

VALENTINES AND THE VICTORIAN IMAGINATION: *MARY BARTON AND FAR FROM THE MADDING CROWD*

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THE CUSTOM OF CELEBRATING VALENTINE'S Day dates back to the Middle Ages.¹ The emergence of Valentine's Day as a commercial holiday, exploited above all by the greeting card industry, is more recent. In Britain, Valentine's Day cards emerged in the eighteenth century. As David Vincent writes,

The observance of 14 February underwent a metamorphosis during the eighteenth century which was later to befall many other customs. What had begun as an exchange of gifts, with many local variations of obscure origin, was gradually transformed into an exchange of tokens and letters, which in turn began to be replaced by printed messages from the end of the century. (44)

Early examples of pre-printed Valentine's Day stationery and manuals for the composition of the perfect valentine reveal that existing folk customs were swiftly adapted by modern print culture and an increasingly literate population. However, it was the 1840 introduction of Rowland Hill's penny post in Britain, alongside concomitant advances in American and European postal infrastructure, which led to a veritable explosion in the exchange of valentines, moulding the practice into a shape still recognisable today (see Golden 222). Hill not only democratised access to written communication by lowering prices, he also anonymised epistolary exchange.² Prepaid stamps and pillar post boxes made it possible to correspond with anyone, anywhere, without giving away one's identity. And while sending an anonymous letter would have been perceived as a violation of epistolary decorum during the remainder of the year, on Valentine's Day it was not only acceptable but, as Farmer Boldwood hints in Thomas Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874), expected. The opportunity for anonymous correspondence generated an enthusiastic response.

One year after the introduction of the penny post, Catherine Golden records, 400,000 valentines travelled across England. Thirty years later, in 1871, 1,200,000 Valentine's Day letters were processed in London alone (223). In their 1850 article "Valentine's Day at the Post-Office," Charles Dickens and W. H. Wills estimated that "The entire correspondence of the three kingdoms is augmented on each St. Valentine's day to the extent of about 400,000 letters" (8). Valentines became ubiquitous, and soon ceased to be associated exclusively with romantic love. Exchanged between lovers, friends, and relatives, the thousands of

extra envelopes processed by the post on 14 February contained anything from friendly greetings to risqué flirtation, from declarations of love to marriage proposals. Moreover, correspondents soon began to exploit the convention of anonymity by sending satirical valentines, or worse.³ In 1865, a *London Review* article deplored that “The valentines of the present day . . . have degenerated very sadly.” The writer is particularly concerned that the “dearest and handsomest . . . quite innocuous” valentines have found a counterpart in valentines which are either “simply idiotic” or “blackguard malevolent.” The convention of anonymity, he states, constitutes a social peril, as it offers “an outlet for every kind of spiteful inuendo, for every malicious sneer, for every envious scoff, and . . . the foulest libels and the fiercest threats.” There is little difference, he concludes, between “these atrocious penny lampoons and the letter which an unpopular Irish landlord sometimes finds on his breakfast-table,” marked by “a few lines of menace written in blood” (“Valentine’s Day” 195–96). As David Henkin summarises,

Even though Valentine’s Day greetings could be intensely intimate gestures between two individuals, their typically anonymous and potentially promiscuous character provided a different model for how interpersonal connections might be fostered through the mail. (152–53)

This “different model” was by no means universally welcome.

In *Postal Pleasures* (2012), Kate Thomas observes that, from its inception, the penny post teased the cultural imagination with the question of “What happens when a postbag bulges with the communications of *all* sorts, communications unified by the engines of the national Post Office” (1). A frequently-quoted excerpt from William Lewins’s book *Her Majesty’s Mails* (1865) illustrates the Victorian fascination with the postal service’s capacity to bring “everyone into connection with anyone” (Thomas 4). Lewins writes:

The same sort of variety that marks society here marks its letters; envelopes of all shades and sizes; handwriting of all imaginable kinds, written in all shades of ink, with every description of pen; names the oddest, and names the most ordinary, and patronymics to which no possible exception can be taken. Then to notice the seals. Here is one envelope stamped with the escutcheoned signet of an earl; another where the wax has yielded submissively to the initials of plain John Brown. (266)

For Lewins, the post is remarkable because it reflects the “variety that marks society,” but also, perhaps more, because it brings its otherwise disparate elements into connection – if only through simultaneous presence in a post-bag. Yet, Lewins glosses over the fact that the post was not only open to all sorts of people, but to all sorts of emotional transactions between them.⁴ It is precisely this idea, by contrast, which agitates the *London Review* writer, who emphasises that the anonymity afforded by Valentine’s Day customs encourages the circulation of “pretty trivialities” alongside “spiteful” and “idiotic” sentiment, “prurient tastes,” and “vindictive,” even “deadly,” fantasies (“Valentine’s Day” 195–96). Perhaps more than on any other date, on “the anniversary of [the] love lettering and mate choosing saint” the contents of post boxes and letter bags reflected the astonishing diversity of interpersonal constellations (“St. Valentine’s Day in Ayr” 5). It is for this reason, I propose, that when valentines appear in works of fiction, they behave in unexpected ways.

This article seeks to complement and add to recent scholarship dedicated to exploring how the Victorian literary imagination responded to changing structures, media, and

technologies of communication.⁵ It does so by offering a comparative analysis of how valentines are used in two novels, Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848) and Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd*. Both novels refuse to portray valentines in their conventional guise: as tokens of romantic love exchanged between a man and a woman. Instead, valentines are given a larger, more complicated trajectory, associated with violence and death rather than romantic fulfilment. In *Mary Barton* and *Far from the Madding Crowd* alike, the anonymous valentine is depicted as a source of disorder. In both texts, the device is used to call into question the normative categories – of masculinity and femininity, reason and emotion, publicity and privacy, domestic and political life – that structure representations of human behaviour and relationships in nineteenth-century fiction. Yet, although both novels bring into play the subversive potential of a network that circulates the communications of, and indiscriminately establishes connections between, *all sorts*, their respective portrayals of Valentine's Day letters ultimately reaffirm the force with which social, sexual, and narrative norms govern human self-understanding and interactions. Whereas Gaskell's novel centres on the valentine's nature as an object of exchange, capable of establishing new, unexpected connections, Hardy's later text foregrounds its role as a source of knowledge, especially its potential to furnish material evidence for transient and transgressive impulses.

