

Book Reviews

Hayden, Wendy. *Evolutionary Rhetoric: Sex, Science, and Free Love in Nineteenth-Century Feminism*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 2013. Print.

Jane Marcellus

Near the beginning of *Evolutionary Rhetoric: Sex, Science, and Free Love in Nineteenth-Century Feminism*, Wendy Hayden tells the story of Victoria Woodhull, who captivated a crowd assembled at New York City's Steinway Hall in November 1871 with her views on women's sexual emancipation. "Yes, I am a free lover," Woodhull declared. "I have an *inalienable, constitutional, and natural* right to love whom I may, to love as *long* or as *short* a period as I can; to *change* that love *every day* if I please, and with *that* right neither you nor any *law* you can frame have *any* right to interfere" (qtd. in Hayden 20, emphasis in original).

Although Woodhull was among the most vocal advocates of "free love," she was far from alone. Both she and her sister, Tennessee Claflin, were members of a loosely organized movement comprised of women and supportive men who sought, as Hayden puts it, "to redefine women's sexuality and to critique the social and legal systems that attempted to regulate it" (16). Advocates included physicians such as Mary Gove Nichols and Juliet Severance, spiritual leaders such as Lois Waisbrooker, and women who had suffered in early marriages in which they had no control over their sexuality. Often forgotten, these "free-love feminists" sought to do away with traditional marriage, arguing that marital sex was coercive, if not by physical force—which it often was—then by economic, social, or familial pressures to marry. "Revealing marriage as an institution that fostered the degradation and inequality of women, free-love advocates rejected the ideologies behind marriage altogether" (3), Hayden writes. Though sometimes accused of either promiscuity or prudery, they were neither. Most thought that love should be "an agreement between partners, not a compulsory activity validated by church or state" (20).

Free-love feminists were not a cohesive group, nor were their arguments static. Instead, their beliefs and rhetorical strategies changed across several decades of the nineteenth century in relation to emerging scientific discourses—evolutionary theory, physiology, bacteriology, embryology and heredity. It is this shifting rhetoric that is the focus of Hayden's highly original and

thorough study. Drawing on extensive archival research and scientific literature, she argues that the movement devolved from its early focus on the needs and rights of women to what she calls the “dark path” (9) of eugenics at the turn of the twentieth century. By 1907, it disappeared altogether. Her goal is to trace this shifting discourse through a close reading of contemporary texts, asking why the movement changed from pro-woman advocacy to implicit racism.

The book is organized chronologically, with each chapter focusing on the relationship between free-love feminism and a specific scientific theory. Although women’s speech in the mid-nineteenth century was proscribed, scientific thought, beginning with Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution in the 1850s, “granted women rhetors the language to discuss the once-taboo topic of women’s sexuality and to do so in a scientific register” (59). For example, feminists repurposed Darwin’s contention that among most animals, females choose to mate with the best males. “To free-love feminists, the interpretation that males must make themselves worthy of females warranted the logic of women’s rights in sexual relationships” (58), Hayden writes. Moreover, it “became a stricture against marital rape and a justification for birth control” (67). With its focus on what is “natural,” Darwinian discourse also found its way into free-love feminist periodicals such as *Lucifer, the Light Bearer*, which “juxtaposed the ‘natural’ with the government-imposed” (61). Claflin, who with Woodhull was co-editor of *Woodhull and Claflin’s Weekly*, used Darwinism to question marriage itself. If animal unions are “marriages,” she asked, “who is there that will prepare some marriage law not in harmony with natural law, that shall compel each of these to forever remain mated?” (64). Meanwhile, Severance argued that marriage stood in the way of women’s natural right to health, while Waisbrooker argued that it impeded spiritual evolution.

