

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: “A BEAUTIFUL MIND: FACES, BEAUTY,
AND THE BRAIN IN THE ANGLO-
ATLANTIC WORLD, 1780-1870”

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In the years surrounding the Enlightenment and the American Revolution, Americans began critiquing slavery and arguing for women’s intellectual equality. Yet by the early decades of the nineteenth century, white male scientists increasingly described the minds and bodies of white men as innately and unalterably superior to those of white women and African Americans. How did early Americans reconcile this Enlightenment and Revolutionary commitment to universal human equality with the very real persistence of *inequality* in their society? To answer this question, “A Beautiful Mind” focuses on physiognomy: a popular transatlantic science predicated on the idea that facial features revealed the inner nature of individuals.

Because most people in early America believed the head and face were the physical features that best revealed the internal capacities of individuals, this project begins from the premise that we cannot comprehend how early Americans understood human difference or navigated social relationships unless we unravel the connections they made between faces, bodies, and brains. At the most basic level, it argues that

physiognomy constituted an influential scientific discourse and widespread social practice—a technology of character detection that early Americans used to rationalize the hierarchies that defined their worlds.

Through this new science of beauty, many Americans suggested that social inequalities were not only necessary facts of life, but also empirically verifiable realities. Perhaps the minds and faces of some people were simply better than others, they posited, and perhaps there were superior human specimens who truly deserved the social, political, and economic dominance they currently retained. Yet even as some people used this popular science to argue for white supremacy, justify gender inequities, and enforce class hierarchies, numerous Americans manipulated physiognomy's slippery language for a wide array of purposes, using it to undermine existing inequities. This dissertation highlights their voices and experiences, showing how women and people of color created unique forms of scientific knowledge and shaped the trajectory of American intellectual thought. In doing so, this project not only asks scholars to rethink what might have counted as science in the early republic; it also challenges us to reimagine who might have counted as a scientist.

A BEAUTIFUL MIND: FACES, BEAUTY, AND THE BRAIN IN THE
ANGLO-ATLANTIC WORLD, 1780-1860

by

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List of Abbreviations

APS: American Philosophical Society

AAS: American Antiquarian Society

APJ: American Phrenological Journal

BA: Boston Athenaeum

CPP: College of Physicians of Philadelphia

HSP: Historical Society of Pennsylvania

LCP: Library Company of Philadelphia

MHS: Massachusetts Historical Society

VHS: Virginia Historical Society

Introduction

In 1776, America's founders declared independence from Britain, proudly proclaiming that "all men are created equal." But these elite white men also faced a troubling conundrum. Despite their assertions of egalitarianism, many were also determined to maintain the racial and gender hierarchies that governed their society. How, then, did Americans reconcile their post-Revolutionary commitment to liberty, justice, and equality with the continued subordination of white women and people of color? To answer that question, this dissertation explores the connections that early Americans drew between appearance, intellect, and character. It focuses particularly on physiognomy: a popular transatlantic science predicated on the assumption that facial features revealed the inner nature of individuals.¹

By recovering the history of facial analysis in the early national and antebellum decades, "A Beautiful Mind" reveals how physiognomy shaped debates about social distinction in America. It exposes, for instance, how white male physicians, politicians, and popular writers marshalled this discipline to both

¹ Edmund Morgan famously addressed this apparent paradox in his pathbreaking work *American Slavery, American Freedom* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1975). Since then, numerous scholars have debated the meaning of the American Revolution and its significance for marginalized Americans. For those who emphasize the revolutionary nature of republican ideals, see Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017 [1967]); Pauline Maier, *From Resistance to Revolution: Colonial Radicals and the Development of American Opposition to Britain, 1765-1776* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972); and Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991). For more recent work, which tends to emphasize the failures of republican ideology for women, African Americans, and other marginalized groups, see Alfred F. Young and Gregory H. Nobles, *Whose American Revolution Was It?: Historians Interpret the Founding* (New York: New York University Press, 2011); Woody Holton: *Unruly Americans and the Origins of the Constitution* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007); Young, *Liberty Tree: Ordinary People and the American Revolution* (New York: New York University Press, 2006); Gary Nash, *The Unknown American Revolution: The Unruly Birth of Democracy and the Struggle to Create America* (New York: Viking, 2005); Young, *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party: Memory and the American Revolution* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000); and Holton, *Forced Founders: Indians, Debtors, Slaves, & the Making of the American Revolution in Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

rationalize and reify systemic inequality. Invoking the explanatory power of science, society's most powerful actors exploited physiognomy's apparent objectivity to depict subordinated groups as their mental, moral, and physical inferiors. Even more importantly, though, this dissertation reveals how both white women and people of color adopted and coopted existing intellectual discourses, creatively using scientific facial analysis to advocate for more expansive notions of both racial justice and gender equity.

Scholars have long argued that early Americans relied on theories of biological determinism to justify racism, sexism, and class inequality. But they have been less effective at explaining precisely *how* scientific knowledge filtered into popular culture. How did ordinary people interpret the human body—and how did they create cultural meaning from it? This project answers those questions by rediscovering the history of a once-pervasive but now-forgotten science. It contends that during the early national and antebellum decades, scientific facial analysis became one of the primary tools that people employed to understand both others and themselves. As a practical discipline that simultaneously shaped both popular and professional practices of science, physiognomy became a prism through which Americans perceived, processed, and discussed both human difference and social hierarchy.²

² For foundational scholarship on how both Americans and Europeans have historically used science to enforce racial and gender hierarchies, see Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Myths of Gender: Biological Theories About Women and Men* (New York: Basic Books, 1992 [1985]); Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990); Londa L. Schiebinger, *Nature's Body: Gender in the Making of Modern Science* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993); Cynthia Eagle Russett, *Sexual Science: The Victoria Construction of Womanhood* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989); Stephen J. Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996 [1981]); Carroll Smith-Rosenberg and Charles Rosenberg, "The Female Animal: Medical and Biological Views of Woman and Her Role in Nineteenth-Century America," *The Journal of American History* 60, no. 2 (September 1973): 332-356; George Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character*

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, science, art, and literature were not distinctly delimited disciplines but rather mutually supportive technologies that people used to better understand their world and the people who inhabited it.³ Taking this reality as its starting point, “A Beautiful Mind” relies on a wide variety of “texts,” from manuscripts, novels, and scientific treatises, to periodicals, pamphlets, and pictures. By analyzing published works and visual images, it illustrates how physiognomy permeated both elite and popular culture. But the project’s evidentiary base also extends beyond printed materials, delving into the manuscripts that Americans left behind. In this way, it evinces how literary and scientific discourses penetrated everyday life and shows how different groups of people repurposed the same ideas for distinct aims.

The project also argues for the value of interdisciplinary inquiry by incorporating methodologies from literature, art history, and the history of science.

and *Destiny, 1817-1914* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1971); and Winthrop Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968). Sharrona Pearl has also examined how people used physiognomy to make distinctions of race and ethnicity in the Victorian era. See Pearl, *About Faces: Physiognomy in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).

³ As one historian has contended, “science rubbed shoulders with a wide range of literary modes” during the early decades of the nineteenth century, “and its promoters helped themselves to these modes in their own writing.” See Ralph O’Connor, “Reflections on Popular Science in Britain: Genres, Categories, and Historians,” *Isis* 100, no. 2 (2009): 333-345.” 339. For scholarship on the intersections of art, science, and literature in early America, see Catherine E. Kelly, *The Republic of Taste: Art, Politics, and Everyday Life in Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016); Marcy Dinius, *The Camera and the Press: American Visual and Print Culture in the Age of the Daguerreotype* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012); Wendy Bellion, *Citizen Spectator: Art, Illusion, and Visual Perception in Early National America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Christopher J. Lukasik, *Discerning Characters: The Culture of Appearance in Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011); Karsten Fitz and Klaus-Dieter Gross, “Early American Visual Culture: Introduction,” *Amerikastudien / American Studies* 50, no. 3, Special Issue on Early American Visual Culture (2005): 427-430; David C. Ward, *Charles Willson Peale: Art and Selfhood in the Early Republic* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Wendy Bellion, “Heads of State: Profile and Politics in Jeffersonian America,” in *New Media, 1740-1915*, eds. Lisa Gitelman and Geoffrey B. Pingree (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 31-59; and Shawn Michelle Smith, *American Archives: Gender, Race, and Class in Visual Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

Literary scholars and art historians have long recognized physiognomy's importance in novels and visual culture, but they have not provided a social and cultural history of how Americans used this science to evaluate others and imagine their own identities.⁴ Historians, on the other hand, have written extensively about race, sex, and gender in the early republic, yet they have not explored the history of scientific facial analysis.⁵ By emphasizing the entwined nature of textual, aesthetic, and

⁴ For recent works on physiognomy in literary studies, see Lukasik, *Discerning Characters*; Peter Edwards Jaros, "Persons, Publics, Physiognomics: Reading and Performing Character in the Early Republic," Ph.D. Diss. Northwestern University, 2009; Martin Porter, *Windows of the Soul: European Physiognomy, 1470-1780* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); and Lucy Hartley, *Physiognomy and the Meaning of Expression in Nineteenth-Century Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). See also John Graham, "Lavater's Physiognomy in England," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 22 (1961): 561-72; Graeme Tytler, "Lavater and Physiognomy in English Fiction 1790-1832," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 7, no. 3 (April 1995): 293-310; Barbara M. Benedict, "Reading Faces: Physiognomy and Epistemology in Late Eighteenth-Century Sentimental Novels," *Studies in Philology* 92, no. 3 (Summer 1995): 311-328; and Juliet McMaster, *The Index of the Mind: Physiognomy in the Novel* (Lethbridge, Alberta: University of Lethbridge Press, 1990). Scott J. Juengel has also written extensively about the connections between literature and physiognomy. See "Countenancing History: Mary Wollstonecraft, Samuel Stanhope Smith, and Enlightenment Racial Science," *ELH* 68, no. 4 (Winter 2001) 897-927; "Face, Figure, Physiognomics: Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and the Moving Image," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 33, no. 3 (Summer 2000) 353-376; and "Godwin, Lavater and the Pleasures of Surface," *Studies in Romanticism* 35, no. 1 (Spring 1996) 73-98. For art historians who have examined physiognomy, see Joan K. Stemmler, "The Physiognomical Portraits of Johann Caspar Lavater," *The Art Bulletin* 75, no. 1 (March 1993): 151-168; Mary Cowling, *The Artist as Anthropologist: The Representation of Type and Character in Victorian Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); and Brandon Brame Fortune, "Portraits of Virtue and Genius: Pantheons of Worthies and Public Portraiture in the Early American Republic, 1780-1820," (PhD diss., University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 1986).

⁵ For some foundational examples on gender and sexuality, see Kate Haulman, *The Politics of Fashion in Eighteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Susan Klepp, *Revolutionary Conceptions: Women, Fertility, and Family Limitation in America, 1760-1820* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); Rosemarie Zagarri, *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007); Clare Lyons, *Sex Among the Rabble: An Intimate History of Gender and Power in the Age of Revolution, Philadelphia, 1730-1830* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); and Nancy Cott, "Passionlessness: An Interpretation of Victorian Sexual Ideology, 1790-1850," *Signs* 4, no. 2 (Winter, 1978): 219-236. On race, see Bruce Dain, *A Hideous Monster of the Mind: American Race Theory in the Early Republic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002); Leslie M. Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626-1863* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003); John Wood Sweet, *Bodies Politic: Negotiating Race in the American North, 1730-1830* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003); Patrick Rael, *Black Identity and Black Protest in the Antebellum North* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); and John Stauffer, *The Black Hearts of Men: Radical Abolitionists and the Transformation of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001).

scientific cultures, “A Beautiful Mind” uses scholarship by literary theorists, art historians, and material culture scholars to re-envision the historiography on inequality in the early republic. During this period, many Americans believed the countenance was the physical feature that best revealed a person’s character. For this reason, this project contends that we cannot understand how people conceptualized human difference—or how they grappled with social and political hierarchies—without first reconstructing how they evaluated human faces.

As the only book-length work on physiognomy in the American context, Christopher Lukasik’s *Discerning Characters* (2011) has had a particularly profound impact on this project. Lukasik asks how “transatlantic discourses for reading the face” shaped early American literature and examines “the face’s relationship to the social perception of character.” He traces a transformation, in the late eighteenth century, when people stopped judging character through dress and behavior and instead began evaluating personality through a close inspection of the corporeal form. Interrogating literary works alongside visual images, Lukasik shows how Americans deployed facial analysis to buttress class hierarchies in the nation’s emerging market economy. “A Beautiful Mind” revises that analysis by investigating how Americans read faces in gendered and racialized ways. How, this project asks, did physiognomy shape discussions about female intellect and virtue in the early republic? And how did both white and black Americans use this science to construct ideas about racial difference? In asking these questions, this project is the first history of American physiognomy to use race and gender as its central categories of analysis.⁶

⁶ See Lukasik, *Discerning Characters*. As Lukasik has pointed out, work on physiognomy “concentrates almost exclusively on the European context” (26). See, for example, Pearl, *About Faces*; Porter, *Windows of the Soul*; Dror Wahrman, *The Making of the Modern Self: Identity and Culture in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 294-305; Hartley,

“A Beautiful Mind” makes three major interventions. First, it shows how some of the United States’ most privileged citizens used physiognomy to uphold inequality by describing it as the inevitable consequence of anatomical realities. At the same time, this project complicates the narratives that historians have told about the rise—and supposed triumph—of biological determinism by the mid-nineteenth century. By demonstrating how women and people of color created conflicting “truths” about the human body, it tells the story of marginalized Americans who crafted oppositional methodologies for measuring human worth. In doing so, it reveals that essentialist understandings of human nature were never hegemonic and always contested during the first half of the nineteenth century.⁷ Finally, this dissertation emphasizes the myriad cross-pollinations of art, science, and literature by illustrating how visual images, elite discourses, and popular texts combined to shape the cultural and intellectual universe of the Anglo-Atlantic world. Taken together, “A Beautiful Mind” asks scholars to reimagine what might have counted as “science” during the nation’s foundational decades. In doing so, it provides a cultural and intellectual history of power relations in early America.

Physiognomy and the Meaning of Expression; Melissa Percival, *The Appearance of Character: Physiognomy and Facial Expression in Eighteenth-Century France* (Leeds: W. S. Maney & Son Ltd., 1999); Graeme Tytler, *Physiognomy in the European Novel: Faces and Fortunes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982); Judith Weschler, *A Human Comedy: Physiognomy and Caricature in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982); and Graham, “Lavater’s Physiognomy in England.”

⁷ In making this argument, this dissertation builds on the work of Bruce Dain, who has argued that “a sharp distinction between nineteenth-century biology and eighteenth-century natural history is not tenable.” See Dain, *A Hideous Monster of the Mind*, vii.

A New “Science of Man”

In the 1730s, the poet Alexander Pope famously declared that the “proper study of mankind is man.”⁸ These oft-quoted words epitomized a much broader Enlightenment impulse to examine the complexities of the human experience. Throughout the eighteenth century, intellectuals in both Europe and America endeavored to investigate, order, and classify the natural world. Not content to establish mastery over nature, they also sought to envisage their own place within society. As the Scottish moral philosopher Francis Hutcheson explained in 1747, the most pressing objective for naturalists, intellectuals, and artists alike was to “search accurately into the constitution of our nature to see what sort of creatures we are.” What made people human, Enlightenment thinkers wondered, and what made humans different from other beasts of creation? To address these quandaries, they crafted elaborate classificatory systems to make sense of their broader environments.⁹

By the middle decades of the eighteenth century, European intellectuals were indulging in what Stephanie Camp has referred to as an “obsessive compulsion for categorization.”¹⁰ In the 1750s, Carolus Linnaeus developed his system of binomial nomenclature, just as anatomists such as Petrus Camper and Johann Friedrich Blumenbach were studying the skeletal structures of human beings and attempting to delineate the differences between the globe’s diverse populations.¹¹ Physiognomy

⁸ Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Man* (Philadelphia: McCarty & Davis, 1821). The poem was initially published between 1733-1734.

⁹ Francis Hutcheson, *A Short Introduction to Moral Philosophy: In Three Books; Containing the Elements of Ethicks and the Law of Nature* (Glasgow: Robert Foulis, 1747), 2.

¹⁰ Stephanie M.H. Camp, “Black Is Beautiful: An American History,” *The Journal of Southern History* 81, no. 3 (August 2015), 679.

¹¹ For a description of these trends, see Londa Schiebinger, “The Anatomy of Difference: Race and Sex in Eighteenth-Century Science,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 23, no. 4, Special Issue:

first emerged as a modern form of scientific observation within this larger context. Facial analysis quickly became an international sensation in the 1770s, captivating people with its promise to interpret entities that had previously seemed unknowable: the human mind and soul. Even more alluring was physiognomy's potential for fulfilling two key Enlightenment dictates: it not only provided a method for hierarchically ordering and classifying the natural world; it also functioned as a newfound "science of man"—a method of inquiry that promised to divulge humankind's most profound mysteries.¹²

In the minds of its evangelists, facial analysis would allow individuals to detect people's inner character through an observational, reflective, and empirical process of scientific discovery. Physiognomists proclaimed that the countenance was both the "index of the mind" and the "mirror of the soul." If this was indeed true, then it might be possible to penetrate the deepest depths of a person's personality by first scrutinizing their corporeal features.¹³ Johann Caspar Lavater was the man most directly responsible for transforming facial analysis into a transatlantic phenomenon. He argued that this science was important because it provided an intelligible code by

The Politics of Difference (Summer, 1990): 387-405; and Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), especially chapters 5 and 6.

¹² Dror Wahrman has argued that western thinkers began reimagining personal identity in the eighteenth century, constructing the concept of an inner, coherent, and inviolable "self." It is no surprise that physiognomy surged to popularity just as this new "regime of selfhood" emerged. Individuals needed concept of the "self" before they could develop a coherent science to study it. See Wahrman, *The Making of the Modern Self* (on physiognomy, see pages 294-305; on "regime of selfhood," see pages 265-311).

¹³ According to Christopher Lukasik, "Lavaterian physiognomy read moral character from unalterable and involuntary facial features, creating a visual system for reading a person's permanent moral character, despite their social masks." Yet Lukasik refers to this as the "physiognomic fallacy." He argues that physiognomy rested on the idea "that a person has one essential character over time and that a face can express it." But in the end, Americans merely placed their hope in a "false opposition between a model of character read from performance and one read from the face." See Lukasik, *Discerning Characters*, 21, 30.

which people could comprehend their contemporaries. The “knowledge of man,” he proclaimed, was the very “soul” of interpersonal interaction and the foundation of social harmony. As like-minded thinkers saw it, physiognomy helped people study human nature and taught them to “read” one another other with ease and accuracy.¹⁴

Intoxicated with physiognomy’s potentialities, both Europeans and Americans analyzed external beauty to discern the character of their contemporaries. Using the body as their signpost, they fashioned an intellectual system for deciphering the mental, moral, and physical differences that seemed to differentiate human beings from one another. Ostensibly, they analyzed visages to discern new information about those around them. Yet they invariably brought their preconceptions with them as they read bodies. Cloaking old ideas in the new rhetoric of scientific empiricism, individuals clung to their treasured beliefs in their quest to comprehend human nature. Finding what they wanted to see in the faces of others, they came to unique conclusions based on their racial, gender, and class identities.

A Republic of Contradictions

Physiognomy was a transatlantic science, but it attained a unique resonance in the United States. After the War for Independence, Americans embarked upon a challenging task: building a new nation from the scattered remnants of a colonial past. Their fledgling republic was fragile, and they feared it might easily succumb to corruption, vice, and monarchical excess. Only by cultivating personal virtue in the country’s citizenry could they forge a viable political system. Precisely because Americans believed the integrity of the nation’s citizens was critical to the nation’s

¹⁴ Johann Caspar Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy: For the Promotion and the Love of Mankind* trans., Thomas Holcroft (London: 1789), 1:77.

success, they placed immense value on the ability to discern people's inner character. In this environment, physiognomy had an important role to play. Particularly in the 1790s, writers and political thinkers began claiming it was possible to see a man's civic virtue by examining his countenance. Through facial analysis, Americans hoped they might distinguish between those who were truly respectable—in other words, genteel individuals with the capacity for republican citizenship—and those who were undeserving of political rights.¹⁵

Physiognomy's surge in popularity coincided with broader transformations in the American political landscape. In the immediate post-Revolutionary decades, most states limited suffrage rights to property owning men. By the 1810s and 1820s, however, many of the nation's non-landholders began demanding that citizenship be based on moral virtue and mental competence, rather than a person's inherited wealth or connection to a plot of soil. At the Virginia Convention of 1829-1830, a group of non-freeholders protested that land ownership did not automatically result in the "moral or intellectual endowments" that were necessary for citizenship. Property, they argued, "no more proves him who has it, wiser or better, than it proves him taller

¹⁵ Physiognomical descriptions of American politicians often suggested that republican virtue was visible in the visage. See "Portrait of General Washington: Translated from the French of Mr. Mandrillon, by a Very Young Lady," *The Columbian Magazine* 1, no. 5 (January 1787); "Portrait of General Washington, By the Marquis Chastellux," *Independent Chronicle* (Boston), March 27, 1800; James Hardie, *The New Universal Biographical Dictionary* (New York: Johnson & Stryker, 1801-1805); "Miscellany. Portrait of Burr," *Port Folio* 3, no. 20 (Philadelphia), May 16, 1807; "Hon. Elias Boudinot," *Baltimore Patriot* 19, no. 110, May 11, 1822; John Sanderson, *Biographies of the Signers of the Declaration of Independence* (Philadelphia: R.W. Pomeroy, 1823-27); James Thacher, *American Medical Biography* (Boston: Richardson & Lord, 1828); James Herring and James Barton Longacre, *The National Portrait Gallery of Distinguished Americans* (Philadelphia: Henry Perkins, 1834-1839); and Stephen W. Williams, *American Medical Biography; Or, Memoirs of Eminent Physicians, Embracing Principally Those Who Have Died Since the Publication of Dr. Thacher's Work on the Same Subject* (Greenfield, M.A.: L. Merriam and Co., 1845); and Rufus Wilmot Griswold, *The Republican Court; or American Society in the Days of Washington* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1856). For secondary work on how Americans used physiognomy to talk about political virtue, see Christopher Lukasik, "The Face of the Public," *Early American Literature* 39, no. 3 (2004): 413-464; Bellion, "Heads of State," 31-59; and Fortune, "Portraits of Virtue and Genius."

or stronger, than him who has it not.” After all, wasn’t it more important for voters to be smart, sensible, and virtuous? Particularly as the United States developed into a vibrant market economy in the early nineteenth century, land ownership seemed an increasingly irrelevant litmus test for full citizenship. By the 1830s, most state legislatures had redefined voting as a natural right, unconnected to property ownership—at least for white men.¹⁶

As political leaders extended suffrage rights to non-freeholders, they seemed to validate the notion that inner characteristics such as virtue and intelligence were the primary qualifications for citizenship. On its surface, this seemed like a victory for republican notions of liberty and equality. Yet at the very same moment that politicians extended suffrage to all white men, they developed new strategies for excluding women and free people of color from the polity. Women appeared in their calculations only indirectly. Political leaders typically imagined that the nation’s female population would serve as virtuous wives and mothers, swaying their husbands and sons toward proper political decisions through gentle persuasion. Only in New Jersey could property-holding women vote in the years after the American Revolution, and in 1807, they lost even this privilege.¹⁷

¹⁶ *Proceedings and Debates of the Virginia State Convention of 1829-30* (Richmond: Samuel Shepherd & Co., 1830), 27. For secondary work on these transformations, see Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005); Alexander Keyssar, *The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States* (New York: Basic Books, 2000); Rogers M. Smith, *Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in U.S. History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), especially chapter 8; Jacob Katz Cogan, “The Look Within: Property, Capacity, and Suffrage in Nineteenth-Century America,” *The Yale Law Journal* 107, No. 2 (November 1997): 473-498; and Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*.

¹⁷ On women and politics in the early republic, see Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980); Jan Lewis, “The Republican Wife: Virtue and Seduction in the Early Republic,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (October 1987): 689-721; Elizabeth Varon, “Tippecanoe and the Ladies, Too: White Women and Party Politics in Antebellum Virginia,” *Journal of American History*, 82 (September 1995): 494-521; Rosemarie Zagarri, “The Rights of Man and Woman in Post-

In a similar way, state legislatures throughout the country began revoking African Americans' voting privileges in the early nineteenth century. In some states, political leaders set landholding requirements so high for free black property holders that they were prohibitively restrictive. In other states, they simply barred black men from voting entirely. Although many free people of color had previously exercised suffrage rights, they confronted a new legal and political structure—one that questioned their capacity for citizenship and denied their right to participate in political decisions.

By mid-century, race and sex had replaced class as the primary dividing line between those who “counted” as full citizens and those who did not. To rationalize this new reality, many politicians began insisting that both white women and black men—no matter how rich and no matter how educated—were unequivocally and intrinsically unqualified for the responsibilities of citizenship. When they did so, politicians argued that voting rights should only be conferred upon those who held the inner “capacity” for to exercise them. Qualifications shifted from external factors—such as wealth or property ownership—to internal characteristics. Even so, people increasingly sought to discern interior traits through external features. Perhaps some people truly *were* smarter and more virtuous than others, many Americans posited, and perhaps these differences were visible in the human body. Anyone who needed scientific justification for these beliefs merely had to tap into a vast and growing transatlantic literature that evaluated human character and capacity through elaborate

Revolutionary America,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 55, no. 2 (April 1998): 203-230; and Susan Branson, *These Fiery Frenchified Dames: Women and Political Culture in Early National Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001). On women voting in New Jersey, see Judith Apter Klinghoffer and Lois Elkis, “‘The Petticoat Electors’: Women’s Suffrage in New Jersey, 1776-1807,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 12, no. 2 (Summer, 1992): 159-193; and Zagarri, *Revolutionary Backlash*, 30-37.

physiological and anatomical observations. By the early nineteenth century, physiognomy had become one of the most influential—and most popularly accessible—disciplines in this scientific tradition.

It is now commonplace for historians to argue that by the mid-nineteenth century, Americans increasingly justified the artificial boundaries of their body politic by rooting the exclusion of certain groups in their anatomical bodies. But many scholars stop there, rather than examining precisely which discourses made these exclusionary arguments seem both plausible and scientifically defensible for the historical actors who employed them. When Americans suggested that certain individuals were—by their very natures—unsuited for political rights, what did they mean? What forms of popular and scientific knowledge were they building upon? And which theories did they find most appealing? As this dissertation reveals, many Americans relied on physiognomy to debate the moral and mental capacities of both white women and African Americans.¹⁸

In most cases, political leaders themselves invoked only nebulously scientific justifications for the exclusionary policies they advocated. The dictates of “nature,” they claimed, ensured that certain people were simply unable to function as full republican citizens. Yet these politicians inhabited a much broader intellectual universe, in which both popular writers and scientific thinkers regularly invoked facial analysis to debate the inner capacity of individuals. In 1833, for instance, the pro-slavery writer Richard H. Colfax declared that African American men should

¹⁸ See, for instance, Patrick Rael, *Eighty-Eight Years: The Long Death of Slavery in the United States, 1777-1865* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2015), 131; Donald Ratcliffe, “The Right to Vote and the Rise of Democracy, 1787-1828,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 33, no. 2 (Summer 2013), 246; Zagarri, *Revolutionary Backlash*, 184; Lyons, *Sex Among the Rabble*, 2; and Sweet, *Bodies Politic*, 296.

never be “allowed the privileges of citizenship in an enlightened country,” because their facial features supposedly exposed their inferior mental faculties.¹⁹ The abolitionist William Goodell, by contrast, argued in favor of black men’s voting privileges. Even Goodell, however, suggested that African Americans were physiognomically inferior to their white counterparts. Still, he thought they deserved full legal and political rights because all human beings had been blessed with an “*improveable*[sic] mind.” For Goodell, the question did not depend “upon the *quantity*” of a person’s brain, “but upon the *expansibility* of it.” In any case, he believed education would eventually improve “the forehead of the black man, enlarge his brain, and magnify his ‘facial angle.’” He contended that people of color should be eligible for citizenship because they possessed the capacity to improve. Mental enhancements would come first, followed by their physiognomical manifestations.²⁰

Black authors, for their part, focused attention on African Americans with the physiognomical signals of superior intellect. They resented how white people flagrantly misrepresented the bodies of black men, whether in visual images, popular print, or scientific works. Frederick Douglass, for instance, complained about white writers and artists who obsessed over the supposedly “high cheek bones” and “retreating forehead” of black countenances, “as if there were no white people with precisely the same peculiarities.” Yet he, too, believed that facial features revealed critical information about intelligence and character. Thinkers such as Colfax,

¹⁹ Richard H. Colfax, *Evidence Against the View of the Abolitionists: Consisting of Physical and Moral Proofs of the Natural Inferiority of the Negroes* (New York: James T.M. Bleakley, 1833), 25.

²⁰ William Goodell, “The Brotherhood of the Human Race,” *The Emancipator* (New York), November 18, 1834.

Goodell, and Douglass made oppositional political arguments, but they all relied on physiognomy to evaluate people of color's moral and mental faculties.²¹

If white authors and political thinkers were quick to pronounce that African Americans were mentally deficient beings, then they were sometimes hesitant to decree that white women—their wives, mothers, and daughters—were intrinsically unintelligent. Instead, they usually proclaimed that women were simply different from—and not necessarily inferior to—men. Even so, they argued that these differences suited women to occupy a unique “sphere” within society: the domestic arena.²² Transatlantic scientists were even bolder in their denigration of women's mental faculties. One physiognomist declared in the 1830s that “the brain of woman is less than that of man,” later pronouncing, “there is a sex of brain and of mind.”²³ Another thinker insisted that every individual had a “natural and *essential*” character, which could be seen in the countenance. Women could “scarcely ever be properly denominated deep thinkers,” he argued, claiming that “nature” did not design “them

²¹ Frederick Douglass, *Claims of the Negro, Ethnologically Considered* (Rochester: Daily American Office, 1854), 22.

²² For politicians discussing women's mental capacities, see *Proceedings and Debates of the Virginia State Convention of 1829-30*. The representative Philip Barbour brought up the issue of female intelligence as a strategy when arguing the state should keep its property qualification for white men. After all, if “capacity” was going to be the new metric for the franchise, then why should unmarried women be excluded? “It will not be contended that females are to be excluded for the want of *capacity*,” he remarked, because women were just as sensible and virtuous as men (92). By contrast, John R. Cooke advocated for universal white male suffrage, claiming that “nature herself had therefore pronounced, on women and children, a sentence of incapacity to exercise political power” (55). Others claimed that women were not necessarily “inferior in intelligence, morality, or virtue, to ourselves,” but claimed that they simply did not *want* to vote (227). For secondary scholarship on these debates, see Cogan, “The Look Within,” 485-489.

²³ Alexander Walker, *Beauty: Illustrated Chiefly by an Analysis and Classification of Beauty in Woman* (New York: J. & H.G. Langley, 1840); and Walker, *Woman: Physiologically Considered as to Mind, Morals, Marriage, Matrimonial Slavery, Infidelity, and Divorce* (New York: J. & H.G. Langley, Second Edition, 1840), 83. These New York editions were based on the London editions, which were published in 1836 and 1839, respectively.

for those pursuits in life in which much profundity of thought is requisite.” In his opinion, women’s facial features betrayed their intrinsic differences from men, which could never be erased, even by the best and most expansive educations.²⁴ By the late 1860s, many scientists unequivocally insisted upon women’s intellectual inferiority. As these thinkers saw it, women’s bodies showcased their internal incapacities and disqualified them from political rights.²⁵

In a changing nineteenth-century world—where hierarchies were in flux and the economy was rapidly developing—many Americans searched for certainty. By relying on physiognomy (and later, on kindred disciplines such as phrenology and craniology), they explained and excused existing forms of inequality by invoking the power and prestige of science. Just as white male thinkers found signs of intellectual inferiority in the heads and faces of white women and people of color, middle-class reformers used physiognomy and phrenology to distinguish between the faces of “refined” Americans and the prostitutes, prisoners, and “feeble-minded” individuals that they designated as members of the “rabble.” Popular writers, meanwhile, assured readers that they would be able to distinguish between the “virtuous” and the “vicious” poor, merely by scrutinizing their visages. In this way, elite and middling Americans imposed their preferred assumptions upon the world, reframing existing inequities as scientific “facts” that had been revealed by the power of rational observation.

²⁴ Thomas Cooke, *A Practical and Familiar View of the Science of Physiognomy* (London: Cumberwell Press, 1819), 11, 116.

²⁵ J. McGrigor Allan, “On the Real Differences in the Minds of Men and Women,” *Journal of the Anthropological Society of London* 7 (1869), ccx.

Even so, marginalized groups also laid claim to physiognomy. Women's rights activists and advocates of female educational advancement used facial analysis to defend the brains of women and argue for their access to higher education. Similarly, both black and white abolitionists deployed physiognomy as a weapon against ethnologists and slaveholders who questioned the mental capacities of black Americans. They did so even as American scientists were using the very same language to justify slavery and enforce racial inequality. In the end, physiognomy attracted practitioners from vastly different social classes, racial groups, and gender identities. It appealed to political radicals and conservatives alike. As a broad-based technology of character detection, this popular science permeated the minds, lives, texts, and images of early Americans. "A Beautiful Mind" uncovers its hitherto-neglected history.²⁶

"Popular Science" and "Science Proper": A Note on Terminology

One of this dissertation's major goals is to reimagine the narratives we tell about scientific expertise, the people who generate it, and the methods by which it purportedly "diffuses" from elite texts into the general population. In recent years, historians of science have critiqued the "diffusion model" of history, which rests on the premise that "true" science originates in the upper echelons of society and then filters into popular culture, where ordinary people eventually gain access to it. This

²⁶ For examples of black and female authors using physiognomy and other popular sciences in creative ways, see Amelia Opie, *Adeline Mowbray*, 2nd ed. (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, and Orme, 1805); Sarah Wentworth Morton, *My Mind and Its Thoughts, in Sketches, Fragments, and Essays* (Boston: Wells and Lilly, 1823); Sarah Josepha Hale, *Sketches of American Character* (Boston: Published by Freeman Hunt, 1831); Mrs. E.C. Imbury, "Characters...No. II," *American Ladies' Magazine* 7, no. 3 (Boston), March 1834; Douglass, *Claims of the Negro Ethnologically Considered*; James McCune Smith, "Civilization: Its Dependence on Physical Circumstances," *Anglo-African Magazine* 1, no. 1 (New York), January 1859: 5-16; and William J. Wilson's "Afric-American Picture Gallery" series in the *Anglo-African Magazine*, published between February 1859 and October 1859.

model assumes that autonomous and wealthy white men make pathbreaking discoveries in their libraries and laboratories. It also imagines marginalized people as mere consumers of scientific discourses: individuals who might adopt and adapt elite theories but do not come up with independent ideas. Most historians of science now agree that this model reinscribes hierarchies of race, class, gender, and status by artificially imposing them on the past. Building on this vast and growing genealogy of scholarship, “A Beautiful Mind” emphasizes the role that non-elite people have played in the creation of scientific knowledge.²⁷

To underscore that science itself has a history, this dissertation intentionally uses the term “science,” rather than “pseudoscience,” when referring to physiognomy, phrenology, and other now-discredited disciplines of the past. As an analytical term, “pseudoscience” allows historians to condemn problematic discourses of bygone eras while maintaining a veneration for science itself. As Britt Rusert puts it, “the deployment of *pseudoscience* tries to imagine a scientific present unencumbered by an embarrassing scientific past.” It also anachronistically implies that historical actors were not actually practicing “real” science at all.²⁸

²⁷ For an example of the older diffusionist model applied to the antebellum United States, see Donald Zochert, “Science and the Common Man in Ante-Bellum America,” *Isis* 65, no. 4 (December 1974): 448-473. For examples of scholars who have challenged this model in recent years, see Jonathan R. Topham, “Rethinking the History of Science Popularization/Popular Science,” in *Popularizing Science and Technology in the European Periphery, 1800–2000*, ed., Faidra Papanelopoulou, Agustí Nieto-Galan, and Enrique Perdiguer (Burlington, V.T.: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2009); Bernard Lightman, *Victorian Popularizers of Science: Designing Nature for New Audiences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Susan Scott Parrish, *American Curiosity: Cultures of Natural History in the Colonial British Atlantic World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); James A. Secord, “Knowledge in Transit,” *Isis* 95, no. 4 (December 2004): 654-672; James A. Secord, *Victorian Sensation: The Extraordinary Publication, Reception, and Secret Authorship of Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); and Anne Secord, “Science in the Pub: Artisan Botanists in Early Nineteenth-Century Lancashire,” *History of Science* 32 (1994): 269-315.

²⁸ Rusert, *Fugitive Science*, 6.

During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, there were no impenetrable divides between what we might now refer to as “science proper” and “pseudoscience.” Elite intellectuals and trained professionals had not yet been able to clearly demarcate boundaries of belonging and exclusion in their fields, in large part because their own practices often muddled those boundaries. Although it now seems both timeless and unremarkable, the term “scientist” was not even part of the English lexicon until 1833. Before the founding of the American Medical Association in 1847—and especially before the rapid segmentation, professionalization, and consolidation of scientific disciplines in the late nineteenth century—science was an eclectic enterprise with diffuse aims and porous boundaries. It attracted college-educated intellectuals, lay practitioners, and amateur dabblers with a wide array of interests, specialties, and skill sets. In many cases, the very same thinkers we might now define as “real” scientists were also enamored by disciplines we now view as both puzzling and peculiar.²⁹

Popular sciences constituted “legitimate knowledge systems” in the early national and antebellum decades because the meaning of science was both capacious in character and constantly in flux.³⁰ Within this context, well-known figures such as Catharine Maria Sedgwick, Frederick Douglass, Sarah Josepha Hale, and Edgar Allan

²⁹ Richard Yeo, *Defining Science: William Whewell, Natural Knowledge and Public Debate in Early Victorian Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 111. Yeo shows that William Whewell first coined the term “scientist” in 1833, but argues it was not widely used in the English-speaking world until far later in the nineteenth century (5). Katherine Pandora likewise sees the late nineteenth century as the moment where “the rupture occurred” between “popular” and “proper” science. See Pandora, “Popular Science in National and Transnational Perspective,” 358. See also Rusert, *Fugitive Science*, 5.

³⁰ For a discussion of popular sciences as “legitimate knowledge systems” in the early republic, see Britt Rusert, “Delaney’s Comet: Fugitive Science and the Speculative Imaginary of Emancipation,” *American Quarterly* 65, no. 4 (December 2013), 801.

Poe could establish identities as popular authors, but also function as intellectuals who used their published works as vehicles for making science more accessible to the broader public. This ensured that laypersons could be active creators—not simply passive consumers—of knowledge. Physiognomy, especially, allowed ordinary Americans to craft unique methodologies for interpreting human bodies and brains. Because it was a practical discipline that did not require expensive training or equipment, it was accessible to most Americans.³¹

Physiognomy was also a malleable discourse that allowed different groups of people to manipulate its precepts in unique ways. Its most influential practitioners promised both empiricism and certainty, but they rarely delivered. If physiognomists could agree on general guidelines, they were largely unable to communicate a set of clear, consistent, or reliable rules for their discipline. In most cases, people depended far more heavily on intuition and preexisting prejudices than on empirically reproducible methodologies. Within this intellectual climate, who was to say what was legitimate knowledge and what was quackery? Lay practitioners' judgments might be no less valid than the claims of physicians or prominent intellectuals. Both groups, after all, were fashioning inventive interpretations as they went along.

³¹ For work in which popular authors play a double role as propagators of popular science, see Britt Rusert, "The Science of Freedom: Counterarchives of Racial Science on the Antebellum Stage," *African American Review* 45, no. 3 (Fall 2012): 291-308; Jan Pilditch, "'Fashionable Female Studies': The Popular Dissemination of Science in 'Godey's Lady's Book,'" *Australasian Journal of American Studies* 24, no. 1 (July 2005): 20-37; Geoffrey Cantor and Sally Shuttleworth, eds., *Science Serialized: Representations of the Sciences in Nineteenth-Century Periodicals* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004); Shelley R. Block and Etta M. Madden, "Science in Catharine Maria Sedgwick's *Hope Leslie*," *Legacy* 20, no. 1/2, Special 20th Anniversary Double Issue (2003): 22-37; James V. Werner, "'Ground-Moles' and Cosmic Flaneurs: Poe, Humboldt, and Nineteenth-Century Science," *Edgar Allan Poe Review* 3, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 45-69; Kevin J. Hayes, "Poe, The Daguerreotype, And The Autobiographical Act," *Biography* 25, no. 3 (Summer 2002): 477-492; Nathaniel Mackey, "Phrenological Whitman," *Conjunctions* 29 (1997): 231-251; Alan Gribben, "Mark Twain, Phrenology and the 'Temperaments': A Study of Pseudoscientific Influence," *American Quarterly* 24, no. 1 (March 1972): 45-68; and Edward Hungerford, "Poe and Phrenology," *American Literature* 2, no. 3 (November 1930): 209-231.

For much of the nineteenth century, knowledge was accessible in a wide variety of venues. Americans might have read about popular sciences in novels and periodicals, but they also encountered this material by visiting museums, talking with their friends, or attending public lectures. Particularly because literacy rates were so high in the United States, newspapers and magazines functioned as important mediums for the transmission of scientific knowledge. By 1850, the literacy rate for white Americans was 90% for the country writ large and 97% for the Northeastern states. This resulted in some European visitors expressing shock that even the poorest Americans could easily get their hands on published works. In 1852, the *New York Times* reprinted an article from a London newspaper, which maintained that “almost every workman enjoys the privilege of the substantial London citizen, and has his own newspaper regularly with his breakfast.” During this same period, there were far fewer newspapers per capita in Britain (and far lower literacy rates, too). The rapid proliferation of lending libraries and lyceum circuits in the United States likewise gave people consistent access to new forms of knowledge. Popular sciences were vibrant and pervasive in the early nineteenth century. American historians, though, have yet to examine precisely how this knowledge reached ordinary people and shaped society’s broader contours. By reconstructing the history of scientific facial analysis in the United States, this dissertation fills that gap.³²

³² “Tax on Knowledge—American and English Newspapers” [reprinted from the *London Sun*], *New York Times*, November 29, 1852, quoted in Pandora, “Popular Science in National and Transnational Perspective,” 354. In a plea for historians of science to study vernacular forms of knowledge in the United States, she proclaims, “it is clear from the strength and reach of antebellum popular science that it was consequential, if in ways that have yet to be given their due” (356). For literacy rates in the early republic, see Ronald Zboray, *A Fictive People: Antebellum Economic Development and the American Reading Public* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 83; and Mary Heininger, *At Home with a Book: Reading in America, 1840–1940* (Rochester, N.Y.: Strong Museum, 1986), 3. For a discussion of popular science in the press, see Cantor and Shuttleworth, eds., *Science Serialized*. Cantor and Shuttleworth claim that during the nineteenth century, “the general periodical press was perhaps the most influential medium for spreading views and information about

There is a surprising lack of scholarship on popular sciences in antebellum America. This historiographical lacuna seems odd when compared with the extensive and sophisticated body of work that explores the same subject in Britain during the Victorian period. It also seems curious when read alongside scholarship on the “Atlantic World” during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.³³ In recent decades, early American historians have eagerly embraced the notion that colonial peoples were entangled in dynamic transatlantic networks.³⁴ Yet scholars of science and society in the antebellum era often remain confined by national boundaries. As James Secord lamented in 2004, historians of science have at times “been even more nationalistic than the people we study.”³⁵ Throughout the nineteenth century,

science. Not only did many general periodicals carry a significant proportion of articles specifically on science, but science often informed and infiltrated articles ostensibly devoted to other topics” (2). On public lectures and lyceum circuits, see Donald M. Scott, “The Popular Lecture and the Creation of a Public in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America,” *Journal of American History* 66, no. 4 (March 1980): 791-809; and Angela Ray, *The Lyceum and Public Culture in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2005).

³³ James Secord refers to a “remarkable gulf” between scholarship on Victorian Britain and the antebellum United States. Katherine Pandora likewise argues that the historiography on popular science in Victorian Britain is well developed, while the scholarship on popular science in antebellum America is largely nonexistent. See Secord, “Knowledge in Transit,” 669; and Pandora, “Popular Science in National and Transnational Perspective,” 449. For works on popular science in nineteenth-century Britain, see Anne Secord, “Science in the Pub”; Secord, *Victorian Sensation*; Lightman, *Victorian Popularizers of Science*; and Ralph O’Connor, *The Earth on Show: Fossils and the Poetics of Popular Science, 1802–1856* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007). For women’s involvement in science, see Ann B. Shteir, *Cultivating Women, Cultivating Science: Flora’s Daughters and Botany in England, 1760 to 1860* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); Barbara T. Gates, *Kindred Nature: Victorian and Edwardian Women Embrace the Living World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); and Anne Secord, “Botany on a Plate: Pleasure and the Power of Pictures in Promoting Early Nineteenth-Century Scientific Knowledge,” *Isis* 93 (2002): 28-57.

³⁴ For some paradigmatic examples of Atlantic histories, see Eliga H. Gould, “Entangled Histories, Entangled Worlds: The English-Speaking Atlantic as a Spanish Periphery,” *American Historical Review* 112, No. 3 (June 2007): 764-786; Eric Slauter, “History, Literature, and the Atlantic World,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 65, no. 1 (January 2008): 135-166; and Karin Wulf, “Foreword: What’s Colonial and Which America?” *OAH Magazine of History* 25, no. 1 (January 2011): 5-6.

³⁵ Secord, “Knowledge in Transit,” 669. For a few works that discuss popular science in the antebellum context, see Rusert, *Fugitive Science*; Lukasik, *Discerning Characters*; Peter McCandless, “Mesmerism and Phrenology in Antebellum Charleston: ‘Enough of the Marvellous,’” *The Journal of Southern History* 58, no. 2 (May 1992): 199-230; Sally Gregory Kohlstedt, “Parlors, Primers, and Public Schooling: Education for Science in Nineteenth-Century America,” *Isis* 81, no. 3 (1990): 425-

scientific discourses traversed the Atlantic with ease, just as the ships, books, and bodies that carried these ideas across oceanic divides. Woven together by shared assumptions, consumer goods, and the personal and familial connections of cosmopolitan travelers, Europeans and Americans existed in a complex web of global interaction and exchange. By demonstrating how transatlantic discourses influenced Americans' daily encounters with science, this project reconstitutes the generative cultural and intellectual milieu that characterized the Atlantic world during the first half of the nineteenth century.

Acknowledging that the United States was part of a broader transatlantic universe also helps us rethink the stories we usually tell about the early national and antebellum decades. Historians of this period have tended to focus on the conflicts and compromises of nation-building, the emergence of the market economy, the expansions and limits of American democracy, and the nation's bitter conflicts over slavery and freedom.³⁶ But, as this dissertation reveals, popular sciences were tools that Americans used to grapple with all these broader social, political, and economic changes. As they attempted to demarcate the boundaries of the body politic, many turned their attention to the body itself. Sketched in the bones, bumps, and crevices of

445; Zochert, "Science and the Common Man in Ante-Bellum America"; and Madeleine B. Stern, *Heads and Headlines: The Phrenological Fowlers* (Norman, O.K.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971).

³⁶ See, for instance, David Waldstreicher, *Slavery's Constitution: From Revolution to Ratification* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2009); Holton, *Unruly Americans and the Origins of the Constitution*; Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005); Alexander Keyssar, *The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States* (New York: Basic Books, 2000); Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Christopher Clark, *The Roots of Rural Capitalism: Western Massachusetts, 1780-1860* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990); and Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970).

the human form, they found “evidence” that certain people should be excluded from the rights and privileges of citizenship. At the same time, popular sciences also shaped American society in less exclusionary ways. The idea that all people could be consumers of scientific knowledge, for instance, aligned with the nation’s republican commitment to universal human equality.

During the antebellum decades, many Americans viewed scientific practice as a shared endeavor—one that should be open to all Americans, regardless of social status. In 1841, the Unitarian minister William Ellery Channing publicly exulted that “science, once the greatest of distinctions, is becoming *popular*.” When making this proclamation, he did not argue that scientific concepts had become less complex or simply more comprehensible for lay practitioners. Instead, he rejoiced that scientific knowledge had become more *attainable* for those who did not have access to elite intellectual circles. The expansion of the press allowed the “discoveries and theories” that were “once the monopoly of philosophers” to instead “become the property of the multitude.” Lyceums were sprouting up in every town, he celebrated, just as women were establishing their expertise in chemistry and laborers were mastering the complex mechanisms that characterized their trades. Channing saw these developments as the achievements of a successful democratic republic, one in which all had equal access to science.³⁷

We should not, of course, uncritically accept Channing’s claims about the broad accessibility of science. Even if everyone had the ability to construct their own

³⁷ William Ellery Channing, *The Present Age: An Address Delivered before the Mercantile Library Company of Philadelphia* (Bristol and London: 1841), 6 (my emphasis added). Katherine Pandora discusses Channing at length in “Popular Science in National and Transnational Perspective.” For her discussion of popular science as a reflection of democratic ideals in antebellum America, see page 353-354.

forms of knowledge, certain individuals used their class and educational status to ensure that their ideas would dominate in both elite and popular culture. As one scholar has argued, popular sciences like physiognomy were “accessible to all” practitioners. Even so, “the reflections of only some were recorded and in turn expanded, forming the framework for future physiognomy and future physiognomists.” Ultimately, those with more social and political power were in a better position to make their mark on the historical record. For this reason, elite thinkers necessarily play a major role in this story. After all, these were the men who wrote books that transcended national boundaries and shaped the intellectual culture of the Western world in the process.³⁸

Yet even if elite white men were more successful at passing down their theories to posterity, they depended on popular understandings of human nature when crafting and marketing their interpretive paradigms. Part of the reason physiognomy became so influential was because it tapped into a set of preexisting cultural conceptions about how the world worked and how interpersonal interactions functioned within it. Popular sciences, in other words, provided a basic ideological foundation that highly educated thinkers could build upon and exploit. Long before physicians penned scientific treatises on physiognomy, thousands of Americans and Europeans already believed the face was an important marker of personal identity. Although educated intellectuals tried to develop more empirical systems of facial analysis in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, many people eagerly embraced these ideas while continuing to develop idiosyncratic methodologies for reading the human body. When it made sense to do so, they incorporated the ideas of

³⁸ Sharrona Pearl, *About Faces* (quotations on 16 and 20).

elite thinkers. But individuals also felt comfortable drawing general conclusions about others based on their own intuitive sense of how the world worked. Sometimes, physiognomic evaluations could be as simple as one person declaring that someone else had a “bad,” “vicious,” “benevolent” or “intellectual” countenance. Precisely what those terms meant was always up for debate and ultimately dependent on individualized interpretations.³⁹

As this project reveals, the very categories of “popular” and “proper” knowledge are themselves historically contingent concepts. The fact that historians distinguish between them at all is a legacy we inherited from professionals and physicians of the past. Particularly in the mid-nineteenth century, white male intellectuals in Europe and the United States made a concerted effort to distinguish between “true” science and the supposedly illegitimate forms of scientific observation being practiced within the broader public.⁴⁰ For this reason, some scholars have suggested we should abandon the term “popular science” entirely. By using it, we run the risk of inadvertently perpetuating older diffusionist models of history and unhelpfully trying to differentiate between “real” science and its alleged

³⁹ Ludwik Fleck has argued for the importance of popular science, arguing that it “furnishes the major portion of every person’s knowledge.” This includes ordinary people, but also “the most specialized expert.” Fleck, however, defined “popular science” as “science for nonexperts.” More recent scholarship has shown that popular sciences appealed to both specialists and lay practitioners. See Ludwik Fleck, *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979 [1935]), 112.

⁴⁰ See Pandora, “Popular Science in National and Transnational Perspective,” 356-358; and Rusert, *Fugitive Science*, 5. In addition to redefining science as a professional endeavor, the elite and middling classes also began describing previously accessible activities as the sole preserve of the culturally refined. This included activities such as watching Shakespearean plays, going to museums, or attending the opera and the symphony. For a description of this process, see Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990).

bastardizations in popular culture.⁴¹ At the same time, simply pointing out that a science was “popular” in the past does necessarily imply that it was less sophisticated or fundamentally different from the discourses of the academic elite. Definitions of “science” and “expertise” have been contested and remade throughout different eras. The category of “the popular” has been similarly dynamic and contingent. Rather than dismiss it, we can probe its meanings within American culture.⁴²

“A Beautiful Mind” embraces the concept of “popular science,” using the term interchangeably with the word “science” more broadly. Physiognomy, to put it simply, was *popular* in early America. Because of its ubiquity within the broader culture, this science shaped how people understood the human body and it influenced the cultural and political conclusions they drew from corporeal analysis. Ultimately, by focusing on both professional and lay uses of facial analysis, this dissertation tracks how scientific and cultural discourses emerged in a simultaneously “top down” and “bottom up” fashion. It highlights the words, experiences, and beliefs of a diverse set of actors, whether black, white, male, female, rich or poor. Using interdisciplinary methods of analysis, it relies on a wide variety of sources to unveil the numerous arenas in which scientific knowledge was created and reformulated.

⁴¹ For a critique of using terms like “popular science” and “science popularization” in historical scholarship, see Roger Cooter and Stephen Pumfrey, “Separate Spheres and Public Places: Reflections on the History of Science Popularization and Science in Popular Culture,” *History of Science* 32 (1994): 237-267. James Secord has similarly argued that we might better understand science “as a form of communication,” emphasizing the ceaseless patterns of interaction and exchange that occur within and between different social groups. See Secord, “Knowledge in Transit.”

⁴² Some scholars have seen merit in the term “popular science,” arguing it functions as a helpful “umbrella category” and allows us to analyze variegated sources under a common analytical lens. Ralph O’Connor protests that “just because some historians use a category inappropriately does not mean that the category itself should be abandoned” “Reflections on Popular Science in Britain,” 343. See also Sigrid Schmalzer, “Popular Science, A Useful and Productive Category after All,” *Historical Studies in the Natural Sciences* 42, No. 5 (November 2012): 590-600; Pandora, “Popular Science in National and Transnational Perspective,” 453; and Topham, “Rethinking the History of Science Popularization/Popular Science.”

The project also serves as a reminder that many historical actors did, indeed, view physiognomy as a legitimate and useful technology of character detection. This group ranged from physicians and intellectuals to educated women, popular novelists, moral reformers, and black abolitionists. This is not to say that all Americans were enthusiastic physiognomists. Many people decried it as a spurious science and a sham. But those individuals never constituted a monolithic or coherent social group. It was not as if all the shrewdest physicians and scientists presciently recognized physiognomy as quackery while a much bigger and more gullible public brainlessly embraced it. Physiognomy was broadly accessible, but there was also considerable overlap between expert and lay knowledge. For that reason, “A Beautiful Mind” uses the term “popular science” merely to point out that physiognomy’s popularity never precluded it from functioning as a discipline that privileged and marginalized people alike used to interpret their worlds, navigate their personal relationships, and understand their identities.

By rethinking what *counted* as science in the early American republic, “A Beautiful Mind” ultimately reimagines who might have counted as a *scientist*. The project argues that physiognomy was a widespread and malleable scientific discourse, which allowed different groups to exploit its murky precepts and adapt them for competing purposes. White male physicians and ethnologists, for instance, used physiognomy to denigrate the mental capacities of poor whites, women, and African Americans. But educated white women and black intellectuals also crafted alternative forms of facial analysis to argue for the eminence and improvability of their own brains. By unearthing a world where many Americans could simultaneously lay claim to scientific knowledge, this project shows how white women and people of color

transformed the discourses that defined them as inferior and instead deployed facial analysis to undercut emerging theories of biological determinism.

Chapter Outline

The dissertation is divided into six chapters, each of which focuses on how physiognomy functioned in unique arenas of society and among different groups of people. It begins by interrogating scientific treatises and then traces how novelists, newspaper editors, artists, and periodical authors distilled physiognomic ideas for a popular audience. Next, by examining the letters and diaries of Americans, it shows how people accessed these concepts through print culture and then created unique scientific methodologies for wrestling with social inequality. Finally, the project delves into the records of prisons and moral reform institutions, demonstrating how Americans deployed physiognomy to analyze the faces of criminals, prostitutes, and people of color. Taken together, the project reveals that scientific information circulated just as easily through visual images, literary sources, and interpersonal interactions as it did in academic journals and elite intellectual networks.

The first chapter explores physiognomy's ascendance as a transatlantic science, explaining how it captivated the American public between the 1790s and 1830s. Scholars often distinguish between environmentalist understandings of human nature—which prevailed in the eighteenth century—and the more restrictive concept of biological determinism, which supposedly triumphed by the mid-nineteenth century. This chapter exposes the inadequacies of that distinction by focusing on Americans' engagements with facial analysis. On one level, physiognomy was premised on the idea that people's mental and facial features were both permanent and heritable. This looked a lot like determinism on its surface. But practitioners of

physiognomy operated in a murky middle ground between environmentalism and essentialism. Because this science was both a product of the Enlightenment and a harbinger of later, more deterministic understandings of human difference, different groups could appropriate physiognomic precepts for oppositional purposes, using them in ways that accorded with their own priorities.⁴³

The second chapter then explores how early national Americans used discussions of female beauty to hierarchically distinguish between the minds of men and women. During this period, most educational reformers and popular writers argued that women should be valued for brains, not physical beauty. The same individuals, however, often suggested that a woman's countenance was the literal embodiment of her intelligence and virtue. By ensuring that women's beauty and rationality remained interwoven, Americans promoted a diluted vision of female intelligence. Although elite and middling women could make claims to mental *competence*, they were unable to make claims to intellectual *parity* with their male counterparts. As a result, they also remained incapable of laying claim to the full rights of American citizenship.

The third chapter then demonstrates how these ideas transformed during the antebellum decades. As women enlarged their public presence and became

⁴³ Winthrop Jordan famously argued that there was "an end to environmentalism" between 1800 and 1812. George Frederickson then revised Jordan's timeline, instead rooting the triumph of racial essentialism in the 1840s and 1850s. See Jordan, *White Over Black*, 533-537; and Frederickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind*, 2, 74, 101. Scholars have made similar arguments in more recent scholarship. Rosemarie Zagarri claims that "biological essentialism was replacing environmentalism" as the primary way of thinking about human difference in the early republic. In a similar way, Patrick Rael has argued that the "fragile edifice of Enlightenment era environmentalism crumbled" in the years following the Revolution, as "ambivalence over environmentalism shifted into a growing faith in racial essentialism." See Zagarri, *Revolutionary Backlash*, 184; and Rael, *Eighty-Eight Years*, 131. For other scholars who invoke this transition from Enlightenment environmentalism to nineteenth-century essentialism, see Ratcliffe, "The Right to Vote and the Rise of Democracy," 246; Lyons, *Sex Among the Rabble*, 2; Sweet, *Bodies Politic*, 296; and Schiebinger, *Nature's Body*, 137-142.

increasingly involved in political activism, many white male physicians, writers, and politicians began fearing that gender hierarchies were disintegrating. As state legislatures expanded suffrage to all white men, they searched for ways to exclude women from claiming political, legal, and economic rights. In this context, science became a powerful weapon. Beginning in the 1830s, male physicians, writers, and politicians invoked physiognomy to claim that the brains and bodies of women were innately and incommensurably different than those of men. They suggested that men had been blessed with broad and high foreheads—traits supposedly necessary for profound mental deliberation. By contrast, they emphasized the beauty, delicacy, and roundness of female faces, claiming that women’s countenances revealed their destiny as mothers, rather than intellectuals. During this period of political instability, white men used physiognomy to weaken white women’s claims for expanded legal and political rights.

The fourth chapter focuses on the educated women who read about, reacted to, and used physiognomic ideas in their daily lives. This chapter analyzes the letters and diaries of over 120 “female physiognomists” in the early republic, showing how they employed physiognomy to discern the moral and intellectual cultivation of their friends, family members, and acquaintances. It reveals that many women adopted physiognomy without seeing it as problematic or discriminatory, even though scientific practitioners were using this discipline to mark women as mentally deficient beings. How, then, did these educated middling and elite women—many of whom openly declared a belief in the intellectual equality of the sexes—adopt and embrace this hierarchical science? The answer lies in *how* they used it: by insisting that intellectual cultivation could improve women’s physical beauty, they employed facial analysis to advocate for their own educational advancement.

Chapter five analyzes how Americans used physiognomy to describe the moral and mental capacities of prisoners, prostitutes, paupers, and mental asylum patients. Focusing on the case files, institutional records, and publications of prisons, asylums, and moral reform societies, it shows how middle-class activists used physiognomy to legitimize their reform crusades. In their writings, reformers often split marginalized Americans into two groups: the improvable and the irredeemable. They portrayed certain individuals as previously virtuous but fallen victims: people with “pleasing physiognomies,” “intelligent countenances,” or “beaming eyes.” By contrast, they criticized others as permanently degraded reprobates with “retreating foreheads,” or “dull” and “hardened” countenances. Using facial analysis, reformers first constructed artificial distinctions between the “virtuous” and “vicious” poor. They then tried to interpret the bodies of prisoners, prostitutes, and the insane to determine their current character and future potential for reform.

The final chapter then shows how African American intellectuals employed physiognomic ideas to challenge prevailing racial assumptions. Scholars have often argued that elite and middling whites relied on science to mark blacks as inferior beings. This chapter tells a different story: many antebellum abolitionists used facial analysis to critique scientific racism. In the hands of black Americans, this science was not merely a discourse that solidified racial hierarchies. It was also a language that subordinated individuals could use to their own advantage. By claiming physiognomy as their own, black intellectuals reconstituted a racist science, using it to advocate for the social, political, and economic advancement of people of color.

By the mid-nineteenth century, Americans largely conceived of race, class, and gender as corporeal realities. Through new scientific technologies such as physiognomy, they found creative ways to justify very old forms of hierarchy. At the

same time, many people believed that the body and the mind were malleable entities, capable of moral, mental, and physical improvement. By coopting scientific discourses for their own ends, educated middling and elite white women and African Americans argued that increased access to education would not only improve their minds, but also make their faces more attractive. Through facial analysis, they undercut an emerging regime of biological determinism and forwarded their own understandings of human anatomy and character.

Chapter 1: “The Mind Molds the Features”

Environmentalism, Essentialism, and the Science of Beauty

Is there a remedy for an ugly face? In 1802, the *Philadelphia Repository and Weekly Register* posed this question for its readers. The article pledged an “investigation of the causes of ugliness,” followed by a “method of cure” for the unfortunate illness. Ephraim Conrad, the magazine’s editor, regretfully acknowledged he was unable to elongate pug noses or pluck displeasing warts from the faces of his readers. “All we promise is, that any person labouring under the malady of an ugly face, may palliate the most distressing symptoms by a diligent use of our remedy.” The goal was twofold: to ensure no woman would “propagate the disease, in all its aggravations, to her progeny,” and to provide “any gentleman” with a way to “mould his countenance by degrees into any expression.” With the right guidance, Conrad insisted that every man could soon “look like an alderman, a common-council man, a statesman, an admiral, a general, a poet, a philosopher, or what you will.”¹

The article provided no beauty tips or creative cosmetic recipes. Instead, it melded moral didacticism with scientific pronouncements about the hereditary nature of physical difference. Arguing that “the imagination and nerves reciprocally actuate each other,” the author suggested that the passions of the mind shaped the appearance of the countenance. If a person cultivated a certain sentiment repeatedly, the face would get used to making that expression. After a while, these “musculine motions” would permanently imprint themselves on the countenance. If unattractive people wanted to improve their visages, they simply had to consistently cultivate virtuous

¹ Ephraim Conrad, “Remarks on Physiognomy,” *Philadelphia Repository and Weekly Register* 2, no. 22, April 10, 1802.

passions. Even if they made only marginal improvements to their own faces, they could potentially pass more pleasing traits onto their children.²

On its surface, the *Philadelphia Repository and Weekly Register*'s article is a curious meditation on facial musculature and morality. But it also reveals much about the cultural, intellectual, and scientific universe of the early American republic. Through its focus on beauty, the magazine grappled with larger, more philosophical quandaries—problems that were at the very heart of Enlightenment science. What was the connection between the body and the mind, for instance, and why did some people's bodies look different than others? Did beauty and deformity result from nature or culture? Moreover, what was the broader significance of corporeal difference in the first place? Were external features important because they revealed more fundamental truths about the inner nature of individuals? Or were they incidental to a person's personality? To answer these questions, Ephraim Conrad invoked physiognomy.

By the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, most Americans believed that the mind and body were intimately entangled entities. Convinced the brain was the "organ of the mind," they insisted the best way to comprehend the complexities of human nature was by studying the physical beauty of the human countenance. For this reason, Americans regularly turned to physiognomy when attempting to understand themselves and their contemporaries. Because this discipline was premised on the idea that the body reflected the mind, it laid the foundation for essentialist understandings of human nature, providing an ostensibly scientific justification for inequities of race, class, and gender within American society.

² Conrad, "Remarks on Physiognomy."

According many practitioners of this popular science, mental traits and their physical manifestations were both permanent and heritable, impervious to the influence of external forces and personal choices. Physiognomy, in other words, allowed Americans to rationalize existing hierarchies by describing them as the natural byproducts of physiological “truths.”³

But scientific facial analysis was an unstable, if powerful, foundation upon which to build the ideological edifices of scientific racism, sexual essentialism, and class hierarchy. Early physiognomic writers intended the discipline to serve as an empirical method for interpreting visages with scientific accuracy, but they were never able to establish a set of clear or reproducible guidelines, in which all physiognomic observers could use the same method and end up with the same results. Despite the protestations of its practitioners, physiognomy never achieved the status of a fully systematized or mathematically precise discipline. As a murky schema with malleable rules, it proved an imperfect technology of social control.

Part of the problem was that anyone could declare themselves a physiognomist. Ephraim Conrad is just one example of an amateur face-analyzer gone rogue. As a periodical editor, he imagined he was perfectly qualified to espouse his own system of physiognomy. Beauty and character were connected, he maintained, and both were hereditary. Yet by saying he had discovered “a cure for unhandsome faces,” and by arguing that the remedy for “disgusting features” lay in moral improvement, Conrad broke with many physiognomists, presenting a more

³ The only book-length work on physiognomy in North America is Christopher Lukasik’s *Discerning Characters: The Culture of Appearance in Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011). For recent work on physiognomy in Europe, see Sharrona Pearl, *About Faces: Physiognomy in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010); and Lucy Hartley, *Physiognomy and the Meaning of Expression in Nineteenth Century Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

flexible version of this science than its founding practitioners had intended. Unlike some of his contemporaries, Conrad promised the possibility of physical beautification through personal refinement.

What was it about scientific facial analysis that made it so susceptible to cooptation and manipulation? To answer that question, this chapter explores the complexities and contradictions of physiognomy—as a science, social practice, and system of bodily scrutiny. By showing how early Americans both understood and creatively misunderstood physiognomic theory, it explains why this science proved so appealing, accessible, and adaptable for a diverse group of Americans. In doing so, this chapter reimagines some of the stories that scholars have told about the intersections between race, sex, hierarchy, and the body in the early republic.

Historians often distinguish between the concepts of “environmentalism” and “essentialism.” They argue that “during the Enlightenment, differences between the sexes and races tended to be attributed to custom, habit, and tradition rather than to innate characteristics.” By the mid-nineteenth century, however, a new deterministic worldview came to dominate American intellectual thought. Within this new paradigm, people began viewing human differences as the result of hereditary divergences. This allowed early Americans to proclaim that some people’s brains and bodies were simply better than others, and that these physical disparities justified existing social, political, and economic inequalities.⁴

⁴ For scholars who invoke this shift between Enlightenment environmentalism and essentialism, see Rosemarie Zagari, *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 184; Patrick Rael, *Eighty-Eight Years: The Long Death of Slavery in the United States, 1777-1865* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2015), 131; Clare Lyons, *Sex Among the Rabble: An Intimate History of Gender and Power in the Age of Revolution, Philadelphia, 1730-1830* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 2; and Londa L. Schiebinger, *Nature’s Body: Gender in the Making of Modern Science* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2004 [1993]), 137-142. For older scholarship, see Winthrop Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (Chapel Hill:

But a study of physiognomy complicates any clear division between a flexible Enlightenment environmentalism and the “harder” versions of biological determinism that emerged by the mid-nineteenth century. In one sense, the rise of physiognomic ideas heralded this new regime of essentialism. Physiognomy, after all, was premised on the notion that observers could scrutinize the permanent and heritable features of people’s faces and determine their innate capacities in the process. Yet physiognomy allowed for the persistence of environmentalist understandings of human nature. As a science, it was internally contradictory and often illogical—a discipline subject to the whims of whoever happened to declare themselves a physiognomic observer. This reality allowed people like Ephraim Conrad to suggest that both the body and brain were mutable entities, capable of transformation. In the end, physiognomy provided Americans with a capacious and adaptable intellectual system, one that different groups of people could, and did, deploy for oppositional purposes.⁵

If Americans thought of character as a trait rooted in the corporeal form, they did not always believe that one’s inner capacities were static or unchangeable. Although people regularly declared that faces reflected character, few individuals embraced the notion that personality traits and their physical manifestations were fixed, permanent, or unresponsive to external forces. Instead, early Americans practiced physiognomy using the same methods that the *Philadelphia Repository and Weekly Register* had prescribed: they suggested that developments in character could

University of North Carolina Press, 2012 [1968]), 533-537; and George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914* (Middletown, C.T.: Wesleyan University Press, 1987 [1971]), 2, 74, 101.

⁵ In emphasizing the messy and incomplete transition from environmentalism to essentialism, this chapter builds on Bruce Dain’s examination of racial theory in the early republic. As Dain demonstrates, “a sharp distinction between nineteenth-century biology and eighteenth-century natural history is not tenable.” See Dain, *A Hideous Monster of the Mind: American Race Theory in the Early Republic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), vii.

improve or degrade the mind, transforming the facial features to better reflect the preceding moral or mental metamorphosis. This was a flexible understanding of human nature that had the potential to undercut emerging ideas about biological determinism. Within this framework, it was not the innate or essential nature of people's bodies that mattered, but rather the changeability of the human constitution. Well into the nineteenth century, many Americans simply refused to believe that birth determined destiny.

The "Celebrated" Lavater: The Rise of Physiognomy in the Atlantic World

Although physiognomy attained its greatest popularity in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, it had long existed as an informal tool of character detection. At least since the time of Plato and Aristotle, the ancient Greeks had studied human countenances for signs of internal character. But for hundreds of years, Europeans imagined physiognomy as a mystical art, classifying it alongside disciplines like astrology, necromancy, palm reading, and alchemy. In 1775, a Swiss reverend named Johann Caspar Lavater upended this reality by publishing the first volume of the *Physiognomische Fragmente* (1775-1778), a series of essays that would spawn over a dozen translations and at least twenty English-language editions by 1810.⁶ In these treatises, Lavater insisted that physiognomy was an indubitable

⁶ Lavater first began publishing on physiognomy in 1772, but released his first major volume in 1775. John Graham has argued Lavater's *Essays on Physiognomy* were "reprinted, abridged, summarized, pirated, parodied, imitated, and reviewed so often that it is difficult to imagine how a literate person of the time could have failed to have some general knowledge of the man and his theories. By 1810, there had been published sixteen German, fifteen French, two American, one Dutch, one Italian, and no less than twenty English versions—a total of fifty-five editions in less than forty years." Christopher Lukasik also argues that "By 1826, no fewer than 677 articles referring to physiognomy has been published in newspapers and periodicals from Maine to Florida, Massachusetts to Illinois." This count undoubtedly understates physiognomy's impact, because Lukasik only counts articles where the words "Lavater" or "physiognomy" appear explicitly, not the articles where authors simply use physiognomic techniques to describe individuals and/or fictional characters. See John

empirical science. He argued it was possible to discern the innate character of individuals by examining the skeletal bones of the human countenance. His volumes soon captivated the attention of millions, transforming the practice of reading faces from a marginal form of mysticism into a widespread cultural phenomenon. By the early decades of the nineteenth century, Lavater was a transatlantic superstar. Authors and advertisers referred to him as a “celebrated” or “ingenious” physiognomist, publishers regularly reprinted his maxims, and people from all over the world traveled to his home in Switzerland for personalized facial readings.⁷

In those early years, Americans would have gained access to physiognomical theory either by reading the French translations of Lavater’s treatises, or by seeing fragments in British magazines. In the 1780s, American periodicals began printing short translations of Lavater’s French and German texts, lamenting that an English

Graham, “Lavater’s Physiognomy in England,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 22, no. 4 (1961), 562; and Lukasik, *Discerning Characters*, 33.

⁷ For just some examples of authors referring to the “celebrated Lavater,” see “Account of a Visit to the Celebrated Lavater, and the Present Religion in France,” *Vergennes Gazette and Vermont and New-York Advertiser* (Vergennes, VT), December 27, 1798; “A letter received at Baltimore...,” *Newport Mercury* (Newport, RI), July 16, 1799; “Philadelphia, July 10,” *New Hampshire Gazette* (Portsmouth, NH), July 23, 1799; “New York, July 29. By the brig Trio, Capt. Hill,” *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, July 31, 1799; “Boston, May 1. from France-Direct,” *American Citizen and General Advertiser* (New York), May 6, 1800; “Bern, Aug. 16,” *Political Repository* (Brookfield, MA), November 4, 1800; “Bern, August 16,” *The Oracle of Dauphin and Harrisburgh Advertiser* (Harrisburg, PA), November 17, 1800; “Observations on the Philosophy of Kant,” *The New England Quarterly Magazine* 2, no. 3 (Boston), October-December 1802; “Extracts from the Letters of an American Traveller in Europe, written in 1800 and 1801,” *The Port-Folio* 4, no. 8 (Philadelphia), February 25, 1804; “Extract from One of the Letters of an American Traveller in Europe, Written in 1800 and 1801,” *Northern Post* (Salem, NY), October 18, 1804; “Communications. For the Balance,” *The Balance, and Columbian Repository* (Hudson, NY), September 30, 1806; Thomas Branagan, *The Excellency of the Female Character Vindicated* (New York: Samuel Wood, 1807), 106; “The Ladies’ Toilette; Or, Encyclopaedia of Beauty,” *Lady’s Weekly Miscellany* 6, no. 15 (New York), February 6, 1808; Benjamin Rush, *Medical Inquiries and Observations, Upon the Diseases of the Mind* (Philadelphia: Kimber and Richardson, 1812), 260; “Anecdotes,” *Religious Remembrancer* 1, no. 9 (Philadelphia), October 30, 1813; “Buffon, Klopstock, and Gessner,” *The Port-Folio* 2, no. 5 (Philadelphia), November 1813; and “Dress,” *The Parlour Companion* 2, no. 14 (Philadelphia), April 4, 1818. American newspapers repeatedly claimed that Lavater “enjoys not an hour of leisure” because travelers from all over the world kept coming “to see a man of such celebrity.” For just one example, see “Anecdote of Lavater,” *Concord Observer* (New Hampshire), October 11, 1819.

version of the *Essays on Physiognomy* did not yet exist.⁸ British publishers released the first English-language volumes of the *Essays on Physiognomy* in 1789, and then the first American edition appeared in 1794. From that point forward, Lavater's treatises appeared in parlors and libraries on both sides of the Atlantic.⁹

The *Essays on Physiognomy* were enormous multi-volume tomes with fancy decorative plates, but printers and authors regularly shortened, adapted, and reprinted portions of Lavater's text to reach a wider popular audience. For those who could not afford the elaborate illustrated volumes, there were smaller editions like the "Pocket Lavater," the "Juvenile Lavater" or the "Aphorisms on Man."¹⁰ American editors and publishers also reprinted sections from the *Essays on Physiognomy* in periodicals and newspapers, or they simply invoked Lavater's methodologies to provide "character sketches" of both real and fictional characters. By the late eighteenth and early

⁸ For the earliest examples of American periodicals writing about Lavater or his *Essays on Physiognomy* in the 1780s, see "Extract from a Treatise on Physiognomy," *New Haven Gazette*, and *The Connecticut Magazine* 1, no. 41, November 23, 1786; "London," *The Massachusetts Centinel and the Republican Journal* 6, no. 28 (Boston), December 23, 1786; "Physiognomy," *The Pennsylvania Herald and General Advertiser* 5, no. 62 (Philadelphia), August 25, 1787; "Jack Flash," *The Columbian Magazine* 1, no. 15 (Philadelphia), November 1787; and "To the Editor of the Columbian Magazine," *The Columbian Magazine* 2 (Philadelphia), March 1788. For an early novel that ruminates on the legitimacy and usefulness of Lavaterian theories, see Louis-Sébastien Mercier, *The Night Cap* (Philadelphia: W. Spotswood, 1788).

⁹ The most popular edition in the United States was Johann Caspar Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy; for the Promotion of the Knowledge and the Love of Mankind*, trans. Thomas Holcroft (London: G.G.J. and J. Robinson, 1789). Unless otherwise noted, I will cite from this version. There were also less popular translations by Henry Hunter and the Reverend C. Moore. For the first American edition, see Johann Caspar Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy; for the Promotion of the Knowledge and the Love of Mankind; Written in the German Language by J.C. Lavater, abridged from Mr. Holcroft's Translation* (Boston: William Spotswood, & David West, 1794).