Mary Barton (1848)

MARY BARTON DISPLAYS A CHARACTERISTICALLY Victorian fascination with (and ambivalence about) the communicative and narrative possibilities opened up by boundless epistolary exchange.⁶ Yet, since the story begins before the days of affordable letter writing and unfolds, largely, in the year of postal reform, it is unsurprising that the valentine in Gaskell's first novel is, in the first instance, conventional: an anonymous message of love, sent to the heroine by the man who has loved her since childhood.⁷ The above-cited *London Review* article would place Jem's valentine to Mary in the category of "sentimental inane" missives, "all 'thine' and 'shine' and 'divine' – and, of course, 'valentine' – 'bliss' and 'kiss,' and 'beauty' and 'duty,' and the Temple of Hymen and Cupid in the clouds, and hearts and darts and angels with wings" ("Valentine's Day" 196). The way in which Gaskell introduces this perfectly generic valentine into the narrative, however, immediately evokes written communication's strange capacity for forging new, unexpected connections, for undermining generic stability, and for challenging familiar interpretative models.

The novel's ninth chapter describes John Barton's return to Manchester from London, where a delegation of working men had endeavoured to petition parliament. Upon leaving Manchester, Barton believes that "the misery" of the "starving multitudes" results from flawed communication rather than flawed policy, and that if it were to be "revealed in all its depths . . . some remedy would be found" (83, ch. 8). After directly experiencing the political and communicational impotence of his class, however, Barton returns a changed man. "I canna tell of our down-casting just as a piece of London news," he declares, "As long as I live, our rejection of that day will abide in my heart; and as long as I live I shall curse them as so cruelly refused to hear us" (99, ch. 9). Significantly, Barton's neighbour Job Legh responds by reciting Samuel Bamford's poem "God Help the Poor." The carefully chosen verses do exactly what Barton and his allies had intended to accomplish in London: they movingly communicate the suffering to which "poor pale girl[s]," "famished lad[s],"

and “bowed and venerable m[en]” are subjected by economic exploitation. But the poignant account is undercut by a self-reflexive awareness of its ineffectiveness: “Theirs is a story sad indeed to tell; / Yet little cares the world, and less ’twould know / About the toil and want men undergo” (108-09, ch. 9). Job uses the poem to redirect Barton’s energies away from hatred for his masters to solidarity for his equals, urging him to look to God rather than parliament for relief. Barton, in turn, is so affected that he asks his daughter Mary to duplicate the verses. Crucially though, Gaskell never clarifies whether this request testifies to the poem’s soothing effect, or whether Barton is simply eager to collect yet another exasperating record of upper-class indifference to working-class suffering. Regardless of her father’s motivation, “the next day on the blank half sheet of a valentine, all bordered with hearts and darts – a valentine she had once suspected to come from Jem Wilson – [Mary] copied Bamford’s beautiful little poem” (110, ch. 9).

The document is of emblematic significance in a novel that blurs the conventions of political and domestic fiction and has, famously, come under attack for not committing sufficiently firmly to either genre.⁸ From the outset, Gaskell’s portrayal of the valentine challenges generic boundaries and gendered assumptions about genre. The private, sentimental letter – habitually associated with domestic femininity, but here composed by a man – becomes the supporting medium for a public, and published, male-authored poem.⁹ This public poem, meanwhile, is transformed into a private, domestic communication, first through Job’s recitation, then through Mary’s handwriting. As it undergoes what Ivan Kreilkamp describes as “a series of rewritings and recyclings,” the valentine turns into a generic hybrid, a *mise en abyme* of the novel itself, in which different discourses and voices are constantly in dialogue, reflecting upon and modifying one another (65).¹⁰ Evaluating earlier Gaskell scholarship in her seminal 1987 study, Patsy Stoneman made the case for a more integrated consideration of Gaskell’s novels, encouraging readers to focus on the interaction rather than the dichotomy between “industrial” and “domestic” matters (30). The image of the valentine not only confirms this insight, but challenges readers to go further yet. The sheet of paper which, on one side, carries an expression of romantic love, and, on its reverse, a fervent statement about working-class solidarity requires us not only to acknowledge the interaction between the “industrial” and the “domestic,” but to view them as inseparable parts of one whole. Moreover, the same narrative gesture undercuts the notion that domestic affairs in general, and romantic relationships in particular, are devoid of political relevance, foregrounding that, in Hilary Schor’s words, “private plots are (particularly for a woman novelist in a time of intense social change) *more* likely to be the centers of political critique” (5).

Throughout the narrative, the two-sided valentine reappears at crucial junctures, reminding us that *Mary Barton* is a novel about the reciprocity of domestic and political realities, and that none of the events or relationships it describes can be interpreted with exclusive reference to either private or public considerations. Initially, the heroine treats the valentine as stationery, useful for the inscription of another text. Her indifference to the message reflects the absence of romantic interest in the writer, which in turn results from her attraction to another man: the heir of her father’s employer. As Judith Walkowitz notes, the domestic melodrama of cross-class seduction was a popular symbolic structure for representing “class exploitation,” since it could be used to evoke “a threat to family hierarchy and an infringement of male working-class prerogatives” (86). However, in addition to evoking the exploitation of working-class women by upper-class men, Gaskell’s novel

foregrounds that women's own romantic preferences and choices are, in and of themselves, replete with political meaning. Hence, the words Mary copies onto the valentine acquire additional significance.

