

## Divination Games and the Romantic Halloween Postcard

Lisa Gabbert

I am grateful for the opportunity to write in honor of Dr. Keiko Wells and have chosen for the occasion a topic that has interested me for some time: the romantic Halloween postcard. Dr. Wells and I have discussed Halloween extensively over the years. In addition to developing lectures and materials on Halloween together, we helped Ritsumeikan students learn to carve pumpkins in 2015, and we promoted our book on American vernacular culture dressed in Halloween costume in 2017. A Halloween topic therefore seems quite appropriate.

Halloween historically had a distinct romantic element, evidence of which can be found in early postcards. Many early postcards contain romantic images, along with short rhymes, verses, and poems indicating affection. Such writing is not fine poetry, but Dr. Wells, who traveled the United States by train in order to learn about vernacular ballads and work songs, will understand that examining them can provide insight into what has become a major global celebration.

Halloween in the United States was a minor holiday for much of the twentieth century and did not attract much research (for an early description, see Santino 1983). It is a vernacular celebration, meaning that it is not officially recognized by the government or other formal institutions, such as churches, banks, or businesses, yet is observed in some fashion by many people. Halloween has always been associated with ideas of spirits, ghosts, and the supernatural, and the most common way of celebrating Halloween in the United States involved children dressing up in costume (often in the form of something “spooky”) and going from door-to-door ritually begging for candy, sweets, or some kind of other treat (signaled by the phrase “trick-or-treat”), although actual practices varied by region and group (see Tuleja 1994 for a history of trick-or-treat). Additional Halloween activities included minor pranking (Siporin 1994), costume parties, and bobbing for apples, a party game in which apples are placed in a barrel of water and participants try to catch an apple by using their mouth only. The fun lies in the fact that people get very wet when playing.

Since the 1970s adults have become more involved in Halloween in various ways (Wells and Gabbert 2017) and the celebration has become more commodified. Today it is common to see adults dressing up in costume alongside their children, and there are haunted houses, public parades, and other kinds of commercial activities. Pranking still exists but is less common. The celebration of Halloween also has spread to countries such as Japan and South Korea, where it is quite popular among young adults, and to Mexico, where it has become

intertwined with Day of the Dead celebrations (Brandes 1998).

Halloween celebrations prior to the mid-twentieth century always involved young adults. Halloween not only always has been associated with ghosts and spirits, but for centuries also was associated with romantic party games, soothsaying, love divination rituals, and other practices in which young people (particularly women) sought to prognosticate their future marriage partner. This may surprise some people, given that Halloween today mostly is associated with horror rather than love. But the supernatural, magical, or mysterious aspects of Halloween were not only associated with ghosts and storytelling, but also with attempts to preternaturally foretell one's romantic destiny. Nick Groom (2018) points out the connections between early celebrations of Valentine's Day and Halloween, noting that both were occasions for prognostications of love. He identifies the rise of mass print in the 18<sup>th</sup> century as helping differentiate the two, particularly with the writing of Valentine's Day poems. I unpack some of these associations in this essay by examining Halloween postcards that were printed and/or circulated between about 1908–1920, illustrating that Halloween continued to be a somewhat romantic holiday well into the twentieth century.

Halloween originated in the British Isles and is interconnected with the ancient Celtic festival known as Samhain. Both Halloween and Samhain are associated with the harvest, falling as they do at the end of October, and the celebrations have always had an associated with the dead. The exact origins and evolution of Halloween, however, are murky, as it also is connected to the Catholic feasts of All Saint's Day (Nov. 01) and All Soul's Day (Nov. 02), which were established during the Christianization of Europe. Lisa Morton's book, *Trick or Treat: A History of Halloween* (2012) offers an excellent overview of the history and influences of Halloween for those who are interested. Halloween was introduced in the U.S. by the large influx of Irish immigrants in the nineteenth century, as people fled Ireland during the great potato famine, which occurred between 1845–1852. Some of the Irish traditions they brought included pranking and mischief-making, along with mumming, a practice of going from house to house to ask for goods. Although mumming was not necessarily associated with Halloween, in some places in Great Britain it was associated with All Soul's Day.