¹⁰ Early American Imprints indicates that editions of Lavater's "Aphorisms on Man" were published in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia in 1790, in Newburyport in 1793, and Catskill, New York in 1795. They were also reprinted in collections alongside other essays in both *The New Complete Letter Writer* (Philadelphia: 1792); and *The Gentleman's Pocket Library* (Boston: 1794). Three editions of the "Pocket Lavater" were published in New York City between 1817 and 1818, as well as in New Haven, CT in 1829, and New York City in 1839. Editions of the "Juvenile Lavater" were published in New York City in 1815.

nineteenth centuries, most educated Americans would have been familiar with physiognomic ideas. As Dror Wahrman has contended, Lavater's *Essays on Physiognomy* were "reprinted, abridged, summarized, pirated, parodied, imitated, and reviewed so often" that it would be "difficult to imagine any literate, semi-literate, or otherwise culturally conscious person remaining unaware of its basic, and deceptively simple, claims."¹¹ This meant that even people who never gained access to Lavater's tomes would have encountered his ideas and methods in the published texts they encountered daily. As New York's *Lady's Monitor* stated in 1801, the *Essays on Physiognomy* took the world by storm: "In Switzerland, in Germany, in France, in Britain, and in America, all the world became passionate admirers of the physiognomical science of Lavater." It seemed as if "everyone was eager to learn to read his neighbor's heart in his face," and the *Essays on Physiognomy* "were thought as necessary in every family as even the bible itself."¹²

An Imperfect Science

The rules of physiognomy were always murky, and both Americans and Europeans contested its legitimacy as an "exact science" from the moment Lavater began publishing. It was enormously popular nonetheless, and even the most diverse practitioners usually agreed on a few general rules. Johann Caspar Lavater had argued

¹¹ Wahrman, *The Making of the Modern Self*, 294.

¹² "Lavater," *Lady's Monitor* 1, no. 13 (New York), November 14, 1801. This quotation was reprinted widely after Lavater's death. Original versions did not include "America" in the list of places enraptured by Lavater's science. It seems as if the *Lady's Monitor* included this addition themselves. For European versions of the same article, see "Additions and Corrections. —Obituary," *Gentleman's Magazine and Historical Chronicle* (London: Nichols and Son, 1801), 184; and "Deaths Abroad," *The Monthly Magazine, Or, British Register* XI, part I (London: Richard Phillips, 1801), 285. For a later American example, see *Eccentric Biography; Or, Sketches of Remarkable Characters, Ancient and Modern*, First American from the Second London Edition (Boston: B. & J. Homans, 1804), 175.

that the human character and body could be divided into three major components: mental, moral, and animal. In his opinion, the face and head represented the mental capacities, the chest signified the moral capacities, and the digestive and reproductive organs embodied the animal propensities. But Lavater also believed that the face was a miniature visual distillation of all these properties, simultaneously displaying a mix of moral, mental, and animal traits. Following Lavater's lead, physiognomists typically divided the head into three segments. The brow and forehead supposedly connoted intellectual capacity, with the eyes being the gateway to the soul. The cheeks, nose, and middle portions of the face indicated moral development. Finally, the mouth and jaw indicated one's animal propensities. This tripartite division of the human countenance provided a general guideline for both amateur dabblers and serious practitioners of physiognomy.¹³

Beyond these general precepts, the consistency of physiognomic doctrine broke down quite quickly. Physiognomy's "rules" were vaguely defined and poorly outlined from the discipline's very inception. As the literary scholar Christopher Rivers has argued, Lavater's method was both "contradictory and incoherent." His "system," in other words, was hardly a system at all. Even if we "suspend our

¹³ Lavater wrote that "the forehead, to the eyebrows, be the mirror, or image, of the understanding; the nose and cheeks the image of the moral and sensitive life; and the mouth and chin the image of the animal life; while the eye will be to the whole as its summary and center." See Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy*, 1:16. Physiognomists, phrenologists, ethnologists, and anthropologists deployed this tripartite division of the countenance throughout the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Herbert Spencer, the influential English anthropologist, wrote: "If the recession of the forehead, protuberance of the jaws, and largeness of the cheekbones, three leading elements of ugliness, are demonstrably indicative of mental inferiority . . . and disappear along with them as intelligence increases, both in the race and in the individual, is it not a fair inference that all such faulty trials of feature signify deficiencies of mind?" See Spencer, *Essays: Scientific, Political and Speculative* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans, and Roberts, 1858), 1:422. For a scholarly discussion of the tripartite division of the face, see Lucy Hartley, "A Science of Beauty? Femininity and the Nineteenth-Century Physiognomic Tradition," *Women: A Cultural Review* 12, no. 1 (2001), 23-24.

disbelief for a moment and try to imagine ourselves as earnest seekers of physiognomical method,” argues Rivers, “we come up against the undeniable problem that there simply is no method in Lavater’s work.”¹⁴ Lavater claimed the bones of the countenance invariably indicated one’s permanent and unalterable nature, but he often broke his own rules and adapted the very guidelines he had laid out for his readers. As the *New England Galaxy* complained in 1818, “no certain rules can be found for the practice of this science.” In the end, Lavater’s tomes were full of ambiguous pronouncements, idiosyncratic facial readings, and pages upon pages of conflicting advice.¹⁵

The *Essays on Physiognomy* also outlined a series of seemingly antithetical arguments concerning the heritability of human difference. Lavater claimed character and appearance were shaped by parental inheritance, and thus, unaffected by education, custom, experience, and climate: “We have proved, as it was incumbent on us, That features and forms are inherited; That moral propensities are inherited,” he wrote.¹⁶ But in a different passage, he hinted that faces might indeed transform over time, responding to stimuli as individuals cultivated certain mental or moral characteristics. He argued, in other words, “that morally beautiful states of the mind impart beautiful impressions” to the countenance while “deformed states of mind

¹⁴ Christopher Rivers, *Face Value: Physiognomical Thought and the Legible Body in Marivaux, Lavater, Balzac, Gautier, and Zola* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994). Brandon Brame Fortune has likewise argued that “Lavater’s theory was not terribly systematic in nature, but was rather expressive in its focus on the individuality of each character whose features were analyzed.” See Fortune, “Portraits of Virtue and Genius: Pantheons of Worthies and Public Portraiture in the Early American Republic, 1780-1820,” (Ph.D. diss., University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 1986), 192.

¹⁵ “Physiognomy,” *New England Galaxy* 1, no. 22 (Boston), March 13, 1818.

¹⁶ Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy*, 1:197.

have deformed expressions.” If these expressions were “incessantly repeated,” they would “stamp durable features” upon people’s visages. These mental traits—and their facial manifestations—would then be passed onto offspring over time.¹⁷

Lavater’s insistence on the heritability of acquired characteristics reflected and forwarded a much broader intellectual commitment to environmentalist theories of human nature, which were circulating within the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Atlantic world.¹⁸ As late as 1872, evolutionists like Charles Darwin remained sympathetic to the notion that repeated facial expressions could permanently imprint themselves on the face, ultimately becoming heritable themselves.¹⁹ This ambiguity left physiognomists with a few questions to iron out: Was character innate and unchangeable? Or could it develop over time? Did people’s faces maintain a consistent appearance throughout their lives? Or were character developments capable of leaving indelible marks on the human countenance? Lavater insisted that true physiognomists would be able to distinguish the difference “between original form and deviations.” But how, exactly, could one differentiate between facial

¹⁷ Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy*, 1:181.

¹⁸ Most people now call this theory “Lamarckianism,” naming after the French biologist Jean-Baptiste Lamarck. In truth, there was widespread belief in the notion that individuals could acquire certain moral, mental, or physical traits during their lifetime, and then pass these traits onto their children. These theories preceded Lamarck’s works and continued at least until the late nineteenth century. This environmentalist understanding of heredity is evident in the works of eighteenth-century thinkers like Samuel Stanhope Smith and Alexander Humboldt, as well as nineteenth-century evolutionists like Herbert Spencer (and even, at times, Charles Darwin).

¹⁹ Charles Darwin, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (London: John Murray, 1872). In this book, Darwin argued that facial expressions might be acquired through habit, and then transmitted to progeny. One scholar has contended that “In 1872, when *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* went to print, Darwin was still emphasizing the Lamarckian mechanism of inheritance of acquired traits, and natural selection was presented as merely a subsidiary force.” See Suzanne Chevalier-Skolnikoff, “Facial Expression of Emotion in Nonhuman Primates,” in Paul Ekman, ed., *Darwin and Facial Expression: A Century of Research in Review* (Cambridge, M.A.: Malor Books, 2006 [1973]), 32. See also Lewis Petrino, “Darwin and the Representative Expression of Reality,” in Ekman, ed., *Darwin and Facial Expression*, 230.

mutations and the supposedly “original” character that individuals inherited from their parents? What should observers be looking for, anyways? Was it more important to discern *inherited* traits than to analyze a person’s *current* appearance and character? The answers were unclear.²⁰

Lavater’s contradictory assertions left readers with two conflicting ideas. On the one hand, he argued that facial appearances and character traits were both heritable and unchangeable. On the other hand, he suggested that individual countenances might transform over time. He attempted to clarify these conflicting assertions by writing that visages might change *marginally*, while suggesting that they could never *dramatically* transform in ways that would undercut their original nature. Lavater argued that the “most beauteous countenance is capable of excessive degradation, and the most deformed of like improvement; but each form, each countenance, is only capable of a certain kind and degree of degradation or improvement.” This theory nonetheless left a troublesome conundrum unresolved: if faces could degrade and beautify, then how could one analyze the stable traits of someone’s character? Lavater himself admitted that physiognomy could only be a true “science” if observers were able to consistently evaluate people’s innate and unchangeable features. If character, intellect, and appearance were all flexible, then what was the point of the whole enterprise?²¹

Many Americans were untroubled by these ideological inconsistencies and unanswered questions. Unlike Lavater, they did not fret about the distinction between the permanent and unalterable features and the more flexible forms of facial expression. Nor did they theorize, in detail, about whether facial and mental features

²⁰ Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy*, 2:209.

²¹ Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy*, 2:52.

were heritable. That is not to say that all Americans unproblematically accepted Lavater's theories. Many scientists, philosophical thinkers, and ordinary people criticized his efforts to frame physiognomy as an empirical form of scientific observation. But even as many people questioned physiognomy's legitimacy, most Americans believed in the central premise undergirding the discipline: facial features and expressions had the potential to convey useful information about a person's inner nature because the face was both the "index of the mind" and the "mirror of the soul."

In medical discourses, popular literature, and daily practice, a broad-based cultural faith in the readability of the human countenance comfortably coexisted alongside widespread skepticism about physiognomy's scientific legitimacy. This meant that most Americans analyzed faces with enthusiasm, despite some people's reluctance to believe in the discipline's absolute infallibility. When the Quaker Elizabeth Drinker checked Lavater's *Essays on Physiognomy* out of the library in 1794, she analyzed the book in her diary: "I believe there is a great deal in what he advances," she wrote, "and am not of the oppinion[sic] of those who say, he is a madman, or out of his sences." Drinker was nonetheless skeptical of Lavater's contention that physiognomy was an unimpeachable and pragmatic discipline. Although she did not distrust the science entirely, she believed Lavater had overstated his own talents. "I think he carries some things much too far, and has rather too much conceit of his abilities," wrote Drinker. Even though Drinker harbored a personal mistrust for physiognomy's most bombastic claims, the person writing her obituary was less skeptical. Memorializing Drinker's life in 1807, the author relayed that she "possessed uncommon personal beauty, which the gentleness of her temper

preserved, in a great degree, to the last; for her countenance was a perfect index of a mind, whose feelings were all attuned to harmony.”²²

By 1799, physiognomy had become so popular that Joseph Bartlett focused his Harvard University commencement speech on the subject. One aspiring Philadelphia physician had so much faith in the science that he decided to write his dissertation on it. His doctoral thesis, *An Essay on the Truth of Physiognomy and its Application to Medicine*, ultimately earned him a degree from the University of Pennsylvania’s medical school in 1807.²³ Between the 1810s and the 1830s, Nathaniel Chapman, a physician and professor of medicine in Philadelphia, as well as the editor of the *Philadelphia Journal of the Medical and Physical Sciences*, gave his students lectures on the “Physiognomy of Diseases.”²⁴ And in 1827, Isaac Ray, an early pioneer in the field of psychiatry, published *Conversations on the Animal Economy*, an educational text that dedicated two chapters to simplifying physiognomical principles for schoolchildren.²⁵ John Kearsley Mitchell, yet another

²² “Diary of Elizabeth Sandwith Drinker,” July 1794, in *The Diary of Elizabeth Drinker*, ed., Elaine Forman Crane (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1991), 1:573-574. The obituary appeared in *Poulson’s American Daily Advertiser* on December 2, 1807, as well as in *Bronson’s United States Gazette*. Quoted in Crane, ed., *The Diary of Elizabeth Drinker*, 304n11. See also “Mortuary,” *The Port Folio* 4, no. 23 (Philadelphia), December 5, 1807; and “American Register of Deaths,” *The American Register, Or General Repository of History, Politics and Science* 2 (Philadelphia: A. Conrad & Co.: 1808), 98-99.

²³ See Joseph Bartlett, *Physiognomy: A Poem Delivered at the Request of The Society of ΦBK in the Chapel of Harvard University on the Day of Their Anniversary, July 18th, 1799* (Boston: John Russell, 1799); and Richard Brown, *An Essay on the Truth of Physiognomy and its Application to Medicine* (Philadelphia: Thomas T. Stiles, 1807), College of Physicians of Philadelphia [hereafter cited as CPP]. For an advertisement of Brown’s graduation, see *The United States’ Gazette* (Philadelphia), April 11, 1807. For a positive review of his “interesting dissertation,” see “Review of Richard Brown’s *An Essay on the Truth of Physiognomy, and its Application to Medicine*,” *Philadelphia Medical Museum* 4, no. 4 (1807): ciii-cix.

²⁴ See “Chapman’s notes, between circa 1810 and 1830,” and “Chapman’s lectures [sic], after 1810,” in the Nathaniel Chapman Papers, ca. 1810-1853, MSS 10a Chapman, CPP.

²⁵ Isaac Ray (“A Physician”), *Conversations on the Animal Economy* (London: Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown, and Green, 1827), 56-65, 164-170.

Philadelphia physician and educator, collected physiognomical sketches of the mentally ill patients in residence at the Pennsylvania Hospital.²⁶

In both the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, medical professionals in Europe and the United States used physiognomy to diagnose and treat various diseases. The American physician J.F. Daniel Lobstein, for instance, wrote a treatise on how medical doctors and legal professionals might use the discipline in medicine and in “criminal jurisprudence.” The administrators at the Elm Hill Private School and Home for Feeble-Minded Youth similarly analyzed the faces of patients to diagnose and understand their maladies.²⁷ On the other side of the Atlantic, British physicians such as Dr. Alexander Morison and Dr. Hugh Welch Diamond used physiognomy to identify the physical manifestations of mental illness and evaluate the usefulness of existing treatments.²⁸

Artists and authors likewise depended on physiognomy as they crafted portraits, novels, and short stories for the American public. In her famous fictional work, *The Coquette* (1797), Hannah Webster Foster included a scene in which two characters meditate on the merits of physiognomy. Authors such as Charles Brockden

²⁶ “Likenesses of the Insane, taken for Dr. Jn. K. Mitchell during his Service at the Pennsylvania Hospital,” MSS 10a/133, CPP.

²⁷ J.F. Daniel Lobstein, M.D., *A Treatise upon the Semeiology of the Eye, For the Use of Physicians; and of the Countenance, for Criminal Jurisprudence* (New York: C.S. Francis, 1830). The treatise was also published that same year in Boston and Philadelphia. For an example of how facial analysis was used to diagnose mental illness and what nineteenth-century Americans would have called “feeble-mindedness,” see Records, Elm Hill Private School and Home for the Education of Feeble-Minded Youth, MSS 6/0013-01, CPP.

²⁸ In the “Prefatory Remarks” of his treatise, Dr. Alexander Morison wrote that physiognomy “gives us warning of the approach of the disease in those whom there is a predisposition to it, as well as confirms our opinion of convalescence in those in whom it is subsiding.” See Alexander Morison, *The Physiognomy of Mental Diseases* (London: Longman and Co., 1843). For an analysis of Dr. Hugh Welch Diamond’s uses of physiognomy, see Pearl, “Photographic Physiognomy: Through A Mediated Mirror,” in *About Faces*, 148-185.

Brown, Susanna Rowson, and Judith Sargent Murray likewise employed physiognomic techniques of character description in their literary works.²⁹ In a similar way, portraitists like Charles Willson Peale and his sons relied on physiognomic theories to accurately convey the character of their sitters, while the sculptor Hiram Powers did the same when molding his famous busts.³⁰ Nineteenth-century writers and novelists continued incorporating physiognomic rhetoric into their stories, using it to describe their characters' personalities and foreshadow plot developments.³¹

In 1852, almost sixty years after Elizabeth Drinker had complained about Lavater's *Essays on Physiognomy*, Catharine Maria Sedgwick was still debating the merits of this popular science in a letter to her niece. After a man named "Dr.

²⁹ Hannah Webster Foster, *The Coquette; Or, The History of Eliza Wharton* (Boston: Samuel Etheridge, 1797), 164. Graeme Tytler has argued that Charles Brockden Brown's *Ormond* (1811) is "a novel swamped with physiognomical analyses," and Christopher Lukasik has written an article exploring the uses of physiognomy in the same novel. See Tytler, *Physiognomy in the European Novel: Faces and Fortunes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 187; and Lukasik, "'The Vanity of Physiognomy': Dissimulation and Discernment in Charles Brockden Brown's *Ormond*," *Amerikastudien / American Studies* 50, no. 3 (2005): 485-505. For an example of physiognomic description in Susanna Rowson's novels, see *Charlotte Temple: A Tale of Truth* (Boston: Charles Ewer, 1824 [1794]), 108-109.

³⁰ On Peale's efforts to convey character through portraiture, see Fortune, "Portraits of Virtue and Genius," 166-182. Charles Colbert has explored Hiram Powers' uses of phrenology. By the antebellum era, phrenology and physiognomy were mutually entangled disciplines. See Colbert, "'Each Little Hillock hath a Tongue': Phrenology and the Art of Hiram Powers," *The Art Bulletin* 68, no. 2 (June 1986): 281-300.

³¹ On physiognomy, phrenology, and popular literature in the early national and antebellum eras, see James V. Werner, "'Ground-Moles' and Cosmic Flaneurs: Poe, Humboldt, and Nineteenth-Century Science," *Edgar Allan Poe Review* 3, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 45-69; Kevin J. Hayes, "Poe, The Daguerreotype, And The Autobiographical Act," *Biography* 25, no. 3 (Summer 2002): 477-492; "Nathaniel Mackey, 'Phrenological Whitman,'" *Conjunctions* 29 (1997): 231-251; Alan Gribben, "Mark Twain, Phrenology and the 'Temperaments': A Study of Pseudoscientific Influence," *American Quarterly* 24, no. 1 (March 1972): 45-68; and Edward Hungerford, "Poe and Phrenology," *American Literature* 2, no. 3 (November 1930): 209-231. For information on how scientific knowledge appeared in magazines and newspapers, see Jan Pilditch, "'Fashionable Female Studies': The Popular Dissemination of Science in 'Godey's Lady's Book,'" *Australasian Journal of American Studies* 24, no. 1 (July 2005): 20-37; and Geoffrey Cantor and Sally Shuttleworth, eds., *Science Serialized: Representations of the Sciences in Nineteenth-Century Periodicals* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004).

Redfield, a professor of the art of reading physiognomy” came through her town to do personalized facial readings, Sedgwick expressed suspicion of physiognomy’s legitimacy, pointing out that Redfield only “pretends that it is an exact science.” Even so, she was impressed many of his conclusions and was pleasantly surprised when he accurately captured the characters of her loved ones, despite never meeting them before: “truly his readings here were wonderful,” she gushed.³² In an analysis of the New York Society Library records, one scholar has shown that numerous women checked Lavater’s *Essays on Physiognomy* out of the library in the late 1840s and 1850s. He argues that these patterns hint at “an unexpected interest in a rather unorthodox science.” For a nineteenth-century American, though, there would have been nothing “unorthodox” or “unexpected” in these results. The fact that educated Americans were still reading, discussing, and debating Lavater’s theories at mid-century demonstrates just how profoundly his work had suffused the broader culture within the United States.³³

Even Lavater’s fiercest critics usually agreed with him on one major point: cognitive and emotional function occurred in the human brain. Taking that assertion as their starting point, they postulated that the skull, forehead, and face might be the strongest indicators of internal capacity, and they conceded that analyzing the face might indeed prove the most efficient way of accessing the deepest recesses of the human mind and soul. As one periodical stated in 1822, “The basis of physiognomy,

³² “Catharine Maria Sedgwick to Katharine Sedgwick Minot,” New York, May 2, 1852, in *Life and Letters of Catharine M. Sedgwick*, ed., Mary E. Dewey (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1871), 339. Sedgwick was referring to James Redfield, author of *Outlines of a New System of Physiognomy* (New York: J.S. Redfield, 1849).

³³ Ronald J. Zboray, “Reading Patterns in Antebellum America: Evidence in the Charge Records of the New York Society Library,” *Libraries & Culture* 26, no. 2 (Spring, 1991), 311-312.

that the face is the silent echo of the heart, is substantially true.”³⁴ This assumption was at the core of Lavater’s system and it later undergirded the rise of other disciplines, which included phrenology and craniology by the early decades of the nineteenth century. Neither Europeans nor their American counterparts knew much about the complexities of human cognition. This ensured that physiognomy—inconsistencies and all—still constituted one of their most effective methods for studying the links between the mind and the body. Through facial analysis, they crafted a new “science of man” that endeavored to make visible the invisible workings of the human mind.³⁵

The Face of Inequality in the Early Republic

From the very moment that physiognomy catapulted to popularity in the late eighteenth century, Americans began using it to legitimize hierarchies of race, class, and gender. The promise of physiognomy was enticing. If facial features were innate, unalterable, and physiologically manifested, then all people would have a distinct corporeal signature, readable by any skilled observer. Facial analysis thus provided Americans with a way of distinguishing between virtuous citizens, on the one hand, and dangerous threats to the social order, on the other. This allowed the “better sorts”

³⁴ “H,” “The Eloquence of Eyes,” *The New Monthly Magazine and Literary Journal* 4, no. 19 (Boston), July 1, 1822.

³⁵ Phrenology’s intellectual debt to physiognomy was reflected in the titles of early phrenological works. Johann Gaspar Spurzheim, for instance, published *The Physiognomical System of Drs. Gall and Spurzheim* (London: Baldwin, Cradock, and Joy, 1815) and *Phrenology, in Connexion with the Study of Physiognomy* (London: Treuttel, Wurtz, and Richter, 1826). Spurzheim believed the face and head revealed character, but he also wanted to “do more” than Lavater had done by systematizing the physiognomical system. Complaining that the “language of Lavater is obviously always vague,” he envisioned a more exact system of discerning human character from the head. See the American edition of Spurzheim’s *Phrenology, in Connexion with the Study of Physiognomy* (Boston: Marsh, Capen, and Lyon, 1833), 8-9, 22.

to map social distinctions onto the human body and then justify these constructed inequities by describing them as physiological realities.

Physiognomy proved especially appealing for elite and middling Americans because it promised a method for delimiting the boundaries of political belonging. To help people discern who “counted” as a virtuous citizen and who did not, early national authors, artists, and engravers regularly published portraits and “character sketches” of the United States’ most illustrious white men. In these volumes, the countenances of the nation’s founders represented republican virtue personified. Joseph Delaplaine, for instance, published the first volume of the *Repository of the Lives and Portraits of Distinguished American Characters* in 1815, with the stated goal of providing “correct and striking likenesses” of America’s most “distinguished characters.” He aimed to show that American citizens were just as cultivated—in body and mind—as their European counterparts. He knew this was no small task.³⁶

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, natural historians like the Comte de Buffon had described the American continent as inferior, in its landscape and population, as well as in its flora and fauna. Other European writers likewise argued for Americans’ inferior minds and bodies. In his *Sketch of the United States of North America* (1814), the French author Louis-Auguste Félix Baron de Beaujour contended that Americans “have little delicacy in their features, and little expression in their physiognomy.” Americans were not necessarily “ugly,” he admitted, but like the Germans, their “tall forms, ruddy and soft” often concealed an “obtuse mind and soul devoid of energy,” a deficiency that was readily observable in their countenances. He argued that it was to “this vice in their physical constitution, more

³⁶ Joseph Delaplaine, *Repository of the Lives and Portraits of Distinguished American Characters* (Philadelphia: 1815-1816).

than to their geographical position, that the eternal irresolution of their government is owing.” Through this statement, Beaujour tied the political instability of the early republic to the inferior intellects and visages of its citizens. He nonetheless assured readers that Americans were not doomed to perpetual inadequacy. Over time, “their temperament will improve with their climate,” and as a result, “the Americans will some day or other acquire more vivacity of mind and more vigour in their character.” Using an environmentalist understanding of human nature, he simultaneously argued for the inferiority and the improvability of American bodies.³⁷

To counter European critics like Buffon and Beaujour, Americans created their own physiognomic galleries, patriotically highlighting the superior brains and bodies of their most distinguished citizens. In addition to Delaplaine’s *Repository*, John Sanderson began releasing *Biographies of the Signers of the Declaration of Independence* in 1823. James Thacher published the *American Medical Biography* in 1828, a tribute to the nation’s greatest physicians, followed by James Herring and James Barton Longacre’s *The National Portrait Gallery of Distinguished Americans* in 1834. All these collections shared a common goal: to provide visual and textual “evidence” of America’s greatness by highlighting the portraits and physiognomical sketches of its most accomplished white men. Physiognomy, although a transatlantic science, attained a unique resonance in the early republic as people began using it to argue for the exceptionalism of the new nation and the distinction of its leaders.³⁸

³⁷ Baron de Beaujour, *Sketch of the United States of North America: At the Commencement of the Nineteenth Century, from 1800 to 1810*, trans. William Walton (London: J. Booth, 1814), 151.

³⁸ For examples of printed “galleries” of distinguished figures, see James Hardie, *The New Universal Biographical Dictionary* (New York: Johnson & Stryker, 1801-1805); John Sanderson, *Biographies of the Signers of the Declaration of Independence* (Philadelphia: R.W. Pomeroy, 1823-27); James Thacher, *American Medical Biography* (Boston: Richardson & Lord, 1828); James Herring and James Barton Longacre, *The National Portrait Gallery of Distinguished Americans* (Philadelphia: Henry Perkins, 1834-1839); and Stephen W. Williams, *American Medical Biography; Or, Memoirs of*

Of all the faces they highlighted, the nation's authors, artists, and writers were most captivated with the countenance of George Washington. One periodical contributor, for instance, waxed poetic about the features and genius of "the greatest man America had ever produced."³⁹ Similarly, before launching into a detailed description of Washington's face and form, the author John Bell insisted it was incumbent on him to delineate "the person of this distinguished man," because it "bears great analogy to the qualifications of his mind." Bell stated that Washington's "features are manly and bold," ornamented by "eyes of a blueish cast and very lively." In Washington's "sensible, composed, and thoughtful" physiognomy, he argued, viewers could see "the striking features of his character," which included truthfulness, affability, simplicity, and sincerity. He claimed that "no man ever united in his own person a more perfect alliance of the virtues of a philosopher with the talents of a general."⁴⁰

Bell was not alone in his obsession with Washington's physical characteristics. The *Philadelphia Monthly Magazine* claimed that his "countenance carries the impression of thoughtfulness," while the *American Museum* suggested that the "general's goodness beams in his eyes."⁴¹ Emphasizing both his martial prowess

Eminent Physicians, Embracing Principally Those Who Have Died Since the Publication of Dr. Thacher's Work on the Same Subject (Greenfield, M.A.: L. Merriam and Co., 1845). For a discussion of these collections and their relationship to physiognomy, see Lukasik, *Discerning Characters*, 127-140; and Fortune, "Portraits of Virtue and Genius," 34-86.

³⁹ "Portrait of General Washington: Translated from the French of Mr. Mandrillon, by a Very Young Lady," *The Columbian Magazine* 1, no. 5 (Philadelphia), January 1787.

⁴⁰ John Bell, "Sketches of the President of the United States," *The Massachusetts Magazine; or, Monthly Museum* 3, no. 3 (Boston), March 1791.

⁴¹ "Memoirs of George Washington, Esq.: Late President of the United States," *The Philadelphia Monthly Magazine; or, Universal Repository of Knowledge and Entertainment* 1, no. 6, June 1798.

and his cheerful disposition, the *Rural Magazine* proclaimed that Washington's "whole aspect pronounces him the hero," even as "the mildness and benignity of his countenance" simultaneously declared that he was "more supremely blest in the kindred sunshine of public harmony and peace" than steeped in the horrors of war.⁴² Joseph Delaplaine suggested that Washington's "corporeal majesty" was so bewitching that whenever viewers gazed upon "the lineaments of his face," they lost themselves in "the impress of his spirit and the expression of his intellect."⁴³

Perhaps Delaplaine was not too far off in this assumption. Abigail Adams wrote that she "was struck with General Washington" when she first encountered him in 1775, pointing out that "the gentleman and soldier, look agreeably blended in him. Modesty marks every line and feature of his face." Months later, she used similar phrasing to describe Benjamin Franklin. "You know I make some pretensions to physiognomy," she wrote in a letter to her husband, "and I thought I could read in his countenance the virtues of his heart, among which, patriotism shone in its full lustre." John Adams replied with a compliment: "I admire your skill in Phisiognomy, and your Talent at drawing Characters." In descriptions like these, scientific facial analysis melded with idealized biographical narratives. As the physical embodiments of virtue, gentility, and disinterestedness, figures like George Washington and Benjamin Franklin became the model citizens of a new nation founded on republican principles. They enthralled Americans as political and military figures, but also as national specimens of physiognomical distinction.⁴⁴

⁴² "Washington," *The Rural Magazine* 1, no. 26 (Newark), August 11, 1798.

⁴³ *Delaplaine's Repository*, 1:81, 106-106.

⁴⁴ "Abigail Smith Adams to John Adams," July 16, 1775; "Abigail Smith Adams to John Adams," November 05, 1775; and "John Adams to Abigail Smith Adams," November 18, 1775; all in the *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive*, MHS, <http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/>.

By providing visual and textual “character sketches” of political leaders, early American authors, artists, and publishers sought to instill virtue in the citizens of the new republic while simultaneously reifying hierarchies of race, class, and gender. In addition to the numerous printed “galleries” that emphasized founding fathers’ faces, there were also physical pantheons of physiognomical portraits. Charles Willson Peale, for instance, opened the “Repository for Natural Curiosities,” which featured the busts and visages of influential Americans in a “Gallery of Distinguished Personages.” It was his hope that this collection of portraits would “instruct the mind and sow the seeds of Virtue.” Visitors, he imagined, would examine the countenances of exemplary figures, discern traits of intelligence and morality in their visages, and then imbibe these characteristics through both rational observation and emulation.⁴⁵

Peale was certainly familiar with physiognomic ideas. He owned a copy of Lavater’s *Aphorisms on Man*, and in the marginalia, he wrote that Lavater had been a skilled and careful observer of character. “Lavater had that disposition,” he recorded, “his works of Phisonomy[sic] throughout bespeak it.”⁴⁶ As an ardent believer in physiognomical principles, Peale argued for a correlation between external features and internal character. For this reason, he sought realistic depictions of his sitters’ visages, rather than idealized visions or flattering “high finishes.” The end goal was to convey deeper information about individuals’ characters through portraiture. As he

⁴⁵ “Charles Willson Peale to the Representatives of the State of Massachusetts in Congress,” December 14, 1795, in Lillian B. Miller, ed., *Selected Papers of Charles Willson Peale and His Family: The Artist as Museum Keeper, 1791-1810* (New Haven, C.T.: Published for the National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, by Yale University Press, 1988), 2:1:136. David C. Ward has argued that “In his gallery, as in all his portraiture, Peale created the pictorial fiction that the mark of election could be read on an individual’s face and that character led ineluctably to good works.” He also contends that Peale believed “character was transparent.” See Ward, *Charles Willson Peale: Art and Selfhood in the Early Republic* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 84, 87.

⁴⁶ Quoted in Fortune, “Portraits of Virtue and Genius,” 194.

wrote in his diary in December of 1817, “It is the mind I would wish to represent through the features of the man, and he that does not possess a good mind, I do not desire to portray his features.”⁴⁷ Because Peale believed countenances conveyed character, he wanted to highlight the individual particularities of people’s faces—a task he viewed as especially important when painting the nation’s most prominent leaders. “Let them have truth,” he declared in a letter to his son, Rembrandt.⁴⁸

Charles Willson Peale intended his museum to convey both scientific and political messages. In his worldview, certain people’s minds—and faces—were simply better than others. For this reason, he organized his collections in ways that invoked both the “Great Chain of Being” and the new Linnaean classificatory system. Using portraits, sculptures, and physical specimens, he visually illustrated this divinely sanctioned order: images of rich, white, and politically powerful white men hung near the ceiling of the room, towering over specimens of insects, birds, and other mammals. Every species had a providentially ordained place in Peale’s hierarchical system, and at the very top were the nation’s founding fathers, its Revolutionary War heroes, and its eminent scientists and intellectual thinkers.⁴⁹ Only

⁴⁷ Charles Willson Peale, “Typescript version of C.W. Peale Diaries, 1817-1818,” December 2, 1817, Series 7, Volume 14, in Peale-Sellers Family Collection, 1686-1963, Mss.B.P31, American Philosophical Society.

⁴⁸ “Charles Willson Peale to Rembrandt Peale,” June 16, 1817, quoted in Miller, *In Pursuit of Fame: Rembrandt Peale, 1778-1860* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, Published for the National Portrait Gallery, 1992), 123.

⁴⁹ According to Brandon Brame Fortune, the American Revolution intensified Peale’s “republican resolve to preserve the likenesses of the worthies of the new United States.” David Brigham has also suggested that “One of Peale’s central ideas was that nature is simultaneously hierarchical and harmonious,” and he sought to portray this order in his museum. See Fortune, “Portraits of Virtue and Genius,” 182; and David R. Brigham, “‘Ask the Beasts, and They Shall Teach Thee’: The Human Lessons of Charles Willson Peale’s Natural History Displays,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 59, no. 2/3 (1996), 183. For more on Peale, his gallery, and his ideas about physiognomy and social hierarchy, see Ward, *Art and Selfhood in the Early Republic*, 82-89; Lukasik, *Discerning Characters*, 131; and Catherine E. Kelly, *The Republic of Taste: Art, Politics, and Everyday Life in Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 159-194.

the physiognomies of the most illustrious Americans proved suitable for the top of Peale's gallery. Such museum displays portrayed republican citizenship as a privilege restricted to distinguished white men.⁵⁰

These pantheons of illustrious personages—whether they were textual, visual, or material—assured Americans that their citizenry was illustrious. By displaying the faces of white men who could lay claim to political rights, physiognomic galleries enforced existing hierarchies in an increasingly unstable world. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Americans were experiencing transformative political and economic developments. In the wake of the Revolutionary War, the nation began evaluating the meaning of republican citizenship and debating who could—and could not—lay claim to it. Meanwhile, as the market economy expanded, young men were moving into urban centers, undermining older methods for maintaining the patriarchal order. As cheap clothing became available and social mobility increased, it became harder to tell genteel individuals from the clever tricksters and confidence men waiting to corrupt an otherwise virtuous American citizenry. Physiognomy gave more privileged Americans hope that they would be able to properly read faces to discern the dissimulators in their midst.⁵¹

⁵⁰ David C. Ward points out that Peale's "collection included no women, African Americans, working people, or 'ordinary' Americans, let alone 'outcasts' like the poor or criminals." See Ward, *Art and Selfhood in the Early Republic*, 83. See also Kelly, *The Republic of Taste*, 189.

⁵¹ Both Karen Haltunnen and Christopher Lukasik have shown how middle-class Americans used physiognomy during this process of identity formation. When it became harder to determine an individual's social class through traditional methods (like community reputation, clothing, or social performance), Americans attempted to root character more firmly in the body. See Lukasik, *Discerning Characters*; and Haltunnen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-class Culture in America, 1830-1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press).

Just as physiognomy served as a scientific justification for class hierarchies, it also became one of the most important precursors to—and foundations for—the rise of scientific racism in Europe, North America, and the broader Atlantic world. As soon as physiognomy made its earliest incursions into American culture, people began using it to rationalize white supremacy. In February of 1792, for instance, a periodical author calling himself “Africanus” employed Lavaterian ideas to suggest that people of color were incapable of scientific learning, success in the arts, or “civilization” more broadly. If there was “any truth in the science” of physiognomy, he argued, then black degradation was more than his own treasured opinion; it was, instead, a provable scientific fact. Africanus insisted “the physiognomy of the white man excels that of the black, as much as the appearance of the liveliest sagacious horse exceeds the stupid aspect of the dullest ass in the creation.” Because of the implicit assumption of white male superiority that suffused physiognomic doctrines, he quite easily adapted and deployed Lavater’s system to justify unequal race relations. Physiognomic ideas would ultimately lay the foundation for new forms of scientific racism in the mid-nineteenth century, providing a language that rationalized racial hierarchies as both aesthetic and anatomical realities.⁵²

Although Lavater did not spend much time discussing racial difference in the *Essays on Physiognomy*, he built on the theories of someone who did: an eighteenth-century Dutch naturalist, artist, and anatomist named Petrus Camper. Camper’s most

⁵² Africanus, “For the New-York Journal, &c. Negroes Interior to the Whites,” *New-York Journal and Patriotic Register* (New York), February 4, 1792. European historians often describe physiognomy as a stepping stone on the road to racial essentialism, but Christopher Lukasik rightly points out that in the early American republic, physiognomy “was used to visualize differences within races as much as it did between them.” Until about 1825, most people primarily used physiognomy to delineate the distinctions between white men. Even so, the assumption of white superiority was present in physiognomic theory from the very beginning, and by the 1830s and 1840s, both scientific and popular thinker regularly invoked physiognomy to rationalize scientific racism. See Lukasik, *Discerning Characters*, 38.

important contribution to physiognomy was his theory of the facial angle. According to Camper, the different “nations” of the world had different skull structures, which caused them to have uniquely identifiable facial features. Camper preferred to analyze skulls in profile (a technique that Lavater enthusiastically adopted). To calculate the facial angle, Camper drew a horizontal line between a person’s nose and ear, as well as a vertical line that stretched from the forehead to the chin and passed through the lips. He would then measure the angle where these two lines intersected.

Although Camper insisted that he was not trying to hierarchically rank human beings, he arranged his skulls on a continuum, with Europeans and the ancient Greeks conspicuously on one side and dogs, apes, and Africans together on the other. Camper argued the faces of the ancient Greeks were the most beautiful, with facial angles of close to 100 degrees. This meant that their foreheads extended far beyond their chins: the mark of a large brain and small animal propensities. Caucasians, he claimed, were closest to the Grecian standard, with facial angles between 80 and 90 degrees. The other “nations” of the world—groups Camper referred to as “Moors,” “Calmucks,” and “Negroes”—had facial angles between 70 and 80 degrees. Camper believed in the universal humanity of all mankind, but he nonetheless crafted an allegedly empirical framework that white people found terribly convenient for rationalizing racial inequality. Scientists, politicians, and popular authors used Camper’s facial line well into the latter decades of the nineteenth century. In this way, physiognomy provided one of the earliest “mathematical” justifications for white supremacy in the early American republic.⁵³

⁵³ See Petrus Camper, *The Works on the Connexion Between the Science of Anatomy and the Arts of Drawing, Painting, Statuary, &c. &c.*, Translated from the Dutch by T. Gogan, M.D. (London: 1794), 42. Miriam Meijer points out that Camper was arguing for the universal humanity of mankind, despite his hierarchical ranking of the world’s various populations. Nineteenth-century scientific racists, however, purposefully misinterpreted Camper’s theories for their own ends. See Meijer, *Race*

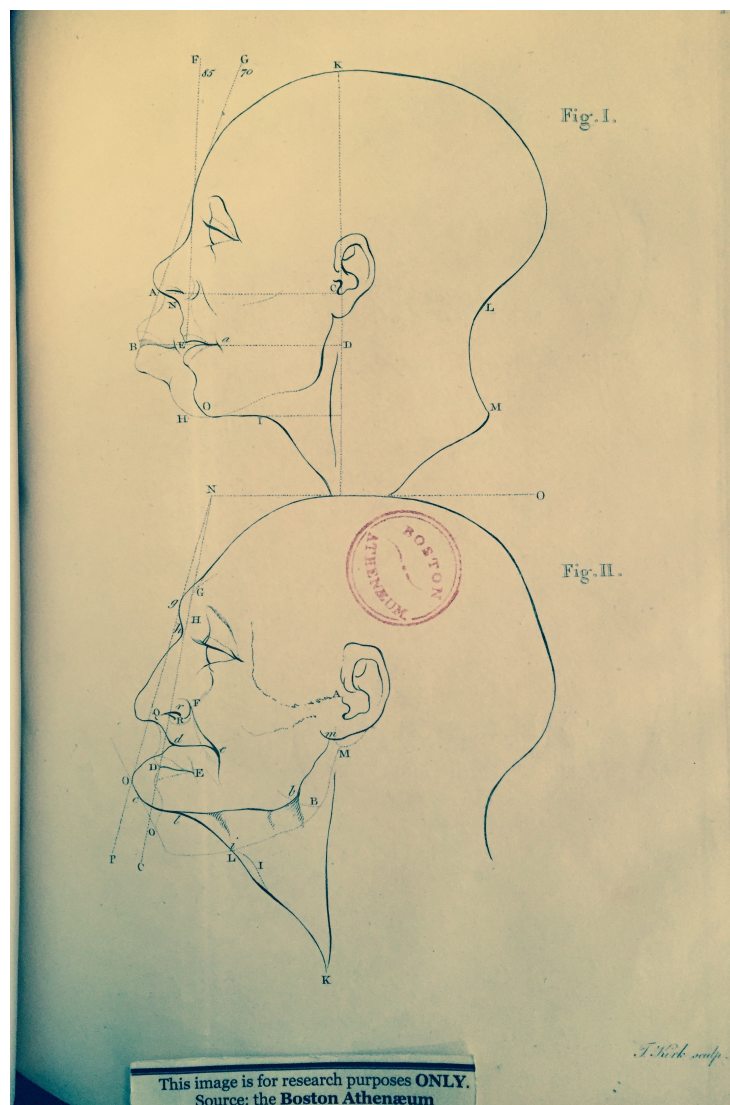


Fig. 1.1 An illustration of Camper's facial angle, from *The Works of the Late Professor Camper, On the Connexion between the Science of Anatomy, & The Arts of Drawing, Painting, Statuary, &c.* (London: J. Hearne, 1821), Boston Athenaeum.

and *Aesthetics in the Anthropology of Petrus Camper* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999). For scholarship on physiognomy's relationship to scientific racism, see John Wood Sweet, *Bodies Politic: Negotiating Race in the American North, 1730-1830* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), esp. 296-298; Roxann Wheeler, *The Complexion of Race: Categories of Difference in Eighteenth-Century British Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000); Judith Weschler, "Lavater, Stereotype, and Prejudice," in Ellis Shookman, ed., *The Faces of Physiognomy: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Johann Caspar Lavater* (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1993), 104-126; Kay Flavell, "Mapping Faces: National Physiognomies as Cultural Prediction," *Eighteenth-Century Life* 18 (1994-95): 8-22; and Richard T. Gray, *About Face: Physiognomic Thought from Lavater to Auschwitz* (Detroit: Wayne Street Press, 2004). On physiognomy's relationship to the emergence of modern anthropology, see Mary Cowling, *The Artist as Anthropologist: The Representation of Type and Character in Victorian Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

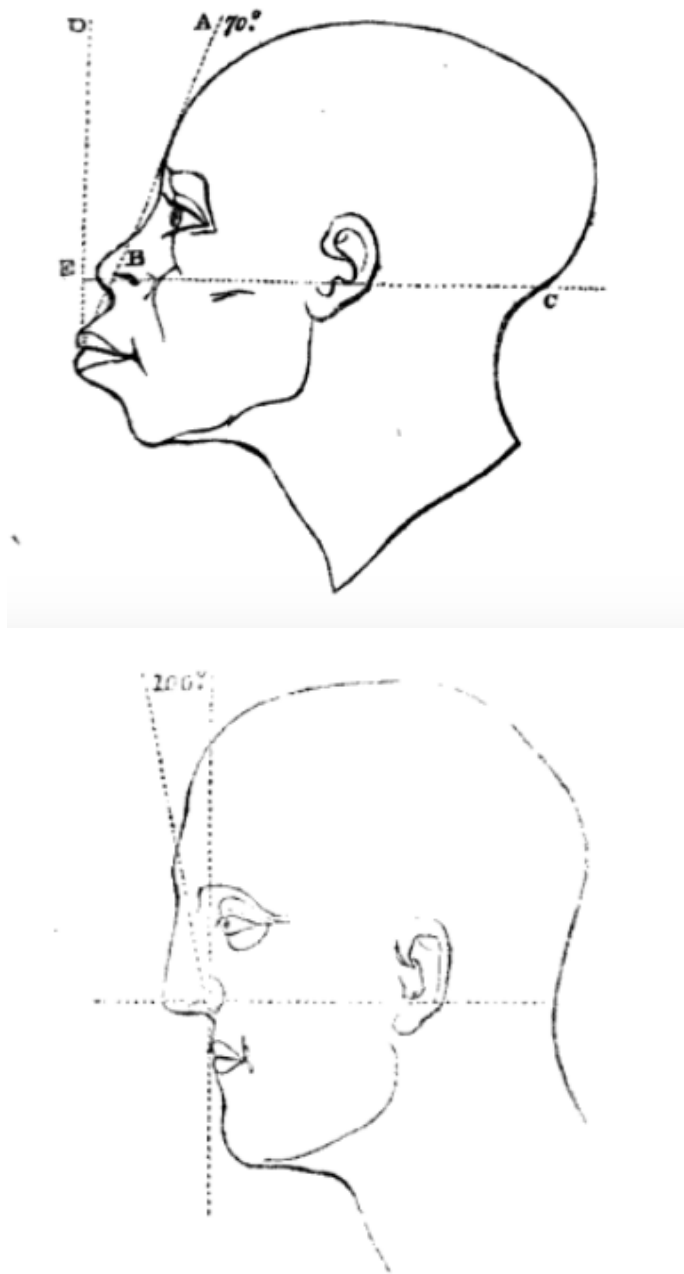


Fig. 1.2 The facial angle of a “Negro” and “ideal” Greek countenance, from Isaac Ray, *Conversations on the Animal Economy* (London: Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown, and Green, 1827). This was a book intended to instruct schoolchildren in physiognomical principles.

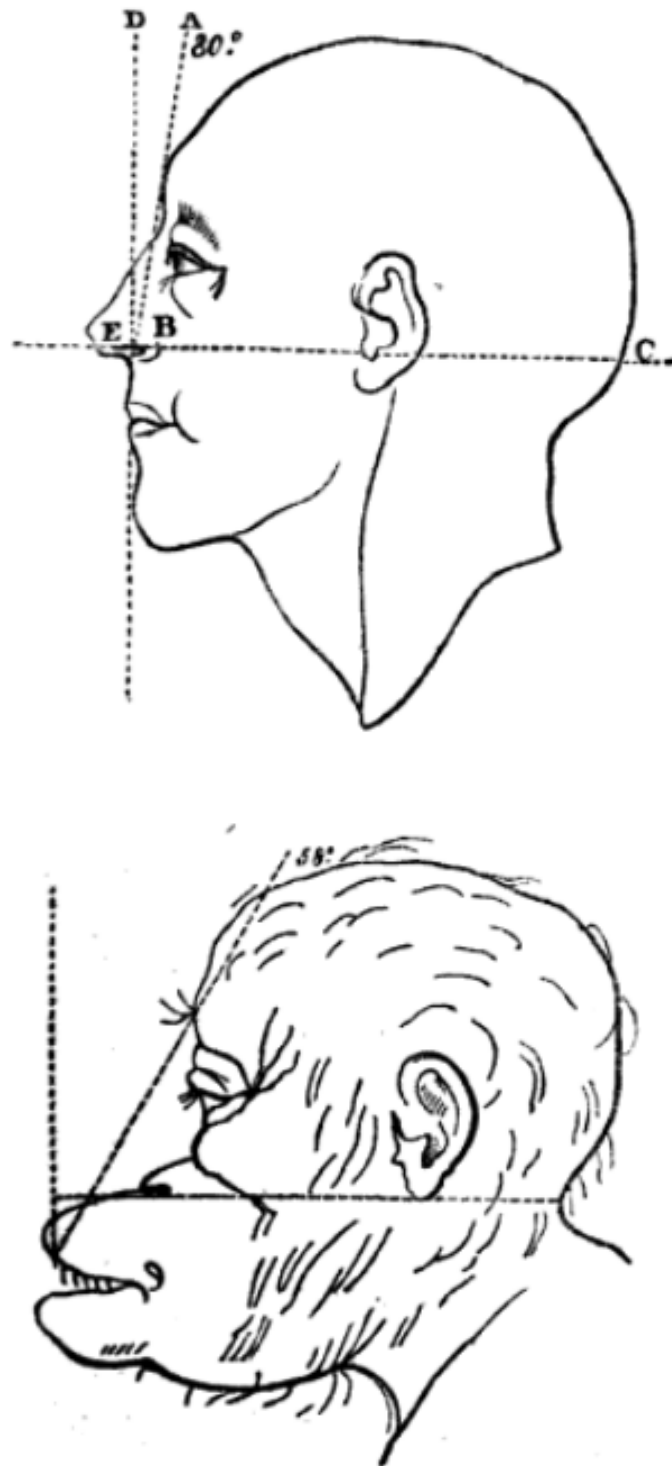


Fig. 1.3 The facial angle of a “Caucasian” and an orangutan, from Isaac Ray, *Conversations on the Animal Economy* (London: Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown, and Green, 1827).

Americans likewise relied on physiognomy to make sense of gender difference and prescribe “proper” roles for men and women within the broader society. By the early decades of the nineteenth century, physiognomic theories provided scientific justification for what historians have called the ideology of “separate spheres” or the “cult of true womanhood.” After reading physiognomical works, Americans would have learned that all women were born with a unique capacity for motherhood, that they were all “weak,” “beautiful,” and “tender” beings, and that they should be “subject to man” in all arenas of life. Lavater, for instance, argued that a “comparison of the external and internal make of the body, in male and female, teaches us that the one is destined for labour and strength, and the other for beauty and propagation.” He claimed that the “bones in the female are more tender, smooth, and round; have fewer sharp edges, cutting and prominent corners,” and claimed it was the “light texture of [women’s] fibres and organs” that made them “so ready of submission to the enterprise and power of the man.”⁵⁴

By the 1830s and 1840s, many physiognomists were arguing that women could only engage in the simplest forms of mental deliberation because their intellectual faculties were hampered by their narrow foreheads and chubby faces, as

⁵⁴ See Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy*, 2:140-141, 2:144, 2:221, 2:235-236, 3:199, 3:205-206. Lavater also argued that women were incapable of “profound thought” (3:206). Lavater’s remarks on women circulated widely within the periodical press. They were first published under the title of “Male and Female” in the British periodical, the *Analytical Review, or History of Literature, Domestic and Foreign* V (London: J. Johnson, 1789), 459-462. See also “Characteristic Differences of the Male and Female of the Human Species,” in the January issue of *Edinburgh Magazine, or Literary Miscellany* XI (Edinburgh: J. Sibbald, 1790), 15-17. The *New York Magazine* directly lifted its comments from the *Edinburgh Magazine*. See “Characteristic Differences of the Male and Female of the Human Species: A Word on the Physiognomical Relation of the Sexes,” *New York Magazine, or Literary Repository* 1, no. 6, June 1790. See also “General Remarks on Women,” *Massachusetts Magazine; or, Monthly Museum* 6, no. 1 (Boston), January 1794; “General Remarks on Women,” *Rural Magazine; or, Vermont Repository* 2, no. 11 (Rutland, VT), November 1796; and “From Lavater’s *Essays on Physiognomy*,” *Weekly Visitor, or Ladies’ Miscellany* 1, no. 28 (New York), April 16, 1803.

well as the inferior “fibres” and “organs” of the female body. Using facial analysis, some physicians and politicians contended that women should not be intellectuals but mothers, and they insisted that their bodies revealed their suitability for such a role.⁵⁵ Physiognomy was ultimately rooted in the premise that human difference was both real and observable. For this reason, it allowed Americans to interpret the permanent features of the human body and rationalize existing hierarchies. It also provided the intellectual scaffolding for later theories of biological determinism, forwarding the notion that some bodies were inherently superior to others and that these differences reflected mental disparities that could not be overcome through social circumstances.

Yet it would be too simplistic to insist that Americans unilaterally used this popular science to justify and enforce inequality. Marginalized groups often embraced facial analysis, reformulating its major tenets to undermine existing hierarchies. Between the 1830s and the 1860s, for instance, black abolitionists upheld physiognomy as an ethical alternative to the scientific racism of the “American school of ethnology.” In a similar way, educated white women used facial analysis to argue in favor of women’s mental cultivation. All these individuals employed more flexible forms of facial scrutiny than Lavater initially intended, often claiming that mental

⁵⁵ For nineteenth-century writers who used physiognomy to argue that women were suited for motherhood, rather than intellectual eminence, see Alexander Walker, *Beauty: Illustrated Chiefly by an Analysis and Classification of Beauty in Woman* (London: Effingham Wilson, 1836); *Intermarriage: Or How and Why Beauty, Health, and Intellect Result from Certain Marriages, and Deformity, Disease, and Insanity from Others* (London: John Churchill, 1838); and *Woman, Physiologically Considered as to Mind, Morals, Marriage, Matrimonial Slavery, Infidelity and Divorce* (London: A.H. Baily and Co., 1839). See also Wilson Flagg, *An Analysis of Female Beauty* (Boston: Marsh, Capen & Lyon, 1833); James S. Redfield, *Outlines of a New System of Physiognomy* (New York: J.S. Redfield, 1849); Orson Squire Fowler, *Maternity: Or, The Bearing and Nursing of Children, Including Female Education and Beauty* (New York: Fowler and Wells, 1854); Daniel Harrison Jacques, *Hints Toward Physical Perfection: Or, The Philosophy of Human Beauty* (New York: Fowler and Wells, 1859); and Samuel Wells, *New Physiognomy: Or, Signs of Character as Manifested Through Temperament* (New York: Fowler and Wells, 1866).

cultivation could lead to external beautification. Physical transformation, these activists argued, was merely a visible sign of their interior enhancements.

It might seem surprising that so many marginalized Americans became such enthusiastic physiognomists. At the very least, it raises a question: what made this popular science appealing to distinct groups of people with vastly different priorities? Ultimately, the nebulous nature of Lavater's method—paired with his provocative avowal that human character was visible in the human visage—made physiognomy a uniquely adaptable and accessible system. Because it provided a panoply of options for diverse practitioners, individuals could easily take the elements of this science that interested them and ditch the parts they found unappealing. In the end, the flexibility of facial analysis only increased its appeal, making the discipline popular because of—and not despite—its bendable rules and bold pronouncements.⁵⁶

The Mind Molds the Features

Lavater intended his physiognomical science to be a technology for measuring the heritable and permanent distinctions between human beings, but many Americans simply adopted his general premise—the idea that faces reflected character—and fused it with a broader commitment to the idea that environmental forces, educational experiences, and personal development could dramatically alter one's physiognomic profile. Ephraim Conrad, remember, believed that facial features were heritable, but he *also* argued that moral cultivation could lead to facial beautification.⁵⁷ In a similar way, Charles Willson Peale described both the mind and the countenance as

⁵⁶ On physiognomy's flexibility, see Pearl, *About Faces*, 2.

⁵⁷ Conrad, "Remarks on Physiognomy."

malleable entities. Despite his efforts to convey a visualized natural hierarchy in his museum, Peale believed that the “temper of a man in a powerful degree fashions, as I may say, the turns of the features.” The “constant exercise of any one passion,” he argued, eventually “fixes the growing form.”⁵⁸ Peale believed that if certain states of mind were repeated often enough, they might permanently alter individual visages. As he wrote in a published “Epistle” to Thomas Jefferson, “the mind has such an amazing influence on the external form, that even the fashion of our faces are determined by our passions.”⁵⁹ Peale’s belief in facial transmutation—and the moral metamorphosis it presumed—was central to how many Americans practiced physiognomy during the early national decades.

Just as Charles Willson Peale used physiognomy to argue for the variability of the human body, periodical authors also relayed tales of physiognomic transformation within the pages of the nation’s magazines. In 1836, one author wrote an article about “Caspar Hauser,” a young man who claimed he grew up isolated in a dark dungeon with no human contact. After attaining his freedom, Hauser aroused international attention. Some described him as a feral child, others described him as a mentally impaired man, and still others suggested that he was an undeveloped genius with secret royal lineage. In the *Western Messenger*, the author imagined Hauser as an uneducated but highly capable individual who had finally been given the opportunity to cultivate his intellect after a long period of isolation and ignorance. The periodical

⁵⁸ Peale, “Typescript version of C.W. Peale Diaries, 1817-1818,” December 2, 1817, APS. David C. Ward argues that Peale was “aware that appearance and behavior not only reflected character but actually became character and personality. . . . continually acting a role would transform one’s character, matching it to one’s appearance.” See Ward, *Art and Selfhood in the Early Republic*, 121.

⁵⁹ Charles Willson Peale, *An Epistle to a Friend* (Philadelphia: R. Aitken, 1803), 27.

argued that when Hauser was released, “his mind began to be developed,” and afterwards, “not only the lines and bearings, but also the features of his face were changed.” By arguing that mental improvements could alter the “lines,” “bearings,” and “features” of an individual’s countenance, this author presented an understanding of physiognomy that emphasized the mutability of both the mind and body. This conflicted with Lavater’s insistence on the heritability of both appearance and character. Even so, the author saw no inconsistency between Lavater’s theories and his own interpretation of Caspar Hauser’s face. In fact, he suggested that Hauser’s story proved the *validity* of physiognomic theory. If faces could alter as the character changed, he wrote, then it was “a strong fact in favor of that correspondence between mind and body, which Lavater taught, and everyone acts upon.” For this author, the fact that Hauser’s face developed alongside his character did not militate against the physiognomic method; it was evidence of Lavater’s genius.⁶⁰

Narratives of physiognomic transformation were not limited to the pages of newspapers, periodicals, and didactic literature, nor was physiognomy a discourse restricted to adult negotiations of social status and privilege. The basic tenets of this science were inculcated in children at a young age, demonstrating the wide reach of physiognomic ideas. In one children’s story, first published in 1788 and then republished in schoolbooks well into the 1830s, a fictional father gives his daughter a lecture about how to properly evaluate people’s physiognomies. Arabella knows that physical beauty pleases people, but she is nonetheless confused: “Ah! I can’t tell how it is, but I know some little Misses that have very handsome faces, and yet they do not

⁶⁰ “Art XII.—Souls and Bodies,” *Western Messenger Devoted to Religion, Life, and Literature* 1, no. 7 (Cincinnati), January 1836.

please me; —and I know others that are not counted handsome, and yet I like their faces very much.” Was not beauty the external manifestation of inner goodness? Taking this as an opportunity to teach his daughter a lesson, her father engages her in guided dialogue about appearance, character, and physiognomic discernment.⁶¹

To convey the inherent difficulty of physiognomic observation, Arabella’s father tells her the story of Socrates, a man who was universally admired for his moral and mental characteristics. He recalls that a “certain able physiognomist” had examined Socrates’ face and “judged him to be a man of a bad mind and vicious inclinations.” At first, Arabella is perplexed by the story. She had always heard her father bestow high praise upon Socrates. If faces reflected character, then how could Socrates’ face portray him as a bad man? Her father then clarifies his meaning: Socrates “was at first viciously inclined, and the features of his face strongly confirmed it.” He began his life with bad morals, and only with hard work did he ultimately eradicate vice. Arabella then triumphantly summarizes the story, declaring that Socrates’ “heart was purged of his faults, but his countenance kept the marks of

⁶¹ This work was first translated into English in 1788 and then republished in several different volumes, in both Great Britain and the United States. The volume I am quoting from in this chapter is the 1825 edition: *The Children’s Companion, or Entertaining Instructor for the Youth of Both Sexes; Designed to Excite Attention, and Inculcate Virtue, Selected from the Works of Berquin, Genlis, Day, and Others* (New York: S. King, 1825), 29-30. For the first English-language edition, see: *The Children’s Friend: Translated from the French of M. Berquin* (London: J. Stockdale; J. Rivington and Sons; B. Law; J. Johnson; C. Dilly; J. Murray; J. Sewell; and Edinburgh: W. Creech, 1788). For later editions in the early nineteenth century, see Increase Cooke, *Sequel to the American Orator, Or, Dialogues for Schools: To which are Prefixed, Elements of Elocution, with an Appendix, Containing Reading Lessons—Prologues—Epilogues—Soliloquies—and Select Speeches* (New Haven: Increase Cooke & Co., 1813); *The Beauties of the Children’s Friend; Being a Selection of Interesting Pieces from that Celebrated Author, M. Berquin* (Boston: Lincoln & Edmands, 1827); and *The Children’s Friend; Translated from the French of M. Berquin* (Boston: Munrow and Francis, and New York: Charles S. Francis, 1833).

them still.” In other words, Socrates’ former bad habits led to an incongruity between his face and current character.⁶²

This was nevertheless a distressing message. Did her father mean to suggest that people were incapable of altering their facial features, even if they reformed their characters? Mr. Oakley turns this question back on his daughter. If Arabella’s friends reformed their unfortunate dispositions, then “would those marks of pride, affectation, or impudence remain still upon their faces?” Or would they, like Socrates, be forever doomed to have faces marked by vice, despite their moral makeovers? Their faces must certainly change, insists Arabella. Her father agrees. Why, then, had Socrates been unable to fix his face? It turns out that for many years, Socrates had given into his innate tendency for vice. His vicious character thus etched itself on his face, and after a while, became permanent. Only when he was “in a more advanced age” did he begin to “combat his vices” and “reform himself daily.” By then, however, “it was too late to new-model his features. The muscles and fibres of his face becoming stiff, the beauty of his mind could make no impression through his countenance.” His face, due to his own poor choices, had been irrevocably marked by his former dissipation.⁶³

Arabella’s father nonetheless insists that his daughter should not despair. She was not yet doomed to ugliness, nor were her friends. Because “the features are more tender and flexible” in childhood, the girls still had time to improve their faces through moral cultivation. As long as they cultivated virtue, rather than vice, their countenances would be pleasing. In sum, Mr. Oakley told his daughter that if she

⁶² *The Children’s Companion*, 31-39.

⁶³ *The Children’s Companion*, 38-40.

wanted to be beautiful, she had to reform her behavior. But he also insisted she had to embark on this moral metamorphosis immediately, while there was still a chance that mental beauties might permanently influence her facial features. If she waited too long to let good triumph over evil, she would be forever marked with the deformities of vice in her visage.

The fact that physiognomic principles filtered into children's literature reveals just how significant this popular science was for early Americans. Physiognomy was a practical science that did not require expensive tools or an advanced education. As a result, it was technically accessible to all people—including young readers. But this story is also important because it shows how people were creatively reimagining physiognomic principles in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Rather than emphasize the fixity of mental and facial features, this story presented a version of facial analysis premised on the mutability of the mind and body. After reading it, children were supposed to learn that education or experience could leave physical marks on the human countenance, and that these marks might *eventually* become permanent. The story not only taught children to analyze the countenances of others, it also assured them that they had an opportunity to shape their own destinies. In doing so, it reimagined Lavater's physiognomic precepts and instead presented a flexible understanding of human character—one that depended more on human choice than heritability.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ *The Children's Companion*, 36-37.

“Character in Action”

In addition to arguing that mental and moral cultivation led to physical changes, many Americans creatively misinterpreted Lavater’s physiognomic theories by disregarding his distinction between facial expressions and facial features. In the *Essays on Physiognomy*, Lavater had famously insisted that individuals could empirically interpret unchangeable facial structures to discern character. Lavater thought it was useful to study the moveable muscles of people’s faces, but he drew a sharp divide between physiognomy—which he defined as a *science*—and pathognomy, which he defined merely as the *art* of interpreting expressions. To analyze someone’s physiognomy was to analyze the shape of their head, the structure of their bones, and the size of the forehead, jaw, and nose. To analyze someone’s pathognomy, by contrast, was to study their expressions: “character in action.”⁶⁵ Lavater used both techniques together, but he also promised that the best way to peer into people’s souls was by scrutinizing the skeletal structure of their visages.⁶⁶

Scholars have highlighted Lavater’s focus on hard and unalterable facial features, rightly describing physiognomy as a technology of character detection that allowed Europeans and Americans to map social distinctions onto the human body. They have suggested that physiognomy laid the groundwork for essentialist

⁶⁵ Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy*, 1:18.

⁶⁶ Christopher Rivers has argued that it was “Lavater’s insistence on defining physiognomy in opposition to pathognomy that renders his work novel. It is also, however, the point which most opponents of physiognomy have found impossible to accept, both before and after Lavater.” Both elite Enlightenment philosophers and popular writers often rejected the notion that physiognomy was somehow different—and more scientific—that pathognomy. The Comte du Buffon, for instance, believed in the face’s ability to convey the workings of the soul. What he disagreed with was Lavater’s insistence that facial features could be scientifically read at rest. See Christopher Rivers, *Face Value*, 83-85 (quotations on 83 and 93).

understandings of human nature, in which character was viewed as a corporeal reality, rather than a form of social performance. This is certainly true, but it also simplifies the complicated ways that the American public used facial analysis in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Americans used physiognomy in idiosyncratic ways. Rarely did they agonize over the “rules” that Lavater had laid out for them or examine the inconsistencies in their own face-reading routines.⁶⁷

Educated middle-class and elite women were particularly creative when analyzing countenances, often disregarding Lavater’s stringent maxims and employing their own definitions of physiognomy. These women sometimes interpreted the permanent bones and skeletal structures of the human skull, practicing physiognomy in exactly the fashion Lavater had intended. More often, though, they focused on the subtle movements and expressions of people’s faces.

The diary of Rachel Van Dyke provides a perfect example of how Americans melded physiognomy and pathognomy, creating a single language of human description that encompassed techniques from both disciplines. Throughout her diary, Van Dyke regularly analyzed the countenances of her contemporaries. In one entry from 1810, she turned her attention to a man named Mr. Davis: a handsome flautist who had enraptured much of her New Jersey town. Despite the enthusiasm of her friends, Van Dyke was unimpressed when she finally encountered him:

⁶⁷ Lucy Hartley describes physiognomy as an effort to “fix difference” in the body in an effort to justify discrimination. She argues it was this “essentialist view of an organism, which was at the centre of Lavater’s physiognomy.” See Hartley, *Physiognomy and the Meaning of Expression*, 37. Christopher Lukasik similarly argues that physiognomy was appealing because it allowed individuals to believe they could “uncover a more permanent, essential, and involuntary sense of character from a person’s face that no amount of individual performance could obscure.” See Lukasik, *Discerning Characters*, 10.

“Well I have seen him. I have heard him play, but he has not won *my* heart. He is handsome enough, has good regular features, but I don’t see much expression in his countenance. It is a certain expression in the eyes, a certain cut of the mouth that always strikes me. I am a great physiognomist. It is an amusement for me to observe the various countenances of persons who pass the windows. Methinks I can tell accurately their dispositions and characters. But to return to Mr. Davis. He is agreeable *enough* but nothing past common. I cannot help thinking that he is more agreeable than wise.”

Like Lavater, Rachel Van Dyke drew a clear distinction between facial features and facial expressions. But unlike him, she valued the latter over the former. Although Mr. Davis apparently had “good regular features,” she found there was something missing in his face. His lack of expression troubled her, leading her to believe that he was not as wise, talented, or attractive as others had imagined. Van Dyke nonetheless styled herself a “physiognomist.” She did not postulate at length about how her own method might have been at odds with Lavater’s supposedly more “scientific” system, nor was she particularly troubled by the discrepancy. Instead, she crafted a personalized methodology for informally interpreting faces.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ “Journal of Rachel Van Dyke,” December 14, 1810, in Lucia McMahon and Deborah Schriver, eds., *To Read My Heart: The Journal of Rachel Van Dyke, 1810-1811* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 204-205.

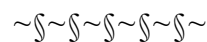
In a similar way, the famous educator Emma Willard privileged her own physiognomic priorities when attempting to uncover the character of her contemporaries. On a trip abroad, Emma Willard penned a letter to her sister, Almira Phelps, writing that she “had the satisfaction of seeing Dr. Chalmers,” the famous Scottish intellectual, “and of marking the expression of his countenance as he spoke in low tones to a person near him.” Willard distinguished between physiognomical attractiveness and superficial beauty, writing that she found Dr. Chalmers, “as others have described him, inelegant in exterior.” She was nonetheless impressed by his animated facial expressions. “Had I marked his physiognomy, merely in a quiescent state,” she recalled, “I am not certain I should have detected the hidden fire within; but from the play of his features in speech, I could clearly discern the marks of his genius and benevolence.”⁶⁹

Had Willard been following Lavater’s rules of physiognomical discernment, she would have privileged the study of Dr. Chalmers’ face in its motionless state. After all, Lavater had clearly defined physiognomy as the “observation of character in a state of tranquility, or rest,” and he had warned that paying too much attention to the muscular movements of someone’s visage could be a distraction.⁷⁰ But Willard was not adhering to Lavaterian techniques. When analyzing Dr. Chalmers’ appearance, she was far more interested in “the play of his features” than in his “quiescent” countenance. Through his expressions—not his features—she was ultimately able to discern his “genius and benevolence.” Willard followed physiognomic guidelines

⁶⁹ Emma Willard, *Journal and Letters: From France and Great-Britain* (Troy, NY: N. Tuttle, 1833), 374.

⁷⁰ Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy*, 1:18.

loosely, creating her own system for evaluating people's appearances.⁷¹ As early national Americans embraced physiognomic language when navigating their lives and social relationships, they, too, created unique methodologies for evaluating people's external features. In the end, physiognomy never constituted a coherent system with inviolable rules. Because it provided such a flexible system for understanding human nature, it allowed people to validate their own preconceptions and priorities.



In the early national decades, physiognomy became an influential scientific discourse and widespread cultural practice—a technology of character detection that early Americans regularly used to rationalize and enforce the racial, class, and gender hierarchies that defined their worlds. Through this new science of beauty, many Americans suggested that social inequalities were not only necessary facts of life, but also empirically verifiable realities. Perhaps the minds and faces of some people were simply better than others, they posited, and perhaps there was a group of superior human specimens who truly deserved the social, political, and economic dominance they currently retained. Yet even as some people used this popular science to argue for white supremacy, justify gender inequities, and enforce class hierarchies, there were numerous Americans who manipulated physiognomy's slippery language for a wide array of purposes, oftentimes deploying it in ways that undermined existing inequalities. Even as physicians and naturalists used facial analysis to advance theories of scientific racism and sexual essentialism, many female educators,

⁷¹ Willard, *Journal and Letters*, 374.

women's rights activists, social reformers, and abolitionists deployed the very same discourses to undermine inequities.

In 1849, sixty years after the first English edition of Lavater's *Essays on Physiognomy*, an American physiognomist named James Redfield declared that "the mind molds the features, and expresses itself through the medium of the face." In his "New System of Physiognomy," Redfield emphasized the variability of both the brain and the body, even as he insisted that people's faces revealed their inborn propensities. These two beliefs might seem contradictory, but, in truth, they reflected the messy inconsistencies that had existed in physiognomy from its very inception.⁷²

Lavater had insisted that facial analysis was an unimpeachable form of scientific observation, capable of achieving almost mathematical certainty in its analyses of people's personalities. But physiognomy was, more accurately, a peculiar way of seeing. It was a method of observation, shaped by a set of predetermined and culturally constructed ideas about human nature, as well as the whims and beliefs of whoever happened to be doing the observing. As an ideological system, it left room for people to insist that intellect and virtue were not innate but acquired traits, and that every person was capable of mental, moral, and physical perfection.

Ultimately, the contradictions of physiognomic logic allowed for the coexistence of two seemingly antithetical ideas: first, the notion that humans were perfectible beings, and second, the belief that individuals were born with a set of unique mental and physical characteristics that would definitively determine their destiny. Because it was flexible enough to incorporate these oppositional worldviews, physiognomy proved strikingly adaptable within diverse social and political

⁷² Redfield, *Outlines of a New System of Physiognomy*, 5.

circumstances. In the end, this popular transatlantic science helped lay the framework for the rise of biological determinism in the mid-nineteenth century, but it also contained the ingredients for its undoing.

Chapter 2: “The Beauties of the Mind”

Female Brains and Bodies in the Early Republic

Most Americans remember Mason Locke Weems as the brilliant book peddler who concocted a story about a youthful George Washington who cut down a cherry tree and could not tell a lie. Less well-known is a story Weems published in Virginia’s *Lover’s Almanac* in 1798, where he pondered the importance of republican womanhood and painted a picture of a fictional young heroine named “Miss Delia D.” Delia was a paragon of feminine virtue and “the most attractive form that ever charmed the world to love.” In addition to being “tall and majestic,” she had an elegant form and an “exquisite shape.” Her “fine, soft blue eyes” resembled “the bright azure of an unclouded sky,” and her arching eyebrows rivaled the “bow of heaven.” As Weems assured his readers, Delia was stunningly beautiful—the ultimate catch for any American bachelor.¹

The story then took a curious turn. After meticulously delineating the “beauties of Delia’s person,” Weems suddenly dismissed the importance of her bewitching face and form. After all, he argued, “The body is but the casket, the mind is the *juice*, the diamond that gives it all its loveliness and worth.” What truly made Delia exceptional was the “far superior beauties of her mind.” This was a fine sentiment, at least at first glance. It rested on the idea that women should be valued

¹ Mason Locke Weems, *The Lover’s Almanac* (Fredericksburg, VA: T. Green, 1798). It appears as if Weems plagiarized large sections of this text from Samuel Jackson Pratt, *The Pupil of Pleasure*, 2nd Edition (London: G. Robinson and J. Bew, 1777), 219. For similar examples of authors who urged men to look beyond the beauties of the body while still describing women’s virtue and intelligence in visual terms, see “An Essay on Woman,” *The Maryland Journal* (Baltimore), January 24, 1786; “On Beauty and Flattery,” in *The Pleasing Instructor, or Entertaining Moralist* (Boston: Joseph Bumstead, 1795), 65-68; and George Wright, *The Lady’s Miscellany* (Boston: William T. Clap, 1797), 9-12.

for their intellect and character, rather than their bodies alone. But it was also dishonest. Even as Weems insisted on the insignificance of Delia's physical beauty, he obsessed over her corporeal features. Delia's "eye sparkles with benignity," he proclaimed, and her countenance exhibits "features animated by a show of devotion." Her "lips are the temples of truth, her cheeks are the emblems of modesty," and her "soft melting eye bespeaks a soul that's united to all around her." According to Weems, Delia was an exemplary republican woman—an identity that was visible in her very visage. Through vivid prose and paradoxical musings, Weems chided young bachelors for their infatuation with female bodies, only to furnish them with careful instructions for reading women's physiognomical features.²

Weems' story epitomized some of the contradictions confronting women in the decades surrounding the American Revolution. Like Weems, early national Americans faced a paradox. On the one hand, they embraced ideas about the intellectual equality of the sexes and believed that women needed to be educated if they were going to be both rational companions to their husbands and effective mothers to their children. On the other hand, many Americans also wanted to uphold existing gender hierarchies. How, then, could they maintain this ideological commitment to the cultivation of women's minds while simultaneously advocating for the status quo in gender relations?³

² Weems, *The Lover's Almanac*

³ Several scholars have addressed this paradox. According to Rosemarie Zagarri, "In the post-Revolutionary era, Americans attempted to reconcile two conflicting principles: the equality of the sexes and the subordination of women to men." Lucia McMahon similarly argues that Americans embraced the concept of "mere equality" to reconcile this contradiction. See Zagarri, "The Rights of Man and Woman in Post-Revolutionary America," *William and Mary Quarterly* 55, no. 2 (April 1998), 204; and McMahon, *Mere Equals: The Paradox of Educated Women in the Early American Republic* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012).

The answer lies in how people talked about women's bodies. Most educational reformers and popular writers in the early republic argued that women should be valued for the capacities of their brains, not the allurements of their physical charms. This was a revolutionary notion—at least on its surface. By espousing Enlightenment ideas about the intellectual equality of the sexes, many Americans decried older cultural and intellectual traditions that valued women for their beauty alone. Instead, they declared that women were rational beings, virtuous wives, and republican mothers. They argued, in other words, that women, too, deserved to cultivate their minds.

At the same time, many Americans suggested that a woman's face was the literal embodiment of her intelligence and virtue. As popular interest in physiognomy grew during the latter decades of the eighteenth century, popular authors, political thinkers, and portraitists all began pronouncing that a woman's "mental beauty" mattered far more than her "personal charms." Yet by arguing that education and moral refinement imbued the face with loveliness, they assured their female readers that beauty did matter after all. In a cultural and intellectual milieu in which individuals believed that the human countenance was the "index of the mind," many Americans collapsed the distinction between mind and matter entirely. Adopting the language and methodology of a new popular science, they suggested it was perfectly acceptable to focus on women's beauty, provided one did so with the intention of discerning deeper characteristics.

