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Anatomy of the Female Angel or Science at the Service of Woman in *Woman and Her Era* by Eliza Farnham

Claire Sorin, LERMA

In January 1864, at Staten Island, a forty-eight year old woman suffering from consumption was writing the preface of what she considered her great work. Eliza Farnham was about to publish a 784 page-long book entitled *Woman and her Era* and wholly devoted to the one “Truth” which had dawned on her two decades earlier: this one truth was “THE SUPERIORITY OF WOMAN”, a phrase she liked to write in capital letters.

Eliza W. Farnham has almost fallen into oblivion but she was fairly well-known in her own time. She was one of those active, passionate nineteenth-century reformers who sincerely believed they could make the world a better place. In the early 1840’s, she embraced provoking prison reforms while she served as matron at the women’s division of Sing Sing prison. Then, during the Gold Rush, she tried to organize the migration of unmarried women to San Francisco in order to introduce order and stability in the brutal, masculine world of mining towns. Her plan failed but she moved to California, built a farm in Santa Cruz, and subsequently crossed the continent several times. She became a regular contributor to the *California Farmer* and delivered a series of public lectures on a great variety of subjects including philosophy, history, spiritualism and phrenology. Although she had received very little formal education, Eliza was an avid, self-taught intellectual who published two successful books on her pioneer years in Illinois and California, as well as a popular autobiographical novel.¹ Lecturing and writing provided Eliza’s only livelihood for she could not count on a husband’s support. Indeed, by 1856, she had lost her first spouse, divorced a second one prone to whisky and violence and three of her four children had died. As a staunch abolitionist, she volunteered to nurse the wounded soldiers at Gettysburg in July 1863 but she contracted a disease on the field and died in December 1864. However, during the last year of her life, she found the energy to publish *Woman and her Era* and write a novel illustrating her vision of manhood and womanhood.²

¹ Eliza W. Farnham published a fictionalized account of her youth in 1859 under the title *My Early Days* (republished in 1864 as *Eliza Woodson; Or, the Early Days of One of the World’s Workers, A Story of American Life*). Her years in Illinois and California are related in *Life in Prairie Land* (1846) and *California, In-doors and Out; Or, How we Farm, Mine and Live generally in the Golden State* (1856).

² *The Ideal Attained* (1865). For a biographical sketch of Eliza Farnham, see W. David Lewis’s article in *Notable American Women* (598-600). For a more detailed biographical account, see Jo Ann Levy, *Unsettling the West*.

Although this active reformer was involved in many different battles, her paramount interest lay in Woman's nature and mission which *Woman and her Era* exposed in great detail. Although fed by personal experience, her work was clearly conceived as a scientific demonstration of woman's superiority. That superiority, Farnham claimed, was primarily inscribed in the female body. In the first part of her book, which is about 120 pages long, she uses all the scientific knowledge available in her age and boldly proposes to prove that woman's position in the scale of life is the highest one, second to God's. Thus, her work can be read as an attempt to use science at the service of Woman. This is a somewhat extraordinary enterprise since most scientific discourses in the nineteenth century tended to belittle the female body and demonstrate its innate inferiority.

Although Farnham's scientific arguments and logical reasoning are not always convincing, she clearly perceived the paradox which struck Victorian women and she turned it to her own advantage. The nineteenth century, indeed, promoted the cult of True Womanhood, idealized the Home, glorified the "Angel in the House" and readily accepted woman's *moral* superiority. However, it also treated women as intellectual inferiors seriously handicapped by complex reproductive organs. In a way, Eliza Farnham proposed to eliminate that paradoxical response to woman by exposing the glorious anatomy of the female angel.

All this was not done out of love for science, however, but for Humanity for Farnham's bold and simple goal was to "speed the day of Woman's Illumination" (viii) and herald "Woman's Era". Only Woman, she believed, could save the human race and improve it. This vision, which has been called "apocalyptic feminism", was both, as we shall see, profoundly revolutionary and conservative.³

The purpose of this paper is to examine the part that science plays in Eliza Farnham's project, first as an epistemological object giving legitimacy to her demonstration, and second as a subject providing convincing evidence. This will lead us to raise a certain number of questions: how does Farnham consider science and scientists? How does she position her own voice? How does she reject, adopt or adapt the contemporary scientific discourses on the female body? And finally, how does her vision of female physiology shape her view of male bodies and of men's roles?

