of short stories about the holiday that appeared in magazines during the 1840s and 1850s focused on the trading of loving notes. Newspaper editorials lauded the giving of romantic missives and were quick to criticize ribald. The editors of the Boston Daily Times wrote enthusiastically that "the eyes of youthful beauty sparkle brighter as they glance over the epistolary effusions prompted by gallantry or true love. Long live Saint Valentine's Day!" Around the same time, "the Philadelphia Public Ledger complained," Schmidt notes, that sending ribald cards "is an innovation which...tends to lessen the pleasures which ought legitimately to hallow the festival." Finally, businesses rarely mentioned comics in their ads during the 1840s. In his adverter from 1847, Thomas Strong covered the genre in just one paragraph at the end of his bill. Even in the 1850s, when dealers had started to promote vinegar valentines more aggressively, they rarely advertised them exclusively. The ad reprinted in figure 18 is typical of how they promoted the two together, often mentioning romantic first.

The centrality of sentimental valentines to the saint's day, and adult promotions of those market goods, reflected two broad and important features of mid-century middle-class culture. First, these popular commercial missives revealed the ascendancy of romantic love. Romantic love had a long and complex history, and by the middle decades of the 1800s, as Karen Lystra has shown, it affected countless areas of public and private life. From the perspective of Valentine's Day and those young men and women who were looking ahead to married life, however, there was one development that was particularly noteworthy. Antebellum Northerners expected to fall in love before they got married. This was significant because as late as the end of the eighteenth century many Americans continued the colonial tradition of "choosing mates whom they could love," as

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137 Philadelphia Public Ledger, 15 February 1848, 2, cited in Schmidt, 78; Boston Daily Times, 14 February 1845, 2.
SPECIAL NOTICES.

Ho! for merry St. Valentine's Day,
When lads and lassies are happy and gay.

As on New Year's, every body is privileged to
Call on every body,
So on St. Valentine's Day,
and during the week, every body is privileged to write to
every body, or to send Valentines. Of course

Every Young Lady
is pretty sure to receive a Valentine, and some will receive
a great number, and of course they send them in turn. To
supply this demand and suit all tastes, we have provided

The Largest Assortment Ever Had
in this city, at prices from 6 cents to $25, including the
grate and gay, comical and sentimental, together with all
the new Valentine writers.

Sold wholesale and retail by JORDAN & WILEY,
Booksellers, 20 State st. 130

FOURTEENTH OF FEBRUARY:

"Oh! this is the time of all the year,
When men and Love with Truth combine
To join together the hearts most dear.
By the happy aid of St. Valentine."

For SAXTON & KELT, 133 Washington street, offer for
sale, at Wholesale and Retail, the largest variety of Valen-
tines ever yet in this market—embracing Sentimental,
Comic and Satirical, Lace Papers and Envelopes, with a
superior assortment of Valentine Writers, ranging in price
from 61 cts to 80 each. A very liberal discount when pur-
chased by the quantity. Send orders early.

SAXTON & KELT, 133 Washington Street.
1824, 1825, 1826, 1827 & 1828

From the Boston Post, 2 February 1847, 2
Ellen Rothman has put it. Romantic attachments, that is, were often expected to develop and flower within married life, not before it. Fifty years later, she writes, "love between men and women [had become] a necessary rather than a desirable precondition for marriage."  

Secondly, the popularity of store-bought notes reflected the importance to middle-class life of what is now known as the "culture of sentiment." Although this loosely defined term has meant different things to different scholars over the last two decades or so, most would now agree that it emerged out of but also differed from eighteenth-century sensibility. Whereas the culture of sensibility had promoted and cultivated individual responsiveness to and reception of emotional expressions, sentimentality as it emerged in the nineteenth century emphasized the ability of communication to elicit specific emotional responses from others. Young men and women would already have been acquainted with the culture of sentiment from the fiction marketed to them in magazine stories and books.  

It is perhaps not surprising then that Augusta and her peers turned to printed sources for help with their own emotional declarations.

There was a potential problem, however, when young people experimented with sentimentality in order to explore the possibilities for romance before marriage. This was one point at which Valentine's Day performed some unique cultural work, and the popularity of romantic missives becomes less "readily intelligible." The bookseller Saxton suggested the often-unacknowledged hazard associated with the saint's day. In his unusual advertisement from 1845, he publicized that his cards would end young men and women's "celibacy" and "disclose their passion and bring about the consummation to their happiness by joining two loving hearts in one." Ultimately, February courting play


139 The "culture of sentiment" got its start among literary scholars and has since caught the attention of those working in interdisciplinary fields. There are far too many works to list here. Barry Shank has a good, short overview of the topic, in *A Token of My Affection: Greeting Cards and American Business Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 21-29. See also June Howard, "What is Sentimentality?" *American Literary History* 11.1 (Spring, 1999), 63-81 and Eustace, Introduction.
held the promise of marriage and the physical intimacy associated with it, or as Saxton noted, an end to celibacy. Yet young card writers were not supposed to acknowledge the link with sex inherent in the holiday. Several years later the editors of the *Evening Post* echoed popular opinion by warning that expressions of love in missives should not be "too warm." Young Valentine's Day celebrants walked a fine line. Sentimental exchanges were based on emotional honesty and intensity, but would-be lovers had to be careful that their effusions did not become too suggestive of physical intimacy.

Antebellum Northerners were not simply and prudishly opposed to sex or discussions about it. "Middle-class Americans," Lystra argues, "actually held an extremely high estimation of, indeed almost reverence for, sexual expression as the ultimate symbol of love and personal sharing." Many letters from married or engaged couples contained language that might surprise modern-day readers who associate Victorianism with sexual repression. But Valentine's Day correspondents were of course not married, nor usually even actively courting. And there lay the rub. Middle-class, mid-century Americans may have talked about and enjoyed physical intimacy within the context of marriage, but they generally opposed sex or discussions about it outside of matrimony.141

Young card writers, in their late-teens and early-twenties, were in the midst of sexual maturation, but they were repeatedly warned to restrain their sexual urges. Young men had only to look to the objectionable image of the "dandy," the man who flouted middle-class standards by making "a spectacle of himself" and making women "objects of his scrutiny." Young women who failed to contain their passion confronted the

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141 Quote from Lystra, 5, see also 3-11; Espousal and matrimonial valentines constituted a distinct subcategory of sentimental cards that aren't discussed here (Schmidt, 92). There was also a voyeuristic component to middle-class attitudes toward sexuality. People disdained public representations of sex, but many also read certain genres, especially "medical" literature, that dwelt on sexuality. See, for example, Karen Halttunen, "Humanitarianism and the Pornography of Pain in Anglo-American Culture," *The American Historical Review* 100, no. 2 (April 1995): 303-334.
prospect of being labeled either a "coquette," someone who "used her sexuality to
manipulate men," or worse yet, a prostitute. Both men and women were also cautioned
against letting their sexual desires turn to "self-pollution," the contemporary term for
masturbation. Concern about "masturbatory insanity" pervaded nineteenth-century
literature. According to popular belief, self-pleasuring threatened individuals'
"psychological or even physical stability."  

What was a young valentine writer to do? How could he or she express his or her
passion in a card while also containing the threat inherent in emotional intensity that
became "too warm"? In order to understand how the early spring celebration helped
young people traverse the minefield of sexuality in courtship, we need to return to
antebellum Americans' understanding of human development. On one end of the
spectrum was the "innocent" child, the boy or girl who had not reached puberty and who
had no interest in sex. On the other end were adults, men and women who had learned to
encapsulate physical intimacy within marriage. Valentine's Day provided one way for
young people to safely bridge this gap between childish innocence and adult sexuality.

The antebellum holiday worked this bit of cultural sleight-of-hand by rooting
itself in juvenile artlessness. According to The Great Republic Monthly, boys and girls
understood that "Love is the element of social life," but that adults sometimes talked of it
"with contempt." The editors of the Boston Daily Courier put it this way: "Whatever
tends to innocent mirth and merriment, cherishes kindly feelings...[and] awakens a
tender sentiment in the present, momentary though it be, has a certain value." During the
month of February, in other words, Augusta and her peers were encouraged to adopt an
idealized, juvenile perspective on love that stressed the power of benevolent kindness to
create happiness in oneself and others. Graham's Magazine warned its readers that those

\[142\] For a discussion of dandies, see John F. Kasson, Rudeness and Civility: Manners in Nineteenth-Century
Urban America (New York: Hill and Wang, 1990), 117-127, quote from 127; for coquettes, see Rothman,
40-41, quote from 41; on masturbation see Kett, 286-87, quote from 287, and G.J. Barker-Benfield,
The Horrors of the Half-Known Life: Male Attitudes Toward Women and Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century

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who failed to adopt this innocent amour would become "insensible to all those affections which once made them happy."  

Love, in other words, would only be corrupted by adult concerns and desires. Young holiday correspondents could find "true love" or "pure love," two terms commonly associated with Valentine's Day, commentators argued, by redirecting any sexual impulses they had into a kind of prepubescent naivety. In effect, the holiday worked to prolong one component of childhood, sexual disinterest, until a defining moment of adulthood, marriage.

Given this connection between idealized juvenile innocence and Valentine's Day, it should come as little surprise that many of the merchants who produced holiday goods also had a strong interest in the growing market for children's literature. Consider, for example, Esther Howland's father. Southworth Howland began in the "bookbindery and retail book trade" in 1821, at the age of twenty-one. In 1842 he went into business by himself and during the next decade published at least seventy different works. His titles included Bible Stories for the Young, The Good Child's Sunday Book, and Good Advice for Boys and Girls. Southworth made a business, in other words, of offering moral and spiritual advice to boys and girls. Augusta Babcock's father, Sidney, followed a similar path. Many of the hundred or so works he published were oriented to the children's market, including Juvenile Pastimes, or, Girls' and Boys' Book of Sports and The Child's Own Sunday Book, or, Sabbath-day Lessons for Little Children. There is no evidence that Sidney ever printed titles for February 14th, but Southworth did. With The Sentimental Valentine Writer, for Ladies and Gentlemen, which we will examine more closely in the next chapter, Southworth sought to offer young February 14th romantics similar moral guidance that he had directed to children for years.  

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144 I arrived at the number of books Southworth published by searching his name in the American Antiquarian Society's catalog, and the number Sidney printed by searching in OCLC. For a brief account of Southworth's career and life see Franklyn Howland, A Brief Genealogical and Biographical History of Arthur, Henry, and John Howland and Their Descendants, of the United States and Canada (New Bedford, MA: Franklyn Howland, 1885), 371-72.
Not all holiday publishers and printers were so focused on didactic works. This was especially true of businessmen in New York and other large metropolises. Thomas Strong marketed a number of books for children, including *Children's Instructive Poetry* and *Interesting Stories for Good Children.* One of his main Manhattan rivals, James Fisher, also published much juvenile literature, especially works written by Mary Durang. Both men began printing sentimental valentines in the early 1840s and offered several collections of romantic holiday verse—competitors to Southworth's title—during the next decade. But both Strong and Fisher also became leading publishers of comic lines in the 1850s. One could call them Valentine's Day opportunists. Unlike Southworth and Esther Howland, who never produced ribald prints, Strong, Fisher and other metropolitan merchants sought to profit from both sides of the February 14th market after mid century. As we will see in more detail in chapter five, these businessmen promoted a more playful version of the holiday youth culture, one that continued to guide young men and women even as it allowed them some room to chafe against middle-class stuffiness. All the while most of these men remained committed to sentimental holiday notes and the juvenile literary market from which they sprung.

The connection between Valentine's Day and idealized childhood innocence that these printers helped to popularize was epitomized by the image of Cupid. By the mid nineteenth century the figure of the angelic child had become synonymous with the holiday. Merchants claimed that the winged deity preferred their wares. Strong, for example, announced to the public that "Cupid calls out his 'Strong Army' again today. All lovers are invited to be present and partake of the beauties...which will be dispensed on the occasion." Newspapers and magazines reiterated the connection between the Roman god and the holiday. On February 13, 1843, the *New York Tribune* reminded its readers that "Tomorrow is St. Valentine's Day—the festival of Cupid—the permitted
season for poetic and sly avowals of the tender passion."\footnote{145} Finally, illustrations of the childish figure had become widespread by the 1850s, in hand-produced and printed cards, in advertisements, and as accompaniments to stories in periodicals. In 1856, for instance, *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* published a drawing that depicted Cupids producing and distributing cards (see figure 19).

Nineteenth-century Americans did not invent Cupid. The story of the god of love and his mistress comes from ancient Roman mythology. Cupid, son of the goddess Venus, took the unearthly beautiful mortal, Psyche, to be his lover. He forbade Psyche to see him, but she disobeyed his command. Sneaking into his chamber at night to get a look at his face, she accidentally pricked herself with one of his arrows, thereby falling in love with him, and then she inadvertently burned him with oil from her lamp. In pain, Cupid fled to his mother, who decided to punish her son's lover. Psyche accomplished the tasks Venus set for her through the assistance of divine aid and then Cupid, now recovered from his injuries, finally came to her rescue. In the end Psyche was immortalized and the pair married at a banquet held by the gods.\footnote{146}

During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries artists transformed and popularized visual representations of Cupid. In classical antiquity he had been represented in a variety of ways, only a few of which would be recognizable to modern-day viewers. Sometimes he appeared as a winged youth or boy, often carrying a bow and arrow or wrapped with a snake. Just as often he was depicted as a hermaphrodite, or as a winged creature "who shows his genitals," or as a phallus with a human head.\footnote{147} Renaissance painters and sculptures popularized two basic visual typologies for the god of love. The first form drew from classical statuary and presented Cupid as a muscular, nude or semi-nude young man; often he was shown seducing a partially clad Psyche. In the second

\footnote{145 Advertisement, *New York Herald*, 14 February 1851, 2; "Tomorrow is St. Valentine's Day," *New York Tribune*, 13 February 1843, 2.}
\footnote{146 For a good synopsis of the myth, see Carl C. Schlam, *The Metamorphoses of Apuleius or Making an Ass of Oneself* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1992), chp. 8.}
Figure 19: Cupids

from "St. Valentine's Day," *Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, 16 February 1856, 157
type the ancient god appeared as a "cherub" with a bow and arrow. In the Judeo-Christian tradition cherubs are angels who reside in the uppermost angelic hierarchy; they are in direct communication with God. By the time of the Renaissance, cherubs were always drawn or carved as nude, usually male, winged children.\textsuperscript{148}

Antebellum Americans continued but modified this tradition of representing the god of love as a cherub, and they connected him specifically to the early spring rite. Indeed, the terms cherub and Cupid were used interchangeably after 1840. References to Psyche during Valentine's Day disappeared. Youthful female sexuality was excised from the holiday. The image of the virile, young male deity also vanished. The Roman god was not simply made childlike, however; he was also unsexed. In contrast to previous artistic renderings, the juvenile Cupid was never drawn nude. He always had strategically placed coverings, as in figure 19, or he was depicted from the side. Moreover, with his long "golden" locks and pudgy features, the deity was not readily identifiable as male or female. He had become an androgynous it. This baby-like, unsexed image, not an adult Saint Valentine, became the figure most readily identified with the holiday.\textsuperscript{149}

Cupid's cherubic innocence was potentially threatened, however, by a second common visual representation of the Roman god. As is evident in figures 19 and 20, the juvenile figure was often drawn with an arrow at the ready, sometimes with it directed at a young person or couple. This deity did not just stand watch over young men and women who courted during Valentine's Day. He took an active role in their wooing. At any moment he would not simply instill love in his "victims." He would pierce them with amour. Cupid's arrow suggested a manly robustness at odds with the god's juvenile androgyny. This latent virility was largely elided, though, by the fact that the actual act


\textsuperscript{149} Schmidt, 75-77.
Figure 20: Cupid

Valentines!

Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society
of impalement was only suggested, never shown. The arrow, in other words, became symbolic of the cultural work the holiday sought to perform on youthful sexuality. The juvenile Cupid aimed young men and women toward an adult intimacy that occurred outside the context of the holiday and promised to safely guide them there by instilling in them a childish, innocent love.

Valentine's Day exchanges, and the popular association of the cherubic Cupid with the celebration, worked to create a space for youthful ventures into courting that was securely anchored to juvenile simplicity. Every February 14th residents of the Northeast who were coming of age were reminded that they were to engage with and view their budding romantic relationships in specific ways. If they followed the examples provided by holiday, they were promised, they could traverse some of the dangers of youth and safely make the passage into adult intimacy and domestic life. Middle-class adults not only entrusted the saint's day to guide the propriety of youthful romance, however, they also used the holiday to indirectly steer youthful courting.

**Publicly Private Gendered Exchanges**

During the month of February young people did not simply exchange valentines. Holiday wooing was what contemporaries often referred to as a late-winter "game," and like any game, it had certain rules and conventions. Broadly speaking, the formula for Valentine's Day card exchanges revolved around two aspects of middle class life: the so-called public, private divide and gender norms. In the mid nineteenth century Americans often talked about two "separate spheres" of daily life. The private sphere encompassed the family and the home. The public sphere included the world of politics and business and was primarily the preserve of men. We now know that theory did not always match practice, that the public and private were not as divided as contemporaries often made them out to be. Valentine's Day exchanges represented one example of the complicated
relationship between the "spheres." Holiday card giving was not entirely private, nor completely public. The practice of sending sentimental missives occupied a middle ground between the two areas. This straddling of the public and private played an important role in drawing young people to the wooing ritual and it provided adults some capacity to direct youthful emotional expression.

How were these saint's day exchanges private? Like love letters in general, sentimental valentines represented personal, direct communications between sender and recipient. Usually the missives were placed within envelopes, secreted away until their intended readers opened them. All of Augusta's cards, for instance, whether they were written on paper or on printed stock, bear creases that indicate they were folded until she opened them. A few of them also contain stains from wax that was applied so that the notes could not be unsealed without her knowledge. Augusta did not leave any record of how she reacted when she received her valentines, but others did. One young woman who was in boarding school in 1859 described her classmate's response. She wrote, after getting her letter in the morning, "[Amanda] sits down by the parlour window as quick as she gets through dinner and reads it all the afternoon." Scenes of young people, usually women, secluding themselves away to slowly ponder and absorb Valentine's Day messages were also common in short stories about the holiday. Individuals might announce to family and friends that they had received a card—Amanda had "shown [her's] to everybody"—but then they read their missives first by themselves.150

The acts of composing and poring over a valentine were generally private, but the events surrounding these moments were much more public. As the weeks around February 14th became marked by shopping, men and women thronged to stores to peruse and purchase cards. Valentines, whether they were made or bought, then generally traveled through the mail. And once in this public domain their fate was out of their

150 Caroline S. North, letter from "Cousin Susie," 21 February 1859, North Family Papers, Col. 380, Folder 34, 54x93.555, Winterthur Library.
senders' control. Would they be delivered to the correct person? Would they arrive on time? Would they be intercepted and perused by eyes other than those of the intended recipients? Valentine's Day exchanges relied on the unpredictable and uncontrollable postal service. This use of the mail also meant that one's friends and neighbors could potentially know how many cards one had received. (Since envelopes usually did not contain return addresses, it would have been difficult to know who had sent the note without opening it). In fact, once letters had been delivered, young people often began competing with one another to see who had received the most number of them. In 1848, Emily Dickinson, who was in school at the time and, like Augusta, corresponding with male students, wrote to her brother Austin, "Every night have I looked, and yet in vain, for one of Cupid's messengers." Comparing herself to her classmates, Dickinson lamented, "Many of the girls have received very beautiful ones; and I have not quite done hoping for one." Young people would have been hard pressed to miss this public, competitive quality of the holiday giving. Newspapers printed numerous articles warning their readers that perhaps they had not received enough love-notes. In one such editorial, the *Boston Daily Times* wrote, "We hardly know of any one who is so highly favored as our friend, for he has received some twenty of these sweet testimonials of affection from as many fair maids."

The convergence of the public and private in Valentine's Day was readily apparent in the amusement that unfolded after a card had been received. Missives were often sent anonymously. Consider Augusta's collection again. Less than one-third of her cards, a total of ten, were signed. The rest contained no indication of the sender or were playfully signed with phrases such as a "A Lover" or "St. Valentine." Augusta and other letter recipients had to discover the identities of these unnamed scribes. Young people

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might enjoy shopping for cards, or making them. They might look forward to receiving and sending them. But most of all they loved to play this print-based sport of hide-and-seek. The *New York Evening Express* put it this way: "St. Valentine's is a day of little harmless deceits; it seems to have been dedicated to disguised handwritings and false signatures; when letters that are only sent to the next door are posted a mile or two away, yet, strange ending of all, each fond lover hopes to be detected through this thin disguise." In order to attach a name to a note, young men and women had to make public the sentiments that had originally been written solely for them. They had to ask family and friends whether they could identify the handwriting, or confront them whether they had actually written the message. The misdirection and confusion that ensued formed the basis this "harmless" and humorous pastime. One might discover that the author was not the person one predicted or wanted. On the other hand, after the veil of anonymity lifted, one might uncover previously unknown or unexpected interest, which could become the basis for further exchanges. The fun associated with this early-spring wooing ritual came from the public search for the source of private sentiments.

This publicity of Valentine's Day card giving had important repercussions for youthful courting play. Not only were young men and women increasingly delaying marriage and hoping to fall in love beforehand, they also enjoyed substantial autonomy while wooing. Mothers and fathers might keep watch on social functions, deny hospitality to a hopeful visitor, or critique a relationship, but in general courting couples were expected to regulate their own behavior. Even when young men and women made mistakes or misbehaved, parents often hesitated to intervene. Children could and did resist parental authority when it became too burdensome, especially if they had "enough

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financial and social independence to allow them to push back. Just a generation or two earlier, youthful courting had been remarkably different. Young men and women in colonial and early America participated in what one scholar has termed a "sexual revolution." Eighteenth-century parents had sought to oversee and direct their children's love lives; men and women of marrying age, in turn, rebelled against such controls, most notably by engaging in premarital sex in order to force their parents to accept their choice of partners. During the second half of the century, as premarital pregnancy rates continued to rise, parents found a number of ways to supervise their children's courting while also providing them some independence. By the second quarter of the 1800s such direct oversight, and the practices associated with it, was disappearing quickly.

The Bachelors' Ball was an effort to indirectly monitor young people by providing them an autonomous space that was organized and run by respectable adults, but even that effort eventually fell out of favor. Yet adults did not completely remove themselves from their children's love lives. How could they maintain some authority over youthful wooing without threatening its apparent autonomy? Valentine's Day provided one answer by offering a subtle and indirect form of adult influence over young people. The early spring "game" was not as autonomous as it might have seemed to those playing it.

