

This is an author-produced PDF of the contents of a webpage published on the BBC website on 14 February 2017 as 'Eight incredibly offensive Victorian valentines'. The webpage was produced to support the 'Rude Valentines' edition of BBC Radio 3's Free Thinking programme, aired on 14 February 2017, which featured Annebella Pollen on the subject of insulting Victorian cards. The published version can be found here:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/34JCKJtrl07f5kY3G9kFNpd/eight-incredibly-offensive-victorian-valentines>

Eight incredibly offensive Victorian valentines

Annebella Pollen

Are you sick of seeing pink hearts everywhere? Do you resent the rampant commercialisation of love and romance? Do you, in fact, hate Valentine's Day and all it represents?

If so, your cynicism isn't anything new. In fact, the anti-valentines movement originated in the very same era that gave us the gilded flowers, hearts and cherub motifs we all know and hate today. The mid-19th century was the golden age of the anti-valentine: back then, people would send vicious "gifts" like parcels of rotting meat, vermin, or even dead pigs dressed as babies (to quote some actual examples listed by the Post Office).

Luckily for Victorian posties, though, most people stuck to sending insult cards – which not only vied for popularity with their sentimental counterparts, but sometimes outstripped them in sales. In a special 14 February episode of Free Thinking, Dr Annebella Pollen explores the ugly side of Valentine's Day. It's enough to make you glad to live in kinder times.

This image shows an insulting valentine being received. Unsurprisingly, most cards were destroyed and few inscribed examples survive. The few collections that exist were compiled by valentine printers or wholesalers.



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Insulting valentines could be sent by both men and women to reject unwelcome advances. This card's image and verse explains the function it was meant to serve:



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While insult cards were sent and received by both men and women, they often criticised those who flouted gender norms. Women were criticised for being "domineering", and men for being "weak". Here, a husband performing his fair share of parenting duties is mocked by the card's inscription.



Image © Royal Pavilion & Museums, Brighton & Hove

Many cards criticised pretentiousness. In this card, a man with showy clothing, a haughty demeanour and a tell-tale red nose is mocked for his airs and graces.



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Some recipients of insulting valentines had their occupation or status mocked. Sometimes this was intended to puncture pomposity, but some cards genuinely victimised those of lowly circumstance. Here, a humble scullery maid is cruelly tricked:



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Some of the social afflictions mocked by insulting valentines might now inspire greater sympathy. Most Victorians saw alcoholism as a moral shortcoming rather than an addiction, and it featured regularly on insult cards.



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Lovers who deceived – whether through jilting or by falsifying aspects of their physical appearance – were common subjects. Here, a woman's age is cruelly doubted.



Image © Royal Pavilion & Museums, Brighton & Hove

Lovers who kept suitors guessing about their true intentions were also criticised. In this card, a young woman keeps putting off a lover who grows wizened as she repeatedly protests:



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For more insulting valentines, see [Dr Annabella Pollen's research on the University of Brighton's website](#). Meanwhile, Dr Pollen joins Edmund Richardson for a discussion of the ugly side of Valentine's Day on Free Thinking. Listen live on 14 February or [online via the Radio 3 website](#) and iPlayer Radio – and [download the Arts and Ideas podcast](#).