³ The phrase "apocalyptic feminism" is used by Elizabeth K. Helsinger to refer to a belief in "a female saviour leading the way to a fuller humanity and ushering in a new era of community and love. This vision of woman's unique role (...) attracted both eccentrics like Eliza Farnham and, to a certain extent, even staunch conservatives like Sara Josepha Hale (...). For some, like Farnham, it amounted to an absolute claim for female superiority; for others, like Margaret Fuller, a temporary claim for woman's special role within an overall vision of human equality". Helsinger notes that although this view was held by a minority, it helped promote the reforms related to temperance, sexual purity, prisons and corruption which marked the late nineteenth century. *The Woman Question*, XV.

The ambiguous place of science in *Woman and her Era*

The two volumes of *Woman and her Era* examine a wide variety of arguments in order to prove the superiority of Woman. Thus, volume 1 has chapters dealing with religion, art, history, popular sentiment and common observation. Similarly, volume 2 includes a comparative study of the “affectional qualities” of the sexes, a part on “Woman in the Kingdom of Uses” and a final chapter entitled “Era of the Feminine”. As its title indicates, the book reads as a prophecy in which Farnham heralds a forthcoming age ruled by purity, democracy, love and persuasion.

Farnham’s prophecy, however, is deeply anchored in its own time and in the spirit of reforms that pervaded the nineteenth century:

This is an age of Revolutions. It has been well said, that History is re-written in the light of Modern science. It is equally true that human nature, with its relations, the fountain and source of History, is to be reread in the light of the wondrous revelations which this Nineteenth Century is making in its hitherto hidden parts. (149)

Woman and her Era proposes a radical re-writing of human nature, which accounts for the fact that the “Organic Argument” is the first one to be examined. By grounding woman’s specificity in her very physiology, Farnham said she intended to reveal *Nature’s* plan and natural laws are repeatedly invoked as the irrefutable proof of woman’s superiority.

Although it was published five years after Charles Darwin’s *Origin of Species*, Farnham’s conception of nature is heavily shaped by natural theology and romanticism. Like many middle-class popularizers of Victorian science, she praised “the divine qualities of the natural world” and believed in a teleological frame (Lightman, 188). Even though her demonstration of woman’s superiority is also shaped and inspired by evolutionary thought, nature is clearly conceived as a product of God’s will. Writing in a post Darwinian context of increased tensions between religion and science, Farnham seeks to reconcile both fields:

(...) organization, the primitive language of Deity in the world of life, and the sole proof touching it which science can recognize, will be no more studied as an end, but as a means, employed by the Creator for the development of higher purposes than can be expressed in gross matter; and when this takes place, the methods of the scientists and spiritualists will be at one. (22-23)

Although she clearly differentiates herself from a professional scientist, Farnham stages herself as a widely-read woman, able to summarize, explain and simplify complex theories to a lay audience. Thus, the text has a polyvocal quality, blending technical passages

with biblical metaphors and sentimental poems with scientific descriptions.⁴ In order to enhance her credibility, Farnham includes lengthy quotes from the respected scientists of her day, such as the English naturalist William B. Carpenter or the German physiologist Ernst Karl Van Baer, or the American scientist John William Draper. She shows special respect for those men for they are specialists in physiology which she considers as a young and promising discipline, able to shed light on the mysterious connections between the body and the soul (14-15).