The power of the holiday to sway wooing in certain directions derived from the unique positioning of Valentine's Day exchanges between public and private life. The saint's day guided youthful emotions by making seemingly private sentiments in fact public. We have already seen that the celebration worked to circumscribe expressions of passion. More broadly, it limited the range of youthful emotional declarations during

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February wooing. Sentiments such as anger, betrayal, disappointment or bitterness were largely absent from homemade and mass-produced loving notes. Part of this regulation of wooing occurred in the context of the family. The "game" of discovering would-be courters led individuals to publicize to friends, family and neighbors some of the thoughts that had originally been directed to them. Once in the open these sentiments could then be monitored by those close to the man or woman who made them known. Adults might use the February occasion to try to nudge young people's emotional expressions along specific lines.

Generally, though, this bounding of Valentine's Day language occurred not through direct adult interjection into youthful correspondences, but rather through public pronouncements of culturally acceptable and unacceptable sentiments. Young men and women were expected to supervise their own exchanges, and the holiday showed them the way. Newspapers and magazines, for example, lauded and reprinted numerous examples of suitable cards. The New York Weekly Herald, the version of the Herald distributed outside of the city, informed its readers, "We received one from some fair creature...but who that fair one is, we cannot tell. Here it is, full of good wishes and prayers." The poem began:

May all the blessings pen can write
Around thee center and unite,
And never lack good appetite,
Or be without a crust to bite.

A decade later, in 1857, the New York Ledger informed its readers that St. Valentine was "no strife-bringer" and that his "agents," that is letter-writers, "kindle hope, and faith, and love in tender hearts."155 And, of course, every year thousands of youths perused and finally purchased store-bought sentimental cards, in the process discovering innumerable

variations of the generally compassionate language of the holiday. For several weeks in February young men and women internalized public, middle-class standards for private self-expression during wooing.

This indirect adult supervision of young people's love lives was readily apparent in short stories about the holiday that popular magazines printed. The theme of public manipulation of private sentiments assumed two general literary forms. In some tales parental figures literally took oblique control of youthful wooing. Consider, for instance, the story of "Kate's Valentine" by Harry Sunderland, published in *Godey's Lady's Book* in 1850. The tale is narrated by Kate's guardian uncle. It starts with a wager between the two that Kate, who is twenty-one, will receive a valentine, as her uncle says, "from a certain young man named—never mind...I won't name him." Rather than leaving the bet to chance, however, he sends his niece an anonymous valentine that contains a poem and a bracelet and he hopes that she will assume it comes from a young man named Loring, to whom she and her uncle are both partial. The ruse works. Kate wears the bracelet whenever Loring calls at the house and eventually, after an undisclosed period of time, her uncle receives "a formal offer for the hand of Kate." 156

"About a month before her wedding day," Kate's uncle reveals his deceit. Taking her hand, he recites the Valentine's Day poem that his niece had not shown to anyone: "This little love-token, dear Kate, is for thee: / Accept it, and keep it, and wear it for me." Kate recoils in shock, asks "You sent it?," and then covers her face with her hands and begins to cry. The tears, however, come from joy rather than disappointment. Uncovering her face to "reveal parting drops of a summer shower," Kate kisses her uncle and declares, "Henceforth, I will wear [the bracelet] for the real giver." The story ends with the uncle's observation ,"On her wedding night, Kate wore her Valentine bracelet;

"Kate's Valentine" highlighted issues about parental authority that played out more subtly in other stories such as "Fanny Clayton's Valentine," "St. Valentine's Morning," and "The Dream of St. Valentine's Eve." All of these tales revolved around a young person, usually a woman, and a parental figure. The fact that fathers and mothers were almost always absent from these stories about the holiday was important. Young people were under the care of aunts, uncles or guardians. Parental authority, in other words, was broadly diffused among adults in general. "Kate's Valentine," moreover, brought into bold relief the claims of that authority. Her uncle was not interested in the initial wager; he never asked for the hat she owed him after he won the bet. He was concerned with something more important: control over the young couple's courting. The bracelet became symbolic of adult presence in youthful love, in this case even during the wedding night. The holiday promised young people autonomy while courting, but Kate's uncle, as Elizabeth White Nelson argues, "makes clear that power is easily recouped by the displaced patriarchal figure." Stories like this revealed adult aspirations to subtly and indirectly regulate youthful emotions during the holiday. The uncle's literal orchestration of his niece's wooing represented the more diffuse adult concern to publicly direct private sentiments during the saint's day.

Other stories about adult authority during Valentine's Day did not involve adults at all. In these tales young people successfully managed their own emotions in culturally prescribed ways and ultimately found true love. "That Valentine," by H.N. Babb, opens with a scene of a school principal literally monitoring her students' reception of holiday

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157 Sunderland, 121.
cards. Miss Vaughn hands out the mail on February 14th and her pupils "shivered as we thought of the close scrutiny they must undergo from her, before being delivered to us." The story quickly heads in another direction, however. Emily Morton is a young teacher at the all-female boarding school. She dreads Valentine's Day, but no one knows why. This year she receives a note—which Vaughn does not read—that turns her world upside-down, reveals the source of her anguish, and finally leads her to happiness.159

Years earlier Emily had been in love with a young man named Edwin Neal. One February 14th he sent her a "strange valentine which released her from her engagement." Heartbroken, she had agreed to marry Mr. Morton "as the only means of saving [her father] from disgrace and ruin." Several years later, again on February fourteenth, "she was shocked into consciousness by the feeling of relief she experienced when told that [Morton] was dead." Emily then took up the profession of teaching. The card she receives at the beginning of the story comes from Edwin; she knows because "it is his handwriting" on the envelope. Another young teacher, Eliza, urges Emily to treat it with "cool contempt." She decides to open the letter, however, and learns the "truth" behind Edwin's jilting of her years earlier. Emily's cousin had told Edwin that Emily was in love with Mr. Morton. When "she felt herself to be dying, and sought to lighten the remorse which tortured her last hours," this cousin sent for Edwin and admitted that not only had she lied, she had intercepted his last valentine to Emily so that she would not learn of his true feelings for her. The romantic story ends, not surprisingly, with the two lovers reuniting and the narrator lamenting that "he bore away our teacher, and we never had as good a one again."160

"That Valentine" dwells on the theme of properly regulated emotions leading to true love, an argument that recurs in numerous other stories about the holiday. In one sense, the publicness of the holiday goes awry in this account. The young cousin is able

160 Babb, 197-98.
to disrupt Emily and Edwin's courting because part of it occurs in the public domain of
the mail; she simply intercepts and then hides their correspondence. Ultimately, though,
this deceit fails. The young cousin cannot contain her guilt and comes clean with Edwin.
Dishonesty and jealousy have no place in Valentine's Day. Eliza, Emily's fellow young
teacher, also exhibits emotions unfitting for the holiday. Her anger and pride have left
her single and suggest she will eventually become a spinster. Emily rejects both of these
emotional foils. She chooses honesty and affection and thereby reconnects with a
Valentine's Day love temporarily derailed. Moralistic stories like this helped to manage
youthful courting by publicizing different, varied sentimental expressions and then
detailing the consequences of specific emotional exchanges.

"That Valentine," "Kate's Valentine," and just about every other fictional account
of the saint's day focused on female characters—not surprising since then, as now,
women were the primary market for fictional literature.\textsuperscript{161} Holiday card giving, however,
involved young men and women and both sexes initiated correspondences during the
middle weeks of February, though they did so differently. Like a well-rehearsed script,
Valentine's Day exchanges orchestrated male and female activities in specific ways.
These gendered standards for trading missives had important repercussions for young
people's plays with courting. They worked to provide young women substantial authority
during wooing, while at the same time guiding the sentimental expressions of both sexes
in distinctly different ways towards the same end.

Every February youthful card giving followed a specific rhythm. Young men sent
valentines to a number of women and then waited to see which of them would respond.
This pattern of exchanges, from men to women and then back again, was reiterated time
and again in fictional stories. Newspaper accounts of the holiday also informed readers

\textsuperscript{161} See for example, Mary Kelley, "Reading Women / Women Reading: The Making of Learned Women in
Antebellum America," \textit{Journal of American History} 83 (September 1996), 140-60 and Michael Kimmel,
that it was the season for would-be suitors to commence searching. The New York Herald observed in 1849 that "the day is looked for by many of our young ladies with much anxiety." The Weekly Herald reflected, "Monday was a gala day among the happy belles of our city. Being St. Valentine's Day, of course every one watched with eager anxiety to see the carriers stop at their doors with the love-disclosing billets." Business advertisements drove home to young beaus their responsibility to begin the holiday wooing. T. Wiley warned them "not omit this necessary auxiliary to the realization of your fondest hopes." This initial flow of cards from men to women mirrored antebellum courting more broadly. In the 1840s and 1850s young suitors were expected to take the lead in initiating courtships.

Valentine's Day, however, inserted a unique wrinkle into this general pattern of exchanges: leap year. In the twenty years before the Civil War, leap year occurred every four years beginning with 1840. Whenever February contained twenty-nine days, young women had the opportunity to send cards to men first. In 1844 Boston's Daily Evening Transcript reminded its readers, "The ladies will have double privileges tomorrow. It will be St. Valentine's Day of the Leap Year, and...why they must wait until 1848, ere they can have another season of breaking the ice of formal custom." Businesses quickly recognized the opportunity to profit from this practice. In 1848 T. Wiley announced, "Ye young women, we implore you do not fail to use the privileges which Leap Year gives you. Four long years spent solitary and alone, before they will again recur." Philip Cozan's ad from 1856 noted that "Ladies can avail themselves of leap year privileges."

It is difficult to know whether or not young people actually adhered to these "formal customs" of men usually initiating exchanges and women only doing so on leap

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163 Lystra, 186.
years, because few surviving valentines indicate who sent the first missive. One of Augusta's cards suggests, however, that they did not always stick to the rules. In an anonymous poem from 1845 a young man indicated that Augusta might have written to him first. Instead of writing that he had received her response to his letter, this suitor opened his note, in pleasant surprise, "Dear Miss your charming Valentine / Came safe at hand." Businesses, moreover, encouraged all young people to send cards. Many of their ads did direct men to take the initiative and women to respond, and some of their announcements addressed the leap year practice. More often, though, dealers simply urged youths of both sexes to buy their valentines. Haliburton and Dudley proclaimed, "To all lady loves! / and / Lovers of ladies! / Fortune, wit, women, men, harmony and matrimony!" George Ives publicized in 1851 that "As the season approaches when lovers of either sex are privileged to send to one another tokens of Love, the subscriber has prepared for the occasion a large and splendid variety of VALENTINES."165

At a time when women had limited power in public realms, these standards for Valentine's Day card-giving helped to create a space in which the sexes met as relative equals. It provided young women some authority over courtship: the power to decide the course of future interactions. Women set many of the terms for holiday exchanges. They decided which cards to answer and which they would ignore or rebuff. Men waited anxiously for replies. Henry Bascom, part of whose letter was quoted earlier, wrote to Augusta, "Until some answer thou shouldst give / Compelling me to die or live! / If die, I'd feel a sweet relief! / If live, I'd live with thee in peace!" This was a season, as Thomas Strong playfully put it, when "lords are all in bondage" to "ladies." Valentine's Day exchanges also created similar emotional standards for both men and women. The holiday demanded that they express the same sentiments, such as commitment, compassion and affection. In this sense it worked, like the love-letters more generally

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165 Babcock, H.11A; advertisement, Redding and Company, Boston Post, 8 February 1845, 3; advertisement, George H. Ives, New York Daily Tribune, 12 February 1851, 1.
that Lysta has examined, "to bridge some sex-role divisions" between young men and women while they started to court. This bridging occurred in part through the association of sentimental expression with youthfulness in general, not with women or men specifically. During the month of February all young people were infected with what contemporaries called the "tender passions."  

Yet Valentine's Day also brought into focus certain continued inequities between the sexes while they courted. Leap year was a "privilege" for women when men were expected to "submit" to this inversion of the standard gendering of holiday exchanges. Strong's use of the term "bondage" during a non-leap year further suggested that female authority during the saint's day was exceptional and it hinted at a certain manly discomfort with that control. Finally, in years when February had the usual twenty-eight days, women might send cards unprompted, but they probably only did so with men whom they knew well and with whom they had established friendships. To do otherwise ran the risk of social disapproval or the label of impropriety. The young Emily Dickinson wrote to her brother, Austin, "Surely my friend Thomas has not lost all his former affection for me! I entreat you to tell him I am pining for a valentine."  She would not initiate the exchange with Thomas, but rather waited for his letter. Like many other young women, Dickinson hesitated to take the lead in holiday "love-making."

Valentine's Day sought to bridge sex-role divisions through the uniquely publicly private nature of exchanges, and this distinct cultural work impacted women and men differently. In the case of middle-class men, the holiday confronted the fact that in their political and economic occupations men were expected to exhibit emotional restraint and control. How could they then make the transition into the emotionally effusive quality of this saint's day? The holiday made it safe for what the *Boston Post* called the "sterner

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166 Letter from J. Henry Bascom to Augusta Babcock, H4.11A, Hallmark Historical Collection, the emphasis is his; advertisement, T.W. Strong, *New York Daily Tribune*, 15 February 1858, 1; Lystra, 9.
167 Quote from Schmidt, 92; Letter from Emily Dickinson to Auston Dickinson, *Letters*, 70.
sex" to express sentiments during the month of February. Young men did not simply become "emotional" during the holiday. Their private exchanges with women involved publicly approved and monitored sentiments. In effect men stepped into this emotional space, a figurative territory centered around and directed by women, by adopting distinct, culturally approved forms of expression. They could also, indeed were expected to, step out of it. Valentine's Day encouraged and cordoned off time for men to practice specific sentimental communications with women. 168

The holiday did not have to perform the same cultural work for young women because they were already familiar with and accustomed to sentimental expression. One of the interesting things about Valentine's Day exchanges was the lack of cards sent between young females. No short stories included scenes of this kind of exchange. Newspaper editorials never mentioned it. No businesses advertised valentines for young ladies to send to one another. And few examples of cards sent between women exist today in archives. Why this silence? We know from the work of Carroll Smith-Rosenberg that it was not unusual for young, middle-class women to send letters to each other that contained language similar to that found in valentines. In fact one of the ways they learned sentimental forms of expression was through their interactions and exchanges with one another. The problem with these forms of communication for the holiday was that they were generally private. They could not be publicly monitored the way valentines were. The February saint's day encouraged young females to direct this sentimental language into the uniquely public realm of card exchanges. Within this space, women, like men, adopted culturally acceptable forms of sentimental expression, but forms based on previously experienced, private interactions. 169

168 "Valentines," Boston Post, 12 February 1848, 2
This process of bridging divisions through the public expression of private sentiments also encouraged young women to direct emotions away from homosocial and into hetersocial relationships. For both young women and men, Valentine's Day was a kind of training ground. In the two decades before the Civil War, the romantic, companionate model of marriage increasingly became the norm for northern, middle-class couples. Within this ideal, men and women were expected to provide one another emotional support and intimacy. Outside of the home they might practice emotional restraint and control; but inside it they were supposed to be openly and intensely loving, caring and expressive. Not all middle-class marriages conformed to this model, of course, but Valentine's Day helped to solidify it as an ideal and to prepare young people for it. During this holiday young people practiced and experimented with sentimental expression central to the emotional standard of the middle class family. They learned to suppress anger, jealousy or resentment and to express compassion, empathy or kindness. This publicly defined cultural ground provided space for young people to tryout and become familiar with emotional values they were expected to carry into the private arena of marriage.

The popularity of Valentine's Day emotional experimentation is a reminder that scholars should be careful about simply linking "sentimentality" to "femininity" or to the "private sphere" of the home. February 14th offered both men and women what one might term a "sentimental economy." As short stories like "Kate's Valentine" and "That Valentine" make clear, antebellum, middle-class parents were expected to encourage youthful love interests at a respectful distance; they were certainly not supposed to pressure their young to marry for money. Yet men and women of marrying age still had to demonstrate their worthiness. Valentine's Day provided youths both a language and

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goods with which they could lay claim to middle-class status by showing off their familiarity with the sentimentality central to that culture. Like peacocks strutting their feathers, every February young men and women displayed their emotional refinement, both to potential partners and often to those around them. These exhibitions not only demonstrated youthful investment in genteel culture, they helped to assure adults of middle-class cultural vitality and reproduction.

Undoubtedly, most youths viewed their late-winter holiday game more as an amusement than any sort of investment. Every year young men eagerly sent sentimental missives to women, who sometimes sent their own, especially during leap years, but who usually waited for cards and then decided which they would acknowledge. For both sexes, the excitement associated with the saint's day came from both the anticipation of receiving a card or cards and then the search to discover who might have written the notes that were sent anonymously. Nonetheless, February 14th amusements also had important lessons to teach. They endeavored to maintain adult presence in youthful wooing through the public display of private sentiments and to align young men and women's sentimental expressions with emotions compatible with the emerging ideal of romantic marriage.

Within a matter of years, by the mid 1840s, Augusta Babcock and her peers had helped to create an antebellum holiday celebration distinctly suited to their needs. For a generation coming of age in an increasingly mobile, market-oriented, and diverse society, the trading of sentimental missives provided an attractive and fitting way to experiment with the language of romance and begin to look for suitable partners, in essence to start the process of courting. The holiday, moreover, allowed them to dream of commitment and intimacy while still retaining their childish innocence. As they envisioned and rehearsed their hopes for loving, affectionate partnerships by trading sentiments with numerous people—in a sense hedging their investments in future romances, they
participated in a coming-of-age ritual that staked their collective claim to genteel culture. A new commercial holiday helped to define a generational cohort's hopes for middle-class status.

Valentine's Day also insured adults some continued though indirect involvement in youthful wooing. Merchants in cities large and small helped to define Augusta's age group as a social category by targeting ads specifically to them, by identifying them as a distinct marketing segment on February 14th. Their announcements and printed goods then offered the promise that during the holiday youthful plays at courting would remain untainted and uncorrupted by adult worldliness. Perhaps most importantly, the distinctly publicly private nature of saint's day exchanges helped insure that adults would continue to monitor their children's love lives.

A robust antebellum market economy had given birth to and helped to popularize Valentine's Day. The holiday would never have become successful, however, if it had simply reflected the market economy of which it was a part and which would play an important role in young people's lives. As the popularity of the holiday spread, it quickly sought to differentiate itself from mere commerce.
Chapter 4

Going into Print: Writing and Publishing for February 14th

The modern-day researcher who visits any archive with substantial numbers of historic valentines will quickly recognize a fundamental distinction within nineteenth-century commercial missives. Cards produced before the Civil War are invariably more likely to contain examples of script, both written and printed, than are their counterparts from the last quarter of the century. One can spend hours looking through tens of boxes and thousands of cards—a reflection of the increased commercial activity of the Gilded Age, only to discover just a handful of examples of scrawl on missives from the end of the century. Notes from the 1840s and 1850s, in contrast, though less plentiful were often sold with cursive already present or were personalized by those who purchased them. This distinction resulted in part from the habits of later collectors, many of whom saved the printed fronts of cards and discarded the backs, the area most likely to be personalized with pen and ink. This is only a partial explanation, however, because collectors mutilated notes from before and after the Civil War with equal abandon. More importantly, in the closing decades of the century people often did not write on their valentines, or if they did, they only scribbled a few lines. The presence of script on so many cards from the 1840s and 1850s suggests that there was something unique about the culture of Valentine's Day during the period, something that would set it apart from later holiday celebrations.

Paradoxically, handwriting and evidence of hand production more generally were prominent on holiday missives during the same years when the saint's day became commercialized. In the twenty years or so before the Civil War Northern merchants and
consumers together created an annual valentines market, a new world of commercial holiday goods. Entrepreneurs like Esther and Southworth Howland produced booklets for February 14th to help young men and women compose verse, and lace and printed cards of all varieties with which they could convey their sentiments, all the while aggressively marketing their wares throughout the Northeast. Augusta Babcock and her peers, meanwhile, not only bought thousands of these printed materials each year. They traded substantial numbers of them with friends and acquaintances. These young men and women helped to create a kind a late-winter courting market, a holiday ritual that sprung from a market economy and shared, superficially at least, its customs of trading and exchanging.

Yet both Esther and Augusta, and by extension most middle-class producers and consumers, would have loathed comparisons between their saint's day and the market economy that had both created and popularized it. Middle-class adults, as we saw in the previous chapter, hoped that these printed wares would help to guide adolescent courting, and they would have been quick to criticize notes that they thought were mere articles of commerce. For their part, young people entrusted that ready-made valentines would be cherished for the loving and affectionate sentiments they conveyed, not their commodity status. Store-bought cards, in other words, had to embody the sincere, authentic expressions of their senders. For observers young and old, however, the question remained—much as it does for many modern-day critics: how could valentines accomplish this? How could they distinguish themselves from other consumer goods?

The antebellum saint's day never entirely solved this riddle, but it did develop a distinctive, and for a while at least, compelling answer. When the Valentine's Day "craze" started, observers generally accepted that manufactured cards and booklets could adequately represent the sentiments of those who bought them. Within a matter of years, however, those same goods had both registered and helped to foster a growing belief that expressions for February 14th should be original to their composers. It was a
development that could have created concern that commerce threatened to intervene in genuine, personal exchanges. Valentine's Day commerce, however, worked to alleviate those concerns by emphasizing both the handcrafted quality of store-bought notes and the importance of personalizing manufactured cards with the stroke of one's own hand. In short, the commercial holiday created its own unique, early-industrial cultural status.