It is a truth thinly-disguised in the Victorian novel that economic privilege determines sexual selection. Accordingly, blending naïve romantic fantasy with shrewd ambition, Mary does "not favour Mr. Carson the less because he was rich and a gentleman" (79, ch. 7). As Lisa Surridge has persuasively demonstrated, Mary chooses not just between two men but two models of masculinity, models which are in turn associated with conflicting economic and moral frameworks: a communal ethic based on cooperative labour and a capitalist ideal of individualistic acquisition (399).¹¹ When Gaskell first describes the valentine, Mary is presented in the act of reproducing an idealising endorsement of working-class community and solidarity, while simultaneously revealing both her disregard for the man who embodies these values and her longing for the life of leisured luxury promised by his rival. Contrary to Linda Hughes and Michael Lund's assertion that "[t]his piece of paper first validates Mary in the traditional role as marriageable object" but then "with Bamford's words added . . . it also suggests her less conventional identification with the politically active working class" (65), Mary's treatment of the valentine suggests a complex, contradictory attitude toward her own class, more explicitly expressed in her hope that an upwardly mobile marriage will empower her truly to "help the poor." Mary not only pictures how, once married, she will surround her father "with every comfort she could devise," she also speculates that "when I'm Mrs. Harry Carson, may happen I can put some good fortune in Jem's way" (78-9, ch. 7). When Mary re-inscribes the valentine, then, adding to and altering its original meaning, she expresses the belief that her solidarity with the labouring poor will be more effective from a distance, a notion which ironically parallels the logic of Gaskell's narrative. For Jem's valentine, Barton's story, and Bamford's poem, like numerous other working-class voices and writings, appear to be authorised by virtue of being incorporated into the narrative of a middle-class outsider, where they are reactivated to generate the sympathetic response they initially failed to inspire.

Mary forwards Jem's unsigned letter to her father, endowing it with new communicational purpose. Yet, as if to illustrate the Lacanian maxim that "a letter always arrives at its destination," after a circuitous journey the valentine returns to its original addressee, who has since realised that she reciprocates the sender's love (Lacan 72). In fact, when it thus resurfaces into the narrative, the valentine has become associated with a wholehearted rejection of bourgeois capitalism. Like the journalist who would two decades later deplore the degeneration of contemporary valentines, the development of Gaskell's plot suggests that, in the hands of the "wrong" people, new opportunities for anonymous correspondence might evolve into a threat against social stability, facilitating the "awful power" of political "combination" (168, ch. 15).¹²

Mary Barton reaches its climax when Jem is arrested for murdering Harry Carson, his economic and romantic rival. As Michael Wheeler suggests, the residents of Manchester, like the press, the police, and the law, "pursue the line of reasoning which, for the reader, is symbolically represented by the valentine greeting" (40). The apparent validity of their logic is corroborated when Gaskell describes Jem's reaction to the discovery of Mary's flirtation with Carson Jr., accentuating his "guilty longing for blood," his "frenzy of jealousy," and his momentary desire that "[s]ome one should die." Erotic and violent impulses blend in Jem's mind as he first imagines killing Mary, envisaging "her pale, sweet

face, with her bright hair all bedabbled with gore,” and then her suitor, “lying smitten, yet conscious; and listening to the upbraiding accusations of his murderer” (161-62; ch. 14). In evoking the easy slippage between romantic longing and violent fantasy, Gaskell lays false trails, leading the reader, as well as the Manchester public, to interpret Carson Jr.’s death as the result of passion that has spiralled out of control, love that has turned to madness.¹³

Of course, Carson’s assassin is motivated by violent excess of emotion. But the emotions in question are neither of an erotic nor even, at first sight, a personal nature. Carson Jr. falls victim to the collective anger of Manchester’s starving factory workers, which escalates when they discover his mean-spirited caricature of their representatives. Having drawn lots with the fragments of this caricature, John Barton becomes responsible for murdering one of his daughter’s suitors, using the paper of the other suitor’s valentine to wad his gun. Although Gaskell has been at pains to document Barton’s gradual descent into opium addiction and monomaniac hatred for his masters, the murder is indubitably a carefully organised political statement. As if to pre-empt later criticism of the novel, the recurrence of the valentine in the context of the murder accentuates that, frequently, what looks like a purely personal act – or utterance, or text – is in fact politically motivated and significant. As Jonathan Grossman argues, “The paper’s trajectory might even seem to chart a condensed inversion of the telos of the story (wrongly but commonly) conceived of as moving from the politics of factory workers’ material conditions to the sentiment of Mary’s personal romance” (113). And yet, the Manchester public is not altogether mistaken in assuming that Harry Carson’s death is the result of private, domestic sentiment. As Grossman goes on to argue, “The paper, . . . like the novel, resists categorization” (113).

Gaskell’s purposeful “recycling” of the valentine emphasises that Carson Jr.’s death is the result of a political act. Simultaneously however, it reveals that the workers who have systematically planned the murder are not exclusively – or even primarily – motivated by hatred for their superiors, but by love for those, within and beyond their nuclear families, who share their suffering, love that is evoked by the poem on the reverse of Jem’s love letter. According to Elizabeth Sabiston, when John Barton decides to transform the valentine into a weapon, he “finally abandons words, as well as the love/nurturing implied by the Valentine, for violence. . . . What was intended as a verbal and artistic declaration of love is turned into an instrument of hate” (138). But Sabiston is mistaken in stating that Gaskell’s narrative stages a clear-cut transition from love to hatred. Barton selects the paper of the valentine/poem not in spite but because of the words it carries, mobilising the letter’s capacity to transgress boundaries and carry verbal utterances to otherwise inaccessible audiences. As Bamford’s poem indicates, economic injustice is experienced more intensely in the private home than in the factory or political assembly. Barton’s master must learn this lesson by painful experience. Unlike the novel’s labouring families, for whom death is an ever-present fact, the Carsons are “startled into the reality of life and death” (205, ch. 18). And while Gaskell’s narrative cannot condone Barton’s crime, it nonetheless suggests that only after being thus “startled” Carson Sr. begins to empathise and engage in dialogue with his workers. Like the love letter on the front of the valentine, then, the poem-letter on its back must travel by a circuitous route before its message can be heeded.

