

# DRINKS WITH DEAD PEOPLE

## QUARANTINE EDITION

APRIL 10, 2020:  
[VINEGAR VALENTINES](#)

It's a week of holidays here in quarantined-history-land.  
Today: the mean Valentines of the Victorian era.

### THE STORY

As long as there have been people on the planet, there have been love notes. But the Valentine as we know it is a relatively recent invention, generally traced to one Esther Howland, an enterprising young Mount Holyoke grad who in 1847 was charmed by a Valentine card from Great Britain and persuaded her father (who owned a stationery business) not only to order some from overseas, but to offer cards of her own creation. Howland's lace-paper cards sold like hotcakes – before long Esther was doing six-figure business and had set up an assembly line of women to produce cards by the thousands (suck it, [Henry Ford!](#)).

That would be a sweet story of blossoming love and female entrepreneurship if it ended there, but once Valentine's Day became the object of public and commercial enthusiasm in the mid-19th century, things changed a little bit and it wasn't all lace paperwork and cute acrostic poems.

Enter “vinegar valentines” or “comic valentines” – caricatures with cutting insult verse, sent to “fusty old bachelors and sour old maids that are beyond cure,”\* frenemies, enemies, as gags and, in the spirit of modern Internet commentary, to be just plain anonymously mean.

Was it just pure spite? Well, mostly – but there's also a cruel Victorian sense of policing decorum. In the worst way, these cards reinforce a strict and specific code of social mores – cards talk about drunkenness, grooming, being cheap or impolite, not complying with women's gender expectations, or even about behavior within a profession. Trolling has been around a LONG time.

Read on [at the blog](#) for more detail and resources.

### DISCUSS:

Anonymous trolling – whether vinegar valentines or on the Internet – is appealing to a lot of people. Why? Like Halloween, Valentine's Day is a historical mish-mash of traditions. Do you like it, or do you think it's a card-industry waste of time?

Why might the print & card industry have been friendly to female entrepreneurs in the 19th century?

Hi, I'm Betsy. Stuck at home? Let's learn history together, because the past helps us to understand that we are not alone. Weekday updates during #COVID19.

**Questions? Comments? Say hello.**

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### READ MORE:

[“When Valentines Were Really, Really Mean,”](#) *Slate*

[“Nothing Says ‘I Hate You’ Like a Vinegar Valentine,”](#) *Smithsonian*

[Vintage Valentine cards](#), via Mental Floss

[“History of Valentine's Day,”](#) History Channel (VIDEO)