

Book Review: Sally Holloway, *The Game of Love in Georgian England: Courtship, Emotions, and Material Culture* (New York: Oxford, 2019)

Author(s): Samantha Armstrong

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Book Review: Sally Holloway, *The Game of Love in Georgian England: Courtship, Emotions, and Material Culture*

SAMANTHA ARMSTRONG

Sally Holloway's *The Game of Love in Georgian England* provides an important addition to the scholarship of emotions as expressed through material culture. She reveals Georgian love as an emotional practice observed through tangible objects.¹ Holloway considers Georgian courtship and the emotional range of love through two overarching questions: 'How did couples contextualize and convey their emotions in words and objects?' and, 'How did they negotiate this potentially fraught period in their life cycle?'² Through exploring these questions, Holloway argues that from c. 1714 to 1840 courtship and breakdown were navigated through words and objects which constituted performative and ritualised acts.

Holloway's work is a macro-study. She develops an argument about a cultural phenomenon that can be found amongst numerous people and objects. Holloway analysed men and women from a wide spectrum of society through their love letters: Anglicans, Unitarians, Quakers, genteel, elite, and middle class. For Holloway's material component, she investigated objects from twenty-three different sources varying from museums to private collections. She studied a large spectrum of objects including common items like hair to the more esoteric exotic goods from the colonies or Far East. As a macro-history, Holloway builds a wider understanding of romantic love and objects which can serve as a starting point for the work of future scholars. However, Holloway's macro-study does not account for the aberrations or smaller trends in romantic objects. Thus, future scholars have an opportunity for micro-studies allowing development in the interconnection of emotions and objects. Holloway's methodological process is well explained allowing for its use in follow-up macro-studies of other emotional objects, for example, affection and objects.

In order to analyze the love letters and objects, Holloway uses a number of approaches including anthropology and literary theory. These approaches are united by Clifford Geertz's concept of 'thick description.' Geertz's theory allows her to contextualize, situate, and unpick, to consider symbols, rituals, and meanings of romantic love held by individual couples.³ These analytical tools allow Holloway to demonstrate that romantic love objects are situated in the marketplace and wider context of popular culture; the romantic objects are considered in various ways for their symbols, rituals and meanings. In sum, Holloway by using Geertz's and other approaches presents the objects and words' symbols, rituals, and, meanings in the performative and ritualised acts of love in Georgian England.

¹ S. Holloway, *The Game of Love in Georgian England: Courtship, Emotions, and Material Culture* (New York, 2019), p. 15–16.

² Holloway, *The Game of Love in Georgian England*, p. 14.

³ Holloway, *The Game of Love in Georgian England*, p. 5.

Holloway's accessible writing style makes the potentially complex subject matter approachable to a non-academic audience. The book is organized into six chapters: 'Language of Love', 'Love Letters', 'Love Tokens', 'The Marketplace of Love', 'Romantic Suffering' and 'Breach of Promise.' Holloway starts by contextualizing the language of love for both genders to examine men and women's love letters and tokens, and their marketplace of love. Once she examines the situation and contextualises romantic life, Holloway moves onto the breakdown of love by examining men and women's romantic suffering and collapse of engagements. Holloway regularly considers gender and differences in presentation, understanding, and, completion of love. For example, Holloway argues that women were more reticent in their letters in expressing romantic sentiments because of their fear of repercussions should the relationship fail.⁴ By doing this, Holloway is able to conceptualize her argument of ritualization of courtship and breakups expressed by words and objects; by first examining the objects and words for courtship and then for breakups.

In the chapter entitled 'Language of Love', Holloway pays attention to how couples experienced, conceived, and navigated love by asking 'how did eighteenth century couples compose their love stories?'⁵ Holloway argues that these various romantic lexicons provided the overarching frame for couples to navigate their courtship within the shared and gendered language of idioms of love.⁶ This chapter is an important development in the field of romantic love because of Holloway's three-prong analysis (religious, physical, and literary tropes). Other historians like Ingrid Tague argue about the dual nature of elite women's romantic love. By convention women were supposed to be submissive, obedient, and dutiful, but through their practical navigation of expectations on them during their everyday lives women gained agency and power.⁷ Unlike Tague, Holloway focusses on how the understanding of romantic love from popular culture was enacted by various men and women in their everyday lives in letters. The limitation of this chapter, however, is that popular culture does not mean a culture adhered to by everybody. Holloway does not address outliers or counter-culture movements. Consequently, in addressing popular culture, Holloway engages only with a broad and commonly held understanding of romantic love.

Considering the importance that Holloway gives to material objects, the following paragraphs will examine her material object methodology, usage, and findings. Few historians have studied the material culture of courtship in the eighteenth century unlike in the scholarship of the sixteenth century. Amanda Vickery has examined the importance of objects in intimate everyday practices; however, Vickery's work is based in the home and family.⁸ Maxine Berg surveyed commercialization and consumption of objects by people but did not focus on romantic objects and instead focused on household items, clothing, and luxury.⁹ Holloway, unlike Berg and Vickery, studies objects in the practice of men and women's love and courtship. The chapters entitled 'Love Tokens' and

⁴ Holloway, *The Game of Love in Georgian England*, p. 67–68.