By focusing on how people debated and interpreted female beauty, this chapter shows how Americans negotiated—and renegotiated—women's social position in the early republic. Over the past forty years, gender historians have written

extensively about women's status during this period. Pathbreaking monographs have examined women's roles as "republican mothers," "female politicians," and "Fiery Frenchified Dames."⁴ Scholars have detailed women's increased access to higher education.⁵ They have also uncovered the stories of women who pushed the boundaries of "proper" womanhood, participated in "civil society," or forged emotional and intellectual bonds with friends and family members across Atlantic divides.⁶ Historians know much about women's sexual behavior, as well as the social and political implications of their fashion and fertility choices.⁷ But we know far less

⁴ On gender and politics in the early republic, see Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980); Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1980); Rosemarie Zagarri, *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007); Jan Lewis, "The Republican Wife: Virtue and Seduction in the Early Republic," *William and Mary Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (October 1987): 689-721; and Susan Branson, *These Fiery Frenchified Dames: Women and Political Culture in Early National Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001).

⁵ On women's education in the early republic, see Mary Kelley, *Learning to Stand and Speak: Women, Education, and Public Life in America's Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); McMahon, *Mere Equals*; Catherine Kerrison, *Claiming the Pen: Women and Intellectual Life in the Early American South* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006); Margaret Nash, *Women's Education in the United States, 1780-1840* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); and Kim Tolley, *The Science Education of American Girls: A Historical Perspective* (New York: Routledge Falmer, 2003).

⁶ For scholarship on women's participation in "civil society," see Kelley, *Learning to Stand and Speak*. On women's intellectual and emotional friendships, see McMahon, *Mere Equals*; Sarah Pearsall, *Atlantic Families: Lives and Letters in the Later Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), esp. chapter 3; Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America," *Signs* 1, no. 1 (Autumn 1975): 1-29; and Cassandra A. Good, *Founding Friendships: Friendships Between Men and Women in the Early American Republic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

⁷ The foundational work on women, gender, and sexuality in the early republic is Clare Lyons, *Sex Among the Rabble: An Intimate History of Gender and Power in the Age of Revolution, Philadelphia, 1730-1830* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006). See also Richard Godbeer, *Sexual Revolution in Early America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002); and Nancy Cott, "Passionlessness: An Interpretation of Victorian Sexual Ideology, 1790-1850," *Signs* Vol. 4, No. 2 (Winter, 1978): 219-236. On pregnancy and fertility limitation, see Susan Klepp, *Revolutionary Conceptions: Women, Fertility, and Family Limitation in America, 1760-1820* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009). On the politics of fashion, see Kate Haulman, *The Politics of Fashion in Eighteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); and Linzy Brekke-Aloise, "'The Scourge of Fashion': Political Economy and the Politics of

about Americans' fascination with female beauty, and the various ways that people deployed the human body as a political tool in debates over women's social position. When contemplating the nature, rights, and sphere of women, how did people bring female beauty into the discussion? And how did they use scientific ideas to create, justify, and perpetuate gendered hierarchies?

Historians of gender and science have been more attentive to the fact "that the human body itself has a history." They have explored how understandings of physicality transformed during the era of Enlightenment, and they have skillfully demonstrated how scientific ideas influenced gender ideologies in the Western hemisphere.⁸ These scholars have shown that by the late eighteenth century, scientific thinkers in the Atlantic world believed there were innate and incommensurable differences between male and female bodies. Most of these monographs, though, have focused on Europe. What, then, was happening on the North American continent? When European scientists began revolutionizing their understandings of sex and gender difference, precisely how did these transformations shape how Americans understood masculinity and femininity on a more practical level?⁹

Consumption in Post-Revolutionary America," *Early American Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 33, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 111-139.

⁸ Catherine Gallagher and Thomas Laqueur, eds. *The Making of the Modern Body: Sexuality and Society in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), vii.

⁹ Pathbreaking scholarship by historians of science has shown how people in the Western world reevaluated their understanding of sex difference in the eighteenth century. Early modern individuals typically described women's bodies as inferior, but similar versions of male bodies. Over the course of the eighteenth century, however, this malleable understanding of sex difference transformed into inflexible perception of sexed anatomies that limited possibilities for "gender-bending" in society. See Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990); Londa Schiebinger, *'The Mind Has No Sex?' Women in the Origins of Modern Science* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989); Schiebinger, *Nature's Body: Gender in the Making of Modern Science* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995); and Ludmilla Jordanova, *Sexual Visions: Images of Gender in Science and Medicine Between the Eighteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989). On the decline of "gender-

To answer those questions, this chapter focuses on popular uses of science in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. During this period, physiognomy provided one of the primary languages that Americans used to talk about people's moral, mental, and physical character. Because it was a popular discipline—one that was predicated on the assumption that external features revealed internal traits—physiognomy gave people license to fixate on women's bodies while claiming that they were searching for more substantial clues about women's hearts, minds, and souls. Ostensibly, Americans used facial analysis to see past appearances—to unearth what they capaciously defined as the “beauties of the mind.” In many instances, though, they merely melded physiognomic rhetoric with an existing commitment to gendered hierarchies. By assuming they could detect women's character in the countenance, Americans developed an understanding of female intelligence that could not be disentangled from discussions of female beauty.¹⁰

Even though Americans believed that men—like women—displayed their internal attributes in their faces, they discussed brains and bodies in distinctly

bending” in Europe by the 1780s and 1790s, see Dror Wahrman, *The Making of the Modern Self: Identity and Culture in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 36. For a historiographical summary of these developments, see Richard Cleminson, “Medical Understandings of the Body: 1750 to Present,” in *The Routledge History of Sex and the Body: 1500 to the Present*, eds. Sarah Toulalan and Kate Fisher (London: Routledge, 2013), 75-88. For challenges to this narrative, see Laura Gowing, *Common Bodies: Women, Touch, and Power in Seventeenth-Century England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003); Katherine Crawford, *European Sexualities, 1400-1800: New Approaches to European History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Mary Fissell, *Vernacular Bodies: The Politics of Reproduction in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); and Helen King, *The One-Sex Body on Trial: The Classical and Early Modern Evidence* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2013).

¹⁰ For some examples of early national Americans using the phrase “beauties of the mind,” see “Advice to the Ladies,” *The Royal American Magazine, or Universal Repository of Instruction and Amusement* 1, no. 1 (Boston), January 1774; “The Visitant. No. VIII. Remarks on the Dress of the Ladies,” *The American Museum* 5, no. 1 (Philadelphia), January 1789; “Rational Love,” *The Universal Asylum and Columbian Magazine* (Philadelphia), June 1792; John Burton, *Lectures on Female Education and Manners* (New York: Samuel Campbell, 1794), 178; “To Achates,” *The Philadelphia Minerva* 1, no. 14, May 9, 1795; and “On Female Acquirements,” *The Boston Weekly Magazine* 1, no. 30, May 21, 1803.

gendered ways. When speculating about women's internal capacities, they framed the discussion as part of a broader debate about the societal dangers posed by an abstract concept: female beauty. Beauty was threatening, they insisted, because it beguiled men while allowing women to indulge their most narcissistic impulses. As cultural conversations about women's faculties became entangled with these larger deliberations about female vanity, frivolity, and affectation, Americans crafted a vision of the human mind that was both anatomical and sex-specific. By appropriating the language of facial analysis, they fused novel developments in transatlantic sciences with existing beliefs about the social and political importance of women's beauty. Through physiognomy's explanatory power, they rationalized female intellectual inferiority as if it was a natural and physiological reality, rooted in women's bones, brains, and bodily attractiveness.

Beauty and the Brain

Since at least the sixteenth century, political thinkers and popular writers had associated reason with manhood and beauty with womanhood, framing both traits as largely oppositional and gender-specific. In *Paradise Lost*, for instance, the poet John Milton famously described Adam and Eve by invoking a divinely-sanctioned gender hierarchy that juxtaposed female delicacy with men's mental and physical strength:

“Not equal, as their sex not equal seemed;
For contemplation he and valour formed;
For softness she and sweet attractive grace.”¹¹

¹¹ John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed., Alastair Fowler (New York: Routledge, 2nd Edition, 2013 [1667]), 238.

Throughout the eighteenth century, both Europeans and Americans repeated this trope. In 1729, one New England newspaper article declared that nature had blessed women with “Advantage in some of the softer Charms of their Persons,” while granting men superior, and more rational “souls.” According to the author, “if [men’s] Exteriour Embellishments are not altogether equal to what [women] can boast of, the Difference of the Intellectual Capacity, will advance up to a Superiour Dignity, and must certainly assert our Dominion at all Times.” According to this argument, women were more beautiful, but men were more rational. Because men were “Supream in the Throne of Reason,” they were warranted in asserting their dominance over women.¹²

By the mid-eighteenth century, the assumption that beauty was inherently feminine and reason essentially masculine was under assault. In the early modern era, Europeans and Americans had explained female subordination as a natural, unalterable, and divinely-sanctioned reality—a heavenly dictate that ensured societal stability. But the epistemological transformations wrought by the Enlightenment encouraged people to believe that all individuals were autonomous agents who could shape their own worlds. Western thinkers insisted it was the capacity for rational thought that made human beings exceptional. Still, a few important questions remained: if it was reason that made people human, then did this attribute also extend

¹² “Dixit, Et Avertens Rosed Cervice Refulfit: Ambrosieque Come Divinum Vertice Odorem Spiravere: Pedes Vestis Desluxit,” *New-England Weekly Journal* (Boston), March 24, 1729. One newspaper similarly distinguished between “Woman’s Beauty” and “Man’s Wit,” while another contended that male “Reason” would inevitably “yield to Beauty’s magic Power.” See “Of Affectation, in Women,” *New-England Weekly Journal* (Boston), February 14, 1738; and “From the London *Evening-Post*,” *Boston Post-Boy*, November 12, 1750.

to women? In other words, was rationality a universal human quality? Or was reason, itself, gendered?¹³

After much debate and disagreement, Enlightenment philosophers affirmed that women were, indeed, rational. As early as the late seventeenth century, the French thinker Francois Poullain de la Barre had proclaimed that “the soul has no sex,” while intellectuals like John Locke began positing a model of the human mind as a *tabula rasa*—a blank slate shaped by both education and experience. Within this worldview, existing intellectual differences between the sexes might be explained by the dissimilar opportunities afforded to men and women. Even so, many were reluctant to assume the equivalency of male and female brains.¹⁴

Throughout the eighteenth century, two oppositional understandings of the female mind concomitantly vied for supremacy. One group of popular and scientific authors emphasized the mental differences between men and women, arguing that women’s minds excelled in sensibility, refinement, and delicacy, while only men’s minds exhibited the “powers of close and comprehensive reasoning.”¹⁵ Jean Jacques

¹³ As Clare Lyons has contended, “Scientific rationalism overturned the belief in a fixed, hierarchical world order, replacing it with a dynamic model of the cosmos and human society.” According to Lyons, “The Enlightenment undermined the belief in such natural hierarchies and upset the basis for women’s subordination to man. A new conceptual framework would be necessary if the gender hierarchy was to be maintained.” See Lyons, *Sex Among the Rabble*, 2. For a similar argument, see Cleminson, “Medical Understandings of the Body: 1750 to Present,” 78.

¹⁴ For Enlightenment reevaluations of women’s reasoning capacities, see Schiebinger, *The Mind Has No Sex*, chapter 6. See also Genevieve Lloyd, *The Man of Reason: “Male” and “Female” in Western Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984); and Geneviève Fraisse, *Reason’s Muse: Sexual Difference and the Birth of Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

¹⁵ For “close and comprehensive reasoning,” see “On Female Character,” *Weekly Visitor, or Ladies’ Miscellany* 2 (New York), August 11, 1804. This article synthesized Enlightenment theories about the gendered nature of the mind, arguing that the “female mind is unrivalled” in both “sprightliness and vivacity” and “quickness of perception.” For similar examples in American print culture, see Philo, “For the Massachusetts Magazine, No. I,” *The Massachusetts Magazine* 1, no. 9 (Boston), September 1789; Philokoinoneas, “On the Happy Influence of the Female Sex in Society, and the Absurd Practice of Separating the Sexes Immediately After Dinner,” *The Universal Asylum*

Rousseau, for instance, argued for a version of gender complementarity that was nonetheless founded upon men's mental superiority.¹⁶ Such thinkers regarded female rationality as a distinct and diluted form of understanding, dependent on both the passions and perceptions. In their minds, "true" reason was male. It encompassed judgment, discernment, and profound thought. But women had their defenders, too. A smaller group of intellectuals maintained that the mind might have no sex at all. They claimed that women, too, were capable of mental distinction, if only they were afforded equal educational opportunities. The French philosopher Condorcet, for example, contended that men should stop trying to rationalize the "inequality of rights between the sexes" by fruitlessly searching for "differences of physical organization, intellect, or moral sensibility." As he saw it, men's fixation with delineating gender distinctions was a transparent bid to buttress the fragile edifice of male supremacy. Throughout the eighteenth century, these two understandings of women's mental capacity coexisted uneasily in European intellectual thought.¹⁷

Debates over the capacities of women's minds similarly permeated American print culture. As early as 1735, one New York City newspaper suggested that both sexes held a common capacity for mental development. The author wondered why

and *Columbian Magazine* (Philadelphia), March 1791; and "Address Delivered by James A. Neal," *Philadelphia Repository and Weekly Register* 1, no. 34 (Philadelphia), July 4, 1801. For secondary work on male reason and female sensibility see G. J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Anne C. Vila, *Enlightenment and Pathology: Sensibility in the Literature and Medicine of Eighteenth-Century France* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998); and Sarah Knott, *Sensibility and the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), especially chapter 2.

¹⁶ See Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Emile; Or, On Education*, Book V, in *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*, trans. Christopher Kelly and Allan Bloom (Hanover, N.H.: Dartmouth College Press, 2010).

¹⁷ Condorcet, *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind* (1793), in *Condorcet: Selected Writings*, ed., Keith Michael (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1976), 274.

women did not have equal access to education. “Since they have the same improveable Minds as the male Part of the Species,” he penned, “why should they not be cultivated in the same Method?” Ten years later, a male contributor to a Boston magazine posed a similar question: “does the Mind differ with the Sex? Is not their Reason as strong, their Memory as good, and is their Judgment less sound than ours?” Venturing an answer, he not only affirmed that Women were capable of learning; he also hinted that they might be better suited to mental cultivation than men. Due to the “Delicacy of their Contexture,” he reasoned, women would spend most of their time at home. Secluded from the world, they would be free to think, write, and learn without distraction.¹⁸

By the late eighteenth century, Americans increasingly asserted that differences in education could explain the mental disparities between the sexes.¹⁹ In 1790, Judith Sargent Murray published “On the Equality of the Sexes,” in which she claimed that women were the intellectual equals of men. If women’s minds were inferior, she argued, it was the result of unequal educations, rather than natural inferiority.²⁰ Then, in 1792, the British thinker Mary Wollstonecraft published her infamous *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, in which she proclaimed that women’s

¹⁸ “Mr. Zenger,” *New-York Weekly Journal*, May 19, 1735; and “Remarkable Instances of the Extensive Capacity of the Fair Sex,” *American Magazine and Historical Chronicle* 2 (Boston) August 1745. As their essays suggest, both these authors were talking about non-laboring women of means.

¹⁹ See, for example, “Are Literary and Scientific Pursuits Suited to the Female Character?” *The American Universal Magazine* 1, no. 5 (Philadelphia), February 6, 1797; “The Rights of Woman,” *The Weekly Magazine of Original Essays, Fugitive Pieces, and Interesting Intelligence* 1, no. 10 (Philadelphia), April 7, 1798; “On the Rights of Woman,” *National Magazine* 2, no. 7 (Richmond), September 1, 1800; and “Defence of the Female Claim to Mental Equality,” *The Lady’s Magazine and Musical Repository* 2 (New York), December 1801.

²⁰ Judith Sargent Murray, “On the Equality of the Sexes” *Massachusetts Magazine* 2, no 4 (Boston), April 1790.

failure to achieve equality with men resulted from the evils of social prejudice, rather than from the dictates of nature. Seeing gender inequity as an artificial reality, enforced by society's customs and laws, she accused men of cloaking their commitment to existing hierarchies beneath deferential language and obsequious flattery. Her work engendered a firestorm of debate on both sides of the Atlantic, accelerating a reevaluation in women's status, which had begun during the Enlightenment and was only further intensified by the revolutionary fervor spreading throughout the Atlantic world.²¹

In response to women's increasingly urgent demands for intellectual parity, some male writers began warning that educational advancement would make the female sex more masculine, and thus, less beautiful. In this worldview, a pedantic woman was an ugly woman, and the attainment of intellectual, educational, and social equality between the sexes would be antithetical to female beauty. In making these claims, some men averred that beauty was a natural feminine trait that precluded women from becoming rational beings. One author, for instance, pointed out that "Reason has been considered as much the distinguishing attribute of man, as is beauty of woman." Even so, he bemoaned that some individuals seemed to be disregarding this natural order, becoming "*completely unsexed*; women, that disregard person altogether, exclusively devoted to the cultivation of reason." Why, he wondered, were women obsessing over their intellectual acumen when they should instead be

²¹ Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, New Edition, with an Introduction by Mrs. Henry Fawcett (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1891 [1792]). Unless otherwise noted, page numbers will be from this edition.

developing their beauty and delicacy? In his opinion, men were innately rational creatures, while women were inherently beautiful ones.²²

Notwithstanding women's insistent arguments in favor of their own equality, many Americans continued to conceptualize reason as a masculine trait while viewing beauty as a feminine characteristic. Describing women's physicality as an "irresistible influence," male intellectuals sycophantically lauded the "power of female beauty" and the authority it supposedly provided women.²³ One author went so far as to claim that women had no need for mental cultivation, because their "empire" ultimately rested in their personal charms. He lampooned the "female authoresses" who fought for social, political, and educational parity with their male counterparts. Arguing instead for the *inequality* of the sexes, he assured women that their "deficiency in other qualities has been often compensated by the power of their personal charms." Women might be lacking in intellectual vigor, but this did not make them inferior, nor did lessen their influence. What made women powerful was not their mental capacity but their physical allure. In this framework, those who clamored for women's rights were inconsiderately attempting to strip women of the influence they already held.²⁴

²² "The Wanderer, No. XXVII.: Original Papers. Beauty," *The Emerald, or, Miscellany of Literature, Containing Sketches of the Manners, Principles and Amusements of the Age* 1, no. 2 (Boston), May 10, 1806.

²³ It is hard to take these fawning laudations of women's beauty seriously, but it was a rhetorical trope that male authors regularly engaged in. See, for example, "The Power of Women," *Weekly Museum* 6, no. 278 (New York), September 7, 1793; "Administration of Justice: Or, The Power of Female Beauty," *Philadelphia Repository*, October 20, 1804; "A Lecture, Upon the Influence Possessed by Females over the Minds and Actions of Men," *Weekly Visitor and Ladies' Museum* 4, no. 2 (New York), May 8, 1819; and "Cheraw, S.C., July 2," *Baltimore Patriot and Mercantile Advertiser*, July 15, 1824.

²⁴ "On the Influence of Woman," *The Literary Magazine, and American Register* 5, no. 33 (Philadelphia), June 1806. For other examples of authors who held up women's beauty as a consolation prize for true gender equality, see "The Rights of Woman," *The Weekly Magazine of*

People who had faith in the improbability of women's brains were quick to condemn such arguments. Among these critics, Mary Wollstonecraft was the most vocal and the most notorious. In the pages of the *Vindication*, she exposed society's obsession with female beauty for what it was: a consolation prize awarded to the women who endeavored to compete with their supposed intellectual betters. In her mind, beauty was a sinister threat to women's intellectual equality and a foe worthy of destruction. "Taught from their infancy that beauty is a woman's sceptre," she proclaimed, "the mind shapes itself to the body, and, roaming round its gilt cage, only seeks to adore its prison."²⁵ Wollstonecraft complained that women were neglecting their brains, desiring nothing more than to be showered with men's adulations. Blissfully wielding the "sceptre" of beauty, these female "rulers" narcissistically believed that they held power over their male counterparts. Men, in turn, granted their female counterparts superiority in this hollow category of human worth. Meanwhile, they greedily usurped the fruits of knowledge for themselves. In Wollstonecraft's mind, beauty was a pernicious force that denied women the ability to cultivate their intelligence. Flattery exalted women upon a worthless pedestal, but only rationality could lead to true advancement for the female sex.²⁶

Original Essays, Fugitive Pieces, and Interesting Intelligence 1, no. 10 (Philadelphia), April 7, 1798; "From the New-England Palladium: The Rights of Woman," *Alexandria Times*, October 14, 1801; "On Female Character," *Weekly Visitor, or Ladies' Miscellany* 2 (New York), August 11, 1804; "On the Influence of Female Beauty Upon Men," *The American Monthly Magazine* (New York), 1, no. 4, April 1824; and "Female Influence," *Ladies' Magazine* 1, no. 7 (Boston), July 1828.

²⁵ Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 82-83.

²⁶ Mary Wollstonecraft's scathing remarks on the "reign" of female beauty extended far beyond this one quotation. See, for example, Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 16-17, 31-36, 51-54, 66, 79-89, 96-103, 116-122, 131-139, 151-162, 179-194, 214, 223-224, and 255-257.

In both published works and private manuscripts, advocates of women's higher education in the United States echoed Wollstonecraft's concerns, describing female beauty as a formidable foe. In 1801, the *Lady's Magazine and Musical Repository* demanded the "emancipation of the fair sex" and the establishment of female academies throughout the nation. While admitting that female beauty had the capacity to shape the decisions of men, the writer avowed that "though possessed of this power, the ladies would willingly relinquish that authority which they have so long enjoyed by courtesy, in order to appear formally on the theatre of the world merely as the equals of men." Other female authors concurred, claiming that women would cheerfully abdicate the throne of beauty in exchange for educational advancement.²⁷ As one writer in the *Ladies Literary Cabinet* proclaimed in 1819, "One great obstacle, in the way of females, to the pursuit of literary acquirements, is beauty." Yet another contended that "A female, by attending to her phiz and outward adornments, is led to neglect the mind." In a similar way, the *Ladies Magazine* denigrated the unfortunate woman who was "admired only for personal beauty," arguing that "she will encourage frivolity and folly in man, and weaken the strong holds of wisdom and virtue." For all these authors, beauty was simultaneously desirable, dangerous, and intellectually debilitating.²⁸

²⁷ "Plan for the Emancipation of the Fair Sex," *The Lady's Magazine and Musical Repository* 3 (New York), January 1802.

²⁸ Philagathos, "Female Education," *The Ladies' Literary Cabinet* 1, no. 12 (New York), July 31, 1819; "For the Saturday Evening Post, from the Old Bachelor," *Saturday Evening Post* 2, no. 22 (Philadelphia), May 31, 1823; and "Female Education: Notice of an Address on Female Education Delivered in Portsmouth, N.H., October 26, 1827," *Ladies' Magazine* 1, no. 1 (Boston), January 1828. This latter article was also reprinted in "Reviews: An Address on Female Education," *American Journal of Education* 3, no. 1 (Boston), January 1828; "Extract from an Address on Female Education," *Gospel Messenger and Southern Episcopal Register* 5, no. 52 (Charleston), April 1828; and "Female Education," *The Religious Intelligencer* 12, no. 50 (New Haven), May 10, 1828. For other instances in which authors frame beauty as the enemy of women's intellectual advancement, see Marcia, "Female Vanity," *New York Magazine, or Literary Repository* 1, no. 12 (New York),

Rachel Van Dyke, a student at a female academy in New Jersey, likewise imagined beauty as a distracting force that prevented men from seeing the value of women's minds. In the pages of her diary, Van Dyke regularly railed against patronizing men who belittled the brains of their female counterparts. Arguing that the "generality of young men" spoke to women "as if we were inferior beings to whom they *condescend to display their abilities*," she called upon both sexes to reform their behavior. Cultivated women "should never allow ourselves to be regarded as the Turks regard our sex—as beings without souls." Men, for their part, needed to stop envisioning women as "pretty, fashionable, simpletons" and instead learn to treat them as "*conversable* beings, blessed with abilities to reflect and acquire knowledge as well as themselves." For Americans such as Rachel Van Dyke, it was society's infatuation with female beauty that prevented women from attaining intellectual equality.²⁹

By the early decades of the nineteenth century, educated middling and elite Americans agreed that women should be valued for their intellect, rather than solely for their appearances. Capitalizing on this new and fervent commitment to female education, they opened hundreds of female academies throughout the new republic. As Mary Kelley has demonstrated, Americans established at least 196 institutions for

December 1790; "On the Supposed Superiority of the Masculine Understanding," *The Universal Asylum and Columbian Magazine* (Philadelphia), July 1791; W.E., "The Cultivation of the Mind Recommended," *The Lady's Magazine, and Repository of Entertaining Knowledge* (Philadelphia), April 1793; "Observations on the Education and Manners of the Fair Sex," *The Weekly Magazine of Original Essays, Fugitive Pieces, and Interesting Intelligence* 3, no. 300, February 23, 1799; "Defence of the Female Claim to Mental Equality," *The Lady's Magazine and Musical Repository* 2 (New York), December 1801; and "The Destiny of Woman," *The Western Monthly Magazine, and Literary Journal* 3 no. 15, March 1834.

²⁹ See entry for July 17, 1810, in Lucia McMahon and Deborah Schriver, eds. *To Read My Heart: The Journal of Rachel Van Dyke* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 81.

women's higher education between 1790 and 1830. Between 1830 and 1860, at least 158 more female academies and seminaries materialized. The country's white middling and elite women, moreover, increasingly asserted their place as the rational counterparts of men. Building on their enhanced educational opportunities, they formed literary associations and extended their influence within the broader society.³⁰ By 1829, women's access to intellectual cultivation had increased so quickly and so dramatically that the editors of the *Ladies Magazine* felt confident enough to assert that "the very idea of *mental inferiority* in woman is highly improbable."³¹

With proponents of female rationality increasingly clamoring for educational rights, it became harder for men to offer beauty up as women's consolation prize for their artificially enforced mental inferiority. Instead, many people began arguing that women's *true* worth was in their brains. Particularly in the 1790s, American writers and publishers encouraged men with new intensity to look *beyond* women's persons. They increasingly printed articles with titles such as: "On the Futility of Personal Charms Without Mental Beauty," "Beauties of the Mind and the Form Compared," and "The *True* Beauty."³²

Women not only internalized these messages, they also promulgated them in social and intellectual exchanges. As Jane Bayard declared in a letter to her friend

³⁰ These calculations are based from her research at the American Antiquarian Society collections, and as she acknowledges, they are conservative because they leave out many Southern and Western schools. See Kelley, *Learning to Stand and Speak*, 67.

³¹ "Man's Mental Superiority over Woman, Referrable to Physical Causes Only," *Ladies' Magazine* 2, no. 8 (Boston), August 1829.

³² "On the Futility of Personal Charms Without Mental Beauty," *The Juvenile Port-Folio, and Literary Miscellany* 2, no. 21 (Philadelphia), May 28, 1814; "Beauties of the Mind and the Form Compared," *The Massachusetts Magazine* 2, no. 10 (Boston), October 1790; and "The True Beauty," *The Gentlemen and Ladies' Town and Country Magazine* (Boston), July 1789.

Sally Wister: “I have always thought the improvement of the mind and heart, of more material consequence than the polish of person and manners.”³³ Young women also copied poems contrasting mental beauty with its corporeal counterpart. Mary Billmeyer’s scrapbook, for instance, included a poetic warning to men who worshipped at the “shrine” of female beauty: “Then eyes of fire, their flames sent / And rosy lips looked eloquent— / Oh! I have turned and wept to find / Beneath it all a *trifling mind*.”³⁴ Meanwhile, two different young women—one in Virginia, the other in Pennsylvania—copied the same poem into their friends’ autograph albums. According to the passage, the “Queen of Beauty” was able to “mould the brow to perfectness, and give unto the form a beautiful proportion.” Yet beauty could not provide women with lasting charms: “What’s the brow / Or the eye’s lustre, or the step of air / Or colour, but the beautiful links that chain / The mind from its rare element? There lies / A talisman in intellect, which yields Celestial music.”³⁵ If women sometimes admitted that their “external attractions” gave them influence, they preferred to earn esteem through their virtue and good sense. Beauty of the body was fleeting, but the beauties of the mind were everlasting.³⁶

³³ Jane Bayard to Sally Wister, February 1, 1790, Eastwick Collection, APS.

³⁴ Mary G. Billmeyer, Collection of Poetry and Clippings, 1817-1871, Mss. Am.024, Historical Society of Pennsylvania [hereafter cited as HSP].

³⁵ Susanna Longstreth, Autograph Book, 1823-1852, Mss.Am.8755, HSP; and Mary Virginia Early Brown, Autograph Album, 1833-1846, Mss. 1Ea765a177, Virginia Historical Society [hereafter cited as VHS].

³⁶ For other examples of women meditating on the connection—or opposition—between beauty and intellect, see Cornelia Wells Walter, Extract Book, 1831-1872, Mss. L445, Boston Athenaeum [hereafter cited as BA]; Caroline H. Hance Long Diary, 1852, 19, Mss. Am.0712, HSP; Lucretia Fiske Farrington, “Notebook for 1834,” Mss. S143, BA; Mary Ware Allen, School Journal, June 12, 1838 and June 18, 1838, Mss. Octavo Volume 25, in Allen-Johnson Family Papers, 1759-1992, AAS; and Journal of Hannah Margaret Wharton, 1812-1813, in the Thomas I. & Henry Wharton Papers (II), Box 5, Folder 1, HSP.

By the early decades of the nineteenth century, advocates of female education were describing beauty as an impediment to women's moral and mental advancement. Even so, men proved reluctant to abandon their attachment to women's personal charms. Seeking to maintain their regard for female beauty—while also acknowledging women as rational creatures—many Americans began to insist that beauty and rationality were not antithetical traits at all, but rather mutually constitutive characteristics. The rising popularity of physiognomic ideas in the 1790s had imbued discussions of women's physical features with a new legitimacy by redefining facial attractiveness as trait that could be objectively and empirically studied. As Lavater declared in the *Essays on Physiognomy*, “The soul is not to be seen without the body, but in the body.”³⁷ Using facial analysis, people found they could comfortably evaluate women's beauty while convincing themselves that they were practitioners of a far more sensible and scientific process. They were not simply obsessing over women's personal charms, people assured themselves. They were responsibly investigating the beauties of women's minds.

“The Empire of Beauty” and the New Republic

After the American Revolution, the nation's leaders found themselves facing a difficult question: what role would women play in the new republic? In the immediate post-Revolutionary decades, many women interpreted their dictate broadly, asserting identities as autonomous political actors. Beginning in the 1790s, though, political leaders increasingly argued that women should instead serve as the educators and

³⁷ Johann Caspar Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy; for the Promotion of the Knowledge and the Love of Mankind*, trans. Thomas Holcroft (London: G.G.J. and J. Robinson, 1789), 3:203.

influencers of men. In addition to mothering meritorious sons, virtuous republican women would sway their husbands toward the path of integrity, quietly ensuring the triumph of the nation's ambitious experiment. As political thinkers conceptualized it, men would surely listen to their wives. But why did they imagine that men would willingly follow women's wishes? What was it about women that made them so charming, so persuasive, and so apparently effective at shaping the hearts and minds of their husbands? For many early Americans, the answer to that question lay in women's physical beauty.³⁸

If the ideology of republican womanhood provided women with political significance while ultimately failing to grant them legal, political, or economic rights, then ideas about female beauty exalted and exaggerated women's power while restricting their ability to claim intellectual equality with their male counterparts. Newspapers and periodicals regularly cited examples of women who changed the course of history by deploying their beauty to influence men. They told narratives of female figures such as Anne Boleyn, Helen of Troy, and Cicero's wife, Terentia. In all these stories, women's beauty shaped men's political decisions. One author, for instance, asserted that "Power may be divided into several classes, viz. 1. That of the State. 2. The power of Wealth. 3. The power of Knowledge. And, 4. That of Beauty." In grouping the power of beauty alongside three more traditional forms of power, he

³⁸ For scholarship on women, gender, and virtue in the early American republic, see Kerber, *Women of the Republic*; Ruth H. Bloch, "The Gendered Meanings of Virtue in Revolutionary America," *Signs* 13, no. 1 (Autumn 1987): 37-58; Jan Lewis, "The Republican Wife: Virtue and Seduction in the Early Republic," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (October, 1987): 689-721; William Hunting Howell, "A More Perfect Copy: David Rittenhouse and the Reproduction of Republican Virtue," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 64, no. 4 (October, 2007): 757-790; and Kristie Hamilton, "An Assault on the Will: Republican Virtue and the City in Hannah Webster Foster's *The Coquette*," *Early American Literature* 24, no. 2 (1989): 135-151.

suggested that women's social and political influence was rooted in their physical features.³⁹ Countless writers repeated the trope, insisting that female beauty had remarkable authority over men's actions. As the *Ladies' Literary Cabinet* put it in 1819, "There is no heart so cold or obdurate as to resist its sway." These authors intimated that women should embrace their influence, using it to instill virtue within American society.⁴⁰

If exemplary women used their attractiveness for admirable and moral purposes, then beauty could serve as a positive social good. Yet politicians and writers claimed that female beauty might be a destructive force within newly established nation. The prolific author Thomas Branagan, for instance, argued that men had to be careful, for women's physical charms might entrap them. "Beauty, combined with artificial modesty," he asserted, "may easily deceive thee to thy ruin." Another author proclaimed that when beauty's "fair possessors are not under the influence of virtue: it is a weapon, in the hands of the vicious." By suggesting women could "overturn" the new republic through their fixation on fashionable appearances,

³⁹ "The Power of Beauty," *The Boston Weekly Magazine* 2, no. 19, March 3, 1804. Another author told an anecdote in which three men were asked to determine which was most powerful: beauty, wine, or the king. As the tale demonstrated, the champion was unequivocally female beauty. No man, after all—not even a king—was immune to the influence of a beautiful woman. See "The Power of Women," *Weekly Museum* 6, no. 278 (New York), September 7, 1793.

⁴⁰ "Female Beauty," *The Ladies' Literary Cabinet* 1, no. 9 (New York), July 10, 1819. For similar articles explaining the power of female beauty in shaping the political, legal, and personal decisions of American men, see "The Power of Women," *Weekly Museum* 6, no. 278 (New York), September 7, 1793; "Sudden Impulses," *The Weekly Magazine of Original Essays, Fugitive Pieces, and Interesting Intelligence* (Philadelphia), April 14, 1798; D'Exmes—M. Le Prevost, "The Parellel Between Wit and Beauty," *Ladies' Museum* (Providence), November 1801; "Administration of Justice: Or, The Power of Female Beauty," *Philadelphia Repository*, October 20, 1804; "On the Influence of Woman," *The Literary Magazine, and American Register* 5, no. 33 (Philadelphia), June 1806; "A Lecture: Upon the Influence Possessed By Females Over the Minds and Actions of Men," *Weekly Visitor and Ladies' Museum* 4, no. 2 (New York) May 8, 1819; "Female Beauty," *The Ladies' Literary Cabinet* 1, no. 9 (New York), July 10, 1819; "The Most Beautiful Woman in the World," *Baltimore Patriot*, March 21, 1822; and "The Power of Beauty," *Ladies Garland* 1, no. 37 (Philadelphia), October 23, 1824.

Americans associated female beauty with political and economic instability, as well as negative traits like vice, folly, and vanity.⁴¹ In the eyes of the men most invested in the project of nation building, female beauty could seduce men and lead them to ruin, rending the very fragile fabric of the new nation. Because of beauty's destructive potential, men needed a method for seeing beyond the hypnotizing spell of women's personal charms and identifying their internal character. With this task ahead of them, they placed their hopes in science.⁴²

A New Science of Beauty

In 1790, the *New York Magazine* published an article on the "Characteristic Differences of the Male and Female of the Human Species." It began with a rhetorical question: "how much more pure, tender, delicate, irritable, affectionate, flexible, and

⁴¹ Thomas Branagan, *The Charms of Benevolence and Patriotic Mentor; Or, The Rights and Privileges of Republicanism* (Philadelphia: Johnston and Patterson, 1813), 115; and "Female Beauty," *The Ladies' Literary Cabinet* 1, no. 9 (New York), July 10, 1819. Novel writers, political thinkers, and didactic authors all denounced female vanity and affectation, framing beauty as a negative trait that could detract from women's virtue. See, for example, "To the Ladies of Frederick-County," *Maryland Chronicle*, August 22, 1787; [No Headline], *Maryland Chronicle* (Fredericktown, Maryland), September 19, 1787; "Female Vanity," *The New York Magazine, or Literary Repository* 1, no. 12, December 1790; "The Observer: Thoughts on Pride and Vanity," *Washington Spy* (Elizabethtown, Maryland), October 6, 1795; "From the Albany Gazette," *Alexandria Gazette*, November 14, 1809; "On Female Beauty," *Free Press* (Lancaster, Pennsylvania), June 24, 1819; "The Old Bachelor," *Baltimore Patriot*, June 8, 1819; and "From the Boston Medical Intelligencer: Tight Dressing," *Baltimore Patriot*, September 2, 1826.

⁴² Americans made clear distinctions between the categories of "beauty" and "fashion." Fashion was associated with vanity, greed, and excessive consumption. Beauty, however—so long as it was "natural" beauty—was valued and expected of women. On the association of women with luxury, vice, folly, and affectation in Britain, see Vivien Jones, "Luxury, Satire and Prostitute Narratives," in *Luxury in the Eighteenth Century*, eds. Maxine Berg and Elizabeth Eger (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 178; E.J. Clery, *The Feminisation Debate in Eighteenth Century Britain* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); and Barbara Taylor, "Enlightenment and the Uses of Woman," *History Workshop Journal* 74, no. 1 (2012), 80-83. On the same trends in American culture, see Ruth Bloch, *Gender and Morality in Anglo-American Culture, 1650-1800* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), 142-144; Haulman, *The Politics of Fashion*, 107, 183, 224; and Brekke-Aloise, "The Scourge of Fashion."

patient, is woman than man?” The article then transitioned to a scientific statement about the bodily differences that characterized the sexes. “The primary matter of which women are constituted,” the author stated, “appears to be more flexible, irritable, and elastic than that of man.” Taken as a group, women allegedly exhibited a few “generic feminine signs” in their bodies: “all their organs are tender, yielding, easily wounded, sensible, and receptive.” These were physiological differences with significant social consequences. After examining women’s bodies, it would purportedly be clear to any rational observer that women were “formed to maternal mildness and affection.”⁴³

First invoking biblical precedent and then vaguely summarizing the claims of European scientists, the author proclaimed that the tremendous “tenderness” of women’s bodies, “this sensibility, this light texture of their fibres and organs, this volatility of feeling, render them so easy to conduct and to tempt; so ready of submission to the enterprise and power of the man.” Even so, he insisted that women were “more powerful through the aid of their charms than man, with all his strength.” This was an appeal to traditional stereotypes about the supposed “power” of female beauty, coupled with an unapologetic commitment to female subordination.⁴⁴

The man who penned this piece imagined a world where women were not simply different from—but also undeniably inferior to—men. There were no encomiums to the capacities of the female mind, no calls for female education, and no

⁴³ “Characteristic Differences of the Male and Female of the Human Species: A Word on the Physiognomical Relation of the Sexes,” *New York Magazine, or Literary Repository* 1, no. 6, June 1790.

⁴⁴ “Characteristic Differences of the Male and Female of the Human Species,” *New York Magazine*, June 1790.

cautionary tales about the perils of valuing women for their beauty alone. Instead, the article declared that women were uniquely suited for the domestic arena, that they were more emotional than men, and that they should exert their power “with tender looks, tears, and sighs,” rather than by relying on their intelligence and competence. The writer was particularly clear in his insistence on the mediocrity of the female brain: “The female thinks not profoundly; profound thought is the power of the male.” Women, he contended, suffered from “extreme sensibility” due to “the irritability of their nerves.” This apparently resulted in an “incapacity for deep enquiry and firm decision,” as well as a troubling tendency to “become the most irreclaimable, the most rapturous enthusiasts.” His message was clear: women were not thinkers; they were feelers. Their tender organs and flexible nerve fibers predicted such a reality.⁴⁵

These bald avowals in favor of men’s mental superiority may seem out-of-step with a cultural and intellectual universe where many Americans were willing to imagine that the mind had no sex. But these statements also reflected a hardening gender climate, in which both Europeans and Americans increasingly imagined that female bodies were the intrinsic and immutable opposites of male bodies. This article became particularly popular in the United States, where newspaper and periodical editors reprinted the piece no less than eighteen times during the 1790s alone.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ “Characteristic Differences of the Male and Female of the Human Species,” *New York Magazine*, June 1790.

⁴⁶ See “Characteristic Differences of the Male and Female of the Human Species,” *The Pennsylvania Packet, and Daily Advertiser* (Philadelphia), December 27, 1790; reprinted under the same title in the *Salem Gazette* (Massachusetts), February 8, 1791; and *Nova-Scotia Magazine* 5, March 1792. The title was revised in 1794. See “General Remarks on Women,” *Massachusetts Magazine; or, Monthly Museum* 6, no. 1 (Boston), January 1794; reprinted in the *Impartial Herald* (Newburyport, Massachusetts), April 11, 1794; *New Hampshire Journal* (Walpole), May 9, 1794; *Hartford Gazette* (Connecticut), May 15, 1794; *Columbian Gazetteer* (New York), May 19, 1794;

Where did it come from? Who was the author? And why did it become so influential? As it turns out, this piece was not a product of American authorship at all. It was an excerpt from a chapter of Lavater's *Essays on Physiognomy*, the three-volume treatise that was currently captivating readers in both Europe and North America.

Because Lavater's work seamlessly traveled between elite intellectual circles and popular culture, his ideas about sexual difference shaped popular ideas about gender, beauty, and human nature in the early republic.⁴⁷ Newspapers and periodicals regularly reprinted his remarks on women, as well as many of his briefer and more anodyne aphorisms about femininity.⁴⁸ In 1794, Bostonians released their own edition

Hartford Gazette (Connecticut), May 19, 1794; *Weekly Museum* 7, no. 319 (New York), June 21, 1794; *Salem Gazette* (Massachusetts), June 24, 1794; *Courier of New Hampshire* (Concord), July 24, 1794; *Rural Magazine; or, Vermont Repository* 2, no. 11 (Rutland), November 1796; *Rutland Herald* (Vermont), November 12, 1798; *Spooner's Vermont Journal* (Windsor), November 27, 1798; *Centinel Of Freedom* (Newark), December 11, 1798; and *Vermont Gazette* (Bennington), December 27, 1798. This article was also reprinted in "From Lavater's *Essays on Physiognomy*," *Weekly Visitor, or Ladies' Miscellany* 1, no. 28 (New York), April 16, 1803.

⁴⁷ These remarks were influential because they infiltrated the periodicals Americans read regularly. As Susan Branson has argued, "It was magazines, more than any other medium, that helped to develop an American public discourse on gender roles and gender relations." See Branson, *These Fiery Frenchified Dames*, 23.

⁴⁸ Lavater's remarks on women were first published under the title of "Male and Female" in the British periodical, the *Analytical Review, or History of Literature, Domestic and Foreign* V (London: J. Johnson, 1789), 459-462. See also Johann Caspar Lavater, "Characteristic Differences of the Male and Female of the Human Species," in the January issue of *Edinburgh Magazine, or Literary Miscellany* XI (Edinburgh: J. Sibbald, 1790), 15-17. The *New York Magazine* directly lifted its comments from the *Edinburgh Magazine*. For Lavater's "Aphorism on Woman," see "Philadelphia, 5 November," *Federal Gazette* (Philadelphia), November 5, 1790; reprinted in the *General Advertiser*, November 8, 1790; *The Freeman's Journal*, November 10, 1790; and *The Gazette* (Portland, Maine), August 27, 1798. See also "Aphorisms on Man, by Lavater," *Pennsylvania Mercury* (Philadelphia), June 11, 1791; reprinted in *Massachusetts Spy* (Worcester), June 23, 1791; *Norwich Packet* (Connecticut), July 7, 1791; and the *Newport Mercury* (Rhode Island), March 26, 1792. See also "Philo, No. XV," *Massachusetts Magazine* 2, no. 12 (Boston), December 1790. For an aphorism on female vanity, see *The Salem Gazette*, April 5, 1791. Lavater's comments on the maternal imagination during childbirth were also republished in "Effects of Imagination," *General Advertiser* (Philadelphia), April 6, 1792.

of Lavater's treatise.⁴⁹ This volume included a chapter comparing the skeletal systems of men and women: "Consideration and comparison of the external and internal make of the body, in male and female," argued Lavater, "teaches us, that the one is destined for labour and strength, and the other for beauty and propagation." Men should be strong and powerful workers, he decreed. Women should be agreeable and attractive mothers.⁵⁰ If American readers did not agree with these sentiments—or if they were eager to read conflicting accounts on the topic—they did not have to look further than the shelves of their local booksellers. Between 1796 and 1797, *The Weekly Museum* listed Lavater's *Essays on Physiognomy* for sale at least eleven times, advertising it alongside Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.⁵¹

At a time when plagiarism laws were virtually non-existent, Lavater's comments on physiognomy, female beauty, and the nature of woman were reproduced in cities as distant as London, Paris, Edinburgh, New York, Philadelphia, and Boston. His statements on gender difference soon became so influential within Anglo-Atlantic intellectual circles that early editions of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* simply extracted his comments on women, copied them directly, and substituted them for the encyclopedia's entry on "Sex." The earliest edition of the encyclopedia, published in 1773, had provided only a brief and simple definition: "SEX, something in the body which distinguishes male from female."⁵² Later editions of the

⁴⁹ For Lavater's sections on women in the first American edition, see "Chapter XIV" and "Chapter XXXIII," in *Essays on Physiognomy; for the Promotion of the Knowledge and the Love of Mankind* (Boston: William Spotswood & David West, 1794), 71-76 and 171-175.

⁵⁰ Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy* (Boston, 1794), 71-72.

⁵¹ The *Farmer's Weekly Museum* (Walpole, New Hampshire) also listed these two books near each other on August 5, 1799.

encyclopedia kept some version of this first sentence, but they also included a copy of Lavater's chapter on women, lifting the text directly from the *Essays on Physiognomy*. Readers who were hoping to find a positive evaluation of the female mind in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* would have instead discovered Lavater's provocative contention that women were incapable of "deep inquiry," easily manipulated, and more emotional and flighty than their male counterparts.⁵³

In 1798, when Thomas Dobson issued the first encyclopedia to be published in the fledgling United States, he did not waste time collecting his own entries. Instead, he copied the text from the third edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, including the entirety of Lavater's "General Remarks on Women." This ensured that early national Americans who wanted to read about "sex" or the "characteristic differences of the male and female of the human species" would have likely encountered the same bombastic declarations found in the *Essays on Physiognomy*. Between the 1790s and the 1860s, Lavater's theories effectively stood in as the definitive statement on sex and gender in the Anglo-Atlantic print universe. Only in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*'s eighth edition, published in 1860, did publishers finally remove Lavater's maxims from the text.⁵⁴

⁵² *Encyclopaedia Britannica: Or, A Dictionary of Arts and Sciences*, First Edition, vol. III (London: John Donaldson, 1773).

⁵³ See *Encyclopædia Britannica: Or, A Dictionary of Arts, Sciences, and Miscellaneous Literature; Enlarged and Improved*, Third Edition, vol. XVII (Edinburgh: A. Bell and C. Macfarquhar, 1797), 327-329. It appears that the 1860 edition removed the entry for "Sex" entirely. The entry reappeared in the ninth edition, published in 1886, but Lavater's comments were excised and replaced with a much longer and more technical discussion of reproductive organs in numerous species, including insects, mammals, fish, and humans. This new entry primarily synthesized the work of famed evolutionary biologists like Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer. See *Encyclopædia Britannica: Or, A Dictionary of Arts, Sciences, and General Literature*, Ninth Edition, vol. XXI (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1886), 721-725.

⁵⁴ See Thomas Dobson's *Encyclopaedia; or, A Dictionary of Arts, Sciences, and Miscellaneous Literature* (Philadelphia: Thomas Dobson, 1798), 17:327-329; *New Encyclopædia; or,*

Of course, not all Americans took Lavater's word as the final say on the character and capacity of the female brain. His flippant dismissal of women's intellectual equality inspired the ire of many, particularly those who believed women should be granted equal educational opportunities. In December of 1801, New York City's *Lady's Magazine and Musical Repository* republished a response to Lavater, which had initially appeared in London's *Lady's Monthly Museum*. The piece was entitled "Defence of the Female Claim to Mental Equality." As its title suggests, the article criticized Lavater for his denigration of women's reasoning capacities. It provided one-sentence summary of his position on the female sex: "That woman knows not how to *think*; they perceive, can associate ideas, but can go no further." Taking issue with these assertions, the magazines pointed out that Lavater was not married and "had not associated much with women in private society." He was thus unqualified to make unilateral statements about the "intellectual capacity" of

Universal Dictionary of Arts and Sciences (London: Vernor, Hood, and Sharpe, 1807), 20:520-522; and *Encyclopaedia Perthensis; Or Universal Dictionary of the Arts, Sciences, Literature, &c.*, Second Edition (Edinburgh: John Brown, 1816), 20:520-521. Sydney Owenson repeated these supposed truisms about the female mind and character in a letter to Mrs. Lefanu in 1803, but misidentified "Lavater" as "Salvater." For a published version of the letter, see *Lady Morgan's Memoirs: Autobiography, Diaries, and Correspondence* (Leipzig: Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1863), 1:211. Lavater's quotation—about men being more "profound" thinkers than women—was also quoted in John Corry, *A Satirical View of London at the Commencement of the Nineteenth Century* (London: G. Kearsley, 1801), 173; *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (Edinburgh: Andrew Bell, 1810), 29:203-204; John Platts, *The Book of Curiosities; Or, Wonders of the Great World, Containing an Account of Whatever is Most Remarkable in Nature & Art, Science, & Literature* (London: Caxton Press, 1822), 34-46; *Memoirs of a Deist, Written First A.D. 1793-4* (London: J. Hatchard and Son, 1824), 85; William H. Porter, *Proverbs: Arranged in Alphabetical Order* (Boston: James Munroe and Company, 1845), 74-77; and "Woman Superior to Man," in John Henry Freese, ed., *Everybody's Book: Or, Gleanings Serious and Entertaining, in Prose and Verse, from the Scrap-Book of a Septuagenarian* (London: Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1860), 298-301. These are just some of the texts in which Lavater's remarks on women were copied. Lavater's remarks were also printed in European and American periodicals, and they continued to be reprinted until at least 1882, when they were directly copied into the entry for "Curiosities Respecting Man.—Difference Between the Sexes," in I. Platt, ed., *Cyclopedia of Wonders and Curiosities of Nature and Art, Science and Literature* (New York: Hurst & Company, 1882), 1:34-35.

womankind. Rejecting Lavater's interpretation of the female brain, these periodicals defiantly insisted that "woman can think, and deeply, too."⁵⁵

Other Americans were similarly offended by Lavater's seemingly antiquated ideas about womanhood. In several works on philanthropy and female education, Thomas Branagan quoted the claims of the *Lady's Monthly Museum*, concurring with their incisive criticisms of Lavater, even as he reiterated his appreciation for physiognomy: "How astonishing it is, that a man of Lavater's ingenuity and celebrity could believe or assert, such a spurious and fallacious sentiment." To Branagan, women were rational creatures and they deserved to be treated as such.⁵⁶ As these examples indicate, many Americans were unwilling to unthinkingly adopt Lavater's belief in the intellectual inferiority of women. But the fact that American authors felt it necessary to engage with him at all speaks to how influential his ideas about women's nature had become in American popular culture by the 1800s. Despite Lavater's derogatory comments about the female brain, physiognomic methods for interpreting the female body flourished alongside the advancement of women's educational opportunities in the early republic.

⁵⁵ "Defence of the Female Claim to Mental Equality," *Lady's Monthly Museum; Or, Polite Repository of Amusement and Instruction* 6 (London: Vernor and Hood, 1801), 115; and "Defence of the Female Claim to Mental Equality," *Lady's Magazine and Musical Repository* 2, December, 1801.

⁵⁶ Thomas Branagan, *The Excellency of the Female Character Vindicated; Being an Investigation Relative to the Cause and Effects of the Encroachments of Men upon the Rights of Women*, Printed from the Second Edition (Harrisburg: Francis Wyeth, 1828), 102. Branagan then repeated this same quotation in *The Guardian Genius of the Federal Union; Or, Patriotic Admonitions on the Signs of the Times* (New York: 1839), 233; and in *The Beauties of Philanthropy* (New York: 1839), 233.

Sex, Gender, and Science in the Atlantic World

As a discourse, science, and social practice, physiognomy was predicated on the notion that women's minds and bodies were both different from and inferior to the minds and bodies of men. In making these claims, physiognomists built upon the work of eighteenth-century anatomists and physiologists—men who claimed they were objectively and empirically delineating the differences between male and female bodies. The scientific agendas of these elite European thinkers were often predicated on two paired assumptions: first, that men and women were morally, mentally, and physically different by nature; and second, that the anatomical distinctions of the sexes demanded unique social and political roles for men and women.⁵⁷

Lavater, to be fair, recognized there was considerable variation in the minds, characters, and appearances of women, and he made allowances for these differences in his individualized descriptions. Even so, he often made sweeping proclamations about the character and capacities of women as a group. For instance, the English translation of Lavater's second volume included images of three female skulls. Lavater described the first engraving as the "most delicate," the "weakest," and the most "manifestly female" of the three. He also insisted that this first skull was the most likely to belong to a person who was "sagacious in trifles." In other words, he invoked stereotypical ideas about women's vanity, frivolity, and obsession with

⁵⁷ Laqueur, *Making Sex*; Schiebinger, *Nature's Body*; Schiebinger, *The Mind Has No Sex*; and Fraisse, *Reason's Muse*. In 1775, the French thinker Pierre Roussel argued that the "essence of sex is not limited to a single organ, but extends to all parts of the body." In a similar way, Jacques Moreau argued that "Sex does not manifest itself in one site only," while Julien Joseph Virey claimed that "Sexual organs are not limited to the organs of generation alone, in either man or woman; but all parts of their bodies." See Roussel, *Système physique et moral de la femme* (1775); Moreau de la Sarthe, *Histoire naturelle de la femme* (1803); and Virey, article on "Femme" in the *Dictionnaire des sciences médicales* (1812-1822); all quoted in Fraisse, *Reason's Muse*, 79.

fashionable goods, even as he pretended to provide a dispassionate analysis of women's skeletal structures.⁵⁸

According to Lavater, the second skull in the image was apparently “not so weak” as the first, but it was “still tender,” as all women's heads were. While the second head was feminine in nature, it was apparently “not so narrow minded” as the first model. The third head, however, was fundamentally “masculine” in its conformation: “the female skull seldom has such *sinus frontales*; it may be said never,” insisted Lavater. “It is the most open, candid, intelligent, of the three; without being a genius of the first or second order.” Unsurprisingly, Lavater asserted that the female skull with the most honesty and intelligence was also the most “masculine” of the three. It was so manly, in fact, that he had trouble believing it had belonged to a woman at all. Men, he assumed, were more rational, open, and honest than women. Certain female skulls might exhibit intelligence and forthrightness—that much seemed clear—but Lavater assured his readers that women's heads could never exhibit “genius of the first or second order.” Women could have sensibility, but not profundity. Passion, but not true reason. Beauty, but not strength. Influence, but not power. Designations of genius were only for men.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy*, 2:235.

⁵⁹ Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy*, 2:235-236.

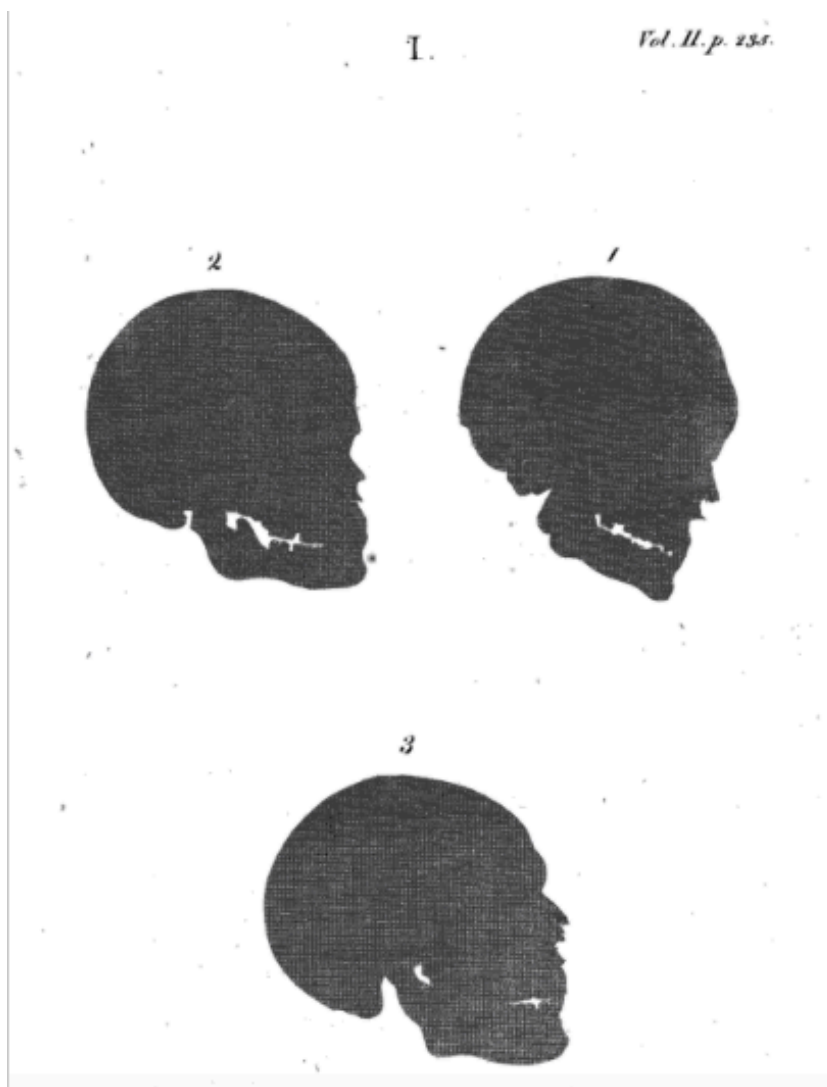


Fig. 2.1. Images of three contrasting “female skulls,” in Johann Caspar Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy; for the Promotion of the Knowledge and the Love of Mankind*, trans. Thomas Holcroft (London: G.G.J. and J. Robinson, 1789), 2:235. The third skull has a projecting brow above the eye sockets—a physiognomical signal that was typically associated with the capacity for profound contemplation and intellectual distinction. Lavater thus had trouble believing that this skull had actually belonged to a woman.

In the pages of the *Essays on Physiognomy*, Enlightenment physiological “knowledge” merged with more basic cultural assumptions about the importance of female beauty and the proper role that women should play within the broader society. Lavater’s treatises, for instance, incorporated the theories of influential eighteenth-century scientists such as Petrus Camper, Johann Winckelmann, Samuel Thomas von Sömmerring, Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, and the Comte du Buffon. All these men had written extensively about human anatomy or had theorized about the meaning and significance of female beauty. Most ordinary people, of course, were not reading the works of these elite European scientists. But many of them *were* reading Lavater. He had intended the *Essays on Physiognomy* for a general readership, not for those with specialized knowledge in natural history. Through his bold declarations and dramatic rhetorical flourishes, Lavater made the work of elite scientists and scholars seem accessible, readable, and provocative for a much broader audience. Through his *Essays on Physiognomy*—and through the many magazines and encyclopedias that excerpted from it—casual readers would have gained access to European scientific theories about the physiological distinctions between the sexes.⁶⁰

Every time Lavater spoke of women’s delicate fibres, their irritable and yet yielding characters, and their beautiful faces, he was engaging in a transatlantic debate about the meaning and significance of sex difference. By the late eighteenth century, a few presumptions had come to dominate European scientific literature. The first was the idea that women’s bodies were somehow more “soft” or “tender” than

⁶⁰ Christopher Rivers argues that Lavater initially toyed with the idea of releasing two editions: one more “scientific” and “one more tailored to a general audience.” Eventually, “the more technical aspect seems to have been deemphasized in favor of a popular appeal and definite theological agenda.” See Christopher Rivers, *Face Value: Physiognomical Thought and the Legible Body* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994), 67-68.

the bodies of men. Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, who many scholars now call the “father of anthropology,” argued that the “general conformation of the female body” demonstrated “tenderness” and “softness.” By contrast, a man was likely to have an “athletic and robust body.”⁶¹ Lavater articulated similar claims in his work, arguing, “all their organs are tender, yielding, easily wounded, sensible, and receptive.”⁶²

In a similar way, eighteenth-century anatomists and physiologists believed that women’s nervous “fibres” were thinner, more flexible, and more easily “stimulated” than those of men. This reinforced the idea that women were more likely to engage in flights of fancy, or in hysterical delusions. Blumenbach, for instance, claimed that women had a greater “propensity to commotions of the mind” and argued that they were “more prompt and spontaneous” in making decisions. Women, as he saw it, did not deliberate. They experienced dramatic mental stimulations and acted immediately.⁶³ Lavater, too, contended that women were more fanciful than men, primarily because of the “flexible, irritable, and elastic” nature of the “primary matter of which women are constituted,” as well as the “light texture of their fibres and organs,” which simultaneously ensured their physical weakness and their “volatility of feeling.”⁶⁴

Lavater also deployed emerging scientific ideas about the sexed skeleton in his physiognomical works. During the eighteenth century, European intellectuals

⁶¹ Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, *Elements of Physiology*, trans. Charles Caldwell (Philadelphia: Thomas Dobson, 1795), 1:111. This was the first edition to be published in the United States. The original treatise, entitled *Institutiones Physiologicae*, was published in 1786.

⁶² Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy* (First American Edition, 1794), 72.

⁶³ Blumenbach, *Elements of Physiology*, 1:113.

⁶⁴ Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy* (First American Edition, 1794), 175.

invested new energy in distinguishing between the bone structures of men and women. Anatomists did not begin drawing explicit distinctions between male and female skeletons until the 1733, when William Cheselden produced the first image of a uniquely female skeleton.⁶⁵ By the late eighteenth century, however, most natural historians felt confident that sex difference was “observable in the bones themselves,” which were “evidently much more smooth and round in females than in males.”⁶⁶ Lavater employed similar ideas in the *Essays on Physiognomy*, affirming that the “general structure of the bones in the males, and of the skull in particular, is evidently of stronger formation than in the female.” Repurposing the theories of eighteenth-century scientific thinkers, he concurred that men’s bones demonstrated “masculine strength,” while women’s bones were smoother, rounder, and more cylindrical.⁶⁷

Lavater also built on the work of European anatomists, who largely agreed that women’s skeletons were broadest at the hips, while men’s skeletons were most expansive in the shoulders. Incorporating these new ideas about the sexed skeleton into his *Essays on Physiognomy*, he wrote, “The body of the male increases, from the hip to the shoulder, in breadth and thickness; hence the broad shoulders and square form of the strong: whereas the female skeleton gradually grows thinner and weaker from the hip upwards.” By including this brief passage, Lavater reduced a large corpus of work by European anatomists to a single sentence, commingling it with a

⁶⁵ For work on the “debut” of the female skeleton, see Londa Schiebinger, “Skeletons in the Closet: The First Illustrations of the Female Skeleton in Eighteenth-Century Anatomy,” *Representations* no. 14 (Spring 1986): 42-82; and Schiebinger, “More Than Skin Deep: The Scientific Search for Sexual Difference,” in *The Mind Has No Sex*, 189-213. For a challenge to this narrative, see M. Stolberg, “A Woman Down to Her Bones: The Anatomy of Sexual Difference in the Sixteenth and Early Seventeenth Centuries,” *Isis* 94, no. 2 (June 2003): 274-299.

⁶⁶ Blumenbach, *Elements of Physiology*, 1:112.

⁶⁷ Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy* (First American Edition, 1794), 72.

larger and more widely-accessible discussion of how to effectively “read” female bodies for signs of women’s inner worth.⁶⁸

It may have been elite European intellectuals who crafted new methods for explaining human bodies in the post-Enlightenment era, but it was primarily by reading about physiognomy that Americans gained access to these ideas. Lavater not only read the work of eighteenth-century anatomists and physiologists; he also synthesized this material, simplifying and popularizing new beliefs about the female body for a general readership. In doing so, he transmitted scientific concepts to an expansive group of people that extended throughout the Atlantic world. From there, American periodicals, newspapers, and novels adopted and adapted physiognomic rhetoric, using it to debate women’s status in the early republic.

With the *Essays on Physiognomy*, Lavater provided readers with a practical template for evaluating women’s faces, bodies, and brains. His system was appealing because it promised his readers a unique skill, one they could not attain anywhere else: the ability to quickly, effectively, and empirically evaluate the appearances of friends, family members, and strangers. As people learned to read faces, Lavater promised, they would be able to discern the internal merit of others. Equipped with the knowledge and methodology of this new popular science, many Americans started thinking of women’s capacities for rational thought in terms of their physicality. Even as they insisted that women should be valued for the “beauties of the mind,” they never quite abandoned their infatuation with the “beauties of the body.”

⁶⁸ Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy* (First American Edition, 1794), 72.

Physiognomically Finding Republican Wives

During the late 1780s and the 1790s, Americans began using physiognomy to navigate the tortured relationship between female beauty and republican citizenship. Thomas Branagan, for instance, believed that the success of republicanism depended on men's ability to identify suitable marriage partners, and he imagined scientific facial analysis as a weapon that men could wield against "female policy." By scrutinizing women's faces for signs of virtue, men could avoid being matched with "tyrannical female beauties." Although Branagan disagreed with Lavater's contention that women were the intellectual inferiors of men, he was convinced by Lavater's instructions on how to find an honorable and appropriately submissive wife.⁶⁹ In the *Essays on Physiognomy*, Lavater had claimed that he could "with certainty say, that true pure physiognomical sensation, in respect to the female sex ... is the most effectual preservative against the degradation of ourselves or others."⁷⁰ Branagan agreed, writing, "I do solemnly declare, that I do not know any means more calculated to guard a modest, innocent, unsuspecting youth, from matrimonial misery ... than a competent knowledge of the science of physiognomy." If only men could learn to properly read women's visages, he asserted, they would be able to see past the wiles and affectations of coquettes.⁷¹

Branagan believed that no republican citizen should have to marry a "she fiend." Luckily, he insisted there were physical markers of proper femininity that were visible on every worthy woman's countenance. Lavater had written that a

⁶⁹ Branagan, *The Charms of Benevolence*, 120, 128.

⁷⁰ Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy* (First American Edition, 1794), 172.

⁷¹ Branagan, *The Charms of Benevolence*, 128.

“noble spotless maiden” would have a “large arched forehead,” in which “all the capacity of immeasurable intelligence which wisdom can communicate be visible.” Branagan paraphrased these words to describe his archetypal republican bride: “In her black, her brilliant, her smiling eyes may be read the candour and generosity of her heart, her large arched forehead, plainly denotes a capacious mind.” Lavater had similarly described the ideal woman as someone with “compressed but not frowning eyebrows,” which “speak an unexplored mind of understanding,” as well as a “gentle outlined or sharpened nose,” “pure and efficient lips” and “eyes, neither too open nor too close,” which “speak the soul that seeks a sisterly embrace.”⁷² Painting his own sketch of the perfect wife, Branagan likewise suggested that “her compressed eyebrows bespeak her understanding, her gentle outlined nose shews refined taste, her placid and pleasing lips point out the complacency and docility of her nature.” Branagan not only invoked physiognomic ideas; he also echoed the phrasing that people like Mason Locke Weems used to describe admirable women. All these writers hinted that if men wanted to achieve matrimonial bliss, they merely had to look for the anatomical identifiers of virtuous republican womanhood.⁷³

If facial analysis helped men identify wives of quality, it was also useful for unmasking malicious or coquettish women. A vain or frivolous individual might be

⁷² Branagan, *The Charms of Benevolence*, 123. For “she fiend,” see page 119. Lavater’s description of the “noble spotless maiden” was also copied into “A Friend to the Improvements,” *Medical Abstracts: On the Nature of Health, with Practical Observations; and the Laws of the Nervous and Fibrous Systems* (London: J. Johnson, 1797), 809. It was also reprinted in Robert John Thornton, *The Philosophy of Medicine: Or, Medical Extracts on the Nature of Health and Disease*, 4th edition (London: C. Whittingham, 1799), 48; “Danger of Sporting with the Affections,” *The New England Quarterly* 2, no. 1 (Boston), April-June 1802; and “Danger of Sporting with the Affections,” *Philadelphia Repository and Weekly Register* 3, no. 34, August 20, 1803. For Lavater’s description of the ideal woman, see *Essays on Physiognomy* (First American Edition, 1794), 174.

⁷³ Branagan, *The Charms of Benevolence*, 123. See also Weems, *The Lover’s Almanac*.

alluring at first, but physiognomic scrutiny could disclose her vicious interior. Quoting directly from Lavater's *Essays on Physiognomy*, Thomas Branagan beseeched America's men to avoid these sorts of women, who were identifiable by "their measured affectation of speech, the haughtiness of their eyes arrogantly overlooking misery and poverty, their authoritative nose, their languid unmeaning lips, relaxed by contempt, bitten by artifice and malice." To demonstrate his point, Branagan told his readers a cautionary tale: "Walking one day in the street, I inadvertently was struck with a most beautiful female countenance." After a first glance, Branagan found the woman attractive. On closer inspection, however, he "recognised the most prominent traits of boisterous irritability." The woman's "dictorial eyebrows, authoritative nose, arrogant and piercing eyes, the affectation of her measured steps, all conspired at once, to convince me she was a beautiful tyrant." Several months later, he encountered the same woman, who had since married an amiable young man. Sure enough, she eventually made her new husband so miserable that he took refuge in a tavern, descending into drunkenness and abdicating his responsibilities as a sober and respectable citizen.⁷⁴

Branagan's book purported to be about "*The Rights and Privileges of Republicanism*," but he ended up dedicating one-fourth of his work to the study of physiognomy and female beauty. This might initially surprise modern readers, but for Branagan—as for many of his contemporaries—the subjects of female beauty, republican politics, and facial analysis were all connected.⁷⁵ In Branagan's telling,

⁷⁴ Branagan, *The Charms of Benevolence*, 124-130.

⁷⁵ As the British historian Robyn Cooper has argued, female beauty cannot be separated from historical discussions of politics, power, and science because it is fundamentally "located within" these discourses. Robyn Cooper, "Victorian Discourses on Gender and Beauty," *Gender and History* 5, no. 1 (1993), 37.

men needed physiognomy if they wanted to forge stable marriages. Reading female faces was important, not simply because it disclosed women's characters, but also because it helped men pick suitable life partners. By shoring up the institution of marriage, physiognomy ensured the success of republicanism itself.

"You pretend to be captivated only with mind."

In December 1790, James Wilson delivered an address on a series of topics that he defined as critical to the success of the early American republic. Predictably, he addressed the topics of civic virtue, republican politics, and the legal education of the nation's citizens. As a prominent Supreme Court Justice and professor of law at the College of Philadelphia, Wilson's address attracted a crowd that included "a most judicious, brilliant, and respectable audience." In attendance were both the President and Vice President of the United States, the chief justice of the Supreme Court, members from both houses of Congress, and "many ladies and gentlemen of distinction," including influential Philadelphians such as Benjamin Rush and Edward Shippen.⁷⁶ Wilson first provided several remarks on the "illustrious" political structure and judicious legal system of the United States, and then called for Americans to turn their attention to the education of the nation's citizenry. But in the final sections of his speech, he turned his attention to a topic that was seemingly unrelated to his earlier remarks on politics, law, and education: women's beauty. As he soon made clear, Wilson saw the subjects of beauty, republican virtue, and female

⁷⁶ For comments on attendance, see "College of Philadelphia," *The Universal Asylum and Columbian Magazine*, December 15, 1790.

education as fundamentally intertwined and deeply important within the political sphere of the republic.⁷⁷

“Methinks,” declared Wilson, “I hear one of the female part of my audience exclaim—what is all this to us? We have heard much of societies, of states, of governments, of laws, and of a law education. Is everything made for your sex?” Answering his own rhetorical question, Wilson asserted that the female sex was in no way deficient in honesty, virtue, or wisdom. Yet he also reminded his audience “that a woman may be an able, without being an accomplished, female character.” Women, he insisted, should not attempt to be too “masculine,” nor should they become embroiled in the “management of public affairs.” These pursuits, after all, would invariably make them less “lovely.” Instead, he declared, “Female beauty is the expression of female virtue.” Despite calling for women to focus on their mental beauties, Wilson did not mean that women should cultivate their intellectual capacities in the same way as men. Women’s primary objective was not to attend academies or compete intellectually with their male counterparts. To the contrary, Wilson suggested that women pursue a plan of education that would allow them to both “shine” in the realm of “domestic society” and “protect and improve social life,” the foundation of a good system of government and law. They could do so, he asserted, not by pursuing the path of rigorous intellectual advancement, but rather by cultivating their beauty, both mental and physical.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ James Wilson, “Extract from the Introductory Lecture,” *The American Museum, or, Universal Magazine* 9, no. 1 (Philadelphia), January 1791, 21.

⁷⁸ Wilson, “Extract from the Introductory Lecture,” 22-23.

Wilson did not explicitly mention the science of physiognomy, but he employed its rhetoric when outlining his vision of proper republican womanhood. To Wilson, a woman's external loveliness could convey her inner virtue: "How beautiful and engaging are the features, the looks, and the gestures, while they disclose modesty sensibility, and every sweet and tender affection!" At the same time, Wilson urged Americans to look beyond women's corporeal attractions. "I know very well, that mere complexion and shape enter into the composition of beauty; but they form beauty of only a lower order. Separate them from animation—separate them from sensibility—separate them from virtue: what are they?" In Wilson's mind, virtue, morality, and intelligence were traits that could "enhance the value of beauty" and characteristics that were plainly visible upon the countenance of a beautiful woman.

Collapsing the distinction between women's physical allurements and their capacity for virtuous morality, Wilson triumphantly declared: "I have been giving a recipe for the improvement and preservation of female beauty; but I find, that I have, at the same time, been delivering instructions for the culture and refinement of female virtue."⁷⁹ Women, he argued, should serve as an ornament to society. They should educate their daughters and sons. Like the nation's men, they should exhibit modesty, grace, sensibility, and virtue. They should not, however, engage in the same political or educational pursuits as their male counterparts. Even though Wilson claimed that women were central to the system of education he had outlined in the earlier part of his lecture, he insisted that women's primary role in the new nation was to cultivate

⁷⁹ Wilson, "Extract from the Introductory Lecture," 24.

their beauty and strengthen their virtue in the process. Women, he believed, should participate in the republican project, but only as beautiful bystanders.

James Wilson was not alone in connecting women's internal characteristics with their physical features. Just as physiognomists asserted one could observe a man's capacity for civic virtue through an examination of his facial features, many writers and political thinkers affirmed that it was possible to determine a woman's inner character through an inspection of her beautiful form. As the *American Museum* asserted in 1789, "the beauties of the person excite our love, because they are connected, or (which is the same thing) because we think them connected, with the beauties of the mind."⁸⁰ In a similar way, the writer John Burton professed that "The countenance is the index of the Soul."⁸¹ Beauty and brains were not oppositional in this paradigm, because a beautiful mind imprinted itself upon a person's features.⁸²

Political thinkers, periodical editors, and portraitists alike began to insist that virtue and intelligence were physical characteristics that could be demonstrated through the countenance. They also acknowledged that "beauty" had different meanings for women and for men. Charles Willson Peale, for example, recognized that all people were concerned with how they looked in portraits. Yet he singled out his female sitters for being particularly concerned with their external attractiveness. He rebuked women for their vanity, telling them that "if they wish to be beautiful

⁸⁰ "The Visitant. No. VIII. Remarks on the Dress of the Ladies," *American Museum, or, Universal Magazine* 5, no. 1 (Philadelphia), January 1789.

⁸¹ Burton, *Lectures on Female Education and Manners*, 37.

