
Raquel: I have character.
Winston Wolf: Just because you are a character doesn’t mean that you have character.


As James Salazar correctly notes in his introduction to *Bodies of Reform*, the lack of critical engagement with nineteenth-century ‘character’ belies its ubiquitous presence in American life throughout the century. Frequent reference is made to this ideal/concept/goal in literary works, in success manuals, in conduct of life books and scientific treatises. It was continually referenced and discussed in newspapers and periodical publications, in debates over immigration and assimilation, in textbooks, in scouting manuals, in literary works and in body-building magazines. Salazar engages with many of these materials, providing an insightful analysis of the kinds of work character was made to do in these varied textual forms.

In the introduction, Salazar provides an overview of the various ways in which character was understood during the nineteenth century. In providing this sketch, Salazar presents character as something that could be built or formed, something that could be read in others, physically embodied, or represented to the world; character is revealed as both goal and process, as performance and badge of respectability, as the path to success and the key to social reform. A number of these conceptualisations of character will be familiar to literary scholars and historians of nineteenth-century America, at least to some extent, but rarely will they have encountered such a comprehensive survey of character in one place. It is in bringing these disparate strands together and subjecting them to protracted critique that Salazar makes such a welcome contribution to scholarship.

Salazar is particularly concerned with the rhetoric of character, a phrase meant to accommodate articulations of character formation as an ‘individual, collective, and institutional practice of self and social reform, on the one hand,’ and the ‘literary, social, and political forms of reading and representing’ character on the other (p.11). Salazar deduces ‘five main elements’ within this rhetoric – performance, habit, inheritance, exercise, and emulation – and structures the remaining chapters and selection of source material around a critical reflection on these elements (p.32). The first chapter focuses on Melville’s *Confidence Man* (1857), the second on Twain’s *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* (1889) and Todd’s *Student’s Manual* (1835), the third on the visual economy of the *National Police Gazette* and on the writings of Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1890 – on), the fourth on the Du Bois-Washington debates and the fiction of Pauline Hopkins – particularly *Contending Forces* (1900), and the final chapter takes Jane Addams’s *Democracy and Social Ethics* (1902) as its major focus.

While the book’s title suggests a primary focus on the Gilded Age, it is a welcome relief to find that the breadth of the material covered is at variance with the specificity of the title. Though there are numerous issues with periodisation – for example the Boy Scouts of
America (1910) are identified as a Gilded Age phenomenon (p.9) – this broad scope is fundamental to recognising the longevity of interest in character during the nineteenth century, the consistency of its conceptualisation over time, as well as the unique adaptations and uses made of the concept amidst the turbulence of urban-industrialization in the Gilded Age.

Salazar is at his strongest when introducing readers to the range of texts selected to unpack the constituent elements of the rhetoric of character. These summations are very well written and the authors’ thoughts on character clearly presented. While there is little new insight here for scholars of Twain and Melville, for those not yet overwrought by the unending deluge of scholarship on the two, these chapters provide a useful exploration of the relationship between habit, self-restraint, self-reliance, and the formation and performance of character. Chapters Three to Five provide fascinating insights into the work of Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Pauline Hopkins and Jane Addams, so offering a welcome counterbalance to the preponderance of existing character scholarship which almost invariably engages with treatises penned by middle-class white males.

It is when Salazar begins to offer his own (re)interpretations of character’s role in the texts critiqued that the quality of the writing begins to fall away, and fall away markedly. Clear, concise and elegant expression cedes to a veritable thicket of jargon and buzz-words, convoluted phrasing and cumbersome sentences. Undoubtedly, this turgid language and expression will make parts of the book inaccessible to undergraduates and a laborious task for generalists and specialists alike. Toil is rewarded though: filtering for linguistic embellishment allows one to access a number of fairly straightforward ideas about the role (and conceptualisation) of character in late-nineteenth century America. Fortunately, these departures occupy only fairly short sections within each chapter and do not detract from the overall value of the work.

Philip Keirle

University of Western Australia