“Physiology,” a term that had multiple meanings and was often conflated with “hygiene,” was sometimes used by anti-feminists to prescribe sexual behavior. Yet for free-love feminist physicians such as Dr. Mary Gove Nichols, the term provided a discourse through which to advocate that a woman had the right to “control of her own person” (81) and maintain her health. It also provided a rationale for sex education, which most free-love feminists advocated. Nichols, in particular, used growing interest in the human body to argue that menstruation and pregnancy should not be pathologized. Disputing notions of “purity,” she contended that female orgasm was normal. Though married herself to Thomas L. Nichols, her collaborator on several free-love treatises, she blamed marital coercion for obliterating women’s sexual and maternal instincts.

The discovery of bacteria provided a new discourse for understanding disease and, by extension, a way of seeing marriage as a “diseased” institution.

This was literally true when bacterial agents of venereal disease were discovered, since men who frequented prostitutes often infected their wives. Questioning the double standard that both protected male promiscuity and deemed prostitutes “fallen women,” some free-love feminists advocated “social purity,” which was not about virginity but about obliterating the double standard. Germ theory brought “a new rhetoric of responsibility” (125) and the idea of “home protection.” Some free-love feminists, such as Angela Heywood, saw “home” as a woman’s own body, so “home protection” was about a woman’s right to protect her health and enjoy sex. Yet this discourse also opened the way for eugenics as the concept of “fitness” for marriage—meaning freedom from venereal disease—emerged. With knowledge of embryology and then heredity came the idea that if “women were united in love with the partner of their choice and provided with sex education, they would be more healthy and able to produce ‘a better race’” (155). Yet anxieties about “race suicide,” which were aimed mainly at white women who had the means to have smaller families, were inherently racist and classist. By about 1900, the rights of children had eclipsed the rights of mothers, Hayden argues, as “Eugenics became the end in itself, not the means for arguing for women’s rights” (171).

Built on an impressive amount of research, Hayden’s work in recovering this movement is exhaustive and articulate. As she notes, free-love feminism was “a multifaceted, multi-voiced social movement” (209). She does not simplify it, but uses the sometimes subtle differences in women’s rhetoric to bring a deeper understanding of how nineteenth-century women viewed their own sexuality. Tracing the evolving rhetoric of free-love feminism in terms of scientific thought provides a clear context for the movement’s change over time. Moreover, the book challenges the still-prevalent stereotype of Victorian women as passionless.

Resisting hagiography, Hayden stresses in her conclusion that not everything these women embraced—meaning eugenics—should be applauded. “Why recover rhetorics that we cannot—and should not—celebrate?” (215), she asks, concluding that “we learn not from their wisdom but from their mistakes” (217). The point is worth making, though Hayden’s slightly apologetic end is surprising in a study that is otherwise so carefully focused on understanding the past on its own terms, avoiding historical presentism until the last few pages. If we’re going to compare free-love feminism to our time, it might be more intriguing to ask what we might learn from these women’s plainspoken critique of marriage, some of which seems relevant today, and some far too radical even for the twenty-first century. Notably, Woodhull’s rhetorical claim that she had “an *inalienable, constitutional, and natural* right to love whom I may” could easily be transplanted into a twenty-first-century argument for legalizing gay marriage. Yet her other claim—the right to change

lovers daily—would be questionable even now. Given our shifting marital mores and the concurrent media obsession with weddings and bridal gowns, it might be worth asking what we can learn from nineteenth-century free-love feminism about what it means for love to be “free.”

About the Author

Jane Marcellus is a professor at Middle Tennessee State University, where she teaches courses in media history and cultural studies. She holds a Ph.D. in Media Studies from the University of Oregon and a master’s in Rhetoric, Composition, and the Teaching of English from the University of Arizona. Her published work includes *Business Girls and Two-Job Wives: Emerging Media Stereotypes of Employed Women* (Hampton Press, 2011) and *Mad Men and Working Women: Feminist Perspectives on Historical Power, Resistance, and Otherness* (Peter Lang, 2014, co-authored with Erika Engstrom, Tracy Lucht, and Kimberly Wilmot Voss). She is working on a study of playwright Sophie Treadwell’s work as a journalist.