⁸² One speaker at the New-York High-School for Females claimed that "intelligence" could "irradiate the form in which it dwelt," and hinted that women should cultivate their minds if they wished to appear pleasing to men. See "Address Delivered on the Opening of the New-York High-School for Females," *American Journal of Education* 1, no. 5 (Hartford), May 1826.

they must be good natured and kind.” This was not merely a vague admonition for persnickety women to behave respectably. Peale believed that if women were to “suffer ill natured passions to govern them, their features will be moulded into extreme homeliness, and all their charms will vanish, and disgust be their portion.” Because he assumed inner character and external appearance were connected—and because he trusted that visages could transform over time—Peale argued that women should first attend to their inner natures if they hoped to be physically appealing.⁸³

In 1790, the *Columbian Magazine* made a similar argument, asserting that true beauty was internal merit. Yet it was only through the external features that individuals could fully ascertain this moral excellence. “The outward form,” the article claimed, “like an instrument tuned in concord, presents to the eye and image of this internal harmony ... beauty is inseparable from virtue.” Like James Wilson, John Burton, and Charles Willson Peale, the *Columbian Magazine* urged men to look *beyond* women’s bodies. Ironically, though, by interweaving its laudations of the female mind with a discussion of women’s physicality, the author merely validated the importance of outer beauty. If anyone noticed these dissonances in physiognomic discourses, few commented on them directly.⁸⁴

One of the few writers to highlight the gendered discrepancies and contradictions in popular physiognomic analyses was Hannah More, one of Britain’s most influential authors. More was an international advocate of women’s higher

⁸³ Peale, “Typescript version of C.W. Peale Diaries, 1817-1818,” December 2, 1817, APS. David C. Ward argues that Peale was “aware that appearance and behavior not only reflected character but actually became character and personality. ... continually acting a role would transform one’s character, matching it to one’s appearance.” See Ward, *Art and Selfhood in the Early Republic*, 121.

⁸⁴ “On True Beauty,” *The Columbian Magazine* (Philadelphia), February 1790.

education who became enormously popular within the early American republic. Although she included detailed facial analyses in her books, she nonetheless challenged many of the assumptions that underwrote physiognomic logic. In *Coelebs In Search of a Wife*, More dedicated part of her novel to mocking men's discussions of women's moral, physical, and intellectual attributes.⁸⁵ Her story featured a hero named Charles, or "Coelebs," a single man looking for a life companion. The heroine was Lucilla Stanley. She was educated, modest, pious, and beautiful—the very paragon of proper womanhood. At one point in the story, Charles glimpses her during a conversation with his friend, Sir John Belfield. It was love at first sight. Quoting the poet, Mark Akenside, Charles declared that he had been captivated by Lucilla's "high expression of a *MIND*." To hear him tell it, it was Lucilla's character and intellect, not her physical features, that enamored him. After all, Charles sought a rational companion—a woman who was morally and mentally refined. Or so he said.⁸⁶

After listening to Charles' poetic proclamation, Sir John Belfield laughed and took a few lighthearted jabs at his friend. "'This is very fine,' he said, sarcastically; 'I admire all you young enthusiastic philosophers, with your intellectual refinement. You pretend to be captivated only with *mind*. I observe, however, that previous to your raptures, you always take care to get this mind lodged in a fair and youthful form.'"

As Sir John suggested, Charles was not entirely ingenuous when he insisted it was Lucilla's intelligence and virtue that attracted his admiration. Mesmerized by

⁸⁵ Hannah More, *Coelebs, In Search of a Wife: Comprehending Observations on Domestic Habits and Manners, Religion and Morals* (Philadelphia: Thomas and William Bradford, 1810).

⁸⁶ More, *Coelebs*, 104.

Lucilla's external loveliness, he determined he would marry her. Only later did he declare that her beautiful form reflected an intellectually engaging character.

Through this interchange, Hannah More raised several issues that confronted educated women in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: What mattered more: physical beauty or internal refinement? Were they one and the same? If appearances manifested one's character, then why did so many authors continually tell women that their personal charms were not only fleeting, but also a signal of their own vanity and frivolity? And if external beauty was truly unimportant, then why were so many people describing the best, most virtuous, and most intelligent women as the prettiest? These were questions that few early national Americans tried to answer explicitly. Instead of unambiguously declaring that women's minds were equal to the minds of men, many Americans instead decided it was easier to describe women beings with "beautiful" minds that could be observed in their attractive faces.

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Early national authors and political thinkers often denounced men who judged women on their physical features alone. Counselling readers to look past the physical form and into the beauties of the mind, they portrayed corporeal beauty as a dangerous distraction, a blinding chimera that obfuscated women's internal character with a dazzling display of alluring charms. At the same time, they envisaged female beauty as the visible display of women's capacity for both virtue and rational thought. In doing so, Americans developed a notion of female worth that could not be detached from women's physical nature—or from transatlantic discourses concerning the anatomy and physiology of women. Female intelligence thus became inseparable from female beauty. As such, it was not simply associated with positive features such

as virtue and morality; it was also entangled with beauty's negative aspects: vanity, superficiality, and misguided self-indulgence. This reality ensured that men could frame women's "mental beauty" as a trait that was not only distinct from—but also inferior to—male rationality and discernment.

In many ways, Americans used physiognomic interpretations of female beauty to undermine the women who clamored for educational parity with their male counterparts. Due to the intellectual upheavals of the Enlightenment, the political disruptions of the American Revolution, and the publication of controversial manifestos such as Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), many women brazenly demanded that men contemplate women's intellectual faculties. In turn, American printers, publishers, and political leaders acknowledged women's capacity for rational thought while also shrewdly tying their version of female intelligence back to their description of women's corporeal traits.

By ensuring that women's beauty and rationality remained interwoven, Americans granted women a form of mental competency without eroding the basis of male superiority within the new republic. In doing so, they promoted a diluted vision of female intelligence, one that was deeply imbricated with existing notions of feminine vanity, affectation, and vice. While elite and middling women were now able to make claims to intellectual competence, they remained unable to make claims to intellectual parity with their male counterparts. As a result, they also remained incapable of laying claim to the full rights of American citizenship.

Chapter 3: “Sex in the Features”

Gender, Physiognomy, and Beauty in Antebellum America

In 1844, *Godey's Lady's Book* published an article entitled “The True Rights of Woman,” written by the American journalist Park Benjamin. It was a condemnation of female participation in public life, paired with a broader commentary on the nature and social position of woman. In the opening paragraphs, Benjamin complained that changes were afoot in the antebellum gender order. He was especially irritated that Americans had been swayed by the arguments of Harriet Martineau—a British intellectual who had advocated for women’s legal and political rights. But Benjamin also knew that women were not alone in challenging female subordination. By the 1840s, it was “no new thing to hear men declaiming, in and out of legislative assemblies, in favour of the exercise by women of the elective franchise and all the glorious collateral privileges.” Uncomfortable with these developments, he addressed himself to the “ladies.” Who among them would be indecorous enough to “willingly assume the burthen of politics?” he asked. Answering his own question, he wrote, “I *hope* there are very few.”¹

Park Benjamin, like many of his contemporaries, believed that women might be influential in their “proper sphere,” despite being inferior to men in “their mental and physical constitution.” Where, then, was the “proper sphere of woman?” he asked rhetorically. “If you would exclude her from the arena of politics and deny her power to surpass or even equal man in the loftiest achievements of intellect, where will you place her? Where is the seat of her dominion?” Responding self-righteously, he

¹ Park Benjamin, “The True Rights of Woman,” *Godey's Lady's Book* 28 (New York), June 1844.

proclaimed: “My answer is—HOME!” Women should stay out of public life. They should focus on pleasing their husbands and raising their children. Domesticity was the province of women. Politics was the province of men.²

Park Benjamin published this statement on the “True Rights of Woman” at an important moment of transition in the United States. In the antebellum decades, both male and female authors argued that men and women should occupy “separate spheres,” with women wielding influence in the household and men controlling the public arena. Of course, ideologies like “separate spheres” or “true womanhood” were always rhetorical constructs, rather than accurate depictions of people’s daily experiences. The demarcation between public and private was never as secure as Americans like Park Benjamin might have wished. Working-class white women and women of color were rarely able to perform these constructed ideals of middle-class domesticity, and even elite and middle-class white women regularly engaged in public activism or paid labor beyond the household. Yet missives like Benjamin’s are important because they expose a concerted effort by white male intellectuals to exclude women from public life during the middle decades of the nineteenth century. The concept of “separate spheres” may not adequately describe the daily realities of all nineteenth-century women, but it nevertheless conveys a cultural ideal that many writers, physicians, and lawmakers strove to impose.³

² Benjamin, “The True Rights of Woman.”

³ On the rhetoric of “separate spheres” in the nineteenth century, see Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860,” *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (Summer 1966): 151-174; and Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: “Woman’s Sphere” in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977). More recently, scholars have begun to challenge the idea that nineteenth-century men and women truly were confined to separate spheres. See, for example, Linda K. Kerber, “Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman’s Place: The Rhetoric of Women’s History,” *Journal of American History* 75, no. 1 (June 1988): 9-39; Carol Lasser, “Beyond Separate Spheres: The Power of Public Opinion,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 21, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 115-123; and

As Americans extended suffrage rights to poor white men in the early decades of the nineteenth century, they found themselves grappling with a series of troubling questions: what qualifications did one need to have to be a full citizen within the United States? If poor white men could vote, then it was clear that property ownership no longer mattered. Perhaps all one needed was the ability to reason? But this logic only resulted in thornier conundrums. If the ability to think rationally and make responsible decisions was the primary prerequisite for American citizenship, then how could state legislatures justify their intention to block white women—and, for that matter, free people of color—from claiming suffrage? The answer that many of the nation's politicians settled on was both imperfect and insidious. To rationalize the continued subordination of white women and people of color, antebellum Americans invoked the explanatory power of science, using its apparent objectivity to depict subordinated groups as the mental, moral, and physical inferiors of white men.⁴

By the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, most scientists agreed that women's bodies were innately and incommensurably different than men's. Historians of the early national and antebellum decades have thus argued that

Cathy N. Davidson and Jessamyn Hatcher, eds., *No More Separate Spheres! A Next Wave American Studies Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002). There were also women who took part in formal politics during the nineteenth century. For one example, see Elizabeth Varon, "Tippecanoe and the Ladies, Too: White Women and Party Politics in Antebellum Virginia," *Journal of American History* 82 (September 1995): 494-521.

⁴ Lori D. Ginzburg has argued that antebellum politicians found themselves ensnared by "debates over who belonged and who had what rights" within the new republic. See Ginzburg, *Untidy Origins: A Story of Woman's Rights in Antebellum New York* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 28. For more on the expansion of democracy and the problems that ensued for racial and gender hierarchies, see Nancy Isenberg, *Sex and Citizenship in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); David Waldstreicher, "The Nationalization and Racialization of American Politics: Before, Beneath, and Between Parties, 1790-1840," in *Contesting Democracy: Substance and Structure in American Political History, 1775-2000*, ed., Byron E. Shafer and Anthony J. Badger (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2001); Rosemarie Zagarri, *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007); and Donald Ratcliffe, "The Right to Vote and the Rise of Democracy, 1787-1828," *Journal of the Early Republic* 33, no. 2 (Summer 2013): 219-254.

Americans relied on scientific theories of sexual essentialism to justify their commitment to ideologies such as female domesticity or separate spheres. Yet scholars often assume and assert that transformations in European scientific discourses held cultural and political salience for early Americans, rather than discerning precisely how people accessed and interpreted this literature. Rosemarie Zagarri, for instance, has suggested that Americans found ways to root women's inferiority in their bodies by appealing to new theories of essentialism. As they came to see women and men as incommensurable opposites, she argues, "the body became the basis for exclusion from the polity." John Wood Sweet has similarly contended that "new anatomical understandings of male and female bodies helped justify the exclusion of women across the country from the emerging public sphere," while Clare Lyons has argued that Americans found a way to "reconceptualize gender" in post-Enlightenment era "by positing radical differences between men and women and fixing them in the anatomical body."⁵

Few scholars, though, have explicitly traced the *process* by which transatlantic scientific discourses came to permeate American print culture, nor have they detailed

⁵ See Zagarri, *Revolutionary Backlash*, 184; Clare Lyons, *Sex Among the Rabble: An Intimate History of Gender and Power in the Age of Revolution, Philadelphia, 1730-1830* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 2; and John Wood Sweet, *Bodies Politic: Negotiating Race in the American North, 1730-1830* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 296. Bruce Burgett has also argued that "sexual dimorphism provided a justification for gender inequality" in the early republic, and Sheila Skemp has similarly contended that "On both sides of the Atlantic, many scholars were adopting an increasingly gendered language of scientific discourse to define women's nature, linking bodily and emotional traits to make a case for qualitative, immutable, and essential differences between men and women." She argues that these new scientific ideas provided "an intellectually defensible way to deny women any formal place in the political arena." Finally, Donald Ratcliffe argues that "the claim of women to vote" was ultimately undermined by "the gradual replacement of Enlightenment environmentalism by biological determinism." See Burgett, *Sentimental Bodies: Sex, Gender, and Citizenship in the Early Republic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 95; Skemp, *First Lady of Letters: Judith Sargent Murray and the Struggle for Female Independence* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 307; and Ratcliffe, "The Right to Vote and the Rise of Democracy," 246.

how public discussions of female bodies shaped women's status in early national and antebellum decades. How, for instance, did ordinary people access and internalize new ideas about human difference? What sorts of cultural meaning did Americans attach to the human body, and how did they use science to justify gender hierarchies? Where did these scientific ideas even come from? And which theories or scientific discourses proved most appealing to the broadest swath of the population?

This chapter answers those questions in two ways. First, it traces the genealogy of concepts like sexual essentialism and separate spheres, exploring their roots in transatlantic intellectual circles and interrogating the scientific theories that made those ideas seem defensible in the first place. Second, the chapter elucidates how people used science to “read” female bodies in the mid-nineteenth century, explaining how they deployed ideas about female beauty to construct, rationalize, and enforce gender hierarchies. It ultimately argues that physiognomy—along with its sister discipline, phrenology—functioned as tools that antebellum Americans used to interpret the mental and bodily differences between the sexes.

Americans had been using facial analysis to justify female intellectual inferiority since Lavater concocted his physiognomical system in the 1770s. But in the 1830s, something qualitatively different began happening. For one, writers began explicitly acknowledging that they were using scientific facial analysis as a response to women's public activism. During the early national decades, women had penetrated the realm of higher education and enlarged their presence in politics. By mid-century, female activists were joining abolitionist groups, organizing moral reform societies, and increasingly agitating for women's legal, political, and economic rights. As women made incursions into the public sphere, some male

intellectuals lamented that their treasured gender order was under assault by “female brawlers” and the “imprudent advocates of the rights of woman.” In response, they insisted that women’s mental inferiority needed to be exposed, explained, and enforced through scientific means.⁶

In physiognomy, they found a powerful weapon. By midcentury, both popular and scientific writers were asserting that men and women had unique physical characteristics that could be identified by careful observers. They argued, for instance, that women had rounder, fleshier faces with softer lines and fewer angles than male countenances. Men, they contended, had higher and broader foreheads than their female counterparts. This ensured that women would excel in “sensibility,” while men would dominate in mental pursuits. Using facial analysis, they argued that female bodies were particularly suited to motherhood, while men’s bodies prepared them for profound thought and public activism. By discussing and debating the female physiognomy in their magazines, newspapers, novels, and almanacs, antebellum Americans devised a workable system for evaluating women’s bodies through purportedly scientific means.

“The Imprudent Advocates of the Rights of Woman”

After the American Revolution, the nation’s political climate had shifted—and so, too, had the country’s conversations about women’s place within society. The

⁶ For “imprudent advocates of the rights of woman,” see Alexander Walker, *Woman: Physiologically Considered as to Mind, Morals, Marriage, Matrimonial Slavery, Infidelity, and Divorce* (New York: J. & H.G. Langley, Second Edition, 1840), 83. For “female brawlers,” see the “American Appendix” to Walker’s *Woman: Physiologically Considered*, 374. Hereafter, I have chosen to cite the second New York edition of 1840 unless otherwise noted. This edition is one of the most widely-accessible versions and is likely the edition most Americans were reading in the 1840s. For the first London edition, see Walker, *Woman, Physiologically Considered as to Mind, Morals, Marriage, Matrimonial Slavery, Infidelity and Divorce* (London: A.H. Baily and Co., 1839).

conflict had emboldened white middle-class and elite women to more confidently cultivate their public personas. Although few early national Americans argued that women should vote, a small group of “female politicians” unapologetically engaged in public discourse, regularly flaunting their political allegiances through their sartorial choices and published works. After the conflict, elite and middling women demanded—and often received—unprecedented access to higher education. Invoking and expanding upon their roles as republican wives and mothers, they established female literary societies, petitioned governmental bodies, spearheaded the creation of benevolent societies, founded and taught at female academies of their own, and regularly participated in public life as members of civil society.⁷

The character of women’s activism transformed even more strikingly in the 1830s, when contingents of women began affiliating with moral reform organizations, joining abolition and temperance societies, and in some cases, directly agitating for expanded legal and political rights for women. Women’s organizational activity had been widely accepted within society during the early American republic. But in the

⁷ As Mary Beth Norton has demonstrated, “the war necessarily broke down the barriers which seemed to insulate women from the realm of politics.” Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty’s Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1980), 297. For foundational scholarship on gender and politics in the early republic, see Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980); Jan Lewis, “The Republican Wife: Virtue and Seduction in the Early Republic,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (October 1987): 689-721; Rosemarie Zagarri, “The Rights of Man and Woman in Post-Revolutionary America,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 55, no. 2 (April 1998): 203-230; Susan Branson, *These Fiery Frenchified Dames: Women and Political Culture in Early National Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001); and Zagarri, *Revolutionary Backlash*. For the most influential scholarship on women’s education in the early republic, see Mary Kelley, *Learning to Stand and Speak: Women, Education, and Public Life in America’s Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Catherine Kerrison, *Claiming the Pen: Women and Intellectual Life in the Early American South* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006); Margaret Nash, *Women’s Education in the United States, 1780-1840* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Kim Tolley, *The Science Education of American Girls: A Historical Perspective* (New York: Routledge Falmer, 2003); and Lucia McMahon, *Mere Equals: The Paradox of Educated Women in the Early American Republic* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012).

1830s, women developed new forms of political activism, which were more directly focused on a sweeping reorganization of American society. These women joined Magdalen societies to rehabilitate prostitutes and expose the behavior of lascivious men. They launched assaults on drinking culture within the United States and sought to pass temperance laws within state legislatures. Many also became involved in abolitionism and moral reform, establishing powerful organizations like the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society in 1833 and the New York Female Moral Reform Society in 1834.⁸

These more radical reformers practiced what Anne Boylan has called a “new style of female politics.” In response, they often found themselves vilified within “respectable” circles. Female abolitionists attracted particularly vehement censure, as they not only challenged established gender norms, but also threatened racial hierarchies. When criticism of female reformers increased in the 1830s and 1840s, some women’s organizations preferred to more closely adhere to gender norms. As the Boston Female Asylum phrased it in 1840, they resolved to “sit quietly in our usefulness” rather than “place ourselves before the public.” By contrast, other women pursued bolder reform agendas, tackling policy matters that many Americans considered to be outside the purview of proper female activism.⁹

⁸ On women’s public activism in the antebellum era, see Nancy A. Hewitt, *Women’s Activism and Social Change: Rochester, New York, 1822-1872* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984); Ellen Carol DuBois, “Outgrowing the Compact of the Fathers: Equal Rights, Woman Suffrage, and the United States Constitution, 1820-1878,” *Journal of American History* 74, no. 3 (December 1987): 836-862; Judith Wellman, “Women’s Rights, Republicanism, and Revolutionary Rhetoric in Antebellum New York State,” *New York History* 69, no. 3 (July 1988): 352-384; Lori D. Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics, and Class in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990); and Anne M. Boylan, *The Origins of Women’s Activism: New York and Boston, 1797-1840* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

⁹ For “new style of female politics,” see Boylan, *The Origins of Women’s Activism*, 137 and 158. For “sit quietly in our usefulness,” see page 158.

During this same historical moment, some female reformers began fighting for increased legal and economic rights for women. Bolstered by limited support from male allies, these activists began pushing for married women's property laws in the 1830s. When the politician Thomas Herttell introduced a married women's property bill to the New York State Legislature in 1837, Sarah Josepha Hale, the editor of *Godey's Lady's Magazine*, threw her support behind the measure. Hale was no radical when it came to women's rights, but even she agreed that women deserved control over their own assets. She railed that American lawmakers currently practiced a "barbarous custom of wresting from a woman whatever she possesses" and then "conferring it all upon the man she marries." In her mind, coverture was an iniquitous legal reality in need of a remedy. Perhaps there might have been some justification for it in the past, she mused, but "in our Republic, where, it is pretended, the law is impartial, instituted to protect and secure equal justice to all, it is marvellous that the law in question has been allowed to disgrace the statute book." Despite garnering the support of this influential magazine editor, Herttell's bill failed. The cause of women's property rights, however, lived on.¹⁰

As female activists continued their assault on coverture, their calls for legal, political, and economic justice for women became even more strident in the late 1830s and 1840s. As one anonymous female writer complained in the *United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, the custom of coverture was "not only unjust, but

¹⁰ Sarah Josepha Hale, "Rights of Married Women," *Godey's Lady's Book* (New York), May 1837. On the fight for married women's property legislation in New York, see Norma Basch, "Equity vs. Equality: Emerging Concepts of Women's Political Status in the Age of Jackson," *Journal of the Early Republic* 3, no. 3 (Autumn 1983): 297-318. See also Isenberg, *Sex and Citizenship in Antebellum America*; Sara L. Zeigler, "Uniformity and Conformity: Regionalism and the Adjudication of the Married Women's Property Act," *Polity* 28, no. 4 (Summer, 1996): 467-495; and Wellman, "Women's Rights, Republicanism, and Revolutionary Rhetoric in Antebellum New York State."

iniquitous.”¹¹ After the Panic of 1837, many men began to find common cause with these female activists, envisioning married women’s property laws as a way of protecting family assets from seizure during economic crises. In most cases, their interests lay in economic self-preservation, rather than a sincere commitment to gender equity. Still, their backing led Mississippi to pass the first married women’s property act in 1839, with other states following in the 1840s and 1850s. With these victories under their belts, some female activists began more explicitly challenging women’s unequal legal, economic, and political status within the United States. By the time that Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton convened the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848, some of the nation’s more radical thinkers were demanding female suffrage.¹²

Already confronted with the specter of female moral reformers, abolitionists, and women’s rights activists, Americans were also facing what they saw as more ominous challenges to their established sex and gender conventions. Between the 1820s and 1830s, the European intellectual Frances Wright set out on an American speaking tour, which was primarily targeted at working-class listeners. In these public addresses, she denounced slavery, repudiated gendered inequities, and castigated the clergy. Wright pushed the bounds of acceptable feminine behavior through her willingness to speak about politics for mixed-sex audiences. Fearing her political radicalism and her alleged licentiousness, many Americans defamed Wright as a

¹¹ “The Legal Wrongs of Women,” *United States Magazine and Democratic Review* XIV, no. LXXI (New York), May 1844.

¹² Basch, “Equity vs. Equality,” 311-312. Suzanne D. Lebsack has argued that these laws often passed because men realized that their own financial futures were at risk, rather than because these men were truly committed to fighting for gender equity. See Lebsack, “Radical Reconstruction and the Property Rights of Southern Women,” *Journal of Southern History* 43 (May 1977), 197.

sexual libertine and demonized her as a “free lover” with “diabolical doctrines.”¹³

The *Western Recorder* was so threatened Wright that they dubbed her the “queen of prostitutes.”¹⁴ In the 1830s, she attracted such vicious condemnation that even radical abolitionists and women’s rights activists like Angelina Grimké worried about being improperly identified as “Fanny Wrightists.”¹⁵

Facing an apparent crisis in gender and sexual relations, elite and middle-class Americans began aggressively insisting that women’s proper “sphere” was in the home. Male politicians, writers, and scientists proclaimed that reproduction was every woman’s imperative, as well as the goal of any successful marriage. Women, too, championed these arguments—though they often failed to adhere to the gendered conventions they cooked up for public consumption. Catherine Beecher, for instance, published rousing defenses of a stark and hierarchical gender order, but she did so as a public intellectual. Meanwhile, Sarah Josepha Hale regularly encouraged women to pursue traditional marriage, motherhood, and higher education in tandem, despite

¹³ “Female Infidelity,” *Advocate of Moral Reform* (New York), August 1, 1836, quoted in Lori D. Ginzburg, “‘The Hearts of Your Readers Will Shudder’: Fanny Wright, Infidelity, and American Freethought,” *American Quarterly* 46, no. 2 (June 1994), 195.

¹⁴ “Frances Wright,” *Western Recorder* (Utica, NY), August 1830.

¹⁵ For the Grimké sisters’ fears of being labeled “Fanny Wrightists,” see Angelina Grimké, “Letter to Jane Smith, New York, December 17, 1836,” in *Women’s Rights Emerges with the Antislavery Movement: A Brief History with Documents*, ed., Kathryn Kish Sklar (Boston: St. Martin’s Press, 2000), 90; and Robert J. Connors, “Frances Wright: First Female Civic Rhetor in America,” *College English* 62, no. 1 (September 1999), 49. Carolyn Eastman has argued that by the mid-1830s, “when female abolitionists and reformers began delivering public addresses, they were attacked as ‘Fanny Wrightists’ simply for engaging in oratory.” To discredit Fanny Wright’s radicalism, the American press presented a “demonizing view of her as an ugly, boorish, masculine figure.” See Eastman, *A Nation of Speechifiers: Making an American Public after the Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 181. For more on Americans’ responses to Wright, see Ginzburg, “‘The Hearts of Your Readers Will Shudder’”; Gail Bederman, “Revisiting Nashoba: Slavery, Utopia, and Frances Wright in America, 1818-1826,” *American Literary History* 17, no. 3 (Autumn 2005): 438-459; Boylan, *The Origins of Women’s Activism*, 164; and Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004 [1984]), 176-183.

herself being a savvy businesswoman, the primary breadwinner for her family, and the influential editor of the United States' most famous women's magazine. In truth, few women were entirely confined to the domestic arena in the middle decades of the nineteenth century. But that did not stop moralists, politicians, popular writers, and physicians from reiterating that "woman" had a unique "nature," which required her to function as a loving wife and meritorious mother in society's private "sphere."¹⁶

"There is a Sex of Brain and Mind"

A gender order so simultaneously fragile and hegemonic needed a plausible intellectual underpinning. For that reason, many Americans turned to science, marshalling its supposed objectivity and empiricism to justify gender hierarchies. Beginning largely in the 1830s and 1840s, physiognomists, physicians, and popular writers became preoccupied with distinguishing between "female beauty" and "manly genius," and they began exploring the anatomy, appearance, character, education, and social position of "Woman."¹⁷ Their aim was to uncover the true "nature of woman"

¹⁶ For scholarship on Catharine Beecher, see Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Catharine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973). On Hale, see Nicole Tonkovich Hoffman, "Legacy Profile: Sarah Josepha Hale," *Legacy* 7, no. 2 (Fall 1990): 47-55; and Nina Baym, "Sarah Hale, Political Writer," in *Feminism and American Literary History: Essays* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 167-182. Lori Ginzburg has likewise commented on the fact that by the 1830s, most middle-class white women "adhered to an ideology that amplified their own silence; even their public speaking, which had caused little comment even a decade earlier, had become a measure of scandalous, even sinful, behavior." See Ginzburg, "The Hearts of Your Readers Will Shudder," 199.

¹⁷ See, for example, Joseph Turnley, *The Language of the Eye: As Indicative of Female Beauty, Manly Genius, and General Character* (London: Partridge and Co., 1856). As Robyn Cooper has argued, "From the latter half of the eighteenth century 'woman' had become a major preoccupation, predominantly, although by no means exclusively, for male minds." See Cooper, "Definition and Control: Alexander Walker's Trilogy on Woman," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 2, no. 3, Special Issue, Part 2: The State, Society, and the Regulation of Sexuality in Modern Europe (January 1992), 341.

through an exhaustive study of female bodies. Mapping rationalizations for gender hierarchies onto the human form, they mobilized physiognomic theories to craft a new vision of ideal womanhood. In the process, they created a conceptual paradigm that scientifically validated their preference for female subordination.

The question of women's mental capacity was always, at root, a political question. Americans' decision to expand suffrage rights to propertyless white men in the 1820s and 1830s had engendered a series of deliberations on the meaning of citizenship and the types of people who might rightfully lay claim to it. When the British sociologist Harriet Martineau published her evaluation of American society in 1837, she entered the debate in favor of women's rights: "One of the fundamental principles announced in the Declaration of Independence is, that governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed." According to Martineau, the "democratic principle" required "the equal political representation of all rational beings." If the primary qualification for citizenship in a representative government was an ability to reason, she explained, then how could "the political condition of women be reconciled with this?"¹⁸ Women's exclusion from the franchise might be justified, but only if it could be proven that they were not rational. How, then, might women's alleged mental deficiencies be verified? To answer that question, many Americans turned to science.¹⁹

In 1840, an editor identifying himself only as an "American Physician" attempted to discredit Harriet Martineau while simultaneously attacking the

¹⁸ Harriet Martineau, *Society in America* (London: Saunders and Otley, 1837), 199-200.

¹⁹ As Londa Schiebinger phrased it, "an appeal to natural rights could be countered only by the proof of natural inequalities." See Schiebinger, *The Mind Has No Sex? Women in the Origins of Modern Science* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 215.

freethinker Fanny Wright. Both were European intellectuals who fought against slavery and advocated for gender equity within the United States. For these reasons, the “American Physician” saw these women as dangerous threats to the existing societal order. He first concocted an idealized vision of a less contentious past. American women had been perfectly satisfied with their social position, at least “till Miss Martineau and Fanny Wright began their ominous croaking” in the 1820s and 1830s. He later identified his villains—and his timeline—with more precision: “We believe it was Miss Martineau, who, treading in the footsteps of Fanny Wright, first infected American women, to any extent, with this absurd notion in relation to the equality of the sexes.” After that, Martineau’s “echo” was apparently “taken up by Mrs. Angelica [sic] Grimke Weld, and her feminine associate, Miss Garrison, Editor of the Boston *Liberator*, who have kept the ball in motion.” In one breath, the “American Physician” lambasted public women as masculine and accused William Lloyd Garrison of effeminacy. Coupling freethinkers, women’s rights activists, and abolitionists together, he described a cohesive and menacing cabal of activists who threatened to upend racial and gender hierarchies in the United States.²⁰

The “American Physician” never disclosed his identity, but it seems clear that his self-identification as a medical professional was part of a larger effort to cloak his arguments for inequality under the mantle of scientific rationalism.²¹ He claimed that

²⁰ “American Physician,” “Appendix,” in Walker, *Woman: Physiologically Considered*, 373-375. Ronald J. Zboray and Mary Saracino Zboray have argued that antebellum Americans sometimes challenged the political platforms of various male activists by mocking them as feminine and using “gender slurs.” See Zboray and Zboray, “Gender Slurs in Boston’s Partisan Press during the 1840s,” *Journal of American Studies* 34, no. 3, Special Edition Part 1: Living in America: Recent and Contemporary Perspectives (December 2000): 413-446.

²¹ Historical sleuthing reveals only that this “American Physician” published with the press owned by the brothers James and Henry Grace Langley, who took over the editorship of the *United States Magazine and Democratic Review* between 1841 and 1845. The “American Physician” might

women's rights activists were publicly propagating a platform that had arisen from their "ignorance of the physiological differences of the sexes." As a "physician," he knew he was better qualified to understand female bodies than women themselves. "If woman had man's physical constitution," he reasoned, "then there would be some sense in talking of her equality of rights and condition; but till that time comes, legislation and civil society must go on under the antiquated notion, that *man is man, and woman is woman*." It was a woman's physical features, in other words, that disqualified her from citizenship.²²

If the ability to reason was the prerequisite for republican citizenship, then what did women's bodies have to do with their political status? According to the "American Physician," one's brain and physical form were not separate entities, but entangled states of being: "All must acknowledge the intimate connection between the mind and the body," he asserted. Although he did not think that the mind and soul were themselves material entities, he believed they were ethereal forces that visibly manifested themselves through the body and molded the features of the human countenance and cranium. The "American Physician" based this medical knowledge on the related disciplines of physiognomy and phrenology. Both disciplines were predicated on the notion that heads and faces reflected people's internal character.

truly have been a medical doctor—the Langley brothers collaborated with several physicians through their publishing company. Just as likely, though, he was no physician at all. Otherwise, why not declare his identity and capitalize on the scientific legitimacy it would have incurred? It seems more likely that this American editor was one of the brothers who operated J. & H.G Langley Press. As publishers, James and Henry Langley churned out books on history, political philosophy, and the nature of woman for New York readers. In the pages of the *United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, they advocated for universal white male suffrage. They did not advocate for similar political rights for women.

²² "American Physician," "Appendix," in Walker, *Woman: Physiologically Considered*, 375.

Using these sciences, he argued that there were clear physical disparities between the sexes, and that these “truths” would be obvious to any rational observer. These bodily distinctions, moreover, would prove that women and men were incommensurable beings with differently capable brains.²³

The “American Physician” may have been polemical, but he was not particularly creative. He never compiled his own treatise on the moral, mental, and physical distinctions between the sexes. Instead, he put his energy into republishing, annotating, and writing an American Preface and Appendix for the work of a Scottish intellectual named Alexander Walker—a man who became a best-selling author in the United States during the mid-nineteenth century. In the 1830s, Walker had set out to prove that women’s brains were inferior to men’s. Using a scientific analysis of female beauty, he tried to show that “there is a sex of brain and of mind.”²⁴ The “American Physician” then reprinted Walker’s works for American consumption during the 1840s. Despite living on separate continents, both men shared a sense of alarm at the increasingly radical tenor of women’s public activism in Britain and the United States. In response, they tried to scientifically substantiate women’s subordination to men.

Alexander Walker had previously published works on physiology, the nervous system, and male physiognomy, but the trilogy he published in the 1830s was specifically focused on the physical features of the female sex.²⁵ These volumes—

²³ “American Physician,” “Appendix,” in Walker, *Woman: Physiologically Considered*, 315-316.

²⁴ Walker, *Woman: Physiologically Considered*, 35 and 37.

²⁵ For the first editions of these works, see Alexander Walker, *Beauty: Illustrated Chiefly by an Analysis and Classification of Beauty in Woman* (London: Effingham Wilson, 1836); *Intermarriage: Or How and Why Beauty, Health, and Intellect Result from Certain Marriages, and*

entitled *Beauty* (1836), *Intermarriage* (1838), and *Woman* (1839)—were immensely popular throughout Europe and were particularly influential in the United States. As the “American Advertisement” at the beginning of *Beauty*’s New York edition claimed, Walker’s previous works had been so positively received by the American public that the publishers felt pressured to release Walker’s book on female beauty even sooner than they had wished. “To say that they have met with a favorable reception from the American public,” stated the advertisement, “would be but a very inadequate expression of the unprecedented success which has attended their publication.” *Intermarriage*, alone, would go through six editions in less than two years and *Woman* was “met with a sale scarcely less extensive.”²⁶ *Beauty* became even more popular than the other two works, going through at least twelve U.S. editions between 1840 and 1857. As an announcement in *The New-Yorker* stated,

Deformity, Disease, and Insanity from Others (London: John Churchill, 1838); and *Woman, Physiologically Considered as to Mind, Morals, Marriage, Matrimonial Slavery, Infidelity and Divorce* (London: A.H. Baily and Co., 1839). These works were republished numerous times, in both Great Britain and the United States. For more information about Walker’s publication history, see the Introduction to Alexander Walker, *Documents and Dates of Modern Discoveries in the Nervous System*, ed., Paul Cranfield (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Reprint Corporation, 1973), iii-xi. As Cranfield admits, though, his bibliography of Walker’s publication is “far from complete.”

²⁶ See the “American Advertisement,” in Alexander Walker, *Beauty; Illustrated Chiefly by an Analysis and Classification of Beauty in Woman* (New York: J. & H.G. Langley, 1841), v. I have been able to identify at least sixteen nineteenth-century editions of *Beauty*, published in both Great Britain and the United States: 1836 (London); 1840 (New York); 1841 (New York); 1844 (New York); 1845 (New York); 1846 (London); 1848 (Hartford); 1852 (New York); 1852 (London); 1854 (Hartford); 1857 (Cincinnati and New York); and 1892 (Glasgow). *Beauty* was also published as a condensed, 63-page version in New York City. See Alexander Walker, *The Book of Beauty: With Modes for Improving and Preserving it in Man and Woman* (New York: Holland and Glover, 1843). Robyn Cooper argues that there was also a “deluxe edition in 1851 with tinted plates and a gold-embossed leather binding.” In addition, *Beauty* was published within a larger three-volume collection by J. and H.G. Langley Press. See Walker, *The Anthropological Works of Alexander Walker* (New York: J. and H.G. Langley, 1843). A revised version of *Beauty* was similarly published in New York in 1856. See Walker, *Female Beauty: Being a Complete Analysis and Description of Every Part of Woman’s Form, and Showing Her Perfect Capacities for the Purposes of Love; Procreative Duties and Happiness* (New York: J.H. Farrell, 1856). Robyn Cooper argues that *Beauty* was Walker’s most popular volume in the United States. See Robyn Cooper, “Victorian Discourses on Gender and Beauty,” *Gender and History* 5, no. 1 (1993), 37; and “Definition and Control: Alexander Walker’s Trilogy on Woman,” *History of Sexuality* 2 (1992): 341-344.

Beauty was “not a volume calculated alone for the perusal of literary and scientific men, but may be read with profit and interest by all.” Walker’s volumes, the magazine claimed, had “created a sensation” in the United States.²⁷

Perhaps the appeal came in the dramatic way that Walker framed his subject. At stake in the study of women’s appearances was nothing less than the “happiness of individuals and the perpetual improvement of the human race.”²⁸ In his scientific works on the nature of “woman,” Alexander Walker claimed it was possible to analyze female attractiveness according to a set of scientific and universal standards. Beauty, he suggested, was not a socially constructed or culturally specific concept, but rather an objective reality—one that could be studied, measured, and defined by “the great truths of anatomy and physiology.”²⁹ According to Walker, it was important to study women’s bodies because corporeal traits were the physical manifestations of internal character. By “scientifically” analyzing facial features, he used physiognomy to support a simple premise: men and women were intrinsically different, and these differences could be seen in their faces, in their physiologies, and by extension, in their minds.

Walker contrived an elaborate classificatory system that allegedly allowed readers to interpret women’s minds by examining their countenances. He focused his attention almost exclusively on white women. In the rare occasions where he talked

²⁷ The *New-Yorker* claimed that Walker’s *Beauty* was “written with much force and elegance, and a perfect mastery of the subject discussed.” See “Review 1 – No Title,” *The New-Yorker* 10, no. 8, November 7, 1840. For more on Walker’s popular reception in the United States, see: Cooper, “Definition and Control,” 342-343.

²⁸ See “Advertisement,” in Walker, *Beauty*, 1.

²⁹ Walker, *Beauty*, 185.

about black women, he described them primarily as savages. He dubiously asserted that women in hot climates—such as Africa—could not exhibit legitimate beauty because they had overly developed sexual organs. By concocting artificial standards of attractiveness that could not encompass women of color, he limited his discussion to white women and described black female beauty as a concept so unfathomable that it was hardly worth discussing. As Londa Schiebinger has shown, white male intellectuals almost always focused their attention on black men and white women. “It was these two groups—and not African women—who were contenders for power,” and thus most immediately threatening.³⁰

Walker ultimately concluded that there were three main types of human beauty: locomotive, nutritive, and intellectual. Locomotive beauty could be seen in the limbs, nutritive beauty could be seen in women’s “vital” organs, and intellectual beauty could be seen primarily in their faces. Each of these types came with a corresponding set of facial features. Women characterized primarily by locomotive beauty had “bony and oblong” faces, “long and tapering” necks, relatively dark complexions, and equally dark, thick, and strong hair. These women were physically impressive, with muscular limbs and lithesome bodies that made them both agile and graceful (Fig. 3.1). By contrast, those who exemplified nutritive beauty had shorter necks, plump faces, “azure” eyes, and “soft and fine flaxen or auburn hair.” These women were superior childbearers. They were blessed with fleshy bodies, broad hips,

³⁰ Londa Schiebinger, “The Anatomy of Difference: Race and Sex in Eighteenth-Century Science,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 23, no. 4 (Summer, 1990), 389. For Walker’s comments on black female beauty, see Walker, *Beauty*, 174-175. Walker insisted the “uncivilized and ignorant inhabitants of hot climates” could not discern true beauty. This was the only way he could explain why African men seemed to value “the thick lips of Negresses, the long and pendent mammae of the women.”

voluptuous bosoms, and rounded features (Fig. 3.2). Finally, exemplars of intellectual beauty had heads with “a pyriform appearance,” oval faces, high and pale foreheads, expressive eyes, and countenances characterized by intellectuality, grace, modesty, and dignity. When beauty of the thinking system predominated in women, the face and head were the most prominent features. These women were exceptional for their mental distinction, but they lacked the rotundity, fleshiness, and buxom nature that characterized women of great nutritive beauty (Fig. 3.3).³¹

In Walker’s telling, beauty was a zero-sum game—superior marks in one category necessarily diminished attractiveness in the others. A woman might simultaneously exhibit intellectual, nutritive, and locomotive beauty, but one form of beauty would always prevail above the others. Because nature dictated that women should be mothers, Walker insisted that nutritive (or vital) beauty should predominate in all women. Exceptional women might sometimes exhibit intellectual beauty, but Walker argued that this form was “less proper to woman” than to man. Women who approached perfection in intellectual beauty not only resembled men too closely; they were also deficient in vital beauty. “As to intellectual ladies,” he wrote, “they either seldom become mothers, or they become intellectual when they cease to be mothers.” For this reason, he suggested that men look for wives with plenty of nutritive beauty, rather than those with the physiognomic signs of intellect.³²

Throughout his books, Walker included numerous engravings of naked female bodies, assuring his readers that these images were scientific and not salacious in

³¹ For Walker’s tripartite understanding of female beauty, see *Beauty*, 189-253.

³² Walker, *Beauty* (for “less proper to women,” 226; for “intellectual ladies,” 206).

nature. Responding to potential critics, Walker wrote: “some will tell us that the analysis of female beauty ... is indelicate.—I shall, on the contrary, show that decency demands this analysis; that the interests of nature, of truth, of the arts, and of morality, demand it.” After all, it was men who held the “power of selection” when forging sexual partnerships. How else would they learn to identify the forms of female beauty that would lead to the happiest and most beneficial marriages? Why would anyone seek to maintain standards of “artificial decency,” he asked, when they could instead cultivate “a critical judgment and a pure taste for beauty”?³³

³³ Walker, *Beauty*, 21-29.



Fig. 3.1 “Beauty of the Locomotive System,” in Alexander Walker, *Beauty: Illustrated Chiefly by an Analysis and Classification of Beauty in Woman*, Second Edition, Revised (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1846). In images of locomotive beauty, Walker highlighted the agility of the limbs and the litness of the body more generally. In this image, the woman holds her arms above her head. Her neck is thick and strong, and her limbs are both agile and muscular.



Fig. 3.2 “Beauty of the Nutritive System,” in Alexander Walker, *Beauty: Illustrated Chiefly by an Analysis and Classification of Beauty in Woman*, Second Edition, Revised (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1846). In images of vital or nutritive beauty, Walker highlighted the fleshiness of the body and the fullness of the bosom. In this image, in particular, he emphasized the width of the woman’s hips—a characteristic that he associated with the capacity for effective childbearing.



Fig. 3.3 “Beauty of the Thinking System,” in Alexander Walker, *Beauty: Illustrated Chiefly by an Analysis and Classification of Beauty in Woman*, Second Edition, Revised (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1846). When portraying women with intellectual beauty, Walker emphasized their high pale foreheads and pyriform countenances. “This species of beauty,” he argued, “is less proper to woman; —less feminine, than the preceding. It is not the intellectual system, but the vital one, which is, and ought to be most developed in woman.” When compared with women who exhibited nutritive beauty, he claimed that these “intellectual ladies” had proportionally larger heads, smaller bosoms, and a distressing lack of plumpness.

Walker intended his works on female beauty for popular audiences, but they also appealed to transatlantic scientists and physicians. He was, for instance, one of the primary intellectual influences on Robert Knox, the Scottish anatomist, physician, and ethnologist. In 1849, Knox wrote a letter to Walker, asserting that “No one has thought more clearly on the great physiological questions than you have.”³⁴ Walker also influenced the work of James McGrigor Allan, a British scientist and member of the Anthropological Society of London. In his scientific manifesto against women’s political rights, entitled “On the Real Differences in the Minds of Men and Women” (1869), Allan repeatedly cited Walker’s works on female beauty and physiology.³⁵ Even Charles Darwin felt Alexander Walker’s impact, both personally and intellectually. After reading Walker’s work on intermarriage, Darwin fretted in his private journal about whether it was a genetically safe decision to wed his first cousin (he decided to go for it). He then cited Walker in his work on sexual selection, *The Descent of Man* (1871).³⁶

³⁴ See Copy of Letter from Dr. Robert Knox to Alexander Walker, August 1848; and Alexander Walker to Sir Robert Peel, February 22, 1849, Peel Papers 40601, fols. 50, 51, British Library, Manuscript Room, quoted in Evelleen Richards, “The ‘Moral Anatomy’ of Robert Knox: The Interplay between Biological and Social Thought in Victorian Scientific Naturalism,” *Journal of the History of Biology* 22, no. 3 (Autumn 1989), 392n56.

³⁵ James McGrigor Allan, “On the Real Differences in the Minds of Men and Women,” *Journal of the Anthropological Society of London* 7 (1869), cciii, ccvi, ccix, and ccxix.

³⁶ In his reading notebook, Darwin wrote that he read Walker’s *Intermarriage* on June 30, 1839. Before tackling the book in its entirety, he had read a review of the book in the *British and Foreign Medical Review* on April 14, 1839. See Charles Darwin, *The Correspondence of Charles Darwin: 1847-1850*, ed., Frederick Burkhardt and Sydney Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 439, 457. Darwin’s copy of *Intermarriage* can be accessed at https://archive.org/details/Walker1838bp62N_MS. For secondary work on Charles Darwin’s reading of Alexander Walker, see Janet Browne, *Charles Darwin: The Power of Place* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 2002), 280; Adam Kuper, “Commentary: A Darwin Family Concern,” *International Journal of Epidemiology* 38 (2009), 1439; and Nancy Fix Anderson, “Cousin Marriage in Victorian England,” *Journal of Family History* 11, no. 3 (September 1986), 291-292.

Scholars have largely forgotten Walker today, but in the middle decades of the nineteenth century, his books appealed both to scientific thinkers and to middle-class readers who were interested in women's nature, rights, and social position. His trilogy on "Woman" was reviewed extensively in American magazines and medical journals, which included popular periodicals such as Philadelphia's *Journal of Belles Lettres*, Boston's *North American Review*, and Freeman Hunts' *Merchants' Magazine and Commercial Review* in New York City. His tripartite understanding of beauty served as the foundation for the work of popular American phrenologists. It also inspired John Bell's manual, *Health and Beauty* (1838), which provided American women with detailed instructions on how to be beautiful. Discussions of Walker's work likewise appeared in prominent medical periodicals such as the *New York Lancet*, the *New-England Journal of Medicine and Surgery*, and Philadelphia's *American Medical Intelligencer*. Walker himself contributed physiological articles to Providence's *Literary Journal and Weekly Register of Science and the Arts*, and to the *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal*. This latter publication changed its name to the *New England Journal of Medicine* in 1928. It is currently considered one of the most prestigious medical journals in the United States.

Alexander Walker's impact ultimately transcended the boundaries between popular and scientific culture—divisions that were already murky before physicians and scientists embarked upon a concerted effort to "professionalize" their disciplines in the latter decades of the nineteenth century. For elite and middle-class readers in the antebellum period, the meaning of "science" was both expansive and dynamic. Oftentimes, there were no stark or unambiguous divides between medical and scientific thought and popular knowledge about the human body. And, if Walker's

numerous engravings of naked women are any hint, the boundaries between pornography and science could likewise be provocatively ambiguous.³⁷

Walker's books ultimately appealed to anyone interested in studying the nature, sphere, and social position of the female sex—but they also spoke to readers who were unsettled by women's public activism and their calls for equal education with men. To those who suggested that women might play a role in politics, patriotic activities, or even philanthropy, Walker argued that these matters were “unsuited to the mind of woman.” In fact, the only women he thought eligible to run for political office were the least attractive ones: “an ugly woman might be harmless,” he conceded, but “a pretty one would certainly corrupt the whole legislation!” Since only the most beautiful—and, by extension, the most foolish—women would prove appealing enough to be elected, it was best to block women from politics all together. In these statements, he directly rejected Enlightenment beliefs in the intellectual equality of the sexes while also responding to transatlantic women's rights activists like Harriet Martineau, who had been agitating for expanded social, political, and economic rights. Arguing that the “organization” of the female body was simply different from that of the male body, he bemoaned that the “imprudent advocates of the rights of woman nevertheless contend for her right to legislate.” Walker feigned

³⁷ For work that explores the murky intermingling of popular and proper science in the nineteenth century, see James A. Secord, *Visions of Science: Books and Readers at the Dawn of the Victorian Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015); Britt Rusert, “Delaney's Comet: Fugitive Science and the Speculative Imaginary of Emancipation,” *American Quarterly* 65:4 (December 2013): 799-829; Katherine Pandora, “Popular Science in National and Transnational Perspective: Suggestions from the American Context,” *Isis* 100, no. 2 (June 2009): 346-358; and Peter McCandless, “Mesmerism and Phrenology in Antebellum Charleston: ‘Enough of the Marvellous,’” *The Journal of Southern History* 58, no. 2 (May, 1992): 199-230. For a foundational piece on the British context, see Anne Secord, “Science in the Pub: Artisan Botanists in Early Nineteenth-Century Lancashire,” *History of Science* 32, no. 3 (1994): 269-315.

befuddlement when presented with women who desired political representation. Didn't their beauty already give them enough sway over men? Nor did he see a problem with valuing women for attractiveness alone, particularly because he believed that external features revealed internal merit.³⁸

When the "American Physician" published Walker's work in the United States, he took Walker's argument about women in politics to its logical extreme. He wrote that "Mr. Walker has offered some physiological reasons why women cannot conveniently be legislators, judges, and generals;" but he also thought it "proper to suggest some additional thoughts on the subject."³⁹ Quoting the Reverend Mr. Winslow of Boston, he argued that women who "assume the place of public teachers," "form societies," "travel about from place to place as lecturers," and "assemble in conventions to discuss questions, pass resolutions, make speeches, and vote upon civil, political, moral, and religious matters" were stepping "beyond their measure" and developing "qualities of boldness, arrogance, rudeness, indelicacy, and the spirit of denunciation." The author was less harsh with prominent female authors such as Lydia Maria Child and Catharine Maria Sedgwick. He particularly admired Sedgwick because she had instructed young women to stop discussing the "rights of woman" and instead urged them to focus on peculiar rights and privileges they held as women. This made her more appealing to the "American Physician," who believed that women and men were simply "cast in a different mould."⁴⁰

³⁸ Walker, *Woman*, 82-83.

³⁹ "Appendix," in Walker, *Woman*, 373.

⁴⁰ Speaking of Catharine Maria Sedgwick, the author wrote: "It is clear, then, that Miss Sedgwick is no advocate for that equality of civil rights so much harped upon by others." By contrast, when describing Mary Wollstonecraft, he described her as a woman who was trying to "unsex her sex." See "Appendix," in Walker, *Woman*, 377-378.

In addition to direct attacks on public women, Walker's books betrayed more subtle fears about women who were abandoning their responsibilities as childrearers and wives. Walker insisted that women should be two things: beautiful companions and mothers. He first asserted that any woman who was "notorious for her mind" was also "in general frightfully ugly." The most beautiful women, he went on to argue, were almost invariably those of the most underdeveloped intellectual capacities. Yet since these individuals were also the loveliest and most pleasing creatures in humanity, they were also the most desirable. Why cultivate the female intellect when learned women could never be truly loveable? Walker also argued that women should focus, above all else, on "procreation, gestation, delivery, nursing and care of children." Women who dedicated too much attention to cultivating their brains, he cautioned, were shirking their social and biological duties. Besides, intellectual cultivation came at a costly price: "great fecundity of the brain in women usually accompanies sterility or disorder of the matrix." If women continued focusing too intently on public activism and higher education, they would ultimately abandon their sacred duty to bear and rear superior children.⁴¹

The childbearing patterns of white middling and elite women had, indeed, transformed between the 1790s and the 1840s. In the decades following the American Revolution, early national women began reevaluating their existing ideas about sex, pregnancy, and childbirth. Despite lacking contraceptive innovations or new medical discoveries, they found ways to assert independence over their own bodies by delaying marriage, regulating their sexual activity, prolonging periods of

⁴¹ Walker, *Woman*, 62-63.

breastfeeding, or using herbal remedies to end early pregnancies. Women had purposefully and dramatically decreased the sizes of their families by the mid-nineteenth century. While the typical American household contained about seven children in 1800, that number had decreased to five by 1850. The decline was even more precipitous in New England, where the average family size decreased by half between 1790 and 1840.⁴²

In the 1830s and 1840s, Americans also found themselves contending with a crop of freethinkers who challenged traditional ideas about sexual behavior. One of Fanny Wright's mentors, the freethinker Robert Dale Owen, published the United States' first birth control manual in 1831. The book scandalized white middle-class Protestant readers by proclaiming that Americans should embrace the pleasurable aspects of sex, rather than obsess over reproductive imperatives.⁴³ Just two years later, Charles Knowlton, a fellow freethinker and physician from Massachusetts, began disseminating his own sex manual to his medical patients. Knowlton's book included topics ranging from infertility and impotence to intercourse and conception. Even more provocatively, it provided women with detailed instructions on how to

⁴² For work on women's childrearing patterns in the early national and antebellum decades, see Susan E. Klepp, *Revolutionary Conceptions: Women, Fertility, & Family Limitation in America, 1760-1820* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 8. To show how dramatic this shift was, Klepp has demonstrated that delegates to the Second Continental Congress in 1776 had an average of 7.3 children, while delegates to the U.S. Constitutional Convention just nine years later had an average of 4.8 children (18-19). See also Gloria L. Main, "Rocking the Cradle: Downsizing the New England Family," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 37, no. 1 (Summer 2006): 35-58. Main contends that "the median size of completed families in the region halved for cohorts marrying between 1790 and 1840" (35).

⁴³ When speaking of sexual desire, Owen argued "that the pleasure derived from this instinct, independent of and totally distinct from its ultimate object, the reproduction of our race, is good, proper, worth securing and enjoying." In other words, he acknowledged that reproduction of the human species was the primary aim of sexual intercourse, but contended that sexual pleasure was an admirable aim in and of itself. See Robert Dale Owen, *Moral Physiology; or, A Brief and Plain Treatise on the Population Question* (New York: Wright and Owen, 1831), 17.

prevent pregnancy through spermicidal douching. Knowlton soon attracted the ire of his town's local minister and eventually found himself arraigned before the bar on charges of obscenity. For defying society's ideas about sex, marriage, and childbirth, he was slapped with a heavy fine and sentenced to three months of hard labor in a Massachusetts prison.⁴⁴

Many Americans were also disturbed by what they saw as a booming abortion business in the middle decades of the nineteenth century. The pages of their city newspapers were riddled with ads for pills, roots, and potions that would succeed in "bringing on the menses." Physicians and apothecaries unabashedly profited from women's unwanted pregnancies. Madame Restell, as one example, became the United States' most famous abortionist by printing advertisements for her "Female Monthly Pills." By the 1840s, she had offices in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia, as well as a sales team who traveled throughout the country peddling her wares. Racialized and class-based anxieties mounted as white middle-class Protestants worried that native-born Anglo-Saxon women were abandoning their maternal responsibilities and selfishly terminating their pregnancies. Meanwhile, they looked on in horror as Irish Catholics and other immigrants moved into their communities and started large families.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Charles Knowlton, *The Fruits of Philosophy: or The Private Companion of Young Married People* (New York: 1832). See also Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, ed., *Attitudes Toward Sex in Antebellum America: A Brief History with Documents* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 60-64.

⁴⁵ For the foundational history of abortion in America, see Leslie J. Reagan, *When Abortion Was a Crime: Women, Medicine, and Law in the United States, 1867-1973* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). On Madame Restell, see page 10. For examples of Restell's advertisements, see Horowitz, ed., *Attitudes Toward Sex in Antebellum America*, 124-125. For other works on the intersections of race, gender, and abortion in early America, see Nancy Leys Stepan, "Race and Gender: The Role of Analogy in Science," *Isis* 77, no. 2 (June 1986): 261-277; and Nicola Beisel and Tamara Kay, "Abortion, Race, and Gender in Nineteenth-Century America," *American Sociological Review* 69 (August 2004): 498-518. On the connection between Protestant, anti-Catholic activism and

Discomfited by the apparent disintegration of the racial, class, and gender norms in the 1830s and 1840s, American physicians, scientists, and writers responded by ideologically emphasizing the glories of Anglo-Saxon motherhood and limiting access to information on birth control. State legislatures, too, began legally enforcing the notion that motherhood was the aim of every white woman. Between the colonial period and the early national decades, abortion had been legal before the fetus “quickened” in a woman’s womb. That began to change in the middle decades of the nineteenth century. In 1821, Connecticut became first state to criminalize abortion, but other states began taking similar steps to enforce compulsory motherhood in the 1830s and 1840s. By the late 1850s, the American Medical Association had embarked upon an ultimately successful crusade to make all forms of abortion illegal throughout the United States.⁴⁶

It was within this cultural and political maelstrom that Alexander Walker’s works attained their greatest popularity and influence. In one sense, Walker was unique. No other English-speaking author had dedicated as much energy—or as many pages—to scientifically analyzing the beauty and physiognomy of the female sex. But Walker was not alone in his broader crusade to empirically interpret women’s minds

sexual politics, see Sandra Frink, “Women, the Family, and the Fate of the Nation in American Anti-Catholic Narratives, 1830-1860,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 18, no. 2 (May 2009): 237-264.

⁴⁶ For a useful exploration of abortion in the colonial period, see Cornelia Hughes Dayton, “Taking the Trade: Abortion and Gender Relations in an Eighteenth-Century New England Village,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 48, no. 1 (January 1991): 19-49. For the history of abortion in the antebellum United States, see R. Sauer, “Attitudes to Abortion in America, 1800-1973,” *Population Studies* 28, no. 1 (March 1974), 53-60; Richard S. Krannich, “Abortion in the United States: Past, Present, and Future Trends,” *Family Relations* 29, no. 3 (July 1980): 365-374; Beisel and Kay, “Abortion, Race, and Gender in Nineteenth-Century America,” 498; Thomas A. Crist, “Babies in the Privy: Prostitution, Infanticide, and Abortion in New York City’s Five Points District,” *Historical Archaeology* 39, no. 1 (2005): 19-46; Anthony M. Joseph, “The ‘Pennsylvania Model’: The Judicial Criminalization of Abortion in Pennsylvania, 1838-1850,” *The American Journal of Legal History* 49, no. 3 (July 2007): 284-320; and Reagan, *When Abortion Was A Crime*.

and bodies. He was just one thinker in a far more expansive intellectual project: a transatlantic effort by white male intellectuals to better understand the abstract category of “Woman.” As the art historian Robyn Cooper has contended, “Vast quantities of mental effort and textual toil were expended by philosophers, clergymen, men of science, and men of letters generally on the subject of woman—her nature, her role, her body, mind, and soul.” Within this intellectual milieu, Walker’s trilogy on female beauty shaped the thinking of popular authors and scientific thinkers alike.⁴⁷

In the end, one of Walker’s most consequential impacts was on an eccentric but enormously influential coterie of American phrenologists, spearheaded by the brothers Lorenzo and Orson Fowler, along with their business associates and extended family members. Between the 1840s and 1860s, the Fowlers would summarize and repurpose many of Walker’s arguments, disseminating his physiognomical ideas—alongside their own—to a broader popular audience. In the process, they provided Americans with scientific strategies for evaluating the minds, bodies, and social position of “Woman.”

“The Female Anatomy Settles the Question Absolutely”

Orson Fowler was one of the antebellum era’s most enthusiastic, influential, and well-known practitioners of facial and cranial analysis. He first set up a phrenological workshop in Philadelphia in 1838, where members of the extended Fowler family took turns examining people’s heads for a small fee. In their peculiar establishment, the Fowlers promised inquisitive visitors a method for better

⁴⁷ Cooper, “Definition and Control,” 341.

understanding the minds and bodies of both others and themselves. Although they closed their Philadelphia phrenological office in 1842, Orson Fowler and his brother Lorenzo quickly opened a “Repository of Curiosities” in New York City later that same year. By the mid-1840s, this phrenological workshop would rival P.T. Barnum’s museum as one of New York City’s most popular attractions.⁴⁸

Orson Fowler and his family were not just amateur scientists and savvy businesspeople; they were also successful publishers. In 1838, they began printing the *American Phrenological Journal and Miscellany*, a periodical that would stay in print until 1911. In addition to being the longest-lasting phrenological magazine in the world, it also proved more resilient than most other American periodicals during the nineteenth century. In their capacity as printers and editors, the Fowlers published an assorted mix of material, which included the works of luminaries such as Walt Whitman, Margaret Fuller, Edgar Allan Poe, and Susan B. Anthony. Their press also trafficked in self-help manuals and in cheap advice pamphlets. These leaflets targeted a popular audience and embraced a wide array of topics, with themes that ranged from love, sex, beauty, and marriage to fashion, gambling, and personal hygiene.⁴⁹

While physiognomists studied the human countenance to discern the character of individuals, phrenologists turned their attention to the bumps and cavities of the

⁴⁸ Madeleine B. Stern has argued that the Fowlers’ New York City shop “would attract almost as many visitors as Barnum’s Museum. . . . It would also form the background for some of the most colorful reform movements in the country.” See Stern, *Heads and Headlines: The Phrenological Fowlers* (Norman, O.K.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971), 32.

⁴⁹ For the publication history of the *American Phrenological Journal and Miscellany*, see Stern, *Heads and Headlines*, 26. Stern argues that by the 1850s, “Fowlers and Wells were manipulators not only of heads but of big business. Their publishing department, under Samuel Wells, claimed to have the largest mail-order list in the city” (84). For information on luminaries like Edgar Allan Poe and Walt Whitman, see chapters five and seven. On the publication of cheap pamphlets, almanacs, and self-help manuals, see chapter eight.

human skull. These two disciplines, though, were intimately interwoven. The Fowler family was especially fond of using both sciences together. In their 1845 almanac, they included a section entitled “Physiognomy Founded on Physiology and Phrenology,” where they proudly declared, “Indeed, the system of Physiognomy is *founded in Phrenology*.” Had they been more concerned with chronological accuracy, they would have reversed the order of that sentence. Lavater’s physiognomical system had, in fact, preceded the emergence of phrenology by almost three decades. In the United States, phrenology did not attain its peak popularity until the 1830s (well after physiognomy first enraptured the American public in the 1790s). Despite their desire to prove the superiority of phrenology, the Fowlers were also cognizant of the connections between the two sciences. “Neither, without the other,” they wrote. “*Both together*, complete our knowledge of human nature.”⁵⁰

Phrenology was predicated on the idea that self-reformation was both ideal and achievable. In the Fowler worldview, insanity and other forms of mental illness were curable, prisoners were capable of moral improvement, and American women

⁵⁰ Orson Squire Fowler and Lorenzo Niles Fowler, *The Phrenological Almanac, and Physiological Guide, for the Year of Our Lord 1845* (New York: O.S. Fowler, 1845), 30. The 1852 version of the *Illustrated Phrenological Almanac* similarly dedicated an entire section to “PHYSIOGNOMY.” The Fowlers argued that both disciplines were founded on similar principles, and that it was best to use them together. See Lorenzo Niles Fowler, *The Illustrated Phrenological Almanac for 1852* (New York: Fowlers and Wells, 1852), 11-12. The connections between physiognomy and phrenology are also evidenced by the fact that in the 1850s, the full title of the *American Phrenological Journal* was *The American Phrenological Journal—Devoted to Phrenology, Physiognomy, Human Nature; to Education, Biography (with Portraits), Mechanism, and the Natural Sciences*. For other examples of how Fowler presses melded physiognomy and phrenology in the nineteenth century, see Samuel R. Wells, *New Physiognomy: or, Signs of Character as Manifested through Temperament and External Forms, and Especially in “The Human Face Divine”* (New York: Fowler and Wells, 1866); Samuel R. Wells, *Outline of the Science of Man, According to Phrenology, Physiology, Physiognomy, and Psychology* (New York: S.R. Wells, 1871); *Heads and Faces, and How to Study Them: A Manual of Phrenology and Physiognomy for the People* (New York: Fowlers and Wells, 1885); and Lorenzo N. Fowler, *Revelations of the Face: A Study in Physiognomy* (New York: Fowler and Wells, 1895).

faced a myriad of social and political ills that needed to be remedied. For this reason, the Fowlers forged partnerships with mental health practitioners and prison reformers. They railed against tight-lacing, spoke of the wonders of the water cure, and advocated for the legitimacy of mesmerism and magnetism. They were invested citizens with eclectic interests—individuals who used popular sciences to engage in moral reform crusades while largely remaining on the outskirts of partisan politics.⁵¹

Between the 1830s and 1860s, the Fowler family provided the American public with a series of multifaceted, complex, and often contradictory visions of ideal womanhood. On the one hand, they printed op-eds supporting the “emancipation” of the female sex, even explicitly declaring their support for women’s rights conventions and the “noble-hearted women” who organized them. They similarly published articles in support of female education, as well as phrenological and physiognomical profiles that gushed about the superior brains of activists like Harriet Martineau, Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Amelia Bloomer. On the other hand, the Fowler family gave public lectures on the glories of female domesticity and ran dozens of articles with the variations of the same title: “Woman—Her Character, Influence, Sphere, and Consequent Duties and Education.” In almost all these pieces, they unequivocally declared that women—by their very nature—were suited for one aim and one aim alone: motherhood.⁵²

⁵¹ Stern, *Heads and Headlines*, chapter three.

⁵² On the cause of “noble-hearted women,” see “Miscellany. The Worcester Female Convention,” *American Phrenological Journal* 12, no. 9 (Philadelphia), September 1, 1850 [hereafter cited as *APJ*]. In 1844, the Fowlers started advertising a series of lectures on “Woman—Her Character, Sphere, and Influence.” In 1845, they began publishing regular columns on the “Nature” of woman. For a sampling of the Fowlers’ articles on woman’s rights conventions during the 1850s, see Mary, “Article XXVII. Woman and Reform,” *APJ* 12, no. 4, April 1, 1850; “Article LXVII. Reform in the Condition of Woman: The Spirit and Means By Which It Is to be Effected,” *APJ* 12, no. 10, October 1, 1850; Peggotty, “Woman’s Rights,” *APJ* 14, no. 4, October 1851; “Woman’s Rights Convention,” *APJ*

One article, published in the *American Phrenological Journal* in 1839, proclaimed that “maternal and domestic duties should be held out as the leading objects of female existence.”⁵³ Another piece from 1848 made this point even more explicit: “Everything in nature has but one PARAMOUNT function, and but one,” the author stated. What, then, was “woman’s one great destiny—her primitive end—her paramount office—her controlling function?” What, in other words, was the very “rationale of her being?” Answering these questions with great rhetorical flourish, the author wrote: “MATERNITY is the one destiny and function of woman—that alone for which she was created.” Connecting women’s roles as mothers to their bodies, the piece suggested that “All the female beauties and perfections” were centered upon woman’s “perfection as a child-bearer.” This reality ensured that “the most beautiful and perfect woman” was the best mother, “while those who are the least fitted for this end are, THEREFORE, the most homely.” To put it bluntly: women without strong baby-birthing bodies were not only imperfect; they were also unattractive.⁵⁴

14, no. 4, October 1851; “Mrs. E. Oakes Smith’s Lecture,” *APJ* 14, no. 5, November 1851; Anna, “Woman! Her Rights and Duties,” *APJ* 14, no. 6, December 1851; “An Acceptable Present,” *APJ* 14, no. 6, December 1851; “Woman’s Rights Convention,” *APJ* 15, no. 4, October 1852; “Woman’s Rights Convention,” *APJ* 17, no. 2, February 1853; “Miss Lucy Stone’s Lectures on Woman’s Rights,” *APJ* 17, no. 6, June 1853; “Woman’s Rights Convention,” *APJ* 18, no. 3, September 1853; “Woman’s Rights Convention,” *APJ* 19, no. 1, January 1854; “Works on Woman’s Rights,” *APJ* 19, no. 3, March 1854. For examples of positive phrenological profiles of female activists, see “Character and Biography of Amelia Bloomer: Biographical Sketch,” *APJ* 17, no. 3, March 1853; “Biography: Paulina Wright Davis,” *APJ* 17, no. 6, June 1853; “Biography: Elizabeth Oakes Smith,” *APJ* 18, no. 5, November 1853; “Grace Greenwood: A Portrait, Biography, and Phrenological Character,” *APJ* 19, no. 1, January 1854; “The Champions of Social Reform: Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony,” *APJ* 49, no. 3, March 1869. For secondary work on the intersections of gender and phrenology in the antebellum United States, see Carla Bittel, “Woman, Know Thyself: Producing and Using Phrenological Knowledge in 19th-Century America,” *Centaurus: An International Journal of the History of Science and its Cultural Aspects* 55, no. 2 (May 2013): 104-130.

⁵³ “Woman in Her Social and Domestic Character,” *APJ* 1, no. 9, June 1, 1839.

⁵⁴ “Article XLVII. Woman—Her Character, Influence, Sphere, and Consequent Duties, Education, and Improvement. Number X,” *APJ* 10, no. 8, August 1, 1848.

Male authors sometimes acknowledged that their conservative view of woman's "sphere" might be unpopular with female readers. Recall, for instance, that Park Benjamin styled himself a brazen protagonist for daring to offend the "ladies."⁵⁵ In a similar way, the "American Physician" had incredulously asked, "why do we hear the cry of injustice and oppression on the part of the other sex; of rights withheld,—privileges denied,—hardships endured,—justice refused?"⁵⁶ Orson Fowler added his voice to this chorus of flummoxed men, complaining that "woman will raise one general hue and cry against" the insistence on compulsory motherhood. "She will affirm that this detracts from her high ends and exalted capacities," he grumbled. But these women were merely letting their "prejudices" cloud their judgment. Nature should be the final "umpire" on the matter, and nature had already dictated woman's proper sphere. "The female anatomy," he asserted, "settles the question absolutely." Addressing himself directly to female readers, Fowler complained, "you wrongfully accuse me of lowering you." It was not "degrading" to describe women primarily as child bearers. "Voting, legislating, public speaking, swaying the destinies of nations, wearing crowns and diadems—all are trifles compared with bringing forth and bringing up superior children." Women did not need more power, for they already held the most powerful job of all.⁵⁷

The Fowlers were nothing if not contradictory. Their magazine advocated for

⁵⁵ Benjamin, "The True Rights of Woman."

⁵⁶ "American Preface," in Walker, *Woman*, xii.

⁵⁷ Orson Fowler first published these ideas in his magazine, but he later compiled them for a book-length work on maternity and reproduction. See "Article XLVII. Woman—Her Character, Influence, Sphere, and Consequent Duties, Education, and Improvement. Number X," *APJ* 10, no. 8, August 1, 1848; and Orson Squire Fowler, *Maternity: Or the Bearing and Nursing of Children, Including Female Education and Beauty* (New York: Fowler and Wells, 1853).

married women's property laws and female suffrage, while simultaneously insisting upon a relatively conservative understanding of women's position within the family and household. Despite these inconsistencies, they assured readers that physiognomy and phrenology would provide scientific justification for their seemingly antithetical visions of ideal womanhood. Even more importantly, they were determined to convey this knowledge to a broad popular audience—whether it was through cheap almanacs, periodical articles, or in person at their lectures or in phrenological workshops. Their missives on womanhood became especially important as phrenology attained its greatest popularity during the antebellum era. By the 1840s and 1850s, any literate American would have had access to phrenological theories. Novelists—who had already been using physiognomy as a form of character description—began to incorporate phrenological techniques in their works.⁵⁸ Portraitists and periodical editors did the same. Sarah Josepha Hale, for instance, published numerous articles on physiognomy and phrenology in the pages of the *Ladies' Magazine* and in *Godey's Lady's Book*. As a supporter of the discipline, she regularly recycled and

⁵⁸ On physiognomy in the early American novel, see Christopher Lukasik, *Discerning Characters: The Culture of Appearance in Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011). On phrenology in American popular culture, see Mark G. Schmeller, *Invisible Sovereign: Imagining Public Opinion from the Revolution to Reconstruction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016), 105-115. For the connections between phrenology and nineteenth-century literature, see Edward Hungerford, "Poe and Phrenology," *American Literature* 2, no. 3 (November 1930): 209-231; Hungerford, "Walt Whitman and His Chart of Bumps," *American Literature* 2, no. 4 (January 1931): 350-384; Alan Gribben, "Mark Twain, Phrenology and the 'Temperaments': A Study of Pseudoscientific Influence," *American Quarterly* 24, no. 1 (March 1972): 45-68; Nathaniel Mackey, "Phrenological Whitman," *Conjunctions* 29 (1997): 231-251; Kevin J. Hayes, "Poe, The Daguerreotype, and the Autobiographical Act," *Biography* 25, no. 3 (Summer 2002): 477-492; Shelley R. Block and Etta M. Madden, "Science in Catharine Maria Sedgwick's *Hope Leslie*," *Legacy* 20, no. 1/2, Special 20th Anniversary Double Issue (2003): 22-37; Mary A. Armstrong, "Reading a Head: 'Jane Eyre,' Phrenology, and the Homoerotics of Legibility," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 33, no. 1 (2005): 107-132; and Matthew Rebhorn, "Minding the Body: 'Benito Cereno' and Melville's Embodied Reading Practice," *Studies in the Novel* 41, no. 2 (Summer 2009): 157-177. On phrenology and portraiture, see Charles Colbert, *A Measure of Perfection: Phrenology and the Fine Arts in America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

reformulated its theories in her magazines and in her novels and short stories.⁵⁹

In addition to reading about facial and cranial analysis, people could also practice it. Those who lived in—or traveled to—New York and Philadelphia would have been able to explore the Fowlers' workshops. Rural residents could also get access to lectures by traveling phrenologists. If they were willing to pay for the privilege, they could even get their heads examined. For instance, in January 1842, a Massachusetts woman named Lucy Chase recorded going to a lecture where she watched her uncle get a phrenological reading. Later that month, she attended a second talk. In her diary, she wrote that the "lecture was as usual very interesting & as usual he examined heads." Whether in printed works or in public presentations, phrenology and physiognomy saturated American popular culture in the antebellum period. Much of this success depended on the Fowlers' financial and ideological support of these disciplines.⁶⁰

The Fowlers and their business associates regularly published articles and almanacs comparing the appearance and character of the sexes. This meant that ordinary Americans could take part in contemporary debates about women's nature, sphere, rights, and social position by reading about physiognomy and phrenology in their pamphlets, periodicals, and almanacs. The Fowlers ultimately did far more than

⁵⁹ See, for example, "The Doctrine of the Temperaments," *Ladies' Magazine* 2, no. 8 (Boston), August 1829; "What Good Will Phrenology Do the Ladies?" *Ladies' Magazine and Literary Gazette* 5, no. 10 (Boston), October 1832; "Phrenology Applied to Character," *Ladies' Magazine and Literary Gazette* 6, no. 6 (Boston), June 1, 1833; "Hints About Phrenology," *Ladies' Magazine and Literary Gazette* 6, no. 9 (Boston), September 1833; William Cutter, "Introversion: Or, Magical Readings of the Inner Man," *Godey's Lady's Book* 21 (New York), July 1840; "Feeling the Bumps.—Imitation Rather Large," *Godey's Lady's Book* 46 (New York), June 1853; and "Intellectual Endowments of Children," *Godey's Lady's Book* (New York), May 1854.

⁶⁰ See Papers of Lucy Chase, Folder 3 Diary fragments, 1841-1847, in Chase Family Papers, c. 1787-c. 1915, Mss. Boxes C, American Antiquarian Society [hereafter cited as AAS].

espouse generalities about women's "nature." They also strategically deployed the arguments of transatlantic anatomists, physiologists, and physiognomists—white men who had spent decades trying to distinguish between the skulls, brains, and foreheads of men and women. Through the Fowler press, a broad readership thus gained access to transatlantic debates about sexual difference and the human brain.

Since the mid-eighteenth century, transatlantic scientists had argued that women were superior to men in "perception" and "sensibility" while men were superior in "reason." One of the prevailing theories in European medical literature was that women's nervous "fibers" were more elongated, more impressionable, and softer than men's. In the *Essays on Physiognomy*, Lavater had suggested that women were more "flexible," "elastic," and "irritable" than their male counterparts because of the "light texture of their fibres and organs." He used this point to conclude: "The female thinks not profoundly; profound thought is the power of the man. Women feel more. Sensibility is the power of the woman." Building on similar logic, European scientists regularly argued that women were feelers while men were thinkers.⁶¹

Physiognomists found "evidence" for these theories in people's foreheads. They not only argued that women's fibers were more delicate (and thus, unsuited to serious study), but they also suggested that the shape of their skulls exacerbated the problem. In both Europe and the United States, physiognomists argued that women had high—but narrow—foreheads. High foreheads supposedly signaled women's

⁶¹ For an American interpretation of Lavater's theory, see "Characteristic Differences of the Male and Female of the Human Species," *New York Magazine*, June 1790. For a discussion of gendered interpretations of "sensibility" and how these ideas connected to eighteenth-century theories about the human nervous system, see Sarah Knott, *Sensibility and the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), especially chapter 2.

superior perceptive abilities. This explained their ability to be quick thinkers and witty conversationalists. But physiognomists also claimed that broad foreheads were essential for profound and prolonged contemplation. Alexander Walker, for instance, argued that men's nervous sensations moved "more slowly and permanently" through their brains, because their heads were broader and wider. As a result, men's passions and emotions were somewhat weaker, but also more permanent than women's. Even though he associated high foreheads with imagination and a facility for poetry, he paired broad foreheads with mechanical and mathematical ability. This rationale supposedly explained why elite and middle-class white women could pick up and process material easily, but could not seem to dedicate themselves to rigorous contemplation over sustained intervals. For these more intense mental deliberations, they apparently needed broader brows.⁶²

The consensus seemed to be that women had greater "intensity" of thought, but less "permanence." When an idea or sensation hit a woman's brain, her flexible "fibers" would vibrate quickly and intensely through her narrow forehead, producing a brilliant exertion of mental energy. But, just as quickly as the sensation appeared, it would vanish, causing women to be capricious and easily distracted. Women's impulsive unpredictability, to be sure, resulted from the shape of their foreheads, brains, and skulls, as well as from the delicate texture of the filaments in their nervous system. Never mind that women were largely blocked from the highest echelons of

⁶² See Alexander Walker, *Physiognomy, Founded on Physiology, and Applied to Various Countries, Professions, and Individuals* (London: 1834), 64.

the educational system and afforded different opportunities than their male peers.

