
Book Review

Kimberly A. Hamlin, *From Eve to Evolution: Darwin, Science, and Women's Rights in Gilded Age America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 248 pp., \$24.00 (pbk), ISBN: 978-0-22632-477-7.

Arbitrary forms of authority have long been sanctified by religious dogma, but they have also been justified, in more recent times, by ideologies that claim the mantle of science. Chattel slavery was legitimized for centuries on religious grounds, but new justifications for the racial caste system it created emerged from racist pseudoscience during the second half of the nineteenth century. In *From Eve to Evolution: Darwin, Science, and Women's Rights in Gilded Age America*, Kimberly A. Hamlin traces a similar transition in strategies for legitimizing the subjugation of women. In the span of just under two hundred pages, Hamlin documents how pioneering advocates of equal opportunity for women confronted challenges from both ancient religious beliefs as well as Victorian pseudoscience.

Beginning her narrative not long before the dawn of the Darwinian revolution. Hamlin explores the lingering power of the Adam and Eve story over the lives of American women during the nineteenth century. In a wonderful illustration of the cultural *zeitgeist* in antebellum America, she documents the enormous popularity of a pair of paintings by Claude-Marie Dubufe entitled 'The Temptation and Expulsion of Adam and Eve' (1827). In the early 1830s, a traveling exhibition of these works drew tens of thousands of viewers in cities such as New York and Philadelphia, earning effusive praise from prominent writers such as future *Atlantic* editor William Dean Howells, who credited these particular works with sparking his lifelong interest in art. As they toured major American cities to sell-out crowds, it was estimated that these works 'probably drew together greater crowds of spectators than any pictures ever exhibited in the country' (p. 26). In the first painting, the archetypal man and woman enjoy harmony with each other and with nature: Eve gazes up admiringly at a confident Adam, while a powerful lion sleeps serenely behind them. In the second painting, Eve is prostrate on the ground and wracked with shame as Adam stands above her, arms extended as if to affirm that the garden behind them, with its Tree of Knowledge and Tree of Life, is now strictly off limits. The lion stalks away into the wilderness, his head turned back and his brooding gaze directed straight into the viewer's eyes.

The phenomenal response to these images transcended the boundaries of education, class, and geography in antebellum America and signaled the abiding power of the Genesis story to define strict gender roles, even as the cause of women's rights was beginning to distinguish itself among contemporary reform movements. Former

president John Quincy Adams, although a prominent ally of abolitionism, still pointed to the Adam and Eve story in his arguments for denying women economic and political equality (p. 30). During the first half of the nineteenth century, some pioneering feminists such as Judith Sargent Murray and Sarah Grimké attempted to reinterpret the Adam and Eve story by emphasizing Eve's intellectual initiative and strength of character, but this strategy was rare (p. 31). Thousands of years of religious teaching had emphasized a misogynistic interpretation of the Genesis tale and such a long-standing precedent was unlikely to be overturned by novel forms of scriptural exegesis in the service of feminist goals.

The inertia of religious dogma surrounding the status of women made the advent of Darwinian evolution particularly exciting for the generation of American feminists who witnessed the publication of *On the Origin Species* in 1859 and *The Descent of Man* in 1871. No sooner did the advent of the Darwinian revolution weaken the power of religious arguments for the subjugation of women, however, than new arguments rushed in to fill the void. As might be expected, these were couched in the language of evolutionary biology. In 1873, just two years after the publication of Darwin's *Descent of Man*, Edward Clarke, a Harvard professor and eye and ear specialist who presumed a sudden expertise in gynecology and brain science, published *Sex in Education, or a Fair Chance for the Girls*. In this bestselling book, which went through over a dozen printings in less than a decade, Clarke made the case that the pursuit of a higher education equal to that available to men would impose such a severe strain on the physiology and psychology of women that it would render them unfit for motherhood, thus creating irreparable harm for future generations. Categorically opposing the idea that women should ever be admitted to elite institutions of learning such as Harvard University, Clarke 'recommended overhauling educational practices throughout the country to suit the "periodicity" of females...forcing girls to take off every fourth week of school to coincide with their menstrual cycles' (p. 74). As leading feminist Helen Hamilton Gardener observed in response to the success of Clarke's arguments, 'Equality of opportunity began to be denied to women, for the first time, upon natural and so-called scientific grounds...it was no longer her soul but her body that needed to be saved from herself' (p. 60).

The brand of pseudoscience articulated by Clarke and his allies during the 1870s had a great influence in checking the progress of the feminist movement in the Gilded Age. Hamlin's book does a fine job of chronicling this backlash, but her more remarkable achievement is her account of how advocates of women's rights such as Helen Hamilton Gardener, Lester Frank Ward, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman all engaged with the emerging science of evolutionary biology to make an increasingly convincing case that women could and should have equal access to education as well as greater control over their reproductive decisions. Their successes, although gradual and far from complete, did pave the way for a sea change in women's social, economic, and political status in the US during the twentieth century. In her final chapter, Hamlin argues that the work of Margaret Sanger would not have been possible without the decades of public advocacy and rigorous scientific debate conducted by the feminists who preceded her. *From Eve to Evolution* is not written in the style of a Whig history celebrating the advance of reform as though it were inevitable. The limited and hard-won successes detailed here, however, point to a principle that remains relevant today. Oppressive myths that are grounded in pseudoscience can be considerably weakened by the steady accumulation of countervailing evidence

achieved through the careful practice of science. In the long run, it was not the theory of evolution itself that proved most liberating to women, but the ethos of scientific inquiry and debate that had given rise to that theory.

A superior work of scholarship may show us something we have not seen before, or it may invite us to view something that we thought of as familiar in an entirely new way. *From Eve to Evolution* accomplishes both of these feats. First, it reveals a long-running engagement between Gilded Age feminists and the emerging science of evolutionary biology that has barely been explored by scholars before now. Second, it reframes the seemingly familiar history of first-wave feminism in the US to reveal the inspiration that it drew not only from contemporary developments in the life sciences, but especially from the scientific ethos that values free inquiry and evidence over tradition and arbitrary authority.

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