

## Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



### Cleland, Katharine. Irregular Unions: Clandestine Marriage in Early Modern English Literature

Heidi Olson Campbell

Volume 44, Number 3, Summer 2021

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1085843ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i3.38016>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Campbell, H. (2021). Review of [Cleland, Katharine. Irregular Unions: Clandestine Marriage in Early Modern English Literature]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 44(3), 267–270.  
<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i3.38016>

by Bronzino (no. 64)—are especially interesting as a way to chart not only his public appearance, or the way he wanted to appear, but also the way his contemporaries understood him as the epitome of Florence under his rule. Similarly, the carefully constructed façade of jewelry and clothing evident in Bronzino's two painted portraits of Eleonora (nos. 26, 28) reveal more about her role as mother to a dynasty than about her private life.

Portraits like these by Bronzino, represented here by twenty-seven paintings, have always, and with good reason, loomed large in any examination of art under the Medici; the Metropolitan's own as-yet-unidentified young man with a book is another excellent example of this type (no. 41). But Pontormo and Salviati, with nine and eleven paintings respectively, are equally fascinating in this context, particularly those portraits by Salviati in the last section of the catalogue, marked by their lavish textiles, elaborately posed hands, and engaging attributes. Although many portraits from this era are notable for their slick veneer and mask-like features, they are also enormously compelling and repay close looking.

The catalogue is beautifully designed with more than two hundred colour reproductions of both exhibited objects and comparanda. Merely turning the pages—which, unfortunately, is all many of us can do given the challenges of travelling to New York in a pandemic—provides a vivid sense of Florence under the Medici, and the essays and entries are intellectually intriguing for art historians while still accessible for students and the larger interested public.

JACQUELINE MARIE MUSACCHIO

Wellesley College

<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i3.38015>

**Cleland, Katharine.**

*Irregular Unions: Clandestine Marriage in Early Modern English Literature.*

Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021. Pp. 196. ISBN 978-1-5017-5347-3 (paperback) \$19.95.

The process of marriage formation was the focus of scrutiny in late medieval and early modern Europe. Ostensibly, marriage needed only the consent of the married couple, allowing couples to choose marriage partners without

parental, community, or religious approval. Clandestine marriages could range in definition from a marriage contracted in private without witnesses, to a full marriage service in a church but without sufficient banns read or taking place outside of the couple's home parish. Irregular marriages could be easily denied by one of the marriage partners as a misunderstanding and only a sexual liaison or be used to hide bigamy. The shift in legally and culturally acceptable ways to form marriage in early modern Europe has long been of interest to historians, but Katharine Cleland breaks new ground by writing the first literary history on clandestine marriage in early modern England.

Cleland contends that in the wake of the Reformation and the Act of Uniformity, which created a standard marriage ritual in the Book of Common Prayer, clandestine marriage became a crucial locus for debates about identity in early modern England. Marriage created a new identity for a man and woman as husband and wife. Those who contracted marriage outside of the rules delineated in the Book of Common Prayer caused social anxiety as it failed to affirm the couple's adherence to England's new religion and its rituals as well as preventing community input. If the couple failed to practise a culturally accepted marriage ritual, the community could refuse to accept the man and woman's transformation to a married couple. Cleland argues that early modern literature exposes a deep-seated social anxiety about clandestine marriage and its role in identity formation that has been neglected by literary scholars.

Most of the literature Cleland explores was written between 1590 and 1605. The text is organized roughly chronologically, moving from Spencer's *The Fairie Queene* and ending in the epilogue with John Ford's *Tis a Pity She's a Whore*. As Cleland points out, views of marriage during this period were changing rather than static. However, the short period that she studies does not allow for much examination of change over time. Cleland does not attempt a comprehensive study of English authors' use of clandestine marriage. Thus, some works featuring clandestine marriage, like *Romeo and Juliet*, are not discussed extensively. Rather, Cleland provides a thought-provoking call for literary scholars to consider more deeply how clandestine marriage plays a central, not a peripheral, role in early modern literature.

