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SMITH, SANDRA WILSON. *The Action-Adventure Heroine: Rediscovering an American Literary Character, 1697-1895*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2018. 280 pp. \$55.00 hardcover; \$55.00 e-book.

It is perhaps fitting that Sandra Wilson Smith's *The Action-Adventure Heroine: Rediscovering an American Literary Character, 1697-1895* should have appeared in the same year that saw the death of the groundbreaking literary historian Nina Baym. *The Action-Adventure Heroine* is clearly inspired by Baym's crucial works of literary recovery, including *Woman's Fiction* (1978) and *Women Writers of the American West* (2011). Like Baym, Smith seeks to reshape our understanding of American literary history, and particularly of the role of women in that history, by unearthing a forgotten female archetype. Smith's work traces a character she calls "the action-adventure heroine" from the captivity narratives of Puritan New England to the detective stories of Gilded Age dime novels. "This bold heroine," Smith asserts, "tramps alone through the forests, demonstrates tremendous physical strength, braves dangers without hesitation, enters the public realm to earn money, and even kills her enemy when necessary" (1). While other critics have discussed gender-bending female archetypes such as the tomboy and the masculine girl, the figure Smith examines is characterized by her participation in an "extended, physically rigorous journey" (5) and, in many cases, by her willingness to use physical violence in defense of herself or others.

To recover this forgotten figure, Smith arranges her text chronologically, with the first three chapters exploring the role of the frontier heroine in the colonial and early national eras. Chapter 1 unearths the action-adventure heroine as she appears in Indian captivity narratives, whether factual (the Puritan goodwife Hannah Dustan), fictional (the unnamed protagonist of the Panther captivity), or somewhere in between (the “fierce woman of Crab Orchard” [43] in early histories of Daniel Boone). In addition to tending her home, the woman in each of these narratives is also called upon to violently defend it, usually from marauding (and ambiguously motivated) Indians. Just as the dangers of the frontier extenuated female violence in the captivity narrative, America’s wars of national independence provided a fictional warrant for female adventure. In her second chapter, Smith locates the action-adventure heroine in tales of female soldiers and sailors, including Mercy Otis Warren’s *The Ladies of Castile* (1790), Herman Mann’s *The Female Review* (1797), and the anonymously authored *The Female Marine* (1815). In these texts, the female heroine who fights in the Revolution or the War of 1812 “suggests metaphorically that Americans—men and women together—were building a powerful, model nation” (55). Smith’s third chapter addresses one of the most popular literary forms of the late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries: the seduction novel. In discussions of *The History of Constantius and Pulchra* (1789-90) and *The Female Wanderer* (1824), Smith highlights how wandering heroines of the early national period repudiated the figure of the cast-off victim of seduction by leaving home to pursue their true (and unfailingly faithful) loves. “In these anti-seduction tales,” Smith asserts, “women have the strength, intellect, and moral fiber to protect and promote bourgeois values, which contribute to the development of a strong nation” (87).

The next three chapters of *The Action-Adventure Heroine* address antebellum texts, where the presence of this archetypal figure, Smith suggests, has been obscured by a

longstanding critical focus on sentimental domesticity. Smith devotes her fourth chapter to the early novels of Catharine Maria Sedgwick, *A New-England Tale* (1822), *Redwood* (1824), *Hope Leslie* (1827), and *The Linwoods* (1835). While Sedgwick's action-adventure heroines (including *A New-England Tale*'s Jane Elton, *Redwood*'s Deborah Lenox and Ellen Bruce, *Hope Leslie*'s Magawisca and eponymous heroine, and *The Linwood*'s Isabella Linwood, Rose, and Mrs. Bengin) are rarely physically violent, they do participate in extended journeys that take them "beyond the boundaries of the home [to] perform active feats of heroism in public spaces" (102). Chapter 5 turns to western frontier novels of the 1840s and 1850s which, like captivity narratives, celebrate female violence conducted in the service of colonial expansion. The protagonists of Harry Halyard's *The Heroine of Tampico* (1847) and the anonymously-authored *The Female Warrior* (1843) and *The Female Volunteer* (1851) advance the spread of "civilization" by assuming martial roles in the Texas War of Independence or the US-Mexican War, furthering Anglo-American goals by helping to defeat a menacing Mexican Other. Smith's sixth chapter, like her fourth, focuses on a single female author: E.D.E.N. Southworth, whose action-adventure heroines, including Gertrude Lion of *The Mother-in-Law* (1849-50), Capitola Black of *The Hidden Hand* (1859), and Britomarte Conyers of *Britomarte, The Man-Hater* (1865-66), subvert sentimental-domestic plots by performing daring rescues, thwarting attempted kidnappings, foiling forced marriages, and fighting in the Civil War. This chapter usefully delineates how the venue of the sensational story paper enabled Southworth to "create a unique, hybrid heroine" (179) who would have been less welcome in the more middlebrow genre of the domestic novel.

Smith's final two chapters address the enormously popular mode of the late-nineteenth-century dime novel, where action-adventure heroines found a home in both frontier adventures

and tales of detection. Chapter 7 details Edward L. Wheeler's western characters Hurricane Nell and Calamity Jane, gun-toting firecrackers who "act as vigilante-exemplars in an untamed West that teems with unscrupulous and criminal figures" (181). Chapter 8 describes Albert W. Aiken's female detectives Hilda Serene and Mignon Lawrence, amateur gumshoes who solve murders and foil thefts, all while sporting masculine physical traits (Mignon has a visible mustache) and repudiating the attentions of men. These lady sleuths also shore up class and race privilege, defending wealthy WASP families from plots perpetrated by immigrants, foreigners, and racially ambiguous characters depicted as "insolvent, shifty, and predatory" (207). Smith concludes her book with a short Afterword that finds the action-adventure heroine alive and well in current media, embodied in Buffy Summers, Katniss Everdeen, Sarah Connor, and Daenerys Targaryen.

The broad historical range of Smith's research makes clear that recent action-adventure heroines did not appear out of the blue, and that the venturesome woman, though perhaps not central to the American literary tradition, nevertheless has a longstanding place in it. But *The Action-Adventure Heroine* could benefit from a more intersectional approach to its subject matter. The heroine as Smith presents her here is, almost without exception, white and middle-class. While Smith acknowledges this, frequently and correctly elaborating the white heroine's role in defending (or extending) a white community against racial and national others (Native Americans, the British, European immigrants, Mexicans), this relationship is treated as coincidental, when in fact it is foundational. The white, middle-class action-adventure heroine enjoys temporary access to masculine prerogative precisely *because* she is white and middle-class, and because her transgression is performed in the service of maintaining class and race hegemony. This reciprocal relationship might have become clearer if *The Action-Adventure Heroine* engaged more thoroughly with its primary theoretical inspiration, Jack Halberstam's

Female Masculinity (1998), since American masculinity, as Halberstam has shown, is not correlated merely with male sexual characteristics but is socially constructed as necessarily white and middle-class. As it happens, the white action-adventure heroine, intriguing as she is, purchases her modicum of freedom at the price of others' oppression and destruction. This isn't to say that she's not worth studying, only that we must do so with a careful eye to the ideologies she perpetrates.

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