On the whole, *Woman and her Era* reflects the “heady optimism about the powers and achievements of scientific inquiry” that characterized the mid nineteenth century (Winter, 25). However, it is striking to notice that Farnham’s relation to science and to scientists is fundamentally ambiguous: indeed, on the one hand, she uses biology as a clincher but on the other hand, she dismisses contemporary science as a limited and materialistic discipline. Sex differences, rather than religious piety, explain this ambivalence. Indeed, science is clearly presented as a masculine discipline, exercised and expanded by *male* observers. Borrowing the familiar dichotomy of separate spheres, Farnham acknowledges that man is endowed with reason and woman with intuition, but ultimately, it is feminine intuition that she values and she introduces the notion of an intuitive science with which woman is gifted. In the third chapter of the second volume, she explains that men and women have different methods towards Truth. Man, for whom Truth is external, uses the inductive approach, relying on his intellect and observation in slow, laborious demonstrations; he is on the human side and limited by the boundaries of the experimental. By contrast, woman, who has internalized Truth and is already “in the sacred presence”, adopts the deductive method, not for proof but for pleasure of acquaintance with details; she is close to the divine and the Ideal is her kingdom (vol.2, 185-187). Farnham’s enterprise mixes both approaches, which accounts for the tautological flavour of her arguments. Indeed, in her attempt to provide the scientific demonstration of an age-old “intuitive Truth” (woman’s superiority), she considers superiority both as a postulate and a theorem.

It is interesting to note that among all the scientific disciplines that Farnham mentions, it is phrenology that she considers the most reliable. Phrenology, at the time she was writing, was losing credibility, but it had enjoyed a wide popularity in the first half of the nineteenth

⁴ Her description of the brain, for example, includes technical terms, such as “cineritious”, “medullary”, “cerebrum”, “cerebellum”, “ganglia” (73-75). By contrast, the passages dealing with the sexual organs are cloaked in Victorian euphemisms and the chapter on the organic argument closes on Patmore’s poem, “Angel in the House”.

century. Well-read in phrenology herself⁵, she claimed that it offered a complete science of humanity “organic, spiritual and social” and that it reconciled the body and the mind (15). Phrenology in itself did not claim that women were superior, it even confirmed that they had a weaker intellect; however, it was an embodied philosophy favourable to women since it stated that the individual’s constitution was determined yet *improvable* (Russett, 17-22). Thus, phrenology offered Farnham the most congenial approach to her enterprise. Although her book is not fraught with phrenological theories, her avowed adhesion to this increasingly criticized discipline probably enabled her to indirectly challenge and transcend the male-managed realm of orthodox science.

Although paying respect to established science, Eliza Farnham’s voice is deeply subversive and doubtful. Her deification of woman, which indirectly leads to a feminisation of the divine, confines man and science to a materialistic universe. The ambiguous role attributed to science and scientists in *Woman and her Era* ultimately confirms that “science continued to be contested territory in the latter half of the nineteenth century” (Lightman, 205).

Revisiting biology or a bio-mystical reading of the female body.

In her attempt to ground woman’s superiority in the female body, Eliza Farnham had to twist and adapt the contemporary medical and scientific discourses on that subject. Medical literature on the female sex was abundant in the nineteenth century and debates about women’s physiological, intellectual and developmental capacities characterized the period.

In the feverish atmosphere of the health movement and the rising medical specialties, phrenologists, physiologists, gynaecologists and craniologists had all something to say about the inside and the outside of women’s bodies.

Most of the time, the conclusions underlined woman’s physical fragility and intellectual inferiority. The brain and the womb were widely considered as the two major weak points which prohibited total equality with men. With a generous amount of sophisticated measures, craniologists had concluded that the female brain was smaller, lighter and less effective than the male’s (Russett, 34-36). As for the womb and ovaries, they were featured as pathological organs which often handicapped their possessors. Women were warned against the dangers of menstruation and menopause which could easily impair not only their bodies but also their minds. Indeed, most nineteenth-century doctors firmly

⁵ Besides giving lectures on phrenology, Farnham had applied its principles when she implemented new methods at Sing Sing prison. In 1846, she published an American edition of a treatise written by the English phrenologist Marmaduke Blake Sampson, entitled *Rationale of Crime, and its Appropriate Treatment*.

believed that the reproductive organs were connected to the nervous system and that menstruating, pregnant and post-menopausal women were naturally more prone to a wide variety of nervous troubles ranging from simple fancies to downright insanity or hysteria (Smith-Rosenberg & Rosenberg, 12-27; Smith-Rosenberg, 182-216).