The fact that Mary’s aunt Esther discovers the valentine at the murder scene further complicates the narrative function of an already polyvalent device. Esther, forced into prostitution after being seduced and abandoned by a wealthier man, is Mary’s foil, a literal

embodiment of the supposed consequences of personal vanity and social ambition. Yet, propelled by “[a] craving desire to know more,” the most marginalised character in *Mary Barton* becomes an agent of truth (226, ch. 21). Linking Esther to both the Biblical archetype of the fallen woman and the usually male detective, her “craving desire” simultaneously evokes a threat against and a defence of social stability and order. By recounting Esther’s intervention in the plot, Gaskell obliges readers to re-interrogate the moral status of the fallen woman. Yet, although *Mary Barton* appears to suggest a revisionary reading of fallenness, Esther’s discovery of the valentine marks a moment of narrative reversal, initiating the movement toward containment and closure.

Until Esther and the valentine converge, both serve to destabilise established representational paradigms and the ideological predicates upon which they are based. Accordingly, both are difficult to read, constantly defying totalising interpretations. Esther’s failure to make sense of the fragmentary valentine – torn, rolled up, and stuffed into the barrel of a gun – is echoed by Mary’s inability to decipher on Esther’s body the signs of fallenness that are instantly identified by Jem Wilson and John Barton. Gaskell thus evokes the arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified, calling into question the apparently natural distinctions between respectability and immorality, innocence and guilt, love letter and murder weapon, private and public sphere. As the novel moves towards its ending, however, the valentine is gradually reduced to one single meaning, branding John Barton as a murderer, while Esther, correspondingly, is shown to be irredeemably marked by her sexual transgression.

Describing Esther’s discovery of the valentine, Gaskell writes:

Suddenly (it was before the sun had risen above the horizon) she became aware of something white in the hedge. . . . What was it? It could not be a flower; – that, the time of year made clear. A frozen lump of snow, lingering late in one of the gnarled tufts of the hedge? She stepped forward to examine. It proved to be a little piece of stiff writing-paper compressed into a round shape. She understood it instantly; it was the paper that had served as wadding for the murderer’s gun. (227, ch. 21)

The transition from speculation to certainty, from twilight to brightness, captures the decisive change of narrative trajectory. First, Esther can only discern “something white,” a blank slate resisting comprehension. Conjuring up images of purity (a white flower, untouched snow), the indeterminate object problematizes the possibility of moral judgment – of the crime to which it has been accessory, as well as of the person who discovers it – suggesting the possibility of an “‘innocent’ motif” behind a “‘guilty’ act” (Stoneman 53). But Esther approaches the object with the detective’s characteristic desire to reveal the truth underneath the mystery: “could it (blank as it appeared to be) give any clue to the murderer?” (227, ch. 21).

When she “dare[s] to open the crushed paper,” Esther finds the fragments of her niece’s name and address, written in familiar handwriting:

it looked very like the writing which she had once known well – the writing of Jem Wilson, who . . . had often been employed by her to write her letters to people, to whom she was ashamed of sending her own misspelt scrawl. She remembered the wonderful flourishes she had so much admired in those days, while she sat by dictating, and Jem, in all the pride of newly-acquired penmanship, used to dazzle her eyes by extraordinary graces and twirls. (228, ch. 21)

Esther's memory signals that handwriting encodes a wealth of information about the writer, particularly about his or her social identity. In this particular instance, however, Jem's "beautiful handwriting" appears to have become a marker of nothing other than murderous guilt. Written communication requires the writer to relinquish his or her words, and entrust their fate to the recipient, but Esther does not consider the possibility that the valentine may have become associated with a relationship other than that evoked by its address. Yet, despite her conviction of Jem's guilt, as if to respect postal confidentiality she leaves the "task of unravelling the mystery of the paper, and the handwriting" to the original addressee, the one person who can truly interpret its message (234, ch. 21).

"That corner of stiff, shining, thick, writing paper," the narrator declares,

[Mary] recognised as a part of the sheet on which she had copied Samuel Bamford's beautiful lines so many months ago – copied (as you perhaps remember) on the blank part of a valentine sent to her by Jem Wilson, in those days when she did not treasure and hoard up everything he had touched, as she would do now. (236, ch. 22)

Whereas Esther forgets that it is in the nature of written messages to enter a circulatory network, Mary desperately hopes that her father may have given away the poem, as she had once, foolishly, given away Jem's valentine. However, in Barton's coat pocket she discovers the other half of the sheet: "it fitted; jagged end to jagged end, letter to letter; and even the part which Esther had considered blank had its tallying mark with the larger piece, its tails of ys and gs" (236–37, ch. 22). Restored to readability, the fragments of the "valentine turned radical poem turned gun wadding" leave no loose ends; they conclusively prove that Mary's father has murdered Carson (Grossman 113). As Mary attempts to erase the truth issued forth by the letter, the valentine leads to a final – albeit temporary – destabilisation of narrative, social, and sexual conventions.