**Learning from Valentine Writers**

Years before Esther Howland established her now-famous business, most likely in the mid 1840s, her father Southworth produced a small and unadorned book for February 14th. Entitled, simply and to-the-point, *The Sentimental Valentine Writer, for Ladies and Gentlemen*, the booklet contained no introduction, nor any description of why it was assembled or who put it together. In fact it had no prose at all. The entire text was a collection of verse. The first poem began, "O would I were only a spirit of song! / I'd float forever around, above you!" and ended eight lines later, "For a musical spirit could never do wrong, / And it would not be wrong to love you, / Valentine." The next twenty-nine pages were filled with similar compositions. This was a collection of verse for the aspiring February poet, an encouragement to put pen to paper and fashion oneself, momentarily at least, into a bard. One can imagine hundreds or even thousands of young men and women perusing the pages of *The Sentimental Valentine Writer* looking for inspiration, copying lines, or transcribing entire stanzas to create their own holiday verse.\(^{171}\)

Southworth's chapbook was not unusual. Similar works had been in circulation for over half a century. By the time the demand for such ephemera withered at the end of the 1850s, publishers in the Northeast and in England had produced over one hundred

and eighty different titles. Like books on etiquette, conduct, letter-writing and courtship, which were also popular at the time, valentine writers were guidebooks. But instead of providing instructions, such as how to hold a fork properly, how to comport oneself at a dinner party, or how to compose a letter, valentine writers taught by example. For decades they provided suggestions for crafting sentimental expressions for Valentine's Day, encouraging young poets to learn by doing, to copy or recite their contents until the language and form seemed "natural." Then, toward the end of their publication life, these booklets became caught up in, and even contributed to, a growing concern with originality in sentimental holiday compositions. ¹⁄²

As we saw know from chapter one, valentine writers first appeared in England at the end of the eighteenth century. It is impossible to determine exactly the year they arrived on the scene, or the subsequent publication history of the corpus, because so many of these books did not include publication dates. Of the 126 works from London that I have identified, exactly half, 63, do not have dates of printing. Of those that do, the earliest was The Complete Valentine Writer: or, the Young Men and Maidens Best Assistant, published by Thomas Sabine in 1783. A few more imprints, including one more by Sabine, popped up during the next twenty years; then in the first decade of the nineteenth century holiday books of verse began to issue out of London's print shops regularly. For the next thirty years or so merchants in the country's capital had access to a ready supply of them. Finally in the 1840s that supply dried up and after mid-century only six new titles appeared (see appendix 2). For over three decades the physical format and accessibility of English valentine writers had remained largely the same. They were

small, thin—usually sixteen to forty pages in length—and, "[priced] typically from one pence to six," affordable.\footnote{Leigh Eric Schmidt, Consumer Rites: The Buying and Selling of American Holidays (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995), 56-57, quote 57. It is possible that many of the 63 undated writers were published after 1840 and that in fact the supply did not dwindle around mid-century. But I doubt it. Dating publications became more common as the century progressed; furthermore, the 63 dated titles establish, I think, a reliable trend for the body of works as a whole.}

Just as the production of valentine writers in London began to slow, American printers started to issue their own versions. English titles may have been available in America for decades, though it is impossible to determine how many came over. Copies residing in American archives today might have arrived in the early 1800s; on the other hand, determined collectors may have shipped them across the ocean decades later. On three separate occasions in the 1820s printers in New York and Philadelphia pirated a London imprint entitled The New Quizzical Valentine Writer, being an Excellent Collection of Humorous, Droll, and Merry Valentines. Then there was a ten-year lull until 1840 when yet another printer, this time from Boston, pirated The New Quizzical Valentine Writer. In the mid-1840s American merchants finally started to produce their own works. During the next decade valentine writers from Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Worcester, Massachusetts and Nashua, New Hampshire circulated throughout the Northeast and probably beyond. By the time the Civil War started Northern publishers had produced around thirty titles. The final chapbook, entitled the California Valentine Writer, debuted in San Francisco in 1863. After that the printing of bound holiday verse ceased. The numbers of American imprints never came close to matching those from England—30 or so compared to 130 plus—but they resembled their foreign counterparts in many other ways. Thomas Strong's publications, for example, ranged in size from a deck of cards to a DVD case and cost around seven cents each.\footnote{See appendix 2. Schmidt 57-58 and Barry Shank, A Token of My Affection: Greeting Cards and American Business Culture (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 31-32. In 1847 Strong advertised seven titles for 6.25 cents, one for 18.75 cents and one for 37.5 cents. See T.W. Strong, Strong's Annual Valentine Advertiser for St. Valentine's Day, Feb. 14, 1847 (NY: Strong's Valentine Depot, 1847), 3.}
Both English and American holiday booklets actually came in two basic varieties. Southworth's collection, as the title suggests, offered sentimental verse. Many holiday chapbooks, though, were filled with comical, or what contemporaries often called quizzical or quizzing, poems. These generally short rhymes were the malicious and mischievous shadow of the more acceptable sentimental expressions. Most titles, such as *The New Quizzical Valentine Writer* or *The Caricature Valentine Writer*, informed potential customers of the contents inside. A few books, in an effort to attract as many consumers as possible, displayed both comic and romantic stanzas together. By and large, though, the two different categories of verse coexisted but did not directly intermingle, except perhaps in the consumers' hands, during the month of February. Satirical writing guides shared most of the physical characteristics of their kin described above, but their content differed markedly and we will examine that more closely in the next chapter on vinegar cards.

Sentimental holiday writers sprung from a larger market for writing instruction, but were also distinct from many of those works in at least two important respects. Perhaps most obviously, these chapbooks acquainted men and women with writing Valentine's Day exchanges in verse, whereas most letter-writing manuals focused on prose. They also taught young people to elicit emotions, not just to become attuned to them. These booklets, in other words, were tutors for sentimentalism, or the culture of sentimentality, so central to middle-class life. If commercial valentines more generally accustomed young people to inciting emotional responses through their correspondences, holiday booklets taught them to run those provocative phrases through their own heads and hands, to become composers of sentimental stanzas. Transcribing and reworking printed saint's day poetry provided many individuals the opportunity to experiment with writing stirring lines, practice that helped them move beyond the familiar prose of
everyday exchanges and eventually, once they were courting or married, compose love letters, the familiar letter's more private and intimate cousin.\textsuperscript{175}

With entries that often stressed the inspirational power and urgency of romantic love during the weeks around February 14\textsuperscript{th}, holiday chapbooks also pointed to important ties between sentimental expression for February 14\textsuperscript{th} and evangelical faith, which the Second Great Awakening had helped to reignite years earlier. Just as evangelicalism emphasized the sudden onset of grace, not the strengthening of faith over time, few compositions in holiday chapbooks dwelt on the themes of long-standing acquaintances or established friendships that had gradually become something more intimate. The verses within them gushed with sudden revelations of true love or love that had to be requited quickly. "Meet me—but only meet me, / With fervor true as mine," implored one of the entries in Southworth's booklet. Holiday writers, moreover, were meant for the present, to inspire emotional revelations. Like a revival meeting, but with more seasonal regularity, they were designed to push one to disclose or discover feelings that had been secreted away. Another of Southworth's stanzas state that, though the writer had long loved the recipient, only the holiday had made the feelings so acute that he or she finally had the courage to announce them:

\begin{verbatim}
Fond Love, who lives in my heart for thee,
Had a message this morning he wanted to send;
While Fear, who will ever beside him be,
Cried, "Better beware, my friend!"\textsuperscript{176}
\end{verbatim}

If well-written and authentic religious readings could bring on experiences of grace, which could then inspire awakenings in others, browsing and transcribing lines from

\textsuperscript{175} See Karen Lystra's discussion of love letters in Searching the Heart: Women, Men, and Romantic Love in Nineteenth-Century America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), Chapter 1. Lystra notes that by the time of the Civil War middle-class Americans scorned the use of writing guides to compose love letters. They had a similar perspective on valentine writers, for reasons I hope will become clear in this chapter.

\textsuperscript{176} The Ladies and Gentlemen's Sentimental Valentine Writer, 10 and 26.
holiday booklets could trigger sincere loving declarations that might have similar effects on their recipients. 177

Yet, also like many religious revivals, sentimental holiday writers were short lived in America, a fact that points to a changing perspective on sentimental expression in the Northeast around mid-century and to a cultural shift many scholars have overlooked. If one excludes the four versions of The New Quizzical Valentine Writer published on or before 1840 and the title published in California in 1863, the majority of holiday chapbooks, around thirty or so, rolled from the presses during a period of less than ten years, from the mid-1840s to the early-1850s. The first imprint date during this period was 1845, and the last 1850; a few undated works might have appeared after 1850, but probably not many (see appendix 2). What might account for this short life? Why were valentine writers popular with American printers for less than ten years? In order to begin to answer this question, one must look closely not at these works' entries but at their opening pages, the pages sandwiched between the cover and the first poetic entry.

The first clue to the short life of American valentine writers often appeared on the backs, or versos, or their title pages. American publishers included publication dates much more often than their English counterparts did. As noted earlier, only half of the 130 or so English chapbooks produced before 1840 contained imprint information. Of the 31 American titles I have identified, by contrast, 21 were dated, and the number is even higher if one considers separate impressions not just editions (see appendix 2). 178 American readers, in other words, more often than not encountered publication information when they opened their valentine writers.

178 John Carter has defined an edition as “all copies of a book printed at any time or times from one setting up of type without substantial change,” and impression as “the whole number of copies of that edition printed at one time.” See his ABC for Book Collectors (New Castle, Delaware: Oak Knoll Press, 1995), 84-85.
Why is this fact important? Scholars in general, and historians of the book in particular, have known for decades that American publishers and printers increasingly sought during the 1840s to protect claims to particular titles by including copyright information in their works. Meredith McGill has argued recently that the presence of publication dates around mid-century was not simply a legal or financial matter, it indicated a shift away from what she terms a "culture of reprinting." During the 1830s and much of the 1840s, McGill posits, most Americans did not just accept reprinting—what today would be considered literary piracy—they perceived the circulation and recirculation of texts to be central to literature's cultural value. Texts were "essentially public property," to be used and reused as individuals saw fit. One might take a printed work or works, such as entries in valentine writers, and create something new through the adroit manipulation and recombination of those publicly-owned materials.\(^\text{179}\)

For decades valentine writers had embodied this culture of reprinting. Though few of them were direct copies of other titles, they all contained verse that would have been immediately recognizable to their readers. Some American publishers, as we saw earlier, did pilfer foreign works, a common practice among printers at the time and one that had slowed considerably by mid-century. In a few instances printers lifted entries from one another. Thomas Strong's *Lady's Valentine Writer* and W. Mather's *Ladies and Gentlemen's Fashionable Valentine Writer*, both New York imprints, share many of exact same poems, though it is impossible to know who copied whom since neither is dated. In most cases, though, printers offered verse that was familiar but distinct. The men and women who penned the chapbooks' contents undoubtedly browsed earlier examples for inspiration, and when they and the printers assembled the verse together they mimicked the well-known format of other writers, but both parties tended to avoid direct copy.

Borrowing from a common stock of phrases and expressions, these authors and printers created works that were fresh but not startling inventive.

From our perspective, then, it might seem odd that the theme of originality had been a part of the marketing of valentine writers since their inception. Both American and English printers readily used terms like *new*, *original*, *choice*, and *fashionable* in the titles of their chapbooks. Printed across colored covers, these titles served as larger-sized versions of the newspaper advertisements we saw in chapter two. Just as urban merchants boasted in their printed announcements that they had the latest and most unique cards in their shops, when they devised their book covers they emphasized similar themes. Leigh Eric Schmidt has argued that in a growing consumer culture it was commonplace for companies to emphasize that their products were fresh and up-to-date. Like modern cereal boxes, he writes, valentine writers "offered the veneer of novelty more than novelty itself." Barry Shank has suggested that antebellum Americans understood "originality" to be a quality "of unrepeatability, of evident variation within comforting reiteration."

What both of these arguments miss, however, is that fact that before the late 1840s people often had different standards than later consumers would have for judging qualities such as originality and newness in their store-bought wares. Within the context of a culture of reprinting, many Americans would have considered a holiday book of verse to be new or original even if its contents were not entirely unique.

The physical format of English valentine writers and some of their American successors reinforced this cultural perspective on reproduction. Like Southworth's *Sentimental Valentine Writer*, chapbooks from both sides of the Atlantic often moved directly from title to verse, though a few had lithographed images pasted between the cover and title page. The young reader opened the booklet and immediately encountered poetry. Very rarely would he or she meet any sort of authorial voice at the start of the

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180 Schmidt, 58-59, quote 59; Shank, 33-34, quote 33.
work. This lack of an editorial or authorial presence made it seem as if the publisher worked not as a supervisor of scribbling laborers, but as a collector, gathering together common and readily available lines and stanzas and then committing them to print. The valentine writer presented itself as a sieve and a funnel of genteel poetic expression, sifting through and presenting the best and newest verse in circulation. The message to the reader was not that these were lines he or she should learn, as one might learn to lace a shoe or fold a napkin; rather, these were commonly known forms of holiday expression with which one should already be familiar and upon which one could draw to create one's own compositions.

By the end of the 1840s, however, American youth were increasingly likely to encounter an authorial or editorial presence in their valentine writers. If the inclusion of publication dates was the first clue that a general acceptance of textual reproduction during Valentine's Day was coming to an end, the pages of instructions at the front of several booklets was the second. English youth would have never found "introductory treatises" in their pre-Victorian chapbooks. Their antebellum American counterparts, however, did. Many scholars have analyzed the content of these opening sections, but most of them have failed to note the simple fact that introductions did not exist before mid-century. The earliest one that I have found appeared in the late 1840s, when Thomas Strong composed or hired someone to compose a short, two-paragraph foreword that he then reproduced in at least two different publications. Several years later, sometime in the early 1850s, J.M. Fletcher included a preface to The Ladies' and Gentlemen's New and Original Valentine Writer. Finally, in one of the only English holiday booklets from the 1850s and the last to come from London, the firm of Ward and

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181 Writing about two works in particular, Shank argues that "Whoever composed the verses and however many individuals were involved in putting together the verses in the booklet, it does no disservice to the legitimacy of those processes...to subsume the totality of their functions under the single title of author." (Shank, 275, note 17). This is probably acceptable for the two books in question, both of which contained fictional editorial names, but an authorial presence should not therefore be extended to all valentine writers.

182 Shank, 31-37; Schmidt, 56-62. White Nelson notes that introductions were absent in the first half of the 1800s, but she doesn't then examine that fact, 180-81.
Lock printed up an eight-page introduction in 1857 entitled "Introductory Treatise on the Composition of a Valentine."\(^{183}\)

Recognizing the imprint dates of these introductions is important because all three of them dealt explicitly with the concept of original self-expression, and in the process, documented changing attitudes towards originality. These essays, in other words, reveal a moment of cultural transition, not a static consensus that one can apply to valentine writers as a whole or to all the decades during which they were produced. First came Thomas Strong's short, two-paragraph foreword from the late 1840s, which admonished its readers, "see to it that your 'Love Knot' does not lose its distinctive character—its highest charm—and become love not." With the phrase "distinctive character," Strong urged his readers to compose original works, but he was ambiguous about what constituted originality. Was it enough to artfully manipulate the sentiments he had provided, or must one use them as a starting point to compose something distinctly one's own? Several years later J.M. Fletcher advised in a three-page preface that his collection could be modified to "give it a personal character, and thereby adapt it to numberless cases." For example, he continued, "the line reading, 'And offer unto thee my love,' may be written, And offer sweetest Nell my love."\(^{184}\) Fletcher's emphasis on "personal" touches recognized consumers' desire to do more than simply transcribe or combine printed lines. They wanted to make compositions that were uniquely their own or that were uniquely suited to their intended recipient. Finally, in 1857 Ward and Lock of London released their lengthy "Introductory Treatise on the Composition of a Valentine." This essay by "Master of Hearts" conceded that, "in writing a Valentine, the very best


\(^{184}\) The Ladies' and Gentlemen's New and Original Valentine Writer (Nashua, N.H: J.M. Fletcher, 1850s), iii-v; True-Love Knots for True Lovers, Or, Cupid's Galaxy, iii-iv.
way of all is to write an original one," by which he meant "an immediate emanation from your own heart, or a direct inspiration of your own brain."\textsuperscript{185}

 Scholars often consider Master of Hearts' "Treatise" to be the quintessential exploration of the importance of originality in holiday compositions, but one can also view it as an oddity. The eight-page essay, nearly three times as long as any other introduction, was a last gasp effort, so to speak, an attempt to make ready-made verse relevant in a culture that now demanded originality around February 14\textsuperscript{th}. Master of Hearts tried to revive an earlier understanding of cultural reproduction by arguing that, "we all do use each other's [brains] in one way or another." Ultimately he conceded, however, that only people who "are not disposed to go to the trouble of writing for [themselves]" would reproduce the lines in his book rather than pen their own.\textsuperscript{186}

 Master of Hearts' "Treatise" provides the final clue to why American valentine writers were so short-lived. By the mid-1850s Northern middle-class cultural expression had become defined in part by what Karen Halttunen has termed the "cult of individual style." Although Halttunen coined the phrase to describe attitudes towards fashion in dress, it aptly describes opinions on sentimental holiday composition too. Middle-class Americans now looked down on verse that was somehow recognizable, even if it evinced deft variations of well-known phrases or printed lines. In order for a Valentine's Day sentiments to be "original," they now had to originate from a particular person without the mediation of print or oral sources.\textsuperscript{187} American holiday publishers recognized this emerging cultural insistence on originality. A couple of them tried to maintain sales by arguing in introductory essays for their works' relevance and malleability. Ultimately, however, almost all of them bowed out of the holiday chapbook market by mid-decade.

\textsuperscript{185} A Collection of New and Original Valentines, Serious & Satirical, Sublime& Ridiculous, on all the Ordinary Names, Professions, Trades, etc...10 and 14, the emphasis comes from the original.

\textsuperscript{186} A Collection of New and Original Valentines, 14-15. For alternative interpretations of Master of Hearts' essay see Shank, 34-36; White Nelson, 180-181; Schmidt, 61-62.

\textsuperscript{187} Karen Halttunen, Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-class Culture in America, 1830-1870 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 159-60. See also McGill, 270-78.
During the ten years or so that they were readily available in the Northeast, valentine writers provided an affordable and convenient introduction to the culture of sentiment, helping a generation become composers, not just consumers, of sentimental expression. Through their inclusion of copyright information and introductory treatises some of these chapbooks also contributed to an increasing cultural concern for originality, not just deft reproduction, in personal sentimental expression for the holiday. Their prefaces certainly recorded that transition, a change that soon made them passé. Their publishers, however, did not completely abandon the Valentine's Day market. Thomas Strong and others continued to produce cards for February 14th throughout the 1850s. Their efforts eventually forced observers to confront the question of how ready-made valentines could represent original, authentic sentiments.

Manufacturing a Card

As originality became more important in Valentine's Day compositions during the early 1850s, one might expect to find a general backlash against store-bought cards. Constructed by anonymous workers and sold to anyone who could afford them, ready-made valentines would seem to be anything but original. And in fact by the end of the 1840s critics of these new commercial goods had started to make their voices heard. During the next decade, however, their remonstrations largely fell on deaf ears. It was not simply that "the critics were overwhelmed," as Schmidt has argued, "[by] the enthusiasm for the new version of the holiday."\footnote{Schmidt, 89.} Detractors of manufactured cards never established anything near a majority opinion. Even most people who were too old to be active and "enthusiastic" participants in holiday exchanges generally did not voice concerns with goods marketed for February 14th. Part of the explanation for this general
acceptance of ready-made valentines came from the cards themselves. Despite increased concerns over their sameness and market value, commercial missives helped to minimize those worries through their distinct status as handmade goods.

Store-bought valentines were produced in three different ways during the 1840s and 1850s. By the time the holiday craze started a few American printers continued to press holiday images using wood engravings, particularly for comic valentines because wood blocks were cheaper to create than other methods. Thomas Strong and most of his rivals in cities throughout the Northeast, however, increasingly relied on lithography, the process of drawing on stone or metal to create more detailed depictions than one could generally make with wood. Lithographed pictures in turn came in two varieties. Most images were done in black and white. Often, once the ink had dried, the printer would then hire workers to apply swashes of watercolor with a brush. By the 1850s color lithographs had started to appear, but they remained expensive and uncommon compared to black-and-white until after the Civil War. The third type of card was the lace, or what was often called the "fancy," valentine. This was the kind of note that Esther and her employees produced and that we saw in chapter two. Fancy valentines sometimes incorporated lithographed images—Esther claimed that her father procured some for her first batch of cards—but the lace style was defined by the intricate, embossed paper used in its construction.189 (See figures 21-23).

During the 1840s the most commonly available valentine in the Northeast, and the only style produced there, was the lithographed card. London merchants began manufacturing lace notes sometime early in the decade (the process of creating lace paper from embossed was perfected in England around 1834). Soon thereafter merchants up and down the east coast imported them, often advertising the fact in local papers with

Figure 21: Lithographed Cards, Shared Image

Courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution, Norcross Collection
Figure 22: Lithographed Card

Valentine's day

To the dear love of my heart,

A valentine, sent with love and care.

Sends love and wishes, hopes and dreams to share.

With thanks to all who have sent their love,

And with all my heart, I send my love to you.

Yours, with all my heart and soul,

Valentine.
Figure 23a: Outside of Lace Valentine with Envelope

Courtesy of the Hallmark Historical Collection
Figure 23b: Inside of Lace Valentine
announcements that shipments of the "finest cards" from England had recently arrived. But imported lace valentines were more expensive than their domestic, lithographed competitors, and thus less common. American manufacturers did not have access to inexpensive lace or embossed paper until the early 1850s. Until that time, the young shopper who entered a store looking for missives for February 14th would have encountered mostly printed examples.190

During the first few years they were sold, ready-made valentines were often well received. In 1844 the *Daily Evening Transcript* proclaimed, "There never was anything like it! Our friends, the booksellers have sent us such a variety of ornate and illustrative missives arranged for circulation as *Valentines*, that we have no excuse for forgetting the anniversary." Several lines later they continued that if anyone was at a loss to find a card, "we admonish them in season where to apply for the thing needful," and then they listed the stores in Boston with holiday wares. The *New York Daily Tribune* kept it concise and to-the-point in 1845: "To interesting individuals in their teens, and indeed to a large class of marriageable persons...we recommend an investment in ready-made Valentines, such as can be found in the shops." One year later the same paper gushed, "The shop windows look as gay and flourishing as banks of summer flowers sown with new born June butterflies." It continued several lines later, linking a card's value to its price in a way some other editors would have found disturbing, "Never have the missals of Valentinehood been so gorgeous, so costly as the present season. Among all the varieties of these dainty things we think that one of the most extensive and splendid is that at Bramhall's, 328½ Broadway."191

These early public advocates of store-bought valentines almost never discriminated between the different styles of cards. There were few editorials or stories

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190 Shank has a good description of how embossed paper was produced, 56. Staff, 42.
that recommended young people buy imported lace valentines instead of lithographed, or vice versa. In 1844 the editor the *Daily Evening Transcript* put it this way. "Redding & Co," he wrote of a shop in downtown Boston, "have a variety of elegant sample lithographs on hand, breathing of devotion and idolatry...whilst Fisher in Court street has blank Valentine paper, hearted and darted, ready for the expression of any kind of piquant and special sentiment." Both lithographed cards and embossed paper, the editor argued, came from the shop already expressing the kinds of emotion—adoration and faithfulness—that young people were expected to include in their own missives.