In a century fascinated by the origin and the development of human races, the place of women on the life scale was also given much notice. Most anthropologists defined women as inferior on the evolutionary ladder and compared them to children or to Blacks (Russett, 11).

Much of the scientific discourse had social implications since the biological and intellectual inferiority of the female sex was invoked to exclude middle and upper-class women from the public sphere: woman's place, Nature dictated, was in the Home which represented a necessary balance to man's active and competitive sphere. The apologists of the separate sphere theory heavily insisted on the sexes' different but complementary qualities and the global distribution of sex roles ultimately reflected an egalitarian ideal, a sort of separate but equal rhetoric which supposedly led to social harmony.

In this gender configuration of social roles, woman was given a positive, regenerative function which took a particular dimension in the millenarian atmosphere characterizing the nineteenth century, and which different reformers defended. For example, Sarah Hale, editor of *Godey's Lady's Magazine*, predicted that: "the moral power in which [women] excel, is yet to rule the world. The empire of physical strength, in which lay man's superiority is (...) wearing out (...) the reign of brute force is now over, and that of intellect and feeling is at hand."⁶

Where did Eliza Farnham stand in that picture? It is clear that she promoted separate spheres but she did not believe in the relative equality of each sphere. In fact, she pushed the theory of separate spheres to its utmost logic and her radical belief in woman's superiority cast man in a lesser, menial role: that of sheer material provider. Farnham acknowledged woman's dependence but as a master would acknowledge his need for a servant. Like Sarah Hale, she strongly promoted woman's identification with the Home but, more actively than anyone, she pushed its limits to embrace the Heavens and the whole human race. As for the medical and scientific discourses on the female body, she accepted most of their technical content but rejected their conclusions.

Indeed, Farnham's examination of the inside and the outside of the female body accepts the assumption that woman is physically weaker than man and that she is a "nervous",

⁶ Quoted in Helsinger, vol.2, 200.

suffering creature endowed with complex organs. However, she twists those arguments in favor of woman. Thus, in her vision, physical weakness becomes a sign of spiritual strength, biological complexity reflects divine sophistication, suffering is part of the female redemptive mission and nerves represent fine connections between the body and the spirit.

Farnham unfolds her demonstration along three lines: first, she deals with woman's physiology, then with her nervous (cranial and extra-cranial) structure and finally she examines her place on the evolutionary scale.

Her examination of female physiology begins with this syllogism:

Life is exalted in proportion to its Organic and Functional Complexity;
Woman's organism is more Complex and her totality of Function larger than those of any other being inhabiting our earth,
Therefore her position in the scale of Life is the most exalted—the Sovereign one. (26)

Her central argument is that the male body, compared to the female's, is devoid of organs, therefore of functions and powers. Thus, the womb and the breasts are considered as the sacred attributes of maternity which Farnham considers woman's "divine service" (93).

Farnham embraces the idea that the cyclical action of the womb was accompanied by a host of mental and emotional states but she places them above the masculine realm of sinful pleasure and dry intellect: "This unique function separates the Ante-maternal from the Ante-Paternal period by a world of fine susceptibilities, emotions, affections, yearnings, which transcend, as intellectual power does mere knowledge, or as moral purpose mere intellect, the limits of self-enjoyment which bound the horizon of the masculine"(42). By contrast, menstruation is "the open window of the feminine soul, affording its longest and divinest outlook beyond self and the present" (42).

The passage on menstruation, which is cloaked in Victorian euphemisms and lyrical metaphors, describes the young woman as a priestess entering a new spiritual world:

Here sweeter ardors take possession of the soul; Faith lights the inner fires that have lain unkindled through all the gay years of infancy (...) the Ideal opens its jasper doors to the yearning eye—all the mountain peaks, that were before shrouded, shine out in the new-descending light, and life is aglow with bright—it may be shifting—realities and intense hopes. (43)

Farnham also considered the "periodic action" as sacred because she shared the widespread belief that women were fertile during their menses and because the suffering it could bring enhanced "courage and lofty faith" (43). Thus, we see that, contrary to many women's rights' activists, she did not reject the fatality of pain. But instead of insisting, like doctors did, on the debilitating effect of pain, she invoked the elevating power of martyrdom.