Clearly, it was their narrow foreheads and flexible brain fibers holding them back.⁶³

In the pages of the Fowlers' magazines and pamphlets, readers could access simplified versions of these more elaborate transatlantic theories about the "nature" of the female brain. Lorenzo Fowler's discussion of the "Difference Between the Sexes," for instance, built on the forehead doctrines of the physiognomists, as well as on the ideas of eighteenth-century anatomists and physiologists. It did not, however, overwhelm readers with extraneous details. It simply stated that the female head was "narrower" while the male head was "broader from ear to ear." The authors also clarified that the "male has a higher and deeper forehead," meaning that "the male sex possess stronger intellect," while "the female sex have stronger feelings and moral sentiments." Phrenologists then added their own supplementary insights to these longstanding theories about women's brains. They argued, for instance, that the back portion of the skull indicated one's parenting abilities. Women who had large and protruding back-heads were sure to be good mothers. But if this region of their skull was underdeveloped, they were likely to flounder as parents. Phrenologists referred to this trait as "philoprogenitiveness" (the love of progeny), and they argued that it was visible in people's craniums.

⁶³ Samuel Roberts Wells, *New Physiognomy: Or, Signs of Character as Manifested Through Temperament* (New York: Fowler and Wells, 1866), 113.

It is also narrower laterally, and the basilar and frontal regions are proportionally smaller. The occipital region is elongated, the organs of Parental Love, Friendship, Love of Home, and Love of Approbation being relatively large. In the male head there is a relatively larger development of the base of the brain, as well as of the superior frontal region. In the



Fig. 119.—FEMALE HEAD.

coronal region—the seat of the spiritual sentiments—woman has relatively a fuller development than man. Alex. Walker remarks, that the female skull seems in



Fig. 120.—MALE HEAD.

general narrower than that of the male; and hence (length giving intensity and breadth permanence), all her mental operations, though more intense and brilliant during their continuance, have, on the same principles, less of permanence.

Fig. 3.4. “Man and Woman: Physiognomical Distinctions,” in Samuel Roberts Wells, *New Physiognomy: Or, Signs of Character as Manifested Through Temperament* (New York: Fowler and Wells, 1866). Building on the ideas of the physiognomists, phrenologists like Samuel Wells argued that women’s features were rounder and smoother than the features of men, who tended to have more angular and well-defined faces. This image, for instance, portrays a man with thick eyebrows and a sharply defined jaw and chin, while the woman has a rounded chin with more subtle features. Wells also argued that women had narrower foreheads, which led to “mental operations” that were “more intense and brilliant,” but also more fleeting than men’s (113).

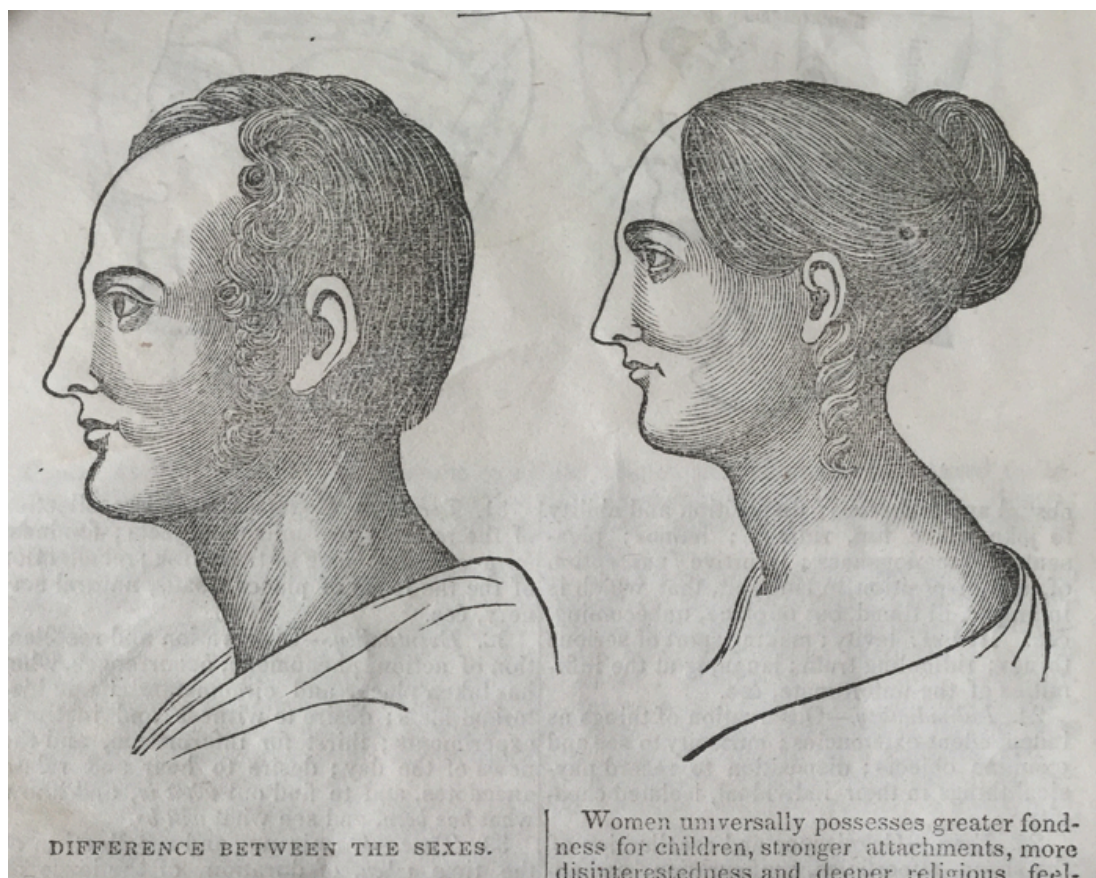


Fig. 3.5. “Difference Between the Sexes,” in Lorenzo Niles Fowler, *The Phrenological Almanac for 1841* (New York: W.J. Spence, 1840), Library Company of Philadelphia. Fowler wrote that these images were “designed to illustrate the difference between the heads of the two sexes.” In this image, the woman demonstrates a protruding backhead, accentuated by her hair, which is gathered into a bun. Phrenologists regularly argued that the posterior portions of women’s heads were more developed than men’s, because that part of the brain was where the organ of “philoprogenitiveness” resided (the love of children). Fowler also portrayed the man with “a higher and deeper forehead, as well as a broader and larger backhead,” which was intended to signify his “stronger intellect and propensities” (8).

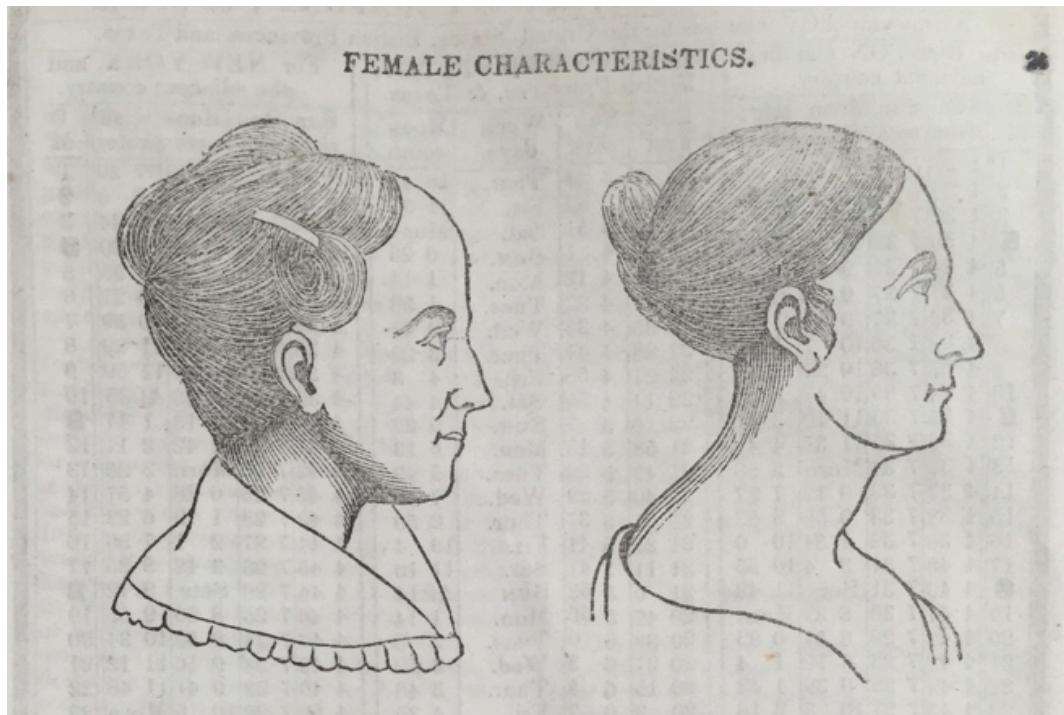


Fig. 3.6. “Female Characteristics,” in Lorenzo Niles Fowler, *The Phrenological Almanac for 1841* (New York: W.J. Spence, 1840), Library Company of Philadelphia. In the text that accompanied this image, Fowler compared two women. The woman on the left supposedly exhibited an intellectual temperament, while the woman on the right was characterized by a vital temperament. Fowler signified intellect with a large, well-developed, and projecting forehead, as well as more sharply-defined features (left). He signified a propensity for domesticity with a substantial protrusion in the posterior portion of the skull (right). The woman on the left, Fowler argued, “will be disposed to devote most of her time and attention to books, to the neglect of domestic duties and social relations.” The woman on the right, by contrast, would “manifest the strongest attachments for children and friends” and would relish her role as “a companion, wife and mother” (25).

Americans gained access to these phrenological theories about sexual difference through print, but also by attending phrenological lectures. Toward the end of Orson Fowler’s visit to Massachusetts, Lucy Chase decided to get her head examined. Fowler took this as an opportunity to chide her for dedicating too much time to intellectual pursuits. As Chase recorded in her diary, “he told me that I must not study, that my brain is too large, that my physical strength was much inferior to my mental, that, I much labor & I shall be obliged to lay aside entirely my course of study, & try to be a character that it has always been unpleasant to me to contemplate,

a very common character.” Later in her diary, she recalled and resented these phrenological findings. Somewhat sarcastically, she noted, “I took Lucy Hind’s place in the kitchen today—I presume Fowler would say that is the place for me.” As her experience demonstrates, phrenologists did not stop at proposing gender ideologies in published works; they also enforced these ideas through direct and personal conversations with American women.⁶⁴

Between the 1850s and the 1860s, the Fowler presses continued printing about female bodies and contemplating the significance of sexual difference for society. They also invested new energy into revitalizing the discipline of physiognomy. Two men, especially, spearheaded this mid-century reinvigoration of facial analysis: Samuel Wells (who was the brother-in-law of Orson and Lorenzo Fowler) and Daniel Jacques (one of their business partners and a fellow publisher). Wells and Jacques both constructed physiognomical systems for interpreting human skulls, faces, and bodies. They believed that Walker’s theories were especially important and quoted liberally from his works in their own books, pamphlets, and magazines. Walker had rejected phrenology in favor of physiognomy—a slight that Wells and Jacques often resented—but they nonetheless believed that both disciplines could be used together.

Both Wells and Jacques adopted Walker’s methodologies for “reading” the human body. Wells, for instance, dedicated a full section of his book on physiognomy to “Alexander Walker’s System.” In a similar way, Daniel Jacques outlined and synthesized Walker’s tripartite model of human beauty for curious readers. Both Jacques and Wells used an expansive definition of physiognomy, seeing it as the study of the human body more generally. They argued, moreover, that people could

⁶⁴ Papers of Lucy Chase, Folder 3 Diary fragments, 1841-1847, AAS.

use physiognomy to discern the differences between men and women. Believing that the mind and the body were intimately connected, both men dedicated significant attention to female beauty in their publications, using it to analyze women's mental and moral peculiarities.⁶⁵

Wells and Jacques drew a few major distinctions between male and female forms. Building on Walker's understanding of the human body, they argued that most women were characterized by the vital temperament, while men exhibited more of the motive apparatus. This meant that men tended to be bigger in general, with broad shoulders and proportionately smaller hips. Women, by contrast, had large pelvises, which were necessary for childbirth. If most men had muscular, powerful frames, then most women were characterized "by bending and varied lines, gracefully rounded limbs, smooth surfaces and elasticity, indicative of delicacy and grace." Physical traits like these were important because they translated to moral and intellectual characteristics. Women, for instance, tended to be enthusiastic and impulsive. According to Wells, women had "more elasticity than firmness, more diligence than persistence, more brilliancy than depth." Through such assertions, Jacques and Wells used the physiognomical theories of both Lavater and Walker to craft a gendered vision of the human mind. Women were brilliant—but not profound—thinkers. They were easily influenced by their emotions, a reality that made them both fickle and flighty.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ The Fowlers had taken over publication of the *Water-Cure Journal* in 1848. Madeleine Stern argues that "in little more than a year," the Fowlers had "increased its circulation from one thousand to twenty thousand." She argues that by the 1850s, the Fowler and Wells company constituted a "small empire" in antebellum publishing. See Stern, *Heads and Headlines*, 51.

⁶⁶ Wells, *New Physiognomy*, 111-113; and Daniel Jacques, "Hints Toward Physical Perfection; Or, How to Acquire and Retain Beauty, Grace, and Strength, and Secure Long Life and

Both Jacques and Wells used physiognomic analysis to suggest that women's bodies were better suited to motherhood than mental distinction. They did not, however, deny that some women were capable of intellectual beauty. Intelligent women, they argued, tended to have "relatively large" heads with "a pyriform appearance." Describing individuals with the mental temperament, Jacques wrote, "The face is generally oval; the forehead high and pale; the features delicate and finely chiseled; the eye bright and expressive." In these women, "the brain and the nervous system are active, the thoughts quick, the senses acute, and the imagination lively and brilliant." Although characteristics like quick thinking and imaginative creativity might initially seem like positive traits, Jacques also lamented that there was "at the present day, and in this country, an excessive and morbid development of this temperament, especially among women." He reiterated that the intellectual temperament would never be as "proper" to women as the vital one, no matter how beautiful it might appear on the surface. Taken together, both Daniel Jacques and Samuel Wells allowed for the possibility of women's mental distinction, while also suggesting it was, in some way, antithetical to feminine nature.⁶⁷

Continued Youthfulness," *The Water-Cure Journal* 24, no. 1 (New York), July 1857. For Lavater's articulation of these ideas, see the *Essays on Physiognomy*, 3:205.

⁶⁷ Jacques, "Hints Toward Physical Perfection



Fig. 3.7. “The Vital Temperament,” in Daniel Harrison Jacques, “Hints Toward Physical Perfection: How to Acquire Beauty, Grace, and Strength, and Secure Long Life and Continued Youthfulness,” *The Water-Cure Journal* 24, no. 1 (New York), July 1857. Jacques built on Alexander Walker’s physiognomical theories to describe women with the vital (or nutritive) temperament. He wrote that these women—exemplified in the figure of “Vitalia” (above)—tended to have round faces, flaxen hair, plump figures, and large bosoms. Jacques argued that “Vitalia” was characterized by “rotundity or plumpness,” both in her body and her countenance. Her complexion was “florid,” her eyes blue, and her “hair soft, light, and abundant.” Women of the vital temperament excelled at “gestation and parturition.” Mentally, they were characterized by “impulsiveness, enthusiasm, versatility, and sometimes by fickleness.” Although these women were easily excited, they had “more brilliancy than depth” in their mental operations (4).

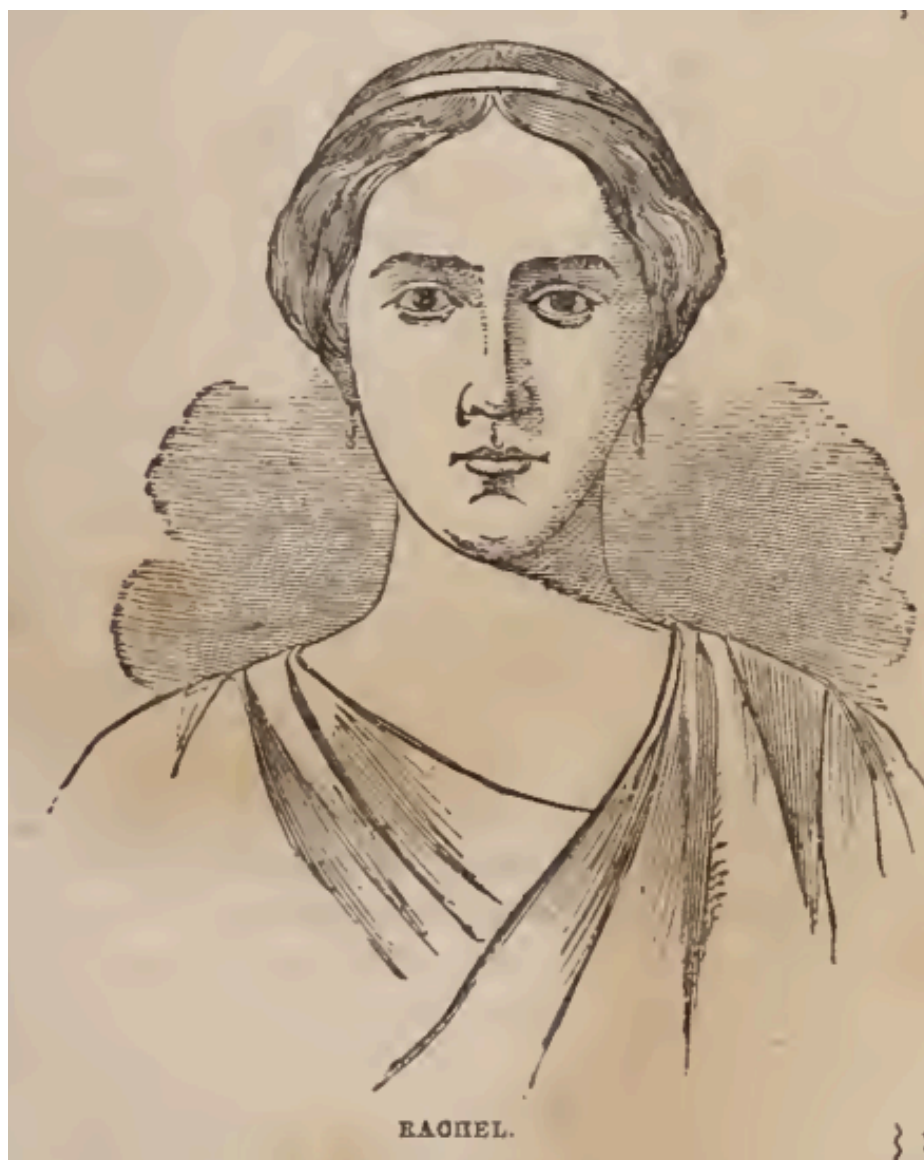


Fig. 3.8. “The Mental Temperament,” in Daniel Harrison Jacques, “Hints Toward Physical Perfection: How to Acquire Beauty, Grace, and Strength, and Secure Long Life and Continued Youthfulness,” *The Water-Cure Journal* 24, no. 1 (New York), July 1857. Jacques portrayed “Rachel” as a woman characterized by the mental temperament. As demonstrated in the image above, such women would have a “slight frame, and a head relatively large and of a pyriform appearance. The face is generally oval; the forehead high and pale, the features delicate and finely chiseled; the eye bright and expressive.” Physiognomically, these traits conveyed an “active” brain and nervous system, “acute” senses, the ability to think quickly, and a “lively” and “brilliant” imagination. Like Alexander Walker, Daniel Jacques argued that the intellectual temperament was “less proper” in women than it was in men (5).

Roundness prevails in her, angularity in him. She has more of the vital system, with its cellular tissues; he more of the motive apparatus, with its muscular fibers.* In each, form corresponds with function in perfect accordance with the law of adaptation stated in our first chapter.

SEX IN THE FEATURES.

In the features, the same law prevails as in the general form of the body. Those of the male are more strongly marked, and there is a closer approach to the straight line than in those of the female. The accompanying outlines of the profiles of a brother and a sister of the same temperament and analogous configuration (fig. 118) will illustrate this remark. Here we have the same style of face in both, but while one is decidedly masculine the other is as unmistakably feminine. The difference will be seen to lie mainly in the greater *roundness* of the latter.



Fig. 118.—PROFILES.

Fig. 3.9. “Sex in the Features,” in Samuel Roberts Wells, *New Physiognomy: Or, Signs of Character as Manifested Through Temperament* (New York: Fowler and Wells, 1866). This image portrays the women with more rounded features. The man’s face is “more strongly marked,” with straighter, less undulating lines.

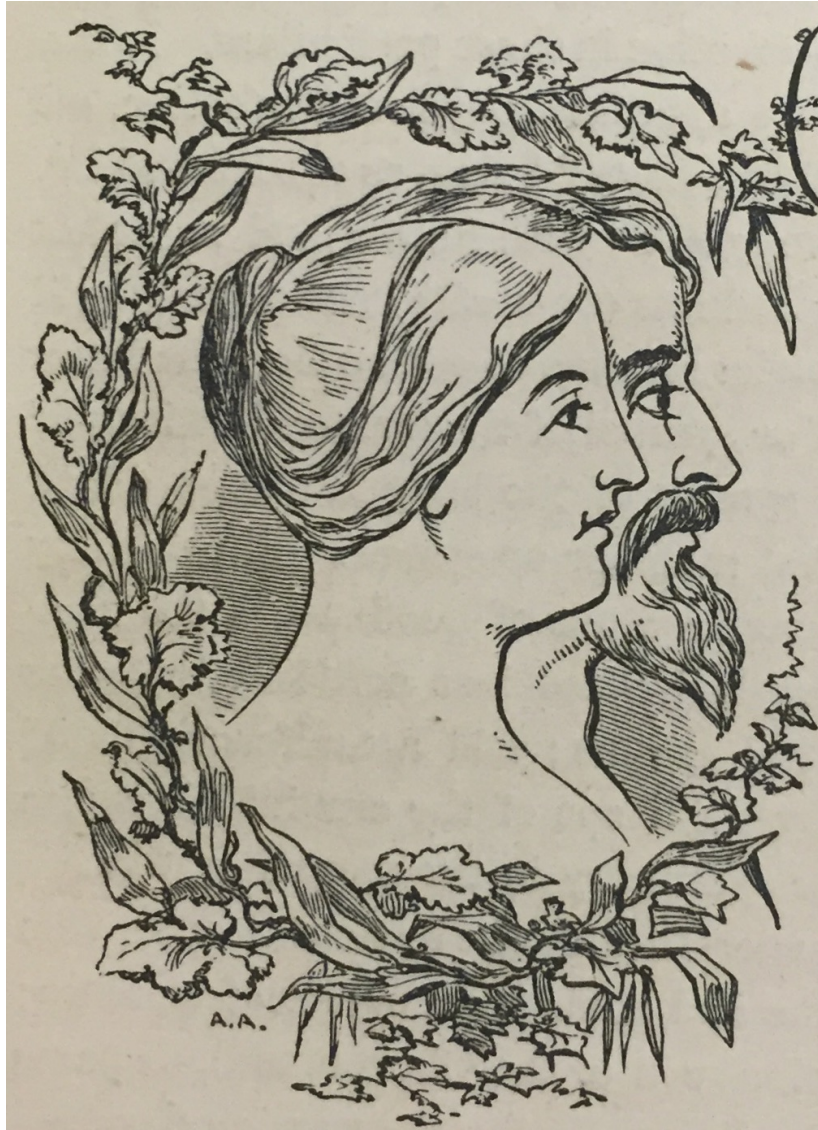


Fig. 3.10. “The Perfect Man and Woman,” in Daniel Harrison Jacques, *Hints Toward Physical Perfection* (New York: Fowler and Wells, 1859). Jacques included this image to demonstrate ideal physiognomies in men and women. He claimed that men’s heads tended to be larger in general, and “more prominent in the superior frontal region, indicating stronger reflective faculties.” Women’s heads demonstrated a “greater delicacy of structure,” but also a “diminished capacity” in mental functioning. In this image the man has a more angular and strongly-marked countenance (39).

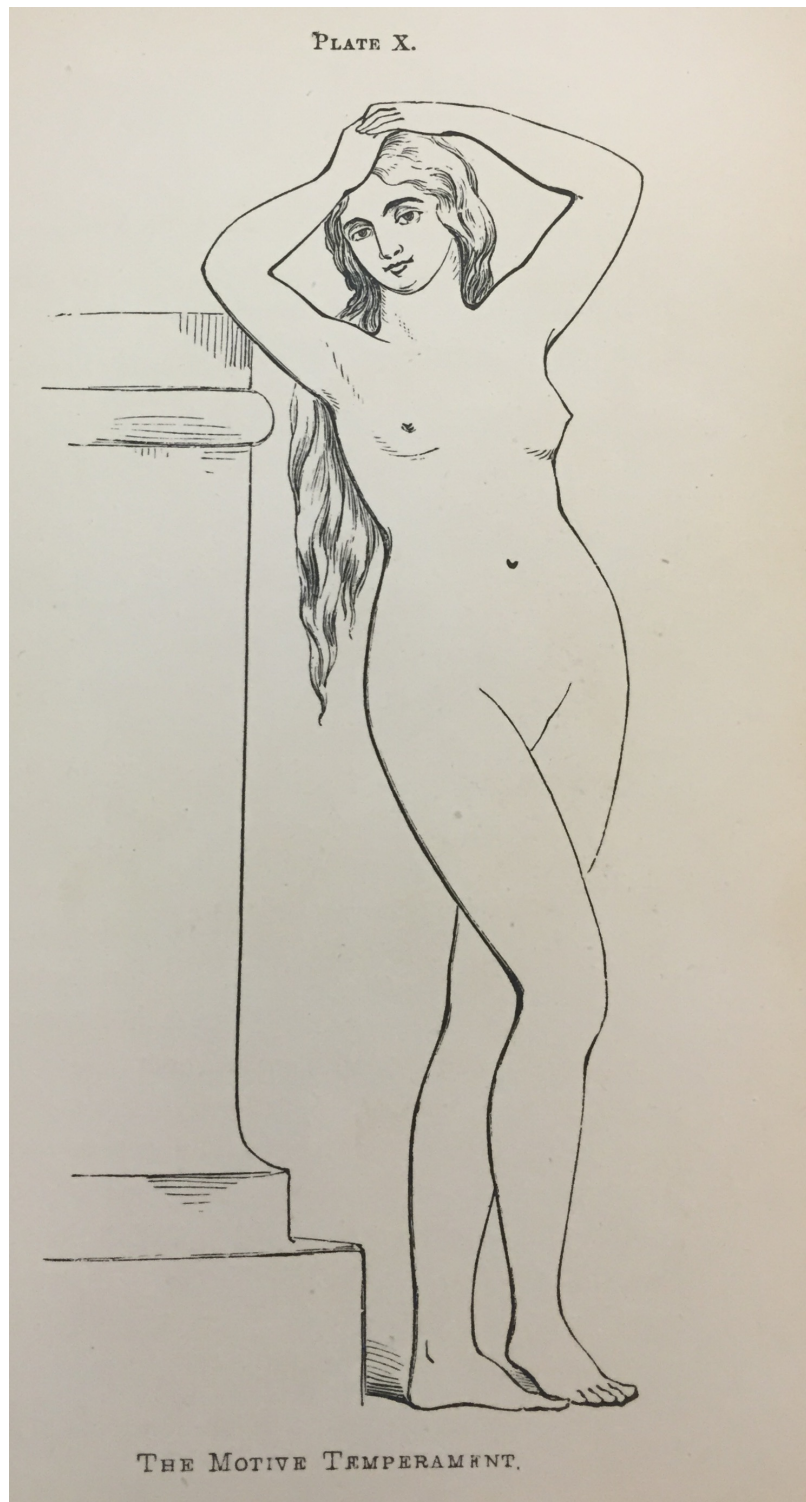


Fig. 3.11. “The Motive Temperament,” in Daniel Harrison Jacques, *Hints Toward Physical Perfection* (New York: Fowler and Wells, 1859). Jacques modeled this image after the engraving in Alexander Walker’s *Beauty* (1836). He signified excellence of the limber system with extended arms.

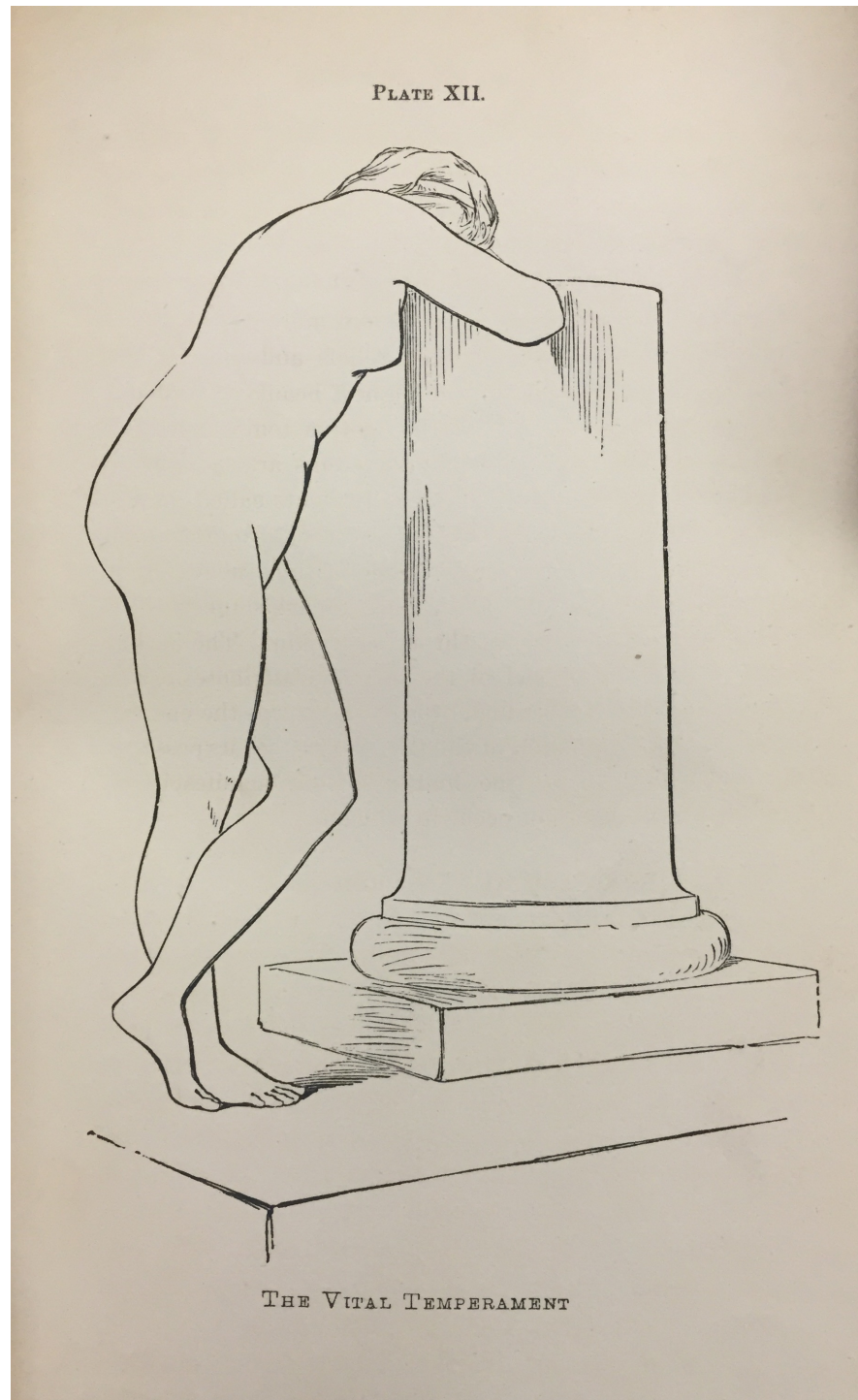


Fig. 3.12. “The Vital Temperament,” in Daniel Harrison Jacques, *Hints Toward Physical Perfection* (New York: Fowler and Wells, 1859). To convey the vital system, Jacques sketched a woman characterized by plumpness and rotundity. The image focuses on the middle portion of the woman’s body, where gestation and parturition occur. Her face—the sign of her intellectual faculties—is not visible.

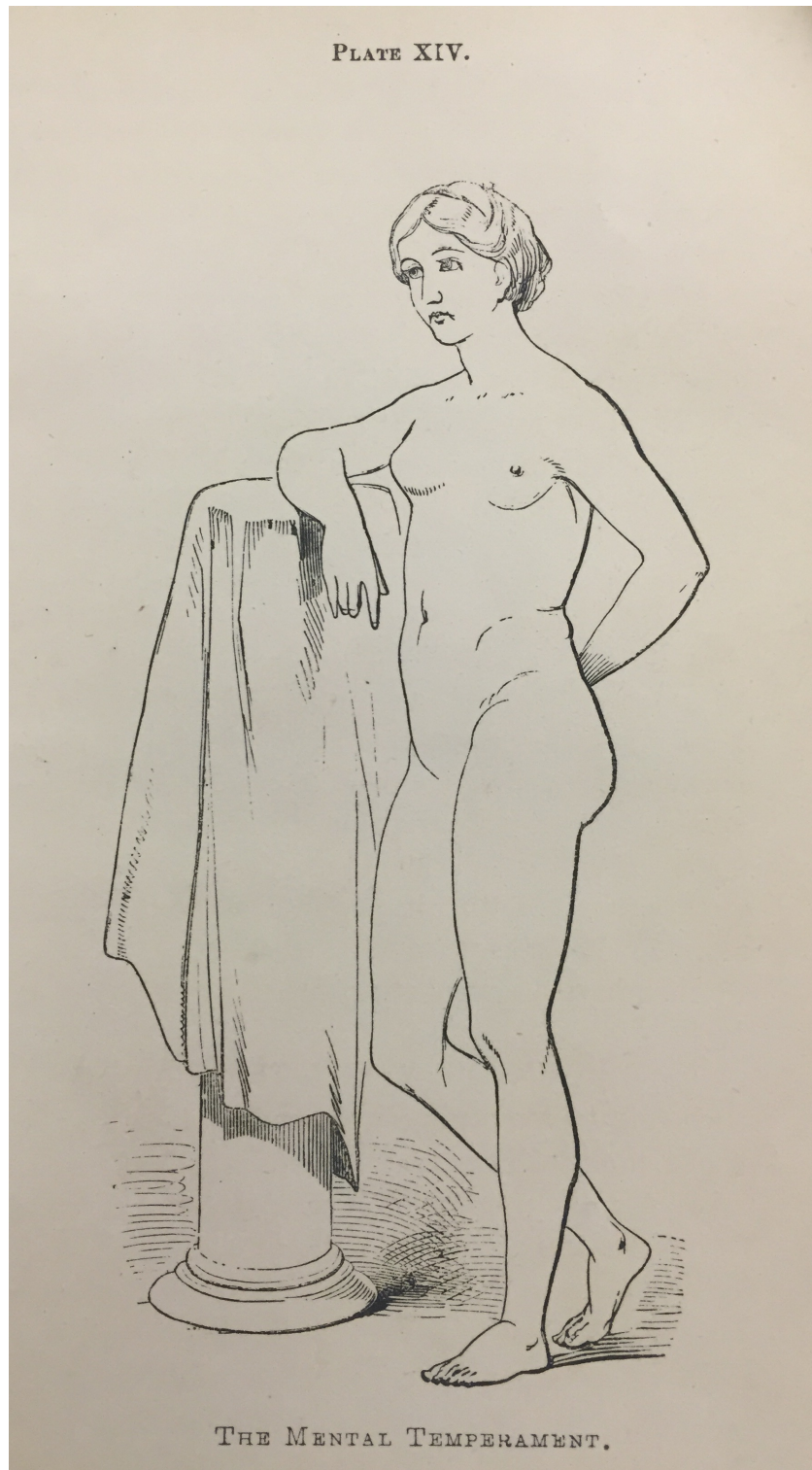


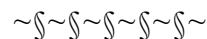
Fig. 3.13. “The Mental Temperament,” in Daniel Harrison Jacques, *Hints Toward Physical Perfection* (New York: Fowler and Wells, 1859). In this image, Jacques signified intellectual beauty by an image of a woman with a large, well-developed forehead and an expressive eye.

By the mid-nineteenth century, both American and European physiognomists largely agreed on a few general guidelines: male faces had more angular and more chiseled features than female faces, and men had broader, loftier, and more expansive foreheads. These were the external symbols of men's intellectual power. Their strong jaws and bold features indicated a mental strength and sense of resilience that women could not match. The most beautiful women, however, had rounded, chubby, and pleasing faces. These were the external symbols of women's vital capacities, as well as their inherent virtue, delicacy, and grace. Women, like men, might exhibit "intellectual beauty" in their high, pale foreheads. These features signaled perceptive capacities, superior sensibility, and sprightly imaginations. But physiognomists insisted this form of beauty was not entirely proper to the female countenance. The most appealing women would instead have bodies and faces that reflected their capacity for childrearing. Through these discourses, American scientists contended that women should not be intellectuals but mothers, and that their bodies were uniquely suited for such a role.⁶⁸

In the end, most writers, politicians, and physicians described white women as strikingly beautiful but mentally deficient individuals—as beings with distinct bodies

⁶⁸ For some examples of these arguments, see Johann Gaspar Spurzheim, *The Physiognomical System of Drs. Gall and Spurzheim* (London: Baldwin, Cradock, and Joy, 1815), 87, 104-105, 195-196, and 363; Thomas Cooke, *A Practical and Familiar View of the Science of Physiognomy* (London: Cumberwell Press, 1819), 75-77, 116, 138-139, and 169; Daniel Harrison Jacques, *Hints Toward Physical Perfection: Or, The Philosophy of Human Beauty; Showing how to Acquire and Retain Bodily Symmetry, Health, and Vigor, Secure Long Life, and Avoid the Infirmities and Deformities of Age* (New York: Fowler and Wells, 1859), 33-41 and 97-98; Samuel Roberts Wells, *New Physiognomy: Or, Signs of Character as Manifested Through Temperament* (New York: Fowler and Wells, 1866), 110-115; Daniel Harrison Jacques, *How to Read Character: A New Illustrated Handbook of Phrenology and Physiognomy* (New York: Samuel R. Wells, 1869), vii; Joseph Simms, *Nature's Revelations of Character; Or, The Mental, Moral and Volitive Dispositions of Mankind, As Manifested in the Human Form and Countenance* (London: L.N. Fowler, 1873), 435-438; and *Traits of Attractive Women and Philosophy of Love Affairs* (Philadelphia: The Belmont Publishing Company, 1874), especially chapters one, seven, ten, eleven, and twelve.

and differently wired brains. They maintained, moreover, that women did not actually need political rights of their own. After all, they already held enormous influence over their husbands and sons. Through their beauty and their birthing abilities, women would be powerful enough. In truth, these writers were attempting to make women's lack of real social, political, and economic power seem both palatable and rational by lauding female beauty and the influence that it allegedly provided women. In doing so, they not only marketed beauty as women's consolation prize for their lack of other opportunities; they also insisted that "science" was on their side. If physical attractiveness gave women influence over their male counterparts, then it also revealed the very moral and mental characteristics that made them inferior to the men they supposedly controlled.



Through physiognomy and phrenology, antebellum Americans developed a systematized language for talking about both female beauty and human difference. For those who were unsettled by the seeming instability of gender hierarchies, physiognomy proved to be a seductive technology for first engineering and then excusing inequality. This discourse, to be sure, only justified constructed inequities by portraying them as physiological realities. Physiognomical analysis, in other words, provided Americans with a seemingly rational method for validating their own prejudices.

By using science to definitively dictate the proper nature, rights, and social position of "Woman," many antebellum Americans tried to defend an increasingly unstable gender order. In their hands, the disciplines of physiognomy and phrenology became ideological antidotes to an imagined disease of female activism. As the next

chapter will demonstrate, though, white male physicians, politicians, and popular writers never held a monopoly on scientific knowledge. To their vexation, they could not always control how American women would interpret and deploy physiognomic theories.

Chapter 4: Character Detectives

Female Physiognomists in Early America

In 1855, a New York City newspaper printed an article skewering phrenology and blaming the science for some of women's oddest beauty habits. According to popular theories of facial and cranial analysis, high foreheads indicated intellectual distinction. For this reason, many American women had apparently been pulling their hair back and exposing their foreheads, all with the goal of emphasizing their mental endowments. To make matters worse, the author scoffed, some women had gone so far as to shave part of their hairlines in an ill-fated attempt to give their faces a more "intellectual appearance." He rejected the notion that high foreheads were attractive in women, arguing instead that "a great expanse of forehead gives a bold, masculine look" and that "tall heads or extremely broad ones" were antithetical to female beauty. Despite mocking phrenology's legitimacy, the author agreed with some of its major conclusions. If high and broad foreheads signaled mental profundity, then these traits were suited to men, not women. To put it simply, he was bothered that women had been coopting popular sciences for their own purposes.¹

One year after this article first appeared in print, the *Boston Press and Post* reprinted it. The *American Phrenological Journal* then fulminated against the essay, calling it a "plausible piece of sophistry." It was a great crime to tell women that

¹ "High Foreheads Not Essential to Female Beauty," *Brother Jonathan* (New York), August 4, 1855. It is not clear if women were, indeed, shaving their hairlines to appear more intellectual, but numerous ads did appear in the *New York Herald* in 1856, advertising a soap that uproots hair from low foreheads." For one example, see "Gouraud's Italian Medicated Soap," *New York Herald*, September 15, 1856. At the very least, there is evidence that some authors urged women to part their hair in ways that would showcase their foreheads and give an "intellectual air" to their countenances. John Bell argued that the "elevation of the forehead" was "itself an index of mind, and, according to some, characteristic of beauty in woman." See John Bell, *Health and Beauty: An Explanation of the Laws of Growth and Exercise* (Philadelphia: E.L. Carey & A. Hart, 1838), 58.

short, retiring foreheads were beautiful, the author asserted, for “if a low, small forehead be an essential of, and a desirable trait in, female beauty, it is so because it shows a lack of wide-reaching and deep-searching intelligence!” In other words, if men preferred low foreheads in women, it was because they were specifically seeking out women who lacked intellectual abilities. This writer at the *American Phrenological Journal* took issue with the article, not simply because it undermined the legitimacy of phrenology, but also because it seemed to consign women to perpetual mental mediocrity, substituting a disingenuous exaltation of female beauty for true respect.²

This journalistic exchange is significant for two major reasons. First, it hints that women had their own ideas about facial and cranial analysis, and that they interpreted bodies in ways that emphasized their own intellectual distinction. Second, it exposes how popular sciences could intersect with prevailing gender ideals in messy and innovative ways. The *American Phrenological Journal*, remember, was published by the Fowlers and their business associates, a group of people who espoused a series of contradictory ideas about the capacities of the female brain. On the one hand, they argued in favor of women’s “emancipation” and became some of the earliest supporters of female suffrage. Even so, they usually asserted that women’s minds and bodies were distinct from men’s, declaring that women should be mothers, rather than intellectuals. In this 1856 article, however, the magazine vehemently insisted that women could have both high foreheads and intellectual

² “High Foreheads, Beauty, and Intellect,” *American Phrenological Journal* 23, no. 3 (Philadelphia), March 1856. An art critic printed a similar critique. See Anima and H.B.S., “Sketchings,” *The Crayon* 2, no. 2 (New York) July 11, 1855.

countenances. Evidently, the same scientific ideas could function very differently, depending on how people chose to use them.

Living within this muddled intellectual milieu, elite and middle-class women would have had access to an array of contradictory theories about women's minds and bodies. This chapter focuses on their experiences. Using the letters, journals, and other fragments they left behind, it reveals how they read about, reacted to, and used popular sciences to evaluate both themselves and others. Building on the manuscripts of 130 elite and middle-class women, it asks a few specific questions: How did educated women gain access to physiognomic knowledge, and how did they deploy this knowledge once they had a physiognomical toolkit at their disposal? How, for instance, did they use facial analysis to engage in cultural debates about female beauty and female intelligence? And how did they use it to grapple with broader political concepts, such as the intellectual equality of the sexes, or the nature, rights, and social position of women?³

To answer those questions, this chapter focuses on the writings that women left behind, both in published works and private manuscripts (see Appendix A). The individuals who appear in this chapter were, for the most part, both racially and economically privileged. Many had attended female academies and seminaries in the

³ I have examined the letters and diaries of one hundred and thirty women, writing between the 1770s and 1880s (but most collections focus on the early- to mid-nineteenth century). These sources include both published and manuscript sources and they are centered on—but not limited to—women in the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic states. The women range in age, from their teenage years to adulthood, although much of my most compelling evidence comes from women between adolescence and their early thirties. This, in part, is because women's diaries are more verbose before marriage and before childrearing. For examples of scholars who distinguish between single and married women's letters and diaries, see: Martha Tomhave Blauvelt, *The Work of the Heart: Young Women and Emotion, 1780-1830* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007), 176-178; Lucia McMahon, *Mere Equals: The Paradox of Educated Women in the Early American Republic* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012), 126-127; and Judy Nolte Lensink, *"A Secret to Be Buried": The Diary and Life of Emily Hawley Gillespie, 1858-1888* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1989), 180.

late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and most believed that the minds of men and women were equal. By contrast, prominent physiognomic writers in Europe and the United States usually embraced ideas about women's intellectual inferiority and attempted to "prove" their mental deficiencies through empirical observation. Because these male authors marshalled physiognomic methods to denigrate the female mind, women might have easily rejected, or at least challenged, the tenets of this popular science. But they did not. Instead, they participated in scientific debates as autonomous practitioners, refashioning prevalent physiognomic ideas to align with their own perceptions of proper womanhood.⁴

By focusing on their words and experiences, this chapter explains how a group of educated women embraced a set of deeply hierarchical discourses and imaginatively appropriated these ideas. When using facial analysis, women did so on their own terms and for their own purposes. Flouting established theories when they did not agree with them, they took elements from physiognomy—and phrenology—that appealed to them while jettisoning doctrines with which they did not agree. In doing so, women deployed popular sciences in both flexible and idiosyncratic ways. By embracing and reworking physiognomic theories, they created techniques for positively evaluating the moral and mental capacities of the women they admired. This allowed them to defend the capacities of the female mind and argue for the improbability of women's character.

⁴ I have identified at least 27 women who explicitly mentioned reading Lavater's works, or who directly mentioned "physiognomy" in their letters, diaries, and notebooks. But this number drastically understates women's engagement with physiognomic ideas during this period. Although only 27 women mentioned "Lavater" or "physiognomy" explicitly, I have identified at least 103 women who regularly analyzed visages in their attempts to understand the inner nature of the various people they encountered between the 1780s and 1880s. In their personal writings, they moved seamlessly between broader discussions about their lives and loved ones, on the one hand, and more extensive meditations on people's moral, mental, and physical beauties, on the other. For a list of the women whose letters and diaries I examined, see "Appendix A: Female Physiognomists."

Using physiognomic techniques of character detection, these women scanned female faces for signs of virtue, modesty, and intellectual acumen. While they denigrated “coquettes” and “celebrated beauties” for their vanity and affectation, they typically found moral or mental beauty in the faces of the people they esteemed, even when those individuals had “irregular features.” As numerous women saw it, intellectual refinement not only electrified the facial expressions; it also beautified the countenance. This could make even the plainest individuals appear pleasing.

For educated women, physiognomic investigation constituted far more than an evaluation of external attractiveness. They viewed it, instead, as an interrogative process that could uncover the inner workings of people’s hearts, minds, and souls. Some of these women systematically scrutinized countenances to discern the character traits of their contemporaries. Others copied down physiognomical passages from published works into their letters, diaries, autograph albums, and commonplace books. Some women did both. But all were enmeshed in a transatlantic intellectual universe, inhabited by philosophers of human nature and by poets, novelists, scientists, and physicians. As readers, they engaged with both popular and scientific authors who employed physiognomy to outline desirable traits of femininity. Then, as character detectives, these female physiognomists deployed facial analysis to decipher the mental, moral, and physical features of their friends, family members, strangers, and acquaintances.

Becoming A Physiognomist

For the most part, women encountered physiognomic rhetoric in three different and yet consistently overlapping ways. First, they discussed popular sciences

such as physiognomy and phrenology in the classroom at female academies and seminaries, as well as at the public educational lectures they attended. Second, they engaged in physiognomical analysis in social gatherings and through informal interactions with others. Third, women accessed physiognomy through the literary and scientific works they read. After copying physiognomical sketches into their letters, journals, autograph albums, and commonplace books, women then used the same language that they had encountered in published works to evaluate the visages of their contemporaries. By reading texts, they learned to read faces.

Female academies and seminaries did not usually offer specialized courses on physiognomy, but facial analysis could nonetheless constitute part of the educational curriculum at these institutions. Margaret Fuller, for instance, conducted informal facial readings on her students while teaching at the Greene Street School in Rhode Island. On December 5, 1838, her student Evelina Metcalf recorded Fuller's use of physiognomy in the classroom: "After we had done talking about the lesson," she wrote, "Miss Fuller told our characters by the expression of our faces and though all was not quite true yet she is a very good delineator of features." Impressed with Fuller's skills, she declared, "I think she told the one that she knows the least the best." As instances like this demonstrate, character analysis could be a key part of the educational experience.⁵

In addition to painting verbal portraits of her own students, Fuller encouraged her students to examine faces when evaluating luminous literary figures, politicians, and fictional characters. In the 1830s, Mary Ware Allen and Anna Gale, two of

⁵ Frank Shuffelton, "Margaret Fuller at the Greene Street School: The Journal of Evelina Metcalf," *Studies in the American Renaissance* (1985), 35.

Fuller's students, both recounted instances where their teacher provided physiognomic readings of famous authors and fictional individuals. Mary Ware Allen recorded one of these "character sketches" in her school journal on May 11, 1838 when she paraphrased a tale about three women who had perished from consumption. Repeating Fuller's description of one heroine's visage, Allen wrote, "Intellect beamed from her large, brilliant eyes, and each look and action showed her to be a being of a superior order."⁶

Fuller not only provided physiognomical portraits in the classroom; she also required her students to craft their own character sketches. Through such assignments, Fuller expected that her students would learn to more effectively study the genius and character of the world's most eminent writers. For instance, on June 12, 1838, Fuller instructed each of her students to pick one of "the most celebrated poets," analyze his or her character, and then make a verbal presentation to the class. Because Anna Gale thought it might help her strengthen her own skills of character detection, she decided to "write down a few of the descriptions." Out of all the poets, she argued that Walter Scott had been "best described." Summarizing her classmate's delineation of his character, she penned that the famous poet "appears to have been a very modest man, with a face expressive of much benevolence." For Anna Gale and her classmates, it was important to describe Scott's visage, as well as his disposition. Mental and physical traits worked together to convey his inner nature.⁷

⁶ Mary Ware Allen, School Journal, May 11, 1838, Mss. Octavo Vol. 25, in Allen-Johnson Family Papers, 1759-1992, American Antiquarian Society [hereafter cited as AAS].

⁷ Anna D. Gale, Journal A, February 6, 1838, Octavo Volume 1, in the Gale Family Papers (1828-1854), Mss. Octavo Vols. G, AAS. For a published version of the diary, see Paula Kopacz, "The School Journal of Hannah (Anna) Gale," *Studies in the American Renaissance* (1996): 67-113.

Fuller's detailed character studies complimented the other subjects she taught at the Greene Street School, a reality that demonstrates how physiognomic knowledge could intersect with and reinforce material from art, science, and literature courses. The notebook of a young Bostonian woman named Lucretia Fiske Farrington demonstrates a similar phenomenon. In it, she copied extracts from literary and scientific texts and discussed the important questions of the day: issues like women's intellectual equality, female beauty, moral philosophy, natural history, astronomy, and New England politics. Like Fuller's students, Farrington regularly copied "character sketches" from the books and periodicals she was reading. Most of these segments used physiognomic language to describe the appearance and character of famous individuals. As one example, Farrington copied a description of John C. Calhoun, which stated that his chin, "if physiognomy may be trusted, denotes firmness." Most of the authors that Farrington was reading employed physiognomy to analyze the appearance, intelligence, and temperament of both real and fictional figures. Farrington then distilled these texts and copied favored segments into her notebook. For her, physiognomy functioned as a practical discipline, which did not require intensive study or expensive equipment. Because it could be performed in the classroom, undertaken on the streets, or honed within the privacy of one's own home, physiognomy was a remarkably accessible science for female practitioners.⁸

Public lectures were yet another arena in which American women accessed and utilized physiognomic techniques of character detection. Catharine Maria Sedgwick, for instance, recalled hearing a talk by "Dr. Redfield, a professor of the art

⁸ Lucretia Fiske Farrington, "Notebook for 1834," Mss. S143, Boston Athenaeum [hereafter cited as BA].

of reading physiognomy.” Afterwards, she paid for personalized physiognomic readings for her family.⁹ Lucy Chase, a young woman who split her time between Massachusetts and Pennsylvania, similarly attended several lectures on subjects we might now see as “proper” sciences—geology, chemistry, anatomy, and physiology—but also on subjects we might be tempted to classify as “pseudosciences,” such as mesmerism, magnetism, and phrenology. Chase spoke of all these lectures as if they were all part of a common quest for scientific knowledge. She took physiognomy and phrenology especially seriously, subsequently relying on these sciences to analyze the intelligence, virtue, and sincerity of those who spoke at subsequent public lectures. Her favorite speaker appears to have been a “Polish Exile” named Major Tochman, whose “frank, open countenance” revealed a “benign expression.” Chase explained that the “expression of sincerity upon his countenance” allowed the audience to “clearly read the soul within.” In a similar way, she argued that one lecturer had a “pleasant intelligent countenance,” while yet another surprised her with his eloquence, ultimately giving the audience “much more than his head promised.” For Lucy Chase, analyzing the faces and skulls of traveling lecturers was just one part of the broader intellectual experience of attending these talks.¹⁰

Women also practiced physiognomy in groups, at social gatherings, and in informal conversations with friends. Two years after the American edition of the

⁹ “Catharine Maria Sedgwick to Katharine Sedgwick Minot,” New York, May 2, 1852, in *Life and Letters of Catharine M. Sedgwick*, ed. Mary E. Dewey (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1871), 339. Sedgwick was referring to James Redfield, author of *Outlines of a New System of Physiognomy* (New York: J.S. Redfield, 1849).

¹⁰ See Papers of Lucy Chase, Folder 3 Diary fragments, 1841-1847, in Chase Family, Papers, c. 1787-c. 1915, Mss. Boxes C, AAS. For secondary scholarship on public lectures and the appeal of popular science for lay practitioners, see James A. Secord, “The Diffusion of Phrenology Through Public Lecturing,” in *Science in the Marketplace: Nineteenth-Century Sites and Experiences*, eds., Aileen Fyfe and Bernard Lightman (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2007), 60-96.

Essays on Physiognomy was released in 1794, a young woman named Charlotte Sheldon wrote that her and her brother went to visit a family friend named Mrs. Beardsley, where they played on the Forte Piano, “read in Lavater & looked at the Heads,” and then took a walk before finally heading home.¹¹ Almost fifty years later, in April of 1843, Margaret Cary similarly recalled discussing popular sciences in a drawing room before a dinner party, documenting that “Lavater’s work on Physiognomy became a principal subject of conversation.”¹² As late as the 1860s, physiognomy was still relevant for American women. Lucy Larcom, for instance, incorporated the *Essays on Physiognomy* into her literature and composition classes, asking her students to write an essay on “the power of the soul in moulding form.”¹³ Frances Willard similarly relied on Lavater’s treatises while crafting lessons for her drawing classes in the 1860s:

“Besides the regular matters, we talk physiognomy. My recollections of Lavater are invaluable here. We analyze faces, hands, figures and feet, classic noses, eyes and eyebrows, disagree about the curve of the nostril, or the aristocratic elevation of an instep, define the Roman nose, studying the school generally in

¹¹ “Diary of Charlotte Sheldon,” May 20, 1796, in Emily Noyes Vanderpoel, comp., and Elizabeth C. Barney Buel, ed., *Chronicles of a Pioneer School from 1792 to 1833, Being the History of Miss Sarah Pierce and Her Litchfield School* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1903), 11.

¹² Margaret G. Cary, “Letter from Margaret G. Cary to George Blankern Cary,” April 14, 1843, in *The Cary Letters*, ed. Curtis, Caroline G. (Cambridge, MA: Riverside Press, 1891), 36.

¹³ “Diary of Lucy Larcom,” January 22, 1862, in Daniel Dulany Addison, ed., *Lucy Larcom: Life, Letters, and Diary* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, and Co., 1894), 119.

respect of all these and their finger-nails and hair
besides.¹⁴

Almost 100 years after Lavater first published the *Essays on Physiognomy*, women such as Lucy Larcom and Frances Willard were still relying on his theories to teach their students how to sketch bodies, convey character, and interpret human nature. Well into the mid-nineteenth century, physiognomic ideas remained relevant in diverse arenas, from schoolrooms and parlors to the popular press.

Physiognomy likewise infiltrated women's social relationships, shaping how they evaluated others and imagined themselves. In her 1852 diary, a young woman named Caroline Hance described a curious visit to a fortuneteller, who mused about the physiognomy and temperament of her future husband. The fortuneteller assured her that she would find a lover with "Black hair, splendid dark eyes, fine forehead, not very tall, fine form, noble in character and disposition, intellect stamped upon every feature, and a peculiar mouth." Hance did not take these pronouncements particularly seriously, writing that "After she had finished I had a good laugh and told her I did not believe a word."¹⁵ She nonetheless copied the fortuneteller's remarks into her journal. On a different occasion, Hance recounted going on a walk with a young man named Fred, who was currently studying to be a physician. Fred insisted his medical training prepared him to "read a young lady's character at first sight." Hance then challenged him to read her countenance, and he proceeded to diagnose his female companion with:

¹⁴ "Diary of Frances Elizabeth Willard," November 22, 1860, in *Glimpses of Fifty Years: The Autobiography of an American Woman* (Chicago: Woman's Temperance Publication Association, 1889), 157.

¹⁵ Caroline H. Hance Long Diary, 1852, Mss. Am.0712, Historical Society of Pennsylvania [hereafter cited as HSP].

a nervous and sanguine temperament, the former meaning that I would commence several things at once and leave them and that I would prefer hard study to hard work—also that I was passionate for a moment and then it was all over—all of which are very true and I suppose it must be the case that he can read character very readily.

Through this “reading,” Fred was cleverly combining humoral theory, physiognomic analysis, mental philosophy, and gendered stereotypes to suggest that Caroline Hance was an intellectually passionate, but also fickle person. She agreed with his assessment and then turned her gaze back on Fred, writing that it was “very hard to look at him steadily as he has a deep, full, beseeching eye, one which I admire very much indeed.”¹⁶

Hance’s physiognomic knowledge came from a wealth of diverse sources: from the texts she read and the people she conversed with, but also from her interactions with an eccentric fortuneteller who attempted to delineate the mental characteristics of her potential husband. Later in the diary, Caroline Hance used these same physiognomical techniques to evaluate her cousin George. When describing him, she wrote that “in his face, there is so much true piety mingled with such gentle firmness, that it at once defines his character. In his eye, there beams forth a loving sympathy.” Physiognomy could be a subject of study for serious intellectuals, but it could also be a lighthearted method that women used to analyze character in social

¹⁶ Caroline H. Hance Long Diary, 37, HSP.

situations. As a popular science, it easily bridged divides between elite scientific discourses and popular practice.¹⁷

Perhaps the most common way that women accessed and exercised physiognomic knowledge was through their engagement with print culture. Even if educated American women never read Lavater's works, they regularly encountered examples of facial analysis in published texts, and then proceeded to incorporate the language into their own writings and practices. The diary of Hannah Margaret Wharton provides just one example of this process in action. In her journals, Wharton did not reference major physiognomic or scientific treatises, yet she consistently studied the faces of others and evaluated her own disposition through an analysis of her appearance.¹⁸ Where, then, was Hannah Wharton encountering physiognomic ideas? Her journal provides several clues. On multiple occasions, Wharton mentioned the books she was reading. Among these titles were several poems by Walter Scott, Hannah More's *Coelebs In Search of a Wife* (1809), the published letters of Anna Seward (1811), and William Wirt's *Sketches of the Life and Character of Patrick Henry* (1817). All these authors relied on physiognomy to analyze the character traits of their major protagonists. William Wirt, for instance, turned to Lavaterian theories when giving a description of Patrick Henry. According to Wirt, Henry's face was

¹⁷ Caroline H. Hance Long Diary, 51, HSP.

¹⁸ Wharton often analyzed her own character and provided information about her father, mother, and siblings. When doing so, she often included descriptions of physical appearances, which often fused messily into delineations of character. On one instance, she compared the appearance of her cousin, Rebecca, to her own appearance. Rebecca, she thought, was quite beautiful. Several people had noted that the two girls looked alike, but Hannah did not agree. "I do not think so," she said, "as my hair is dark, and eyes very dark blue—and the character of our countenances are essentially different." While Rebecca's face was "generally expressive of rest, animation, and vivacity," Hannah thought her own countenance to be "of a more pensive and serious cast." She believed that the differences in countenance between her and her cousin reflected their different characters. See: The Journal of Hannah Margaret Wharton, July 15, 1812, in the Thomas I. & Henry Wharton Papers (II), Box 5, Folder 1, HSP.

“full of intelligence,” with a “high and straight” forehead, a Roman nose, and a set of “manly, bold, and well proportioned” features. The author Anna Seward similarly used physiognomy to evaluate the individuals she wrote about in her published letters, just as Walter Scott and Hannah More employed it when providing “sketches” of their fictional heroes and heroines.¹⁹

Hannah Wharton did not stop at reading these texts; she also copied portions of them in her journal, showing how physiognomy moved from published sources into daily practice. At one point, Wharton copied one of Walter Scott’s poems in its entirety, commenting that the author had provided “a beautiful description of his heroine.”²⁰ In this poem, Scott described the forehead of Mathilda, as both “fair” and “high”—traits that authors used to signal beauty, intellect, and whiteness. He then proceeded to paint a picture of Mathilda by emphasizing her “full dark eye” and “soft and pensive” face, ultimately writing that her “mild expression spoke a mind” that was “In duty firm, composed, and resign’d.”²¹ As literary scholar Graeme Tytler has argued, Scott’s novels and poems were saturated with physiognomical analyses of both major and minor characters.²² This poem, for instance, focused on Mathilda’s

¹⁹ See Journal of Hannah Margaret Warton, October 15[?], 1812 and February 15, 1813, HSP. See also Wharton’s “Recollections of 1817-18,” December 1, 1817, HSP. For the books Wharton was reading, see Hannah More, *Coelebs: In Search of a Wife*, 11th ed. (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1809); *Letters of Anna Seward: Written Between the Years 1784 and 1807*, In Six Volumes (Edinburgh: George Ramsay & Company, 1811); and William Wirt, *Sketches of the Life and Character of Patrick Henry* (Philadelphia: James Webster, 1817).

²⁰ Journal of Hannah Margaret Wharton, Wednesday, February 10[?], 1813, HSP.

²¹ Walter Scott, *The Poetical Works of Sir Walter Scott* (Edinburgh: Robert Cadell, 1841), 317.

²² Graeme Tytler, “Lavater’s Influence on Sir Walter Scott: A Tacit Assumption?” in *Physiognomy in Profile: Lavater’s Impact on European Culture*, ed. Melissa Percival and Graeme Tytler (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2005), 112. See also: Graeme Tytler, “‘Faith in the Hand of Nature’: Physiognomy in Sir Walter Scott’s Fiction,” *Studies in Scottish Literature* 33:1 (2004): 223-246.

attractiveness to convey more detailed information about her character. By copying the excerpt into her diary, Wharton acknowledged that she not only admired Scott's "beautiful description," but also found it important enough to record in her journal.²³

The diary of Charlotte Forten, an educated black woman from New England, provides yet another example of how physiognomy could move between published texts and private manuscripts. In 1854, Forten recorded that she had been reading Robert Turnbull's *Genius of Scotland* (1809), which she found "very interesting." She claimed she "was much pleased with the description of the elegant city of Edinburgh." Even so, she asserted that "what interested me most were the sketches of the fitted men who are the glory of Scotland."²⁴ These "sketches" were saturated with physiognomical detail. At one point in the book, Robert Turnbull analyzes a sculpture of the poet Robert Burns, writing that his "forehead is particularly fine—open, massive, and high, with an air of lofty repose." In nineteenth-century parlance, a "high," "massive," and "lofty" forehead indicated intellectual prowess and poetic imagination. Turnbull nonetheless claimed that the sculpture of Burns' face was "not quite equal to one's conception of the poet," for the "mouth is unpoetical and vulgar." The sculpture's mouth apparently lacked "the chiseled delicacy, as well as gracious

²³ Walter Scott's poem was not the last instance in which Wharton interacted with the physiognomic descriptions she read in published texts. On another occasion, she copied an article about the physiognomy of Jesus Christ, which was republished in several periodicals throughout the nineteenth century. This entry was simply labeled "Sunday," but took place at some point between August 27, 1818 and January 3, 1819. See the Journals of Hannah Margaret Wharton, HSP. For just two works that republished the description of Jesus, see John Hayward, comp., *The Book of Notions* (Boston: Bela Marsh; and New York: Fowlers and Wells, 1850), 62; and William Fields, comp., *The Scrap-Book*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo, & Co., 1851), 435.

²⁴ Charlotte Forten Grimké, Journal One, July 13, 1854, in Brenda Stevenson, ed., *The Journals of Charlotte Forten Grimké* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 86. Forten also recorded reading books such as Mrs. Crosland's *Memorable Women* (1854) and Mary Langdon's anti-slavery novel, *Ida May* (1854), both of which provided detailed physiognomical sketches of real and fictional characters. See entries for November 24, 1854 and November 26, 1854, in *The Journals of Charlotte Forten Grimké*, 113.

expression of noble and generous feeling which we naturally look for in the countenance of Burns.” Because the artist had failed to capture the “intelligence and good humor” of Burns’s mouth, Turnbull contended that the “likeness” must have been “defective.”²⁵ Charlotte Forten explicitly acknowledged that these physiognomical character sketches were what she admired most in Turnbull’s book. As her journal reveals, educated nineteenth-century readers expected a certain level of physiognomical specificity from the texts they read.

Just as Robert Turnbull had analyzed the sculpture of Robert Burns and found it lacking, young women sometimes complained about the portraits they encountered, pointing out when they encountered poor or defective likenesses. On one occasion in 1810, a New Jersey woman named Rachel Van Dyke interpreted the countenance of Elizabeth Smith, a female author. Although Van Dyke was impressed with Smith’s character and poetical fragments, she was “not pleased with” the book’s frontispiece (Fig. 4.1). Perhaps it was a bad likeness, she postulated, for it did not match up with the woman’s character as she had conceived of it. Van Dyke complained that the likeness gave Smith “the appearance and countenance of a child.” If it was “a correct one,” then she did not have “much beauty to boast of.” Still, Van Dyke aimed to analyze this image in a more sophisticated manner, paying attention to small details:

Her features are small but regular and there is a certain sweetness or softness which appears to play round her mouth and makes her countenance rather interesting than not. But her eyes are bad—they make her look like a simpleton—so modest—so sleepy—so

²⁵ Robert Turnbull, *The Genius of Scotland: Or Sketches of Scottish Scenery, Literature and Religion*, 2nd ed. (New York: Robert Carter: 1847), 77-78.

languishing. When I have *read* the book I shall be able to judge of her title to the fame which she has acquired.”²⁶



Fig. 4.1. Portrait of Elizabeth Smith by J.G. Wood, in H.M. Bowdler, *Fragments in Prose and Verse by Miss Elizabeth Smith, Lately Deceased; With Some Account of Her Life and Character* (London: Richard Cruttwell, 1809). This was the image Van Dyke analyzed.

Van Dyke ultimately decided that Smith’s character was more important than her beauty, claiming that she would gain more from reading the author’s words than staring at her visage. Still, she analyzed the image intently. She not only commented

²⁶ Diary of Rachel Van Dyke, July 25, 1810, in Lucia McMahon and Deborah Schriver, eds., *To Read My Heart: The Journal of Rachel Van Dyke* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 87-88.

on Smith's beauty (or lack thereof); she also attempted to find sweetness in her mouth and intellect in her otherwise sleepy eyes.

In the early decades of the nineteenth century, the interpretation of portraits could be an essential component of truly comprehending a text. In instances where an image was unavailable, readers analyzed the ekphrastic clues provided by authors or developed their own textual sketches. For instance, after reading the memoirs of the Empress Josephine in 1838, Anna Gale embarked upon a detailed analysis of Napoleon's consort. Based on her own understanding of the woman's inner nature, she provided a description of what she believed the Empress might have looked like:

In Josephine's—character, I discovered, energy, benevolence, firmness, strong maternal affection, united to a most delicate, and refined taste, and a graceful ease of manners, which charmed, and won the admiration of those around her. In her countenance, I could see beaming from her large, soft, blue eyes, an expression of mild benignity.

When Anna wrote that she “could see” Josephine's beaming and benignant eyes, she was not speaking literally, but rather was embarking upon a form of reverse physiognomy. After first reading Josephine's memoirs and determining her prevailing character traits, Gale ventured an imaginative sketch of the Empress Josephine's appearance. When she discovered a portrait of Josephine that she had previously overlooked, she was sorely disappointed (Fig. 4.2). Gale had pictured Josephine as a stunning and impressive figure, but the image failed to match up to the vision she had theorized. “Forming such an idea of her character, and beauty,” wrote Gale, “what

was my disappointment, when turning to the commencement of the book, I discovered an engraving of her, which before had escaped my notice. It was not only far from being beautiful,” Gale complained, “but it was even coarse, and commonplace; there was no expression in the face, no grace in the form, and I wished more than once, that a blot instead of an ornament had not been placed in such an interesting book.” When imagination confronted reality, Anna Gale was frustrated to find her physiognomic dexterity lacking.²⁷



Fig. 4.2. Portrait of Josephine, Napoleon’s Consort, in John S. Memes, *Memoirs of the Empress Josephine* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1837). This is likely the image that Anna Gale was referring to. It was published the year before she made her diary entry.

²⁷ Anna D. Gale, Journal A, February 28, 1838, AAS.

By the early nineteenth century, the act of systematically interpreting visages had become an important part of the process of properly digesting a published work. As one periodical author argued in 1807, “An ingenious author has observed, that a reader seldom pursues a book with pleasure, till he has a tolerable notion of the physiognomy of the author.”²⁸ Through their physiognomic interpretations of famous people’s faces, published authors provided middle-class women with a template for analyzing the portraits of the authors whose books they were currently reading.²⁹

Taken together, educated American women used physiognomy in casual forms of social interaction, in educational environments, and in their own imaginations as they analyzed persons, portraits, and texts. Some attended lectures on physiognomy or phrenology, first absorbing the knowledge and then deploying the skills they learned to analyze the heads and faces of the speakers who enamored them. Others used physiognomic language to complete assignments for their teachers in female academies and seminaries. And still others read Lavater’s *Essays on Physiognomy* or discussed his works in conversations with friends and acquaintances. For educated middle-class and elite women, physiognomy could be a form of empirical observation, a practice that heightened the pleasure of reading, or a means

²⁸ Proteus Echo, “Essays, Proteus Echo,” *The Emerald, or, Miscellany of Literature, Containing Sketches of the Manners, Principles and Amusements of the Age* 1, no. 9 (Boston), Dec 19, 1807. One author similarly wrote, “As the life of an author is in his books, so is his face often the best edition of his works.” In 1835, the *Knickerbocker* compared physiognomically analyzing faces to judging a book by its cover, but not in a pejorative sense. Yet another article inverted this practice, examining the physiognomy of individuals as they read and trying to discern how the process of reading transformed the physiognomies of readers. See E.W. Robbins, “A Chapter on Physiognomy,” *The American Literary Magazine* 4, no. 5 (Hartford), May 1849; Review of *The South West*, in *The Knickerbocker; or New York Monthly Magazine* 6, no. 6 (Boston), December 1835; and “Y,” “Old Books,” *The New Monthly Magazine and Literary Journal* 2, no. 7 (Boston), 1821.

²⁹ Sophia Peabody Hawthorne’s writings provide yet another example of how authors provided readers with a template for analyzing countenances. In her *Notes in England and Italy* (New York: G.P. Putnam & Son, 1869), Hawthorne provides physiognomically detailed character sketches of both real and fictional individuals that were portrayed in the portraits and sculptures she examined during her trip abroad.

of social collaboration that enlivened dinner parties. To some women, it may have been all these things simultaneously. Physiognomy, above all else, was a shared language of character examination—one that came as second-nature to the educated middle-class women who were steeped in the transatlantic intellectual milieu of the early nineteenth century.

A few questions nonetheless remain: Once these women gained access to physiognomic knowledge, what did they do with it? How, for instance, did they use physiognomy to understand the female body and the female mind? The next section of this chapter grapples with those questions, revealing how educated women came to embrace physiognomy—a science that denigrated their minds—and nonetheless used it to envisage a positive perception of female intellect and character.

Discerning Character: Women's Uses of Physiognomy

Margaret Fuller was an ugly woman. At least that was what Ralph Waldo Emerson proclaimed when he noted her “extreme plainness,” the “nasal tone” of her voice, and her disagreeable “trick of incessantly opening and shutting her eyelids.” In Emerson’s telling, Fuller’s features initially “repelled” him. After getting to know her better, however, he learned to value her mind over her beauty.³⁰ Despite this personal change of heart, Emerson’s first impression of Fuller’s appearance has proven stubbornly persistent in American intellectual circles. It was echoed by Emerson’s nineteenth-century contemporaries, and it has since been quoted in encyclopedias and repeated by scholars and popular authors alike. Whether in the nineteenth century or

³⁰ “Reminisces by Emerson,” in *Love-letters of Margaret Fuller: 1845-1846, with an Introduction by Julia Ward Howe* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1903), 195.

in the present, most of Fuller's biographers have agreed on one thing: Margaret Fuller may have been plain in body, but she was impressive in mind.³¹

While Emerson initially focused on Fuller's supposed plainness, the women who esteemed Fuller for her intellectual distinction usually analyzed her face in far shrewder and more perceptive ways. Fuller's students, it seems, got particularly defensive when people accused their instructor of being unattractive. Nineteenth-century authors recalled that Fuller's intellect, eloquence, and enthusiasm brought such "dignity to her appearance and such fine expression to her countenance that her companions, especially the younger members of the class, went away impressed with 'her beautiful looks,' and would on no account allow people to call her plain." By arguing the intellectual workings of Fuller's mind imbued her face with a pleasing cast, Fuller's students and admirers suggested that her intellectual eminence increased her physical charms and made her more attractive. Acknowledging that Fuller was not perfectly beautiful, they nonetheless argued that her irregular features conveyed her superior mind.³²

³¹ For other authors nineteenth-century authors who quoted or echoed Emerson's comments, see "Margaret Fuller Ossoli," in Robert Chambers, ed., *The Book of Days: A Miscellany of Popular Antiquities* (London & Edinburgh: W. & R. Chambers, 1832), 2:68; William Channing, ed., *Memoirs of Margaret Fuller Ossoli* (Boston: Phillips, Sampson and Company, 1851), 1:337; Entry for "Ossoli, Margaret Fuller," in George Ripley and Charles A. Dana, eds., *The New American Cyclopaedia: A Popular Dictionary of General Knowledge* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1863), 15:598. For modern writers who comment on Fuller's supposed plainness, see Charles Capper, *Margaret Fuller: An American Romantic Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 297-298; Joel Myerson, ed., *Fuller in Her Own Time: A Biographical Chronicle of Her Life* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2008), xxii-xxiii; and Meg McGavran Murray, *Margaret Fuller, Wandering Pilgrim* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012), 91, 311, 363.