Archival holdings today suggest that adolescent holiday participants had a similar perspective on the ready-made notes available to them; one finds in these collections just about an equal number of fancy and printed valentines. In other words, at least during the 1840s, most Northerners thought that sentimental compositions could be associated equally well with lithographed or embossed cards.

By the late-1840s, however, editorials and stories in newspapers and magazines had become more critical of all varieties of store-bought valentines. Manufactured holiday goods had their detractors almost as soon as they appeared on the market. The earliest critique of Valentine's Day printed ephemera I have found appeared in 1845 in Boston's *Daily Evening Transcript*, the same paper that one-year earlier had recommended Redding and Company's store in the editorial cited above. In general, though, during the first three years or so of the holiday craze commentators took a

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193 Barry Shank argues that Esther Howland's lace cards "were beloved tokens of intricate feeling" because they "transformed texturing and layering into the structural principles of her production," 61. I have found no evidence that Howland's valentines were anymore "beloved" than other cards, at least through the mid-1860s. By the 1850s, as we'll see shortly, embossed cards were readily available, but lithographed also remained common. Shank's argument works to reaffirm the hagiography he sets out to critique at the start of his discussion of Howland. I am sympathetic to his suggestion that Howland realized a connection between materiality and sentiment, but I think his timing is off. Howland's cards would become the predominant model for valentines after the Civil War precisely because the business became more mechanized. Her cards retained at least a semblance of hand-production through the use of layering and texture long after hands had largely disappeared from the actual construction of individual valentines.
generous view of manufactured notes. Between 1844 and 1846 three essays appeared in Boston and New York newspapers recommending that young people visit holiday stores. Then, in 1846, the printed praises ceased. After that the handful of editorialists who commented on ready-made valentines usually disparaged them, often also recommending that young people avoid them.194

These detractors of store-bought cards expressed two concerns. The 1845 *Daily Evening Transcript* piece denounced merchants who made "money out of ornamented papers worth about sixpence apiece, but sold for a dollar and upwards according to perforations, painting, design, &c!" Four years later *Godey's Lady's Book* published an article that began with a young woman exclaiming that her valentine "must have cost at least fifty dollars." Her level-headed friend then rebutted, "none but a vain fool would send such an expensive toy, that is not of the least worth either for use or ornament. Probably the dunce who sent it has not paid his tailor's bill for the year." The *Philadelphia Public Ledger* declared in 1848, "printed Valentines are an abomination, invented by cunning stationers and booksellers for pecuniary profit." Several lines later the author added that each one was "a precise facsimile of fifty thousand others." Critics of ready-made cards sometimes disparaged their sameness and repeatability, but just like in the Ledger editorial, these remarks tended to come after criticisms of their monetary worth. Those who worried that mass-produced notes were somehow leading to a decline of the holiday focused on their association with pecuniary exchange first and foremost and their reproducibility, if at all, secondarily and with less alarm.195

Despite the critics' best efforts, most people did not heed their warnings about the pernicious effects of valentines. Young people continued to purchase mass-produced cards through the 1850s. Their parents' generation, meanwhile, tolerated, if not actively

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194 *Daily Evening Transcript*, 13 February 1845, 2.
195 *Daily Evening Transcript*, 13 February 1845, 2; "A New Fashion for Valentines," *Godey's Lady's Book* 37 (February 1849), 73; *Philadelphia Public Ledger* article quoted in Schmidt, 88. Schmidt argues that critics were concerned with both issues, which is true, but they expressed more alarm over cards' monetary values than their stereotyped qualities.
supported, the efforts of holiday merchants. Storeowners continued to sell sentimental valentines through the 1850s. Businessmen and women continued to profit from holiday sales and many, including Esther Howland, grew their companies. Even middle-class magazines featured stories about holiday cards that did not pass judgment on them, including some from Godey's that we examined earlier. Why did people generally ignore the critics? Or, to put it another way, how did Valentine's Day work to make mass-produced sentimental goods more acceptable? The answer lies, in part, in the cards themselves and how they were produced.

Consider again the tale of Esther Howland, which we examined briefly in chapter two. Reflecting in 1901 on the start of her holiday card business in Worcester, Massachusetts in the late 1840s and early 1850s, Esther told of first discovering valentines when her father brought home some English versions. Enthralled and inspired by the lace marvels, so the story goes, she concocted the first batch of her own notes in a small room in her family home. Over the next couple of years the orders increased and she moved into "a more commodious room." Within this "factory," as the reporter called it, the Howlands built a large table around which "bright young employees, mostly young girls, friends of the family, would gather and copy the designs made by Miss Howland." In popular histories this latter part of the story often plays second-fiddle to the myth of Esther "inventing" the American industry, but the tale of her employees reveals a couple of things about the early mass-production of valentines. These commercial goods were not only made by hand, more specifically, they were assembled by women's hands. In order to understand how ready-made cards were received in the antebellum North, and why, one must consider both how they were made and by whom.

All varieties of antebellum store-bought valentines were constructed using hand labor. A printer or publisher who produced cards using either lithography or wood

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blocks needed someone to cut the wood or draw on the stone, to pull the press, to fold the sheet and, in some cases, to color the final image. Sometimes the same person or people performed these different tasks; other times each task was specialized. In 1847 Strong boasted that he employed "ten engravers on wood, three excellent lithographers, letter press and lithographic printers, thirty colorists, and other ornamental artists." Merchants like Esther, who did not produce their own paper or images, relied on hand labor to assemble the materials they bought. Embossed paper had to be cut and folded, images had to be separated and ordered, and everything had to be glued together.197

Ready-made missives were not just handmade, very often they looked handmade. This was certainly true for lace valentines. The cards that Esther Howland's employees constructed, for example, resembled what young men or women might make at home, except that they sometimes contained more layers and more expensive materials than young people used or could purchase on their own. Figure 24 shows a Howland card from the 1850s; figure 25 is a homemade card from 1840 that employs some of the same motifs as the later Howland note.198 Even lithographed notes could look handmade. Today collectors sometimes struggle to determine whether or what parts of a lithographed valentine were created in a shop. One of the best-known scholars of Valentine's Day cards, Ruth Webb Lee, wrote of one particular example, "Considerable hand work is involved in this valentine, for there is more to it than meets the eye at a casual glance."

"In terms of present-day labor costs," she continued, "this would be an expensive valentine to produce. However, it is entirely possible that it was purchased by a love-lorn

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197 Strong, Strong's Annual Valentine Advertiser, 3.
198 Shank characterizes Esther Howland's cards as "gaudy and overwrought" and suggests they "assault you with their riot of colors and forms," 67. This could describe her cards from the early 1870s on, but those from before that decade I would call "busy." Esther used more layers than one typically finds on homemade valentines. By the early 1870s she and other manufacturers had started to elaborate combine chromolithography (colored lithographic plates applied one after another), embossed paper, and cut-out designs to create ostentatious designs characteristic of the late-Victorian era. One of the reasons, I suspect, her cards from the antebellum period are so prized by collectors, besides their rarity, is because they resemble notes young people might have made themselves.
Figure 24: Esther Howland Card circa 1850s

Courtesy of the Hallmark Historical Collection
Figure 25: Homemade Card circa 1840s

To my Nettle & Dave, Fairfield.
May fortune kindly attend the ever
Around this path, event as strong
The bed of innocence forever,
Within the heart, still bloom anew.

As for us this
You look to see
Other kind friend
Remember me.

This from your friend,
Fanny M. Leonard
Fairfield U Sept 27, 1841

Courtesy of the Hallmark Historical Collection

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youth or damsel, who inserted the satin center in an effort to create a more ornate effect."\textsuperscript{199}

Like Ruth Webb Lee one hundred years later, antebellum holiday recipients would often have had difficulty determining what parts of their valentines had been assembled in a shop and what parts in the sender's home. The point is not that young people could or did construct lithograph or lace valentines on their own. It is important to note, however, that in the 1840s and 1850s they could create valentines that were not strikingly different than what they might have found in their local shops. Furthermore, store-bought notes often bore the marks of hand-assembly, just like their homespun siblings did. By the 1870s holiday celebrants would not face similar challenges. With the introduction of chromolithography and machine-assembly after the Civil War, ready-made cards, an example of which is reproduced in figure 26, had become divorced from anything a young person could craft him or herself. Antebellum ready-made valentines, in other words, worked to limit criticisms that they were readily reproducible—what contemporaries often called "stereotyped"—by bearing the marks of hand-production. Despite the fact that it had been mass-produced, a store-bought missive often remained a distinctly recognizable product of someone's labor. It displayed a quality of original, personal workmanship.

More often than not, women's labor was involved in the construction of ready-made valentines. Many Northerners probably knew that women assembled the cards they bought in stores during February. The use of female workers was not hidden from public view. As early as the 1830s New York printers regularly advertised throughout the year in their local papers that they wanted to hire young women or girls to apply color to prints. Coloring holiday lithographs would have been an extension of this practice. Occasionally during the 1840s and 1850s journalists investigated the holiday business

\textsuperscript{199} Lee, 45.
Figure 26: Walter Crane Valentine circa 1875

Courtesy of the Hallmark Historical Collection
and reported on how valentines were produced. In 1850 the *Boston Daily Evening Transcript* noted briefly that, "many poor women in London derive employment from painting and otherwise ornamenting these amorous missives." *Harper's Weekly* in 1858 recorded that about 75 percent of holiday workers were women.\(^{200}\) Those residents of the Northeast who did not know that women manufactured cards would not have been surprised to learn of it. During the 1820s, as Christopher Clark has shown in great detail, women throughout New England began taking in "outwork," assembling items like buttons and palm-leaf-hats at home and then selling the finished goods to merchants. By the 1840s much of this manufacturing had moved or started to move out of homes and into workshops, bringing with it female laborers. Whether conducted in a shop like Thomas Strong's or in a home like Esther Howland's, assembling valentines, but not printing them, was a form of early industrial work that antebellum observers considered suitable for women.\(^ {201}\)

One of the few commentaries we have on the use of female labor in holiday shops, and one of the longest and most thorough explorations of holiday manufacturing, appeared in the *New York Times* in 1853. "St. Valentine; His History and Mystery" began like most essays about Valentine's Day from the period. After more than fifteen paragraphs detailing the history of the holiday, the author finally dedicated three paragraphs to a discussion of the business of February 14\(^{th}\). "It struck us," he wrote, "that it would be no bad contrast to hunt up some of the facts relative to the valentine of the present day." They did some investigating and "discovered that at the office of the American Valentine Company...we would likely to be supplied with the information we


wanted." After the visit the author acknowledged that, "Our previous ideas of a valentine had been very limited indeed."202

Throughout his description of the holiday goods he found at 84 Nassau Street, the author of "St. Valentine; His History and Mystery" assumed a sarcastic tone. The missives Mr. Frere, "Agent of the Company," showed him ranged from "thirty to one hundred and fifty dollars each." Even "other valentines of a less elaborate order ranged from twenty dollars down to six cents each." The verse on the company's cards was little better, offering "no connection between the picture and the poetry."203

When he described the labor involved in assembling valentines in the next paragraph, however, the author's tone changed. "One of these valentines is a very delicate thing to make," he began, "and the process is principally conducted by young ladies, a number of whom we saw at work in the establishments visited." He then listed the tasks women performed in the Park Row shops. "One was gumming little stars on a great white satin bow...Another was gilding an embossed sheet of paper with liquid gold leaf, a third was putting a dab of red on the cheeks of innumerable cupids who lay about, while a fourth was cutting a whole heaven full of clouds out of great sheets of rice-paper." "In this way," he concluded, "a single valentine of the more expensive order will have to go through twenty or thirty hands before it is finished."204

The Times journalist's use of the term "young ladies" was significant. He did not call them young women or girls; and he avoided the pejorative term "poor women,"

203 "Valentine's Day. St. Valentine; His History and Mystery," 2.
204 "Valentine's Day. St. Valentine; His History and Mystery," 2. Shank argues that descriptions of how valentines were produced represented "fantastic dreams of pleasant work performed by happy and decently paid workers," but he uses a well-known story printed in Charles Dickens's journal All Year Round in 1864. By the 1860s England had reached a point of industrialization that the U.S. would not reach until at least the Gilded Age. Dickens's description removed valentine production from the realm of industrial manufacturing and placed it in a fictionalized world of the household economy, something journalists in the antebellum U.S. did not do. In fact, one could compare Dickens's essay to the story on Esther Howland from 1901, published at a time when the U.S. was struggling with the negative consequences of its own industrialization. Shank, 63.
which the *Daily Evening Transcript* had used three years earlier to describe female holiday laborers in England. His choice of the word "ladies" created a connection between the workers in Park Row and middle-class readers perusing the paper. These employees of the American Valentine Company might be working for wages, he implied, but they had the cultural assets to eventually move into the middle class. Indeed the labor they provided—cutting and pasting—was similar to the work a middle-class daughter might do at home and imparted qualities of delicacy and taste to the cards they produced. The author's anonymous female holiday workers represented what Richard Broadhead has termed "veiled ladies." In the antebellum middle-class imagination these ladies' very publicness depended on their association with private space, that zone in Victorian ideology associated with the non-productive home. For many readers and observers, the fact that their ready-made missives were assembled by young ladies' hands suggested that these goods were more than mere market commodities. They might be bought and sold, but valentines went on to the market with clear connections to the middle-class home, their ultimate destination.

The author of the *New York Times* article did not share this opinion, though. He started the second-to-last paragraph by stating clearly and simply, "However the age may have improved in other ways, we do not think it has improved much in its taste for

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206 In a short book on Valentine’s Day published in 1871, William H. Cremer emphasized that female labor imbued cards with sentiment, a "tender passion" that had become specifically tied to women. "It would seem," Cremer wrote, "that the valentine has grown more rapidly to perfection than anything else of the kind that can be thought of. This is easily explained. The manufacture of valentines is almost entirely in the hands of the fair sex... To keep alive the tender passion has always been...the chief concern of woman-kind. And thus the marvelous excellence which valentines have attained is all accounted for." Cremer’s perspective helps explain why it would become important for later American observers to emphasize that a woman, Esther Howland, had been pivotal to the creation of modern card manufacturing. Not only did she align such production with a preindustrial household economy, her sex inclined her to produce truly sentimental goods, holiday products unlikely to be tarnished by the male-oriented business world. I have found no examples from the antebellum period to suggest that consumers made a similar connection between female labor and sentimental production. W.H. Cremer, *St. Valentine’s Day and Valentines. A Few Words on the Subject* (London: W.H. Cremer, 1871), 13.
valentines." Despite the fact that the cards were made by respectable young women, the author held the notes in low esteem. He then explained why. "Inexpensive customs" had been replaced by "large sums of money spent in the most worthless and foolish manner." "Of what earthly use is it to give fifty dollars for a gilt paper-box?" "How could she love a man who could so vulgarise the passion he felt for her, as to permit a mechanic at five dollars a week...to be its interpreter?" And finally, he suggested that, "Judging from their popularity we presume that the more they cost the more likely they are to subdue the unrelenting fair one." Throughout this extended lambaste the author focused on one thing: money. He did later criticize "stereotyped shop-valentines," but this came almost as an afterthought. He was not overly concerned with the mass-production of cards. The author decried the connection of missives to capital. Men spent too much on holiday products and women judged suitors by the amount they paid for goods for February 14th. It was the presence of monetary exchange, he argued, that severed the connection between ready-made valentines and the middle-class home, and disrupted the propriety of sentimental production.207

"St. Valentine; His History and Mystery" presented both the potential of holiday market goods to curb their commodity status and the limitations of that circumscription. By invoking the image of young ladies laboring to construct valentines, the Times journalist presented his readers with a comforting picture that worked to reassure some of them that the missives they or their children bought were more than just market goods; from the point of their original inception they had a connection to the middle-class household. For the author and many other readers, however, ready-made valentines remained primarily articles of commerce. When he referred to holiday laborers as mere "mechanics" who worked for "five dollars a week" at the end of his essay, he underscored

207 "Valentine's Day. St.Valentine; His History and Mystery," 2.
their status as paid workers, not as temporary artisans with particular cultural connections to middle-class consumers.

During the first twenty years or so that they were available, store-bought valentines were the products of a distinctly early-industrial market economy. The fabrication of goods for February 14th did not substantially change how valentines were created—ready-made notes were still manufactured, or literally made by hand—but it did change where they were assembled. The activities of holiday merchants moved the location of production out of households and into shops. Ready-made missives did not so much "disguise their origins" in this economy, as they did emphasize their specific and unique origins in the market. The evidence of hand-assemblage worked to quiet criticisms that holiday commodities looked similar, that the same sentiment might go to many different recipients. Their association with the middle-class home vis-a-vis laboring ladies, though, was less successful at squelching critiques that they remained above all goods for sale. In order to underscore a valentine's status as more than just a commodity, something else was needed. Every February throughout the Northeast young people were reminded to put pen to paper and leave their own personalized mark.

**Handwriting Verse**

Handwriting on antebellum valentines was not only widespread, it originated from various, and sometimes unexpected, sources. Consider the note reproduced in figure 22. Above and below the lithographed image is handwritten verse and prose. The sender, Desdemona, calls attention to her own writing in the last line, "receive this from the faithful hand of your admiring and tender hearted." In fact, though, her card includes script from two different hands. Someone other than Desdemona penned the poem. The

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208 Nissenbaum argues that Christmas gift books worked "to conceal the facts of their own production and distribution" in order to emphasize their status as sentimental gifts, 148.

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neat, flowing pen strokes of the lines of verse contrast quite sharply with Desdemona's own less graceful movements. One can tell that these lines were written and not printed by examining closely the end of the first sentence, where the person transcribing the poem smudged the "r" in "Dear." Desdemona has personalized this ready-made card with her own hand but her words compete with the already-established text, which literally pushes them to the edges of the page because of its length. Her missive testified to the cultural authority of handwriting during the 1840s and 1850s, an authority that print lacked. Valentine's Day merchants, including the one that produced Desdemona's note, used this prestige of script to lend a personal aura to their ready-made cards, while young people were expected to apply their own hands to their missives. Both processes worked to further allay fears of any commercial corruption of original, personalized sentiments.

Holiday printers were quick to market ready-made handwriting like that found in Desdemona's card, and they produced it in two different ways. Some printers chose to reproduce script using lithography, paying someone with suitable hand to write on stone and then using that stone until it had worn out. This process had a couple of advantages. Since the stone could be used repeatedly, it might be cheaper in the long-term than hiring individual calligraphers, and the image on the stone could be used in different designs. Most merchants, including the one who made the card Desdemona purchased, hired scribes, men and women who were paid to copy text for hours on end. Using scribal workers limited a merchant's investment in labor and supplies, since workers could be fired on a moment's notice and he needed to buy only enough supplies to cover short-term needs. Furthermore, calligraphers could alter text and reproduce it on different media, things impossible or difficult to do with lithographed plates. Some businessmen went so far as to advertise the services of their scribal laborers independent of the cards they produced. "Original Valentines, written to order," proclaimed the "Lone Bard" of...
New York City in 1846. Six years later one of his competitors, John Levison, announced that he sold "Valentines made to order...written in a beautiful hand."209

Through their manufacturing and marketing of script, Valentine’s Day merchants demonstrated a new perspective on scribal publication. For hundred of years, since medieval times, churches, governments and private individuals had employed scribes to copy documents. Traditionally, Harold Love has argued, these publishers used scribal publication in cases where they wanted to limit access to specific persons by producing copies for them only, where they wanted to release new copies gradually over time, or where perceived demand was small. Antebellum holiday printers followed none of these scriptural publishing customs. The announcements for their holiday goods not only proclaimed their newness and originality, they offered ready-made handwritten goods for all consumers, right now. Ironically, although their business activities helped to fuel what has often been called the print revolution of the mid-nineteenth century, a time when rapid developments in technology related to printing made more reading material available to a wider public at cheaper prices, these merchants often used the printed medium to deliver to consumers examples of script, print’s cultural opposite.210

Ready-made handwriting appealed to these holiday merchants precisely because of its contrast to print. Like most of their contemporaries, printers, publishers and storeowners understood that print and script were experienced in two very different ways. Print was an impersonal medium, transmitting ideas and words that were not necessarily connected to any physical presence. Script, on the other hand, "referred back to the hand, the body, and the individual." It represented not just an author’s ideas or thoughts, but the author himself. This separation of script from print, a redefinition of the written word in

contradistinction to the press, had occurred much earlier, as early the seventeenth century. By the mid-nineteenth century, though, handwriting had come to symbolize not just the self or the individual, as Tamara Thornton has pointed out, it embodied the writer's personality or distinctiveness. Valentine's Day businessmen capitalized on these unique qualities of script to further distinguish their goods from mere market commodities. The handwriting their cards and stationery displayed might not have been associated with any particular writer, but it did work to add a distinctive, personal character to mass-produced ephemera.

Despite the fact that their valentines often already included examples of penned verse, young people were repeatedly reminded to put their own handwriting in their missives. Consider again the two introductions published in American valentine writers in the late 1840s and early 1850s. Both Strong and Fletcher assumed that their readers would use the booklets to write personalized poems. Neither printer suggested that his readers cut out lines or stanzas and then paste them in notes or on manufactured cards. Why not? Both merchants would have had an economic incentive to make such a recommendation, because they could potentially sell more books if their customers pulled apart and manipulated valentine writers. A generation later the children of the holiday's first participants would do something like this, collecting printed material and pasting it in scrapbooks, in effect being constructed as consumers by print while also manipulating those materials to suit their own needs.

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211 Numerous scholars over the last half-century have debated what constitutes the distinctive "logics" or "auras" of print and script. Harold Love has a good summary of some of the more abstracted, theoretical arguments. He also dates the distinction between handwriting and print to seventeenth-century English scribal publication. Love, chapters 4 and 7. Michael Warner has pointed out that what has counted as "print" since the eighteenth century is the "increasingly important criterion of a negative relation to the hand." Michael Warner, *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 7. Tamara Thornton argues that in addition to its association with the hand, or body, script by the nineteenth century was not only a form of self-representation—i.e. an indication of one's social status, it was also a means of self-expression. Tamara Thornton, *Handwriting in America: A Cultural History* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1996), quote 41.

largely unthinkable. I have unearthed no cards from before the Civil War in which men or women attached printed verse instead of writing their own. When a youth sent a valentine, he or she was expected to enclose examples of his or her script.

