

Book Reviews

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

Halttunen's highly stimulating study seeks answer to two questions: "Why did nineteenth century conduct manuals represent hypocrisy, personified in the confidence man and painted woman, as a major threat to American society?" And secondly, "how did the conduct manuals propose to meet the dangerous threat of hypocrisy to their readers' social lives?" The author has based her analysis of the problem on thorough examination of conduct manuals of various kind — advice books for young men, fashion magazines, and etiquette books of the first half of the nineteenth century. She devotes special attention to the 1830s and 1840s, the years of sentimental culture. She finds such books particularly informative because, combining criticism of current with models of desirable state of affairs, they point out unmistakably, if implicitly, to most crucial social problems. Their very number and popularity confirm that they voice the dominant concerns of the day. They were written for mass, mostly unsophisticated audience by self-appointed leaders and guardians of society and morality in an attempt to win control over minds and thus, indirectly, to mold social behavior and mores of the younger generation.

Halttunen's underlying assumption is that widespread, though apparently marginal, phenomena deserve careful scrutiny. So do, in fact, popular opinions voiced with a note of certain urgency. However odd or ridiculous they seem, they are symptomatic, therefore should be interpreted as indirect, often awkward expression of those subconscious fears, apprehensions, and desires which are keenly felt but seldom clearly realized or articulated by the general public.

Of these fears and apprehensions the most poignant in the early decades of the nineteenth century was the uncertainty about the future of American society and the American republic; uncertainty rooted in an overwhelming sense of change affecting all spheres of middle class life. Accelerated development of national parties and professional politics seemed to undermine the very core of American republicanism deriving power from local leadership. Under the joint pressure of industrialization and urbanization, the familiar hierarchic structure based on authority was rapidly dissolving, giving place to an open, formless society of "strangers" or men on the make i.e. men without fixed social position and relations. Since such men remain virtually outside social control, they are as vulnerable to being duped as to succumbing to vice and wickedness. The most disturbing, however, was the fact that with increased social and geographical mobility the established rules of distinction and the old network of a social fabric failed to operate or, more precisely, lost their relevance.

Aspiring to social prominence but deprived of sure guidelines, American middle classes feared total disaster — social disorder, usurpation of power,

manipulation, and mob tyranny — even though they were aware that the very same loosening of social ties opened for unprecedented chances of economic and social advancement. Karen Halttunen connects all specific problems and phenomena with her main argument: the middle class preoccupation with hypocrisy derives from social and economic changes, the consequences of which they feared and deplored but nevertheless profited by and, in many a way, wished for. This entrapment between fear and desire explains, Halttunen points out, why the solutions they painstakingly sought sound self-contradictory, unsatisfactory, almost hypocritical.

The most perceptive sections of the book concentrate on the laborious struggle to accommodate the elementary principle of sincerity — that man must not appear i.e. pretend what he is not — to the demands of the mobile society and the new business in which to succeed man must appear what he aspires to become. The tension between the requirements of real life and the ideal introduced an artificial distinction between public life in which dissimulation was recognized as inevitable and the private realm of the parlor ruled by perfect sincerity. Since both etiquette books and fashion magazines listed minute directives on how to display one's sincerity through dress and manners, they are tainted by a lurking apprehension that their advice may be unscrupulously used to achieve mere pretense of virtue and honesty.

Halttunen presents the development of the sentimental culture, its success ideology and women's role in society in a new perspective. Happily she avoids cliché formulas and worn out arguments. Not that she establishes new facts to contradict former interpretations; rather, she rearranges the well-known facts in a complex and fascinating pattern fitting them neatly and logically into a broad cultural and sociological context.

The final conclusion to Halttunen's research is convincing: by the 1850s, having established its position in American society, the middle class ceased to worry about hypocrisy as the major threat to social order. Instead, it accepted arbitrary artificiality of social manners, a code of politeness, and fashion as convenient means of stratification and exclusion, admitting freely to the theatrical character of society life. In "the era of the triumphant bourgeois ... from 1848 to 1875, an unprecedented economic prosperity created a bourgeois world dominated by men of substance, financial power, and influence and by women whose major social role was to demonstrate their husbands' substance by spending money lavishly on summer holidays, ornate houses and furnishings, and elaborate dress." Nor can one dispute Halttunen's comment that after the Civil War conduct manuals recognize and promote aggressiveness, charm, and social manipulation. It seems, however, that the growth of the corporate system, consolidation of capital, increased discrepancy between the rich and the poor as well as the panic of 1873 re-awakened in the late 1870s and 1880s doubts and anxieties similar to those of the first half of the century. Numerous self-help manuals and advice books voiced the same concern about the deterioration and, consequently, the future of the U.S. They contain the very same plea for simplicity, sincerity, and transparency, insisting that mere show of good manners cannot avail much or grant lasting success. True success, they argue, is the one in the realm of morals, in being righteous and honest, not in mere financial gains. This, however, is but a minor correction which in no way invalidates the main thesis

of the book. The last but not least merit of Hälttunen's scholarly research is that it reads like a novel.

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