³² Mrs. Newton Crosland, ed., *Memorable Women: The Story of their Lives* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1854), 287, 298-299. Margaret Fuller's reputation as a rather plain woman, whose intellect nevertheless infused her face with a pleasing appearance, was echoed in Julia Ward Howe's memoirs of Margaret Fuller. She wrote: "She was not handsome nor even pretty, but her animated countenance at once made its own impression, and awakened in those who saw her a desire to know more of her. Fine hair and teeth, vivacious eyes, and peculiarly graceful carriage of the head and neck were points which redeemed her from the charge of plainness. This face of hers was, indeed, somewhat problematic in its expression, which carried with it the assurance of great possibilities, but not the

Like Margaret Fuller's students, educated American women regularly analyzed the moral, mental, and physical characteristics of the women they respected, often finding ways to unearth "beauty" in countenances that the rest of the world denoted plain. Deeply invested in discerning the character of others, women also studied people's dispositions as part of a larger process of personal cultivation. Along with an investigation of people's "conversation" and "manners," they used facial analysis to evaluate the inner worth of the women who entered their lives. This allowed them to comprehend the flaws and merits of other people, but also to recognize deficiencies in themselves. By detecting commendable traits in those they admired—and by denouncing imperfections in those they did not—educated women attempted to simultaneously identify female role models, denounce disreputable women, and improve their own characters.

In both manuscripts and published works, women used facial analysis in three major ways. First, women distinguished between the "beauty of features" and the "beauty of expression." Any lifeless statue could have perfectly beautiful features, they argued, but only the most refined women could convey intelligence or benevolence through their beaming eyes and the workings of their facial musculature. Using this line of argument, Fuller's students, could reasonably assert that their teacher's *expression* was beautiful, even if her *features* were imperfect. Recalling the comments of those who had experienced the genius of Margaret Fuller, the popular British author Robert Chambers wrote that Fuller "is said to have discoursed as one

certainty of their fulfillment." She is clear to point out—as were most defenders of Fuller's intellect—that Fuller's intelligence made her more attractive. Moreover, by pointing to her vivacious eyes and her fine hair and teeth, she argued that she was not, in fact, as plain as her reputation suggested. Beauty, in the end, was still important. See Julia Ward Howe, *Margaret Fuller* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1905), 19.

inspired; and her face, lighted up with feeling and intellect, dissolved its plainness, if not deformity, in beauty of expression.” It was this distinction—between the “beauty of expression,” on the one hand, and a superb skeletal structure on the other—that many American women relied upon when analyzing the faces of their female contemporaries.³³

Related to this first tendency was a second and related strategy of facial analysis: women would often make clear distinctions between people who they referred to as “perfect beauties” and those who were physiognomically pleasing. A “perfect beauty” had symmetrical features, elegant proportions, and a graceful form. Yet she could also be vain, affected, and enamored with her own personal charms. Because “perfectly beautiful” women were preoccupied with their own attractiveness, they often failed to cultivate the far more meaningful “beauties of the mind.” These women supposedly experienced a pinnacle of adoration and flattery in their teenage years, but their external attractiveness invariably faded away over time. Eventually, they were left with nothing but wrinkly skin and vacuous minds. By contrast, a woman with a pleasing physiognomy might lack perfectly regular features or an idyllic form, but she usually had a high and well-developed forehead, eyes that conveyed intelligence, cheeks that expressed modesty, and lips that only spoke the truth. By explaining the difference between “perfect beauty” and physiognomical beauty, female authors and educated women together distinguished between “good” and “bad” forms of female attractiveness. This strategy allowed them to identify a set of positive mental, moral, and physical traits in the women they admired, while also

³³ “Margaret Fuller Ossoli,” in Robert Chambers, ed., *The Book of Days*, 2:68.

adhering to gendered stereotypes that denounced the vanity, affectation, and frivolity of statuesque women with symmetrical features.

Finally, educated American women embraced an understanding of physiognomy that emphasized not the heritability and permanence of mental and physical features, but rather the body's ability to transform as the mind improved. They argued, in other words, that intellectual cultivation not only beautified the mind, but also made women's faces more attractive. Some women vaguely suggested that mental improvement infused the countenance with an ethereal essence that made it appear more attractive, even if it did not fundamentally alter the features. But others argued that intellectual improvement quite literally transformed one's features and expressions. According to this worldview, education could make women more beautiful, and thus more pleasing to men. Using these strategies, many women found physiognomic beauty in female faces that were deficient in what they called "regular beauty." This allowed them to argue in favor of women's intellectual advancement. It also helped them combat stereotypes predicated on the idea that educated women were invariably ugly and pedantic shrews.³⁴

Particularly when they read the works of female authors, educated women discovered far more positive evaluations of women's moral and mental characteristics than they would have found in works written by the men who proclaimed themselves physiognomists. Unlike many white male scientists, female writers rarely denigrated women's rational capacities. Instead, they identified both real and fictional women

³⁴ Lucia McMahon has demonstrated that early national Americans portrayed pedantic women as women who "lacked beauty and desirability" and who "represented a masculine, indeed absurd, model of womanhood." In novels, periodicals, and prescriptive literature, "the pedant was cast as an unattractive, masculine figure." See McMahon, *Mere Equals*, 12-13.

whose exemplary minds and characters made them paragons for readers to admire. Almost invariably, they found beauty, brains, and benevolence in the physiognomies of educated women, presenting a fundamentally positive vision of the female mind.

Even as these stories enforced prevailing gender norms and encouraged women to be modest, domestic, motherly, and unassuming, they also imagined women's intellectual advancement as a positive good and argued that the facial signatures of cultivated women would reveal their status as rational individuals. Sarah Josepha Hale, editor of the *Ladies' Magazine* and *Godey's Lady's Book*, regularly defended female intellectual equality in the pages of the two magazines she managed. Hale never endorsed granting women political equality, nor was she sympathetic to the women's rights movement. She was no radical, nor were most of the women who read and wrote for her magazine. Yet Hale assiduously advocated for women's access to higher education and insisted on female intellectual competence.³⁵ In one instance, the *Ladies' Magazine* painted a "character sketch" of a fictional young woman named "Catharine Talbort." According to the story, this heroine had an "overhanging forehead, so full of intellectual expression," as well as "very black eyes" with a "peculiar fire and animation." The "classical contour of her head," stated the story, was covered with a gorgeous set of "rich glossy curls," and her "finely formed" features were the external indicators of her bold, independent, and intellectual spirit. In providing this description, the author conveyed information

³⁵ Hale wrote and published several essays advocating for women's access to higher education and argued for their intellectual equality. "The female sex have long been the acknowledged possessors of a sort of mental quickness and intellectual acumen," she asserted in one volume of the *Ladies' Magazine*, and as a result, they should be treated as "rational creatures." She later claimed that if men saw women as superficial, frivolous, or showy, then, "The fault is in their education, not in the female mind." See "Female Character," *Ladies' Magazine* 1, no. 5 (Boston), May 1828; and Sarah Josepha Hale, *Sketches of American Character* (Boston: Published by Freeman Hunt, 1831), 106.

about Catharine's character. Her "*overhanging* forehead" revealed her intellectual acumen. Her fiery and piercing eyes indicated her fiercely independent nature. Moreover, the "classical contour of her head" marked her as an exemplar of Grecian features: the physiognomists' definition of ideal beauty.³⁶

Within this story, the *Ladies' Magazine* lauded Catharine Talbort for her intellectual achievements. Yet while saying that she had a "mind of the highest order," the author also pointed out that her boldness, lack of delicacy, a "fearless manner of expressing her thoughts" sometimes made her unappealing to others. For this reason, Catharine was "stigmatized as a '*bas bleu*'" (a bluestocking). Hale assured her readers that Catharine eventually learned to be more modest and conciliatory. After she stopped "hoarding mental gems and brooding over them," she became more invested in devoting her time and knowledge to others. This "perfection" in Catharine's character worked alongside her already eminent mind to make her an ideal woman: delicate, intelligent, diffident, and pleasing. Ultimately, Hale's literary "sketch" of Catharine Talbort provided a relatively conservative view of proper womanhood. But it was also a vision that made room for "intellectual" women, so long as they tempered their cultivated minds with modesty, a pleasant demeanor, and commitment to caring for others.

When women read articles in periodicals like the *Ladies' Magazine* or *Godey's Lady's Book*, they encountered physiognomical portrayals of female intellectuals that assured them of women's mental competence. Then, like popular authors, women used physiognomy in their daily lives, not only to evaluate the faces of other women, but also to debate the connections between female beauty and the

³⁶ "Catharine Talbort," *Ladies' Magazine* 1, no. 6 (Boston), June 1828.

female brain. When they did so, women created unique forms of scientific knowledge, refashioning existing discourses in ways that aligned with their own perceptions of the world. Through facial analysis, they reimagined the meaning and significance of female intellectual advancement.

“Beauty of Expression”

Among the most dedicated and creative female physiognomists in the early decades of the nineteenth century was a wealthy, young woman of the Boston elite: Anna Cabot Lowell. Between 1818 and her death in 1894, Lowell kept detailed diaries which together comprise more than twenty boxes of manuscripts. These journals detail her daily experiences, her religious opinions, and her intellectual development, as well as her interactions with the fashionable world of Boston society. As the journals reveal, Anna Cabot Lowell observed and regulated her own character with marked assiduity and regularly tried to discern both the moral and mental attributes of her friends, family members, and acquaintances.

Anna Cabot Lowell made important distinctions between facial features and facial expressions, a technique that helped her find laudable internal traits in women with less-than-pleasing external characteristics. On one instance, she described a young woman named Elvira Degin, writing that her guest was “certainly plain, yet she has occasionally such a sweet expression & her countenance is so faithful a mirror of what passes in her mind, that I look at her with far more pleasure than I do many beauties.” Similarly, on another occasion, Anna spoke of her friend Sarah Sullivan, saying it was a “privilege” to be in her company. Even though Sullivan was “without any pretensions to beauty,” her moral and mental merit made her worthy of

emulation. Sullivan's "traits of character," Lowell wrote, "are so depicted on her countenance, that I take far more pleasure in looking at her than I do in contemplating many handsome persons." On yet another instance, she evaluated her friend, Emmeline Austin, saying, "She is a most lovely girl. Without being handsome, she has a delicacy of features & a sweetness of expression which has all the charm of beauty, whilst she mingled grace, dignity, softness & sprightliness of her manners is peculiarly fascinating." Anna Lowell acknowledged that women like Sarah Sullivan, Elivra Degin, and Emmeline Austin were not traditionally attractive. Yet she admired them nonetheless. In Lowell's mind, it was intelligence and virtue that made women's countenances appealing.³⁷

By focusing on the expressive nature of faces, rather than their permanent traits, female physiognomists such as Anna Lowell found beauty in women that might have appeared homely at first glance. Catharine Maria Sedgwick, for instance, distinguished between stereotypically beautiful faces and countenances that conveyed more meaningful personality traits. Though she was skeptical about whether physiognomy could provide a truly scientific measure of character, Sedgwick nonetheless interpreted the faces of friends and loved ones on a regular basis. In 1822, evaluated her brother Robert's new fiancée, Elizabeth Ellery, writing that she had "a

³⁷ Anna Cabot Lowell regularly found appealing physiognomical characteristics in the faces of women she did not find pretty. For just a few instances of this pattern, see the descriptions of Frank Cunningham, Miss Ware, "Little Mary Anne," Lucilla Parker, Mrs. Peabody, and Elizabeth Jackson. See Anna Cabot Lowell's entries on: December 26, 1829 (Box 2, Volume 15); June 30, 1830 (Box 2, Volume 16); August 26, 1830 (Box 2, Volume 16); October 24, 1830 (Box 2, Volume 16); and March 8, 1832 (Box 3, Volume 20). Similarly, there are other instances where she remarks positively on an individual's beauty, but says that their expression leaves much to be desired. See, for example: April 14, 1829 (Box 2, Volume 13); all held in the Anna Cabot Lowell Diaries (1818-1894), Ms. N-1512, MHS. In one of her extract books, Anna Cabot Lowell included an "Extract from the private Journal of Lavater." Her inclusion of one of Lavater's maxims in her diaries—coupled with her physiognomic techniques of character detection throughout her life—make it almost certain that Anna Cabot Lowell either read or—at the very least—was familiar with the *Essays on Physiognomy*. See Anna Cabot Lowell Extract Book, n.d., Ms.N-1513, MHS.

very bright, intelligent face, without being handsome” and a perceptive eye, like that of a “seer” or “prophetess.”³⁸ She used similar language when describing the female intellectual Fredrika Bremer. “I like her more and more,” wrote Sedgwick, “and, as the soul comes out and overspreads the features with its beaming and beautiful light, I am ashamed to have called her ‘plain.’” Arguing that the soul shaped the form, Sedgwick suggested that the expression of moral or mental excellence could make even plain women appear pretty.³⁹

When evaluating Fredrika Bremer, Catharine Maria Sedgwick may have been recording her own unique opinion, but she also might have been building on themes she encountered in print culture. Ten years earlier, a similar anecdote had appeared in *Miss Leslie's Behaviour Book* (1839). In this guidebook for young women, Eliza Leslie described Bremer's appearance, writing that she had several “personal defects.” At the same time, Leslie pointed to her “broad and intellectual forehead,” a characteristic that physiognomists would have recognized as a signifier of superior genius. Leslie felt compelled to comment on Bremer's beauty, even as she tried to emphasize the qualities of her mind. She did so resourcefully, however, noting the difference between perfect beauty and physiognomical allure: “Physiognomists say that the eye denotes the mind, and the mouth indicates the heart,” wrote Leslie. “Truth it is, that with a good heart and a good mind, no woman can be ugly. ... An intelligent eye, and a good humoured mouth, are excellent substitutes for the want of regular beauty.” She argued, in other words, that even plain features could reveal

³⁸ “Catharine Maria Sedgwick to Frances Watson,” New York, February 1822, in *Life and Letters of Catherine M. Sedgwick*, ed., Mary E. Dewey (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1872), 149.

³⁹ “Catharine Maria Sedgwick to Katharine Maria Sedgwick Minot,” October 13, 1849, in *Life and Letters of Catherine M. Sedgwick*, 317.

intellect and character. Rather than invoke conventional notions of perfect female beauty, both Catharine Maria Sedgwick and Eliza Leslie judged Fredrika Bremer according to their own physiognomical standards. By the metrics they employed, Bremer could be beautiful, because the physiognomical charm of intellect in her countenance trumped the purely symmetrical features of less refined—if more immediately attractive—belles.⁴⁰

Determined to find “beauty” in the faces of morally and mentally distinguished women, female physiognomists often focused on the malleable and expressive elements of the human countenance. As Susan Fenimore Cooper once stated, “It will often happen that the most intelligent countenance is connected with ill-formed features, that the best expression of kindly feeling, or generous spirit, beams over the homely face.” In her mind, even people with supposedly damning countenances were capable of reformation, while individuals with the most promising faces could “sink to the lowest degradation of corruption.” It was not that Cooper and her contemporaries thought female beauty was inconsequential. Otherwise they would not have spent so much time analyzing it. For them, expressions simply mattered more than features. Some women took this rhetoric even further, arguing that “perfect beauty” and physiognomical beauty were different things entirely. The distinction, they claimed, would be visible to those who skillfully studied the countenances of others.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Eliza Leslie, *Miss Leslie's Behaviour Book: A Guide and Manual for Ladies* (Philadelphia: T.B. Peterson and Brothers, 1839), 321.

⁴¹ “Diary of Susan Fenimore Cooper,” October, 1849? in *Journal of a Naturalist in the United States* (London: Richard Bentley & Son, 1855), 2:105.

“Not a Perfect Beauty”

In 1853, Sarah Josepha Hale compiled a tome entitled *Woman's Record*, which provided biographical and physiognomical sketches of some of the world's most distinguished women. One of the most detailed physiognomical descriptions in the book focused on Catharine Macaulay, the British intellectual who had written *The History of England*. Hale attested that Macaulay was “delicate in her person and with features, if not perfectly beautiful, so fascinating in their expression, as deservedly to rank her face among the higher order of human countenances.” She went on to describe Macaulay in detail, concluding that “Her eyes were as beautiful as imagination can conceive; full of penetration and fire; but their fire softened by the mildest beams of benevolence; their colour was a fine dark hazel, and their expression the indication of a superior soul.” Macaulay's countenance, asserted Hale, was “peculiarly interesting.” She was not a perfect beauty, but she exhibited the physiognomical signs of an illustrious mind.⁴²

A similar article, published years earlier in the *Ladies' Literary Portfolio*, included a character sketch of a fictional female paragon, Miss Neville. According to the description, Miss Neville “was not what the gay world would call a perfect beauty,” but there was nevertheless “a bewitching expression in her countenance, which rendered her peculiarly interesting. Her eyes were a dark blue, and rather

⁴² Sarah Josepha Hale, *Woman's Record, Or, Sketches of All Distinguished Women* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1853), 395. Hale did not come up with this passage on her own. This same description of Macaulay's appearance was widely reprinted in the early decades of the nineteenth century. Hale may have copied it from Mary Hays, *Female Biography; or, Memoirs of Illustrious and Celebrated Women, of All Ages and Countries* (London: Richard Phillips, 1803), 293; Anna Maria Lee, *Memoirs of Eminent Female Writers, of All Ages and Countries* (Philadelphia: John Grigg, 1827), 92; or from the review of the *Memoirs of the Life of Catherine Macaulay Graham*, published in *The Evening Fire-Side; Or Weekly Intelligence* 1, no. 4 (Philadelphia), January 5, 1805. It also appeared in “Female Biography: Macauley,” *The Ariel: A Literary Gazette* 2, no. 9 (Philadelphia), August 23, 1828.

piercing in their look; her nose somewhat aquiline; her lips thin, and well formed.” In both instances, the authors juxtaposed “perfectly beautiful” features with the physiognomic indications of a “superior” mind and soul. Catharine Macaulay and Miss Neville were not faultless belles, that much was clear. But they both had “peculiarly interesting” countenances. This was hardly a disavowal of beauty’s importance. In both cases, the authors made it clear that their heroines were not homely. But both articles instructed their readers to look for the *proper* forms of female attractiveness. Through physiognomy, they promised, women would be able to see past exterior superfluities and instead discern the internal dispositions of their female contemporaries.⁴³

When popular authors distinguished between perfect and physiognomical beauty, American women listened. Lucretia Fiske Farrington, for example, copied segments from printed works about female beauty and female education into her notebook. In one extract from 1834, she recorded a section from *The Hungarian Brothers* (1807), a novel by the Scottish author Anna Maria Porter. Farrington focused on a portion of the book where the main characters physiognomically analyze a woman’s face to discern her mental and moral merits. The novel’s hero, Charles, boldly asserts that one of the female characters, Madame de Fontainville, is “*perfectly beautiful*,” but he suggests that her visage revealed a lack of “sense and sensibility.” While he acknowledged Fontainville’s “faultless beauty,” he reiterated his longing “to see those melting eyes sometimes change their character—to see them look as if she were thinking.” In the end, Charles declares that he is “not to be captivated by mere externals: I prefer eyes that make one forget their brightness in the brighter

⁴³ “Female Biography: A Sketch of Miss Neville’s Character,” *The Ladies’ Literary Portfolio: A General Miscellany Devoted to the Fine Arts and Sciences* 1, no. 20 (Philadelphia), April 29, 1829.

intellect transmitted through them.” Charles insisted that he valued mental beauty “before every other species” and, for this reason, he could not love any woman whose countenance did not exhibit both intellect and virtue. He suggested, moreover, that men should conduct physiognomic analyses of their future partners to avoid becoming blindly enamored with their physical beauty alone.⁴⁴

Somewhat ironically, Anna Maria Porter’s novel rebuked men for being obsessed with women’s physical features, even as it suggested that men could best discern the commendable traits of women’s characters by studying their countenances. Lucretia Fiske Farrington then copied this segment of the novel in her notebook, demonstrating her awareness of how popular authors were using physiognomy to discuss concepts like female beauty, female intellect, and the gendered relationships between women and men. As Farrington’s manuscript demonstrates, educated women had ready access to stories that contrasted stereotypically beautiful belles with mentally refined women.

Like popular authors, educated American women often emphasized the difference between a “perfectly beautiful” face, on the one hand, and a countenance capable of transmitting intellect or virtue, on the other. They did so particularly when evaluating the faces of female companions whose minds they admired. Sarah Connell, a young woman from New Hampshire, engaged in this process when evaluating the visage of a woman named Sophronia in 1808. “Her modest virtues do not immediately unfold themselves to the eye of a stranger,” Connell wrote, admitting, “She is not beautiful.” Even so, Connell contended that “the inward beauties of her mind are conspicuous to her friends” and argued that “the sweet

⁴⁴ See Lucretia Fiske Farrington, “Notebook for 1834,” BA; and Anna Maria Porter, *The Hungarian Brothers* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, and Orme, 1807), 1:99-100.

benevolence exprest in her countenance, makes her an interesting object.”

Acknowledging that Sophronia was not pretty, Connell nevertheless found merit in her visage, seeing it as the external manifestation of the “inward beauties of her mind.”⁴⁵ When later describing her future husband’s mother, Connell made a similar claim: “She is not handsome, but has ‘somthing[sic] than beauty dearer,’ in her countenance. She appears to live very genteelly, and to have a cultured mind.”

Although Mrs. Ayer was not traditionally attractive, Connell insisted that her “whole appearance is prepossessing.” There was something “dearer” than beauty in her face, something that conveyed deeper and more substantial qualities.⁴⁶

In addition to distinguishing between perfectly beautiful women and those with more estimable faces, American women expended much intellectual energy trying to distinguish between “good” and “bad” kinds of beauty. The most common strategy was to contrast two types of women. On one side was the beautiful and fashionable—but frivolous and coquettish—belle. On the other side was the cultivated woman. The cultivated woman perhaps had irregular or unsymmetrical

⁴⁵ *Diary of Sarah Connell Ayer*, February 15, 1808, (Portland, ME: Lefavor-Tower Co., 1910), 35.

⁴⁶ *Diary of Sarah Connell Ayer*, July 28, 1809, 114. Connell was quoting from an extended poem by James Thomson, *The Seasons*, originally published between 1726 and 1730. Thomson wrote before Lavater’s *Essays on Physiognomy* initiated the physiognomical craze in Europe and the United States, but the notion that the face reflected people’s inner nature was an old one. Many women would have been familiar with physiognomic ideas, even before the publication of Lavater’s *Essays on Physiognomy*, but most did not start providing detailed analyses of facial features and expressions until the late eighteenth century. For Thomson’s poem, see Thomson, *The Seasons* (Edinburgh: Alexander Donaldson, 1768 [first ed., 1726]). Amelia Opie’s novel also repeated the phrase. See *Adeline Mowbray*, 2nd ed. (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, and Orme, 1805), 47. It was also reprinted in numerous periodicals, including, but not limited to: “To the Editor of the *Lady’s Magazine*,” *The Lady’s Magazine: Or, Entertaining Companion for the Fair Sex* 26, no. 10 (London), October 1795, 452; “Josephine: A Tale of Truth,” *The Ladies’ Literary Cabinet* 1, no. 23 (New York), October 16, 1819; “Aphorisms, Thoughts, and Opinions on Morals,” *The Atheneum; or, Spirit of the English Magazines* 11 (Boston), September 15, 1822; E.B.W. “Flirtation,” *Ladies’ Magazine* 1, no. 8 (Boston), August 1828; and L.H.M., “The Mother and Daughter,” *Atkinson’s Casket* 11 (Philadelphia), November 1833.

features, but she also had an “interesting,” “engaging,” or “intelligent” physiognomy. Popular authors conveyed this message through short stories in which they compared two fictional characters. In 1834, Emma C. Embury—a contributor to the *New York Mirror* and *Ladies’ Magazine* and author of didactic short stories—used a fictional tale to contrast two imaginary women: Aunt Mabel and Aunt Silly. Both were old maids, but the two were opposites when it came to moral and mental cultivation. Aunt Silly, as her name suggests, valued nothing but fashion, frippery, and her own beauty. Aunt Mabel, on the other hand, was a woman of good sense, intellectual sophistication, and moral quality.⁴⁷

As the story makes clear, “perfect beauty” was not the same as a pleasing or intelligent physiognomy. “Mabel Morrison could never have been styled a beauty,” wrote the author, “but if delicate features, dark grey eyes shaded by long black lashes, and a countenance expressive of the most winning gentleness, be at all attractive, then was she certainly possessed of that which is far rarer than beauty—I mean loveliness.” The author then distinguished between the two sisters in old age. Aunt Silly had once been stunning, but her beauty had faded. She now had so many wrinkles and so few teeth that her face resembled a “musty parchment.” Aunt Mabel, by contrast, had never been as perfectly beautiful as Aunt Silly in her prime. But her countenance had always been the mirror of her meritorious mind. This meant that Aunt Mabel’s face remained lovely and attractive throughout her entire life:

Few are so unskilled in physiognomy as to require to be
told that the most beautiful faces are not always the
loveliest. A mouth may be as perfect as if formed by the

⁴⁷ Mrs. Emma C. Imbury, “Characters...No. II,” *American Ladies’ Magazine* 7, no. 3 (Boston), March 1834.

chisel of a Phidias, and yet, if unadorned by the smile of good humor it will never be lovely — an eye may be as brilliant as the diamond, yet if it lack the *inward* light of intellect, or if it be overhung by the scowling brow of habitual anger, it will never awaken the feeling of tenderness. A face may possess a combination of features, which, according to the rules of art, constitute the perfection of beauty, but it may be utterly deficient in loveliness; and a face utterly destitute of regular beauty may, if intelligent and amiable, be exceedingly *lovely*.

The message was clear: Women should aspire to be both lovely and beautiful. But they should cultivate the “beauties of the mind,” rather than the “beauties of the person.” If plain in body, they should be attractive in mind. This mental excellence would then reflect itself on their facial features, giving them a pleasing and lovely physiognomy.⁴⁸

Just as Emma Embury had distinguished between Aunt Mabel and Aunt Silly, female physiognomists used similar techniques to identify virtuous and intelligent women and contrast them with their less impressive counterparts. Harriet Story White

⁴⁸ Embury, “Characters...No. II.” Other authors made similar argument. James Garnett drew a distinction between beauty of the mind and “personal attractions,” writing, “Without this moral beauty and loveliness, by which I mean a countenance and manner irradiating all the amiable qualities of the heart, mere regularity of features and symmetry of form, are scarcely worth a passing thought.” Yet he still argued that the countenance and manner would be capable of “irradiating” mental beauty. See Garnett, *Seven Lectures on Female Education* (Richmond: T.W. White, 1824), 70. Similarly, in *Lectures on Female Education*, James Burton wrote: “Beauty alone will gain admiration. But to please, by manners and conversation, independent of exterior form, has something more active in it’s[sic] nature, and must proceed from a mind animated by thought or sentiment.” See John Burton, *Lectures on Female Education and Manners, Second Edition* (London: J. Johnson, 1793), 141.

Paige, for instance, compared the faces of Jane Seymour and Caroline Norton, commenting that they were both granddaughters of the “celebrated Sheridan.” While saying that both women excelled in “personal beauty,” she wrote that Mrs. Norton’s beauty was of “a more intellectual, less regular, and of a decidedly higher order than Lady Seymour’s.” She argued that Mrs. Norton had “a large mouth, betokening energy, and decision,” while Lady Seymour had a “regular loveliness.” In other words, Lady Seymour might have been more of a perfect beauty with symmetrical features, but Mrs. Norton’s face conveyed intellect, energy, and decisiveness.⁴⁹

Margaret Bayard Smith engaged in a similar process when comparing the minds and appearances of Thomas Jefferson’s daughters in 1802. When describing Maria Eppes, she wrote that her subject was “beautiful,” with a face demonstrating “simplicity and timidity personified.” Even though Martha Randolph was “rather homely” in comparison to her sister, Smith still found her the more “interesting” of the two. Smith insisted that Randolph was the superior sister, because she had a “countenance beaming with intelligence, benevolence and sensibility.” Her face conveyed merit, claimed Smith, and “her conversation fulfills all her countenance promises.”⁵⁰ Although women like Harriet White Paige and Margaret Bayard Smith believed that appearances correlated with inner nature, they also distinguished between the “perfect beauty” that accompanied more “regular features” and the beauty that resulted from an “intellectual” or “dignified” countenance.

⁴⁹ “Diary of Harriet White Paige,” June 1839, in *Daniel Webster in England: Journal of Harriette Story Paige, 1839* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, & Co., 1917), 65.

⁵⁰ Margaret Bayard Smith, “Letter from Margaret Bayard Smith to Susan B. Smith,” December 26, 1802, in *The First Forty Years of Washington Society in the Family Letters of Margaret Bayard Smith*, ed., Gaillard Hunt (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1906), 34.

Because women valued inner characteristics, they privileged things like virtuous conduct and a carefully cultivated mind. Despite prizing these moral and mental traits over personal beauty, they did not stop at examining the “manners” or “conversation” of the women they encountered; they also looked for deeper qualities in their countenances. These women imagined that attributes such as generosity, modesty, and intelligence were not simply internal traits; they were also physical realities. Ultimately, by stressing the difference between “regular beauty” and physiognomical beauty, women made two seemingly antithetical arguments. On one level, they suggested physical attractiveness did not matter. At the same time, they unequivocally indicated that appearances were important. They reconciled these claims by insisting that so long as one was looking for the proper features in the face—traits like intelligence, virtue, and good sense—then it was entirely acceptable to analyze the appearances of others.

Intellect Beautifies

In 1823, the Bostonian poet Sarah Wentworth Morton published a collection entitled *My Mind and Its Thoughts*, which included a chapter on “Physiognomy.” Morton explicitly engaged with the physiognomic ideas of Johann Caspar Lavater, but she was not terribly impressed by his corpus of work. Referring to the *Essays on Physiognomy* as a “specious” set of guidelines, she criticized the “various twistings” of his logic. But even as Morton criticized Lavater, she never condemned his central premise. She agreed with him on the idea that external traits conveyed internal merit, merely critiquing his tendency to treat physiognomy as an infallible scientific system with universally applicable rules. For her, it was possible to study a person’s

countenance without “critical regard to the complex laws of Lavater.” Facial analysis itself was useful, she proposed, but it was a far more complicated and flexible process than Lavater’s “altogether systematic and artificial” maxims suggested.⁵¹

One of Morton’s biggest critiques of physiognomy lay in Lavater’s obsession with studying the permanent and unmovable features of the human countenance. Morton was more concerned with expressions than features, and she believed that inner transformations could lead to shifts in people’s appearances. In her own remarks, she insisted “that the moral habits, the disposition, the understanding, and the passions, give *expression*, and in effect, stamp *character* on the features, without changing the tints, or altering the strong lineaments of original nature.” In other words, the face did, indeed, convey inner characteristics, but the bone structure was not as revelatory as Lavater had proclaimed. As people cultivated certain parts of their disposition, these moral and mental elements would quite literally “stamp *character* on the features,” even if they did not change the skeletal conformation of one’s countenance. Expressions were more important than features, and faces could change as one’s inner qualities dictated.⁵²

Most of Wentworth’s female contemporaries did not publish their ideas about physiognomy so publicly, but that did not stop them from embarking upon similarly creative and idiosyncratic methods of facial analysis. Many of these women were far less invested in studying the unmovable elements of people’s skeletal structures than in tracking how people’s bones, muscles, and expressions had transformed over time. If a polished mind could imbue an otherwise homely face with physiognomical

⁵¹ Sarah Wentworth Morton, *My Mind and Its Thoughts, in Sketches, Fragments, and Essays* (Boston: Wells and Lilly, 1823), 186-187.

⁵² Morton, *My Mind and Its Thoughts*, 186-190.

loveliness, then it stood to reason that countenances could also transform. Education, in other words, might transform women's physical features, making them more beautiful as they improved upon their reasoning capacities.

Anna Cabot Lowell articulated this idea on several instances, but particularly when analyzing the face of Elizabeth Jackson, a young woman in her social circle. Elizabeth "charms me more and more," she gushed, claiming that she "never saw such a change in anyone, as there has been in her." While Elizabeth Jackson had always been a respectable young woman, she had previously been "embarrassed & awkward." Recently, though, she had "enriched her mind & cultivated her taste." This internal alteration was accompanied with a shift in appearance. She admitted that Elizabeth was "not in the least regularly handsome," but as for "her expression," Anna insisted that she "scarcely ever saw its like." Elizabeth, she argued, now appeared "angelick—every emotion of her soul is painted upon her countenance" and her improved character could be seen, "shin[ing] through her face in a most heavenly manner." In making this assertion, Anna melded a description of Elizabeth's outward transformation with a discussion of her inner refinement. By enriching her mind, Elizabeth had beautified her body.⁵³

Lowell engaged in a similar practice when describing the physical, moral, and intellectual changes she observed in her cousin Mary Lowell. Recalling their last meeting, Anna Lowell remembered being unimpressed. Fortunately, though, her cousin's unappealing personality traits seem to have dissipated by the fall of 1825, for in September, Anna declared that a "considerable change took place in her." To

⁵³ Anna Cabot Lowell diaries, March 8, 1832 (Box 3, Volume 20), Ms. N-1512, MHS.

illustrate this shift, she turned first to a description of Mary Lowell's physical transformation:

“In the first place, she grew up from a little, puny thing, with pale cheeks, ~~though bright~~ eyes, to be a tall, fine-looking young lady, with eyes beaming with intelligence, & cheeks whose ‘mantling blood in ready play, rival the blush of rising day:’ indeed, she has become really beautiful.”

In attempting to describe Mary's moral metamorphosis, Anna thought to begin first with a delineation of how her physical features had changed since their last meeting. Though Mary had previously demonstrated a “cultivated” mind, her eyes were now “beaming with intelligence.” Though she had previously been a “puny thing” with pale cheeks, she was now “a tall, fine-looking young lady.”⁵⁴

In providing this account of Mary's external alterations, Anna was also describing a change in Mary's character. Previously, she had barely been comfortable admitting that her cousin's eyes were “bright” (as indicated by her efforts to cross out the word). But when she described Mary in 1825, she employed the phrase “eyes beaming with intelligence.” In doing so, Anna tapped into a larger cultural tradition—evident in the period's newspapers, novels, and periodicals—which conflated eyes and intelligence. An 1831 periodical description of Irish “authoresses and heroines,” for example, described the writer Margaret Derenzy as a woman, “tall and graceful,” with “fine black eyes, beaming with intelligence.” Her eyes, the author asserted,

⁵⁴ Anna Cabot Lowell diaries, September 17, 1825 (Box 2, Volume 10), Ms. N-1512, MHS.

“threw a halo of intellectual expression over [her] countenance.”⁵⁵ Another periodical, described the appearance of a fictional figure by calling her “beautiful beyond description,” a paragon of pious femininity whose “expressive blue eyes, beaming with intelligence, declared the mildness of her disposition.”⁵⁶ And, in the *Memoirs of Sir Joshua Reynolds* (1817), Leonardo Da Vinci is described as having had “a form perfect in proportion” and “eyes beaming with intelligence and fire.”⁵⁷ Descriptions like these proliferated throughout the early decades of the nineteenth-century, both in published works and in women’s private writings. This fascination with “beaming” eyes reflected a broader cultural attachment to physiognomy, as well as the prevalent idea that the eyes were the “window of the soul.”⁵⁸

As women described the faces of their female contemporaries, they used similar phrases. In the autograph album of a Philadelphia woman named Elizabeth Clemson, one of her friends wrote a poem about Elizabeth’s “beaming refinement of mind,” which “spread o’er the whole of [her] face.” Margaret Bayard Smith had also

⁵⁵ “Biographical Sketches of Irish Authoresses and Heroines. No. IV.: Margaret Derenzy,” *The Irish Shield: A Historical and Literary Weekly Paper* 3, no. 3 (Philadelphia), January 28, 1831.

⁵⁶ “A Young Lady of this City,” “For the Juvenile Port-Folio,” *The Juvenile Port-Folio, and Literary Miscellany* 1, no. 57 (Philadelphia), November 13, 1813.

⁵⁷ James Northcote, *Memoirs of Sir Joshua Reynolds* (Philadelphia: M. Carey & Son, 1817), 6. This work also discusses the role of physiognomy in portraiture and contains physiognomical discussions of figures such as “the Honourable Mrs. P.,” John Milton, Raphael Urbin, and various figures of antiquity.

⁵⁸ For just some examples of the eye being described as the “window” of the soul, heart, or mind, see Richard Brown, *An Essay on the Truth of Physiognomy and its Application to Medicine* (Philadelphia: Thomas T. Stiles, 1807), 23; Sarah Anderson Hastings, *Poems on Different Subjects* (Lancaster, PA: William Dickson, 1808), 102; A.Q.T., “The Blind Girl,” *The Juvenile Miscellany* 2, no. 1 (Boston), March 1827; “The Mirror of the Graces,” *Lady’s Book* (New York), February 1832; “Art. III. Hints to Students on the Use of the Eyes,” *The Biblical Repository* 3, no. 11 (Andover, MA), July 1, 1833; “The Five Senses,” *The Family Magazine; or, Monthly Abstract of General Knowledge* 3 (New York), May 1836; The Editor, “Hints to Youthful Readers,” *Ladies Repository, and Gatherings of the West* 4 (Cincinnati), September 1844; and Joseph Turnley, *The Language of the Eye: As Indicative of Female Beauty, Manly Genius, and General Character* (London: Partridge and Co., Paternoster Row, 1856), 19.

described her meeting with Thomas Jefferson's daughter by writing that Martha Randolph had a "countenance beaming with intelligence."⁵⁹ Remember, too, that Margaret Fuller's students used similar language within the classroom. Mary Ware Allen, for instance, described a fictional heroine by writing that "Intellect beamed from her large, brilliant eyes." And, when Anna Gale imagined the countenance of the Empress Josephine, she declared that she "could see beaming from her large, soft, blue eyes, an expression of mild benignity."⁶⁰ Similarly, Catharine Maria Sedgwick wrote to her niece Katharine about the actress, Ellen Tree, saying that she had "a face beaming with expression" and a countenance that reflected her frank and natural disposition. When viewed in this context, it seems clear that Anna Lowell was not merely describing the appearance of her younger cousin when she used the phrase "eyes beaming with intelligence." She was also participating in a much broader cultural conversation about the connections between facial beauty and moral and intellectual excellence.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Margaret Bayard Smith, "Letter from Margaret Bayard Smith to Susan B. Smith," in *The First Forty Years of Washington Society*, 34.

⁶⁰ See Mary Ware Allen, School Journal, May 11, 1838, Mss. Octavo Volume 25, in Allen-Johnson Family Papers, 1759-1992, AAS; and Journal of Anna D. Gale, February 28, 1838, AAS.

⁶¹ "Catharine Maria Sedgwick to Katharine Sedgwick Minot," New York, April 16, 1837, in *Life and Letters of Catharine M. Sedgwick*, 264. For other women who provided descriptions of eyes and faces which were "beaming" with traits of mind or soul, see the Papers of Lucy Chase, Folder 3, Diary Fragments, 14 May 1844 to June 1844, in Chase Family Papers, AAS; Elizabeth C. Clemson, Commonplace Book, 1824-1828, HSP; "Letter LXXI. Mr. Saville, Buxton, June 15, 1793," in *Letters of Anna Seward: Written Between the Years 1784 and 1807* (Edinburgh: George Ramsay & Company, 1811), 3:262. For other published articulations of this theme in women's magazines and novels, see "For the Juvenile Port-Folio, By a Young Lady of the City," *The Juvenile Port-Folio, and Literary Miscellany* 1 no. 57 (Philadelphia), November 13, 1813; "Resignation, An Original Tale: Chapter XV," *The Ladies' Literary Cabinet* 2, no. 4 (New York), June 3, 1820; E.B.W., "Flirtation," *Ladies' Magazine* 1, no. 8 (Boston), August 1828, 361; "Miscellaneous Communications: Distinguished Persons in England," *Christian Spectator* 2, no. 11 (New Haven), November 1, 1828; and Sarah Josepha Hale, *Northwood: Or, Life North and South* (Boston: Bowles and Dearborn, 1827), 1:79 and 2:102.

Even more explicitly, Lowell indicated her entanglement in the literary and scientific culture of the day when she described Mary's cheeks, "whose 'mantling blood in ready play, rival the blush of rising day.'" Here, she quoted directly from the same Walter Scott poem that Hannah Wharton had copied into her journal years earlier in 1813. By quoting Scott's physiognomical phrases, both these young women indicated their awareness of popular novelists and poets, as well as a familiarity with the Lavaterian principles. Not only did they suggest that inner goodness had the power to "beam" through otherwise unimpressive external traits, they also suggested that education or experience could literally transform one's appearance, manifesting itself through changes in the physical form.⁶²

Female writers who were invested in the intellectual advancement of other women repeatedly made this argument in both private manuscripts and published works. In the novel, *Northwood* (1827), Sarah Josepha Hale described a woman's intellectual maturation, writing, "Her mind had been developed and disciplined, and its pure free light seemed to irradiate her face with intelligence, and gave a lustre to her eyes."⁶³ In a similar way, the female educator Almira Phelps suggested that women's status as the intellectual equals of men required a new conceptualization of female beauty. "Women are now looked upon as rational beings," she proclaimed. "Even beauty has learned, that connected with ignorance and folly, she must give

⁶² For instances in which female authors play with Walter Scott's phrase, "mantling blood in ready play," to describe women's moral character, see Amelia Opie's novel, *Adeline Mowbray*, 47; "Louisa Worthington," *Ladies' Magazine and Literary Gazette* 3, no. 1 (Boston), January 1830; and Almira Hart Lincoln Phelps, *Ida Norman; Or, Trials and Their Uses* (Baltimore: Cushing & Brother, 1848), 239. For American women who do the same in their manuscripts, see Sally Bridges, Autograph Book, 1849-1863, Mss. Am.8702, HSP; Journal of Hannah Margaret Wharton (after February 15, 1813), 43-44, HSP; and "Diary of Sara Jane Lippincott," February 1853, in *Haps and Mishaps of a Tour of Europe* (Boston: Ticknor & Co., 1854), 233.

⁶³ Hale, *Northwood*, 5th ed. (New York: H. Long & Brother, 1852 [1827]), 403.

precedence to the plainest features irradiated with intelligence and good sense.” Later in the book, Phelps returned to this theme: “As to personal beauty,” she wrote, “it depends so much upon the expression of mental qualities,” that if women wanted to appear beautiful, they had to first embark upon an internal makeover, manufacturing attractiveness from the inside out.⁶⁴

Nor were educated women and female authors exceptional in arguing that intellectual cultivation could magnify women’s beauty. Beginning largely in the 1790s, and continuing throughout the nineteenth century, male advocates of women’s higher education made similar claims. In 1792, one author argued that the “beauty is little more than the emanation of intellectual excellence.” He contended that the “pleasing and softer passions” had a “mechanical effect upon the aspect.” “Beauty, therefore, depends principally upon the mind, and consequently may be influenced by education.”⁶⁵ Similarly, in *Advice to Young Ladies on the Improvement of the Mind* (1808), Thomas Broadhurst argued that “a well-cultivated mind . . . by a sort of magic power, imparts to every feature of the moral character an indescribable charm,” writing that it was visible “in the very looks and language of the countenance.” In his

⁶⁴ Almira H. Lincoln Phelps, *Lectures to Young Ladies: Comprising Outlines and Applications of the Different Branches of Female Education* (Boston: Carter, Hendee, & Co., 1833), 118, 199.

⁶⁵ “Influence of Moral Sentiment in Producing Personal Beauty,” *The Universal Asylum and Columbian Magazine* (Philadelphia), May 1792. This article was reprinted numerous times under a series of different titles. See “The Art of Being Pretty,” *Weekly Museum* 7, no. 360 (New York), April 4, 1795; “The Art of Being Pretty,” *The Philadelphia Minerva* 1, no. 10, April 11, 1795; “Personal Beauty Produced by Moral Sentiment,” *The New York Weekly Magazine; Or, Miscellaneous Repository* 1, no. 43, April 27, 1796; “Personal Beauty Produced by Moral Sentiment,” *The Philadelphia Minerva* 2, no. 70, June 4, 1796; “Personal Beauty Produced by Moral Sentiment,” *The Baltimore Weekly Magazine*, January 28, 1801; M.S., “Personal Beauty Produced by Moral Sentiment,” *The New England Quarterly Magazine* 2, no. 3 (Boston), October-December 1802; “The Ladies’ Toilette: Feminine Beauty,” *The Freemasons’ Magazine and General Miscellany* 1, no. 1 (Philadelphia), April 1, 1811; and “Feminine Beauty,” *The Monthly Magazine and Literary Journal* 1, no. 4 (Winchester), August 1, 1812.

worldview, a refined intellect conferred “graces, even upon those to whom nature has denied them.”⁶⁶ In an address to students at a female academy in 1841, the speaker Samuel Galloway similarly urged women to cultivate their minds and improve their beauty. He asked, “Is she not lovelier, whose heart is mellowed with the modesty of true science—whose eye kindles with the mingled fire of elevated thought and pure feeling, and whose countenance is invested with those radiant lines of thought, which like stars on the broad canopy of heaven, tell of a bright spirit within?” For Galloway, engagement with “true science” and the cultivation of “elevated thought” could beautify young women’s faces.⁶⁷

In both their published works and private manuscripts, people concurred that moral and mental development might enrich women’s personal charms. Writing to her family in 1844, Rebecca Gratz mused about the importance of female beauty. She acknowledged that individuals often waxed poetic about the beauties of the mind, even though most women desired the physical features that society deemed attractive. At the same time, she made her own encomiums to inner beauty, postulating that “an expression of goodness is so necessary to beauty, that I believe it is independent of features in a great degree.” For this reason, Rebecca Gratz believed that “an amiable & good mother, may always beautify her daughters by bringing them up well.”⁶⁸ In a

⁶⁶ Thomas Broadhurst, *Advice to Young Ladies on the Improvement of the Mind and the Conduct of Life*, 2nd ed. (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, and Orme, 1810 [first ed., 1808]), 84. This book went through at least nine English editions between 1808 and 1822. Pieces of it were also reprinted in John Platts, ed., *The Female Mentor; Or, Ladies’ Class-Book* (Derby, England: Henry Mozley, 1823). Lucretia Farrington copied this passage into her commonplace book. See Farrington, “Notebook for 1834,” BA.

⁶⁷ Samuel Galloway, “An Address,” *Ladies Repository, and Gatherings of the West* 1 (Cincinnati), March 1841. This was also reprinted in the April 1841 edition of the *Ladies Repository, and Gatherings of the West*.

⁶⁸ “Letter from Rebecca Gratz to Benjamin Gratz and Ann Boswell Gratz,” May 13, 1844, Gratz Family Papers, 1750-1974, Series III, Mss.Ms.Coll.72, APS.

similar way, Mary Putnam Jacobi acknowledged it was important for women to be attractive, but she also claimed that “at twenty-five, beauty is of less consequence than at sixteen, because the character has become more formed and positive, and moulds the body surprisingly.” In other words, she believed that character could fashion the body over time. If women cultivated the correct personality traits, their inherited beauty would be less important than the impressions their behavior left on their faces.⁶⁹

The belief in the mind’s capacity to alter the visage continued throughout most of the nineteenth century, even as anatomists and physiologists were increasingly claiming that all individuals inherited their minds and bodies and could do little to alter them. Americans phrenologists became some of the most enthusiastic advocates of the notion that character developments could influence the countenance. In 1859, Daniel Jacques insisted that “intellectual cultivation” would lead to “an evident change in the expression of the eye, a softening of the lines of the eyebrows, and a lateral expansion of the nose from the bridge downward.” In addition to these shifts, he argued that “the lips become more gracefully arched and firmer; the chin more delicate and clearly defined, and the lines of the face, as a whole, more diversified and beautiful.” Binding mental enrichment to facial attractiveness, he wrote: “The higher the culture the more varied will be the expression of the countenance, and the more capable of the highest beauty.”⁷⁰

⁶⁹ “Letter from Mary Putnam Jacobi to Victorine Haven Putnam,” August 02, 1868, in Ruth Putnam, ed., *Life and Letters of Mary Putnam Jacobi* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1925), 188.

⁷⁰ Daniel Harrison Jacques, *Hints Toward Physical Perfection: Or, The Philosophy of Human Beauty* (New York: Fowler and Wells, 1859), 90.

In their letters, diaries, and autograph albums, women were rarely as specific as people like Daniel Jacques in describing how mental “culture” affected the form. But many nonetheless believed that mind and matter were connected, and they assumed that a positive change in one’s mental characteristics could result in physical beautification. A woman named Bathsheba Crane, for instance, made a similar argument. In 1880, she published a volume of reminiscences about her life, which included copies of the letters she had written between the 1840s and 1870s. In one letter, she declared that “the face, like a dial, is a revelation of character.” She then launched into a detailed discussion of how the mind molded the form, proclaiming that “every human being carries his life in his face, and is good-looking or the reverse, as that life has been good or evil.” Quoting the Lord Lytton, she wrote: “It is said, ‘men and women make their own ugliness.’” In other words, she suggested that both mental and physical characteristics were mutable and fundamentally dependent on one’s character traits:

On our features the fine chisels of thought and emotion are forever at work. The passions of the soul—love, hate, revenge, jealousy, tenderness, and sorrow—steal into the lines of the face, are stamped in the deep iris of the prophetic eyes, and breathe in the magic power and pathos of the wonderful voice. Where a fine organization and deep sensibility accompany the practice of intellectual pursuits, the soul revels in light and shadow upon the face, ... A soul full of sunshine

will light up the face and give it a charm mere beauty
could never impart.

For women like Bathsheba Crane, the mind reflected the character, but the body was not a hard, inflexible shell that displayed one's hereditary capacities. It was, instead, an impressionable and dynamic entity, continuously changing according to the dictates of one's internal faculties and personal decisions.⁷¹

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Unlike the white male physiognomists who argued in favor of women's mental inferiority, most American women never argued that there was one scientific standard of feminine loveliness, nor did they believe that beauty of features always corresponded with a refined character. Formal practitioners of physiognomy insisted that individuals could use it to empirically interpret unalterable facial features. By contrast, educated women believed it was just as important to analyze people's moveable facial expressions as it was to study the more permanent bones and structures of the face. Bending the "rules," they insisted on a flexible model of facial analysis, rather than an inflexible interpretation of the skeletal structure.

In a similar way, these women often distinguished between the "perfect beauty" of stereotypically attractive women and the *physiognomic* appeal of those with commendable moral and mental traits. Most of them thought it improper to evaluate other women based on beauty alone. But they found it perfectly acceptable to analyze female physiognomies, so long as they were looking for something deeper—traits such as intelligence, benevolence, virtue, or honesty. By distinguishing between "regular beauty" and physiognomical beauty, educated women insisted on

⁷¹ Bathsheba H. Morse Crane, *Life, Letters, and Wayside Gleanings, for the Folks at Home* (Boston: J.H. Earle, 1880), 264.

the value of mind over matter, even as they methodically studied the bodies of their female contemporaries for external signs of their internal worth.

Finally, by reinterpreting the precepts of the physiognomic method, many educated American women suggested that intellect was not determined merely by heredity, but also by intellectual cultivation. Describing both mind and matter as transformable, they suggested that moral and mental cultivation could improve the features of the female face, making women more attractive as their minds became more cultivated. These women studied faces to understand human nature, but for them, bodies did not determine destiny. Seizing physiognomic ideas as their own, they argued for the eminence of women's minds and the improvability of their brains.

These women employed physiognomy to better understand their world. Yet it was rarely to solidify ideas about sex and gender by rooting difference more securely in the body. Physiognomy, instead, allowed women to cultivate unique systems of knowledge and interpretation. It created space for them craft an expertise in reading and understanding moral and intellectual value in others. By simultaneously affirming and destabilizing the connection between the mind and the body, women constructed an intellectual paradigm in which facial features revealed female character, but could also be used to argue for women's moral and mental cultivation. In doing so, their practical uses of this discipline conflicted with scientific prescriptions concerning the intellectual and physiological differences between the sexes, even as they turned to the body to answer their questions about the human mind.

Chapter 5: Finding Virtue in the Face of Vice

Prisoners, Prostitutes, and the Politics of Moral Reform

In a letter to her lover in 1845, Margaret Fuller described a visit to a group of female felons who had recently been released from prison. She took special interest in one of the young women, suggesting that her epistolary companion would have admired the girl's face: "Her eyes were brown and very soft," she wrote, "around the mouth signs of great sensibility." Despite the woman's beauty and refined delicacy, she appeared to be suffering from consumption. This caused Fuller to lament the degraded position of formerly incarcerated women. She nonetheless saw these individuals as reformable, writing that she often liked female felons "better than most women I meet, because, if any good is left, it is so genuine, and they make no false pretensions." After meeting with the prisoners, she made a public appeal for funds provide the women temporary asylum and find them useful employment.¹

Sara Jane Lippincott—a nineteenth-century writer, abolitionist, and women's rights activist—developed a different interpretation of the criminals she encountered in her travels. Like Fuller, she used physiognomy to interpret inmates' characters. But unlike Fuller, she viewed them as "hard, Heaven-forgotten looking creatures." When visiting the Newgate Prison on a trip to London, she wrote that her "very soul shuddered and sickened at the sight of beings seemingly so helpless, hopeless, and redemptionless." For Lippincott, these prisoner's faces reflected their moral depravity: "I think I never saw human eyes which had so lost every ray of the primal soul light, seeming to give out only a deathly, pestilential gleam from moral vileness

¹ *Love-Letters of Margaret Fuller, 1845-1846* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1903), 113.

and corruption—faces into which all evil passions were so stamped as by the iron hoof of Satan himself.” In her mind, evil could be ineradicably imprinted on a criminal’s countenance.²

The two women’s divergent uses of physiognomy shed light on a set of larger debates that preoccupied middle-class reformers in the United States. Were prisoners redeemable? Or did they constitute a unique class of corrupt and incorrigible beings? Was vice itself an innate propensity? Or were most social problems precipitated by environmental forces beyond people’s control? Antebellum reformers developed a diverse assortment of answers to these questions. Even so, many of them were united in their assumption that the countenance reflected character. Just as educated American women had used physiognomy to interpret the faces of women and men in their own social circles, they also studied the visages of criminals, prostitutes, and otherwise marginalized individuals. If Margaret Fuller discovered sensibility in one female felon’s mouth, then Sara Lippincott found “evil passions” in the eyes of Newgate’s prisoners. Both women, despite their differences, relied on physiognomy to understand vice and how it might be combatted.³

By exploring how reformers evaluated the countenances and characters of the “rabble,” this chapter reveals how scientific discourses infiltrated intimate interactions between different social groups in antebellum America. It discloses how

² “Diary of Sara Jane Lippincott, July 1852,” in *Haps and Mishaps of a Tour of Europe* (Boston: Ticknor & Co., 1854), 45.

³ For scholarship on shifts in criminality, poverty, and personal responsibility in early national America, see John Alexander, *Render Them Submissive: Responses to Poverty in Philadelphia, 1760-1800* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980); Michael Meranze, *Laboratories of Virtue: Punishment, Revolution, and Authority in Philadelphia, 1760-1835* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Peter Okun, *Crime and the Nation: Prison Reform and Popular Fiction in Philadelphia, 1786-1800* (New York: Routledge, 2002); and Jonathan Simon, “Rise of the Carceral State,” *Social Research* 74, no. 2 (Summer 2007), 476-481.

facial analysis mediated relationships between prisoners and reformers, between medical practitioners and their patients, and between prostitutes and the economically privileged activists who tried so hard to “save” them. In the antebellum decades, physiognomic ideas spread far beyond elite scientific treatises and the fictional stories that appeared in novels, newspapers, and popular periodicals. As a practical technology of character detection, this popular science shaped how people perceived their contemporaries and how they made meaning from the mental, moral, and physiological differences that supposedly distinguished Americans from one another. Middle-class reformers, especially, relied on physiognomy to evaluate prostitutes, prisoners, and poor people. As they articulated their political priorities, conducted their professional duties, and contemplated their personal interactions with the lower classes, they analyzed heads and faces.

By the 1840s and 1850s, Americans practiced a form of physiognomy that they had cobbled together from an eclectic mix of intellectual traditions: an old commitment to Enlightenment empiricism, a new belief in biological determinism, and the Second Great Awakening’s doctrine of human perfectibility. On top of this foundation, they added the insights of phrenology, which had become increasingly popular in the 1830s. Phrenologists were particularly concerned with cranial analysis, but many were equally invested in analyzing foreheads and facial features. Antebellum Americans thus continued to see the human countenance as the physical feature that best revealed the inner workings of the mind. Embracing both physiognomy and phrenology, they employed them as synergetic systems for reading their contemporaries.

Through their uses of facial analysis, Americans attempted to reconcile two apparently incongruous understandings of human nature. On the one hand, both physiognomy and phrenology promised the ability to peer into people's souls, providing a technique for seeing individuals' innate propensities in the bones and sinews of their bodies. On the other hand, many people viewed the mind and body as malleable entities that were subject to change and capable of cultivation. They believed, in other words, that environmental forces—paired with people's personal choices—could transform the mind and alter the countenance. Within this context, physiognomic analysis had a prophetic ability to predict people's future behavior, but it was not necessarily deterministic. One's body did not dictate one's destiny, but it might provide hints about a person's prospects and possibilities.⁴

Physiognomy's tenets were ultimately flexible enough to account for the fact that all humans were perfectible beings. Because its doctrines did not doom any individual to perpetual degradation, moral reformers found in it a convenient justification for their political crusades. At the most fundamental level, activists had to believe that all people could attain redemption. Otherwise, what was the point of their life's work? Yet physiognomy also provided them with a way of reifying

⁴ Several scholars have highlighted the contradictions between environmentalism and biological determinism that were inherent in phrenology, but few have pointed out that these inconsistencies first emerged in physiognomic discourses in the late eighteenth century. See Peter McCandless, "Mesmerism and Phrenology in Antebellum Charleston: 'Enough of the Marvellous,'" *The Journal of Southern History* 58, no. 2 (May 1992), 204; Roger Smith, *The Norton History of the Human Sciences* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), 395-396; Stuart Ewen and Elizabeth Ewen, *Typecasting: On the Arts and Sciences of Human Inequality* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2006), 163-190; Cynthia S. Hamilton, "'Am I Not a Man and a Brother?' Phrenology and Anti-Slavery," *Slavery and Abolition* 29, no. 2 (2008): 173-187; Christopher J. Beshara, "Moral Hospitals, Addled Brains, and Cranial Conundrums: Phrenological Rationalisations of the Criminal Mind in Antebellum America," *Australasian Journal of American Studies* 29, no. 1 (July 2010): 36-60; and Carla Bittel, "Woman, Know Thyself: Producing and Using Phrenological Knowledge in 19th-Century America," *Centaureus: An International Journal of the History of Science and its Cultural Aspects* 55, no. 2 (May 2013): 104-130.

existing hierarchies by rooting them more securely in the human body. In the minds of many reformers, most criminals had vicious countenances, retreating foreheads, vacant eyes, and hardened features. Predictably, they only saw the visual signs of remorsefulness in the lineaments of those they deemed capable of redemption. All others, it seemed, deserved their degraded position because of their bad choices and biological propensities.

“The Impress of Villany”

As early as the 1790s, American authors began using facial analysis to suggest that criminality manifested itself in the human countenance. Lavater had included brief remarks on the subject in the *Essays on Physiognomy* (1775-78). “Whoever has frequently viewed the human countenance in houses of correction and jails,” he argued, “will often scarcely believe his eyes, will shudder at the stigmas with which vice brands her slaves.”⁵ Numerous American authors then took up this argument, claiming that criminality was visible in the visage. In 1796, for instance, the *Weekly Museum* published a short story entitled “Physiognomy” in which a character managed to save his own life by detecting “the formation of some shocking design” in the visage of a homicidal visitor.⁶ Similarly, in an oration delivered to a group of freemasons in 1798, the speaker R.W. James Mann described a “murderous culprit” who was unable to escape “retributive justice” because his face exhibited the “conspicuous mark” of criminality. In one of the story’s footnotes, the author wrote:

⁵ Johann Caspar Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy; for the Promotion of the Knowledge and the Love of Mankind*, trans. Thomas Holcroft (London: G.G.J. and J. Robinson, 1789), 1:205.

⁶ “Physiognomy,” *Weekly Museum* 9, no. 14 (New York), September 24, 1796.

“Whoever attentively reads Lavater on physiognomy, will be convinced, that man carries the traits of his immoral part, upon his countenance.” This tale assured anxious listeners that criminals simply could not hide their true natures. They would always be identifiable, for their faces would give them away.⁷

One story in *The Literary Mirror* similarly featured a narrator who was convinced that criminality exhibited itself in facial features. Although he found the *Essays on Physiognomy* to be helpful, he did not think the volumes spent enough time talking about criminal countenances. For that reason, he spent two years collecting “the silhouette of every offender that came under my jurisdiction, carefully delineated,” and then compiled “an appendix to the Lavaterian codex.” This man believed the proper identification of criminals constituted the most important branch of the human sciences, for it was “far more important to distinguish at first sight the house-breaker, the highwayman, the adulterer, or the murderer ... than to analyze [sic] the poetical, heaven-directed ethereal soul.”⁸ Decades later, the New York physician J.F. Daniel Lobstein would make a similar argument in a treatise on medical physiognomy. The “habit of crime” was visible in the eyes, he claimed, following this assertion with a set of physiognomical instructions for determining a person’s guilt or innocence in the courtroom.⁹ In these instances, popular and scientific writers alike suggested that there was something unique about criminal faces. If only people could

⁷ R.W. James Mann, *An Oration: Addressed to the Fraternity of Free Masons* (Wrentham, M.A.: 1798), 9-10.

⁸ “(Inclosed),” *The Literary Mirror* 1, no. 10 (Portsmouth), April 23, 1808.

⁹ J.F. Daniel Lobstein, M.D., *A Treatise upon the Semeiology of the Eye, For the Use of Physicians; and of the Countenance, for Criminal Jurisprudence* (New York: C.S. Francis, 1830), 35-36. See also pages 130-134.

learn to read offenders' appearances properly, they might be able to prevent their diabolical designs and mitigate social suffering.¹⁰

Early national authors also used physiognomy to distinguish between the "virtuous" and the "vicious" poor, claiming that a careful observer would be able to discern refinement in even the most hapless characters. In 1796, Matthew Carey published a story about a fictional, poverty-stricken woman whose husband had just died. Consumed by sorrow and preoccupied with the care of her young children, the woman did not notice the man who was furtively staring at her. "I had therefore full leisure to exercise my skill in physiognomy," Carey's narrator mused. The woman's dress was both "homely and coarse," which "excited the idea of an uncultivated owner." But her face was different. According to the narrator, "Less skill than that of Lavater would suffice to discover marks of refinement and tenderness there, that might have done honor to elevated situations." Carey encouraged his readers to revel in the fictional woman's distress: "Check not your tears, tender reader—Let them flow freely." After all, this moralistic tale was intended to evoke sympathy in its readers, assuring them of their own refined sensibilities. But the story also had a

¹⁰ For other discussions of the criminal physiognomy in the early republic, see Henry Bunbury, "The Wheelbarrow," *Daily National Intelligencer* (Washington, D.C.), September 24, 1816; "Horrible Crime," *Ladies Port Folio* 1, no. 22 (Boston), May 27, 1820; "Physiognomy of Murderers," *Republican Star* 25, no. 19 (Easton, MD), December 23, 1823; Geryn, "Adventures of a Rambler, No. 1," *The American Monthly Magazine* 1, no. 4 (Philadelphia), May 1824; "Execution," *The National Advocate* (New York), September 27, 1824; Washington Irving, *Tales of a Traveller* (London: John Murray, 1824), 166; B.B.T., "The Stealing Propensity," *The Knickerbocker; or New York Monthly Magazine* 4, no. 3 (New York), September 1834; Emma Embury, "Newton Ainslie: A Sketch," *Lady's Book* (New York), August 1839; "Phrenological Examination of Prisoners," *American Phrenological Journal* 3, no. 2 (Philadelphia), November 1, 1840; and Lorenzo Niles Fowler, *The Illustrated Phrenological Almanac for 1852* (New York: Fowlers and Wells, 1852), 17. In 1835, Godey's *Lady's Book* published a critique of those who too quickly drew physiognomic judgements when evaluating criminals. The author did not challenge the legitimacy of physiognomy, writing, "I quarrel not with the principles of this science, as they are laid down by learned professors." But the author did urge caution and asked people to interrogate their own physiognomic assumptions before publishing them in the papers. See "Moral and Personal Deformity; A Hint to Those Who Frame Advertisements for Apprehending Offenders," *Godey's Lady's Book* (New York), September 1835.

deeper function: it conjured up a tangible image of virtuous poverty and provided readers with a template for identifying this trait in the human body. Carey's character may have been clad in ragged clothing, but her homely attire could not obscure a refined visage. She was so virtuous, in fact, that her neighbors raised over sixty dollars for her support. A woman such as this, the tale suggested, was one who deserved the benevolence of others.¹¹

Through stories about vicious criminals and virtuous poverty, Americans assured themselves that moral character was a corporeal trait. These themes continued in popular culture during the antebellum era. Periodical authors, for instance, told stories of poor people whose faces exposed their internal refinement, allowing prescient observers to see past their outwardly degraded circumstances. In a fictional account from 1840, published in the *Farmers' Gazette*, a wealthy man describes walking into a shop to get his shoe mended. Observing the shopkeeper's face, the author thinks, "What an expansive forehead! What an intelligent countenance! What an expressive eye! There is truth in physiognomy, exclaimed I to myself—that fellow's brains are not made of green peas!" After this initial exultation, the visitor became despondent. What a shame to have a man with so much intellect confined to so menial a position. He then inquired of the cobbler, "are you happy here?" To his

¹¹ Matthew Carey, "A Fragment," *The New York Magazine, or Literary Repository* (New York), August 1796. For a similar story that positively contrasts the physiognomy of a poor but virtuous washerwoman with the insipid countenances of elite young ladies, see "Estelle Aubert: A Tale," *American Ladies' Magazine* 7, no. 7 (Boston), July 1834. For scholarship on how touching stories were supposed to inspire "sympathy" and "sensibility" in middle-class readers, see Sarah Knott, *Sensibility and the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), especially chapters one and two; Nicole Eustace, *Passion is the Gale: Emotion, Power, and the Coming of the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008); Julia A. Stern, *The Plight of Feeling: Sympathy and Dissent in the Early American Novel* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1997); and G. J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

surprise, the cobbler responded that he was entirely satisfied with his lot in life. He did not need money or possessions, for his contentment depended on inner peace.¹²

Such saccharine narratives valorized bourgeois work ethics, soothing readers who might have been unnerved by the upheavals of the market revolution and the proliferation of economic inequality it precipitated. If poor men could be as happy as their wealthy counterparts, then inequality might coexist with social harmony. At a more fundamental level, though, this story suggested that internal worth was a physical trait, visible in a person's "expansive forehead," "intelligent countenance," and "expressive eye." These stories suggested that physiognomic virtue was not limited to the upper classes, but they also promised elite and middling Americans that facial analysis would help them discern precisely who among the rabble might be worthy of their esteem.¹³

Christian reformers were especially anxious to distinguish between the virtuous and vicious poor. They were determined to spread God's love, but only to those who were eager for salvation. Harriet Wadsworth Winslow, for instance, was a

¹² "From the St. Louis Bulletin," *Farmers' Gazette, and Cheraw Advertiser* (Cheraw, S.C.), September 23, 1840.

¹³ For other stories in which elite or middle-class individuals try to distinguish between the virtuous and vicious poor through physiognomy, see T.S. Arthur, "Giving and Withholding; Or What Is Charity?" *Godey's Lady's Book* 23 (New York), September 1841; "Sketcher," "The Purse: An American Tale," *The Rural Repository* 18, no. 25 (Hudson), May 21, 1842; "A New Contributor," "The Alms House," *The Knickerbocker; or New York Monthly Magazine* 23, no. 3 (New York), March 1844; Reverend Edward Price, "Sick Calls: from the Diary of a Missionary," *Brownson's Quarterly Review* 6, no. 1 (Boston), January 1, 1852; and George Combe, "Criminal Legislation and Prison Discipline: Chapter X," *American Phrenological Journal* 22, no. 6 (Philadelphia), December 1855. For secondary scholarship on reformers' attitudes toward the "virtuous" v. "vicious" poor, see Paul Lewis, "'Lectures or a Little Charity': Poor Visits in Antebellum Literature and Culture," *The New England Quarterly* 73, no. 2 (June 2000): 246-273; Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), especially chapters one and two; and Monique Bourque, "Poor Relief 'Without Violating the Rights of Humanity,'" in Billy G. Smith, ed., *Down and Out in Early America* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004), 189-212.

Protestant reformer who visited families to discern their suitability for aid. In 1840, the American Tract Society published her letters, in which she recounted her reform efforts. In one instance, Winslow described meeting a woman who professed that she had been eagerly reading the Bible. The reformer did not believe her. Using her physiognomical skills, Winslow declared, “her countenance indicated the lowest grade of vice.” She then felt vindicated when the poor woman finally “confessed she was a sinner.” Even so, Winslow held out hope for her soul.¹⁴ The *American Monthly Magazine* recounted a similar tale in 1837. The author claimed there were three major types of poor people: “the virtuous poor, the vicious poor, and those who are poor from sheer shiftlessness.” According to the article, the “miserable monotony of a vicious poverty” led people to develop a “stupid state of heart” that could be “read in the very countenance.” Internal viciousness, the author assured readers, would reveal itself in the “wooden features” and “vacant stare” of unrepentant paupers.¹⁵

As the market economy expanded in the first half of the nineteenth century, many white middle-class Americans began confronting what Karen Haltunnen has referred to as a “crisis of social identity.” To establish their place within a rapidly shifting social, political, and economic environment, middle-class Americans looked for ways to establish a unique cultural identity and exclude those whom they believed did not belong. In this context, hypocrites and liars were a threat to the social order. These were the people that hid their inner character, deceived others, and employed trickery to get ahead. These anxieties about confidence men, painted women, and

¹⁴ “Letter from Harriet Wadsworth Winslow, September 03, 1817,” in *Memoir of Mrs. Harriet L. Winslow, Thirteen Years a Member of the American Mission in Ceylon* (New York: American Tract Society, 1840), 111.

¹⁵ “A Doctor’s Ana, No. 1,” *The American Monthly Magazine* 10 (New York), October 1837.

vicious paupers facilitated a growing fascination with physiognomy. Particularly after it became harder to determine an individual's social class through traditional methods (such as clothing, community reputation, or social performance), Americans tried to root character more firmly in the body. Convincing themselves that one's inner nature was visible in the visage, they used facial analysis to solidify class distinctions, reifying hierarchy in a rapidly evolving world that threatened its existence.¹⁶

Some antebellum authors went so far as to argue that social class itself was visible in the lineaments of the human countenance. The *Christian Disciple and Theological Review*, for instance, argued that a person's social position affected their appearance: "Occupations and professions give to those engaged in them a specific, moral, and intellectual physiognomy," the author wrote, arguing that "rank, wealth, and power" produced internal changes that molded the countenance.¹⁷ An influential antebellum phrenologist, physiognomist, and popular author, Daniel Jacques, made a similar claim: "each profession and occupation has a tendency to impress its peculiar lines upon the physical system of those habitually exercising it; so that we may generally know a man's trade by the cut of his features." Jacques nevertheless insisted that mental and facial features were malleable. Referring to the United States as the "land of political equality," he claimed Americans were "constantly rising from lower to higher social grades, acquiring at the same time, measurably at least, the physical

¹⁶ For a discussion of physiognomy, class, and the market economy, see Lukasik, *Discerning Characters*, especially chapter one. For Karen Haltunnen's discussion of physiognomy and the market revolution, see *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830-1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 40-54. For her discussion of female beauty and the middle class' obsession with reading and displaying the female face, see pages 71-84.

¹⁷ "Tracts Published by the Christian Tract Society, London, and Republished by Wells and Lilly," *The Christian Disciple and Theological Review* 2, no. 8 (Boston), March/April 1820.

traits of the rank which they assume.” For Jacques, social status was a physiological attribute, imprinted in the lines of people’s visages. At the same time, he argued that mental eminence and physical beauty were acquired traits, accessible (at least in theory) to all Americans. Jacques assumed that as individuals attained “education and political enfranchisement,” their faces would become more beautiful. His version of physiognomy, in other words, controlled for class mobility. This was not biological determinism. He did not think that people’s innate characteristics dictated their destinies. But Jacques’ theory was nonetheless rooted in the idea that physical appearances reflected people’s current social status.¹⁸

If middling and elite Americans spoke of the faces of working-class people to emphasize their own distance from the lower orders, then they also sometimes used facial analysis to bridge social divides. For many antebellum Americans, a person’s countenance was important, but it was not necessarily determinative. Faces revealed character, but mental deficiencies could be overcome through education. In 1858, Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas, a plantation mistress, teacher, and social activist from Georgia, described a young working musician named Tipton by writing, “My attention was attracted to his fine forehead (indicating so much talent) but the lower part of the face” was apparently “so animal” that it reminded her of the “English poorer classes.” In this examination, she built on the work of transatlantic physiognomists, who suggested the face could be divided into three main segments: the forehead, which reflected intellectual capacity; the nose and cheeks, which indicated moral character; and the chin, mouth and jaw, which reflected mankind’s

¹⁸ Daniel Harrison Jacques, *Hints Toward Physical Perfection: Or, The Philosophy of Human Beauty; Showing how to Acquire and Retain Bodily Symmetry, Health, and Vigor, Secure Long Life, and Avoid the Infirmities and Deformities of Age* (New York: Fowler and Wells, 1859), 114-117.

animal propensities. Ella Thomas never argued the man's alleged defects were insurmountable. In fact, her next comment was: "What a pity it is that education is not more generally diffused." For her, Tipton's lower face and jaw identified him as a poor workingman, yet his high forehead indicated both existing talent and the ability to improve. Although Thomas imagined that the lower classes exhibited both facial and intellectual deficiencies, she was confident that these problems could be overcome through universal education.¹⁹

Numerous historians have argued that by the middle decades of the nineteenth century, American scientists and politicians increasingly described social inequality as a natural reality: the inevitable result of physiological differences between different groups of people. But these historiographical narratives also obscure a more complicated reality. Although many Americans did, indeed, look for the origins of social hierarchies in the human form, they did not necessarily believe that bodies were permanent and inflexible shells that invariably reflected people's innate characteristics.²⁰ In many ways, physiognomy was the perfect science for grappling

¹⁹ "Letter from Ella Gertrude Thomas, November 14, 1858," in *Secret Eye: The Journal of Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas, 1848-1889*, ed., Virginia Ingraham Burr (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 165. For a similar example, see "Diary of Sarah Pugh, December 1851," in *Memorial of Sarah Pugh: A Tribute of Respect from Her Cousins* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co., 1888), 45. When traveling to Rome in 1851, Pugh discussed the appearances of "the people and the peasantry," drawing clear class distinctions in facial features: "At first the people struck me as homely," she wrote, "but, now that I know them better, I am often charmed with their fine faces, particularly their hair, forehead, and eyes." Yet, she also was sure to add, "the lower part of the face is not so good."

²⁰ For foundational scholarship on biological determinism, see William Stanton, *The Leopard's Spots: Scientific Attitudes Toward Race in America, 1815-59* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960); Winthrop Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (1968); George Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914* (1971); Carroll Smith-Rosenberg and Charles Rosenberg, "The Female Animal: Medical and Biological Views of Woman and Her Role in Nineteenth-Century America," *The Journal of American History* 60, No. 2 (September 1973): 332-356; Stephen J. Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1981); and Cynthia Eagle Russett, *Sexual Science: The Victoria Construction of Womanhood* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989). For more recent works that employ these arguments, see Rosemarie

with the contradictions at the heart of the American meritocratic ideal. On one level, people believed all individuals were capable social advancement and personal refinement. But they also wanted to highlight the currently degraded circumstances of certain individuals. Physiognomy—at least as many antebellum Americans practiced it—seemed to provide “evidence” that the lower classes were less beautiful and intelligent than the middling and upper orders.

At the same time, physiognomy did not necessarily preclude the possibility that working Americans might elevate themselves and attain beauty in the process. Jacques’ vision of physiognomy, for instance, was rooted in two seemingly oppositional understandings of human nature. He argued that membership in the lower classes would produce a set of involuntary corporeal manifestations. But he also insisted that upward mobility would lead to increased mental cultivation, eventually resulting in a more pleasing appearance. According to the tenets of this worldview, both the brain and the body were malleable entities, simultaneously shaped by a set of inherited propensities and environmental forces.²¹

Zagarri, *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007); and John Carson, *The Measure of Merit: Talents, Intelligence, and Inequality in the French and American Republics, 1750-1940* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), especially chapter two.

²¹ See Jacques, “Social Conditions and Occupations,” in *Hints Toward Physical Perfection*, 112-129. As John Carson has shown, Americans were committed to the notion that “any individual, through hard work and determination, could manifest talent and achieve success, celebrating this possibility as the clearest indication of the meritocratic nature of American politics and society.” See Carson, *The Measure of Merit*, 74.