There were, however, harvest celebration traditions that existed in the U.S. prior to the mass arrival of the Irish. One famous description is by Washington Irving in his *Legend of Sleepy Hollow*, published in 1819. Irving describes a “merry-making or a quilting frolic” hosted by a rich farmer that celebrates autumnal abundance, including descriptions of many items associated with Halloween in the U.S. today: apples, corn, and pumpkins, along with honey. Ichabod Crane's rival Brom Bones is characterized as prone to mischief and pranks, activities associated with Halloween celebrations later in the century, and at the end of the party the gathered company begins telling various kinds of ghost stories. Interestingly, *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* also is about romance: Ichabod Crane seeks the hand in marriage of Katrina Van Tassel, the daughter of a wealthy farmer. Crane is unsuccessful and run of

town by his rival Brom Bones, who disguises himself as the terrifying headless horseman and throws a pumpkin at Ichabod Crane in order to frighten him.

The connection of romance, the supernatural, and soothsaying were associated with Halloween in Ireland, Scotland, and Wales for several hundred years. An early record of these traditions comes from the great poet Robert Burns, whose poem “Halloween” was written in 1785 and first published in 1786. Lisa Morton notes that “It’s impossible to pinpoint exactly when fortune-telling games became an integral part of Halloween festivities; most later accounts of them simply refer back to the Burns poem, which suggests that fortune-telling rituals were already well-established and linked to Halloween” (2012:37). The poem, which is both humorous and quite long, describes a rural country scene in which young people play different divination games in order to determine their future spouse.<sup>1)</sup> One custom entails pulling up kale from the fields and examining whether the stalk was straight or crooked. A straight stalk indicated that one’s future mate would be tall and strong, while a crooked one presumably represented a mate with a crooked back. Another game Burns wrote about was the practice of burning nuts a fire. Each nut was named for a person, and the behavior of the nuts in the fire as they roasted predicted the future of the couple. Burns also notes the unearthly dimensions of Halloween in the first opening lines, when he connects Halloween night to fairies:

Upon that night, when fairies light  
On Cassilis Downans dance

This connection is long-standing, with references to fairy activity on Samhain (although not necessarily Halloween) dating to the fifteenth century (Morton 2012:46). Further, in British tradition, fairies often were associated with the dead, making Halloween a natural calendrical time for their occurrence (Briggs 1967).

Descriptions of love divination customs similar to the ones in Burns’s poem can be found throughout the nineteenth century. An 1834 edition of the *Dublin Penny Journal*, for example, contains an article by Denis O’Donoho who describes an all night Halloween party and mentions the burning of nuts and the telling of ghost stories. O’Donoho also describes a divination custom in which a saucer containing sand, a second containing water, and a third containing a ring were placed before a girl who was blindfolded. She determined her fate by which saucer she touched; if she touched the one with the ring she would marry quickly, while if she touched the one with sand, she would soon die.

James Mooney in his address to the American Philosophical Society in 1889 further notes the role that apples played in Halloween soothsaying, divination rituals, and games. For example, a young lady might hang apple parings from above and the first person to walk below them was the person she would marry. Mooney states that the famous antiquarian

John Brand described the association of apples and nuts with Halloween dating back at least back to 1728, when servants demanded them. He also describes a divination ritual in which lead was melted through the ring of a key into water. The shape of the cooled lead hinted at the initials of one's future romantic partner.

Mooney elaborates on the connections between Halloween and supernatural beings such as fairies, ghosts, and witches. He notes that Halloween traditionally was a time when witches were thought to be about: witches were blamed for cattle falling sick at that time of year and churns were protected with rowan leaves to prevent them from stealing butter. Further, although most romantic divination rituals were taken lightheartedly, some practices were treated with suspicion and wariness because they were viewed as being associated with forces of darkness, or even the devil. Mooney describes one divination practice that entailed throwing a ball of yarn into a cellar, or chimney, or other dark place, and then winding the ball of yarn back up: the spirit of one's future lover would supposedly emerge from the dark. Mooney characterizes this ritual as sometimes associated with the devil and therefore taboo. But attitudes towards divination rituals varied greatly over time and across groups. Burns, for example, describes this same practice but characterizes it as being prone to pranking and jest, since someone could tug on the other end of the yarn.

