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*The Clerk's Tale: Young Men and Moral Life in
Nineteenth-Century America* (review)

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American Studies, Volume 48, Number 1, Spring 2007, pp. 137-138 (Review)

Published by Mid-American Studies Association

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/ams.0.0100>

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Reviews

THE CLERK'S TALE: Young Men and Moral Life in Nineteenth-Century America. By Thomas Augst. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 2003.

Thomas Augst has written a fascinating study of how "individuality came to be produced within the modern landscape of literacy" (256). Augst traces modern literacy back to young men adapting to the middle-class workplaces of nineteenth-century U.S. capitalism. Relying on the many personal diaries written by aspiring clerks, many taking jobs far from their home, Augst finds in these unpublished writings powerful evidence for the spread of those middle-class ideals traditionally identified with Emersonian self-reliance, liberal individualism, and the secularized Protestantism of the U.S. civil religion. Interpreting these diaries in conjunction with Franklin's *Autobiography*, Emerson's lectures, and Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener," Augst turns a neglected topic of nineteenth-century U.S. literacy into an important study of how literature was legitimated as a medium of moral reflection and self-realization.

Augst includes useful accounts of such representative institutions as the New York Mercantile Library at Astor Place, New York, the *Lyceum* lecture series in which Emerson became a national celebrity, and popular periodicals, like *Harper's* and *Putnam's*, in which these young diarists read and studied literary models. Nineteenth-century middle-class literacy is thus the work of everyday acts of interpellation by bourgeois men who in turn shaped literary tastes in terms of individual development. We have long known that *Bildung* structures many nineteenth-century narratives, notably the novel, so Augst's research offers merely confirmation in the reading and writing practices of ordinary bourgeois subjects.

The scholarly emphasis on women's roles in the production and reception of nineteenth-century literature, especially sentimental and domestic romances, has caused us to neglect *masculine* sentimentalism, despite excellent studies in this area by Scott Derrick, Gordon Hutner, and T. Walter Herbert. Augst's interpretation of middle-class male morality suggests a new approach to the gendered "separate spheres" of the period. Alone in their rented rooms, many of Augst's young men yearn nostalgically for domestic values while fighting off sexual temptations and other distractions from the ennui of their working

lives. For these very reasons, Augst ought to have considered more carefully feminine sentimentalism in both its literary forms and women's private practices. Nineteenth-century African-American writers, such as Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, as well as Native American writers, like John Rollin Ridge and Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins, also understood the appeal of sentimentalism and adapted it to their own political, social, and literary purposes. Although Augst cannot be expected to take into account all aspects of nineteenth-century sentimentalism, his own comparative approach to popular and material cultures in relation to traditional literature requires some consideration of literacy across gender, class, and ethnic boundaries. For all its virtues, the present study remains too narrowly focused on white, middle-class, masculine practices, most of which were constructed ideologically to exclude other social formations.

The academic study of literature in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century U.S. culture undoubtedly depends significantly on bourgeois masculine values, but the feminine and minority sentimental and other literary forms excluded from the academic curriculum until quite recently were vigorously, in some cases *violently*, repressed. What do these exclusions teach us about the emergence of "American literature" out of middle-class literacy and its "moral economy" in the period? Augst's book does not help us answer this question, but it provokes us to ask it.

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THE MOST AMERICAN THING IN AMERICA: Circuit Chatauqua as Performance.
By Charlotte M. Canning. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press. 2005.

Before radio, television, and the internet, one mass medium provided rural Americans with a mix of education, entertainment, evangelism, and patriotism that constituted a shared national experience. Called "Chatauquas" in reference to the Methodist institution at Lake Chatauqua in western New York that inspired the movement, these traveling performance companies crisscrossed the United States from roughly 1904 to 1930, playing virtually every town large enough to support a train station. Charlotte M. Canning's lively and thorough book narrates the history of circuit Chatauqua (or, simply, "the circuits," referring to the itinerant nature of the companies), which at its peak in the 1910s and early 1920s played to thousands of towns and millions of Americans each year. Canning, a theatre historian, draws on a broad range of archival sources to paint a vivid picture of the once ubiquitous circuits whose trademark brown canvas tents and wood platform stages showcased "talent" of all sorts, from Susan B. Anthony to Swiss bell ringers, from William Jennings Bryan to literature professors, from Mark Twain to bowdlerized productions of Shakespeare's plays. Over one-hundred illustrations, spaced throughout, help bring the period alive for the reader.

By focusing on the interaction between the Chatauquas and the audiences for whom they performed, Canning demonstrates persuasively that the circuits were a site of complex negotiations of citizenship and national identity. Unlike other popular entertainments of the period (vaudeville, burlesque, circus) Chatauqua spoke directly to the desire of many Americans to preserve a rural, agricultural way of life. "In the Chatauqua tent," writes Canning, "small-town America was participating in the performance of small-town America. [. . .] By performing the America they wanted to exist, Chatauqua and its communities helped to make that America exist, even if only for the duration of the performance" (5).

The book takes its organizing structure from its subject matter. After a brief but thorough Introduction ("Remembering the Platform"), each of five chapters brings a different