“Ruins of the Most Splendid Temple”

When talking about vice and the groups of people who fell victim to it, antebellum Americans invoked complex—and often contradictory—understandings of mental and bodily difference. They argued that virtue was both a state of mind and a physically discernible characteristic. But they also claimed that a life of crime or dissipation could “stamp” certain physical features upon offenders. The Massachusetts reverend Cyrus Bartol, for instance, imagined that moral vices disfigured people’s appearances. As a Unitarian minister, he visited sick parishioners and provided charity for the poor. One day in 1834, he met with a young woman who had been “seduced” and abandoned “by one who promised marriage.” Bartol lamented how sickly she looked, but also stated that the woman’s “lineaments indicate the *material* for a fine strong character,” and pointed out that there were still “remains of beauty in her countenance.” He nonetheless regretted that her misfortunes had wreaked havoc upon her mental and corporeal beauty. Comparing her atrophied countenance to the “ruins of the most Splendid Temple,” he lamented, “How sad the spectacle of a mind whose native capacities are thus crushed!” In Bartol’s worldview, both minds and faces could change over time, responding to the vagaries of personal experience. This convinced him that his parishioner’s “seduction” had initiated a form of moral decay that transformed her body into “ruins.” Remnants of her previously virtuous character were still discernible in the “lineaments” of her countenance, but the evidence of her former virtue was barely visible.²²

²² Throughout his notebook, Bartol engaged in extended meditations where he compared physical beauty with “mental loveliness” or the “Beauty of Mind.” He likewise debated the merits of physiognomy and phrenology, contemplating how they might be used together. His discussion of the phrenologist Johann Spurzheim is especially detailed and thoughtful. See Cyrus A. Bartol Diary, June 16, 1834, Ms. N-1812, Massachusetts Historical Society [hereafter cited as MHS].

Just as they sought to discern the physical symptoms of vice in people's faces, moral reformers also relied on facial analysis to make artificial decisions between individuals who might be capable of reformation and those who were not. In 1844, the Prison Discipline Society compared the countenances of two villainous men with the visage of an unfortunate young mother who had been caught up in the criminal escapades of an unsavory associate. "The impress of villany [sic] was deep on the countenances of the white men," the report noted. "One was a thief, the other a counterfeiter." By contrast, when the authors then described the female prisoner, they wrote that she "showed in her countenance no marks of peculiar depravity. Her crime was being associated with a black man, who stole from, and set fire to, a building in which no one lived." Condemned by the crimes of someone else, the poor woman now faced the death penalty and her innocent infant confronted the prospect of a life without its loving mother.²³

As a way of showing that criminals did not constitute a monolithic class of deplorable individuals, reformers often highlighted the stories—and appearances—of previously virtuous but ill-fated offenders. John Luckey, an administrator at the Sing Sing Prison outside New York City, described one particularly penitent prisoner as having a "manly and dignified bearing, intellectual countenance, and serious deportment."²⁴ In a similar way, the Reverend Ansel D. Eddy published a religious pamphlet analyzing the appearance of Jacob Hodges, a reformed criminal. After

²³ "Mr. Barrett's Journal, containing Observations on Prisons and Asylums for the Insane, in the Western and Southern States," in *Annual Report of the Board of Managers of the Prison Discipline Society* (Boston: 63 Atkinson Street, 1844), 431.

²⁴ John Luckey, *Life in Sing Sing State Prison, as Seen in a Twelve Years' Chaplaincy* (New York: N. Tibbals & Co., 1860), 145. Luckey was no fan of phrenology, but even he used physiognomic language to describe prisoners.

meeting Hodges for the first time, Eddy remembered that he “had a full view of his broad African face, every line of which spoke the language of a mind and heart of no ordinary character. There was a subdued, tender, yet cheerful aspect to his countenance, as if fully conscious of what he had been, yet blessed with the conviction of a new heart, and in hope of a better state yet to come.” As Hodges’ appearance apparently suggested, he was not only a repentant criminal, but also a living, breathing example of God’s forgiving grace.²⁵

Similar descriptions appeared in the nation’s popular magazines. In 1839, Emma C. Embury published an article in *Godey’s Lady’s Book* where she analyzed the head and face of the fictional Newton Ainslie, a previously respectable man who accidentally maimed a young boy and landed himself in jail. Although the prisoner’s body was both “shrunkened” and “attenuated” (he was a hunchback), he apparently exhibited “a head so fully developed, it would have thrown a phrenologist into ecstasies.” Newton Ainslie’s “forehead was high and broad, his eyes piercing and intelligent, his features delicately formed.” The man did not look appear to be a traditional offender, and as it turns out, he was far more than a “common felon.” In addition to demonstrating “remarkable intelligence,” he was “a good classical scholar” and mathematical genius. Ainslie had been a good—but ill-tempered—man who gave into his basest passions and destroyed his own life. Embury published this story as a cautionary tale: Anyone could succumb to the temptations of vice without proper self-regulation. Even the most intelligent individuals were not exempt. Her

²⁵ Ansel D. Eddy, *Black Jacob, A Monument of Grace: The Life of Jacob Hodges, An African Negro, Who Died in Canandaiuga, NY* (Philadelphia: American Sunday-School Union, 1842), 37.

story made it clear that people could improve, but it also warned that if Americans were not careful, they might change for the worse.²⁶

If reformers recognized penitence in the faces of ideal prisoners, then they also discerned traces of virtue in the faces of individuals who had given themselves over to vice. The New York Female Moral Reform Society, for example, regularly visited prostitutes in hopes of “redeeming” them. In the Society’s magazine, *The Advocate of Moral Reform*, one reformer recounted an encounter with a woman “of the town” on her approaching death. The prostitute did not think herself worthy of redemption. The reformer was nonetheless determined to fight for the final salvation of her soul and set about scrutinizing her face for signs that the woman was capable of reform. The initial analysis seemed promising. “Her personal appearance very much surprised me; and her intense anguish of spirit awakened all my sympathy,” the author recalled. “She was evidently no ordinary woman. Her stature was tall, her figure, though large, was elegant, and of beautiful symmetry. Her eye was dark, full, and piercing; her forehead high, and her whole countenance strong marked, and indicative of a high order of intellect.” These physiognomical signals hinted that she once held the capacity for virtue and intelligence. But to the reformer’s vexation, the woman proved resistant to salvation. Predictably, she eventually died a miserable death, suffering alongside her brothel “associates.” This was not a hopeful tale of

²⁶ Emma Embury, “Newton Ainslie: A Sketch,” *Lady’s Book* 18, no. 8 (Philadelphia), August 1839. This story also had a religious message. Part of the reason that Ainslie allowed himself to be consumed by bitterness and swept up in a fit of passion was because he abandoned God to follow the blasphemous teachings of Thomas Paine. While in prison, however, he rekindled his Christianity.

redemption. Like Emma Embury's story, it warned readers that even the most sophisticated individuals were not immune to vicious inclinations.²⁷

The same magazine published an analogous account in 1852, which followed a member of the New York Female Moral Reform Society as she visited the syphilitic ward of a women's hospital. Voyeuristically, the reformer guided her readers through the hall, describing the women she encountered along her path: "There, on that pillow near us, is a bloated, burning face, in whose delicate tissues the disease is burning like a consuming fire," she wrote. "Beyond, is a haggard, though still delicate woman, on whose features ineffaceably are written the lines of passion and pain." For the author, it seemed obvious that these women were suffering from the corporeal ravages of a devastating disease. But she was less interested in the women's bodily suffering than in their sexual misconduct, asserting that their mental and physical ailments could be traced back to the folly of "ungoverned passion." She argued that most of the patients were "brutal, sodden, animal in their expression," claiming that there were some "from whose features vice and brutality have worn every trace even of womanhood." If she admitted that sickness was the immediate cause of their physical degradation,

²⁷ Z.P., "Retribution," *The Advocate of Moral Reform* 3, no. 4 (New York), February 15, 1837. For scholarship on the New York Female Moral Reform Society and the *Advocate of Moral Reform*, see Therese L. Lueck, "Women's Moral Reform Periodicals of the 19th Century: A Cultural Feminist Analysis of *The Advocate*," *American Journalism* 16, no. 3 (Summer 1999): 37-52; Nicolette Severson, "Devils Would Blush to Look": Brothel Visits of the New York Female Moral Reform Society, 1835 and 1836," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 23, no. 2 (May 2014): 226-246; Lori D. Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics, and Class in the 19th Century United States* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 13-14, 19-21, 27, 56-59, 62, 113-114, and 128; and Stansell, *City of Women* (1987). For the role of women in prison reform, see Estelle Freedman, *Their Sisters' Keepers: Women's Prison Reform in America, 1830-1930* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1984). For moral reformers interactions with prostitutes in a different context, see Jeffery S. Adler, "Streetwalkers, Degraded Outcasts, and Good-for-Nothing Huzzies: Women and the Dangerous Class in Antebellum St. Louis," *Journal of Social History* 25, no. 4 (Summer 1992): 737-755.

then she nonetheless claimed that it was the women's moral turpitude that precipitated their corporeal decay.²⁸

Like her contemporaries, this female reformer relied on physiognomic techniques to describe the faces, bodies, and minds of the patients she encountered. On these women's countenances, she detected clear signs of visceral agony. But she also argued that their visages reflected something "keener than the pang from tortured nerve and burning tissue." It was, in her opinion, the physical sign of debilitating guilt. One patient particularly caught the reformer's eye, causing her to declare, "it was evident, at a glance, she must have been of a very different class from her companions." Although the woman exhibited the physical symptoms of syphilis, her "crime had not worn away noble features." Her forehead remained "full and finely arching, the head high, complexion soft and delicate, unnatural intensity of expression, and the lips firm and fixed, all the lines of her face fine and noble, and every feature expressing the proud and refined woman." The woman's distinguished visage indicated an unrealized possibility for a promising life. But tragically, she had succumbed to sexual passion. Now she would pay the price of this moral failure with her life. In instances like these, reformers did not use physiognomy to argue that prostitutes had innate criminal propensities. Instead, they relied on it to uncover traces of virtue in the faces of "fallen" women. They then relayed these women's stories,

²⁸ C.L., "The Last Home of the Living Lost," *Advocate of Moral Reform and Family Guardian* 18, no. 16 (New York), August 15, 1852. Stories like this one adhered to narrative conventions that Karen Haltunnen has called the "pornography of pain." Beginning in the mid-eighteenth century, new medical and social theories encouraged elite and middle-class individuals to cultivate a sense of "sympathy" for the suffering. But this often translated into voyeuristic and sensationalistic descriptions of individuals in anguish. These stories were supposed to invoke sensibility in those who read them. But they also threatened to inure people to the suffering of their less privileged contemporaries. See Karen Haltunnen, "Humanitarianism and the Pornography of Pain in Anglo-American Culture," *American Historical Review* 100, no. 2 (April 1995): 303-334.

framing them as cautionary tales. Vice could annihilate anyone, they warned. Every woman must be vigilant.²⁹

Ultimately, the New York Female Moral Reform Society sought to alleviate the sufferings of marginalized women, but their main goal was to obliterate the moral corruption at the heart of society. When they sent visiting reformers to brothels, poor homes, workhouses, and hospital wards, their primary aim was not to palliate the physical pain of tormented victims. Instead, the reformers used their magazine to provide harrowing accounts of women in distress, warning those who were still virtuous. These accounts were nonetheless predicated on the idea that human nature was perfectible, vice was avoidable, and redemption was possible. Certain people might inherit vicious propensities, but that did not mean they must become immoral in the future. By contrast, even initially respectable individuals might suddenly find themselves on a precipitous descent into the pits of vice. These ideas reflected a new understanding of crime: a theory of wrongdoing that rooted bad behavior in the moral failings of individuals. It was a philosophy had been decades in the making by the mid-nineteenth century.

“Perhaps His Face Tells a Lye”

Beginning in the late eighteenth century, both Americans and Europeans started reconceptualizing criminal behavior and searching for ways to grapple with it more effectively. For much of the colonial period, Americans punished lawbreakers through spectacles of public punishment. They hanged offenders, whipped them in the town square, cropped their ears, or trapped them in stockades during public rituals

²⁹ C.L., “The Last Home of the Living Lost.”

of suffering and humiliation. In the decades following the American Revolution, however, Americans became uncomfortable with such visible displays of state-sanctioned cruelty. Throughout the nation, reformers began arguing that criminals—along with other troublesome individuals—might instead be removed from society and reformed. Ideally, these offenders would occupy prisons, work houses, and asylums. During this period of temporary sequestration, they would labor to improve themselves, attain salvation, and develop the moral character necessary for eventual republican citizenship.³⁰

By the early decades of the nineteenth century, the strategic containment of problematic citizens had largely replaced the spectacle of public punishment. This transformation was inspired by the humanitarian impulses of the Enlightenment and the egalitarian spirit of the American Revolution, but it was also entangled with the Second Great Awakening's emphasis on human perfectibility. Protestant reformers, in particular, argued that criminals needed—and were capable of—redemption. Together with Quaker activists, they began crafting a new system based on the notion that crime was best prevented through moral reform, rather than physical punishment. Even so, punitive measures never disappeared from the criminal justice system. Corporeal punishments merely moved inside the prison, where the lurking eyes of a

³⁰ Michel Foucault famously chronicled this transition in his pathbreaking work, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon, 1977). For an examination of how this process played out in the American context, see Meranze, *Laboratories of Virtue*; Marvin E. Schultz, "'Running the Risks of Experiments': The Politics of Penal Reform in Tennessee, 1807-1829," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 52, no. 2 (Summer 1993): 86-97; and Adam J. Hirsch, "From Pillory to Penitentiary: The Rise of Criminal Incarceration in Early Massachusetts," *Michigan Law Review* 80, no. 6 (May 1982): 1179-1269; and Jacqueline Thibaut, "'To Pave the Way to Penitence': Prisoners and Discipline at the Eastern State Penitentiary, 1829-1835," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 106, no. 2 (April 1982): 187-222. For more recent work on prisons and prisoners in the early republic, see Jen Manion, *Liberty's Prisoners: Carceral Culture in Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).

voyeuristic public could no longer witness them. Rather than eliminate pain entirely, reformers argued for the power of “redemptive suffering” behind institutional walls. Their new establishments would be called penitentiaries: a name reflecting this new preoccupation with personal penitence.³¹

To rehabilitate the unredeemed, reform-minded citizens tried to guide them on the path toward salvation. In addition to visiting the homes of the poor, invading brothels and public houses, and building “Houses of Refuge,” many elite and middling Americans trekked to prisons to visit prisoners, prostitutes, and otherwise “debauched” or “fallen” individuals. Penitentiaries likewise hired prison chaplains and “moral instructors” to guide inmates on their path toward redemption. These reformers were committed, in principle, to the notion that all people could change. But they also sought to distance themselves from those they endeavored to improve. If reformers saw certain individuals as redeemable, they described others as inherently hopeless. In doing so, they contributed to the idea that a degraded criminal class existed within society: a group of people who were, by their very natures, different from truly respectable citizens. For this reason, they tried to develop metrics for distinguishing between the potentially virtuous and the permanently vicious. While deeming the first group worthy of rehabilitation and aid, they dismissed the second group as people who deserved only condemnation.

The success of these reform crusades depended on the whims of the people subjected to containment. Effective prison management, in other words, relied on

³¹ For the concept of “redemptive suffering,” see Jennifer Graber, *The Furnace of Affliction: Prisons and Religion in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011). For inmates’ responses to this concept, see Graber, “Engaging the Trope of Redemptive Suffering: Inmate Voices in the Antebellum Prison Debates,” *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 79, no. 2 (Spring 2012): 209-233.

inmates' willingness to voluntarily enact the rituals of redemptive suffering. It required prisoners to first acknowledge their misdeeds and then make conscious efforts to address their previous wrongs. Prisoners did not always cooperate, however, a reality that frustrated zealous reformers and caused them to complain about deceptive inmates. Physiognomy and phrenology thus emerged as two paired strategies for countering dissimulation. By reading the heads and faces of prisoners, reformers sought to discern deeper truths about the people they were trying to save.

In 1826, Levi Lincoln Jr., the governor of Massachusetts, bemoaned the state of penal institutions in his state. "There is much reason to believe," he wrote, "that, as a Penitentiary, the system is utterly ineffectual to purposes of reform or amendment." Although convicts were enriching the state through forced labor, it appeared they were not becoming more virtuous. Even worse, it seemed that confinement was only corrupting inmates further. The governor complained that four to sixteen prisoners were forced to sleep in the same cell at night. Locked together in these "committee rooms of mischief," they took advantage of close quarters to engage in precisely the types of behavior that reformers were trying to prevent. To combat this tendency, the Massachusetts State Prison turned to the expertise of its prison chaplain, Jared Curtis. Between 1829 and 1831, Curtis recorded detailed memoranda about the moral, mental, and physical traits of inmates at the Massachusetts State Prison. In these assessments, he tried to gauge prisoners' reformability by evaluating their appearances.³²

³² See "Extract from Gov. Lincoln's Message, Jan. 1826," in *Reports of the Prison Discipline Society of Boston*, First Annual Report (1826; reprint ed., Montclair, NJ, 1972), 4, quoted in Larry Goldsmith, "History from the Inside Out: Prison Life in Nineteenth-Century Massachusetts," *Journal of Social History* 31, no. 1 (Autumn 1997), 109. For Jared Curtis' commentary on prisoners at the Massachusetts State Prison in Charlestown, see "Jared Curtis Notebooks, 1829-1831," Ms. SBd-63, Massachusetts Historical Society [hereafter cited as MHS]. For a published version, see Philip F. Gura,

Curtis knew that first impressions were not always what they seemed. Still, he found it useful to analyze prisoners' faces, even when he acknowledged that he might later be proven wrong. On one occasion, he described a man named Thomas Jennings as someone who was "Not very frank & communicative," writing, "Should think him a shrew'd crafty fellow—not much feeling—and cut out for a rogue." But Curtis also acknowledged that he came to this interpretation merely by examining his physical features. "Perhaps, however, I judge him too hard," he wrote. After all, the man seemed to be reading the Bible. Was he truly that bad? Curtis nonetheless found it hard to shake his initial assumptions, admitting that he did "not like his appearance." On one level, the prison chaplain was hopeful that certain people would exceed his expectations. But he also assumed that other prisoners would disappoint him. One day, he appraised a man named Josiah Harris, writing that he "appears like a sincere man—frank, ingenious & humble—Conduct good." But Curtis was characteristically cautious in this evaluation, and he quickly added, "Still he may be very deceitful though he is far from having that appearance." With such prisoners, only time would tell.³³

On other occasions, Curtis expressed more confidence about his own skills of character detection, favoring his own physiognomical interpretations over the stories

ed., *Buried from the World: Inside the Massachusetts State Prison, 1829-1831* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005). I will cite the manuscript versions unless otherwise noted. Philadelphia's prison administrators were equally concerned about the failures of early-nineteenth-century prisons. After taking charge of the Eastern State Penitentiary, Samuel Wood criticized the Walnut Street Prison, which allowed prisoners to interact: "I assert, without fear of contradiction, that it is not possible for the Legislature to devise a system where men will be more completely contaminated, hardened, and depraved, than in that college of vice, the Walnut Street Prison." See Samuel R. Wood, "Sale of Walnut Street Prison," *Register of Pennsylvania* 7, no. 7 (Philadelphia), February 12, 1831, quoted in Manion, *Liberty's Prisoners*, 190.

³³ "Jared Curtis Notebooks," Vol. 1, MHS.

prisoners told him. John Reed, for instance, insisted he had been temperate, but Curtis pointed out that “his face tells a different story.” The man looked like “rather a hard character,” wrote Curtis, but “perhaps his face tells a lye.” On another instance, he simply dismissed Charles Watson as a “wild fellow” with “a bad face.” Even more forcefully, he described George White as having “a very bad face—& from his life, it does not belie him.” White insisted he was innocent of his most recent offense, but he was also a perpetual offender. Because of his record and his disagreeable visage, Curtis scorned him as a “a finish’d scholar in his line of business”: theft.³⁴

Curtis was especially skeptical of Irish prisoners, demonstrating his prejudices as a Protestant prison chaplain. After meeting with a man named Thomas Goffs, he wrote: “Appears frank & clever—like many Irish men—but is, most likely, like many Irish men, better outwardly, than at heart—Drink—drink—drink—is the ruin.” On another occasion, Curtis evaluated an Irish inmate named Thomas Baron, writing that he “appears mild and pleasant and well dispos’d.” Curtis seemed hopeful for the man’s good behavior, particularly because he had been diligently reading the Bible in his prison cell. “But an Irishman is not always to be seen through with a glance,” he wrote. For that reason, he would have to wait to see how the man performed. In all these encounters, Curtis searched for a sense of certainty. He wanted the comfort that came from “knowing” whether a prisoner would reform or not. At the same time, he recognized that certainty was not an option in his line of business. Curtis nonetheless analyzed faces to validate his own assumptions and develop better institutional strategies for reform.³⁵

³⁴ “Jared Curtis Notebooks,” Vol. 2, MHS.

³⁵ “Jared Curtis Notebooks,” Vol. 1, MHS.

These instances of face-to-face evaluation were not unique to the Massachusetts State Prison. Scholars have long known about Eliza Farnham's efforts to use phrenology to diagnose and treat female prisoners during her time as the Matron of the Female Ward at Sing Sing State Prison. During the 1840s, Farnham became notorious for her radical efforts to reimagine prison discipline. She allowed inmates to talk to each other, a sweeping change for an institution that previously relied on a system of enforced silence and forced labor. In addition, she provided inmates with novels and phrenological manuals, established a nursery for those who gave birth while incarcerated, and even furnished prisoners with a decorative parlor, complete with a piano and music books. As an evangelist for the science of phrenology, Farnham claimed that criminals were not entirely responsible for their actions and should be treated rather than punished. She believed they were born with a set of vicious propensities, but insisted they could nonetheless be reformed. Even so, she claimed that lower-class individuals often lacked the educational cultivation that more privileged Americans had access to. This prevented them from developing their better propensities and allowed the vicious elements of their character to reign supreme. Penitentiaries, she believed, could counter people's undesirable inclinations by developing their virtue.³⁶

Farnham worked closely with Lorenzo Niles Fowler, one of the nation's most famous phrenologists. Farnham first required numerous Sing Sing prisoners to sit for

³⁶ On Farnham, phrenology, and prison reforms at Sing Sing, see Janet Floyd, "Dislocations of the Self: Eliza Farnham at Sing Sing Prison," *Journal of American Studies* 40, no. 2 (August 2006): 311-325; John Lardas Modern, "Ghosts of Sing Sing, or the Metaphysics of Secularism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 75, no. 3 (September 2007): 615-650; and Schorb, *Reading Prisoners: Literature, Literacy, and the Transformation of American Punishment, 1700-1845* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2014), 169-184.

daguerreotypes while Fowler provided their phrenological readings. Then, in 1846, she compiled an American edition of the British reformer Marmaduke Sampson's book, *Rationale of Crime, and its Appropriate Treatment*. In the book's appendix, she included excerpts from Fowler's phrenological descriptions, alongside images of the Sing Sing inmates.³⁷

With public exploits such as this, Farnham acquired enemies quickly. John Luckey, who served as prison chaplain during most of her tenure, resented her obsessive reliance on phrenology and her rejection of religion. By the late 1840s, Farnham was attracting an avalanche of unfavorable media attention. In the end, her attempts to profoundly reimagine the Sing Sing State Prison got her fired. This has led scholars to emphasize Farnham's supposedly unique affection for the popular psychological sciences of the day, as well as her revolutionary effort to remake the prison according to phrenological dictates. Farnham, to be sure, was more radical than most of her contemporaries. She was also exceptional in her effort to elevate phrenology above all other reform techniques. But in using facial and cranial analysis to analyze prisoners, she was far from exceptional. To the contrary, many of her methods reflected practices that were happening at other penal institutions throughout the country.³⁸

³⁷ See Marmaduke Blake Sampson, *Rationale of Crime, and Its Appropriate Treatment: Being a Treatise on Criminal Jurisprudence Considered in Relation to Cerebral Organization*, ed., Eliza Farnham (New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1846). For a discussion of the daguerreotyping process, see Madeleine B. Stern, "Mathew B. Brady and the *Rationale of Crime*: A Discovery in Daguerreotypes," *The Quarterly Journal of the Library of Congress* 31, no. 3 (July 1974): 126-135; Ewen and Ewen, *Typecasting*, 215; Modern, "Ghosts of Sing Sing," 631-633; and Floyd, "Dislocations of the Self," 314.

³⁸ For descriptions of Farnham's radicalism, see Modern, "Ghosts of Sing Sing"; and Floyd, "Dislocations of the Self."

“I Discovered What He Wished to Conceal”

By the middle decades of the nineteenth century, physiognomy and phrenology were two prongs of a common intellectual tradition. Both sciences, after all, were rooted in the same idea: that external forms revealed internal truths. As a discipline, phrenology had more detailed guidelines than physiognomy. Different phrenologists sometimes disagreed on the precise details of their method, but they agreed that the brain was made up of a set of “faculties” that indicated ones “propensities.” Distinct parts of the brain corresponded with different mental functions or character traits. As a result, the skull might be bulbous or flat in certain areas, depending on a person’s character (Fig. 5.1).

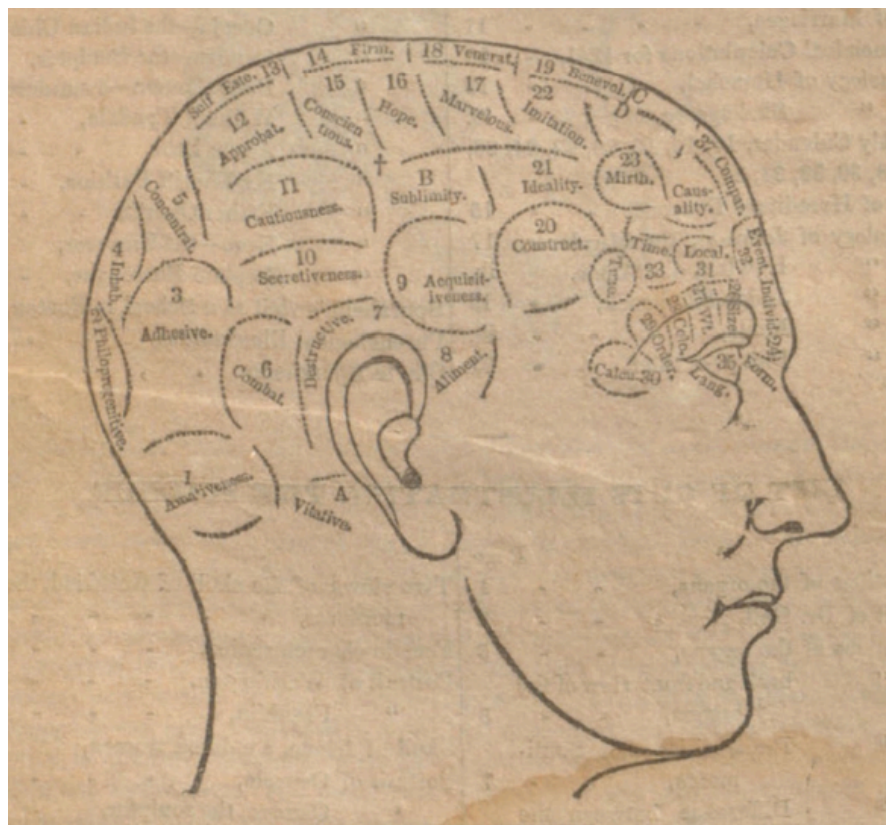


Fig. 5.1. Illustration of the phrenological faculties, in Lorenzo Niles Fowler, *The Phrenological Almanac for 1841* (New York: Nassau St., 1841).

To practice this science, one might need a phrenological chart or calipers for measuring the human cranium. Phrenological analysis also depended on a person's willingness to poke and prod people's skulls in the name of science. Physiognomy was a simpler, less invasive, and more flexible technique for reading the corporeal form. Due to its accessibility and practicality, physiognomy only grew in strength with the ascendance of phrenology in the 1830s and 1840s. Even the Fowler family—the nation's most popular and recognizable phrenologists—saw these disciplines as complimentary. Although they maintained that phrenology was superior, their almanacs and magazines often blurred the boundaries between the two sciences. Many Americans followed suit, embracing both facial and cranial analysis and using both sciences in symbiotic ways. This included Thomas Larcombe: the moral instructor at the Eastern State Penitentiary.

Seven years before Farnham was appointed the Female Matron at Sing Sing in 1844, Philadelphia's Eastern State Penitentiary hired the Reverend Thomas Larcombe to serve as the prison's "moral instructor." In this capacity, Larcombe would regularly visit prisoners to assess their mental, moral, and physical characteristics. Every time he entered an inmate's cell, he would jot down short entries where he analyzed their countenances, appraised their religiosity, and made conjectures about their potential for future redemption. Like Farnham, Larcombe relied on physiognomy and phrenology to guide him in these pursuits.

Because he was always searching for ways to separate the improvable from the irredeemable, Larcombe tried to distinguish between the individuals who were smart and clever, on the one hand, and those that were both intelligent *and* virtuous, on the other. He knew he had to be careful with the first group of inmates, because he

feared they might use their calculating natures to manipulate prison workers. The second group, however, he deemed capable of redemption. Larcombe ultimately developed a short hand for discussing prisoners' reformability. If certain inmates were discharged, he assumed they would quickly resume their felonious activities. He marked these entries as "No hope," or simply "n.h." In other instances, Larcombe's outlook was more positive, leading him to predict there was "considerable hope" that an individual would reform.³⁹

To his dismay, Larcombe sometimes followed up these prognostications with a short correction added to the bottom of the page: "No hope." Although he went to great lengths to determine inmates' sincerity, he rarely trusted the words of the prisoners. He also questioned the evaluations of the prison workers. On one occasion, he recorded an entry for a man named Daniel Davis, noting, "Keeper thinks him sincere." Initially, he thought the man might embrace religion and atone for his crimes, but after several visits, he decided Davis was "Too old to learn." In a similar way, he once described a prisoner named William Johnson as having "some appearance of tenderness, affirms innocence, had a good character." After another meeting, however, Larcombe crossed out the phrase "had a good character," and instead wrote "NO HOPE" in the margins.⁴⁰

Larcombe was even harsher with other prisoners, using phrases like "Ingenious, cunning, skeptical & hopeless," "harden'd & reckless," "incredibly

³⁹ "State Penitentiary for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania Records, 1819-1955," Series I. Admission Ledgers and Bound Volumes. Mss.365.P381p, American Philosophical Society [hereafter cited as APS]. I am relying on volumes A, B, and D of Larcombe's notes. Volume C has been lost.

⁴⁰ "State Penitentiary for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania Records, 1819-1955," Series I, Vol. A, APS.

vicious,” or “Hardened & hopeless to the last.” After several encounters with George Hark, a man convicted of burglary, Larcombe described him as “palpably deceptive.” Although Hark initially made “pretences to religious experience,” he had “since confessed he was only hypocritically pretending and seems filled with a diabolical spirit.” This prisoner’s behavior earned him an evaluation of “n.h.” from the moral instructor. Larcombe projected the illusion of control by taking detailed and analytical notes. In truth, though, activists feared people like George Hark. These prisoners not only undermined moral reform enterprises through their disruptive behavior; they also threatened to make fools of reformers through their duplicity. Hark evidently knew the script he was expected to enact, so he performed his artificial religiosity with great aplomb. In the end, neither Larcombe nor his reform-minded contemporaries could distinguish between allegedly “hopeless” prisoners and individuals who showed “hope of M. Ref.” They might have been able to contain people within the penitentiary, but they could not control their souls.⁴¹

Reformers were nonetheless sanguine about their ability to separate the disingenuous from their undesigning counterparts. To identify dissemblers, they regularly deployed techniques from physiognomy, resting their hopes in the notion that external features proclaimed internal dispositions. Thomas Larcombe for instance, once congratulated himself for discerning a lack of “tenderness” in one prisoner’s appearance: “In conversation,” he wrote, “I discovered what he wished to conceal.” When recounting his encounter with Lewis Williams, Larcombe employed

⁴¹ “State Penitentiary for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania Records, 1819-1955,” Series I, Vols. A and B, APS. As Larry Goldsmith has argued, “Prisoners may have been captives, but they were hardly passive.” See Goldsmith, “History from the Inside Out,” 110.

a similar strategy, noting that he “looks and acts in the silent doggest manner of an old convict.” As for John Dickerson, Larcombe apparently “Never saw a more ruffianlike expression.” Then, when evaluating David Baggs, Larcombe regretted that the man had “no proper sense of his moral condition,” arguing that he had the “peculiarly strong look of a Sharper.” This was a term that nineteenth-century Americans used to describe particularly clever or conniving tricksters who conned people out of their possessions. Even though Baggs made “strong promises” about his desire to improve his character, Larcombe was reluctant to believe him. Sarcastically noting that the man was “no doubt Sincere,” the moral instructor declared that his “appearance is much against him.” Rather than trust Baggs’ words, he analyzed his features, expressing skepticism that the man could reform.⁴²

On other occasions, Larcombe even more explicitly invoked the language of physiognomy and phrenology. He suggested, for instance, that William Thompson had “strong Phrenological manifestations of a thief.” In a similar way, Larcombe visited the cell of a man named John May, concluding that he “looks guilty & like one whose head denotes a thief.” Then, when describing William White, he wrote that the man was “an old convict no doubt” because he was “Secretive” and had “the appearance of a thief. (eyes close).” More dramatically, he referred to Brian Monahan as “a low browed Stupid, animal,” destined by his inherent “Propensity” to become a criminal. He likewise insisted that William Jones was a man with “Dishonesty & low trickery impress’d upon his face.” Perhaps Larcombe poked and prodded these men’s skulls as a true phrenological investigation would have required. This process would

⁴² “State Penitentiary for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania Records, 1819-1955,” Series I, Vol. B, APS.

have allowed him to enact his privilege and power as a middle-class reformer through an invasion of prisoners' bodily integrity. But perhaps he simply stared at inmates, using his physiognomical "skills" to interpret their inner characters. In any case, Larcombe believed these men's countenances and craniums conveyed deeper truths about their criminal proclivities.⁴³

Prison reformers sometimes recognized that inmates took exception to the ogling eyes of observers. In 1836, the Annual Report of the Board of Managers of the Prison Discipline Society admitted many prisoners were unnecessarily suffering from "a daily exposure to the gaze of idle curiosity, cast upon him by the thousands, who flock in to witness the state of degradation to which his crimes have reduced him." Criticizing the disciplinary system practiced at Auburn State Prison in New York, the authors complained that the "young offender" was constantly subjected to the "gaze of men, women, and children, who line his pathway, and scrutinize his countenance." This sort of surveillance would eventually obliterate a prisoner's "sense of shame, generate bitter and revengeful feelings, and set him more at war with society than before," they argued. By contrast, the authors thought that Philadelphia's system of solitary confinement was more constructive. It seems that they were not too seriously concerned with the privacy of prisoners, however, for they never interrogated the pernicious effects of subjecting prisoners to the unrelenting gaze of meddlesome men like Thomas Larcombe.⁴⁴

⁴³ Monahan apparently insisted that he was a Presbyterian, but Larcombe was convinced by his appearance that he was Catholic. When Monahan left the prison, Larcombe wrote, "T.O. no hope." T.O. stood for "Time Out." "State Penitentiary for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania Records, 1819-1955," Series I, Vols. B and D, APS.

⁴⁴ *Annual Report of the Board of Managers of the Prison Discipline Society* (Boston: Perkins and Marvin, 1836), 80.

Larcombe's notebook itself provides evidence that certain prisoners resisted scrutiny, resentful of his efforts to draw conclusions about their character from his invasive observations. William Thompson, for instance, made efforts to disguise his own countenance and instead turn his eyes upon prison reformers and administrators. Larcombe recorded that he "Seems closely to watch, the person who speaks to him as if to ascertain his object & character & to not commit himself." In a similar way, George Ryno begrudged his meetings with the moral instructor. It was "Evidently a painful struggle to the prisoner to meet with me" Larcombe wrote. For this reason, Ryno tried "to make his face as Brass." This was a coping mechanism and strategy of resistance that the moral instructor dismissively called "another hardning [sic] process." On a different occasion Larcombe recorded that one inmate demonstrated "evident uneasiness under the gaze of the person speaking." He also wrote that another prisoner "Seems ashamed to look at me," while yet another "hates to see me." This latter prisoner, Jesse Quantrill, was probably justified in his antipathy toward the moral instructor. At one point, Larcombe had derisively asserted that his visage looked "like a basilisk" (a giant deadly serpent). Yet even as Quantrill resisted the moral instructor's observations, he could not escape them entirely. Larcombe still managed to accomplish his physiognomical analysis, documenting that "the Countenance of this prisoner, indicates, passion the most baleful & deadly." Although Quantrill was eventually discharged, Larcombe insisted that he was "as wicked as ever" when he left the penitentiary.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ "State Penitentiary for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania Records, 1819-1955," Series I, Vols. A, B, and D, APS. For an examination of how inmates navigated and responded to the "moral instruction" of prison reformers, see Graber, "Engaging the Trope of Redemptive Suffering," 209-233. Michel Foucault famously decried the "disciplinary gaze", particularly pointing to the panopticon: an architectural style that would have subjected prisons to reformers' constant surveillance. See Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (for "disciplinary gaze," 168).

In addition to the paid employees who invaded prisoners' cells to facilitate their own reform agendas, there were also invested citizens who took it upon themselves to meet with the "fallen" and help them attain salvation. William Parker Foulke, for instance, was a lawyer, abolitionist, and philanthropist who joined the Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries in Public Prisons in 1845. In this capacity, he regularly visited the Eastern State Penitentiary. Foulke was both an avid prison reformer and an evangelist for the "Pennsylvania system" of "cellular isolation." Prisoners needed to be separated from one another in solitary confinement, he thought, lest they pick up bad habits from their depraved contemporaries. Foulke nonetheless believed that prisoners might benefit from conversations with virtuous reformers, so he regularly visited inmates and conversed with them on a variety of topics. These discussions usually centered around religion, but he also encouraged prisoners to tell him about their personal lives and contribute their own thoughts on prison reform.⁴⁶

Foulke wanted to distinguish between prisoners who seemed reformable and their more hardened counterparts. To accomplish this aim, he studied their heads and faces. On one instance in 1846, Foulke visited Prisoner No. 1623, whom he described as "a man whose countenance indicates firmness, & yet want of moral principle," admitting, "I did not like him in first view." But Foulke continued visiting the man,

⁴⁶ "Notebooks Concerning Prisons and Prisoners," in William Parker Foulke Papers, 1840-1865, Box 7, Mss.B.F826, APS. The Pennsylvania System vied with the Auburn System for influence. At the Eastern State Penitentiary, prisoners were isolated in private cells and blocked from all interaction with fellow inmates. In Auburn, prison administrators forced inmates to work together, but in silence. The prison at Sing Sing followed the Auburn model. The goal in both systems was for prisoners to internalize punishment and engage in silent self-reflection. On the differences between these two systems, see Simon, "Rise of the Carceral State," 476-481; Modern, "Ghosts of Sing Sing," 625-628; and Meranze, *Laboratories of Virtue*, 254-259.

and with time, he began to think differently. On one visit, he wrote that the prisoner was “much changed. Instead of the sullen, stubborn looks with which he used to meet me, he seemed cheerful—showed me his book & asked for a better one—which I provided.” According to the prison keeper, the man was behaving superbly. He had been reading religious books and practicing arithmetic: a positive change for someone who previously threatened to murder a prison officer! Yet this prisoner’s story also exposed the limits of reformers’ work as character detectives. Foulke thought the inmate had been cheerfully adjusting to prison life, but the following August, he hanged himself in his cell.⁴⁷

In general, Foulke’s notebooks disclose both a basic inability to understand prisoners’ priorities and a carefully cultivated spirit of expedient ignorance. Above all else, Foulke wanted to hear that penitentiary reforms were having their desired effect on inmates. Hoping the prisoners would confirm his deepest hopes, he regularly inquired if their experience in the Eastern State Penitentiary had been beneficial. Inmates sometimes brazenly rejected Foulke’s idealized narratives, but they often humored him, telling him what he wanted to hear whether they truly believed it or not. Foulke then enthusiastically recorded these exchanges, assuring himself that the “separate system” had been splendidly effective and that prisoners themselves recognized its many benefits.

Because Foulke was personally invested in the notion that prisoners were being truthful in their praise, he relied on physiognomy and phrenology to validate their candor. Seeing what he wanted to see, Foulke described one of these prisoners as “a young man of good head & countenance; active mind—very intelligent—frank

⁴⁷ Foulke, “Notebooks Concerning Prisons and Prisoners,” APS.

& manly in his bearing.” When speaking of another favored inmate, he wrote that the man was “quiet of manner,” exhibiting “sincerity of expression in his eye, & a freedom from cant & strong professions which won my confidence.” Determined to have concrete examples of his own success, Foulke was nevertheless dependent on the positive affirmations of the people he was supposed to be reforming. His commitment to locating sincerity in the visages of these inmates only convinced him of his own effectiveness.⁴⁸

In other instances, Foulke ignored evidence that the Eastern State Penitentiary’s system of solitary confinement was harming the mental health of prisoners, even when his standards of physiognomical evidence seemed to suggest otherwise. Through his regular visits and his correspondence with Dr. Given, the prison physician, Foulke became aware that mental illness was troublingly prevalent within penitentiary walls. Although he was inclined to trust the doctors, he was also determined to examine the “physical aspect of actual cases” by visiting the afflicted inmates himself. By this time, the Eastern State Penitentiary was facing serious reproaches from medical professionals, popular writers, and reformers across the

⁴⁸ For instance, Prisoner No. 1831 apparently told Foulke that the Eastern State Penitentiary system was more effective at reforming individuals than the New York House of Refuge, Blackwell’s Island, or Moyamensing: institutions where individuals apparently cultivated “bad associations.” Even so, the prisoner criticized the Philadelphia system, arguing that men found ways to communicate with each other, regardless of restrictions. Prisoner 1454 similarly discussed the “effect of our system on his mind,” saying “that it was like the effect of keeping a limb out of use—that it benumbed it.” But Foulke pressed on with his questions, demanding to know whether the solitary system was better or worse than the systems at other prisons. The prisoner—undoubtedly knowing what Foulke wanted to hear—humored him and assured him that the Eastern State Penitentiary was superior to other prisons. See Foulke, “Notebooks Concerning Prisons and Prisoners,” APS. Jennifer Graber and Jen Manion have tried to discern how prisoners manipulated authority figures to attain their own goals, sometimes reinforcing the narratives of prison administrators and reformers. See Graber, “Engaging the Trope of Redemptive Suffering”; and Manion, *Liberty’s Prisoners*. Jodi Schorb and Larry Goldsmith have also shown how inmates used reading and writing as strategies of resistance within antebellum penitentiaries. See Goldsmith, “History from the Inside Out”; and Schorb, *Reading Prisoners*, chapters two and three.

country. Critics argued that by isolating prisoners from human contact, prison administrators subjected them to a particularly cruel form of mental degradation—a regime of torture that destroyed inmates’ sanity and sense of self. Charles Dickens, for instance, famously commented on the prevalence of mental illness among those subjected to solitary confinement:

“On the haggard face of every man among these prisoners, the same expression sat. I know not what to liken it to. It had something of that strained attention which we see upon the faces of the blind and deaf, mingled with a kind of horror, as though they had all been secretly terrified. In every little chamber that I entered, and at every grate through which I looked, I seemed to see the same appalling countenance. It lives in my memory, with the fascination of a remarkable picture. Parade before my eyes, a hundred men, with one among them newly released from this solitary suffering, and I would point him out.”⁴⁹

When critics attacked Eastern State Penitentiary’s “separate system,” they claimed it imposed cerebral agony upon prisoners, eventually wearing them down until they were incapable of living beyond the penitentiary walls. For Charles Dickens,

⁴⁹ Charles Dickens, *American Notes for General Circulation*, eds. John S. Whitley and Arnold Goldman (London: Penguin Books, 1985 [1842]), 156. Strangely, Dickens thought solitary confinement had a positive effect on women’s appearances: “The faces of the women, as I have said, it humanises and refines. Whether this be because of their better nature, which is elicited in solitude, or because of their being gentler creatures, of greater patience and longer suffering, I do not know; but so it is. That the punishment is nevertheless, to my thinking, fully as cruel and as wrong in their case, as in that of the men, I need scarcely add” (156).

Philadelphia's inmates were men who had been "buried alive ... dead to everything but torturing anxieties and horrible despair."⁵⁰

Foulke was aware of—and deeply threatened by—these criticisms. He also was familiar with the medical literature on physiognomy and mental illness. In the early decades of the nineteenth century, American and European medical professionals regularly argued that mental illness could manifest itself in the countenance. Prison reformers followed these debates and sometimes incorporated medical physiognomy into their activism. The Prison Discipline Society, for instance, published a report in 1830 that stated: "With the insane, it is emphatically true, that the dark shadows of the mind are visibly projected upon the face." They also suggested that recovering inmates would exhibit signs of their newfound health through physical changes in the "outward aspect" of their countenances.⁵¹

In a strategic reformulation of physiognomic ideas, Foulke used facial analysis to assure himself that the situation at the Eastern State Penitentiary was not nearly as bad as it seemed. After seeing a young African American prisoner, Foulke ventured an interpretation of the man's mental state: "His eyes had a dull, heavy look; he had a sprightly smile—His air was rather bashful," he recorded. According to the penitentiary's physician, the man had been suffering from dementia. But the physiognomical evidence did not convince Foulke, and he insisted that the man's appearance resembled "what one often sees in blacks of sound mind." Still, he worried that the man's time in prison might have worsened his mental condition,

⁵⁰ Dickens, *American Notes for General Circulation*, 148.

⁵¹ See *First Annual Report of the Board of Managers of the Prison Discipline Society*, Boston, June 2, 1826, 6th Edition (Boston: Perkins and Marvin, 1830), 300.

noting, “If the dull look has been occasioned by the imprisonment, it deserves notice.” On another occasion, he inspected a young white prisoner’s physiognomy for signs of mental malady. Disturbingly, the man was showing symptoms of delusion, even though “Dr. Given says that when he came into prison, he exhibited no indication of weakness.” Even Foulke had to admit that he “Looks feeble in body & there is an expression of face indicative of mentle [sic] feebleness.” It seemed that imprisonment itself had been the cause of his current mental state.⁵²

Part of the reason that Foulke made these visits in the first place was because Dr. Given asked him to do so. The physician worried that the penitentiary’s regime of solitary confinement was negatively affecting prisoners’ minds. Foulke was not so sure. Even though he was open to small reforms, he was not willing to give up on his commitment to the “separate system.” Still, Foulke continued meeting with the prison’s physicians, and after speaking with Dr. Evans, he acknowledged the signs of mental illness were, indeed, “alarming.” He nonetheless was sure to point out that the physicians remained supportive of solitary confinement. After first detailing Dr. Evans’ complaints, he added: “at same time, his confidence in the separate principle is undiminished, & his conclusion is only that its administration ought to be improved.” In these instances, Foulke took the advice of medical professionals, but he also used physiognomy to draw his own conclusions about the brains and bodies of the captive population.⁵³

⁵² Foulke, “Notebooks Concerning Prisons and Prisoners,” APS.

⁵³ Foulke, “Notebooks Concerning Prisons and Prisoners,” APS. The problem of penitentiary-induced mental illness plagued prison administrators throughout the nation. In 1848, the Prison Discipline Society also wrote about the “Cases of Insanity, ‘supposed to have originated’ in the New Penitentiary in Philadelphia, and in the State Prison at Charlestown, Mass., in 1846.” See the *Twenty-First Annual Report of the Board of Managers of the Prison Discipline Society*, Boston, May 1846 (Boston: Damrell and Moore, 1848), 132-133.

Like Foulke, other Philadelphia reformers cautiously used physiognomy to combat criticisms of solitary confinement. In 1848, the *Pennsylvania Journal of Prison Discipline and Philanthropy* published a discussion of how the “separate system” was affecting the minds and physiognomies of prisoners. The periodical admitted there were certain “peculiarities” in the countenances of “men who have been kept in comparative seclusion,” but the authors did not agree that solitary confinement destroyed prisoners’ mental faculties entirely. In a similar way, Foulke confessed that he discerned mental maladies in the visages of certain inmates. But he preferred to posit other reasons for these disquieting psychological symptoms. He believed, for instance, that most of the problems had been caused by the prisoners’ unnatural attachment to masturbation, rather than their enforced isolation from human contact. Despite relying on facial analysis, he used it to confirm “facts” he already believed to be true.⁵⁴

In the end, reformers such as Jacob Curtis, Eliza Farnham, Thomas Larcombe, and William Parker Foulke used physiognomy as a tool to mediate their relationships with prisoners and facilitate their preferred reform agendas. By scrutinizing inmates’ facial and cranial features, they tried to ascertain if inmates were reformable, differentiate the liars from the truth tellers, and detect those who might have been born with innate criminal propensities. Their physiognomical conclusions, however,

⁵⁴ See “British Penal Discipline,” *Pennsylvania Journal of Prison Discipline and Philanthropy* 3, no. 3 (Philadelphia), July 1848. For Foulke’s theory on masturbation and insanity, see Foulke, “Notebooks Concerning Prisons and Prisoners,” APS (especially the entry on November 14, 1849). He presented this theory to the prison physician, Dr. Evans: “I then asked Dr. Evans whether he had formed any opinion of the extent to which the dementia was attributable to the practise[sic] of masturbation – He answered that he did not doubt that a portion of it was so – but not as much as was supposed by some persons.” Dr. Parrish, by contrast, argued against Foulke’s theory citing medical testimony during a recent legal case. He argued that “the medical opinion then given was against the idea of the vice disqualifying the party” from serving as a testator on a will.

were always shaped by preconceived ideas. These reformers all believed, for instance, that individuals were redeemable. Otherwise, why waste so much time meeting with them privately, bringing them books, and tracking their progress? Every now and then, they identified a promising prisoner with a “good head and countenance.” But reformers also wanted to distinguish between themselves—in other words, proper republican citizens—and the incarcerated individuals that they intended to remake in their own image. In instances where their efforts proved fruitless, physiognomy and phrenology provided convenient justifications. Certain prisoners, they hinted, might not be capable of reform, particularly if they had the “strong Phrenological manifestations of a thief” or “Dishonesty and low trickery impress’d” upon their visages. By insisting that they could unmask prisoners’ duplicity, reformers both emphasized and exaggerated their own power. Through the empirical power of science, they assured themselves they would be able to separate the good prisoners from the bad—a task that was far easier in theory than in practice.

“The Feeble Mind Within”: Physiognomy and Insanity

In addition to the antebellum reformers who claimed they could see criminality in the countenances of prisoners, there were also mental health practitioners who used physiognomy to diagnose and treat patients. Numerous nineteenth-century physicians either wrote treatises on the connections between physiognomy and mental illness or used scientific facial analysis to study “dementia,” “mania,” “idiocy,” and other disorders. Between the 1810s and 1830s, for instance, Philadelphia’s medical students would have had the option of attending Dr. Chapman’s lectures on the “Physiognomy of Diseases.” They would have also had

access to medical treatises on the connections between mental illness and physiognomy, written by scientists in both Europe and the United States. The New York physician J.F. Daniel Lobstein, for example, published a book on how to identify criminals and the mentally ill through their facial features. A British mental health practitioner named Dr. Alexander Morison similarly wrote a treatise on this subject, in which he argued that physiognomy “gives us warning of the approach of the disease in those whom there is a predisposition to it, as well as confirms our opinion of convalescence in those in whom it is subsiding.” Even children had access to simplified versions of these ideas. The early psychiatrist Isaac Ray distilled physiognomic principles in a book for small children so that they would be able to more easily identify mental characteristics in people’s faces.⁵⁵

Some physicians believed so thoroughly in physiognomy that they used it to diagnose and treat patients who suffered from mental maladies. The most infamous practitioner to employ these methods was the British psychiatrist, Dr. Hugh Welch Diamond. Between the 1840s and 1860s, Diamond consistently argued that there was a correlation between physical appearance and insanity. He was also a pioneer in the field of photography. Combining his interest in new visual technologies with his

⁵⁵ See “Chapman’s notes, between circa 1810 and 1830,” and “Chapman’s lectures [sic], after 1810,” in the Nathaniel Chapman Papers, ca. 1810-1853, 10a Chapman, College of Physicians of Philadelphia [hereafter cited as CPP]; Lobstein, *A Treatise upon the Semeiology of the Eye*; and Alexander Morison, *The Physiognomy of Mental Diseases* (London: Longman and Co., 1843), 1; and Isaac Ray (“A Physician”), *Conversations on the Animal Economy* (London: Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown, and Green, 1827), 56-65, 164-170. For secondary literature on physiognomy and insanity in the nineteenth century, see Sander L. Gilman, ed., *The Face of Madness: Hugh W. Diamond and the Origin of Psychiatric Photography* (Brattleboro, V.T.: Echo Point Books & Media, 1976). On the emergence of mental asylums, see David J. Rothman, *The Discovery of the Asylum: Social Order and Disorder in the New Republic*, Revised Edition (New York: Routledge, 2002 [1971]); Nancy Tomes, *A Generous Confidence: Thomas Story Kirkbride and the Art of Asylum-Keeping, 1840-1883* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Roy Porter, *Madness: A Brief History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), and Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans., Richard Howard (New York: Vintage Books, 2013 [1961]).

medical expertise, he produced daguerreotypes of his patients when attempting to detect their symptoms and develop medical remedies. As part of his “curative” regime, Diamond would show patients photographs of their faces during episodes, encouraging them to instead emulate the facial expressions of “sane” individuals. He also took pictures of his patients after their mental conditions had improved, using these photographs as “proof” that his methods had been successful. Diamond would then publish his visual productions in medical journals, using the pictures as “evidence” for his distinctive method of combining physiognomy with photography. At least one of his fellow physicians insisted these techniques worked, telling the story of a patient who “begged for a portrait of herself, that she might send to her son ... to show how much better she was.” Diamond continued to share these images publicly until 1858, when he stopped treating poor patients at the Surrey County Asylum and instead opened a private facility that catered to elite and middle-class women. In the end, his concern for class hierarchies dictated the practices he found medically and ethically acceptable.⁵⁶

Diamond might have been unique in his innovative use of photography during psychiatric treatment, but his attachment to physiognomy reflected a broader cultural commitment to the scientific interpretation of faces. Between 1827 and 1834—

⁵⁶ For a discussion of Diamond, physiognomy, and photography, see Sharrona Pearl, *About Faces: Physiognomy in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), chapter five; Adrienne Burrows and Iwan Schumacher, *Portraits of the Insane: The Case of Dr. Diamond* (London: Quartet Books, 1990); and Jennifer Green-Lewis, *Framing the Victorians: Photography and the Culture of Realism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996). For one of Diamond’s essays, see “On the Application of Photography to the Physiognomic and Mental Phenomena of Insanity,” May 22, 1856, in Gilman, *The Face of Madness*, 17-24 (For quotation, see page 9). Guillaume-Benjamin-Amand Duchenne de Boulogne, physician at the Salpêtrière hospital in Paris during the late nineteenth century, used even more invasive technologies for analyzing the faces of his mental patients. He strategically sent electrical currents through patients’ facial muscles with electric shocks to simulate the appearance of certain emotions. See Guillaume-Benjamin-Amand Duchenne de Boulogne, *The Mechanism of Human Facial Expression*, trans. R.A. Cuthbertson (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990 [1862]).

several years before Diamond first began producing daguerreotypes of his patients—Dr. John Kearsley Mitchell sketched the faces of mental patients at the Pennsylvania Hospital for the Insane. Case studies for these patients also exist, but they are held at the Pennsylvania Hospital Archives, where researchers cannot access them due to federal regulations that protect patient privacy. It is impossible to say without seeing the manuscripts, but Mitchell almost certainly accompanied his visual sketches with detailed textual analyses. In any case, Mitchell clearly cared about his patients’ physiognomies. He drew most of their visages in profile, which suggests that he was trying to evaluate patients’ facial angles according to the methods outlined by transatlantic physiognomists such as Johann Lavater and Petrus Camper. These efforts to delineate individual faces suggest that visual forms of analysis played a key role in Mitchell’s treatment regime, just as they did for Dr. Hugh Welch Diamond (see Fig. 5.2 and Appendix B).⁵⁷

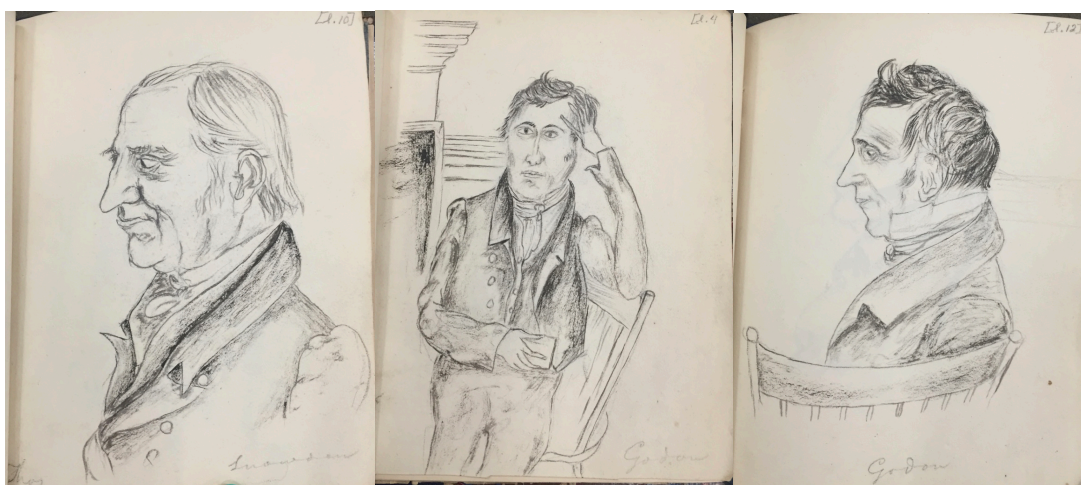


Fig. 5.2. “Likenesses of Insane People,” collected by Dr. John Kearsley Mitchell at the Pennsylvania Hospital, 1827-1834, College of Physicians of Philadelphia.

⁵⁷ See “Likenesses of the Insane, taken for Dr. Jn. K. Mitchell during his service at the Pennsylvania Hospital,” 1827-1834, Mss. 10a/133, CPP.

Other American physicians likewise invoked physiognomic doctrines when evaluating and treating patients. At the Elm Hill Private School and Home for the Education of Feeble-Minded Youth in Massachusetts, Dr. George Brown regularly evaluated the countenances of his students when contemplating their mental disorders. In his “Case Files,” he would record every new patient that entered the school, making comments on their appearance, behavior, and family medical history. When writing about a young child with epilepsy, for instance, he described him as “a slight delicate handsome boy with no outward marks of deficiency,” subsequently penciling in “to ordinary observers” in the margins: a phrase presumably intended to highlight his own unique expertise. In July of 1860, the school “Rece’d a boy of twelve, slight, delicate, with refined features, exhibiting no outward marks of peculiarity except an unnatural stiffness of manner in walking & abnormal expression to the eye when closely observed.” Brown was nevertheless convinced that the child suffered from either “insanity” or “idiocy,” and argued “his peculiarities were congenital” in nature. He blamed the fact that the boy’s mother had come from an overly “intellectual family, where brain had been stimulated at the expense of muscle.” A year later, he similarly described a twelve-year-old girl who was “graceful in gait” and had a “well developed physique.” Brown nonetheless pointed to her “expressionless countenance, which,” in his opinion, “truly portrayed the feeble mind within.” Apparently, the girl once had a traumatic experience on a visit to Cuba, where she encountered a wild bear. Since then, Brown noted that “all her intellectual faculties seemed hopelessly blighted.”⁵⁸

⁵⁸ “Case Files,” Elm Hill Private School and Home for the Education of Feeble-Minded Youth, Box 49, Ser. 4.1–4.2.1, MSS 6/0013-01, CPP.

In more severe cases of mental disability, Brown was both harsh and insensitive as he evaluated his patients' mental and physical capacities. When describing an eight-year-old boy in 1861, he wrote that it was a "case of pure micracephalic [sic] idiocy—parietal walls of the head flat, forehead low, & face monkey like." After derogatively describing the boy's limbs and bodily movements as animalistic, he wrote: "whole appearance resembling the common idea of an idiot & consequently repulsive." He similarly described a thirteen-year-old girl as having a "countenance dull, indicative of a low mentality." This surprised him, since her father's side of the family was apparently known for their "breadth of intellect." Seeing hope for improvement in the girl's appearance, Brown determined to teach her basic information and simple stories. But he also pointed out that her family was not wealthy. Allowing his class prejudices to shape his treatment, he assured himself that she might be capable of exhibiting "low cunning," but that she would never achieve any literary accomplishments.⁵⁹

Throughout these case files, Dr. Brown attempted to identify the physiological signs of mental illness and then discern their hereditary causes by asking for the children's family histories. It appears that most of his clients came from wealthy or middle-class families. But they were not equally privileged. This caused him to focus on the supposedly defective minds of the child's parents in some instances, finding biological reasons for their alleged deficiencies. When describing one student, he argued she had a "head ill shaped, mouth very large and gaping, with thick protruding lips, countenance and whole manner excessively disagreeable." Brown insisted that she "showed such serious derangement of the nervous system, with so little capability

⁵⁹ "Case Files," Elm Hill Private School, CPP.

for any intellectual improvement, that it was most humane, to leave her undisturbed by the teacher.” In other words, he did not plan to educate her because he believed her case to be hopeless. At other times, he described stories of maternally-induced trauma during pregnancy or childhood. In cases where the child’s parents had been especially well-educated or particularly “refined,” he looked for alternative explanations for the children’s apparent mental disorders. He found, for instance, that one student’s “countenance indicated a low degree of intelligence,” but also the potential for progress. As these cases demonstrate, educators at Elm Hill deemed some residents treatable while dismissing others as permanently debilitated individuals who merely needed to be contained. In many of these cases, Dr. Brown analyzed the children’s faces—alongside their family histories—to discern which group they belonged in.⁶⁰

Physicians such as John Kearsley Mitchell, Hugh Welch Diamond, and George Brown lived, thought, and worked in an intellectual milieu shaped by the physiognomical theories of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Building on decades of popular and scientific knowledge, they assumed that faces reflected character. For this reason, they argued that any derangements in the mind would exhibit themselves in the countenance. In making these claims, medical professionals buttressed preexisting popular theories about insanity’s physiognomical signs. American medical journals had long published articles on the facial indicators of mental illness for a broader audience.⁶¹ The same was true of more popularly

⁶⁰ “Case Files,” Elm Hill Private School, CPP.

⁶¹ See, for example, Dr. Dumas, “Observation on the Physiognomy of some Chronic Diseases,” *Eclectic Repertory and Analytical Review, Medical and Philosophical* 4, no. 3 (Philadelphia), April 1814; “Insanity Demonstrated from the Physiognomy,” *New York City Hall Recorder* 1 (New York), 1817; “Article 4—No Title,” *The Journal of Foreign Medical Science and Literature* 11, no. 1 (Philadelphia), January 1821; and R.R. Porter, “Reports of Cases of Insanity,

accessible magazines. The *American Phrenological Journal*, for instance, once described “madness” as a disease that inspired a “peculiar look of ferocity manifested amid the utter wreck of intellect.” In a person suffering from this ailment, the editors contended, “the expression of mental energy is lacking,” and “those facial muscles whose office is to indicate sentiment are dormant.” By reading such articles, popular audiences could participate in many of the same discussions that preoccupied transatlantic medical professionals.⁶²

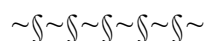
Some authors equated insanity with criminality. Both Eliza Farnham and the British author Marmaduke Sampson, for instance, argued that mental disorders and criminal activity resulted from the same root cause: a person’s innate propensities. Physiognomists like Alexander Walker and Samuel Wells similarly sought to discern the hereditary causes of mental illness in their published works, and physicians—both in and beyond the penitentiary—regularly used facial analysis to diagnose and treat these maladies.

As the nineteenth century progressed, Americans increasingly conceived of mental illness and criminality as innate disorders, passed down in families with

Treated at Friends’ Asylum,” *The American Journal of the Medical Sciences* (Philadelphia), August 1837.

⁶² “Physiognomy of the Insane,” *American Phrenological Journal* 40, no. 5 (Philadelphia), November 1864. For other periodicals that discussed the physiognomy of mental illnesses, see “Of the Passions, as they Display Themselves in the Look and Gesture, from Dr. Beattie’s *Elements of Moral Science*,” *Weekly Visitor, or Ladies’ Miscellany* 2, no. 8 (New York), May 12, 1804; “Insanity Demonstrated from the Physiognomy,” *New York City Hall Recorder* 1 (New York), 1817; A.A., “On Heads,” *The New Monthly Magazine and Literary Journal* 2, no. 7 (Boston), January 1, 1821; “Article 4—No Title,” *The Journal of Foreign Medical Science and Literature* 11, no. 1 (Philadelphia) January 1821; “Sketches at Home and Abroad: The Madhouse of Palermo,” *The New-York Mirror: A Weekly Gazette of Literature and the Fine Arts* 12, no. 13 (New York), September 27, 1834; “The Madman,” *The Huntress* 1, no. 17 (Washington, D.C.), March 25, 1837; “Esquirol and Ellis on Insanity,” *The American Medical Intelligencer* 2, no. 18 (Philadelphia), December 15, 1838; “Insanity Caused by Excessive Drinking, Followed by Anasarca,” *Medical Examiner and Record of Medical Science* 7, no. 23 (Philadelphia), November 16, 1844; and “Signs of Character: Our New Dictionary of Physiognomy and Phrenology,” *American Phrenological Journal* 43, no. 2 (Philadelphia), February 1866.

unlucky biological predispositions. By the 1870s, Cesare Lombroso famously insisted that both insanity and genius were congenital characteristics and that up to 70% of prisoners were “born criminals.” Like the reformers who came before him, he contended that innate propensities would display themselves in the human countenance. But unlike many antebellum reformers, he did not believe that minds and bodies were malleable. Instead, he insisted that people’s mental capacities, criminal propensities, and moral defects were both heritable and immutable. This was an increasingly inflexible understanding of human nature—one that built on earlier ideas, even as it diverged from them.⁶³



In 1873, a local New York magazine told a happy tale of a reformed female felon. Elizabeth D. had once been an evil-doer, but she attained grace, escaping “a life of infamy and a drunkard’s grave.” Her face apparently had improved alongside her moral character. According to the reformer who encountered her later in life, “nothing in her queenly air, fine features, and intellectual countenance, would have suggested the life she led. Truly all things are possible with God.” By the late nineteenth century, optimistic narratives like this one would become more infrequent, as both Americans and their European counterparts increasingly conceived of criminality as an ineradicable identity that resulted from innate and intrinsic deficiencies.⁶⁴

⁶³ Cesare Lombroso, *Criminal Man*, trans. Mary Gibson and Nicole Hahn Rafter (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006 [1876]). For secondary work on how Americans and Europeans began to systematize physiognomical and phrenological theories by the late nineteenth century, using them to create the categories of the “born criminal” or “feeble-minded” individual, see Nicole Hahn Rafter, *Creating Born Criminals* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997).

⁶⁴ G.C. “Organized Charities,” *Oneida Circular* 10, no. 48 (Brooklyn), November 24, 1873.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, however, many Americans employed a flexible version of physiognomic determinism—one that aligned with their complicated understandings of crime, social hierarchies, and personal responsibility. Antebellum reformers were committed to the notion that all individuals were perfectible beings, and that drastic social change was not only possible but also desirable. This mindset served as the intellectual foundation for abolitionism, the growth of temperance crusades, the rise of utopian communities throughout the nation, and the various outpourings of religious enthusiasm that characterized the Second Great Awakening. Importantly, it was this same attitude that undergirded penitentiary reforms and inspired the establishment of mental asylums, houses of refuge, charitable organizations, and moral reform societies.

Because of its lack of standardization and malleable rules, physiognomy allowed for the coexistence of the notion that humans were perfectible beings and the idea that individuals were born with a set of unique physical and intellectual characteristics that would definitively determine their destiny. But moral reformers were not the only people who managed to imaginatively interpret—and sometimes purposefully misinterpret—physiognomic doctrines. When African Americans confronted the rise of scientific racism in the antebellum decades, they, too, turned to facial analysis. In their hands, it became a weapon against the white scientists who questioned their humanity.

Chapter 6: Facing Race

Black Body Politics in the Era of Scientific Racism

In 1849, Frederick Douglass published a scathing critique of white painters in the *North Star*: “Negroes can never have impartial portraits, at the hands of white artists,” he wrote. “It seems to us next to impossible for white men to take likenesses of black men, without most grossly exaggerating their distinctive features.” For Douglass, the reason for this impartiality was obvious. White observers declared their incapacity to distinguish between the faces of black individuals, proclaiming instead that they all looked alike. Ignoring the great “variety of form and feature” among black Americans, even the most sympathetic white artists imposed a preconceived understanding of black features upon people of color. By invariably sketching them with “high cheek bones, distended nostril, depressed nose, thick lips, and retreating foreheads,” white portraitists crafted visual caricatures of African Americans and emphasized their supposed “ignorance, degradation, and imbecility.”¹

Scholars have cited this quotation repeatedly, using it to explain why Douglass was so invested in sitting for his own photograph. Only photographs could be true-to-nature portrayals, Douglass often suggested, for only photographs could portray African Americans as they truly existed, rather than how they looked in the minds of prejudicial painters. Yet most scholars do not interrogate one of the primary reasons that Douglass thought pictures were so consequential in the first place: like most antebellum viewers, he interpreted portraits using the science of physiognomy.

¹ Frederick Douglass’s review of Wilson Armistead’s *A Tribute for the Negro*, published in *The North Star* (Rochester), April 7, 1849. William Lloyd Garrison republished Douglass’ criticism of white portrait painters, though not his review of Armistead’s book. See Frederick Douglass, “Negro Portraits,” *The Liberator* (Boston), April 20, 1849.

When Douglass complained about the artists and naturalists who distorted black features, he invoked a far broader transatlantic discourse—a discipline that white thinkers had been using to denigrate black minds and bodies since the latter decades of the eighteenth century.²

If historians truly want to understand why visual representation mattered so much for Douglass and his contemporaries, we must recreate their mental universe: a cultural and intellectual milieu in which Americans relied on scientific facial analysis to interpret images and construct racial hierarchies. By the mid-nineteenth century, white Americans turned to facial features as evidence that proved the alleged reality of black degradation. Even when physiognomic ideas were rejected as “hard” science, they often laid the foundation for scientific racism and the political disfranchisement of people of color in antebellum America.³

² John Stauffer, *The Black Hearts of Men: Radical Abolitionists and the Transformation of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 51. For the most recent articulation of this argument, see John Stauffer, Zoe Trodd, and Celeste-Marie Bernier, ed., *Picturing Frederick Douglass: An Illustrated Biography of the Nineteenth Century's Most Photographed American* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2015). Stauffer has argued that daguerreotyping in the nineteenth century “conveyed more than physical description or even photographic memory, for a daguerreotype was thought to penetrate the sitter’s soul as well as his mind.” See Stauffer, “Frederick Douglass and the Aesthetics of Freedom,” *Raritan: A Quarterly Review* 25, no. 1 (Summer 2005), 120; and Stauffer, “Creating an Image in Black: The Power of Abolition Pictures,” in *Prophets of Protest: Reconsidering the History of American Abolitionism*, ed. Timothy Patrick McCarthy and John Stauffer (New York: The New Press, 2006), 256-267. Stauffer also published this essay in *Beyond Blackface: African Americans and the Creation of American Popular Culture*, ed., W. Fitzhugh Brundage (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 66-94. Other scholars have also written about Frederick Douglass’ belief in the power of visual representation. See Ginger Hill, “‘Rightly Viewed’: Theorizations of Self in Frederick Douglass’s Lectures on Pictures,” in *Pictures and Progress: Early Photography and the Making of African American Identity*, ed. Maurice O. Wallace and Shawn Michelle Smith (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012), 41; Laura Wexler, “‘A More Perfect Likeness’: Frederick Douglass and the Image of the Nation,” in *Pictures and Progress*, 20-21; Eric Foner, “True Likenesses,” in *Forever Free: The Story of Emancipation and Reconstruction* (New York: Vintage Books, 2013), 34-37; and Celeste-Marie Bernier, “A Visual Call to Arms against the ‘Caracature[sic] of My Own Face’: From Fugitive Slave to Fugitive Image in Frederick Douglass’s Theory of Portraiture,” *Journal of American Studies* 49, no. 2 (May 2015): 323-357.

³ For the history of physiognomy in Europe, see Dror Wahrman, *The Making of the Modern Self: Identity and Culture in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 294-305; John Graham, “Lavater’s Physiognomy in England,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 22 (1961): 561-72; Lucy Hartley, *Physiognomy and the Meaning of Expression in Nineteenth-Century*

But physiognomy was a malleable discourse, which allowed both white and black Americans to interpret it in unique and oppositional ways. Although white artists and scientists relied on physiognomic “evidence” to argue that African Americans were mentally and physically inferior beings, black Americans coopted the very discourses that undergirded the rise of racial essentialism, crafting an alternative science of facial analysis to argue for racial equality. When wielded by black hands, physiognomy did not solidify white supremacy; it instead became a tool for vindicating the mental capacities of African Americans.

By focusing on African Americans uses of facial analysis, this chapter exposes how people of color engaged with antebellum race theory, reformulating it in unique ways and for their own purposes. In doing so, it builds on recent works by scholars such as Bruce Dain, Mia Bay, Patrick Rael, and Britt Rusert, who have explored how African Americans responded to and shaped nineteenth-century racial science.⁴ This chapter also speaks to recent interdisciplinary scholarship on how African Americans used visual and literary culture to represent the meaning of freedom, claim citizenship, and challenge racism. Scholars have recently shown how

Culture (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Melissa Percival, *The Appearance of Character: Physiognomy and Facial Expression in Eighteenth-Century France* (Leeds: W. S. Maney & Son Ltd, 1999); Martin Porter, *Windows of the Soul: European Physiognomy, 1470-1780* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Graeme Tytler, *Physiognomy in the European Novel: Faces and Fortunes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982); and Judith Weschler, *A Human Comedy: Physiognomy and Caricature in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

⁴ See Bruce Dain, *A Hideous Monster of the Mind: American Race Theory in the Early Republic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002); Mia Bay, *The White Image in the Black Mind: African American Ideas about White People, 1830-1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Patrick Rael, *Black Identity and Black Protest in the Antebellum North* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Rael, “A Common Nature, A United Destiny: African American Responses to Racial Science from the Revolution to the Civil War,” in *Prophets of Protest*; Britt Rusert, *Fugitive Science: Empiricism and Freedom in Early African American Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2017); and Rusert, “Delany’s Comet: Fugitive Science and the Speculative Imaginary of Emancipation,” *American Quarterly* 65, no. 4 (December 2013), 801.

individuals like Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth manipulated the possibilities of photography to present a carefully crafted image to the viewing public. This chapter makes a new contribution by recovering the physiognomic logic that undergirded these practices. In doing so, it reimagines how people of color both saw and were seen in American visual culture. Finally, by exposing the intimate entanglements of art, science, and literature in the early republic, the chapter shows how scientific knowledge traversed the divides between elite intellectual debates, visual culture, and daily practice.⁵

In an era dominated by scientific racism, free people of color in the antebellum North became some of the most outspoken challengers of white ethnologists. Using physiognomic language, elite and middle-class black intellectuals seized upon a broad-based and culturally salient science, deploying it as a weapon in the struggle for racial justice.⁶ These black thinkers both crafted and responded to the intellectual milieu they inhabited. They were not passive imbibers of white bourgeois ideology, nor were they heroic radicals who were insulated from the hegemonic

⁵ For scholarship on the intersections of art, science, and literature, see Maurice O. Wallace and Shawn Michelle Smith, eds., *Pictures and Progress*, 4-5; Christopher Lukasik, *Discerning Characters: The Culture of Appearance in Early America* (Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011); Marcy Dinius, *The Camera and the Press: American Visual and Print Culture in the Age of the Daguerreotype* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012); Shawn Michelle Smith, *American Archives: Gender, Race, and Class in Visual Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); Rusert, "Delany's Comet"; Jasmine Nichole Cobb, *Picture Freedom: Remaking Black Visuality in the Early Nineteenth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2015); Sarah Blackwood, "'Making Good Use of Our Eyes': Nineteenth-Century African Americans Write Visual Culture," *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U.S.* 39, no. 2 (Summer 2014): 42-65; and Blackwood, "Fugitive Obscura: Runaway Slave Portraiture and Early Photographic Technology," *American Literature* 81, no. 1 (2009): 93-125. On how Sojourner Truth presented herself through visual culture, see Nell Irvin Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996), esp. chapters 20 and 26.