Faced with evidence of her father's guilt, Mary eschews the demand for feminine passivity and privacy. By burning the "tell-tale paper," Mary actively perverts the course of justice, revealing her own criminal potential (240, ch. 22). But Mary not only tries to make the truth of Barton's guilt disappear, she also strives to reveal Jem's innocence. When she pursues the ship carrying Jem's cousin, "'Normal' gender roles, of victim and liberator, are reversed" (Flint 18–19). Chasing after an alibi for her lover, before making a sensational appearance as court witness, Mary is "transformed by a traditionally masculine adventure or 'unmaidenly action,'" deliberately – though involuntarily – disregarding the cultural ideal of femininity and her society's conventions of courtship (Hennelly 150). From its first appearance, the valentine foregrounds the reciprocity of domestic and political life, accentuating that economic and political conflicts affect women and children in no less significant ways than men. The portrayal of Mary's "unchaperoned plunge into the public sphere," triggered by the valentine's final appearance, appears to advance an argument in support of women's capacity for and right to political agency (Struve 8). The novel's ending, however, compromises the progressive force of this argument.

The valentine is a richly evocative image, which undermines the neat division of private and public life, reveals the close affinities between personal and political conflict, and emphasises the domestic effects of economic exploitation. Moreover, juxtaposing Jem and Mary's handwritings on reverse sides of this paper, Gaskell emphasises that public discourses about class relations and private discourses about romantic relations are neither clearly separable nor inherently gendered. As Marjorie Stone has argued,

Those who divide the world of *Mary Barton* into an implicitly male political sphere and a female private sphere, or who split the “social-problem” or “tragic” from the “romance” or “domestic” plot of the novel endorse gender-inflected paradigms that Gaskell’s own novelistic practice repeatedly subverts. (178)

A particularly striking example of Gaskell’s subversive novelistic practice, the valentine ties the novel’s cast of characters into a complicated knot, in which seemingly unassailable hierarchies and distinctions are, at least temporarily, suspended.

And yet, while the Valentine’s Day letter can be torn, re-inscribed, forwarded, and finally destroyed, its last message, that of John Barton’s guilt, cannot be erased. Although the public never becomes privy to the valentine’s evidentiary status, this final meaning of the valentine overwrites its earlier meanings, precipitating the novel’s ultimately conservative ending. *Mary Barton* closes with an account of the ways in which society censors dissenting ideas and transgressive behaviours. Barton may fight against economic injustice and oppression, but due to the narrowly limited opportunities for legal – and effective – political agency afforded by his society, he dies not as a heroic reformer but an isolated, remorseful murderer. Mary proves herself to be a competent public agent, but is rewarded by mental and physical collapse, followed by withdrawal into the conventionally domestic identity of wife- and motherhood. Esther, who uses the valentine to assume agency from her marginal position, finally returns to the domestic space of the Barton home, but she cannot survive there, because, within the moral frameworks of middle- and working-class respectability alike, fallenness remains an irredeemable taint.¹⁴ Throughout *Mary Barton*, the image of the valentine suggestively evokes alternative models for the arrangement of social and sexual relations. The novel’s ending, however, does not celebrate these alternative models. Instead, as it promotes a “reconciliation of the classes” rather than a dissolution of class boundaries, better understanding rather than greater equality, it finally transforms the valentine into a marker of guilt, the guilt associated with the endeavour to redraw social and sexual borders (Easson 56).

The valentine in *Mary Barton* captures a duality inherent to epistolary communication: on the one hand, letters are objects of circulation, distinguished by their ability to transgress boundaries. On the other hand, due to their “tangible, documentary nature,” letters can become sources of information, of evidence that can be scrutinised for insight into the writer’s heart and mind, or, more ominously, used to monitor, censor, and punish his or her thoughts and actions (Altman 54). On the whole, however, Gaskell is more fascinated by the letter’s material nature than by its epistemological potential, foregrounding what Hennelly describes as its “circuitous circulation and mutilation” (146). While Thomas Hardy’s *Far from the Madding Crowd* also uses a valentine to evoke the potentially subversive nature of anonymous correspondence, the later novel is more explicitly concerned with exploring how a letter, even an anonymous letter, might be utilised to police the very subversions it facilitates.

Far from the Madding Crowd (1874)

UNLIKE ITS PREDECESSOR IN *MARY BARTON*, the valentine in *Far from the Madding Crowd* is, from its inception, an unusual specimen.¹⁵ The independent woman farmer Bathsheba Everdene intends to “surprise” the son of two farmworkers with a valentine, “a gorgeously illuminated and embossed design in post octavo which had been bought on the previous

market-day at the chief stationer's in Casterbridge" (97, ch. 13). Beyond conveying a view of master-worker relations strikingly different from that articulated in *Mary Barton*, this passage reveals that, by the late 1840s, Valentine's Day had become a "postal holiday," a development which manifested itself especially clearly in the proliferation of a new kind of material artefact (Henkin 149). Notably, Hardy is highly specific about the format, material, and design of the valentine Bathsheba has bought for Teddy Coggan, implying that she has chosen from a broad, varied selection. As the advertisement pages of Victorian periodicals and newspapers reveal, valentines came in all shapes and sizes: an announcement by Eugene Rimmel in the *Examiner*, for instance, promotes "The Pictorial Valentine," "The Medieval Valentine," "The Sachet Valentine," and "the Musical Valentine, the greatest Novelty of the Season," among other "Richly Mounted Valentines, in endless Variety" ("Advertisements & Notices"). Bathsheba's consumer choice, of one specific valentine from a large range of possibilities, is crucial to the development of the plot.