Variations of prognostications also can be found in an 1893 article in the *Journal of American Folklore* describing folklore from Ireland, which mentions the placing of saucers of clay, water, and a ring on a table to be chosen. A girl was blindfolded and taken to the table; if she touched the saucer with clay, she would die before becoming an old maid, the water, an old maid, the gold ring, she would marry very soon. This article also describes a variation of pulling kale but with cabbage instead and touching the cabbage head rather than the stalk. It also mentions that fruit which had not been gathered before Halloween was considered not fit to eat as the fairies had spoiled it.

Similar traditions were practiced in the United States, presumably brought by Irish and Scottish immigrants. In an entry labeled "Folk-lore from Maine" dated 1892, Gertrude Decrow writes that in the past, in order to know one's future mate, a person might throw a ball of yarn into a barn, house, or cellar and then wind up the ball of yarn repeating the lines "I wind, I wind, my true love to find/The color of his hair, the clothes he will wear/the day he is married to me." It is noted that this should be done at midnight on Oct. 31 and the true love would appear. She does not suggest, however, that this practice was associated with the devil. Another divination ritual, taken from the same entry, states that one should cut up two alphabets and place them into water face down at night. On the morning of Oct. 31 the letters that are turned up are the initials of the person one will marry.

Evidence of love charms, soothsaying, and divination practices are also found in paintings. The best known is "Snap-Apple Night, or All Hallow's Eve," which was painted by Daniel Maclise in 1833 and exhibited at London Royal Academy of Arts in 1834 (figure 1). It shows

people feasting and playing of divination games on Halloween in Ireland and is based on a party the artist attended. According to the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art, the catalog entry for the painting included the following verse:

There Peggy was dancing with Dan  
While Maureen the lead was melting,  
To prove how their fortunes ran  
With the Cards could Nancy dealt in;  
There was Kate, and her sweet-heart Will,  
In nuts their true-love burning,  
And poor Norah, though smiling still  
She'd missed the snap-apple turning.

(On the Festival of Hallow Eve, 1833)

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/644100>



**Figure 1. 'Snap-Apple Night, or All Hallow's Eve' by Daniel Maclise, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.**

Halloween love charms, soothsaying, and divination practices are most visible, however, in early Halloween postcards. The origin of the modern postcard can be dated to 1869 in Austria-Hungary. The idea is attributed to Dr. Emanuel Herrmann, who recommended the postcard as an efficient alternative to letter writing. The Austrian post apparently liked the idea so much that it created a "*correspondenz-karte*," a rectangular shape consisting of heavy paper with room for an address on the front and room for a short correspondence on the back. The idea quickly spread throughout Europe and was introduced in the United States in 1873. The earliest postcards with pictures on them were black and white, although the use of color was quickly introduced in Germany with the use of chromolithography, a means of producing color pictures using chemicals. Chromolithographic postcards were some of the earliest color picture postcards.

The golden era of postcards is regarded as being the period from 1900–1915, when the buying, sending, and receiving of postcards was at its height. Unfortunately, although large collections of Halloween postcards are available on-line, it is difficult to know exactly when the cards were used or sent, as many web images show the front illustration but not the back of the card, which presumably would have the postage date, as well as printing information. The earliest card I found online was dated from 1909, and although it is likely that the period of 1900–1915 corresponds to many early Halloween postcard images I examined, exact information about these postcards requires future travel to postcard archives.

Many early Halloween postcards directly reproduce the divination games and love charms described in written accounts of Halloween activities. One card, for example, contains an image of the divination game in which a young woman is blindfolded. Three saucers are set before her and she is about to choose one of them. The costume of the woman and other participants is Scottish plaid, suggesting that this postcard is of Scottish origin. It does not have any rhyme but simply says "Halloween Greetings."

The issue of gender in the postcards is interesting as they portray both young men and women as interested in romantic divination and soothsaying. One example draws directly on the practice of roasting nuts. It shows a young couple seated by the fireside roasting nuts in a pan, presumably to divine the future of their relationship and suggesting that both the boy and the girl were interested in the answer. The only word that accompanies the card is "Halloween" (figure 2).

