
Ira Clark is probably right in arguing that the entry of young men into marriage, as depicted in early modern comedies, has not received as much attention as it deserves. (By implication, has there been an overabundance of feminist studies of the travails of young women in the marriage market?) He offers an attractive “cluster of inquiries” into five topics linked to the eligibility of young men for marriage, and he shows easy familiarity with a number of early modern comedies that are never performed and rarely attract critical scrutiny. Although Clark’s helpful book is unlikely to inspire the revival of, say, Thomas Randolph’s *The Muses’ Looking Glass,* it will help better to locate Shakespearean comedies like *Love’s Labour’s Lost* and *As You Like It* in the context of Elizabethan and Jacobean anxieties about marriage and career advancement. *Comedy, Youth and Manhood* closes by asking some pertinent questions about the extent to which early modern comedies held the mirror up to their audience’s trepidations; and it ends by asking if the early modern audiences did not catch on and were not persuaded by the comic depictions of genuine social anxieties.

Developing the ideas of social historians like Anthony Fletcher, Clark argues that manhood in the early modern period was an achievement or a status to be attained by effort, not an automatic stage in personal formation. For him, the stage comedies present possible forms of action whereby young men in the audience could witness ways of asserting their arrival at manhood. The second chapter contrasts the depiction of academies of behavior for young men, which could presumably have genuine value for all those
young men (think of the young John Donne) who were jostling for positions at the courts of Elizabeth and James with the frankly satirical depictions of such academies. To Clark, Ferdinand’s “academe” in Love's Labour’s Lost seems more satirical than earnest, although a young man on the rise would have something to learn from the doomed efforts of Ferdinand and Biron. Clark’s discussion of The Muses’ Looking Glass makes a good case for this rarely-noted play as just the sort of entertainment that could offer useful advice for potential courtiers.

The third chapter deals with the plight of younger sons who are deprived of means to sustain their status. Borrowing Louis Montrose’s argument that As You Like It both reflects this familiar form of social conflict and presents a means of reconciliation, Clark shows convincingly that the plight of Orlando could raise discomfort among the young men in the audience and show them the way to reconcile their differences with their brothers, even if the conflict among the three sons of Sir Rowland de Boys is only one part in the rich fabric of As You Like It. For every Orlando who wins his Rosalind, another one might seek out a rich widow in order to preserve his station or to rise in the world. Hence, in the fourth chapter, Clark argues that the “widow hunt” on stage confirms a familiar “masculine fantasy of self-fulfillment and exploitation.” For the gallant, the hope is to gain access to the widow’s fortune; however, there is always a danger that, in having won the widow, the gallant finds himself, in marriage, ruled by her.

The fifth chapter, which is the book’s longest, ponders the arguments for and against dueling. Not sharing our modern distaste for this practice, early modern playwrights made dueling an “urgent preoccupation” and were willing to consider arguments on both sides. The anti-dueling tracts saw this stylized action not so much as a violent abuse of human rights, as we do, but as an offence against God and social order. Clark notes that George Chapman’s Bussy D’Ambois presents two positive arguments for dueling—that an offence against a gentleman’s reputation is worse than the threat of bodily harm and that the valor displayed in a
duel rises above the civil law. The plays that depict dueling favorably seem to suggest that a duel, when properly conducted, proves the nobility of the participants. If plays in the early modern period seem generally to condemn dueling as dangerous and destructive, they also appear to sympathize with the ability of dueling to assert the virility and gentility of its participants.

The first five chapters confirm Clark’s initial description of the book as a “cluster of inquiries” rather than as a comprehensive or fully unified study of the maturation of young men into full adulthood. The fact that so many of Clark’s comedies chosen for discussion are largely unfamiliar makes his study fascinating but also frustrating, and more references to comedies from the canon would have been helpful. The conclusion doesn’t reveal a hard answer to the main question implied at the beginning: did the comedies hold a mirror up to the young men in the audience, or did the folly of the comic characters simply make the comedies more escapist than psychologically compelling for the viewers? Did the power of the comedies derive from their realistic depiction of the typical problems of young men seeking answers to vexing questions or from their clever presentation of comic fantasies? Clark is correct to point out that the close watch given to the stage by the Tudor and Stuart state censors serves as proof that the comedies must have been depicting current affairs with some degree of accuracy and that they did have an effect on the audience. Clark concludes his study pessimistically, however, by wondering if only a few in the audience were directly affected by the plays; he ends by citing evidence that “audiences did not catch on to performances, or were not persuaded.” The theatre audiences of early modern London may not all have been a set of Claudiuses or guilty creatures, but surely they recognized many of their own follies in the comic actions onstage, and at least some of them must have acted positively as a result of this recognition of their own follies.