

# NINETEENTH-CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

Issue 20.3 (Winter 2024)

---

## Phrenology's Lost History as a Nineteenth-Century Liberation Science for Women

*Equal Natures, Popular Brain Science and Victorian Women's Writing.* Shalyn Claggett. New York: SUNY Press, 2023. 258 pp.

Reviewed by Lizzie Harris McCormick, SUNY Suffolk

<1> An ugly part of the legacy of Victorian science is its history of being leveraged to underwrite a social order that subjugated women, racialized peoples, and the mentally or physically disabled. That truism comes out of the last decades of interdisciplinary nineteenth-century scholarship, heavily informed by feminist, queer, post-colonial and similar studies. This work reveals various ways many of these “scientific” grounds for discrimination were subverted – either directly or in creative re-formations – in favor of the oppressed. Yet, even within this rich and nuanced critical ecosystem, the freshness and excellence of Shalyn Claggett’s *Equal Natures, Popular Brain Science and Victorian Women's Writing* stands out for its quality, insight, and bravery.

<2> By carefully focusing on Victorian women writers’ uses of phrenology, a wildly popular nineteenth-century pseudo-science to which a wide swath of the British reading public had access, Claggett opens up new terrain for understanding the biological arguments made in the era in favor of gender equality. Phrenology purported to identify aspects of innate character through study of the cranium’s physical dimensions. Claggett uncovers and analyzes how her subjects seized on its potential. No matter how varied the strategies and ideological permutations, women writers looked to scientifically validate and elucidate one critical idea: intellectual capacity, developmental potential, and multifaceted personality are as inborn in women as they are in men, and in similar scale and qualities. The skull proved it. In this way, essentialist arguments served as a powerful antidote to pervasive social and scientific formulations by which these capacities were acquired, inscribed on a *tabula rasa* of mind. It also provided a tool to drive a wedge into the circular double bind by which women’s mental limitations were seen as derived from their

exclusion from intellectual and other kinds of development, and then this supposed inferiority was used to justify the exclusion. As Claggett demonstrates, phrenological study become a powerful intervention in the history of feminist thought.

<3> Critically reviewing the history of medicine and science – as well as direct and subversive literary applications of ideas from the zeitgeist – is a solid and well-worn approach to this kind of work. Where Claggett’s book excels is in its embrace of and mastery at dismantling ideological tensions between some of the necessary formulations of its thesis and negative contemporary associations with biological essentialism. The “third-rail” nature of these debates could have certainly deterred research into the productive work of these Victorian citizen-scientist-feminists, but we are fortunate that Claggett was not dissuaded.

<4> To begin with the most obvious of these problematic areas, phrenology existed along the spectrum of certain notoriously misused anthropometric “sciences,” such as eugenics. These biologically based fields of inquiry served as fonts of endless scientific colonialism, racism, sexism, and ableism. The horrors driven by abuses of scientifically-unsound ideas have marred Western history, well into recent times. This fuels an academic reflex against any openness to even some metaphorically productive and progressive uses of these ideas. This is, of course, what Claggett’s inquiry into women writers’ approaches to phrenology reveals.

<5> The other conceptual allergy, quickly identifiable to those working in and around gender research in all fields, involves the scientific and social construction of gender vis-à-vis biology. Questions involving biological essentialism have become *the* fault lines of academic, scientific and – especially now – political debate. In our current intellectual moment, wading into this landscape carries risks. It is intellectually honest to acknowledge that some Victorian women writers found liberation in biological essentialism, as *Equal Natures* does, without defending biological essentialism itself.

<6> Claggett’s “Introduction” contextualizes the socio-scientific structure of early nineteenth-century England. It also announces the book’s three aims, developing ample and fascinating discussions around each. First, it squares off – in nuanced and knowledgeable ways – against the rigidity of “contemporary feminist thought” which argues that “essentialism has been the exclusive province of patriarchal values and reactionary political agendas” (4). Claggett’s aim is at the stiffness and hegemony of thinking, rather than the value of its thought. Next, *Equal Natures* presents research into a specific and overlooked historical aspect of

women's engagement with science, ignored in part because their specialties were of the popular and not academic variety. For those interested in the interplay of Victorian literature and psychology, Claggett seeks to "significantly expand our knowledge of Victorian literature that grapples with the social implications of cerebral localization" – especially those texts written "before and outside" mainstream scientific research (10).

<7> Chapter One, "Feminist Phrenologists and the Battle for the Brain," demonstrates an impressive array of historical research into the birth and popularity of phrenology, its role in the early nineteenth-century imagination, and its availability to women interested in the interplay (and potential contradictions) of biological gender and social power structures. The work skillfully traces the development of the varied debates between Victorian philosophers, scientists, and social activists throughout the century.

<8> Chapter Two begins a pattern, to be continued in later chapters, of weaving excellent literary close readings of major texts with biographical information about women authors' access to, knowledge of, and – interestingly - motivations for using phrenology heavily in their work. In "Of Two Minds: Charlotte and Anne Brontë's Use of Innate Psychology," Claggett begins the literary readings by contrasting Charlotte's well-analyzed and hegemonic uses of phrenology in texts like *Jane Eyre* (1847) with Anne's more subversive takes in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) and *Agnes Gray* (1847). As Charlotte's approach has stood as the only major subject of scholarship into women writers and phrenology, it has had outsized – and misleading – influence. Her work, "rife with characters attending to the contours of foreheads" consistently "endorse[s] the accuracy" of mainstream phrenological science (64). In the hands of her sister, Anne, however, phrenology is used to show the cruel cultural expectations that expected women to "transform" their husbands after marriage, no matter their innate dispositions and, more tragically, their intractably inborn depravities.

<9> The Third Chapter engages with the lectures and writings of Harriet Martineau, who found in phrenology physical proof for her materialist belief that the mind was a product of the brain, and not the soul. She was able to concretize her "feeling," as she expressed in her *Autobiography*, "that the theological belief of almost everybody in the civilized world is baseless" (100). The chapter traces her work as a public intellectual and "material rebirth" born of her sustained interaction with phrenologist Henry George Atkinson.

<10> “Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s Psychological Critique of Social Identity” analyzes how the sensation novel *The Trial of The Serpent* (1861) uses phrenology as a plot point to emphasize the ways innate biology may be misaligned with social position and appearances. The novel opens and closes with phrenological analyses. It opens with public disdain for the traveling cranium-reader who notes schoolteacher Jabez North’s criminality, and then concludes with the vindication that North is, indeed, a murderer. This is a simplification of the plot, of course, and of Claggett’s excellent analysis. However, the novel’s interest in emphasizing the potential disconnect between public status and innate psychology serves as a critique of social structures at large.

<11> The final literary chapter, “George Eliot and Biological Destiny” traces the writer’s movement from “initial interest in phrenology to a staunch critique of its social implications” (165). The chapter focuses more on the latter, in a fitting conclusion to Claggett’s research. It reviews Eliot’s literary hostilities towards the science in “The Lifted Veil” (1859) and “A Minor Prophet” (1865), alongside a particularly fascinating discussion of the many uses of essentialism in *Daniel Deronda* (1876), despite her misgivings about the science.

<12> Shalyn Claggett has done a great service to scholars interested in Victorian ontologies of all kinds, as well as to those interested in developmental vectors of nineteenth-century literature, philosophy, gender discourse, and brain sciences.