Following a last-minute change of mind, Bathsheba sends her valentine not to a young working-class boy but a neighbouring gentleman farmer – her economic and social superior, and, more importantly, a potential suitor. Farmer Boldwood is a prosperous tenant-farmer, but although "his person was the nearest approach to aristocracy that this remoter quarter . . . could boast of" (121, ch. 18), he is known, above all, for his retiring habits and perceived aloofness. The immediate cause for Bathsheba's decision to address the valentine to this man lies in his failure to acknowledge her attractiveness. Beneath the surface, however, the act of sending the valentine bespeaks a rebellious impulse, an urge to revolt against the value system that her addressee seems to embody. The product of an unusual moment of cross-class bonding between Bathsheba and her maid-servant Liddy, the valentine is explicitly designed as an attack on Boldwood's hyper-respectable masculinity, his "moral and social magnitude" (97, ch. 13). Though Bathsheba fills the "small oval enclosure" on the valentine with an inscription deemed perfectly suited "to a chubby-faced child," she is tempted instantly by Liddy's suggestion "to send it to the stupid old Boldwood" instead (97, ch. 13) "[F]ar from being seriously concerned about his nonconformity," the narrator explains, she nonetheless finds it "faintly depressing that the most dignified and valuable man in the parish should withhold his eyes" (97, ch. 13). The key words here are "dignified" and "valuable." What truly irks Hardy's heroine, it seems, is not Boldwood's "nonconformity" with the admiration to which she is accustomed, but his extreme "conformity" to a particular ideal of masculinity, distinguished by dignity, rigid sexual propriety, and economic effectiveness.¹⁶ She feels compelled to challenge Boldwood's emphatically masculine sense of self, and, prompted by Liddy's suggestion, intuits that her aim will be accomplished most effectively by a deliberate, aggressive subversion of sexual and gender norms. The customary anonymity of the valentine provides the ideal opportunity.

Longing to commit but unwilling to assume complete responsibility for what she knows is a transgressive action, Bathsheba lets chance determine who will receive her valentine. The proposition to "toss, as men do," however, explicitly confirms her desire to destabilise gender norms by appropriating conventionally masculine behaviour (98, ch. 13).¹⁷ This desire is confirmed when Hardy describes how, once the letter has been directed to Boldwood, Bathsheba chooses its seal: having dismissed a "unicorn's head" and "two doves" as unremarkable, she settles on "one with a motto" (98, ch. 13). She is delighted when she discovers that the chosen motto may well "upset the solemnity of a parson and clerk too," as the red wax on her envelope commands the addressee to "MARRY ME!" (98, ch. 13).

Usurping the male prerogatives of commanding language and sexual initiative, Bathsheba playfully inverts and parodies the rules of courtship.¹⁸ It is an instance of erotic teasing without erotic intent, done “idly and unreflectingly.” However, though written and sent in a spirit of “awful mirth,” the valentine becomes all too powerful as a “weapon” against Boldwood’s authority, so powerful that it recoils on the author (97, ch. 13).

The valentine is transgressive in the most literal way. As John R. Nelson parenthetically notes, “Bathsheba’s valentine arrives by mail, and thus can penetrate the almonry,” the space in which Boldwood has – both physically and psychologically – isolated himself from social and sexual intercourse (55). An overture arriving in the post catches Boldwood off-guard, in the vulnerable privacy of his own home. As Bathsheba predicted, he does not “see the humour in” (97, ch. 13) the valentine, and, as she intended, he is profoundly shaken by its message (see Ogden 7). Commenting on the performative power of letters, Hillis Miller argues that “Boldwood becomes the bold lover Bathsheba’s valentine seems to tell him he is” (Miller, “Thomas Hardy” 173). In the chapters following the valentine’s creation and transmission, Hardy’s language insistently accentuates how destabilising this new role proves for “the solemn and reserved yeoman,” who has so thoroughly accustomed himself to self-repression (100, ch. 14): “The receipt of the missive” causes Boldwood to feel “the symmetry of his existence to be slowly getting distorted in the direction of an ideal passion” (99, ch. 14). During their next encounter, Bathsheba is “conscious of having broken into that dignified stronghold at last,” feeling tinged of regret for having disturbed Boldwood’s “placidity” (119, ch. 17). She does not yet realise that her attack on his composure has not only been thoughtless but positively dangerous: “That stillness which struck casual observers more than anything else in his character and habit,” the narrator explains, “may have been the perfect balance of enormous antagonistic forces – positives and negatives in fine adjustment. His equilibrium disturbed: he was in extremity at once” (122, ch. 18). Indeed, infatuated with his image of the letter writer, Boldwood is propelled into the monomaniac passion that will escalate in his murder of Bathsheba’s estranged husband.¹⁹ Leading up to the catastrophe, Hardy carefully traces the disintegration of Boldwood’s exemplary masculinity.

To Bathsheba’s valentine, which ruptures “The insulation of his heart by reserve . . . without a channel of any kind for disposable emotion,” Boldwood can only respond with a pathological excess, a perversely distorted reflection, of “genuine lover’s love” (123, ch. 18). Love, or rather desire, literally unbalances Boldwood, depriving him of his stoic dignity and – as becomes increasingly clear after Bathsheba’s marriage to the profligate Sergeant Troy – his effectiveness as an economic agent. Chapter 38, entitled “Rain: One Solitary Meets Another,” documents Gabriel Oak’s efforts to save Bathsheba’s harvest from the rain, and reveals that, like Troy, Boldwood has neglected to protect his ricks from the weather. More than Boldwood’s “strangely altered” appearance, this neglect of business matters signals to Oak how much damage Bathsheba has inflicted upon the other man (251, ch. 38). Like Gaskell, Hardy accentuates the link between economic status and performance and the construction of gender and sexual identity.²⁰ It is no coincidence, therefore, that an exchange about his failure to protect the harvest triggers Boldwood’s confession that, since the valentine arrived in the mail, he has become “weak, and foolish” (252, ch. 38), that he feels, in other words, emasculated (see Nemesvari 100).