In the book, Cleland engages and nuances scholarship on Edmund Spencer's *The Fairie Queene*, Christopher Marlowe's *Hero and Leander*, and William Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, "A Lover's Complaint," *Merchant of Venice*, and *Othello*. As Cleland demonstrates, both Spencer and Marlowe,

and by extension George Chapman who completed *Hero and Leander*, viewed clandestine marriage as damaging community relationships. Spencer tied adherence to the marriage ritual in the Book of Common Prayer to English national identity. Those in irregular unions, therefore, were not expressing their Englishness. Yet Spencer's historical circumstances, particularly the aging Virgin Queen Elizabeth who inhibited courtiers from marrying, later informed his book 6 in which clandestine marriage is portrayed in a more sympathetic light. The sexual liaison of Marlowe's *Hero and Leander* could be interpreted as an irrevocable marriage contract, but without witnesses it broke formalized social bonds between employee and employer, father and daughter, and son-in-law and father-in-law, and thus ends tragically. Similarly, Cleland demonstrates that William Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* and "A Lover's Complaint," written around the time clandestine marriage became the object of parliamentary scrutiny under James I, expose the precarious position clandestine marriage placed couples in if society did not accept their marriages as legitimate.

Cleland's last two chapters on Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello* address both the opportunity and the challenge irregular marriages provided for racial and religious outsiders to integrate into white society. The elopement of Jessica and Lorenzo as much as Jessica's Jewishness, according to Cleland, causes challenges for their new identity, and only Shylock's public acknowledgement of their marriage, albeit coerced, allows them to be accepted by the community as a married couple. Similarly, Cleland attributes Othello's unhappy ending, in large part, to Othello and Desdemona's clandestine marriage. Desdemona's acceptance of a clandestine marriage places her outside the bonds of cultural respectability, allowing Othello to question her sexual fidelity. A more thorough comparison of Hermione from *The Winter's Tale* with Desdemona would have strengthened her argument, as Hermione's sexuality is questioned, too, by her husband. Is clandestine marriage the only factor that explains why Desdemona's state is so precarious? In the conclusion, Cleland argues that debates about clandestine marriage were again brought to national attention during Charles I's reign and combined with concerns about incest and bigamy as demonstrated by John Ford's *Tis a Pity She's a Whore*.

Cleland's historical contextualization casts new light on literature but does not fully support her assertion that "the practice of clandestine marriage not only was at the heart of the Reformation but also played a role in the events

leading to the English Revolution” (136). Engaging more with scholarship on late medieval clandestine marriage and broader consideration of the social, economic, and environmental changes in England, beyond the political milieu, might have shed greater light on why clandestine marriage was such an area of concern between 1590 and 1605 and again in the 1620s.

Yet, despite these minor critiques, Cleland’s book represents an important step forward in contextualizing early modern English literature. This book enriches that scholarship by providing a deeper understanding of the many types of marriages portrayed in early modern literature and how they reflect the social anxieties of the period. Clearly written and tightly argued, the book should be of interest to scholars of literature and history.

HEIDI OLSON CAMPBELL

Baylor University

<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i3.38016>

**D’Arista, Carla.**

*The Pucci of Florence: Patronage and Politics in Renaissance Italy.*

The Medici Archive Project 6. London: Harvey Miller Publishers / Turnhout: Brepols, 2020. Pp. iv, 359 + 296 colour ill. ISBN 978-1-912554-25-6 (hardcover) €200.

Chosen for publication in the Medici Archive Project series, Carla D’Arista’s art historical investigation of the Pucci family of Florence during the Renaissance rests on a very firm foundation of documentary research. In its impressive sweep, her study charts the family’s patronage of architecture, art, and other domestic and sacred furnishings in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. For each generation in turn, D’Arista carefully portrays the fraught political environment in which the Pucci rose to prominence. During the Quattrocento, despite modest roots in the artisan class, the Pucci earned leading positions in the Medici government through fervent demonstrations of allegiance. The Pucci fortune was gained from banking (including loans with very high interest rates and speculation in government bonds), and through farming on thirty-six estates in the Tuscan countryside, though the family also endured pronounced downturns of fortune. By the first decades of the Cinquecento, D’Arista’s focus