Yet another card reproduces the divination game in which one winds yarn. Many early postcards feature people with jack-o-lanterns for heads. This example also is interesting in terms of gender because the jack-o-lantern "person" is clearly male. He has thrown the ball of yarn into the recesses of a fireplace and is in the process of winding it up. He has been successful in his summoning, as a jack-o-lantern face, presumably female and with a somewhat ambivalent expression, is emerging from the dark (figure 3), again suggesting that men and not just women were interested in romantic divination.



Figure 2.



Figure 3.

Many cards reproduce the game of snap-apple, which is the title of the Halloween painting by Daniel Maclise. Apples have for centuries been associated with autumn celebrations, including both Samhain and Halloween since apples ripen in October (Morton 2012:52). In this game, a set of rotating spokes is hung from the ceiling. An apple is placed on alternate spokes, while the others contain lit candles. Participants must try to bite an apple without using their hands and without getting burned by a lighted candle. The other player must blow out the candle before an apple is bitten. In one card, which looks very much like a Valentine because of the hearts incorporated into the design, the boy must blow out the candle to secure his sweetheart before the girl opposite him bites an apple, and so the card is from a male perspective (figure 4). The rhyme reads:

If you blow out the light ere the Apple is bit  
 By the girl that you Love the best  
 Her heart's yours forever-She'll think it clever  
 And your Marriage will be Blessed.



Figure 4.



The most common type of divination practice featured in Halloween postcards, however, is a ritual in which a young woman looks into a mirror while holding a candle in order to see the face of her future mate. (I have not yet found an example that features a boy looking into the mirror.) Occasionally the girl is also combing her hair, which is a variation. Like figure 2, figure 5 below only contains the word “Halloween” rather than “Happy Halloween,” and so it appears the card is simply acknowledging a common summoning Halloween activity, rather than sending a holiday “greeting.” Others contain phrases like “Happy reflections” (dated 1909), the purpose of which presumably was to wish the receiver of the card, like the girl looking in the mirror, a suitable marriage partner. In yet another, a girl is holding a mirror and sees a portrait of a man behind her with the words “A Happy Halloween/would you believe it?”



Figure 5.

Some of the face-in-the-mirror cards are humorous. The response of the girl upon seeing the reflection in the mirror can range from surprise, to happiness, to shock. In one example, possibly from the 1920s or 30s judging by the artistic style, the reflection in the mirror is a ghostly Halloween mask and the words on the card are “Oh my! Do you s’pose that’s really him?” Another example is a card of a coquette who is pictured as seeing not one, but *four* male faces in her Halloween mirror (figure 6). A grandfather clock strikes midnight behind her. The card urges:

Fair maid! What have you done?  
 To see more faces there, than one  
 Tonight ere you turn to your rest  
 Be kind, and take him you like best.



Figure 6.

The role of the supernatural in soothsaying and divination games is crucial. Divination games, love charms and the like play with the idea of magic through foretelling the future, and these ideas are emphasized through figures of witches and fairies. Sometimes witches and fairies are even pictured together and they can be interpreted as supernatural helpers who assist young people in their fortune-telling. Because they are associated with the future, they also are associated with fate and luck. One card image, for example, combines several divination games: the one with bowls, a mirror, and a woman who is blindfolded. An image of a witch also is included. This card reads:

On Halloween by pumpkin's light  
This witch will help you choose aright.

The witch in this case clearly represents a supernatural figure that is inclined to help the blindfolded girl choose a good fate (mate).

As noted above, fairies have long been associated with Samhain and Halloween in Ireland, and also with luck, whether good or bad. In Irish tradition fairies are not beings that one

wants to encounter; they are best avoided entirely, as people who encountered fairies usually (although not always) fared poorly. In Halloween postcards, however, fairies are always associated with good luck as in the following lines:

“Heed not the hideous Witche’s face (sic)  
for laughter’s all about tonight  
Hark! For the fairies wish you joy  
a season of pure delight.”