Superficially, Bathsheba’s valentine produces exactly the intended effect. Hardy makes it painstakingly clear, however, that her successful subversion of sexual power dynamics does not prove liberating. In fact, as Boldwood attempts to regain his masculinity through

sexual pursuit, Bathsheba becomes trapped in the uncomfortable role of romantic love object. Despite the irrational nature of his infatuation, Boldwood repeatedly comes close to securing Bathsheba's promise of marriage. His coercive power emerges from the same source as his gradual loss of rational self-control: the valentine. Boldwood proposes to Bathsheba shortly after the valentine arrives in the mail: "I want you for my wife – so strongly that no other feeling can abide in me; but I should not have spoken out had I not been led to hope," he declares, issuing a sharp reminder of the fact that he possesses physical evidence of her sexual transgression (128, ch. 19). Similarly, after receiving a new letter, in which Bathsheba writes "that she . . . could not marry him," Boldwood emphasises that "you drew me on. And if you say you gave me no encouragement I cannot but contradict you" (193, 200; chs. 30, 31). Clinging to the valentine's solicitation to "Marry Me" as if it were an unpaid debt, a romantic "I.O.U.," he pursues Bathsheba beyond her marriage to another man. Thus, shortly after Troy's apparent death, he demands once again that she "repair the old wrong to me by marrying me" (342, ch. 51).

The novel's ending overshadows the fact that Boldwood's relentless pursuit of Bathsheba, until the point at which he shoots her returned husband, is essentially in keeping with his society's heteronormative sexual conventions. Conversely, Bathsheba's actions, especially that of sending the valentine, meet with constant censure, by her male farmhands, by Boldwood himself, and, most importantly, by Bathsheba's first and ultimately successful suitor, Gabriel Oak. "[Y]ou are greatly to blame for playing pranks upon a man like Mr Boldwood," the latter admonishes his mistress, adding that "if you seriously inclined towards him you might have let him find it out in some way of true loving-kindness and not by sending him a valentine's letter" (134, ch. 20). For a twenty-first century reader, it should be evident that none of the novel's male characters has the right to blame and coerce Bathsheba, tying her to the transient meaning of an impulsively written message, no matter how ill-advised. Yet, while Boldwood's reaction to the valentine is undoubtedly excessive, readers err when they blame him for the failure to recognise the valentine for the joke it is, declaring, as Marjorie Garson does, that Bathsheba is "unlucky in sending it to the only man in Wessex who would fail to realize that 14 February is the one day of the year when one does not take the invitation to 'Marry Me' wholly seriously" (Garson 32).²¹ Textual and historical evidence run counter to this argument.

Repeated comments by Weatherbury locals clarify that Boldwood has received considerable romantic attention in the past, giving him good reason to assume that the valentine, too, might represent an earnest, albeit inappropriate, expression of interest. More pertinently, the material shape and verbal content of Bathsheba's valentine are extremely deceptive, lending additional plausibility to Boldwood's misreading. As suggested above, by the late 1840s, Valentine's Day was firmly established as a "postal holiday" (Henkin 149). Given the sheer variety of valentines on offer, it was essential to choose one's missive and message carefully. In this context, then, it becomes necessary to acknowledge that every aspect of Bathsheba's valentine, from the stationery to the seal, signals serious rather than mocking intentions. The exquisite print may have appeared humorous when addressed to a little boy, but it gains an entirely different resonance when it is delivered to an eligible bachelor. The inscription Bathsheba inserts into the space "left blank [for] tender words more appropriate to the special occasion than any generalities by a printer could possibly be" (97, ch. 13) draws on flower language which, according to Kate Greenway's typology, encodes the ideas of love and faithfulness (see Golden 228). Of course, the component of the

valentine that lends itself most readily to misconstruction is the seal. In his intriguing essay “Sam Weller’s Valentine,” Hillis Miller compellingly explores the risks inherent in putting a performative phrase as powerful as “Marry Me” into writing.²² “That Bathsheba does not intend the words to be taken seriously,” he argues, “does not prevent them from working,” since they “work on their own, mechanically, impersonally, independently of an conscious, willing subjectivity, just as grammar does” (Miller, “Sam Weller’s Valentine” 113). In a clear illustration of the notion that “the medium is the message,” then, Bathsheba’s valentine is susceptible to misconstructions precisely because it perfectly emulates Victorian conventions of romantic correspondence and courtship (Ong 25).

In *Far from the Madding Crowd*, the very anonymity of the valentine becomes problematic. In Dickens’s *Pickwick Papers* (1836), Sam Weller explains that it is a rule to “Never sign a valentine with your own name” (436). Hardy’s Bathsheba abides by this rule, but given her irreverent motif for sending the valentine, she does not take sufficient precautions to guard her identity. Boldwood has no difficulty in identifying the valentine’s author, for Bathsheba has failed to “conceal [her] penmanship” (see Golden 225). “[I]t is always expected that privy inquiries will be made: that’s where the – fun lies,” Boldwood exclaims when he interrogates Farmer Oak about the letter, thus unwittingly commenting on Bathsheba’s error (113–14, ch. 15). As in *Mary Barton*, the identifiability of handwriting alters the valentine’s narrative function: the valentine, initially devised as a challenge to oppressive gender identities and sexual hierarchies, is gradually transformed into an instrument of patriarchal discipline. In the final instance, like in *Mary Barton* – though in a less literal fashion – the valentine in *Far from the Madding Crowd* causes the death of the heroine’s unworthy lover. However, Troy’s death and Boldwood’s imprisonment do not restore Bathsheba’s independence, but merely make room for a man who, according to her own society’s sexual ideology, deserves to possess and has the strength to master her. Like in *Mary Barton*, too, the murder caused by the valentine effectively results in the containment of the heroine’s subversive potential, the suppression of her energy, ambition, and self-delight.²³

