

The Clerk's Tale: Young Men and Moral Life in Nineteenth-Century America. By Thomas Augst. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003. xii + 321 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, notes, index. Cloth, \$62.00; paper, \$25.00. ISBN: cloth 0-226-03219-1; 0-226-03220-5.

Reviewed by Reynolds J. Scott-Childress

In the late 1950s, Henry Nash Smith, Leo Marx, and other scholars chafed at the boundaries between the disciplines of history and literature. Wanting to discover the contents of the American mind, they inaugurated interdisciplinary studies of national myths and symbols. Now a number of their interdisciplinary descendents, schooled in a whole array of structuralist and poststructuralist theories, have turned the myth-and-symbol school of American Studies on its head.

Thomas Augst's *The Clerk's Tale* is promiscuously interdisciplinary. But it reflects a very different set of concerns from those of Smith and Marx. With little concern for myths and symbols, Augst examines the effects of various literary practices and performances on the formation of antebellum American selfhood.

The Clerk's Tale theorizes about the ways low-level business clerks used literacy to construct a self-monitoring moral framework in a rapidly changing urban world. These clerks were deeply enmeshed in the expansion of early corporate capitalism. Augst argues that, as soldiers in the vast reorganization of American economic and cultural life, they fought a two-front war. On the one hand, they questioned how to impose order on their lives in a society that enshrined liberal individualism as its guiding credo. On the other, they grappled with the dilemma of how individuals caught up in the Jacksonian-era market revolution could develop the psychological armor necessary to do the stultifying labor of the countinghouse. To show how clerks addressed these issues, Augst analyzes several specific sites of writing and reception through the critical lenses of European theorists, Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu in particular.

Americans had long feared empty time as the devil's workshop. By the early national period, one of the most problematic unintended consequences of the market revolution was the production of leisure time for young men. How could young clerks—

mostly immigrants from the countryside, strangers to the city, loosed from the social constraints of rural life—fill up their urban free time in morally fulfilling ways? The answer, according to Augst, was through the formulation of literary taste. But this is not the genteel criticism of effete intellectuals. Augst considers literary taste a form of cultural capital that was crucial to the formation of a new form of capitalized self. This self developed out of the individual's quasi-clerical practices of keeping diaries, reading novels, and attending lectures.

Augst pays scant attention to the content of his clerks' literature. Employing something of a functionalist analysis of their interaction with diaries, novels, and lectures, as if reaching back to John Dewey's Progressive-era dictum that one learns what one does rather than what one is shown, Augst conceives of these media as tools clerks used to order their moral lives. Through ritualized writing in diaries, for example, clerks internalized the new workplace rhythms of large-scale capitalist enterprise. Although clerks might use diaries as intimate confessors, Augst focuses mostly on how the very act of diary writing placed clerks in a new temporal order, removed from the quotidian and seasonal rhythms of the farming life. Diary writing, Augst argues, was a form of individual self-creation. But this practice was not a sign of individual freedom. It was bounded by limits produced by what Augst refers to variously as "mass print culture," "mass literacy," and "mass media." The practice of diary writing, Augst maintains, was conditioned by the captains of a corporately centralizing consciousness through broadly distributed media, such as fiction and platform oratory.

That is, diary writing did not occur in a vacuum. As a literary practice, it was shaped by other forms of widely distributed literary practice. Augst shows, for example, how Ralph Waldo Emerson's popularity derived less from his philosophical thought than from his standing as an avatar of "natural" eloquence. Libraries, for Augst, are important not for the plots and characters in the books on their shelves, but as sites of reading. He depicts the individuals who patronized the New York Mercantile Library as socializing in new ways. They largely ignored one another in order to engage the literary minds in the books and magazines before them on the library tables.

While Augst is at the cutting edge of literary theory, historians may be concerned by three issues central to writing history. First, Augst claims to be speaking for all

American young men. Yet his cohort of diary writers numbers only thirty or so, and virtually all of these were New Yorkers. He takes urban life as the antebellum norm, ignoring the majority of Americans who still lived in rural areas. Second, culture—understood as rules, symbols, rites, group boundaries and interrelationships, methods of interpretation, and shared meanings—is largely absent. Thus Augst only briefly mentions Christianity and says nothing about the important Businessmen’s Revival of 1857 to 1858, which swept through American cities and attracted precisely the clerks Augst discusses to daily lunch-time prayer meetings (see John Corrigan, *Business of the Heart*, 2002). Third, Augst uses the term “mass” with neither context nor nuance. Communications historians, sociologists, and critical theorists have raised major questions about whether terms such as “mass culture” and “mass media” have any real analytic validity. He does not enter the debates sparked, for instance, by Raymond Williams’s or James Carey’s arguments about communications in modern culture.

Fittingly, the power of Augst’s book derives from its being an allegorical work. As such it has different valences that will speak to different audiences. The title of the book refers to Chaucer’s tale about the necessity of constancy in the face of adversity. But in Augst’s hands constancy is not a virtue. It is a form of social control. For Augst, the idea of the individual seems to be the chimerical prerequisite to the formation and maintenance of what Herbert Marcuse called “one-dimensional man.” The reader does not have to put stock in this political message, however, to see the historiographical dividends of Augst’s other major goal: to bring to history new ways of thinking and new tools for analysis. If read in the spirit of interdisciplinary innovation, *The Clerk’s Tale* will reward the labor of reading through it.

Reynolds J. Scott-Childress is assistant professor of history at State University of New York at New Paltz. He is the editor of Race and the Production of Modern American Nationalism (1999). His current work concerns the northern production of southern culture through popular American magazines of the late nineteenth century.