On the whole, however, menstruation is seen as a period of strength, a cyclical renewal of woman's "most occult forces" which restores nervous equilibrium and contrasts with the male logic of waste (44-45). This conception clearly transcends the pathological approach.

It is striking to notice that her criticism of the medical discourse becomes more radical as she proceeds to expose her revolutionary vision of conception and menopause. Because she meant to persuade her readers that the female principle had the upper hand in the reproductive process, and because this view was clearly marginal at the time, she starts by doubting the reliability of current knowledge on the subject: a myriad of contradictory and confusing theories, she says, has led to a "pitiful result—O representing to-day pretty fairly, the sum of our actual knowledge of *law* herein" (46). Farnham was actually lucid since the exact mechanism of conception was known decades later; nonetheless, she attempted to put forth her own theory: if research has failed, she claims, it is because male scientists erroneously conceived woman as a simple medium, and not as the main creator. Farnham rejected the findings of comparative embryology by claiming that the laws governing the animal kingdom could not be applied to the higher human kingdom. Instead, she proposed to rely on the power of deduction—since woman is a superior creature, she cannot be second in the generative process—and she quotes at length a Dr Redfield whose theory is reminiscent of that of the eighteenth-century ovists. Redfield, an American phrenologist, states that the father has a minor role in the generative process since sperm is but the food of the ovum; for him (and for Farnham who speaks through him) man is disconnected from the offspring and any physical resemblance is simply due to the psychological impression that the father makes on the mother. This conception of the male semen as mere food for the embryo's development perfectly reflects Farnham's more global vision of gender roles in which man is merely a material provider.

The idealization of motherhood and the general depreciation of elderly women lead Farnham to propose a bold revision of menopause. For Farnham, menopause must not be seen as a loss but as a gain of power and of womanhood; it must be considered as a physical, psychical and ultimately mystical metamorphosis which transforms woman into the spiritual mother of humanity. Thanks to menopause, Farnham explains that woman's body can reach the ultimate "regenerative" stage (58). That menopause is a hectic and perturbed transitional phase, she does not deny, but she attributes the perturbations to the centrifugal transfer of powers from the womb to the soul. This metamorphosis, which leads to what she calls the "superior maternal system" (65), is described as a painful sequence of deaths and revivals which turns the aging woman into a Christlike figure.

Perhaps because the author herself was approaching this critical stage, she radically and repeatedly denounces man's scornful attitude towards post-menopausal women. In fact, Farnham clearly puts forth that man's social contempt and scientific ignorance, rather than physiological processes *per se*, constitute the major threats for the aging woman. Claiming that "*a pathological can only come through a physiological possibility*" (78), she boldly assimilates men and male scientists to inferior creatures:

When, therefore, men congratulate themselves as being superior to Woman because of their exemption from the suffering and disabilities peculiar to her, it is the Orang congratulating himself that he can never lose the cunning right hand which may make a watch or a telescope, and so bring the rolling heavens into the observatory (...) Superior for his position and work on the earth man undoubtedly is, in his exclusion from woman's pathological world, as, for the same reason, the fish is superior to him for swimming in the sea, the bird for the upper air (...); but superior in his position and work, no, except less be reckoned better than more, lower than higher. (78)

In dealing with the nervous structure of the female body, Farnham gladly adopts the widespread belief that the female reproductive organs are connected to the nervous system. Indeed, making nerves "feminine" amounts to making woman divine since nerves constitute a link with the spiritual, immaterial world.

Besides, she admits that men's skulls and brains are larger than women's but she reverses the argument by saying that more matter amounts to less spirit. In other words, man has the sad privilege of quantity while woman possesses quality: "Her brain is finer, as her other tissues are; it is more complex, as her general structure is. Through the fineness comes a higher character, in powers of the same order; (...) more penetrative reach of faculty (...) a state more receptive of illumination (...) every added convolution spreads a surface for this vestment, whose presence invites the gods (...)" (74-75). As a result, man is left with a bigger but less sophisticated brain.⁷ Likewise, his body is physically stronger, "of a greater relative proportion of the osseous and fibrous tissues", whereas woman's is all nerves (81).