Whereas Strong and Fletcher assumed their customers would write their lines, later commentators would insist that February 14th celebrants make their handwriting visible. In his long harangue against the commodification of holiday sentiment in 1853, the author of the *New York Times* piece that we examined in the previous section, "St. Valentine; His History and Mystery," put it simply. "A valentine," he argued, "to possess any value, should convey some sentiment or idea which no one else could convey. It should be individual, and a type or characteristic of the sender." This was a clear explication of the middle-class perspective on originality that would define holiday sentimental expression during much of the 1850s, and it would seem to preclude any role for valentine writers in February versification. Yet the journalist-turned-critic ended with a short, one-sentence paragraph in which he recommended those chapbooks. "We must content ourselves with pens, ink and paper," part of his conclusion noted, "and that charming collection of jeu de' esprits called 'Cupid's Valentine Writer.'" With this reference to one of Thomas Strong's holiday booklets, the *Times* writer returned his readers to the topic that had ignited his displeasure, the presence of commercial goods during the February celebration. But instead of critiquing valentine writers like he had ready-made cards, he called the reader's attention to the writing instruments one could use to transcribe from them. It was better to write original lines, he argued, but holiday observers and participants could "content" themselves with these booklets so long as the messages derived from them bore the handwriting of the note's composer. Personalized script, in other words, helped to remove the commercial taint from store-bought

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213 "St. Valentine: His History and Mystery," 2. The author misspelled "joie d'esprits."
sentimental goods, even ready-made verse, by connecting them to the individual, to traits "characteristic of the sender."

Four years later, in the preface to the British chapbook we saw earlier, Master of Hearts also referenced the cultural authority of script to rationalize the use of his printed holiday verse, but his tone was noticeably more defensive than the Times journalist's had been. "Write at least with your own pen, and let the matter be selected, as far as possible, by your own judgment," he wrote in 1857, "so will one step be gained. And, even though you still employ the 'mercenary bard,' it is hoped and believed that the reformation of your Valentines will have begun." Barry Shank suggests that this preface helps "us locate a lived measure of authenticity within the transatlantic commercial society." "The mark of one's own hand," he writes of this passage, "along with the personalized tools of pen and ink, could splatter a coating of authenticity onto the borrowed phrases."\(^{214}\)

The problem for Master of Hearts was that by the late 1850s a "coating of authenticity" was not enough to justify the use of a valentine writer, and he knew it. He admitted that he was a "mercenary bard," a paid versifier, and he could only "hope and believe" that through the mark of the pen "one step [would] be gained" in the "reformation" of store-bought poetry into personalized, original sentiments. Master of Hearts recognized that handwriting remained important in Valentine's Day exchanges for its ability to represent something of the self, and he tried to use the cultural authority of script to defend his work. As the decade rolled to a close, however, people now expected that holiday verse would not only be handwritten it would, as the Times journalist had argued, "convey some sentiment or idea which no one else could convey." The increasing concern with originality in holiday verse during the 1850s highlighted the importance of script. Handwriting began the process of differentiating a valentine from other commodities by associating it with an individual person, or "body," a process that

\(^{214}\) A Collection of New and Original Valentines, 15; Shank, 35-36.
was ideally completed by an original composition that connected a card to an individual, creative thought, or mind.

There was one potential problem, however, with the role of script in Valentine’s Day exchanges throughout the 1840s and 1850s. If handwriting ideally conveyed a writer's personality or distinctiveness, what did it mean when script was mass-produced? What was to prevent a young holiday participant from walking into a store, buying a card with handwriting on it already or paying a scribe to write something, and then trying to pass that script off as his or her own? Might not script's "measure of authenticity," or ideal as a "transparent medium of the self," be a shallow veneer, easily replicated and, in fact, not readily attributable to any specific person?215

One can begin to glimpse how Valentine’s Day worked to resolve this problem by examining closely examples of store-bought handwriting. In his newspaper ad from 1852, John Levison boasted that he had valentines written not just by hand, but in "a beautiful hand." In fact, the scribal laborers merchants hired may not have always been expert calligraphers, but the script they produced almost always demonstrated skill and dexterity with pen and ink. Consider again the card that Desdemona sent, which is reproduced in figure 22. The verse around the image was written in what was known as Spencerian hand, named for the one of the most famous Victorian penman Platt Rogers Spencer. The exaggerated, rounded lines, particularly evident in the capitals "A" and "R" in the first line, were typical of Spencer's script, one of the most elaborate of hands taught in schools at the time. The script in one of the ready-made notes Augusta Babcock received, reproduced in figure 16, is flowing, legible, and neat, though not nearly as elaborate as Spencerian hand. The letters penned on the card in figure 21 were typical of what consumers would have found on inexpensive notes. They retain the flow and grace associated with genteel penmanship, but they are more compact and angular than the

215 "Measure of authenticity" comes from Shank, 35; "Transparent medium" from Thornton, 33.
letters produced on the other two examples. Not all merchants, in other words, could afford to hire master penman, even to produce script that they might then commit to stone and use many times, but the calligraphers that they did employ were expected to be able to turn out handwriting beautiful enough to catch the attention of browsing customers.

The ready-made script these chirographers created was often more elegant than the cursive young people themselves could make. The collection of holiday notes that Augusta Babcock preserved provides a good sample of how well her generation had mastered penmanship. Actually, one might expect that, because of Augusta's proximity to Yale, many of her correspondents would have had years of education and thus notable skills with pen and paper. Figure 27 shows a sentence or two from each of the letters she kept, starting with the most elegant and ending with the most crude. Some of her friends came close to reproducing Spencerian hand, accentuating individual characters with long, loopy lines and attempting to form curlicues, especially on capital letters. Others, however, produced tight, angular cursive that, while legible, certainly was not elegant. These latter notes were probably not unusual. The woman who wrote the card in figure 25, Fanny, incorporated some aspects of fancy hand into an otherwise jerky and uneven script. Finally, Desdemona's writing, which frames the elegant Spencerian verse in figure 22, is at points almost illegible. Young men and women may have imitated the handwriting they saw on manufactured valentines, but their own script often fell short of the middle-class standard for genteel cursive.

This contrast between ready-made script and the lines young people actually penned helps to explain why so few people commented on the potential problem store-bought handwriting presented. Holiday businessmen simply followed convention when they hired calligraphers in order to associate sentimental verse with script. In the process, though, they reminded young participants that their own hands often did not match the

\[216\] See Thornton, 46-63, for a discussion of Spencerian and other antebellum scripts.
Figure 27: Examples of Handwriting from Augusta's Collection

"Get ready and pour the tobacco down and keep the face from every door."

"I know now that wherever thousand may be for the season,"

"Dear. I hope your charming Valentine."

"Here's a hand on my love."

"Cherished Day!"

"I love the girl whom every smile,"

"Here at the church, my very friend."

"I know, my love, you think more powerfully than you know,"

"Now be wise and learn, I'll pour the tobacco down."

"Here's a hand on my love, and in return."

"Cherished Day!"

Courtesy of the Hallmark Historical Collection

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elegance of the script they had purchased. The coarseness of this personalized chirography—its deviations from a manufactured ideal—then defined its cultural authority, for it signaled that the verse had come from the person sending the valentine, not just the person who had made it. Ironically, at a time when middle-class youth were taught fancy hands that could demonstrate their gentility, their own less-than-exemplar attempts at those scripts had the advantage of appearing neither ready-made nor mass-produced.

A short story *Godey's Lady's Book* published in 1861 provides a good example of how middle-class Northerners understood their youths' personalized scripts. Entitled simply "Saint Valentine's Day," the tale centered on the unnamed narrator, her beautiful cousin Mabel Grey, and a young man named Fred Pratt. The story began with Mabel arriving at her cousin's home. Finally out of the controlling reach of her clergyman father, Mabel started flirting with many young men. Fred decided to send her a valentine, even though she had spurned the advances of every other suitor. "Can you write a feigned hand?" Fred asked the narrator, Mabel's cousin. "I've been trying a new kind of penmanship the whole morning, but I don't think it will do," he explained. The author read Fred's poem, first commenting, "I said I thought I had heard the lines before; but as Fred indignantly denied my suspicion, I withdrew the assertion." She then told him, "I would not feign my hand in sending such a Valentine... I should let her know who sent it; direct it in your own handwriting." Fred rewrote the note "in a hand that would have done honor to a Brobdignagian, with a seal to match." Finally the narrator rushed the note to Mabel and the story ended a page later, not surprisingly, with Fred and Mabel engaged.\(^{217}\)

The author of "Saint Valentine's Day" directed her readers to consider Fred's holiday composing from two perspectives. In the midst of discussing his handwriting she

redirected her attention to his verse, which she noted sounded very familiar. When Fred denied that he had transcribed some of the lines or copied some of the language, however, she dropped the matter. Originality in holiday versification was clearly important to this young critic, but when she could not get Fred to admit to his literary crime she turned her attention to his script, which she was determined would be original.

She noted first that he hoped she would copy the lines for him, because he had not been able to master a "new kind of penmanship." After refusing to pen the letter, she encouraged Fred to compose it in his "own handwriting." Lastly, she specifically noted the quality of his script, which she described as "Brobdignagian," a misspelling of Jonathan Swift's invented word "Brobdingnagian." In Swift's classic *Gulliver's Travels* Brobdignag was an island inhabited by giants. Fred's handwriting, in other words, was giant-like. Each of his letters most certainly was large; his words were probably awkwardly shaped; perhaps his whole script looked ungainly. The product of his hand definitely was not Spencerian, and that was exactly the point. The prose may not have been entirely his own, but the movement of pen across paper clearly represented his individuality, and ultimately worked, lest we forget, to win Mabel's heart.

*Godey's* story, "Saint Valentine's Day," exposed a common understanding among antebellum middle-class Northerners about the importance of personalized script. Unlike print, handwriting was in essence a personal or bodily medium, and its inclusion on cards found in stores signaled that those notes were something more than mere commodities. Moreover, the presence of writing that deviated from the ideals found on those holiday cards or in textbooks—penmanship that looked like it was made by an amateur—more clearly defined a missive as an original, personalized production. During the 1840s and 1850s thousands of young people did exactly what many observers hoped they would do. They sat down with pen and paper, or ready-made cards, and drafted sentimental lines.

In the process, the individualized scrawl of these men and women helped to alleviate middle-class concerns that commerce might corrupt authentic, individual holiday sentiments. The marks of a known or knowable person—the sender—worked to remove a valentine from the potential vagaries of the marketplace and attach it to the private, protected space of personal, sentimental exchanges.

From our perspective, the early-industrial market culture of Valentine's Day might seem both strangely foreign and distinctly familiar. At its start the antebellum holiday had encouraged a form of expression founded on copying and recirculation, even providing young men and women examples of verse that they could imitate or transcribe. With a few years, however, there was a noticeable shift in attitudes towards February 14th compositions, as participants were now expected to crafts lines that were somehow unique and particular to them. This increased emphasis on originality in late-winter exchanges occurred at the same time that the business in ready-made cards was growing rapidly. A mass market for late-winter goods, in other words, gave rise to a cultural premium on individuality in sentimental holiday expression. The commercialized antebellum Valentine’s Day witnessed the rise of and helped to foster the value we now term “individualism.” Writing for February 14th would not be the same after this subtle but important shift, as cards or compositions were now judged in large part by the degree to which they revealed something distinctive about the individuals who had sent them.

However much antebellum observers and participants shared a later concern for individuality in holiday writing, their worry that store-bought, mass-produced cards might corrupt Valentine’s Day originality was distinctly muted. To a large extent this was due to commercial valentines themselves. February 14th goods helped to forestall criticisms that they were reproductions, or facsimiles of each other, and that they were valued for their monetary worth, by calling attention to both their handmade appearance—their similarities to what a young person might make at home—and to their
inclusion of handwriting, which represented the presence of an individual in the card's production. It was a distinctive market culture that did not survive intact long after the 1850s, but it certainly worked to quiet its detractors in the years before the Civil War.

The critics did not remain silent, however, when it came to vinegar valentines. By the early 1850s a new kind of commercial valentine had emerged and become enormously popular, one without precedence in earlier holiday traditions and one that stood in stark contrast to notes that played at courting for the day. Comic cards, as they were usually called, would quickly prove to be everything that their sentimental brethren were not.
Chapter 5
Malice in the Mail: A Flourishing Trade in Comic Valentines

On February 14, 1848, a lengthy story on Valentine's Day—more than two hundred words long—appeared in the Evening Post, one of New York's six-penny dailies. The piece began like countless other observations of the day that had been printed since the holiday became popular in the city five years or so earlier. There were statistics about the numbers of cards that would be traded; references to "pretty maidens" waiting "anxiously" at their doors for the penny postmen; and comments on the quality of poetry that would be penned. Then the editorial took an unusual turn. The second and final paragraph, which was just one sentence long, focused on the trade in comic valentines. Other papers had noted in previous years that young people sent comic cards, and some had even tried to discourage them from doing so. The Evening Post editorial, though, added a dramatic flourish. "Those who delight in these horrid and witless caricatures," observed the writer, "should be careful on whom they practice their jokes, remembering that a case of suicide occurred last year, occasioned, it is said by one of those cruel missives."\(^{219}\)

The following year the New York Herald picked up this story of a February suicide. In the midst of an article on Valentine's Day that occupied half of a front-page column, the reporter asserted that, "Numerous instances have been known where young ladies have been wounded to the quick by the receipt of offensive 'Valentines.'" The story then assumed the dramatic and exaggerated prose that had helped to make James

\(^{219}\) "St. Valentine's Day," Evening Post, 14 February 1848, 2.
Gordon Bennett's penny paper famous. "The records of the Coroner's office show at least one case," it continued, "in which the feelings of a pure and youthful creature were so barbarously wrung by one of them, that in the tortured degeneration of her sensitive mind, she seized and swallowed a deadly drug for the purpose of destroying her life, and she succeeded in her attempt." In case the reader still did not see the moral of the story, the writer ended with the blunt warning, "She fills a suicide's grave, and her case affords a sad lesson to the inhuman, who would wantonly trifle in this manner with the feelings of others."220

The warning bells had sounded. The stories of youthful suicides in the *Evening Post* and the *Herald* were some of the first salvos in a cultural rebuke of comic valentines that would last for more than a decade. Valentine's Day, the preserve of antebellum, middle-class sentimentalism, these commentators lamented, had taken a turn for the worse. It had become the playground for those who would poison Cupid's arrows with vicious and spiteful sentiments. More to the point, the *Herald's* use of phrases such as "young ladies," "pure creatures," and "sensitive mind" signaled that these barbs were aimed at the middle class's own children. No wonder observers quickly made their opinions known. Some, like the writers of the pieces in the *Evening Post* and *Herald*, included critiques of comic notes as part of longer reflections on the holiday in general. Others, however, focused their full wrath on the satirical gibes. By the mid 1850s denouncements of these holiday goods were standard fare in newspapers and magazines and it was not uncommon for them to run on for several paragraphs. Whether or not the mid-February suicide actually occurred in New York or was connected to the receipt of a comic note, its story marked the start of a general concern and displeasure with these holiday goods.

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The focus of these middle-class commentators' ire were sheets of inexpensive paper, generally no larger than 6x11 inches, on which were printed crude color images and simple, short poems. More often than not these comic valentines showed no mercy. They ridiculed and lambasted people from various walks of life, from clerks and widows to drunkards and thieves, and in the process introduced a rowdy and unbridled quality to an oftentimes maudlin and tranquil day. They also proved to be enormously popular. By the mid 1850s advertisements for comic notes were as prominent and numerous as those for sentimental, and thousands of the acerbic cards traveled through the mail every year. These commercial goods did not necessarily transform the holiday, but they did add a transgressive quality to Valentine's Day that had been largely absent just several years earlier.

What made these notes particularly troubling for some observers was the fact that they snuck into the symbolic center of the middle-class family, the parlor of its home. Slipped through the mail-slot, one of the family's main portals to the world outside, caustic cards brought in uninvited some of the very same qualities of the untamed and raucous streets that, as Stephen Nissenbaum has shown, middle-class participants had worked to eliminate from their other great antebellum domestic holiday, Christmas. Comic valentines might have been distant cousins to the carnivalesque traditions of early modern Europe—Bakhtinian "private charivaris" as Leigh Eric Schmidt has termed them. More specifically, though, these new commercial goods were the offspring of an established but dramatically growing market for graphic and literary humor, and by the early 1850s they had most definitely become a public concern for middle-class tastemakers. Despite and because of this opposition, these printed ephemera worked to strengthen and clarify some of the values of a growing middle class, while at the same

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time providing a ritualized amusement for youth to both test the boundaries of those values and express status anxieties.  

**Quizzical Sheets**

Vinegar valentines, as they would later be termed, were not particularly new or original when they first became abundant around 1850. Printed satire both in verse and prose form had been common in North America since at least the early eighteenth century. By the 1830s printers had started to produce substantial quantities of humorous publications, the contents of which ranged from parody to ridicule. Around the same time ready-made jocular images became so common that one scholar of nineteenth-century prints has termed the 1850s "the great age of American graphic satire." Despite the fact that comic valentines derived from and were latecomers to a booming market for graphic prints in antebellum America, and that their witty lines had appeared in various forms in ephemeral publications for decades, the distinctive combination of image and

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verse on these inexpensive sheets created "quizzical" satires that quickly eclipsed other forms of humor printed specifically for February 14th.223

Comic valentines owed their visual content and layout—in short their look—to an explosion around mid century in printed illustrated matter. In part, they were offshoots of the work done by a group of printers and illustrators whom Bernard Reilly has termed "Jacksonian cartoonists." Beginning with Andrew Jackson's presidency, political campaigns became markedly contentious and often personal. Political parties at both the national and local levels found that the satiric cartoon was an effective and popular way to attack their rivals. These caricatures were often printed on separate sheets "ranging in size from 10 by 12 to 14 by 20 inches." When they appeared almost fifteen years after the first Jacksonian broadsides, comic valentines differed from political cartoons in at least one important respect, in addition to the fact that they generally offered social satires. Political caricatures increasingly relied on detailed likenesses. It was important, in other words, that the viewer recognize in the drawing the person being ridiculed, even when some of that person's features were exaggerated. Vinegar notes, in contrast, invariably contained cruder, more unrefined, and therefore less expensive images. Comic sheets borrowed the form but not necessarily the artistic execution that Jacksonian broadsides had helped to popularize.224

The more immediate visual predecessors to comic valentines were the comic almanacs of the Jacksonian and antebellum years. Almanacs had been popular since the seventeenth century (in fact, they were the most common books in early-American

households after the Bible). By the second quarter of the nineteenth century specialized almanacs had become common, including editions that issued from social organizations, religious denominations and state governments. In 1831 the first almanac dedicated exclusively to humorous material appeared in Boston. Inspired by George Cruikshank's *Comic Almanac* from England, American publishers produced hundreds of jocular works over the next thirty years, the heyday for such titles. The most famous issues, at least among later scholars, were the various *Crockett Almanacs* based around the frontier legend of Davy Crockett, though other titles were just as numerous. Most importantly perhaps from the perspective of later comic valentines, these thin, inexpensive publications contained an abundance of illustrations, many of which, Robert Secor opines, "were frequently funnier than the text [they accompanied]." The images, not coincidentally, looked remarkably similar to those found on sheets produced for February 14th.

The connection between the illustrations in comic almanacs and valentines is readily apparent and explicable when one considers their publishers. Many of the same men responsible for humorous booklets also printed holiday sheets. The most established was Robert "Comic" Elton, who between 1834 and 1850 produced *Elton's Comic-All-my-nack*. From 1841 to 1847 James Fisher released *Fisher's Comic Almanac*. And beginning in the mid 1840s Thomas Strong, the largest publisher of comic valentines, offered almanacs under several different titles. Strong in particular, Reilly has argued, "has the distinction of being perhaps the single most important patron of cartoonists in America" before the end of the century. Taking inspiration from the "exceedingly popular" political broadsides, these printers transposed onto single sheets the kinds of images they were accustomed to producing for their humorous booklets.

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226 Secor, 561-562; Reilly, 152; Murrell, quote 116.
If the illustrations common to comic valentines had their origins in recent developments to political and popular publications, their verse had a different and older lineage. The stanzas on humorous holiday sheets derived from comic valentine writers. The first such American work, entitled *The New Quizzical Valentine Writer being an Excellent Collection of all the Humourous, Droll, and Merry Valentines, Ever Published*, appeared in New York in 1823. This chapbook by W. Borradaile was a direct copy of an English title that a few more American publishers also pilfered during the 1820s. For the next fifteen years or so, however, Northeastern printers showed no interest in such works. By the time they began producing booklets in earnest again in the early 1840s, their English counterparts had given up on comic writers, having already released more than twenty separate editions in the previous decades. American printers would create around a dozen during the next decade or so. When Elton, Fisher, Strong and others began publicizing their vinegar notes in earnest around 1850, they quietly abandoned their production of humorous writers (see Appendix 2).

Comic writers, and sometimes the verse within any one book, actually came in two distinct varieties. Scholars, when they have considered these chapbooks at all, have tended to misread them by focusing exclusively on their satiric entries. Many of them, however, also contained another kind of "comic" poetry. Some of the stanzas within Borradaile's *New Quizzical Valentine Writer*, for example, offered light-hearted plays on words. Consider "With a rolling-pin," which read,

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227 Many of the earliest comic writers from both sides of the Atlantic contained lithographed or woodcut engravings on the sheet before the title page. Schmidt argues that, "It was only a small step for producers to detach these frontispieces from the covers of the valentine writers to create freestanding engraved or lithographed valentines," 56. English comic cards may have originated this way, though I suspect a more detailed examination of London publishers would reveal that they too were producing comic almanacs at the same time they began releasing vinegar sheets—just as their American counterparts were twenty years later—and that their almanacs and notes shared similar illustrations.


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My charming cook,
So plump you look,
Which first my heart did win,
That I have sent,
Pray be content,
To you a rolling-pin,

When making paste,
To speed your haste,
It will be very fine;
Make no excuse,
Do not refuse,
To be my Valentine.²²⁹

Lines like this represented mid-nineteenth-century versions of what the literary scholar Linda Hutcheon has termed "loving parodies." Modern parody, she observes, has ranged "from the ironic and playful to the scornful and ridiculing." Consequently, all too often scholars have confused parody with satire. Satire seeks to demean and deride its subjects for humorous effect. Parody, on the other hand, exaggerates characteristics without necessarily always discrediting the object of its attention.²³⁰

During the 1840s, among all the publishers of comic writers, Thomas Strong was most apt to produce this kind of parodic verse. Over the course of about ten years he printed at least three separate booklets, although it is almost impossible to know in what order since many of his publications were not dated. His Comic Valentine Writer Comprising the Best Pieces... contained both satiric and parodic entries. Many of the stanzas, actually, came directly from the chapbook Borradaile and others had printed twenty years earlier. Cupid's Valentine Writer contained similarly diverse poetry. In 1849 Strong released Love Points, the only work I have encountered dedicated exclusively to parodic lines. The next year he included it as part of a collection of works in True-Love Knots for True Lovers (see Appendix 2).