This verse suggests an intermingling of witches and fairies. The fairies are responsible for joy and pure delight, while the witch is nothing to worry about. The example below further brings together witches and luck. The sender states that if s/he were a witch, they would use magic to bring joy, love, and luck:

If I were a witch skilled in magical art  
I’d work a bright charm to bring joy to your heart  
Your friends would be faithful, your lover be true  
And all days of this year would be lucky for you!

Another postcard features both a witch and a fairy working their love magic together upon young men (who are running away) by lassoing them with rope in mid-air (figure 7). The image is accompanied by the lines:



Figure 7.

Flee bachelors flee  
 If you would single stay  
 Tis Halloween eve  
 The witches wedding day.

According to this verse, it is the witch/fairy figure who seeks romance, rather than a human girl.

In some postcards, the association of witches with romantic love is quite direct: the card states that in reality the witch is a cupid, a figure associated with love since ancient times. One card reproduces a divination practice that parallels dropping molten lead in water but uses a candle that drops into the water instead. It has both an image of a witch in the background and also a cupid figure wearing a witch's hat, illustrating that the witch is really cupid in disguise (figure 8). The lines read:

Let the candle grease drip and drop  
 Into the water while it's hot  
 And the floating grease will form the name  
 Of your partner in the marriage game.  
 Cupid's disguised as a witch Halloween  
 In all the games played his hand can be seen.

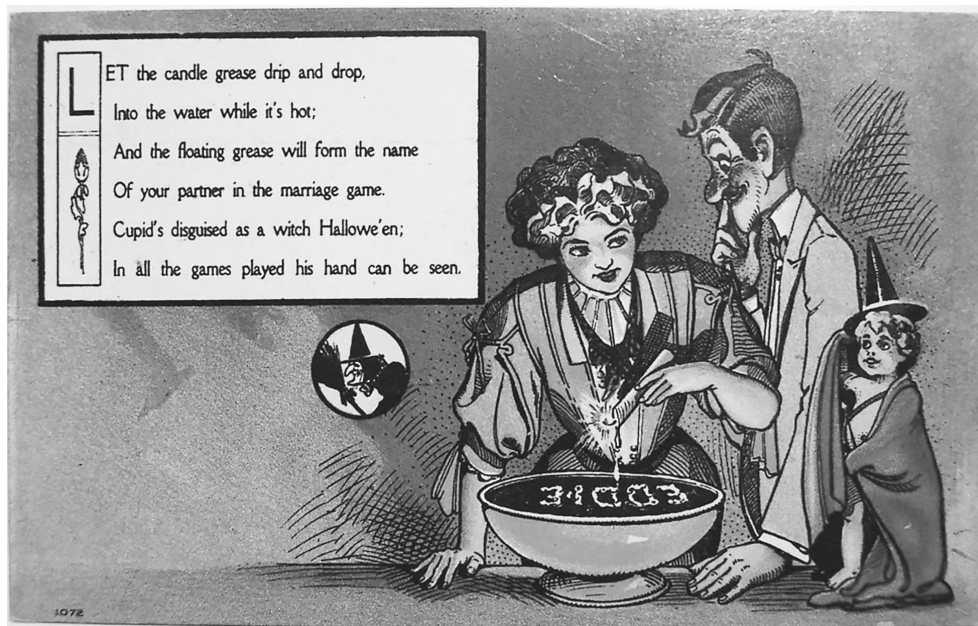


Figure 8.

Another card, illustrating a Halloween ball from Scotland, associates the fairies with cupid in verse:

Sweet Halloween, when fairies glide  
 And human fairies turn aside  
 While cupid draws the beau beside  
 Some friendly shade.  
 The memory in some hearts abide  
 Of vows then made.

Finally, many postcards read like straightforward valentines, expressing a desire for the card receiver's affections and thoughts. The example below is something like a valentine's day greeting that acknowledges the existence of "spirits" whose job, it seems, is to bring lovers together.

On Halloween, sweet Halloween  
 When spirits let themselves be seen  
 When lovers wishes all come true  
 My thoughts will all be fixed on you.

Another features an image of a scowling jack-o-lantern and refers vaguely to divination/fortune-telling practices:

Your face, the prettiest I've ever seen  
 Was shown to me on Halloween.

