

BOOK REVIEWS

NEW PERSPECTIVES ON CLASSICS TEXTS

Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830-1870. Karen Halttunen. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982.

In this pioneering work, Halttunen argues that during the period 1830-1870 the “sentimental ideal of sincerity that shaped the norms of middle-class conduct in the antebellum period was central to the self-conscious self-definition of middle-class culture during the most critical period of its development” (xvii). Genteel women and men in America’s growing cities worried about their precarious social status in a fluid society. A confidence man, or a painted woman, could play the part of a virtuous member of the urban middle-class while harboring less than virtuous motives. Authors of advice and etiquette manuals helped their readers navigate this confusing social milieu by outlining the behaviors and fashions that reflected inward virtue. These authors never fully came to terms, however, with the idea that hypocrites might affect middle-class behaviors without possessing middle-class virtue. Because women supposedly could not hide their thoughts and emotions as well as men, they were the special guardians of sincerity and so restrained the tendency of the men in their lives to be less than honest as they contracted business in antebellum cities. The domestic sphere consequently became the arena in which the members of the middle class tested one another’s sincerity. Only those who displayed impeccable character through adherence to precise middle-class parlor rituals were truly genteel.

Halttunen skillfully unpacks her argument for the reader. She opens with a discussion of the rapidly changing urban environment in antebellum America. More young men, for example, left farms and did so at earlier ages. These naïve young men lacked the faculties to discern a true friend from a confidence man. Halttunen next discusses how advice manuals, cheap fiction, and journals such as

Godey's Lady's Book set forth rules of conduct for the middle-class in three areas: fashion, etiquette, and mourning. In each case a flawed internal logic doomed what Halttunen calls “the genteel performance.” Gentility demanded “a system of polite conduct” that ultimately rang “hollow-hearted and hypocritical” (122). In fact, middle-class etiquette existed in a “vicious circle” wherein “sincere social forms and rituals” begat “heightened concerns about hypocrisy” (196). These concerns led to more rituals, which in turn, led to greater fears. Antebellum social critics and storytellers ultimately could not draw direct connections between outward appearances and inner virtues.

Those in the urban middle class escaped the vicious circle by embracing the genteel performance for what it was – a performance. Halttunen illustrates middle-class acceptance of the performance in her excellent final chapter on parlor entertainment. Beginning in the 1850s, genteel men and women began to entertain themselves with amateur theater performed at home. What had been the proving ground for sincerity now became the site of deliberate artifice. Amateur players enacted charades, tableaux vivants, and skits, some of which exposed and poked fun at the genteel performance. That middle-class performers might lack sincerity no longer troubled those who aspired to gentility. The willingness and ability to enact the genteel performance actually became the marker of middle-class identity, regardless of the sincerity of the performer. As Halttunen argues in the Epilogue, heroes of late nineteenth century fiction like Horatio Alger's Ragged Dick might even have served as confidence men themselves. Their ability to play a part reflected intelligence and “pluck” rather than moral degradation.

Confidence Men and Painted Women received generally positive reviews after its release. Paula Fass in the *Journal of Social History*, David Grimstead in *The Journal of American History*, and David Reynolds in the *American Historical Review* all praised the book. Fass offered the most substantive critique, charging that Halttunen's “discussion of social dynamics and social change seems borrowed and sometimes inconsistent” (Fass 141). Fass nevertheless lauds *Confidence Men and Painted Women* as “a subtle book that gently unfolds from [Halttunen's] mastery of the subject and intelligent prose” (Fass, 141). She also writes that Halttunen has “thickened our history with anthropology and steeled it with sociology.” With her praise, Fass identifies one of the hallmarks of American cultural history – the use of tools from the social sciences to study the American past as an anthropologist would another culture.

In Halttunen's case, she draws on both Mary Douglas's idea of the trickster and Arnold van Gennep's concept of liminality to describe the dangers posed by the confidence man (24-7). She also cites Vic Turner's argument that liminality can become institutionalized (30). Halttunen was not the first to integrate insights from other disciplines, but her application of these thinkers' to the confidence man of the nineteenth century is an exceptionally clear example of how cultural historians have done so.

Halttunen's work also foreshadows different ways that cultural historians of the 1980s and 1990s would define "culture." First, and not surprisingly, Halttunen displays what Jay Cook and Lawrence Glickman call the "'anthropological' concept of culture." Culture is a "way of life," a means of ordering society. Glickman and Cook also identify Halttunen as one who treats culture as a "discursive system" that provides coherent meaning for existence in society. Because middle-class culture for Halttunen is centered on the genteel performance in the front rooms of middle-class homes, she also appears to define culture as "an institutional sphere" where "collective forms of meaning are made" (Cook and Glickman, 12-4).

Confidence Men and Painted Women is of course not perfect. Although the northeast was the most urban part of the nation during the antebellum period, there were cities in other parts of the country. The reader does not get any sense, however, that urban middle-class culture in Philadelphia and Boston was any different than genteel culture in cities such as Charleston and New Orleans. Halttunen also largely ignores questions of race even though all of her sources assume that the middle-class ideal was white. She does mention that amateur parlor actors performed in blackface and put on darker make-up when portraying Indians (178). This tantalizing detail begs a number of questions that Halttunen does not explore. For example, what roles did black characters play in these amateur theaters? Were there black servants in urban middle-class homes, and what do the sources say about middle-class attitudes toward them? Do any sources discuss the social rituals of the extremely small black middle class? Later studies would treat all of these questions and more, but Halttunen does not touch on them.

These criticisms do not diminish *Confidence Men and Painted Women* as a classic of cultural history, and a model for how cultural historians analyze sources and frame arguments. It displays that Halttunen herself would later call both the "empathic" and "discursive" models of cultural history. In other words, Halttunen

explores both how her subjects shaped culture, and how their culture in turn shaped them (Halttunen, 418). Thus, *Confidence Men and Painted Women* serves as an excellent introduction to the complex field of American cultural history.

Nathan Saunders
University of South Carolina

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