²²⁹ Peter Quizumall, The New Quizzical Valentine Writer being an Excellent Collection of all the Humorous, Droll, and Merry Valentines, Ever Published (New York: W. Borradaile, 1823), 25, italics in the original.
²³⁰ Hutcheon, 87-89, quote 89.
The poems included in these chapbooks by Strong were not simply examples of "loving parodies." More specifically, by combining images of exaggerated character traits with the sentiments of the loving writers we saw in the last chapter, these compositions effectively created what one might call "sentimental caricatures." "From A Blacksmith" was typical. This entry from *Love Points* concluded with the rhyme,

Let's be *welded together*
By Hymen's bright *chain*,
And we'll wear the soft *tether*
Through sunshine and rain.

Strong offered parodies, in other words, that employed metaphors based on personal occupation, religion, or other qualities in order to add unusual, stirring or amusing twists to loving sentiments. They may have been humorous, but ultimately they aimed to use caricature to woo recipients with "clever demonstrations of...verbal acuity," as Barry Shank has written of *True-Love Knots.*

This type of print humor did not survive into the 1850s, at least not in large quantities. For reasons we will examine shortly, comic writers in general disappeared from the market after mid century. Furthermore, verse found in chapbooks such as *Love Points* never made it onto commercial cards or sheets. Young people may have continued to pen sentimental caricatures on their own, though I have come across no examples. Loving parody for February 14th was largely a thing of the past in the decade before the Civil War.

The one exception to this trend, perhaps, was the banknote card. These facsimiles of bank bills were technically illegal. In 1850 Boston's *Daily Evening Transcript* described what happened to one enterprising businessman who was unfamiliar with the law:

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Yesterday afternoon, officer Clapp arrested in Congress Square an Irishman from New York, named James Carter, for peddling Valentines in the similitude of a $50 bank bill, purporting to be on the "Bank of True Love," in the "State of Matrimony," and "secured by the pledge of the whole stock of truth, honor and fidelity," with the signature of "Cupid" as President... The peddler was manifestly entirely ignorant of our laws against his traffic; accordingly the officer released him after taking possession of his stock in trade. The fine for making or vending such funny jokes is $50.232

This man was lucky. Because he was Irish, and therefore "ignorant of our laws," he escaped without a fine, though he did lose his stock of holiday goods. Other native-born merchants presumably were not so fortunate. Despite the efforts of authorities, however, banknote cards never entirely disappeared during the antebellum period. Examples still exist today in archives and private collections around the country.233

Banknote valentines, an example of which is reproduced in figure 28, were "funny jokes," as the Transcript called them, for a number of reasons. At a time when real, monetary loans were notoriously fragile, these cards poked fun at that insecurity by guaranteeing the love they represented with something other than financial credit. James Carter's cards, for example, came from the "Bank of True Love" in the "State of Matrimony" and were "secured by... truth, honor and fidelity." Many of them also laughed at monetary lenders by representing Valentine's Day "bankers" as the child-like Cupid dressed in business attire. Perhaps most importantly, though, these cards played with middle-class concerns—which we explored in the previous chapter—that holiday goods might actually be esteemed for their monetary rather than sincere romantic value. Carter offered consumers the chance to present recipients with "the whole stock of truth, honor and fidelity" but the strength of that exchange was represented by the $50 printed on the paper, not by the representation of the sender vis-à-vis his or her handwritten sentiments. The "gentle irreverence" of these holiday notes, Elizabeth White Nelson writes, "would have been an unlikely choice for a serious proposal of marriage, nor

would they have been appropriate for a platonic valentine." Rather, they represented a middle-ground, a sense of humor about serious, romantic cards that did not succumb "to the rancor of cheap comic valentines or [relinquish] the sentimental aesthetics of fancy valentines." 

Banknote cards, however, were always rare. Few Americans would have ever glimpsed one, and fewer still would have sent or received them. By the 1850s the satiric sentiments of vinegar valentines ruled the humorous side of the holiday. And these scornful lines had their origins in the earliest comic writers. Consider, for example, an entry from Borradaile's 1823 publication entitled "To a Vain Old Lady":

Believe me, you're too old to catch
A young man in your arms.
In vain you try to hide your age,
Sixty at once appears—...
I'll your grand-daughter have for mine. 

Most Northern residents familiar with popular literature would probably not have been surprised by this poem from Borradaile's booklet, even if they disapproved of it. Holiday writers presented a form of written, as opposed to illustrated, humor that had been common to almanacs for decades. As early as the 1730s printers had included in their annuals "witty aphorisms, humorous anecdotes, and amusing prefaces." By the last quarter of the eighteenth century amusing material had become even more prevalent, occupying by Secor's estimates over half of the verse in many editions. This humor encompassed numerous vernacular and colloquial subjects. Some lines focused on racial and ethnic stereotypes; others ridiculed professionals, including doctors, lawyers,

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234 White Nelson, 199-201.
235 Peter Quizumall, The New Quizzical Valentine Writer being an Excellent Collection of all the Humourous, Droll, and Merry Valentines, Ever Published (New York: W. Borradaile, 1823), 15, italics in the original.
clergymen and politicians; and still others dealt with relationships between men and women.236

During the 1830s and 1840s comic writers and almanacs, along with other humorous publications, added a new twist to this comedic tradition. These works depicted for the first time what David Sloane has referred to as the "vulgar urban type." Antebellum Northerners would have referred to many of these character sketches as "trades." Shank posits that these depictions of laborers became common to holiday satire during the 1840s, when writers began to emphasize "differences of occupation in addition to qualities of beauty, age, and grace." This is only partly correct. Many of the earliest English booklets, as well as their plagiarized American editions, had included entries for the "trades." Park's Guide to Hymen, for example, a London publication probably printed during the 1820s, included the poem "To a Baker" that read in part, "Baker, baker, what a sloven, / Out of doors or at the oven, / Oh, never, never, would I be / The wife of such a knave as thee."237 When American publishers started to produce their own writers during the 1840s, they borrowed from both this established English tradition and their own more recent humorous publications, including almanacs, to create humorous sketches of laborers.

The "vulgar urban type" was a subtle shift, not a dramatic break, from earlier forms of printed vernacular humor. Whereas early-American almanacs had focused on individuals who worked in the professions, Jacksonian comic writers and almanacs offered broader, more diverse sketches that included professionals along with such metropolitan figures as chimney sweeps, dandies, and clerks. Like the "loving parodies"

236 Secor, 552-555, quote 555; Robert K. Dodge has compiled innumerable examples in Early American Almanac Humor (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1987). See also Marion Stowell, Early American Almanacs (New York: Burt Franklin, 1977), passim.

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in some of Thomas Strong's works, these publications relied on caricature. They exaggerated for humorous effect easily recognizable character traits. But where "sentimental caricatures" depicted distortion with little or no implied acrimony, comic writers and almanacs used it to demean or discredit their subjects. Inside these chapbooks antebellum readers encountered coarse and unrefined portraits of some of the vast array of characters they might also encounter on the streets of metropolises large and small. It was an assortment of sketches that reflected, not coincidentally, the eclectic mix of people found in areas like Park Row, where, outside of printing and publishing establishments, residents of the wealthy western and northern sections of New York mingled with poorer inhabitants from near the Bowery.

Around the same time that American publishers rediscovered and printed comic writers, they began producing and promoting holiday sheets. The earliest newspaper ad I have found for these printed ephemera was in the *New York Herald* in 1844, when Strong mentioned at the end of a short notice to "love-stricken youth of Gotham" that, in addition to loving missives, he carried "Comical Valentines." Two years later a duo of Boston shops, Saxton and Kelt and Redding and Company, both announced that they stocked them. Comic cards had been available in Boston at least one year earlier, though, because in 1845 the *Daily Evening Transcript* noted, with certainly some exaggeration, "every other grown person of either sex received a missive—comic or sentimental."239

Nonetheless, until the late 1840s comic valentines took a backseat to sentimental. Both Shank and Schmidt note that in his 1847 *Annual Valentine Advertiser*, a short publication for dealers in and outside of New York City, Thomas Strong dedicated only one paragraph to describing his comic cards, whereas he went on for three pages about his sentimental. Unfortunately, a similar handbill from Strong from the 1850s has not

survived. By 1853, when he began publishing his monthly magazine *Yankee Notions*, satiric missives had become an important part of Strong's Valentine's Day business. He regularly advertised in *Yankee Notions* that he produced "Over 1000 kinds of Comic Valentines, the best in the market," and the "Ten Dollar Lots of Valentines" he sold to dealers contained over 300 cards, almost half of which were comic. Similarly, during most of the 1840s, when other dealers mentioned satiric sheets at all in their newspapers ads, they limited the space they dedicated to them or placed them toward the end of the announcement. By the early 1850s, however, humorous missives often appeared prominently in notices.\(^\text{240}\)

Many printers borrowed from the language in the titles of their writers to advertise their comic notes. Whereas verse in a parodic chapbook such as *Love Points* might be described as "humorous, droll and merry," lines in other writers and all on sheets were "ridiculous, witty, and severe" or "quizzical, whimsical, satirical and laughable."\(^\text{241}\) Philip Cozans of New York, for instance, referred to his stock in 1856 as "Funny Valentines," which were useful "if you want to quiz your friends." Even G.W. Cottrell of Boston, who in 1849 advertised that, "There is no Valentines [sic] in the country that will compare with those of this establishment for...wit and humor, without grossness," and almost ten years later announced "a new style of humorous...which, without being scurrilous or offensive, are calculated to make everybody laugh," was not above publicizing his satiric notes. In 1849, the same year he promised humor "without grossness," Cottrell asked in an ad in a different paper, "Do you wish to...pay off an old joke or would you make [illegible] friends laugh themselves fat?" He continued, "Come

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\(^{240}\) T. W. Strong, *Strong's Annual Valentine Advertiser for St. Valentine's Day, Feb. 14, 1847* (NY: Strong's Valentine Depot, 1847), 6; Schmidt, 78-80; Shank, 42. *Yankee Notions* 2.2 (February 1854), 64 and 6.2 (February 1857), 64. See also Lee, chapter 6.

then and select from our innumerable and incomparable assortment of...side-splitting, jest-making, comical, quizzical Valentines suitable for Professions and Trades of all denominations.²⁴²

Cottrell's and Cozans's use of the term "quizzical" was particularly telling. In the mid nineteenth century the word "quiz" had a much different meaning than it does for modern-day English-speakers, particularly Americans, for whom "to quiz" generally means "to examine." Before the Civil War residents of the Northeast associated "quizzing" with "ridiculing" or "making fun or sport of another person." Here was a term that succinctly described the intent of comic valentines. By combining graphic and poetic satiric humor, they created distinctive commercial goods perfectly suited to deliver insults to their recipients. Designed to elicit laughter at the expense of others, these holiday prints stood in stark contrast to the loving expressions found on their sentimental counterparts.²⁴³

Antebellum comic valentines had first appeared along with sentimental cards, and within a matter of years had become an important part of the holiday marketplace. At the same time these simple publications, with their roots in established forms of published graphic humor and satiric verse, rather quickly crowded out other kinds of holiday print humor. By the early 1850s their combination of crude illustrations and short poems had made Valentine's Day a time of contrasts. On the one side were earnest, often saccharin cards, and on the other biting, quizzical notes. The two customs had become cultural water and oil, flowing together but never mixing on February 14th. Despite the oppositional nature of comic prints, though, the cultural work they performed was remarkably conventional.

**Popular Caricatured Reflections**

During the fifteen years or so that they were in demand, comic valentines changed very little. Thumbing through examples of these antebellum ephemera today, it is exceedingly difficult to distinguish which were made in the 1840s and which ten years later. Their caricatures of people from all walks of life were not only long-lived and unchanging, but also widely popular. Residents throughout Northeast, particularly during the first half of the 1850s, would have been hard pressed to open a newspaper in late January or anytime in February and not encounter advertisements for comic missives. Even if local papers did not carry announcements for these printed ephemera, as we saw in chapter two, major metropolitan dailies and weeklies circulated throughout the region and brought with them news of the availability of ribald valentines. Within a few years of their appearance in shop windows and newspaper ads, comic cards had found an audience among youth of diverse geographic, social and economic backgrounds, and in the process, had become a form of oblique social control for the middle class by expressing hostility to those who broke accepted norms or stepped out of line.

At first glance it might seem that there was little rhyme or reason to the stinging lines and crude pictures that populated comic valentines. Their images and verses mocked all varieties of individuals indiscriminately. In fact, though, most quizzical cards fell into at least one of three broad categories of Valentine's Day satire. The distinctions between these categories were not always fast and clear because some notes touched on more than one. Even in those instances, however, a missive usually emphasized one theme over another.

The first category of holiday mockery focused on issues of gender relations and conflict. Considering the holiday's associations with love and courtship, it is not surprising that when merchants looked for issues to satirize in mid February they often highlighted and exaggerated tensions between the sexes. Some cards portrayed the
darker, unromantic side of marriage. Couples fighting, falling out of love, or just dealing with the day-to-day problems of living together were common themes. One card, entitled "Return of a Three Year's Volunteer," depicted a soldier stepping through the front door to find his wife changing a baby's diaper. Under the image were the lines:

Your time is up and you have come,  
With blast of bugle—roll of drum,  
What meets your gaze? your tidy wife,  
And the stern realities of life.

Another missive, sarcastically entitled "Affection," mocked the tenderness middle-class couples were expected to display towards one another in the privacy of their homes. "O, this is the way 'twill be with us," it predicted, "When we've been wed a year / We'll be at it, shovel and tongs / I promise you, my dear." All of these commercial missives turned upside down the image of the loving, romantic couple, the very ideal young people were encouraged to envision in their sentimental exchanges.244

Still other cards mocked men who did not perform their duties as husbands and breadwinners. One particularly grotesque note, seen in figure 29, portrayed a Frankenstein-like "tyrant" who employed the kind of physical coercion that had become antithetical to the ideal of middle-class marriage, but commonly associated with the slave-holding South in the minds of many Northerners. Perhaps the most common subject for these notes about disorderly men was the "hen-pecked husband." These men defied norms for middle-class manliness by allowing their wives to rule over them. "He who would be a woman's fool, / Will find himself a henpecked fool," warned one card

Figure 29: Comic Valentine: "The Tyrant"

I ne'er for a husband a tyrant would have,
Because he would treat me just like some old slave;
And if he should try his persuasions to urge,
I'm sure it would be 'cross my back with a scourge.

THE TYRANT.

Courtesy of the Library Company of Philadelphia
that also carried an image of a well-dressed man holding a baby and being scolded by a woman.245

The flipside of the hen-pecked husband, of course, was the domineering wife. Without a doubt, "unruly and unwed women," as Schmidt has noted, were the most frequently ridiculed subjects among cards that dealt with gender relations. They were mocked for being unlady-like, often tom-boyish, for being out of wedlock, either unmarried or widowed, and for being immoral, often either a flirt or a coquette. One particularly horrid card, reproduced in figure 30, presented "a daughter of the devil," an unkempt lizard-like creature that was about as far from the image of nineteenth-century true womanhood as one could imagine. The similarity between this creature's tongue and that of a snake's was particularly telling. These images regularly included distorted or grotesque tongues, as in figure 31, appendages that became embodiments of loud and unruly behavior.246

The fact that some women in the North had recently begun to protest inequality at the same time that comic valentines became popular was not lost on the cards' creators. These women who dared organize for their rights, warned the last line in figure 32, "are too bold to be my Valentine." Yet, other than these derisions of the first women's rights movement, there was nothing particularly novel or timely in the cards that disdained disorderly men, women and marriages. Since at least the time of carnivals in early-modern Europe, communal mocking rituals had focused on individuals who defied gender conventions. More recently, as we saw in the previous section, eighteenth-century almanacs and later Jacksonian comic almanacs had employed exaggerated relationships between men and women for comedic effect. All of these mid-century

Figure 30: Comic Valentine: “A Daughter of the D—”

A DAUGHTER OF THE D—

If all that God e’er made was good,
Some things like you we find most evil;
And we must think, at least we should,
That you’re the offspring of the D—.

Courtesy of the Library Company of Philadelphia
Figure 31: Comic Valentine: “Long Tongued Woman”

LONG TONGUED WOMAN.
Of all the girls I’ve seen
A long tongue is the worst to come by;
Wit with a cold hat, say, and menses like a weep;
If you’re to be believed like your long
Never so happy as when you’re around
Never so heartbroken when the truth is found;
You may have a cold tongue. It’s not such a treasure this;
I’d rather have a short tongue, but be my Valentine.

Courtesy of the Library Company of Philadelphia
Figure 32: Comic Valentine

Among the women who in history brightest have shone
Are those who have left the men's affairs alone,
Whose husbands have found their proper place,
And sought not to crowd to share their face;
We see you seek a different line—
You are too bold to be my Valentine.

Courtesy of the Library Company of Philadelphia
printed goods shared one thing in common. They used humor, as Gary Bunker points out, "as a vital force in normative social control." Commercial missives produced for February 14th, in other words, helped the middle class define and regulate acceptable gender norms by presenting and criticizing unsuitable examples.247

Holiday notes in the second category of comic satire looked quite different from those that mocked unruly men and women. These prints depicted various "vulgar urban types" or individuals involved in "trades." A number of them focused on occupations that involved non-manual work. Clerks were particularly popular objects for derision. The lines below the man depicted in figure 33 both mocked his preoccupation with wealth and questioned his morality. As Shank points out, clerking was a relatively new profession with "ambiguous job requirements and future possibilities." The same could be said of other careers that involved laboring with one's mind more than one's hands. In an age before the professionalization of white-collar occupations, doctors, lawyers and bankers—what would now be considered middle-class careers—were ready sources for comic satire.248

Other valentines, in fact the majority of cards in this category, portrayed individuals involved in manual labor. The picture of the "Gardener" in figure 34 is a good example of how holiday merchants applied color to their prints to add to their appeal, though the coloring on this particular card was applied by machine not by hand and thus was not quite as crude as other pictures. With some of the tools of his trade strategically placed around him, this gardener is mocked for both his ineptitude and his simple-mindedness. Images of grocers, printers, bakers, tailors and countless other laborers populated the fronts of these sheets of paper. Female workers were not overlooked either. One card entitled "A Vest-Maker" degraded both the woman's

248 Shank, 44.
Figure 33: Comic Valentine: "Clerk"

To count the dollars, cents and mills,
For that alone you’re fit,
Devoid of common sense.
Or any show ofwit.
Thank ye, I’ll buy me a piggy
Or to his love insinuate?
I’ll never count a bag of dimes,
To be my Valentine.

Courtesy of the Library Company of Philadelphia
Figure 34: Comic Valentine: “Gardener”

Courtesy of the Hallmark Historical Collection

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occupational potential—"You're only suited for the bench"—and her current workmanship—"Such nondescripts don't do for me. / Such vests as you pretend to make."

What all of these printed derisions of manual labor shared in common was an emphasis on both the menial nature of the work involved and the subject's inability to do it well.249

As with depictions of tumultuous gender relations, prints of boorish or repellent "trades" were not particularly new or uncommon. Similar sketches, as we saw earlier, had appeared in comic writers and almanacs for over a decade. Printers' use of the image of the vulgar urban type in their comic valentines, however, does raise a couple of important questions about these holiday broadsides. First, one might wonder, who was the primary audience for these goods? Did their illustrations of laborers indicate that they were popular among working-class readers and viewers, kin to the so-called sporting papers that thrived in the early 1840s and reflective of what Helen Horowitz describes as the "rough ways of male working-class life?" Or did they appeal to middle-class youth, providing a forum in which they could malign those they considered beneath them?250

Determining who bought or read holiday broadsides is exceedingly and notoriously difficult. There are no records, for example, of where prints sold best—in the poor or wealthy sections of New York—or even estimates of how many were purchased each year. There are a couple clues from the business practices of printers to suggest, though, that comic valentines had a diverse audience. For one thing, unlike sporting newspapers, which circulated primarily among young, urban men, humorous sheets for February 14th could be found throughout the Northeast. Through wholesale and retail ads in newspapers and periodicals, printers chased a geographically broad consumer base. An entry in the diary of a London, Ontario mother from 1859—that three of her children

250 Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, Rereading Sex: Battles Over Sexual Knowledge and Suppression in Nineteenth-Century America (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), chps. 6 and 8, quote 125.
had received satiric missives—attest that printers were at least partially successful.\textsuperscript{251} These businessmen also sought young buyers from all social and economic backgrounds. A few like "Comic" Elton, as his name suggests, might have pursued a primarily working-class, male audience. Most, however, could not afford or chose not to be so focused. Thomas Strong and his competitors, as we saw earlier, not only sold sentimental notes; throughout the rest of the year they marketed numerous other distinctively middle-class publications. These metropolitan printers walked a fine line. Their acerbic sheets were successful in part because they contrasted to the aesthetic qualities of middle-class sentimentalism, but they had to be careful not to be too offensive or sales of other publications they offered might suffer. Printers of comic valentines might have appropriated some of the attributes of working-class culture, and hoped to sell their goods in places like the Bowery, but they also hoped to distribute those sheets and other publications to self-consciously "respectable" consumers, including residents in places as distant as Ontario.

The marketing of images of "vulgar urban types" to middle-class and rural customers raises another question about comic valentines. What exactly was so offensive about these holiday sheets? Consumers and critics, after all, would have encountered such illustrations and stanzas in other publications, including almanacs and holiday writers, and would have been quite familiar with them by the late 1840s and early 1850s. Why then did they get particularly incensed about February 14\textsuperscript{th} broadsides, or at least not mention other satiric works in their critiques of them?

There was one important difference between vinegar valentines and other comic publications. Both might be considered "quizzical" in the sense that they sought to ridicule others. Almanacs, holiday writers and other works presented exaggerations that were humorous because of their absurdities. Readers were expected to laugh at the

\textsuperscript{251} Horowitz, chp. 8; Amelia Ryerse Harris, "Diary of Amelia Ryerse Harris, February 1859" in The Eldon House Diaries: Five Women's Views of the 19\textsuperscript{th} Century (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1994), 91
images in front of them. Valentine's Day notes, on the other hand, took the same kinds of
images and projected them back onto their readers. Comic cards played with the mirror­
like qualities inherent in their sentimental counterparts. Young recipients opened loving
missives expecting to encounter idealized images of themselves or potential relationships.
By the mid 1850s some commercial sentimental valentines even included small pieces of
looking glass. Like the wavy mirrors found in modern-day funhouses, acerbic sheets
distorted and even inverted this reflective nature of holiday sentimentality. They
delivered, as their critics often noted, exactly the opposite kind of self-image most young
people hoped to receive on February 14th.