Conclusion: Valentine’s Day at the Post-Office

THE DIFFERENT YET STRIKINGLY SIMILAR ways in which valentines are portrayed in Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* and Hardy’s *Far from the Madding Crowd* resonate strongly with the themes of Dickens and Wills’s “Valentine’s Day at the Post-Office,” a text which offers an early formulation of how it feels to live in a networked world. Like the two novels, the article is structured by a dialectic of fluidity and stability, of subversion and order. On the one hand, Dickens and Wills express astonishment at the sheer volume of mail, which evokes a diversity of correspondents and correspondences that could furnish material for endless novels and stories. On the other hand, they delight in tracing how the seemingly uncontrollable torrent is transformed into a manageable “postal flow” (see Menke 38). As Richard Menke summarises, quoting from the text, “On the floor of the General Post Office the day’s post seems like ‘an apparently interminable and hopeless confusion,’ yet it is ‘really in a system of admirable order’” (52). Following the trajectories of three “tell-tale” letters, marked by their striking colours, the authors of the article gradually discover that, in fact, the reformed postal service is perfectly capable of sorting and ordering the nation’s multiple and varied correspondences, of ensuring that each message will travel by the appropriate channel and reach the correct recipient. Accordingly, in two popular novels – one published two years earlier, the other

more than two decades later – valentines can be used to evoke both the destabilisation and the eventual restoration of order. Gaskell and Hardy use the epistolary device of the valentine in such a way as to illustrate that, despite their capacity to transgress borders and create new connections, even anonymous letters may become instruments of cultural discipline, often without the knowledge and against the better will of the writer.

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NOTES

1. On the early history of Valentine's Day customs, see Lambdin and Lambdin 191, Muir 70, and Buchholz and Key 207. On more recent developments, see Webb Lee and Staff
2. For further information about the history of the Victorian Post Office, see Daunton and Campbell-Smith.
3. Examples of a large variety of Victorian valentines can be accessed in Webb Lee, Staff, Bradford, and Holder. The Bath Postal Museum has digitised the Frank Staff Valentines Collection, which features over sixty examples of nineteenth-century valentines. The British Postal Museum and Archive's online exhibition "Be My Valentine," likewise, features several Victorian valentines, alongside earlier and later specimen.
4. This notion is, by contrast, central to Thomas's argument.
5. For a sample, see Clayton and Meadows, Golden, Herzl-Betz, Keirstead, Menke, Rotunno, and Thomas.
6. For a more general discussion of the ways in which epistolary and postal tropes are used in the novel, see Hennelly.
7. This timeline is suggested by Ohno.
8. This view governs Williams's account of the novel in *Culture and Society, 1780–1950*. It also shapes Gill's 1970 introduction to a now out-of-print Penguin edition of the novel, as well as Lucas's critical discussions of *Mary Barton*.
9. On the link between femininity, domesticity, and letter writing, see Perry, Favret, and McKeon.
10. For an excellent discussion of the novel's interweaving of different voices, see Stone. Also see Grossman's illuminating reading, which evokes the parallels between the generic fluidity of the valentine and the novel itself.
11. On the juxtaposition of middle-class and working-class values, see Stoneman's chapter on *Mary Barton*.
12. Golden's chapter "Unwanted Missives and the Spread of Vice" presents evidence for considerable anxiety, as well as considerable enthusiasm, regarding the social and moral consequences of postal reform. While supporters of and detractors against the penny post were equally prone to exaggeration, there are, in fact, indications that the penny post was used to promote radical causes, most notably the abolition of the Corn Laws. In a letter to Hill, Richard Cobden, the leader of the Anti-Corn Law League, wrote: "I shall feel like an emancipated negro – having fulfilled my seven-year apprenticeship to an agitation which has known no respite. I feel that you have done not a little to strike the fetters from my limbs, for without the penny postage we might have had more years of agitation and anxiety" (qtd. in Cleere 186). By contrast, Harriet Martineau expressed the belief that postal reform would save the nation "from violent revolution."
13. On the ways in which the link between love, crime, and madness were conceptualised by the Victorians, see Showalter and Appignanesi.
14. For a more detailed exploration of the way in which subversive energies and identities are contained in *Mary Barton*, see D'Albertis 51. D'Albertis highlights that "Barton and Esther, the most flamboyant characters in *Mary Barton*, flaunt their disaffection with the order of things – he rejects a system of political representation that recognises workers only in the form of caricature, while she rebels against

- a standard of feminine conduct that rewards only self-abnegation. Consequently, the two are driven underground: leading subterranean existences, they become silent and thoroughly ineffectual watchers of a society they can neither destroy nor support.”
15. This discussion of the valentine complements my comments in Chapter 3 of *Thomas Hardy and Victorian Communication* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2016).
 16. On the construction of the Victorian ideal of masculinity, see Cominos, Eli Adams, Sussman, and Tosh.
 17. On Bathsheba’s androgyny, and on the general significance of sexual mixing and reversal in the novel, see Mistichelli and Shires.
 18. Goode accentuates that “The valentine is a message whose coded form ‘Marry Me’ is the language of a patriarchal monogamy” (24).
 19. Cope offers a detailed exploration of Boldwood’s psychological decline, situating Hardy’s characterisation in the context of Victorian theories about monomania.
 20. Boumelha offers a particularly clear and nuanced discussion of the interrelation between gender and class identity in Hardy’s novels in her essay “The Patriarchy of Class: *Under the Greenwood Tree, Far From the Madding Crowd, The Woodlanders*.”
 21. Also see Brooks 160.
 22. Of course, in *Pickwick Papers*, Sam Weller’s valentine involves the novel’s eponymous protagonist into a (second) lawsuit for breaking a promise of marriage. For further information on how letters were used in breach of promise cases, and how such cases influenced and were dramatised in literary works, see Craig and Frost.
 23. Morgan articulates a particularly compelling, though perhaps too extreme, version of this view, describing Oak as a “puritanical censor,” who exploits “guilt and fear” to “straighten [Bathsheba] into conformity” (32–33). Boumelha expresses a similar view, but offers a more temperate judgment of Oak, when she explains that Bathsheba’s “moral and emotional growth are paralleled by the breaking of her spirit,” and that “[t]he process by which she is made into a fitting wife for Oak involves not only growth, but also loss” (33).

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