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Review of *Masculine Style: The American West and Literary Modernism* by Daniel Worden

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Daniel Worden argues that masculinity isn’t a biological identity or a fixed construct, but a type of performance that allows for fluidity, enabling individuals “the freedom to refashion the self and live as an equal among others.” The men and women who assume such a style challenge a hierarchical system in which men are equated with power and dominance. They reveal a complex subjectivity, sometimes engaging in sentimental relationships and forming unorthodox friendships and unions—unlike the traditional cowboy, who is portrayed in literature as a rugged and isolate, though presumably heterosexual, male. Worden examines the subversion of stereotypical western masculinity in dime novels and formula westerns, tracing this mode of experimentation through the modernist period by analyzing works by Willa Cather, Ernest Hemingway, and John Steinbeck.

The argument in the first part of the book won’t come as a surprise to readers familiar with early western American literature. Dime novels feature numerous heroes and heroines who cross-dress or disguise their class origins. The Virginian’s homosocial friendships and his unconventional courtship of the schoolteacher Molly have already been noted by scholars. The book’s second part presents a more intriguing proposition, but failed to convince me in the end. Worden claims that the self-fashioning trend that begins in the late nineteenth century continues into the modernist era. He is careful not to claim a direct line of influence. Perhaps this is just as well, since he offers no evidence that Cather, Hemingway, or Steinbeck read these earlier novelists or were inspired by them. We are left with a series of separate close readings, some of which work better than others. The chapter on Cather is the most successful. But the chapter on Hemingway doesn’t belong in the book. Worden unconvincingly asserts that “Death in the Afternoon is not set in the American West but in Europe, yet despite this different locale, Hemingway’s masculinity is bound to the tradition of the [region].” It’s unclear why Worden ends the book with a chapter on Steinbeck, whom he clearly despises. Referring to Steinbeck as a “middle-brow writer” and an author of “popular, trite fiction,” he condescends toward his subject, whose worst offense seems to be that he wasn’t a modernist interested in theoretically more intellectual, aesthetic concerns.

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