Paradoxically, despite the critics, this same reflective quality of comic missives
worked to the advantage of middle-class cultural authority. In order to best see how these
commercial goods accomplished this, one need only look to the third category of cards.
These comic missives took as their theme depictions of dress and decorum, and
commented on issues such as an individual's appearance, habits, and interests. One of the
most common habits these cards targeted was drinking, as Shank points out. Below the
image of a rather well-dressed but inebriated man, an example of one of these sheets
included the scathing lines,

Drinking you make your sole delight
Porter and brandy, rum and gin,
All in excess are taken in—
No drunkard ever shall be mine
You don't deserve a Valentine.

By mid century consuming alcohol had become associated with the lower classes,
particularly with immigrant laborers. Despite the genteel appearance of the man on the
card, in other words, his love of liquor threatened to derail any aspirations he might have
to middle-class status.252

252 Shank, 49-50; J4.6.5, Comic Valentines 1840-1870, Hallmark Historical Collection, Kansas City,
Missouri.
Comic notes ridiculed lower class culture from countless other directions too. Dress and appearance were especially popular sources for derision. "The House-Maid" caricatured its subject as a "Dirty, ugly, vulgar, pert, / So begrimed with grease and dirt." Bowery Boys and Bowery Gals showed up on many sheets and were singled out for their loud and crass deportment. A product of New York's working-class Bowery district, the B'hoy, as he was often called, was an urban figure remarkable for the contrast between his unconventional but "self-consciously dashing presence" and his rough-hewn "manners and speech." "One of the B'hoys" complained, "You always keep blowing 'bout something, / When you're mussy, you make such a noise, / There's no peace in the crib till you're gone." Urban laborers were not the only working-class victims of comic notes. A card to "A Country Pumbkin," for example, lampooned the simplicity and coarseness of rural life.253

Commercial valentines did not hesitate to satirize features of middle-class life either. One of the most common images, perhaps equaling that of the drunkard, was of a woman wearing a hoopskirt. During the 1850s the "drooping slenderness" of women's dresses was replaced by a "broad, inflated look." By mid decade skirts had become so wide—often more than ten feet—they needed metal undergarments to hold their shape. The obvious excesses of this fashion quickly placed it in the crosshairs of vinegar notes. One sheet, reproduced in figure 35, suggested that the woman's dress did a better job of cleaning the streets than any sweeper did. In addition to dress and appearance, comic notes satirized aspirations and claims to learnedness. "The Man of Letters" noted sarcastically, "You look finer than your better, / And take great airs upon yourself, / Since you've grown a man of letters." Similarly, another card about a "'Finished' Boarding-

Figure 35: Comic Valentine: “Pretty Lady do not Rage”

Pretty lady do not rage
When I say you’re in a rage,
By a lot of hoopoe assured—
Of it I am well assured.
Sweep away the side-walk clean,
Of street sweepers, you’re the queen.

Courtesy of the Library Company of Philadelphia
School Miss" mocked that though the young woman might be proficient in French, "I
doubt that, my dear, / You the oven could clear / When the time came for putting a dish
in 't."254

These valentines that focused on dress and decorum helped a growing middle
class both define itself and flex its cultural muscle not through the use of blunt force, or
"policing" as Shank has termed it, but with sly and surreptitious compulsion. By
ridiculing just about every occupation imaginable, from lawyers and clerks to bakers and
street sweepers, these cards actually blurred economic and social boundaries as often as
they defined them. They invited individuals from numerous and varied walks of life to
consider themselves or aspire to be middle class.255 Humorous holiday sheets presented
class status as largely an outgrowth of individual presentation and comportment, and
through the use of satire, helped to define those limits. Comic broadsides used their
reflective qualities in two ways. They both provided a forum in which the middle class
could turn a mirror on itself and mock with equal ruthlessness individuals from a variety
of backgrounds who might make claims to middling status, at the same time that they
focused the onus of class status on the individual. Recipients were warned not to debase
themselves by adopting certain lower-class habits and customs and not to embarrass
themselves by succumbing to the excesses of middling fashion. The ideal, which was
conspicuous because of its absence, lay in between the parodied extremes.

The distinct cultural work of comic valentines is readily evident when one
compares them to their closest print relative, comic writers. The main difference between
holiday chapbooks and the ribald cards that succeeded them was not their visual or
literary imagery, which as we have seen was often similar, but how they were used, or
more specifically their relationship to handwriting. Humorous writers, just like

254 Karen Halttunen, Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America,
1830-1870 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), quote 161; "The Man of Letters," 6.16 and
255 Shank, 51-52.
sentimental, were marketed to be read and potentially reworked to create something uniquely one's own but not necessarily original. There is little evidence that young people actually did this. For example, I have discovered no acerbic handwritten poems that might have been transcribed from a printed source, nor any letters in which someone mentioned rewriting satiric lines or receiving them. This is not entirely surprising, though. Why would someone admit to sending or transcribing a mocking note? Even if young people did not often pen the comic verse they found in writers, clearly there was an expectation, perhaps especially among printers and businessmen, that some would.

Comic cards were entirely different. They had what one could term a negative relationship to the hand. After viewing thousands of these sheets, I have discovered no instances when a sender included his or her handwriting on the print itself. Furthermore, I have found only one card that came from the shop with script already on it. Merchants almost always printed the verse on missives, rather than hire scribes to write it. This lack of cursive, a stark contrast to sentimental notes, contributed to the cultural work and authority of vinegar valentines. By combining print and images together in a package that could be bought and mailed, they became a disembodied voice of the middle class. Their satiric injunctions to adhere to specific habits and values came not from a known or knowable person, as represented by the presence of distinctive pen-strokes, but from a nondescript world of printed goods that, as in the case of etiquette books, members of the middle class were accustomed to turning to for advice on how to comport themselves.

The contrasting ways in which comic booklets and broadsides were used also helps to explain why satiric writers disappeared in the late 1840s. If one excludes Strong's title from 1849, which contained parodic not satirical poems, American printers produced less than half a dozen comic writers after 1840 and the last dated editions, two separate titles, appeared in 1848 (see Appendix 2). The importance of script's absence in holiday satire meant that writers were no longer relevant to Valentine's Day mocking. Young people clearly preferred to send pre-printed verse than to pen their own.
These comic valentines that young men and women turned to in large numbers in the late 1840s and early 1850s provided a growing middle class with an idealized, democratic vision of itself. By skewering numerous and varied professions and occupations with equal vigor, they suggested that people in these employments were equally open to ridicule. Then by disdaining both characteristics the middle class associated with working-class life and examples of its own decadence and over-refinement, the cards painted the outlines of acceptable, genteel culture. Finally, by mocking disorderly men, women and marriages, they habituated people to the loving, romantic and domesticated couple, a relatively recent ideal that had become central to the middle-class's vision of itself. These commercial notes turned the issue of class status, as John Kasson has written of etiquette books, "back upon the individual." But unlike more acceptable publications, they sought to encourage individuals to reform themselves by offering up grotesque caricatures of what might happen if they did not. Of course, for all the important cultural work acerbic sheets did, young people would never have purchased them in large numbers in the first place if they were not somehow also hilarious.

What's So Funny?

From our perspective, comic valentines might hardly seem funny at all. Most people today would probably call them rude, vulgar or insulting. We tend to equate "comic" with "humorous." In the mid nineteenth century, however, the term "comic" carried two general meanings. The older of the two aligned comedy with humor and amusement. The more recent definition, which probably became common earlier in the century, linked comedy to burlesque. We have already seen how satiric notes functioned

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as cultural burlesque. Can we also understand what made them "funny?" Put another way, a century and a half later can we "get the joke" of these commercial goods? A part of their humor is certainly lost to us, veiled by the changes of time and ensconced in cultural traditions that have become foreign. Yet the outlines, at least, of what made them funny are visible when one considers three of their qualities: the ways in which they were used, the reactions they evoked because of their contrasts to the sentimental holiday, and their ability to displace anxiety. Taken together these qualities provided a venue for young men and women to both laugh at some of the standards of genteel, middle-class culture and express their concerns about their futures.257

Comic valentines depended on mail delivery to reach their intended recipients. There is no evidence that many individuals conveyed notes themselves. On the contrary, as we will see in more detail shortly, essays and stories repeatedly depicted adolescents using the post to send their missives. Young people did not dispatch satiric prints merely because it was convenient, however, though mailmen did make it possible to reach people at a distance. Using the postal service cloaked senders of acerbic lines in a veil of anonymity. This lack of authorship began with the cards themselves, which, as we have already seen, rarely contained cursive script. Their printed stanzas and crude images provided few immediate clues about the identity of their senders. Holiday victims would find scant more clues on the envelopes that conveyed the insults. During the 1840s and 1850s envelopes were not required to have, and rarely contained, return addresses. The only evidence about the point of origin of a letter was the stamp from the post office where it was mailed, which may or may not have helped a recipient narrow the number of possible senders. The other evidence on an envelope, of course, was the handwritten

257 See the *Oxford English Dictionary* for examples of how writers at the end of the 1800s tried to distance comedy from the vulgar and burlesque. It was an effort that was not entirely successful, as the modern-day punch line "You know you’re a redneck when..." attests. Inspiration for this section comes from Robert Darnton's close examination of a cat murder in eighteenth-century France. See his essay "Workers Revolt: The Great Cat Massacre of the Rue Saint-Severin" in *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1985), 75-106.
address, which was usually only a couple of lines long. From these two limited hints—a point of origin and a few written words—the target of a February 14th indignity might begin the difficult task of determining its perpetrator.

Anonymity was also a fundamental component of sentimental exchanges, of course. But in a loving card a sender purposely obscured his or her identity only thinly. The holiday game of hide and seek would not have worked if a composer had completely concealed the origins of his or her missive. Central to the fun associated with trading romantic lines was the difficult but not impossible chase that might follow the reception of a valentine. Ribald notes shared in this fun. The sender of insulting verse knew that the recipient might try to determine his or her identity. What made these exchanges funny in addition to fun, however, was the knowledge that the search most likely would be to no avail. In short, comic valentines turned the sport of hide and seek on its head. The object was to avoid detection, to completely hide oneself while a victim searched in vain. The laughter in this case issued from the imagined, fruitless chase that a recipient undertook after receiving a lampooning card.

A story Peterson's Magazine published acknowledged the humor of anonymous holiday ridicule, and sought to counter it. Entitled "Jane's Valentine," the short Cinderella-like tale—less than two pages long—centered on the youngest of four sisters and the only one who "possessed no claim to personal beauty." This particular February 14th all four sisters received valentines. Only Jane, however, was the victim of "a vile caricature... accompanied by an exaggerated description of her ugliness, in verse." Her three sisters "grew...merry over her solitary Valentine" and laughed even harder when Jane became visibly upset. Perhaps one of her sisters sent it. The fact that they "always managed to bring their own prettiness into such forcible contrast with her plainness" suggested that sending such a card would not have been out of the ordinary for them. At the very least, they reveled in the insult and the knowledge that Jane would not uncover its perpetrator. Not surprisingly, "Jane's Valentine" turned this holiday mockery into a
morality tale when Charles Lee, who was "rich, fine-looking, and intelligent," called upon Jane shortly after she received her valentine. Charles had himself received a "grotesque" note that depicted "a lone widower shivering over a miserable fire." He immediately proposed to Jane for, as he declared, "I do not base my preferences on personal beauty."258

"Jane's Valentine" was one of the few fictional accounts of Valentine's Day satire, and although its author highlighted the importance of anonymity, she either ignored or was unaware of the sense of danger inherent in the holiday amusement. An essential component of the humor of sending comic valentines was the risk involved. The United States Democratic Review put it this way: "There is no question that the senders of these things would be liable to an action for libel, if they could be discovered. At all events, such proceedings tend to breaches of the peace, and in that light would be actionable." Perhaps, but it seems unlikely that anyone would go to court for mailing an insult, and there are no indications that anyone ever did. Nonetheless, the Democratic Review touched on a central component of satiric fun. Printed comic sheets and mail delivery might obscure the identity of a sender, but they could never completely hide it. There was always the chance that one might get caught. The consequences of being discovered might not include jail time, but at the very least one would likely face reproof and criticism, perhaps even condemnation and ostracism. Avoiding detection, on the other hand, contributed to the merriment. One could not only laugh at the thought of a victim trying unsuccessfully to learn who sent the insult, one could also take pleasure from escaping retribution. As Robert Darnton has written of eighteenth-century workers who mocked their employers by killing their cat, "The risk was part of the joke."259


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Who, though, perpetrated these mid-February jokes? Until now I have assumed both men and women sent satiric sheets. But, as was the case with the cat-murderers Darnton studied, were young men the primary culprits? For hundreds of years carnivalesque practices, at least the way scholars have defined them, had traditionally been male-dominated public events.260 Unfortunately, just as there is almost no evidence for the identities of individuals who sent insulting lines, there is no conclusive documentation of their sex either. Contemporary observers sometimes assumed that men were more likely than women to commit these holiday "crimes." Boston's Daily Evening Transcript called it the, "practice of some stupid young coxcombs." The New York Herald believed that, "colored caricature prints...are carefully bought and directed by some malicious bipeds to females whose feelings they hope to wound." More often, though, commentators used the general term "youth" when criticizing those who sent comic valentines. "Young folks enjoy the fun so much that they usually keep it up for a week," the New York Daily Tribune opined, "by sending some wretched caricature calculated to hit off a special infirmity." At the start of the holiday's popularity in 1845 the Daily Transcript went so far as to state that, "every other grown person of either sex received a [comic] missive."

There is also evidence from newspaper advertisements and holiday goods themselves that sending comic valentines was a satirizing custom that both men and women practiced. Businessmen wanted to sell their prints, and they sought as many customers as possible. From the start, merchants had encouraged girls to participate in the holiday in general and every leap year instructed that they should initiate exchanges. There is no indication that merchants sought to exclude women from the satiric side of


February 14th. Moreover, before ready-made sheets ever became available and for several years during the mid 1840s, young women had been directed within the pages of valentine writers to transcribe both satiric poems and biting responses to verse. The caustic prints that became popular in the late 1840s changed the means by which satire was expressed, but they did not necessarily exclude individuals who had previously been encouraged to express it.

This, then, like the romantic side of the holiday, was a youthful diversion. But part of what made the pastime of sending comic valentines funny, in addition to fun, was the fact that it was an anonymous game that involved some risk. A young man or woman not only delivered an unsigned satire, if successful he or she escaped the prank unpunished. No degree or type of insult would be funny, however, if it was not also somehow disreputable. What was the pleasure of a slight if it went unnoticed or ignored? Caustic cards also provided amusement from the reactions they evoked because of their stark differences from and defiance of sentimental traditions.

Valentines within any of the three themes we examined in the previous section could and often did defy sentimental standards for February 14th, for example by accusing someone of being ugly, poorly dressed, or a drunkard. Perhaps no cards, however, disdained holiday sentimentality more boldly than those that highlighted the subject of sex. One would be hard-pressed today to dig through a box or leaf through a folder of mid-century satiric sheets and not be struck by the prominent display of sexuality in these commercial goods. It wasn't everywhere, as present-day critiques of mass media sometimes assert, but it would have been nearly impossible for observers in the years before the Civil War to miss.262

Some cards approached the subject with ambiguity and double-entendre. Depictions of roosters were particularly popular. One of the first valentine writers

262 Despite the conspicuousness of sexuality in comic valentines, neither Schmidt nor Shank addresses it. Schmidt even includes, but does not comment on, an image of a "Fireman" holding a phallic hose, 81.
published in the Northeast contained a frontispiece with an image of a devil waving a rooster on a stick at a clearly frightened woman. The bird even wore a pair of pants to cover its own immodesty. In case the reader did not "get the joke" of the barnyard fowl, beneath the picture in W. Borradaile's 1828 publication were the lines:

Fear not fair Virgin, free from sin;  
This Present from your friend I bring.  
Which if refused you know full well,  
[illegible] you must shortly lead in Hell.

Three decades later ribald holiday sheets continued to play with the image of the rooster. One card, reproduced in figure 36, presented a well-dressed man warning a fashionable woman about the enticing but dangerous qualities of the mysterious bird.263

Other comic valentines, however, were not so subtle. The sheet copied in figure 37 dispensed with verse altogether. The one-sentence question above the man's head made the card's meaning immediately discernable, in case the reader did not already recognize the humor from the expressions on the characters' faces and the pole in the man's arms. Many cards toyed with depictions of women's hoopskirts. The vogue for wide attire presented men with a "convenient fashion," proclaimed one card with an image of gentlemen whose head was literally caught beneath the skirt of a woman climbing into a carriage. Another note portrayed a woman reaching up to the top of a window, pulling with her the wire crinoline and thus exposing her legs for all to see, including the viewer of the card. "Mount a box, bench, chair or tub," it warned, "For while you're dusting off the blind, / The boys are peeping up behind."264

263 *The New Quizzical Valentine Writer being an Excellent Collection of all the Humourous, Droll, and Merry Valentines, Ever Published* (New York: W. Borradaile, 1823), front page verso.
Figure 36: Comic Valentine

Maiden no doubt you oft have heard
About this strange & dangerous bird
If man should offer it to you.
Beware! with him have naught todo.

Courtesy of the Hallmark Historical Collection
Figure 37: Comic Valentine

"What's the state of your flue?"

Courtesy of the Hallmark Historical Collection
Images like these were popular in part because of their titillating qualities, but their propensity to excite was rather limited, even by mid-century standards. More important was the fact that these sheets were particularly and blatantly indecent and offensive, because they accentuated a topic that adults had entrusted the sentimental holiday to sublimate. Valentine's Day did not ignore sexuality, as we know from chapter three. Rather it sought to guide adolescents into it with a childish innocence. Comic cards scorned this prescribed cultural work. Instead of assuming the vantage of a loving child—most conspicuously represented by Cupid, satiric traditions presented the viewpoint of a hormonal adolescent. From this perspective, sexuality and discussions about it might be the private, secretive preserves of married adults, but they were also fair game for inquisitive and prying youth. Ribald notes had let the cat out of the bag—or perhaps a rooster would be a more apt image—and had done so in a very public way. No wonder they quickly raised the ire of contemporary observers.

Few commentators during the 1840s and 1850s singled out for criticism any one particular theme within comic valentines. They did not suggest that cards that lampooned loud women were more injurious than those that touched on sexuality, for example. The self-appointed arbiters of taste complained about all satiric goods, and if they occasionally worried in public forums about the manufactured quality of sentimental missives, they routinely denounced what they considered to be the degenerative nature of holiday parody. By the early 1850s, without fail, censorious articles and essays appeared every spring, year after year. None followed the examples of the editorials from the two New York newspapers by suggesting that biting verse had caused suicides, but their tones were only slightly less severe.

One issue connected all of these numerous pieces together. The *New York Times* put it this way in 1859: "vulgarity and obscenity have almost completely usurped the place which decency once claimed in the composition of these missives." Boston's *Daily Courier* called comic cards "mean and despicable examples of small villainy." The basis
for all critiques of these commercial goods, then, was their intentional inversion of the qualities of romantic notes. These were "sentimental" goods, though no commentators would refer to them that way, because instead of encouraging the expression of sentiments like compassion and love, they dispensed with disdain and repulsion. Anyone who would send such verse, Q.K. Doesticks grumbled in 1855, "would steal the pennies from a blind man, and then coax his dog away to sell to the butcher boys." 265

From this common, shared perspective on satirical sheets observers then launched two additional critiques. First, writers accused young people of abusing the mail system. During the late 1840s and early 1850s, right when lampooning notes became popular, postage generally had to be paid upon delivery, as we know from chapter two. Mischievous adolescents used this fact to double the fun of sending satiric sheets. On February 14th young men and women might eagerly await the delivery of that season's valentines, only to discover that mixed in among the lot were rude letters. From the sender's perspective, ideally the recipient would not only be shocked by the arrival of such missives, he or she would be duped into paying their postage. Q.K. Doesticks noted that, "This is a day to rejoice the hearts of the penny postmen, who always get their money before they give up the documents." Doesticks himself claimed to have received "seventeen letters, all unpaid, and all from 'Valentine.'" "Some were complimentary and some abusive," he concluded, "[but] as they cost me three cents each, I've regretted ever since that I didn't sell them to the corner grocery man to wrap round sausages." 266

Many observers hoped that the arrival of prepaid postage would put an end to comic valentines. James Holbrook, a former postman whose memoirs were published the same year as Doesticks' commentary, predicted that, "Thanks to the law-makers, the advance pay requisition will hereafter put a stop to that species of petty swindling."


266 Doesticks, 193, 196, 199.
Three years later, in 1858, the *Boston Daily Courier* announced unequivocally, "It is one of the good effects of the law requiring the prepayment of postages that this abuse is thereby very sensibly diminished." Unfortunately, I have not found any estimates on the numbers of caustic notes sent during the 1850s. Despite the *Courier*'s pronouncement, though, other sources indicate that the coming of prepaid letters did not put a substantial dent in the popularity of mailing ribald cards. As the decade progressed holiday newspaper advertising declined, as we saw in chapter two, but within the ads that remained comic notes appeared just about as often as sentimental.

In fact, most observers complained that prepayment had little or no effect on the popularity of comic valentine, and that, more alarmingly, recipients had started to reject all valentines. The arrival of prepaid postage may have taken away one of the joys of sending satiric notes, but young people quickly found new ways to have devious fun with missives they had to pay to send. Boston's *Daily Evening Transcript* noted as early as 1850, "The practice of...sending impertinent or indecent missives, under the guise of valentines, has no doubt resulted in inducing many families to exclude all valentines without distinction." Just over ten years later, after the introduction of prepaid postage, things had not changed much. "In consequence of the vulgar devices and course lithographs sold for Valentines," the *Daily Evening Transcript* observed, "many persons decline to receive drop letters today." Satiric sheets had not just soiled an otherwise wholesome holiday. They threatened to derail the day altogether. People would decline all valentines because according to the *Transcript*, "it would be difficult to say whether an insult were not couched under a richly embroidered envelope as well as under one of coarser texture." Like a cancerous growth that had overwhelmed an organ, ribald

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cards could not be removed from February 14th, these writers worried, without threatening the day's healthy and decorous customs too.

