

Abstract

My dissertation explores depictions of athletic female characters in nineteenth-century American literature. I argue that there is a rich literary tradition of athletic women, whose origin I date to the 1840s, that has not been explored. To date, scholars have considered athletic women in literature anomalies, a case of a gender-bending female found in a single text, but not part of a longer genealogy of this character type. By examining athletic women over a period of decades and across several genres of American literature we see how this character type has been shaped by authors and culture alike. I illustrate how authors fashioned a character type that reflected the racial, political, and cultural moment in which he or she was writing. Simultaneously, athletic female embodiment reveals how texts themselves change when physical performance culture enters narratives.

Athletic women, historically and in fiction, are linked to the theater and performance. Because athletic women were not taken seriously for their skills, they were looked at as simply entertainment; their sports were often relegated to theatrical spaces, such as stages during play intermissions. Authors recognized this connection between athletics and performance and utilized it to draw attention to the performativity of gender on the part of the female athlete. Athletic characters change their embodied performances based on context and audience, showing how women appropriated cultural scripts through sport. Ultimately, in nineteenth and early twentieth century literature, play-acting and athleticism become entwined and athleticism becomes a method for self-invention.