⁵ Holloway, *The Game of Love in Georgian England*, p. 22.

⁶ Holloway, *The Game of Love in Georgian England*, p. 7.

⁷ I. H. Tague, 'Love, Honor, and Obedience: Fashionable Women and the Discourse of Marriage in the Early Eighteenth Century,' *Journal of British Studies*, 40 (2001), p. 76–106.

⁸ A. Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter: Women's Lives in Georgian England* (New Haven, 1999); A. Vickery, *Behind Closed Doors: At Home in Georgian England* (New Haven, 2009).

⁹ M. Berg, *Luxury and Pleasure in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford, 2005).

‘Marketplace of Love’ are a solid addition to the field of romantic love because Holloway expands and underscores the importance of objects in the conceptualization and ritualization of romantic love for couples. First in ‘Love Tokens’, Holloway examines the highly ritualized ways couples engaged with gifted items that created or expedited experiences of love. All these objects are united with Holloway arguing that romantic gifts provided a key means for courting couples to negotiate the path to matrimony because these gifts gave a way to conceptualize and process their emotions. These emotions played a vital role in preserving the identity of the giver in memory, but also of creating symbolic objects of the couple’s emotional intimacy.¹⁰ Second in ‘Marketplace of Love’ explores the newly commercialized range of romantic gifts and celebration of Valentine’s Day. Holloway argues that observance of romanticism coincided with the explosion in luxury goods and rise of leisure shopping activities resulting in love being packaged and sold to men and women through a new range of objects.¹¹ Thus, adding a new dimension to the study of material objects and ritualization of gift giving.

Previous work on courtrooms have focused on language, representation, and, social class without considering material objects. Holloway rectifies this oversight to a degree by examining what happened during a romantic breakdown, particularly those that played out in the courtroom. For example, a court case where one defendant sued the other for breaking a promise of intention to marry. Holloway argues that by the 1790s romantic hurt characterized by fragility, beauty, nervous disposition, and, mental instability was presented uniquely as a female grievance. Conversely, men were presented as amorous, impetuous, and passionate. These discourses surrounding the genders were reflections of the changing discourse on love, and, breakups that occurred since the 1750s in popular culture.¹² Holloway discusses in depth the popular discourse about gendered romantic suffering in an earlier chapter. Further these discourses surrounding the genders was purposefully done in order to achieve the aim of compensating women for trauma and excusing men’s behaviour. Therefore, objects were of vital importance as proof of a relationship before the courts and society.¹³ Holloway demonstrates that everyday objects had emotional and cultural significance to the judges and participants in understanding the relationships brought into the courtroom, thus, a solid addition to the field of material culture. Further work can be done on objects in other courtroom cases outside of breach of promise—not fulfilling the promise of marriage.

By interlinking each chapter, Holloway is emphasizing the ritualized nature of understanding, creating, and performing love. For example, after explicitly describing the language of love in the first chapter, Holloway repeats and strengthens those idioms by mentioning them in context of love letters, inscriptions on love tokens, crafting of Valentine’s cards, the gendered notions of romantic suffering, and, the gendered discourses of love in court cases. Several questions and omissions need to be addressed. While Holloway frames her work through ritualization, is ritualization of objects necessary to understand emotions and material culture? Can historians understand love through objects without ritualization? Furthermore, there is one glaring omission: LGBTQ love. Holloway writes that ‘romantic relationships between same-sex couples are beyond the scope of this book,’ with no further

¹⁰ Holloway, *The Game of Love in Georgian England*, p, 69–70.

¹¹ Holloway, *The Game of Love in Georgian England*, p.93.

¹² Holloway, *The Game of Love in Georgian England*, p. 164–65.

¹³ Holloway, *The Game of Love in Georgian England*, p. 164–65.

explanation or consideration.¹⁴ Holloway does not explore same-sex couples, and, even overlooked alternative forms of love, because it was not topical to the question.¹⁵ However, can historians understand the complex nature of ritualization of love in eighteenth century England without understanding all forms of love? LGBTQ considerations fall outside of what could be termed as popular culture in this period, therefore do heterosexual rituals of love reflect on queer rituals or does adding LGBTQ love destroy the understanding Holloway argued about heterosexual ritualized love? A future study on LGBTQ love and ritualization of love would greatly further the understanding of eighteenth century love.

The Game of Love is an impressive tome of scholarly accomplishment that brings together an impressive variety of sources, and, methodologies. Her scholarship adds significantly to the work on material culture by placing objects within the emotional practices of romantic love. In sum, Holloway's work on Georgian love is a valuable source for historians of eighteenth century material culture, and of emotion.

¹⁴ Holloway, *The Game of Love in Georgian England*, p. 12.

¹⁵ Holloway, *The Game of Love in Georgian England*, p. 12.

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