The second general critique stemmed from this concern that people had started to refuse all valentines. Observers lamented that the holiday was in decline. This declension argument, in turn, had two components. Sometimes writers decided that literally fewer people marked the day than had been the case just years earlier. On the eve of the Civil War the *New York Daily Tribune* wrote, "The day...has been so much outraged, and used as a cover for giving vent to malice...that it has fallen into merited disrepute, and indeed come to be considered a nuisance." It continued, without any supporting evidence, "At the Post-Office the falling off of Valentines sent through the mails was much below that of last year when the diminution was very marked." Other times observers argued that the day was in declension because it had been debased. "The practice of sending valentines has degenerated from the gentle anonymous love billet," lamented the *Boston Daily Times*. "The romance is all gone, now—the miserable caricatures which are sent, often in malice, makes it dangerous for any one to open any letter about these days."269

All of these commentators hoped, of course, that young men and women would discontinue sending comic valentines altogether and exchange only loving missives. But in order to encourage the growth of sentimental practices, some of them also suggested alternative amusements. One does not have to look far to find examples of prescribed entertainments. Every year magazines and newspapers ran commentaries and stories that subtly or directly suggested games adolescents could play together for the holiday. Some pieces looked to an imagined past for inspiration. The *New York Times* essay that we examined in the last chapter, for example, encouraged young people to reinvent a tradition of trading names around a fireplace under the watchful eye of a parent. Many of

the stories that *Godey's Lady Book* published invoked images of young people gathering together in someone's home to celebrate Valentine's Day with a party and some sort of pairing game. Regardless of the specifics of each individual story or essay, they all presented a similar picture of adolescents assembled in a house, usually in a parlor, to celebrate the matchmaking potential of the day.

Mailing comic notes deviated from these prescribed games, and from the actual custom of exchanging loving lines, in just about every way imaginable. Part of the entertainment took place in the parlor to be sure, but in contrast to acceptable, middle-class parlor games, sending satiric lines involved isolated individuals who inverted the day's affiliation with pairing by mocking another person's potential to find a match. For most young people who mailed insults it probably did not matter much exactly how observers denounced satiric sheets. What mattered was that they criticized them at all. These missives were funny not only because of the imagined reactions they elicited from their recipients, but also because of the very real concerns they caused adults to voice. Comic valentines, in other words, allowed individuals to poke fun at the romantic pretensions of Valentine's Day. The sarcastic laughter they generated formed the basis for a yearly youthful rebellion against some of standards and conventions of middle-class life.

This laughter also provided an outlet for young men and women to express some of the concerns they had about coming of age. Valentines that lampooned old maids, widowers or unruly marriages were particularly well suited to a generation that postponed marriage for years. These themes might have been as old as carnivals themselves, but they assumed new importance at mid century. Young men and women worried that they might have to settle for a less-than-ideal match, that a loving relationship might turn sour
with time, that they might not find a suitable partner, or that they might get too old to marry. Comic notes voiced the distinct matchmaking apprehensions of a generation.\textsuperscript{270}

So too did they display young people's uncertainties about their future economic and class status. Young men and women may or may not have faced more challenges and opportunities than previous generations had as they set out to establish their own independence and careers. In any case, they clearly believed, judging from comic cards, that they confronted difficult and uncertain prospects. Satiric sheets that played with the ambiguous class status of various occupations also revealed a general nervousness about social rank among individuals just about to start or at the beginning of their working lives. Similarly, these missives' injunctions about how to lead middle-class lives would have left many young people wondering whether they were meeting, or were able to meet, those expectations.\textsuperscript{271}

Perhaps it is somewhat self-evident that the popularity of comic valentines depended to a great degree on their ability to communicate some of the concerns of those who bought and sent them. It is more challenging to discern, though, how these printed sheets also helped to allay some of those same worries. This was where humor played a central role. Satiric notes made private considerations public. There they were, in shop windows and in published commentaries, for all to view. Once out in the open, they became not just individual burdens but also matters for general review. More importantly, the issues and subjects manufactured notes presented were sources for communal amusement. Collectively a public could laugh at depictions of disorderly marriages, pretensions to middle-class status, or any of the other numerous themes on cards. And this laughter was diffuse, directed not at any one particular person or at least

\begin{footnotes}
\item[270] Shank, 44.
\item[271] There are few studies of how adolescents experienced coming-of-age in the 1840s and 1850s. The best that I am aware of is still Mary P. Ryan, \textit{Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865} (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), chp. 4. See also Jonathan Prude, \textit{The Coming of Industrial Order: Town and Factory Life in Rural Massachusetts, 1810-1860} (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1983), 194.
\end{footnotes}
not at anyone alone. In contemporary vernacular, we would say that comic valentines' publicity displaced the satirizing humor that at other times was intended for specific individuals.

Yet there was also a dark side to comic humor, a pointed, scathing laughter that contrasted to its public revelry and that most concerned adult observers. Satiric notes rarely critiqued their subjects solely in the abstract. Their generalized lampooning quickly focused on the card's recipient. Take for example "The Widow," a short holiday poem printed on a sheet now housed in the Library Company of Philadelphia. "My widow you're like an old shoe," it read, "That in its short life had ill fared; / And like it now when left all alone, / To be useful you must be re-paired." Notice the use of "you" in the card. The verse began and ended by calling the reader's attention to herself. It could have read something like "Widows are like old shoes...to be useful they must be re-paired." Instead, it explicitly stated that "you're like an old shoe" and "you must be re-paired." Most likely this card's sender did not share these concerns about widowhood. In any case, that was probably not central to the card's hilarity. Comic valentines did not simply allow individuals to laugh at the expense others' troubles. They effectively took the concerns of a generation and aimed them at individual recipients. The laughter they evoked in large part reflected the efforts of young men and women to allay their collective trepidations about the future by projecting them onto specific targets.272

Whether they were displacing or focusing a generation's unease, satiric sheets provided a forum for youth to vent some of their apprehensions about coming of age. Every February thousands of young men and women participated in a pastime that challenged middle-class expectations for the holiday. Sending insulting verse and images was a disorderly amusement that was all the more enjoyable because one risked getting caught, even if the chances of being detected were slim. What made comic valentines

"funny" then was not simply the crude images and acerbic lines they contained, nor the angst that they caused for their recipients. An essential component of their hilarity was their unique ability to serve some of the interests of young men and women in the years before the Civil War. The generational laughter these commercial goods elicited was both defiant and nervous.

The rapid rise in popularity of comic valentines—their prominent place in the holiday by the early 1850s and their eclipse of printed parodic humor—established a central irony to the antebellum saint's day. Satiric sheets familiarized young men and women with some of the values and norms of a growing middle class. In a sense they did the bidding of concerned adults. At the same time they provided an opportunity for adolescents to rebel against some of those standards. Comic valentines were a unique product of a growing middle class, related to yet distinct from earlier carnivalesque traditions, but the incongruity of their cultural work was as old as youthful misrule itself. Defined moments of disorder, Natalie Zemon Davis has written of carnivals in early-modern Europe, "socialized [youth] to the conscience of the community by making them the raucous voice of that conscience."²⁷³

Comic valentines were both socializing and contentious, but they were also funny. And one must not lose sight of the laughter they produced around February 14th. Their merriment provided a break from a holiday that was at times heavy-handed, that took adolescent wooing a bit too seriously. Through its mocking hilarity this popular amusement remains today a visible example of the limitations of early Victorian sentimentality. We cannot view the laughter February 14th broadsides invoked, for very few people described or even admitted to sending them. Perhaps in the end, though, that is fitting. In a sense, we are in the same position as both the victims and the critics of

²⁷³ Davis, Society, 108.
comic valentines. We can look at a card and know that someone enjoyed the insult, but both the identity of the perpetrator and the sound of his or her laughter remain concealed.
Epilogue

More than fifty years after they had first appeared on the holiday marketplace, comic valentines experienced a renaissance of sorts. For at least a few years during the 1920s these satiric sheets once again rolled off of printing presses annually in time for the saint's day. Judging from surviving collections, their numbers never came close to matching their antebellum predecessors. Repositories that contain such ephemera will often have dozens of prints from the mid nineteenth century for every one from the 1920s. The fact that these insulting missives survived and resurfaced at all is certainly a testament to the durability of the modern, commercial holiday that took root in the years before the Civil War. Yet their limited numbers should also caution us against making quick or facile comparisons between the antebellum saint's day and developments that came later. The 1840s and 1850s remained a distinct era in the history of Valentine's Day, even as it provided the basis for many of the changes that would occur in the subsequent decades.

For much of the 1860s, however, it was not even clear how well the holiday would survive. The declining popularity of the saint's day that started around the time of the post-1857 recession continued, not surprisingly, through the Civil War. Ready-made valentines did not disappear entirely, but their numbers did dwindle substantially. Newspaper advertisements provide one way to judge the holiday's fortunes. Throughout most of the late 1850s and 1860s only one or two businesses advertised each year in Manhattan's papers. In 1867 the New York Times provided some of the only statistics from the period on February 14th exchanges. Quoting the "Superintendent of the Carrier Department of the City Post-office," they noted that carriers delivered 21,260 valentines in 1862, 22,452 in 1863, and 15,924 in 1864. Even if these numbers were off by several
thousand, they were still far below the numbers during the 1840s and early 1850s. In the midst of a war, most people did not make time for the holiday; collectors have consequently coveted the limited numbers of prints that they did exchange and preserve.

In the years after the war the holiday's fortunes began to change slowly. The same article from the *Times* noted that in 1865 carriers delivered 66,428 valentines and in 1866 88,218, numbers that, considering the city's population growth, were still below what they had been a decade or so earlier. During these lean years some of the same merchants who had witnessed and spurred the earlier boom struggled along. Thomas Strong and Philip Cozans continued advertising in New York newspapers every February through the late 1860s, though few of their competitors joined them. Within a few years both of these businessmen had also given up on Valentine's Day merchandising. Strong continued publishing his magazine *Yankee Notions* until 1875. He probably went out of business shortly thereafter. The last book Cozans published was *The American General Tom Thumb* in 1880.

The departures of Strong and Cozans were symbolic of a more general changing of the guard. Most antebellum holiday merchants did not survive into the Gilded Age. A new, postwar era of prosperity ushered in a new group of Valentine's Day businesses. In the late 1870s Esther Howland was bought out by her local rival, George Whitney. At the start of World War I, Whitney had become one of the largest producers of valentines in the country. For many years one of his main rivals was Louis Prang, a man who became famous for his promotions of lithography as a legitimate, democratic art form. By the 1880s this second generation of businessmen had spun off a whole new industry. Whereas Strong, Cozans and others had been printers or publishers, Whitney and his rivals specialized in greeting cards. They continued to produce printed and lace notes for February 14th, while also expanding and transforming the trade to encompass other

holidays and special occasions. By the end of the century greeting cards were available nearly year round for ever-increasing numbers of events. In 1912 Joyce C. Hall joined these greeting card entrepreneurs when he added valentines to the mail-order postcard business he had recently established. Within a couple of decades Hallmark became the largest company of its kind.

The emergence of this group of Gilded Age card manufacturers harkened the first of at least two regional shifts in Valentine's Day manufacturing. As the century came to an end, New York City was eclipsed as the center and locus of holiday commerce, a position it had held during the antebellum years. Whitney and Prang got their starts in Massachusetts, Worcester and Roxbury respectively, and once established they kept their businesses there. Through the end of World War I, New England, and Massachusetts specifically, remained the manufacturing "heart" of February 14th, a fact Worcester now proudly claims for itself. During the 1920s holiday commerce shifted regions once again, this time moving westward as the Kansas-City-based Hallmark grew in size.

The shift from Manhattan to Massachusetts in the last quarter of the nineteenth century revealed the old fault line between moralist businessmen, such as Southworth Howland, and opportunists, like Strong, and one of the most apparent outcomes of the move was the stifled production of comic valentines. Whitney for instance, Ruth Webb Lee has claimed, "happened to abhor comics." When he bought out New York businesses, including A. J. Fisher, he sold or destroyed their satiric woodcuts and plates. McLouglin Brothers was one of the few firms that specialized in comics to linger on into the twentieth century, though if they produced any quizzical sheets before World War One, I have not come across them. The reemergence of insulting valentines after the war was the genre's swan song. They would not have a prominent place in the holiday again.

It is worth noting that these sheets bid their final adieu to the saint's day during a period that, in at least two respects, was remarkably similar to the 1840s and 1850s. The Roaring Twenties were a time when prosperity was often, sometimes garishly, on display and when the struggle for women's rights once again captured public attention. The second wave of comic valentines did not fail to satirize both of these developments.

The Gilded Age businesses might not have produced quizzical sheets, but they did aggressively seek out new consumers and goods for the holiday. As we saw in chapter three, Strong and other antebellum merchants had produced some notes specifically for children and adults. By the 1880s this practice had become much more common, with cards containing images of kids playing games or involved in various activities marketed to school-age children and notes marketed to married adults to encourage them to celebrate the day. Moreover, Leigh Eric Schmidt notes, as whole new industries seized on the commercial possibilities of February 14th, the saint's day became a time of giving gifts as well as exchanging cards. Antebellum florists and jewelers had occasionally advertised in newspapers for the saint's day. After the war these efforts increased a thousandfold. Perhaps most notably, the candy industry put the holiday squarely in its sights, establishing a national trade journal in the mid 1870s that within a decade or so was touting the possible financial windfalls for confectioners who could break into a market dominated by printers.

Card manufacturers, meanwhile, produced ever more elaborate goods for February 14th, distinctive "late Victorian valentines" notable for their textural and operative complexity. Some of these notes combined lace paper and lithographed images in such a way that they clearly derived from the kinds of cards Howland had started producing decades earlier. As the years passed, though, manufactures added more layers, moving parts, and new fabrics. Some missives unfolded like fans or accordions, while

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277 Lee, 71; Shank, 120.
278 Schmidt, 95-96.
others had panels that the recipients had to open to uncover surprises underneath. By the 1890s a whole new kind of card, the so-called "mechanical valentine," had become common. These three-dimensional lithographed "novelties," in the words of one collector, unfolded and were then freestanding. Some of them presented elaborate but static scenes, while others were shaped as everyday items or consumer goods. In the ways they functioned and appeared, these "cards" embodied the mechanized production of an industrial age.279

Which bring us to the question of lineage. What was, exactly, the relationship between this Gilded Age holiday and the antebellum that preceded it? If strong ties or threads continued to run through the saint's day decades after the Civil War, what was the particular nature of those connections? Or, to ask the question more broadly, how is our own contemporary Valentine's Day related to the card-centered saint's day of the 1840s and 1850s?

It is a question that has concerned antiquarians and card collectors since at least the 1950s. One can get a sense of their collective answer by simply browsing the books two of them have published. In 1952 Lee self-published A History of Valentines, a study that has seven chapters on American cards, only one of which goes beyond the 1850s. Frank Staff's work, The Valentine and Its Origins, appeared more than fifteen years later and contains eight chapters, the first six of which cover up through the period when Esther Howland started her business. As a group, these men and women have tended to link antebellum ready-made missives to the traditions that preceded them. Lee put it succinctly, arguing that the "transition from 'handiwork' to 'machine made'" led to "a general decline in taste" that became apparent in the 1860s.280 For these men and women, the "real" or "authentic" holiday essentially ended with the Civil War, before a

280 Lee, 96.
history of hand-assemblage was largely corrupted by mechanical production and reproduction.

There are a couple of problems with this argument. First, machines were central to the creation of antebellum store-bought missives just as they were to later valentines. Individual hands might have been involved in much of the final work, whether that was gluing together pieces or applying color, but presses, increasingly steam-driven, produced the paper and images used. The distinctive "look" of cards from the 1840s and 1850s derived from the combination of hand and machine work that went into their production. Secondly, this collective romanticizing of early ready-made cards has obscured the fact that they were commercial goods. Produced for profit and sold in stores, these first valentines established a tradition that has endured for close to a century and a half.

Within the last decade or so the antebellum saint's day has also started to catch the attention of scholars. In a short but wide-ranging survey of the pre-Civil War holiday, Schmidt concludes that the most important point about the era was that the commercialization of the day transformed "disparate, provincial folk customs into shared social rituals." While it is certainly true that ready-made cards rather quickly swept aside most other February 14th traditions, Schmidt misses the irony that those "folk customs" were themselves often commercially based. It was through the efforts of printers and newspapermen to sell their goods that most eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century Americans first learned of English traditions, whether it was choosing someone as a valentine or trading printed notes. Commerce had been part of the holiday for decades when Americans first started buying their missives in shops, even if holiday goods themselves had not yet been commercialized.

More recently, scholars have focused specifically on the relationship between antebellum February 14th commerce and sentimental expression. Elizabeth White Nelson

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281 Schmidt, 102.
contends that Valentine’s Day exchanges initially offered the promise of "refashioning" and encapsulating the rituals of a market culture within a sentimental culture, in effect producing a moral market, but that the language of exchange and consumption ultimately betrayed this promise. Barry Shank argues that personal sentimental expression and the market economy developed together, both founded on the public display of independent judgment, or what he calls "an agentive interiority," which structured personal emotive exchanges on the saint's day. Both of these studies attribute a transhistorical, teleological quality to a market economy. What was true for the 1880s, or 1920s or 1940s, must also have been true for the 1850s. In the case of Nelson, the holiday's culture of sentiment seems from the outset doomed to failure in the face a growing and engrossing market economy. For Shank, a universal and hegemonic "business culture" quickly establishes a stranglehold on individual, emotional expression, an iron-like grip that has only grown stronger in the intervening decades.\footnote{Elizabeth White Nelson, Market Sentiments: Middle-Class Market Culture in Nineteenth-Century America (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 2004), 20 and chapter 1; Shank, 8 and chapter 1.}

Whatever the specific strengths and weaknesses of these studies, they all share at least one thing in common. They turn on its head the narrative established by antiquarians and card collectors. Schmidt, Nelson, and Shank view the antebellum commercial holiday as a beginning rather than an end. There was no golden age of handiwork before the modern saint's day was overrun with mechanized production. The commercial celebration was tainted from the beginning. The sudden popularity of exchanging ready-made cards signaled the steady and unrelenting march of commerce. The antebellum holiday had set the die. In the decades to come, Valentine's Day would largely follow the general pattern engraved during the 1840s and 1850s. Any changes it experienced would largely consist of elaborations to, rather than departures from, developments that originated in the 1840s.
I am sympathetic to what I think is the underlying concern of all of these works. The presence of commerce in our own time and in our personal lives can at times seem overwhelming and suffocating. And I too would stress that the many of the seeds of change were planted as early as the 1840s. The events of the Gilded Age—changing markets, new and more elaborate goods, and aggrandizing merchants—were visible decades earlier, even though one might sometimes have to look closely to find them. The antebellum saint's day was foundational. Its basic shape, its outline, would direct much of the growth that followed it.

Foundations, however, are generally distinct from the edifices they support, and Valentine's Day in the 1840s and 1850s had a coherence, organization, and design all its own. The holiday represented the aspirations and hopes of a growing middle class in a robust, early-industrial economy. It provided a forum in which adults could monitor and guide youthful love lives, a sense of insurance that their own children might make it into and thus strengthen the middle class. In the process it directed young men and women on how to use new commercial goods to express authentic, original personal sentiments. And in case the holiday sometimes seemed oppressive and overbearing, it allowed its participants some space to rebel against middle class sentimentalism. Much of this unique cultural work of the saint's day would not survive past the 1850s, as the consumer base of the holiday broadened, script largely disappeared from missives, and the celebration's transgressive qualities were suppressed.

One might wonder about the connections between our own so-called post-industrial, post-print age and this early-industrial celebration. Perhaps the digital revolution has propelled us into an era as distinct from what preceded it as the antebellum was from what followed. The use of computers and other electronic media has certainly altered the way many people celebrate the day. The ready availability of free digital greetings now allows individuals to circumvent merchants and the post office, the two mainstays of the commercial holiday for over one hundred and fifty years. Yet the story
of antebellum Valentine's Day should also caution us about making too much of these changes. The digital literacy necessary to participate in the contemporary holiday is perhaps as much a sign of the authority and sway of middle class culture as was fluency in February 14th sentimentalism and rebelliousness in the years before the Civil War.
### Appendix 1: Holiday Stores Advertising in Penny Newspapers

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Appendix 2: American and British Valentine Writers

I took many of the following citations from the article Harry B. Weiss published in 1939, “English and American Valentine Writers.”¹ Weiss had at his disposal examples from two private collections and the catalogues of the New York Public Library and the British Museum. I have expanded his “preliminary check list” by adding titles I found in the online databases OCLC and RILN and works I discovered during my research at the American Antiquarian Society, the Hallmark Historical Collection, Winterthur, the Smithsonian, and the Library Company of Philadelphia.

Despite the advances in bibliographic searching since Weiss compiled his checklist, I make no claims that my own bibliography is exhaustive or flawless. Valentine writers were ephemera, and their publishers, distributors and purchasers treated them as such. This fact creates several difficulties for the researcher and bibliographer. Most obviously, examples of every work published have not survived and those copies that have are often rare. I am certain there are titles I have not encountered during my research trips or online investigations. Furthermore, the physical construction of valentine writers makes it difficult sometimes to identify them exactly. These chapbooks were usually wrapped in colored paper and in many cases the title on the wrapper did not match the title printed inside. The same body of text, in other words, could be catalogued two different ways, especially if one copy lacked its cover. Because I did not read each work listed below, there are certainly separate “titles” in my list whose texts are in fact identical. Finally, publishers sometimes reissued printings or type-settings, slapping on


Key: AAS=American Antiquarian Society; Hallmark Historical Collection; LCP=Library Company of Philadelphia; Norcross Collection at the Smithsonian; OCLC=Online Computer Library Center; Winterthur Library

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new covers or title pages before shipping them out. In these situations, deciding what constitutes a distinct “work” is often difficult, especially when working with citations rather than physical books. For books that have the same title and publisher but different publication dates, I have cited them once and indicated the years of publication together. I did not list undated publications more than once if the title and publisher did not vary substantially.

With these precautions in mind, I offer this as a “secondary check list,” a follow-up to Weiss’s work and one indebted to the detailed research he conducted over sixty years ago. In the citations that follow I have indicated the source of bibliographic information below each entry. In those cases where I have found information to confirm Weiss’s entry, I have listed the source and left out Weiss. When I could not confirm his research, I cited only “Weiss.”

### American Valentine Writers

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Born in Livonia, Michigan on December 3, 1968. Graduated from Drew University in Madison, New Jersey with a B.A. in History and Biology in May 1991. Received a Master of Science in Library Science from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in May 1996. Earned his Master of Arts in History from the College of William and Mary in 1998. Began the Ph.D. program in History at William and Mary in the fall of 1998.