Man's superior muscular power is yet another sign, for Farnham, that men's stage of development is still entangled in brutish strength. On several occasions, the muscular, selfish, active man and the sexist, short-sighted male scientist are compared to animals or inferior human beings. Thus, besides the analogy with the orang we just mentioned, man is said to be "of the Bos or Equine fiber" (87) and, when she denounces the intellectual flaw of the

⁷ Interestingly enough, Farnham rejects the marginal theory developed by the German physiologist Friedrich Tiedemann (1781-1861) who claimed that female brains were larger. According to her, female brains are necessarily smaller because "an equal quantity of brain of the finer quality would cause the destruction instead of the development (...) of the lesser and more delicate body." Besides, she points out that the female brain is bound to develop and expand once women emancipate and occupy the place they deserve since "use is the condition of full normal volume in any organ." (75-76).

scientist who judges the female body while assuming *man* as the standard, she compares him to a Chinese savant or an African King unable to “see better methods than those he employs” (77). In fact, this depreciative view of the male sex reflects the main point she initially proposes to demonstrate, that “these two sexes are also two grades of development and that the female sex is the higher” (38).

Her last argument, steeped in Darwinian language, drives the point home. It deals with rudimentary organs and explains that the contrast between the undeveloped, useless male mammae and the wonderfully developed woman’s breasts proves that woman has reached the highest stage of physiological development: at that point, Farnham believes that evolutionary processes no longer concern woman since woman is perfect, and why would nature want to alter perfection? For the readers who would still doubt her, she invokes the beauty of the female body as a proof of perfection: beauty, she says, is the “external sign of a spiritual nature” which needs no mask: after all, aren’t these beards and hairy chests designed to conceal the imperfect body of the male whose “whole life is a game of concealments and surprises” (106-107)?

However, although Farnham admires the divine perfection of the female body, she acknowledges that much progress remains to be achieved in the intellectual realm. Women, she claims, have had no opportunity to develop their intellects because they are still in a state of physical and mental oppression, subject to man’s rule. For Farnham, however, women’s rights activism is not the answer because the egalitarian ideal is the wrong one. The female angel, she argues, is unfit for work outside her sphere, and she takes the example of the women slaves in the South and the female workers in the North whom physical work has turned into physical and spiritual “monsters”; halfway between manhood and womanhood, those women’s progeny is bound to be inferior (88). Besides, if we follow Farnham’s reasoning, why would women ask for *equality*? It was almost as ludicrous, after all, as for man to ask for equality with the ape.

Farnham’s book, like Farnham herself, finally emerges as a paradox: it is at once an anti feminist and an “arch feminist” manifesto; it is also at once revolutionary and conservative. Indeed, it is probably the first ambitious assertion of woman’s dominance made by an American and it heralds the gynaecocracy theory that Lester Ward developed two decades later. But at the same time, its language and assumptions take for granted the ideal of domesticity as well as a hierarchical vision of race and class, which casts a doubt as to the universality of womanhood. Indeed, although Farnham speaks to all women and announces

Woman's era, it seems that the ideal, angelic creature she dreams of is essentially the white, middle-class educated woman.

Woman and her Era did not meet the success Eliza Farnham expected as the book only went through one edition and received mitigated reviews. Critic Helen Woodward points out that the temperate tone of those reviews is surprising, given the provocative assertion of female superiority (*The Bold Women*, 341). It is possible that the conventional style and exceeding length of the book somewhat muffled the boldest appeals to women. It is also likely that the segregated pattern of gender roles promoted by Farnham ultimately comforted man's position. However, one should not underestimate the profound originality and radicalism of a work which "called upon women to exult in their ovaries, or rule the world on the basis of their breasts" (Woodward, 344) and which was meant to be read as Woman's Manifest Destiny.

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