In yet another example, a woman is looking into a mirror while holding a candle and sees the reflection of a young man. The card reads:

May the reflection you see  
 Be the counterfeit of me

meaning that the sender hopes his face is the one portended in the mirror. The most overtly romantic Halloween postcard I found is below (figure 9, likely of a later date), which simply pictures a couple embracing inside a lighted jack-o-lantern.

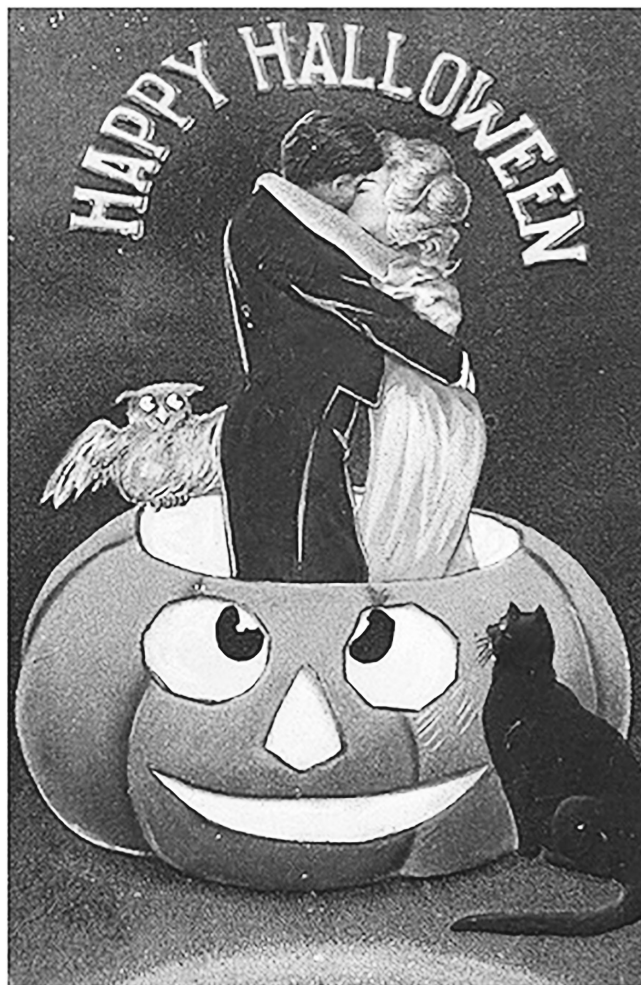


Figure 9.

In conclusion, Halloween of the past had two interconnecting dimensions: a romantic one and one associated with the uncanny. There are clear connections between witches, fairies, love, fortune-telling, and luck in the postcards, and Halloween was more associated with a playful, somewhat supernatural way of determining one's fate than with the diabolical. The romantic aspects of Halloween are no longer found in contemporary celebrations in the United States. The celebration in its current form tends to embrace horror. There are likely many reasons for this, including, I suspect, the rise of the horror films, but these reasons will be explored in future research.

#### Note

1) I use the terms "game," "custom," and "ritual" interchangeably throughout this essay, as the practices described have elements of all these terms.

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## Divination Games and the Romantic Halloween Postcard

by

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Halloween in the United States was a minor holiday for much of the twentieth century and did not attract much research until quite recently. Halloween has always been associated with ideas of spirits, ghosts, and the supernatural, but it also largely was a children's holiday, in which children dressed up in costume and went trick-or-treating from door-to-door by asking for candy or sweets and so was considered unimportant. Although it has grown in importance and has become more commodified over time, Halloween remains a vernacular celebration, meaning that it is not officially recognized by the government or other formal institutions, such as churches, banks, or businesses, yet is observed in some fashion by many people.

For centuries, however, both in Europe and in the United States Halloween also was associated with romantic party games, soothsaying, and love divination rituals in which young people (particularly women) sought to prognosticate their future marriage partner. This paper examines the images and verses of early romantic Halloween postcards to unpack some of these associations between divination, magic, and love. I illustrate that, although today Halloween is a celebration of horror, Halloween was actually a somewhat romantic holiday well into the twentieth century.