⁶ Manisha Sinha writes that African Americans in the North were able to "develop a more vocal tradition of protest" than their enslaved counterparts, despite sharing ideological goals. See Sinha, "Coming of Age: The Historiography of Black Abolitionism," in *Prophets of Protest*, 34.

culture in which they existed. They were active cofabricators and refashioners of predominant cultural values: individuals who constructed unique ideas about physiognomy and race, and then employed these ideas for their own political purposes. While black thinkers may have marshaled the master's tools in their efforts to dismantle the master's house, they also crafted their own discursive strategies and cleverly refashioned the rhetoric that was available to them.⁷

At a time when Americans increasingly saw intellectual capacity as one of the primary prerequisites for citizenship, African Americans turned to physiognomy to defend their mental faculties. Physiognomy ultimately allowed black thinkers to address and challenge new forms of scientific racism because it had provided the intellectual foundation for these ideas in the first place. It not only provided black thinkers with a scientific language to argue for the improvement of the black race; it also explained the seemingly undeniable reality of black people's current subordination in the United States. At the same time, physiognomy represented a conceptual compromise for African Americans. Through their uses of facial analysis, black activists legitimized the notion that the body could be scientifically scrutinized for signs of internal capacity. In doing so, they sometimes validated European beauty standards and indirectly solidified a broader intellectual system that had developed out of the racist discourses of white thinkers. Because of their social and economic status, black intellectuals also advocated principles of "respectability" and

⁷ I rely heavily on Patrick Rael's concept of "cofabrication." See Rael, *Black Identity and Black Protest*, 5, 10, 124, 174, and 283. For another examination of class divisions among African Americans in New York, see Leslie M. Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626-1863* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), esp. chapter 6. On ideological hegemony: Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1984), 110-114. For a discussion of the historiographical debate surrounding Lorde's analysis within African American history, see Rael, "A Common Nature, A United Destiny," 185-186, and 195-199.

“elevation,” which alienated many of the laboring black Americans they sought to encompass under their political umbrella. This chapter does not attempt to vindicate the many successes of their efforts, nor does it lament their myriad failures. Instead, it takes black scientific thought seriously to better understand how antebellum Americans conceived of race, racism, and humanity itself.

Physiognomy and the Construction of Race

The promise of physiognomy was enticing for white Americans. If facial features were innate, unalterable, and physiologically manifested, then all people had a unique corporeal signature that any skilled observer could “read.” Physiognomy thus allowed individuals to map racial distinctions onto the human body and then justify constructed inequities by describing them as scientific discoveries. In February of 1792, for instance, an American periodical author calling himself “Africanus” used Lavaterian ideas to denigrate people of color. Africanus argued that there were “marks of inferior mental faculties in the physiognomy of the negro tribes,” and insisted that “the physiognomy of the white man excels that of the black.” The *Port-Folio* in Philadelphia deployed a similar strategy when evaluating the body and mind of Colonel Noailles Joysin, a black revolutionary from Haiti. The magazine described him as “a young negro of about thirty years of age, of a savage and fierce physiognomy, and of a mind perfectly correspondent with his countenance.” Adapting Lavater’s system for their own purposes, both authors rationalized white supremacy within the United States.⁸

⁸ See Africanus, “For the New-York Journal, &c. Negroes Inferior to the Whites,” *New-York Journal and Patriotic Register* (New York), February 4, 1792; and “R,” “Memoirs of Hayti—Letter VI,” *The Port-Folio* 2, no. 5 (Philadelphia) November 1809. For other examples of books and

Physiognomic ideas also underpinned the work of Samuel Stanhope Smith, president of the College of New Jersey and one of the early republic's most prominent intellectuals. In 1787, Stanhope Smith authored an *Essay on the Causes of the Variety of Complexion and Figure in the Human Species*, a treatise that Bruce Dain has called "the most important and influential American statement of monogenism in the nineteenth century." Smith later revised the work and published a much longer and more influential edition in 1810. In both versions, he started from a simple premise: all beings, whether black or white, were part of the same human species—and all were capable of moral, mental, and physical improvement. Smith cited Lavater's physiognomic theories in his essay, but he adapted them considerably. Unlike Lavater, Smith argued that both climate and the "state of society" could engender significant changes in the faces, minds, and bodies of individuals. As evidence, he compared the visages of enslaved field laborers and domestic slaves. Domestic workers, he dubiously suggested, were smarter and more beautiful than those who were subjected to harsher forms of labor.⁹

periodicals that used physiognomy to discuss racial difference, see "From Humboldt's General Considerations on the Extent and Physical Aspect of the Kingdom of New Spain," *The American Register; or, General Repository of History, Politics and Science* 7 (Philadelphia), January 2, 1810; Henri Grégoire, *An Enquiry Concerning the Intellectual and Moral Faculties, and Literature of Negroes*, trans. D.B. Warden (Brooklyn: Thomas Kirk, 1810); Richard Harlan, *Medical and Physical Researches: Or, Original Memoirs in Medicine Surgery, Physiology, Geology, Zoology, and Comparative Anatomy* (Philadelphia: Lydia R. Bailey, 1835), 521-528; and "From the Albany Daily Advertiser," *Daily National Intelligencer* (Washington, D.C.), November 24, 1817.

⁹ Samuel Stanhope Smith's first edition was largely a theological defense of the unity of mankind, but the second edition primarily focused on environmentalist understandings of human nature. I have taken all my quotations from the second edition. See Stanhope Smith, *An Essay on the Causes of the Variety of Complexion and Figure in the Human Species* (New-Brunswick: J. Simpson and Co., 1810). For Smith's discussion of Lavater, see pages 264-267. For mentions of physiognomy more broadly, see pages 105, 109, 160, 172, 191, 217, 250, 252, 255, and 365. For evidence that black thinkers were reading—if not always citing—Stanhope Smith's work. See Dain, *A Hideous Monster of the Mind*, 114.

In Smith's understanding of human physiognomy, better social conditions led to more attractive physical features. While arguing that slavery degraded individuals, he nevertheless suggested that enslaved people in the United States were being exposed to a more "civilized" form of society than the conditions he imagined in Africa. For this reason, he argued that "in the United States, the physiognomy, and the whole figure and personal appearance of the African race is undergoing a favorable change." Despite conceptualizing the human brain and body as malleable entities, Smith viewed black inferiority as a self-evident truth. In a racially-charged reformulation of Lavater's physiognomic theory, he insisted that slavery itself had improved the minds and visages of Africans.¹⁰

In the late eighteenth century, most American and European intellectuals shared Smith's belief in environmentalism. By the 1830s, however, white naturalists began abandoning the theory, arguing instead that the different "races" of the world were distinguished by a set of innate differences. Many of these thinkers nonetheless shared Smith's reliance on physiognomic ideas in their efforts to construct and understand racial difference. At its root, physiognomy was a discipline predicated on the idea that external features conveyed internal traits. This assumption undergirded later sciences of human nature. Both phrenology and craniology, for instance, were rooted in the same concept as physiognomy: that the countenance and cranium conveyed a person's inner capacities.

¹⁰ Smith, *An Essay on the Causes of the Variety of Complexion and Figure in the Human Species*, 255. Smith believed that slavery improved Africans' minds and bodies, writing, "Hence the American negro is visibly losing the most uncouth peculiarities of the African person, and physiognomy" (252). The French author, Henri Grégoire, made a similar argument, writing: "These effects are most sensible among slaves in domestic service, who are accustomed to a milder treatment and a better nourishment; not only their features and physiognomy have undergone a visible change, but their moral habits are also improved." See Grégoire, *An Enquiry Concerning the Intellectual and Moral Faculties, and Literature of Negroes*, 29.

Americans used physiognomy and phrenology together, invoking the power and prestige of science to propagate prejudicial ideas about black minds and bodies.¹¹ In 1841, the *American Phrenological Journal* described what they dismissively referred to as “the skull of a stupid negro woman,” writing that it displayed a “low forehead” with projecting eye sockets. “This form is incompatible with intellect,” the author asserted, providing no evidence for his inflammatory accusation.¹² Twelve years later, the same magazine printed images of white and black countenances, meant to exemplify “The Typical Races of Men.” Describing the “Caucasian” type, the author wrote that “face is the index of intellect, of sensibility, and of morality.” In a chart comparing the physical characteristics of these groups, he bluntly asserted his prejudices: “It will be seen at a glance how superior the Caucasian is to all the other races in every possible peculiarity, and, more especially, how immeasurably superior he is to the Ethiopian or Negro race.”¹³ In the end, white physiognomists and phrenologists built on shared set of assumptions: first, they believed the brain was the “organ of the mind”; second, they claimed the head and face reflected one’s character and intelligence; and third, they assumed Caucasian physiognomies constituted the corporeal symbols of intellectual distinction. They conveyed these theories through both textual descriptions and visual images.

¹¹ Phrenology’s intellectual debt to physiognomy was reflected in the titles of the earliest phrenological works. See Johann Gaspar Spurzheim, *The Physiognomical System of Drs. Gall and Spurzheim* (London: Baldwin, Cradock, and Joy, 1815) and *Phrenology, in Connexion with the Study of Physiognomy* (London: Treuttel, Wurtz, and Richter, 1826). For an American edition, see *Phrenology, in Connexion with the Study of Physiognomy* (Boston: Marsh, Capen, and Lyon, 1833). Spurzheim discusses his own reimagining of Lavater’s system directly on pages 8-9 and 22.

¹² J.R. Buchanan, M.D., “Article V. On the Faculty of Language and Its Cerebral Organs,” *The American Phrenological Journal and Miscellany* 3, no. 5 (Philadelphia) February 1, 1841.

¹³ “Natural History: The Natural History of Man,” *American Phrenological Journal and Miscellany* 18, no. 1 (Philadelphia), July 1853.

In addition to functioning as popularly accessible technologies of character detection, physiognomy and phrenology provided an ideological foundation for the work of racial scientists in the United States.¹⁴ Beginning largely in the 1820s and 1830s, a new group of white male intellectuals began collecting human skulls, measuring the cranial capacity of various “races,” and insisting that the “inferiority” of people of color was a quantifiable physiological reality, rather than a social or political decision. In 1839, the American skull collector Samuel Morton published *Crania Americana*, a voluminous work that would become the foundation for the “American School” of ethnology. Morton’s techniques emphasized essential cranial structures over facial features or expressions. His goal was to determine the mental capacity of different “races” by measuring the capacity of human skulls. Focusing primarily on the cranium, Morton suggested that people of European ancestry had bigger—and thus more powerful—brains than people of color.¹⁵

These new craniologists emphasized more quantitative methods of corporeal analysis than the physiognomists and phrenologists who came before them, but they

¹⁴ For phrenology’s relationship to both scientific racism and anti-slavery politics, see Cynthia S. Hamilton, “‘Am I Not a Man and a Brother?’ Phrenology and Anti-Slavery,” *Slavery and Abolition* 29, no. 2 (2008): 173-187.

¹⁵ On Morton, see William R. Stanton, *The Leopard’s Spots: Scientific Attitudes toward Race in America, 1815-1859* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960); George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914* (Middletown, C.T.: Wesleyan University Press, 1987 [1971]); Stephen J. Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996 [1981]); and Ann Fabian, *The Skull Collectors: Race, Science, and America’s Unburied Dead* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010). James Poskett has recently placed *Crania Americana* in a transatlantic context, showing how thinkers like James Cowles Prichard—who were trying to carve out space for ethnology as a new discipline—tried to claim Morton’s book as a work of ethnology. By contrast, phrenologists like George Combe tried to claim Morton as their own. Such a conflict illustrates the messy boundaries between disciplines like ethnology and phrenology in the early nineteenth century. See Poskett, “National Types: The Transatlantic Publication and Reception of *Crania Americana* (1839),” *History of Science* 53, no. 3 (2015): 265-295. These new craniological theories differed from both physiognomy and phrenology, which “suggested that character was both malleable and fixed.” See Hamilton, “‘Am I Not a Man and a Brother?’” 176.

were working in the same ideological tradition. As Nell Irvin Painter has contended, most nineteenth-century scientists “ultimately rejected Lavater’s views as too simplistic, yet his conceits—that the skull and face, in particular, reveal racial worth and that the head deserves careful measurement—lingered on among natural scientists.”¹⁶ Because ethnologists remained invested in analyzing people’s visages, physiognomy persisted in American racial discourses. For instance, Josiah Nott and George Gliddon—two of the most notorious white supremacists in the United States—printed sketches of black countenances alongside detailed physiognomical descriptions in their tome on racial science, *Types of Mankind* (1854). It was not simply skull shape that distinguished the races, they claimed, but physical beauty itself. The disciplines of physiognomy, phrenology, and craniology messily melded together in their work. Merging with white people’s aesthetic prejudices, these three scientific traditions combined into a racist ethnological system, predicated on the faulty assumption that external attractiveness conveyed internal worth.¹⁷

Physiognomy not only shaped American racial science; it also had implications for American politics. If Americans equated physical beauty with mental fitness, then they also associated people’s intellectual faculties with the capacity for self-government. As Douglass Baynton has contended, one of the most common arguments for slavery “was simply that African Americans lacked sufficient

¹⁶ Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), 68.

¹⁷ Josiah Clark Nott and George Robins Gliddon, *Types of Mankind: Or, Ethnological Researches, Based upon the Ancient Monuments, Painting, Sculptures, and Crania of Races, and upon their Natural, Geographical, Philological, and Biblical History* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo & Co., 1854). This book quickly became a touchstone for white supremacists. For just some of the examples of physiognomic analysis, see pages 124-179, 184-207, 213-216, 219-227, and 246-271.

intelligence to participate or compete on an equal basis in society with white Americans.” When white Americans deployed physiognomy to argue for black people’s internal inadequacies, they laid an ideological foundation for the political disfranchisement of free people of color.¹⁸

In one tract from 1833, the proslavery author Richard H. Colfax provided what he saw as scientific “proof” of the “natural inferiority” of African Americans. He insisted that “we are not believers in physiognomy, (as a science,) yet we cannot avoid making a remark upon the negro’s face.” He then launched into a diatribe about black visages, belying his own skepticism about the legitimacy of physiognomic analysis. African Americans, he pontificated, had thick lips, slanting foreheads, projecting jaws, and retreating chins. Insisting his preferred doctrine of black inferiority was “consistent with science,” he suggested it was “improper and impolitic” for black men to be “allowed the privileges of citizenship in an enlightened country!” Physiognomy, in other words, provided these white thinkers with a language for rationalizing racial hierarchies by instead describing them as aesthetic and anatomical realities.¹⁹

¹⁸ Douglass Baynton, “Disability and the Justification of Inequality in American History,” in *The New Disability History: American Perspectives* ed. Paul K. Longmore and Lauri Umansky (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 37. Mia Bay has also argued that “the Negro’s capacity was becoming the central issue for spokesmen on both sides of the slavery debate.” See Bay, *The White Image in the Black Mind*, 20. Frederick Douglass himself made a similar argument. See Douglass, “Selections. Woman’s Rights Convention,” *The North Star* (Rochester), August 11, 1848, quoted in Baynton, “Disability and the Justification of Inequality in American History,” 44.

¹⁹ Richard H. Colfax, *Evidence Against the View of the Abolitionists: Consisting of Physical and Moral Proofs of the Natural Inferiority of the Negroes* (New York: James T.M. Bleakley, 1833), 25. In a similar way, one European pamphlet—which was translated by an American physician and published in New York in 1853—discussed the “negro physiognomy,” describing Africans and American Americans in derogatory ways and hinting that external characteristics correlated with internal nature. See Hermann Burmeister, *The Black Man: The Comparative Anatomy and Psychology of the African Negro* (New York: William C. Bryant, 1853), 11.

White Americans also relied on visual caricature to denigrate the moral and mental capacities of people of color. Between 1828 and 1830, the Philadelphia artist Edwards Williams Clay drew numerous engravings of black Americans in his “Life in Philadelphia” series. Most of these images mocked free people of color by portraying them as uppity and self-centered dandies, attempting to rise above their station. The caricatures envisaged African Americans with distorted facial features, disproportioned bodies, and outlandish outfits. Clay’s images were also sometimes accompanied with imagined conversations between mythical archetypes of black Americans, littered with misspelled words, and written in dialects that only purportedly matched the speech patterns of Northern blacks. For white viewers, the joke was supposed to be clear: people of color were unaware of their inability to attain the “true” refinement that theoretically came naturally to white Americans.²⁰

In most of these images, Clay marked his subjects with facial traits intended to signal their alleged inferiority. Because physiognomy was so prevalent in popular culture, much of Clay’s audience would have been familiar with its rules of character detection, and they likely would have viewed his images within that context. According to most physiognomic theories, the face could be divided into three major areas: 1) the forehead and eyes, 2) the nose and middle portions of the face, and 3) the mouth and jaw. The forehead supposedly revealed a person’s mental capacities, and the eyes were the index of the soul. The nose and cheeks signified moral characteristics, like benevolence, virtue, honesty, cunning, or vindictiveness. By

²⁰ For a discussion of the Clay prints, see Cobb, *Picture Freedom*, esp. chapter 3. As Cobb has argued, “Clay’s caricatures taught White viewers that free African Americans maintained unlearned and insurmountable racial deficiencies that would permanently bar them from national belonging” (145-146).

contrast, the mouth and lower portions of the face were supposed to signify people's animal propensities. White physiognomists often contended that Grecian and Roman facial features were the most beautiful. They also suggested that broad and high foreheads reflected intellectual greatness. If the lower regions in a person's face were more prominent than the upper regions, this meant that a person's animal traits had triumphed over their intellectual characteristics.²¹

Clay's drawings reified these racist assumptions. In one image, he portrayed a black man and woman, both draped in extravagant fashions. The woman played music while her male counterpart sang about her beauty. Viewers were supposed to recognize the purported contradiction between the woman's corporeal form and the obsequious compliments that the black man in the image showered upon her. By drawing people of color as physiognomic caricatures, Clay visually conveyed a sinister message: black Americans—no matter how refined they believed themselves to be—were individuals whose animalistic propensities predominated over their moral and mental faculties. These images, of course, were not accurate depictions of real black faces. Nor did physiognomy ever constitute a legitimate system for measuring moral character or intellectual cultivation. Instead, Clay's images trafficked in popular stereotypes, strategically using visual culture to reinforce the tenets of scientific racism.²²

²¹ See Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy*, 1:16. Physiognomists, phrenologists, ethnologists, and anthropologists deployed this tripartite division of the countenance throughout the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. See, for example, Spencer, *Essays: Scientific, Political and Speculative* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans, and Roberts, 1858), 1:422. For a scholarly discussion of the tripartite division of the face, see Lucy Hartley, "A Science of Beauty? Femininity and the Nineteenth-Century Physiognomic Tradition," *Women: A Cultural Review* 12, no. 1 (2001), 23-24.

²² The lyrics in the image present a misspelling of John Whitaker's "Thine Am I," which was included in numerous nineteenth-century songbooks. See G.S. Thornton, *The Melodist: Comprising a Selection of the Most Favourite English, Scotch, and Irish Songs* (New York: George Singleton, 1820),



Fig. 6.1. Edward Williams Clay, *Life in Philadelphia*, Plate 12, Library Company of Philadelphia, African Americana Collection, Digital Collections.

Black intellectuals readily recognized such images as visual mockery, but they also viewed them as insidious statements about the inner capacities of an entire race. In Frederick Douglass' lecture on ethnology, he claimed he had "never seen a single picture in an American work, designed to give an idea of the mental endowments of the negro." When artists and naturalists portrayed the "European face," he argued, they drew it "in harmony with the highest ideas of beauty, dignity, and intellect." By

115-118; *The Vocal Library: Being the Largest Collection of English, Scottish, and Irish Songs* (London: G.B. Whittaker, 1824), 470-471; and *Hodgson's National Songster; Or, Encyclopaedia of Harmony* (London: Orlando Hodgson, 1832), 156-157.

contrast, they drew black Americans “with the features distorted, lips exaggerated, forehead depressed—and the whole expression of the countenance made to harmonize with the popular idea of negro imbecility.” For this reason, Douglass sought to remedy the political reality of racial injustice through the power of pictures. He demanded that artists start conveying the faces of eminent black intellectuals such as Henry Highland Garnet, William J. Wilson, and Martin Delany. Their heads, he contended, “indicate the presence of intellect more than any pictures I have seen” in American ethnological works. As part of his strategy for addressing this problem, Douglass sat for dozens of daguerreotypes himself, ultimately becoming the most photographed American in the nineteenth century. By carefully curating his public image, he created a visual archive to refute racist imagery and serve as physiognomic proof of his own mental eminence.²³

Scholars of race and visual culture have often argued that black Americans embraced visual culture to present a vision of human nature that subverted the racism of white artists. But they have less clearly answered a more fundamental question: Why did black activists believe that photographs visually conveyed human interiority to begin with? Answering that question requires historians to grapple with physiognomy’s cultural salience in antebellum America. During this period, images were meaningful because all Americans—whether black or white—inhabited a common intellectual universe in which countenances counted in the debate over black

²³ Frederick Douglass, *Claims of the Negro, Ethnologically Considered* (Rochester: Daily American Office, 1854), 20–21. William Lloyd Garrison later republished part of Douglass’ lecture. See Frederick Douglass, “The Negro is a Man,” *The Liberator* (Boston), July 28, 1854. The black intellectual, William J. Wilson made similar arguments about white pictures of black people, dismissing them as images that were “gotten up for the *American prejudice Market*.” See Wilson, “Afric-American Picture Gallery—Second Paper. By Ethiop.” *Anglo-African Magazine* 1, no. 3 (New York), March 1859, 88.

capacity. When viewed in this context, Frederick Douglass' obsession with photography is far more than a fascination with a new form of visual representation. For black activists, visual depictions of facial features could function as scientific evidence with broader import in the fight for racial justice.²⁴



Fig. 6.2. Portrait of Frederick Douglass, c. 1850, Library Company of Philadelphia. By sitting for portraits, Douglass consciously conveyed a more positive vision of the black physiognomy than prints that might be found in series like Clay's *Life in Philadelphia*, or in American and European ethnological works.

²⁴ In an analysis of Douglass' lectures on photography, Ginger Hill argues that Douglass used photographs to "claim the status of rights-bearing autonomy" and express "proclaim his complex interiority." Sarah Blackwood similarly argues that Americans thought daguerreotypes were "associated with the revelation of certain truths about their sitters." Neither scholar examines precisely *why* Americans believed pictures reflected "truths" about people's character in the first place. See Hill, "'Rightly Viewed': Theorizations of Self in Frederick Douglass's Lectures on Pictures," 46; and Blackwood, "Fugitive Obscura," 97.

African American Uses of Physiognomy

In the early decades of the nineteenth century, gradual emancipation laws initiated the slow demise of slavery, and in doing so, dissolved the most significant barrier between enslaved blacks and their free counterparts. This allowed white Americans to group all African Americans together as members of a uniformly degraded class, regardless of social or economic status. During this same period, African Americans were also confronting a “rabid colonizationist mobilization,” which questioned their status as true Americans and sought to “return” them to their ostensible African homeland. As the growth of the market economy intensified and as a massive wave of poor European immigrants poured into northern cities, native-born white laborers grew increasingly resentful of black workers. And by the 1830s and 1840s, racially motivated mob violence had intensified in northern cities, just as the abolitionist movement was increasing in power and visibility. Particularly after a revitalized Fugitive Slave Act passed in 1850, sectional tensions reached a fever pitch, and the nation careened ever closer to Civil War. Free people of color experienced these ominous developments with alarm, and they responded with a reenergized commitment to racial justice.²⁵

Black writers felt compelled to repudiate white ethnological theories, even though they bitterly resented this duty. Between the late 1830s and 1850s, African Americans confronted a veritable onslaught of both scientific and political justifications for white supremacy. In response, black intellectuals increasingly turned

²⁵ As George Price and James Brewer Stewart have argued, “Never before had white violence flared so intensely in northern cities,” and never before “had disagreements in the North over the meaning of ‘race’ carried such explosive potential.” For a broad adumbration of these transformations, see James Brewer Stewart, “The Emergence of Racial Modernity and the Rise of the White North, 1790-1840,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 18, no. 2 (Summer, 1998): 181-217. See also Dain, *A Hideous Monster of the Mind*, 119-121; and Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery*, esp. chapter 4.

to physiognomy: a popular, accessible, and adaptable science with malleable rules. But how did physiognomy—a discipline that white authors, artists, and intellectuals regularly used to denigrate black minds and bodies—somehow become a discourse that people of color used for their own purposes?

Facial analysis was particularly appealing for black writers because it proved more accessible than the “hard” ethnological sciences that solidified between the 1830s and 1850s. Craniometrical analysis required access to medical training, as well as an expensive and colossal collection of human skulls. To be a physiognomist, however, all one needed was a discerning eye and a steady supply of faces. Because physiognomy lacked phrenology’s detailed charts of cranial bumps and crevices, as well as the hard-and-fast skull measurements of new racial sciences like craniology, it allowed its practitioners to agree on a general premise—namely that facial features revealed internal character—without having to agree on a set of specific, universal, or unchanging rules. Facial analysis depended on the individualized perceptions of the person doing the observing. For this reason, black physiognomic observers had considerable latitude in their efforts to interpret visages.²⁶

Facial analysis was particularly powerful because it was ubiquitous within American society. When readers picked up a newspaper, got lost in their favorite novel, or delved into the latest magazines, they would have encountered detailed descriptions of human visages. Authors like Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Herman Melville relied on physiognomical techniques of character description in

²⁶ Rael, “A Common Nature, A United Destiny,” 190-191.

their novels.²⁷ Periodical editors also published discussions of physiognomy in their magazines. Sarah Josepha Hale, for instance, printed numerous articles debating the merits of physiognomy and phrenology in the *Ladies' Magazine* and *Godey's Lady's Book*. She also published editorials and short stories written by enthusiasts of these disciplines, and she employed facial analysis as a narrative strategy in her own novels, tales, and historical works.²⁸ Political periodicals likewise used physiognomy to describe both real and fictional figures. Between the 1830s and 1850s, *The United States Magazine and Democratic Review* consistently published articles that evaluated the mental, moral, and facial traits of America's leading politicians.²⁹

²⁷ For a discussion of physiognomy and its prevalence in nineteenth-century American literature and culture, see Lukasik, *Discerning Characters*; Dana Brand, *The Spectator and the City in Nineteenth Century American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), esp. 34-49 and 118-120; James V. Werner, "The Detective Gaze: Edgar A. Poe, the Flaneur, and the Physiognomy of Crime," *American Transcendental Quarterly* 15, no. 1 (March 2001): 5-21; Kevin J. Hayes, "Visual Culture and the Word in Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Man of the Crowd,'" *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 56, no. 4 (March 2002): 445-465 (esp. 457 and 465); Kevin J. Hayes, "Poe, The Daguerreotype, And The Autobiographical Act," *Biography* 25, no. 3 (Summer 2002): 477-492; Matthew Rebhorn, "Minding the Body: 'Benito Cereno' and Melville's Embodied Reading Practice," *Studies in the Novel* 41, no. 2 (Summer 2009): 157-177; and Andrew Miller, "Favoring Nature: Herman Melville's 'On the Photograph of a Corps Commander,'" *Journal of American Studies* 46, no. 3 (August 2012): 663-679.

²⁸ There are far too many instances of physiognomic description in these two magazines to cite. For just a few examples, see "The Doctrine of the Temperaments," *Ladies' Magazine* 2, no. 8 (Boston), August 1829; "What Good Will Phrenology Do the Ladies?" *Ladies' Magazine and Literary Gazette* 5, no. 10 (Boston), October 1832; "The Gatherer," *Lady's Book* (New York), September 1, 1830; "Moral and Personal Deformity: A Hint to Those Who Frame Advertisements for Apprehending Offenders," *Lady's Book* (New York), September 1835; and Emma C. Embury, "Our Jessie, Or, The Exclusives," *Godey's Lady's Book* 20, no. 5 (New York), January 1840. Hale also relied heavily on physiognomy in her novels. See Hale, *Northwood: A Tale of New England* (Boston: Bowles and Dearborn, 1827); and *Sketches of American Character*, 4th ed. (Boston: Freeman Hunt, 1831). Finally, Hale used physiognomy to describe the characters of the world's most famous women in her magisterial volume, *Woman's Record, Or, Sketches of All Distinguished Women* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1853).

²⁹ For just a few examples, see "A Reporter," "Glances at Congress," *The United States Magazine and Democratic Review* 1, no. 1 (New York), October 1837; "Political Portraits: Theodore Sedgwick," *The United States Magazine and Democratic Review* 7, no. 26 (New York), February 1840; and C. Montgomery, "The Presidents of Texas," *The United States Magazine and Democratic Review* 26, no. 81 (New York), March 1845. This latter example describes General Stephen F. Houston of Texas in this way: "His countenance is noble and expressive, despite the stony coldness of a hard, grey eye, and a something of insincerity about the lines of his mouth" (286).

Physiognomy was also pervasive in abolitionist novels, whether they were written by white or black authors. In *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), Harriet Beecher Stowe provided physiognomic character sketches of both major and minor characters. When describing Uncle Tom, she pointed to his “truly African features,” which were “characterized by an expression of grave and steady good sense.” On another occasion, she focused on Lucy’s face, which supposedly conveyed a “wild, painful and romantic history.” Stowe argued that Lucy’s “forehead was high, and her eyebrows marked with beautiful clearness.” She pointed to her “straight, well-formed nose, her finely-cut mouth, and the graceful contour of her head and neck,” writing that Lucy had a “fierce pride and defiance in every line of her face, in every curve of the flexible lip, in every motion of her body.” By describing Lucy’s forehead as “high,” Stowe emphasized her impressive mental capacities. She also argued for her physical attractiveness, challenging those Americans who argued that black women were incapable of achieving true beauty.³⁰

Black novelists, too, used physiognomy to positively describe characters of color. In one of the earliest novels written by an African American, *The Garies and Their Friends* (1857), the novelist Frank Webb described the countenance of a character named Mr. Walters, a man “exceedingly well-proportioned; of jet-black complexion, and smooth glossy skin.” In his description of Mr. Walters, Webb focused on the “attractiveness of his appearance,” as well as his “broad but not very high forehead.” For most physiognomists, Broad foreheads indicated breadth of

³⁰ Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin; Or, Life Among the Lowly* (Boston: John P. Jewett & Company and Cleveland: Jewett, Proctor, and Worthington, 1852), 1:40-41 and 2:189. Like other novelists of her time, Stowe regularly employed physiognomy in her character descriptions. For examples of physiognomic description in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, see Vol. I: 13-14, 16, 40-41, 98, 133, 184, 211-212, 229, and 269; and Vol. II: 12, 32, 70, 102, 112, 114, 164, 166, 181, and 189.

judgment, as well as the capacity to grapple with complicated material or engaged in sustained intellectual deliberation. In emphasizing this trait, Webb defended Mr. Walters' mind. He also described Mr. Walters as having an "aquiline nose, thin lips, and broad chin." These were traits that white physiognomists typically associated only with Caucasian countenances. Physiognomists particularly emphasized aquiline noses when they wanted to invoke the imagery of the ancient Romans. Finally, Webb depicted Mr. Walters with small eyes, "black, and piercing, and set deep in his head." In doing so, he subtly challenged white physiognomic thinkers who dismissed African Americans as individuals with dull eyes and projecting eye sockets. Trying to answer a question that "slavery has raised in many thoughtful minds," the book's preface asked its readers, "Are the race at present held as slaves capable of freedom, self-government, and progress?" Through its physiognomical descriptions of the minds and bodies of black people, Webb's novel answered this query in the affirmative.³¹

Because physiognomic rhetoric traversed art, science, and literature, it proved a remarkably accessible discipline for black writers—whether they published in novels, newspapers, or popular periodicals. Nor were physiognomic ideas limited to novelistic descriptions of fictional characters. Black writers also employed them

³¹ For the description of Mr. Walters, see Frank J. Webb, *The Garies and Their Friends* (London: G. Routledge & Co., 1857), 121. For an articulation of the novel's political statement, see the Preface. For other anti-slavery works that employ physiognomy as a technology of character detection, see Hale, *Northwood* (1827); William Wells Brown, *Clotel; Or, the President's Daughter* (London: Partridge & Oakey, 1853); Frederick Douglass, *The Heroic Slave*, in *Autographs for Freedom* (Boston: John P. Jewett, & Co., 1853); Wells Brown, *The American Fugitive in Europe: Sketches of Places and People Abroad* (Boston: John P. Jewett and Company, 1855); William C. Nell, *The Colored Patriots of the American Revolution* (Boston: Robert F. Wallcut, 1855); Josephine Brown, *Biography of an American Bondman, by his Daughter* (Boston: R.F. Wallcut, 1856); and Wells Brown, "Chapter IV: Slave Revolt at Sea," in *The Negro in the American Rebellion: His Heroism and His Fidelity* (Boston: Lee & Shepard, 1867).

when defending people of color who struggled to maintain their dignity in a white supremacist culture. The abolitionist William Still, for instance, used physiognomy to argue that enslaved people were capable of freedom and self-government. As he recorded encounters with fugitives on the Underground Railroad, he explained how refreshing it was “to observe in every countenance, determination, rare manly and womanly bearing, with remarkable intelligence.” When recounting the stories of former slaves, Still liked to highlight individuals whose faces revealed their “ardent thirst for liberty.” If a person had a particularly “intelligent countenance,” he made sure to note it, also spotlighting those with “intellectual” features, a “countenance indicative of having no sympathy with Slavery,” or “a countenance indicative of intelligence and spirit.” At one point, he focused on a formerly enslaved young woman named Hannah, who had “a countenance that indicated that liberty was what she wanted and was contending for, and that she could not willingly submit to the yoke.” Ultimately, he used facial analysis as one strategy in a larger assault on a slave system that had tried—and failed—to turn autonomous beings into property.³²

William Wells Brown similarly relied on physiognomy when arguing for the genius, history, and achievements of black people in America. When describing the features of the black lawyer John Mercer Langston, for example, he wrote that Langston was an eloquent public speaker with a “high and well-formed forehead,

³² For William Still’s physiognomic descriptions, see “Journal C of the Underground Railroad in Philadelphia kept by William Still: containing notices of arrivals of fugitive slaves in Philadelphia with descriptions of their flight, 1852-1857,” Historical Society of Pennsylvania, AmS.232. Digitized images of these manuscripts can be accessed at <http://digitallibrary.hsp.org/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/idno/2030>. Lydia Maria Child also used physiognomy to suggest that certain individuals were particularly unsuited for slavery. When telling the story of a fictional slave who advocated for rebellion, she wrote: “His high, bold forehead and flashing eye indicated an intellect too active, and a spirit too fiery, for Slavery.” See Child, “The Meeting in the Swamp,” in *The Freedmen’s Book* (Ticknor and Fields, 1866), 107.

eyes full, but not prominent, mild and amiable countenance, modest deportment, strong, musical voice, and wears the air of a gentleman.” Similarly, when recounting the mental and physical character of an elite young African American woman named Charlotte Forten, Wells Brown described her as a skilled intellectual who “possesses genius of a high order,” visible in her “finely-chiselled features, well-developed forehead, countenance beaming with intelligence, and her dark complexion.” William Wells Brown repeatedly argued that an intelligent mind could shine through all complexions, so long as a person exhibited the facial characteristics that indicated refinement. If he did not believe that one’s skin color reflected capacity, he nevertheless contended that people’s features were reliable indicators of their inner nature. In the end, black intellectuals recognized that white ethnologists, political thinkers, and popular writers were using physiognomic descriptions—alongside visual culture—to denigrate the mental and moral capacities of people of color. They responded by coopting physiognomic language and using it to positively describe the faces of black women and men.³³

The Mutability of Minds and Faces:

In 1837, the abolitionist and minister, Hosea Easton, became the first black thinker to craft a comprehensive theory explaining the historical and scientific significance of race within the United States. After he and his parishioners faced the violence of white mobs on at least three occasions between 1834 and 1836, he published *A Treatise on the Intellectual Character, and Civil and Political Condition*

³³ William Wells Brown, *The Black Man, His Antecedents, His Genius, and His Achievements* (New York: Thomas Hamilton, 1863), 237. For the description of Forten, see pages 192-193.

of the Colored People of the U. States (1837).³⁴ Easton had, for years, extolled the value of racial uplift, but in his 1837 *Treatise*, he mostly divulged a sense of frustration and rage. No matter how “respectable” black people had proven themselves to be, it seemed as if prejudice was ineradicable. Seeing white supremacy as “an almost insurmountable barrier,” he decided to challenge it with “a direct intellectual assault.” Although he had previously called on African Americans to “uplift” themselves, Easton penned his 1837 *Treatise* as a rebuke to white people for how thoroughly they had managed to degrade the minds and bodies of black Americans.³⁵

Like Samuel Stanhope Smith, Easton viewed the body and mind as mutable. He argued, moreover, that slavery had altered the brains and physiognomies of those in bondage. But while Smith had blamed African nations for their supposed mental and physical “degradation,” Easton modified this interpretation, this time placing the blame entirely upon whites. To show “the lineal effects of slavery on its victims,” Easton highlighted the “Contracted and sloped foreheads” of enslaved individuals, as well as their “prominent eye-balls; projecting under jaw; certain distended muscles about the mouth, or lower parts of the face; thick lips and flat nose.” For Easton, these

³⁴ Bruce Dain has called this work “the first major African American writing on record to address in an original and systematic manner racial differences and racial history.” James Brewer Stewart and George R. Price have similarly argued that before Easton published his *Treatise*, “no American writer had ever attempted so comprehensive an analysis of ‘black and white’ in all of its ramifications.” See Dain, *A Hideous Monster of the Mind*, 173; and Price and Stewart, ed., *To Heal the Scourge of Prejudice: The Life and Writings of Hosea Easton* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), 26.

³⁵ Dain, *A Hideous Monster of the Mind*, 173.

were physical traits that resulted from environmental forces unleashed by the greed and moral deprivation of white people, not from innate African inferiority.³⁶

To be clear: physiognomy is not a legitimate science, nor is it a neutral technology for interpreting human appearance. There is no evidence to support the notion that characteristics such as a “contracting and sloped forehead,” “projecting under jaw,” “thick lips,” or “flat nose” truly do reflect mental inferiority. Nor are these traits accurate descriptors of all black people’s appearances. These ideas, after all, were the products of a racist physiognomic discourse, which white scientists began propagating with gusto in the late eighteenth century. At the same time, it is important to remember that Hosea Easton was living and operating within the intellectual milieu of the 1830s. During this period, many intellectual thinkers—both black and white—believed that physiognomic features revealed important clues about the human form. While Easton brazenly challenged certain aspects of this worldview, he also internalized other elements of physiognomic discourses.

When engaging in public activism during the 1830s and 1840s, Easton and other black intellectuals were often torn between two objectives. On the one hand, they wanted to demonstrate their own refinement and capacity for republican citizenship. This meant distinguishing themselves from the enslaved and from the black working classes. On the other hand, they wanted to advocate for racial justice more broadly. This meant fighting against slavery and arguing for the social, political,

³⁶ Hosea Easton, *A Treatise on the Intellectual Character, and Civil and Political Condition of the Colored People of the U. States* (Boston: Printed and Published by Isaac Knapp, 1837), 23. It was common in the nineteenth century for abolitionists to claim that slavery damaged both the minds and bodies of enslaved people. As Dea H. Boster has argued, anti-slavery activists and enslaved people often claimed that slavery precipitated epileptic fits among bondpeople. See Boster, “A ‘Epileptick’ Bondswoman: Fits, Slavery, and Power in the Antebellum South,” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 83, no. 2 (Summer 2009), 285-287.

and economic advancement of working-class African Americans. To reconcile these competing objectives, middle-class blacks often argued for the “moral uplift” of their race, practicing a form of respectability politics that aligned more closely with the goals of white abolitionists than working-class African Americans.

This often resulted in black intellectuals trying to distance themselves from the laboring poor. Black newspaper editors like Samuel Cornish and John Russwurm, for instance, complained about the public processions of lower-class blacks: “Nothing serves more to keep us in our present degraded condition, than these foolish exhibitions of ourselves,” they complained, preferring more “respectable” forms of protest and celebration.³⁷ As Leslie Harris has argued, black reformers thought that they understood working-class blacks better than white abolitionists did. “But they, too, viewed the mass of blacks as inferior to whites, and perhaps to themselves, and believed that blacks needed preparation and education for citizenship.” Although they sought to emphasize unity among people of color, they also attempted to “reform,” “uplift,” and “educate” recently freed and working-class blacks.³⁸

This class- and status-based understanding of black capacity translated into physiognomic descriptions. When Frederick Douglass complained that white artists did not focus on the refined physiognomies of the black community, he focused on other middle-class intellectuals—men such as Alexander Crummel, Henry Highland Garnet, Charles Remond, James Pennington, and Martin Delany.³⁹ Similarly, when William Wells Brown compiled a volume on “the black man, his genius, and his

³⁷ Quoted in Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery*, 127.

³⁸ Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery*, 200.

³⁹ Douglass, *Claims of the Negro Ethnologically Considered*, 21.

achievements,” he focused much of his attention on individuals such as Benjamin Banneker (a skilled astronomical observer who corresponded with Thomas Jefferson), Ira Aldridge (an internationally renowned and well-educated actor), and James McCune Smith (a licensed medical doctor).⁴⁰ In a periodical series that provided sketches of both real and fictional people of color, the author William J. Wilson focused on the “finely formed head and ample brow” of Reverend Peter Williams (the first editor of *Freedom’s Journal*) and on the superior countenance of the Haitian leader Toussaint L’Ouverture. By contrast, he described a fictional group of enslaved people during a white minister’s sermon, writing that they listened with “eyes dilated, mouths agape, nostrils distended and ears alert.” To be fair, Wilson described other—and, to his mind, more intelligent—enslaved people as having defiant visages: “These faces, in contrast with the others of the congregation, give a most striking effect to the picture,” he wrote. “They are the unruly, the skeptical, the worthless of the flock.” To Wilson, militant enslaved people were simply more honorable and intelligent than their more passive counterparts.⁴¹

Ultimately, black intellectuals were invested in the project of racial justice, but they were also intent on proving their capacity for republic citizenship. This often meant distinguishing themselves from enslaved people and lower-class blacks, whom they sometimes regarded as less refined than themselves. Easton’s discussions of enslaved people’s physiognomies should be viewed in this intellectual context. When grappling with racial difference, he problematically contended that some black

⁴⁰ Wells Brown, *The Black Man, His Antecedents, His Genius, and His Achievements*.

⁴¹ “Afric-American Picture Gallery.—Fifth Paper,” *Anglo-African Magazine* 1, no. 7 (New York), July 1859, 217.

countenances might, in fact, be unattractive. But he also insisted this disparity could be eradicated with the end of slavery and the moral and mental cultivation of all African Americans.

For Easton, appearances were primarily significant because they reflected the workings of the mind. Throughout the *Treatise*, he repeated a single refrain: “Mind acts on matter.” Building on the physiognomic premise that internal dispositions acted upon external features, he described the human body as a malleable entity, capable of change. He also believed that faces and bodies could change as the brain developed. He tied this claim directly to abolitionism by arguing that slavery imprisoned the minds of black Americans and disfigured their appearances. If enslaved individuals attained liberty, he argued, their physiognomies would transform for the better:

The countenance which has been cast down, hitherto, would brighten up with joy. Their narrow foreheads, which have hitherto been contracted for the want of mental exercise, would begin to broaden. Their eye balls, hitherto strained out to prominence by a frenzy excited by the flourish of the whip, would fall back under a thick foliage of curly eyebrows, indicative of deep penetrating thought.

Easton claimed, in other words, that when bondswomen and bondsmen became free, their foreheads would eventually broaden, their eyes would recede, and their brows

would begin to reflect “deep penetrating thought.”⁴² Of course, Easton’s claims themselves reified white physiognomic theories, which had suggested that broad and high foreheads were the symbols of intellectual excellence. If not purposefully, he also lent credence to white beauty standards, which suspiciously maintained that black people’s eyes projected further than white people’s eyes.

At the same time, by arguing that liberty transformed the mind, as well as the physical body, Hosea Easton argued for emancipation while simultaneously challenging the doctrines of proslavery physicians. During the antebellum era, slaveholders and physicians alike had argued that emancipation was impossible because freedom would vitiate the minds and bodies of African Americans, causing both mental and physical disabilities. Both John C. Calhoun and the *New York Journal of Medicine*, for instance, claimed that deafness, blindness, and insanity afflicted free people of color more often than enslaved people. Easton, by contrast, argued that freedom would lead to mental and physiological improvement. Like Samuel Stanhope Smith before him, Easton employed a form of positive physiognomic environmentalism that was simultaneously premised on two notions: 1) the body reflected the mind, and 2) bodies could change as the mind improved. He wedded these ideas with political activism by working to secure voting rights for northern blacks and attending the early conventions of the American Society of Free Persons of Colour and the National Colored Convention. Though dying at the early

⁴² Easton, *A Treatise on the Intellectual Character, and Civil and Political Condition of the Colored People*, 52-53. For “Mind acts on matter,” see pages 6, 24, 44. For more information on Hosea Easton as an intellectual and activist, see Dain, *A Hideous Monster of the Mind*, 170-196; and Price and Stewart, *To Heal the Scourge of Prejudice*. William J. Wilson suggested a similar argument in a fictional series. See Wilson’s description of the underground railroad and slavery’s effect on black bodies: “Afric-American Picture Gallery,” *Anglo-African Magazine* 1, no. 2 (New York), February 1859.

age of 35, he left an important legacy as the first African American to methodically theorize racial difference in a book-length work.⁴³

As one of the only black Americans to train as a professional medical doctor in the nineteenth century, James McCune Smith likewise challenged white scientists by claiming that climate, culture, and geographical position could transform both the mental and physical aspects of mankind. In a critique of Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*, he argued that improvements in African Americans' mental faculties exerted osteological changes in their skulls and faces. Because African Americans were exposed to a more temperate climate than their African counterparts, McCune Smith believed their appearances had already begun to change. The slope of their foreheads supposedly decreased, he argued, just as their jaws protruded less, their skin became lighter, and they became more attractive and intelligent. Like Samuel Stanhope Smith and Hosea Easton, he highlighted the mutability of the black body and demonstrated the importance of both environment and education on the human form.⁴⁴

⁴³ Samuel Forry, "On the Relative Proportion of Centenarians, of Deaf and Dumb, of Blind, and of Insane in the Races of European and African Origin," *New York Journal of Medicine and the Collateral Sciences* 2, May 1844. For a discussion of John C. Calhoun and other nineteenth-century arguments claiming that African Americans would be "disabled by freedom," see Baynton, "Disability and the Justification of Inequality in American History," 37-39. For more on the rhetoric of disability within pro- and anti-slavery activism, see Douglas Baynton, "Slaves, Immigrants, and Suffragists: The Uses of Disability in Citizenship Debates," *PMLA* 120, no. 2 (March 2005), 562. Easton was hopeful that freedom would invigorate the bodies and minds of formerly enslaved people. But Jim Downs has shown that Emancipation often left enslaved people with significant health problems and a lack of medical aid. See Downs, *Sick from Freedom: African-American Illness and Suffering During the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁴⁴ James McCune Smith, "Civilization: Its Dependence on Physical Circumstances," *Anglo-African Magazine* 1, no. 1 (New York), January 1859: 5-16. Nicholas P. Wood also describes McCune Smith's opinion on the changing human form in "Jefferson's Legacy, Race Science, and Righteous Violence in Jabez Hammond's Abolitionist Fiction," *Early American Studies*, 14, no. 3 (Summer 2016), 590. For the essay in which McCune Smith makes these claims, see James McCune Smith, "On the Fourteenth Query of Thomas Jefferson's Notes on Virginia," *Anglo-African Magazine* 1, no. 8 (New York), August 1859: 225-238. For other instances in which McCune Smith used physiognomy to argue for racial equality, see "For Frederick Douglass' Paper," *Frederick Douglass' Paper*

McCune Smith ultimately had a complicated relationship with physiognomy, phrenology, and the “American School” of ethnology. He often alternated between two strategies: attacking the legitimacy of these sciences entirely, or using their principles to advocate for the mental equality of black people. Even as he mocked phrenologists through a satirical piece on the “Heads of the Colored People,” he nonetheless felt it necessary to prove that the “flat, retreating forehead” was not a physical trait that defined every black American. Within the “colored churches” of America, he argued, a careful observer “will find the low, retreating forehead to be the exception, and not the rule.” In other words, James McCune Smith contended that observers would find a collection of high, intellectual foreheads in a congregation of “refined” blacks, just like they might find in white churches. Physiognomic ideas played a large role in McCune Smith’s works, even though he was conflicted about their scientific legitimacy. His ambivalence demonstrates just how central physiognomy had been in shaping the debate over racial difference. Though he resented the need to engage with white ethnologists, he also knew he had to battle them on their own terrain. His continued attachment to environmentalist understandings of human nature, however, demonstrates how physiognomic discourses functioned differently in proslavery and abolitionist thought.⁴⁵

(Rochester), December 18, 1851; and Communipaw [James McCune Smith], “Nicaragua,” *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* (Rochester), January 8, 1852.

⁴⁵ McCune Smith, “On the Fourteenth Query of Thomas Jefferson’s Notes on Virginia,” 228. In general, James McCune Smith was more dismissive of phrenology than he was of physiognomy. He entitled his iconic series, “Heads of the Colored People,” as a critique to phrenological discourses, and yet even in these articles, he employs physiognomic descriptions of his subjects. See John Stauffer, *The Works of James McCune Smith: Black Intellectual and Abolitionist* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 185-242.

Even when African American writers agreed with white scientists in saying the face and skull reflected inner capacity, they rarely described heads and faces as permanent and heritable features, incapable of physical change. This allowed black writers to analyze faces in creative ways. On the one hand, they regularly pointed to African Americans with impressive foreheads, chiseled jaws, and refined features. Yet they also sometimes argued that *certain* people of color were mentally and physically inferior beings. This was part of a larger process by which black intellectuals sought to challenge white racism while simultaneously distinguishing themselves from the working poor and the enslaved. At the same time, they never wavered in their argument that minds could improve with cultivation, making the face more beautiful as the mental powers developed. Their strategy undermined the arguments of slavery's apologists, who often claimed that black bodies were not suited for freedom and warned that the end of slavery would lead to the proliferation of mental insanity and physical degeneration among African Americans. Instead, they described black bodies and minds as dynamic entities that were constantly transforming for the better.

The Liberatory Potential of Facial Analysis

If faces or minds could change over time, then it stood to reason that there were African Americans who had not only attained mental refinement, but also exhibited the facial features that signified inner excellence. As another physiognomic strategy, black writers highlighted the visages of prominent members of their community to illustrate what was possible when the black mind was nurtured and encouraged to develop. William J. Wilson, for instance, used physiognomy to assure

black readers that many African Americans had already achieved intellectual eminence and that others were capable of further advancement. Wilson served as the headmaster of the African Free School in Brooklyn and regularly drafted pieces for Frederick Douglass' paper, as well as the *Anglo-African Magazine*, usually writing under pseudonyms of "Ethiop" or the "Brooklyn Correspondent." Like Douglass, Wilson believed white artists often presented prejudicial images of black faces. Yet Wilson was equally concerned with how the black community interpreted the appearances of its own members. To remedy this problem, he drafted a submission to Frederick Douglass' paper that reflected upon Philadelphia's Colored National Convention of 1855 and focused on the appearances of two figures who spoke at the meeting: Isaiah C. Weare and Mary Ann Shadd.⁴⁶

As a member of the Pennsylvania delegation at the Colored National Convention, Isaiah Weare was an intellectual giant, despite being "a young man, and very small." He was so slight in stature, that those who observed him might have asked themselves: "how can a large mind be contained within so small a mould?" To answer this question, Wilson argued that Weare's intellectual eminence could be seen in his head, form, and features. He contended that Weare's "lower face, too, especially the under jaw, is wonderfully indicative of intellectual power." After spotlighting Weare's appearance, Wilson also noted Mary Ann Shadd's "small and penetrating" eyes, "fine physical organization," and "feminine" features. Melding the

⁴⁶ Isaiah Weare kept a manuscript version of this document in his collection of "Notebooks, Letters, Financial Papers, and Newspaper Clippings (1855-1900)." For the manuscript, see "Leon Gardiner Collection of American Negro Historical Society Records, 1790-1905," Collection 8, Box 9G, Folder 4, Document 2, HSP. For the published version, see William J. Wilson, "For Frederick Douglass' Paper. From Our Brooklyn Correspondent," *Frederick Douglass' Paper* (Rochester), Nov. 9, 1855.

disciplines of physiognomy and phrenology, he suggested that the human exterior revealed the inner man or woman.⁴⁷

Wilson's comments reveal a subversive form of physiognomic observation. By locating Isaiah Weare's "intellectual power" in his lower jaw, Wilson revised traditional physiognomic doctrines, articulated first by Lavater and adopted by physiognomists in both Europe and the United States. For physiognomists, it was the forehead and eyes that portrayed intellectual capacity. The jaw, by contrast, portrayed the baser instincts of humankind. By arguing that Wilson's intellect could be found in his jaw, Wilson not only undermined racist depictions of black people's supposedly "prognathus" jaws; he also created his own physiognomic system, in which it was not merely the forehead and eyes that revealed intelligence, but also the "lower face."⁴⁸

Wilson knew that African Americans were intelligent and attractive, but he feared that even people of color preferred white facial features—mistakenly believing that only whites could exhibit the physical signs of inner greatness. Because of this unconscious and internalized prejudice, he argued, many African Americans were

⁴⁷ After Wilson's physiognomic profile, Isaiah Weare angrily wrote to *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, claiming he never spoke to the anonymous "Brooklyn Correspondent" who had nevertheless "volunteered to be my daguerreotypist, and to give to the public, pictures *gratis*." It appears that Weare was far less radical than both Douglass and Wilson, for he made sure to insist that he *was not* the leader of the Philadelphia delegation, and that "no word or sentence, indicating a sectional idea or preference, escaped [his] lips." See Isaiah C. Weare, "Letter from Isaiah C. Weare," *Frederick Douglass' Paper* (Rochester), Nov. 9, 1855. Weare maintained a relatively low public profile in the 1850s, but he did serve on the Executive Committee of the Mother Bethel A.M.E. Church and became an active advocate for black voting rights. He forged relationship with both William Still and James Forten, two prominent members of the Philadelphia black community. The historical record is ambiguous on the proper spelling of his last name, at times it is listed as "Weare" and at others, it is listed as "Wears." I used "Weare" because this is how both he and Wilson spelled it in the 1850s (though it appears he later used "Wears"). For a closer examination of Weare's political activism in the decades following the Civil War, see Harry C. Silcox, "The Black 'Better Class' Political Dilemma: Philadelphia Prototype Isaiah C. Wears," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 113, no. 1 (January 1989): 45-66.

⁴⁸ Wilson, "For Frederick Douglass' Paper."

wholly incapable of recognizing specimens of genius within their own ranks. Fearing that people of color too often turned to white bodies for examples of physical and intellectual distinction, Wilson implored black communities to turn inward when searching for faces of genius. If intellect could not be confined to white brains—and he believed it could not—then physical manifestations of intellect should be visible on black features as well as white ones. By talking about the “beautiful” and “intellectual” countenances of Isaiah Weare and Mary Ann Shadd, he argued for the power of their minds.⁴⁹

Wilson was so deeply invested in the liberatory potential of facial analysis that he dedicated an entire periodical series to describing fictional images of black figures. Like Douglass, Wilson believed white artists and writers could never fully represent the faces and minds of black Americans. As a result, he argued African Americans needed a gallery of artistic works in which black artists portrayed black subjects. Because such a gallery did not exist, Wilson generated a fictional one in the pages of the *Anglo-African Magazine*, a periodical written by black authors and specifically intended for black readers. By touring through corridors that never materialized and analyzing artworks that did not exist, Wilson visualized a virtual art exhibit for his readers. He published these essays in serial form, over the course of nine months. In each installment, he guided readers through the gallery, encouraging them to meander and examine the pieces. Through the narrative voice of “Ethiop,” the museum’s fictitious curator, Wilson coached readers on how to interpret these mental images.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Wilson, “For Frederick Douglass’ Paper.”

⁵⁰ “Afric-American Picture Gallery—Second Paper. By Ethiop.” *Anglo-African Magazine* 1, no. 3, March 1859, 89. Though writing in the twentieth century, bell hooks echoed Wilson’s concerns. During the era of segregation, she argues, African Americans needed a space to portray images of their race: “Since no ‘white’ galleries displayed images of black people created by black folks, spaces had to

This “picture gallery” never existed as a physical space, nor did Wilson draw the pictures he described. Instead, he provided his readers with “word paintings,” in which he encouraged readers to imagine a collection of artworks, even if they could not experience the gallery in person. As Ivy Wilson has argued, Wilson used the gallery to imagine “that which does not quite exist ... as a way to present alternative ways of seeing for his black readers.” Because the gallery was fictional, he could have included anything within its walls. The choices he made reveal just how deeply he believed in the power of facial analysis for African Americans’ own perceptions of racial difference. Through a literary dramatization of an illusory art gallery, Wilson articulated artistic, scientific, and political messages that rejected the theories of Anglo-American ethnologists.⁵¹

Though Wilson used physiognomic descriptions throughout his entire public career, his meditation on Phillis Wheatley’s “portrait” in the Afric-American Picture Gallery was one of his most detailed uses of this science. Wilson likely based his description on the only existing portrait of Wheatley: a profile engraving from the late eighteenth century, which pictured her in the act of poetic composition. Wilson had almost certainly seen Wheatley’s portrait, and he likely imagined this image as he crafted a description of her countenance for the *Anglo-African Magazine*. Before Ethiop mentions anything about Wheatley’s history, poetry, or achievements, he first gives his readers a detailed description of her facial angle, forehead, and brain:

be made within diverse black communities.” See bell hooks, “In Our Glory: Photography and Black Life,” in *Art on my Mind: Visual Politics* (New York: The New Press, 1995), 59. For secondary work on the Afric-American Picture Gallery, see John Ernest, *Liberation Historiography: African American Writers and the Challenge of History, 1794-1861* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 321-329; and Ivy Wilson, *Specters of Democracy: Blackness and the Aesthetics of Politics in the Antebellum U.S.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 145-168.

⁵¹ Wilson, *Specters of Democracy*, 148.

The facial angle contains full ninety degree; the forehead is finely formed, and the brain large; the nose is long, and the nostrils thin, while the eyes, though not large, are well set. To this may be added a small mouth, with lips prettily turned, and a chin—that perfection of beauty in the female face—delicately tapered from a throat and neck that are themselves perfection. The whole make-up of this face is an index of healthy intellectual powers, combined with an active temperament, over which has fallen a slight tinge of religious pensiveness. Thus hangs Phillis Wheatley before you in the Afric-American Picture Gallery.

To begin, Wilson's narrator focused on Wheatley's 90-degree facial angle. Here he referred to a theory invented and popularized by Petrus Camper, a Dutch physician, artist, and naturalist who published extensively about art and anatomy. Camper claimed that the Grecian face demonstrated facial angles between 95 and 100 degrees. Europeans were supposedly closest to this standard, purportedly with facial angles between 80 and 90 degrees, followed by other groups, such as "Moors," "Calmucks," and "Negroes," all with facial angles between 70 and 80 degrees.⁵²

⁵² "Afric-American Picture Gallery.—Fifth Paper. By Ethiop." *Anglo-African Magazine* 1, no. 7 (New York), July 1859, 218. For the history of Phillis Wheatley's portrait, see Gwendolyn Dubois Shaw, "'On Deathless Glories Fix Thine Ardent View': Scipio Moorhead, Phillis Wheatley, and the Mythic Origins of Anglo-African Portraiture in New England," in Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw and Emily K. Shubert, eds., *Portraits of a People: Picturing African Americans in the Nineteenth Century* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, and Andover, MA: Addison Gallery of American Art, 2006), 26-40; and Eric Slauter, "Looking for Scipio Moorhead: An 'African Painter' in Revolutionary North America," in Agnes Lugo-Ortiz and Angela Rosenthal, eds., *Slave Portraiture in the Atlantic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 89-111. For the theory of the facial angle, see Petrus Camper, *The Works on the Connexion Between the Science of Anatomy and the*

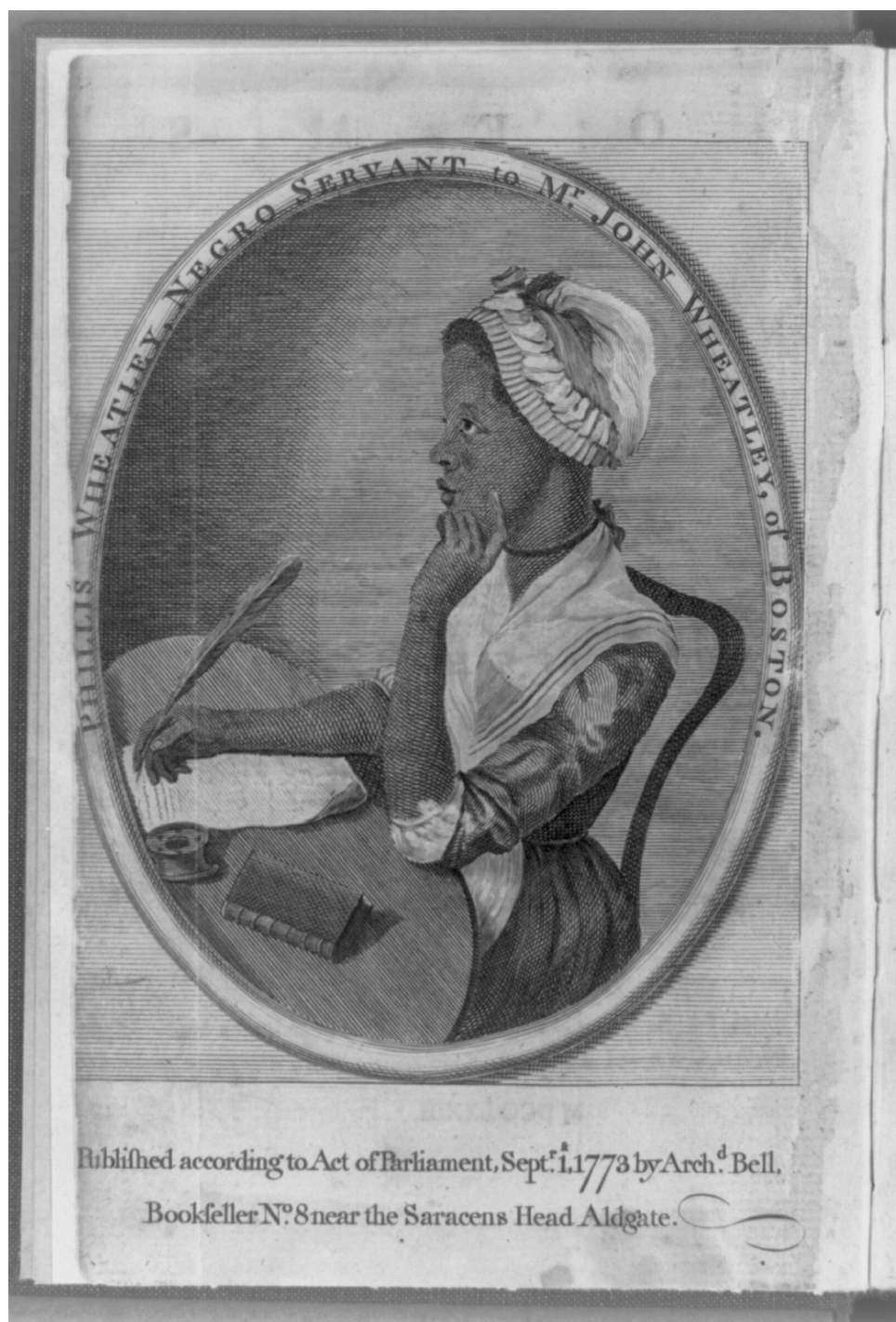


Fig. 6.3. “Phillis Wheatley, Negro Servant to Mr. John Wheatley of Boston,” frontispiece for Phillis Wheatley, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (London: Printed for Archibald Bell, bookseller 1773), Library of Congress.

In the mid-nineteenth century, proponents of scientific racism would exaggerate Camper's theories, arguing that lower facial angles indicated animality, while facial angles between 90 and 100 degrees were the markers of human perfection. When placed in this context, Ethiop's insistence that Phillis Wheatley's portrait conveyed a 90-degree facial angle, an "intellectual" countenance, and a "finely formed" forehead becomes more significant. Using a fictional image of a black woman, he argued African Americans could display the physical features necessary for great mental accomplishment. In the process, Wilson invoked the same physiognomic theories that undergirded the rise of scientific racism, but he used them to argue for the "eminence" of Wheatley's brain.

In many ways, Wilson's use of the facial angle may have approached Camper's original intentions more closely than the scientific racists who misinterpreted Camper's work. As Nell Painter has argued, Camper "insisted on the unity of mankind, even going so far as to suggest that Adam and Eve might well have been black, because no one skin color was superior to the others." By the middle decades of the nineteenth century, however, "scientific racists in Britain and the United States ... went on reproducing his images as irrefutable proof of a white supremacy that Camper himself had never embraced." Although Camper *did* arrange the skulls of white and black individuals on a hierarchical continuum—with black skulls positioned next to the skulls of apes—he also argued in favor of human variation and natural equality. When Wilson used the facial angle to describe Phillis Wheatley, he made a strategic appeal to Camper's late-eighteenth-century vision of

universal humanity: a theory that white ethnologists were distorting for their own purposes in the antebellum period.⁵³

By the mid-nineteenth century, Wheatley's countenance became a battleground: one arena of a physiognomic conflict in which ethnologists, abolitionists, and popular writers clashed in their interpretations of racial difference. For example, Robert Chambers, the famous British writer and anonymous author of the influential *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (1844), provided extensive commentary on Wheatley's countenance and capacities. Citing the British ethnologists James Cowles Prichard and William Lawrence, he argued that intellectual "cultivation" was "capable of modifying even the shape of the skull." At the same time, he started from a belief in black inferiority, arguing for "a decided inferiority of cerebral organization in the Negro, attended with a corresponding inferiority of faculties." He argued that *some* black individuals might exhibit great mental prowess and physical attractiveness, and cited Phillis Wheatley as his example. But he also suggested that the most intelligent African Americans had visages with purportedly "white" features. Phillis Wheatley's portrait, he argued, demonstrated "not only a Caucasian brow and head, but those of the finest order." In Chambers' view, she was not a "typical" African American. She was merely an exception that proved his racist rule.⁵⁴

⁵³ Painter, *The History of White People*, 66-67. Miriam Meijer argues that nineteenth century racial theorists purposefully distorted Petrus Camper's work. She contends that Camper was arguing for the universal humanity of mankind. See Meijer, *Race and Aesthetics in the Anthropology of Petrus Camper* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999).

⁵⁴ Robert Chambers, *Chamber's Information for the People: A Popular Encyclopedia*, First American Edition (Philadelphia: G.B. Bieber & Co., 1848), 1:68.

White authors often argued that Wheatley's face marked her as a unique individual, fundamentally unlike other African Americans. By contrast, both white and black abolitionists claimed Wheatley's face displayed her intellectual eminence and hinted at the possibility for the mental refinement of the entire black race. In *Narratives of Colored Americans* (1826), for instance, the white female abolitionist Abigail Mott suggested Wheatley's "countenance appears to have been pleasing, and her head highly intellectual." The British Quaker and abolitionist, Wilson Armistead, likewise used Wheatley's face to prove the moral and mental equality of the "coloured portion of mankind." This meant that when William J. Wilson "sketched" her portrait in 1859, he built on a much larger tradition of black and white activists who interpreted her portrait for political purposes. William Wells Brown then continued this tradition, copying the text of Wilson's description in *The Black Man, His Antecedents, His Genius, and His Achievements* (1863). Using Wheatley as an example, these authors argued that blacks, too, could have high, "finely-formed" foreheads, "chiseled" features, and "beautiful" Roman or Grecian countenances. It was important for abolitionists to highlight African Americans that displayed the physiognomic features that supposedly signaled mental merit, because these were the criteria by which white scientists were judging the entire race.⁵⁵

As anthropologists recognize, "race" is more a social construct than a biological reality. There is no such thing as a definitive "white" or "black" countenance because human variation is vast, and individuals of all backgrounds

⁵⁵ For descriptions of Wheatley's "intellectual" countenance, see Abigail Mott, *Narratives of Colored Americans: Printed by Order of the Trustees of the Residuary Estate of Lindley Murray* (1826, rep., New York, 1875), 8; Wilson Armistead, *A Tribute for the Negro* (New York: William Harned, 1848), 346; and Wells Brown, *The Black Man*, 231.

display a wide array of facial features. The messy reality of human diversity belies the existence of a racially standardized facial type. This is something that people of color recognized in the 1840s and 1850s, long before white intellectuals embraced it. Rightly insisting that people of color were unique individuals, black writers pointed out that all black faces were unique. James McCune Smith, for instance, described race not as a biological reality, but rather as a way of seeing—a lens that shaped white viewers' perceptions of African Americans. White people did not see black people for who they were, he argued. When they conceptualized a black person, they did not imagine an “actual physical being of flesh and bones and blood.” Instead, they relied on a stereotypical vision of blackness, in which a person of color was not an individual but rather an exemplar of a type: “a hideous monster of the mind.” Frederick Douglass similarly argued that white artists began with “a theory respecting the distinctive features of the negro physiognomy,” rather than an inspection of the individualized faces of black individuals. Rather than closely examining the physical features of the being in front of them, whites saw what their preconceptions had conditioned them to see.⁵⁶

These insights are particularly important, because they reveal both the perils and possibilities of physiognomy for advocates of racial equality. By encouraging people to use facial analysis, black writers demanded that white Americans examine the “flesh and blood and bones” of African Americans, rather than relying on harmful stereotypes. Yet by themselves deploying facial analysis, they gave credence to the idea that the physical form truly did reveal character. Even as they adapted

⁵⁶ James McCune Smith, “Nicaragua,” *Frederick Douglass' Paper* (Rochester), Jan. 8, 1852; Frederick Douglass, “A Tribute for the Negro,” *The North Star* (Rochester), April 7, 1849.

physiognomic precepts for their own purposes, black writers created artificial distinctions between people of color who had “good” or “intelligent” physiognomies and those who allegedly did not. This meant that they sometimes reified white beauty standards, inadvertently legitimizing a system of facial analysis that had devalued them from its very inception.

One black author, M.H. Freeman, explicitly highlighted this problem. He argued that the “great want of the free colored race in this country” was its failure to recognize “its own intrinsic worthiness” and beauty. Freeman pointed to the “deplorable” practice, in which every black child “is taught directly or indirectly by its parents that he or she is pretty, just in proportion as the features approximate to the Anglo Saxon standard.” When black parents commented on the “good hair” or “good features” of their children, everyone knew this meant straight hair and “white” features. No wonder black children were not proud of their racial heritage, he scoffed. How could they be proud when they spent so much time trying to “fix” their hair and features to approximate European standards of beauty? In a cultural climate like this—where “white” faces were “good” faces—how could young African Americans ever develop the self-respect necessary for racial advancement? Freeman argued that this process must start with black parents, who should teach their children not only to value and improve the black mind, but also love their black bodies. Crafting a prescient critique of antebellum aesthetic standards, he highlighted the many problems that resulted when black families reified a physiognomic value system created by white intellectuals.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ M.H. Freeman, “The Educational Wants of the Free Colored People,” *Anglo-African Magazine* 1, no. 4 (New York), April 1859, 115-119. Freeman raised issues that black Americans continue to face. As scholars like Susannah Walker have argued, “forty years after Stokely Carmichael

Freeman's focus on learning to love black bodies predated the "Black is Beautiful" movement of the 1960s and 1970s, as well as twentieth-century black feminist critiques of white beauty standards. But, as bell hooks has argued, there "has been little change" in how black people are represented in popular culture since the nineteenth century. Most images of black people, she argues, are either "constructed by white people who have not divested of racism, or by people of color/black people who may see the world through the lens of white supremacy." M.H. Freeman anticipated hooks' argument by over a century. If most African Americans were willing to criticize whites for how they portrayed black appearances, Freeman was quite unique in his unapologetic and absolute refusal to adhere to a set of physiognomic standards that had been created by white people and often reinscribed by black writers.⁵⁸



Physiognomy presented black thinkers with a series of thorny ideological conundrums. Frederick Douglass, for instance, regularly engaged in scientific facial analysis and extolled the merits of phrenology. While he vociferously rejected the craniological theories of the "American School" of ethnology, he saw physiognomy and phrenology as alternative and more ethical scientific practices: disciplines that allowed for the possibility of human improvement. Intellectuals like William Wells Brown and William J. Wilson were likewise committed to the project of facial analysis, often using it to suggest that black people were superior to their white

declared that 'black is beautiful' the phrases 'good hair' and 'bad hair' still have meaning for African Americans." See Walker, *Style and Status: Selling Beauty to African American Women, 1920-1975* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2007), 2.

⁵⁸ Freeman, "The Educational Wants of the Free Colored People." See also bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 1.

counterparts. But as people like M.H. Freeman rightly realized, whenever African American thinkers enthusiastically engaged with the physiognomic project, they legitimized the very discourses that white Americans were using to rationalize white supremacy. Black writers, like their white counterparts, both existed in and helped create the physiognomic intellectual milieu of the mid-nineteenth century.

Even so, black writers engaged in a radical act, simply by practicing physiognomy. By asserting their right to scientifically discern faces, they not only used facial analysis to challenge white supremacy; they also undermined many of the tenets that white physiognomists followed. Lavater, for instance, had claimed that only truly beautiful and intelligent individuals could be successful face decoders. In his worldview, wealthy, educated, white men were the best physiognomists. For him, beauty was in the eye of the beholder, but only the truly beautiful could be skillful beholders. Ideas about who “counted” as a proper physiognomist were profoundly shaped by existing hierarchies of race, class, and gender. Black writers thus challenged a central element of physiognomic thought, simply by asserting their claim to physiognomic knowledge. By insisting they, too, were physiognomic observers, they asserted their influence over scientific and popular thought. To quote bell hooks: “There is power in looking.”⁵⁹

⁵⁹ bell hooks, *Black Looks*, 115. Both Walter Johnson and Jasmine Nichole Cobb have argued that white men positioned themselves as viewers in the nineteenth-century, priding themselves on their ability to “see” and scrutinize black bodies, particularly those of enslaved Americans on the auction block. Cobb calls slavery a “peculiarly ocular institution,” rooted in the idea that white men were somehow particularly gifted “seers.” See Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 137; and Cobb, *Picture Freedom*, 38-43. Christopher Lukasik has similarly pointed out that Lavater’s physiognomic system rested on the premise that “the physiognomist needed to possess a number of traits—beauty, education, leisure, and, by extension, capital among them—in order to read faces accurately.” In other words, “the capacity for physiognomic discernment varied with the attention, experience, education, and wealth of the observer.” See Lukasik, *Discerning Characters*, 35. See also Christopher Rivers, *Face Value: Physiognomical Thought and the Legible Body in Marivaux, Lavater, Balzac, Gautier, and Zola* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994), 94.

Ultimately, by speaking the same language as the white scientists and popular writers who challenged their humanity, people of color subverted theories of biological determinism from within. Integrating older, environmentalist understandings of human difference with new methods of human description, they highlighted black people who had attained physiognomic eminence and argued for the broader capacities of the black race. Moreover, by emphasizing black individuals who had attained both mental and facial eminence, they challenged the claim that African Americans were an irremediably degraded class. In doing so, they took an old yet resilient scientific tradition, wrestled it away from the hands and minds of white practitioners, and instead used it to advocate for the social, political, and economic advancement of black Americans.

Conclusion

Science is a powerful weapon. When rationalized through its explanatory power, social hierarchies often seem like the natural byproducts of objective and physiological realities. But science is—and always has been—an unreliable arbiter of truth. Intellectuals have not always agreed on what “counts” as good science, and standards of experimentation and reliability have shifted over time, continually responding to social, economic, and political pressures. Science, to put it succinctly, is a capacious construct with a complicated and problematic history.

Between the 1790s and the 1860s, physiognomy functioned as a method for understanding human nature and a popular science that permeated the lives, mindsets, and literary practices of early national and antebellum Americans. As a discipline, it rested on the premise that external appearance and inner worth were connected. Even more enticingly, physiognomy promised people a system of corporeal analysis that would let them “read” other people with precision. By analyzing visages, those in the elite and middling classes found ways to mark certain individuals as social, sexual, racial, or economic inferiors, simply by describing them as members of a distinct and anatomically identifiable class of subordinate beings. For those who were invested in maintaining established power relationships, physiognomy conveniently rooted inequities in the apparently unchangeable features of the human body. It assured people that human character was a measurable, corporeal trait.

When physiognomy first took the North American continent by storm in the 1790s, Americans were mired in the challenges of establishing a new political system. As the country’s founders struggled to erect a representative government and forge a

national identity, they confronted a series of contradictions. On the one hand, republican political theory depended on the notion that civic virtue was rooted in individual merit, not the artificial distinctions of birth. Within this context, everyone might take charge of their own destiny, so long as they embarked upon a project of personal betterment. On the other hand, more privileged Americans found it tempting to rationalize existing distinctions by finding scientific justifications for their existence. Within this context, the body became a terrain on which social hierarchies were contested, and physiognomy emerged as a widely accessible weapon that all parties could wield as they fought for their cause.

As physiognomy grew in popularity during the early national decades, elite and middling white men quickly realized that they could use its tenets to personify republican citizenship, rationalize their own privileged position within society, and marginalize the figures that they deemed less intelligent, virtuous, and capable than themselves. Arguing that civic virtue was both a moral and physical quality, the country's artists, political thinkers, and popular authors contended that the capacity for republic citizenship constituted an internal reality that nonetheless manifested itself in the visages of the nation's most prominent white men. They constructed physical and textual pantheons to spotlight the countenances of Revolutionary leaders and luminaries such as George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Alexander Hamilton, and Thomas Jefferson. These efforts constituted a dual attempt to elucidate the eminence of the United States' population and to accentuate the moral, mental, and physical distinction of the country's most exemplary citizens.¹

¹ For a discussion of these physiognomical pantheons, see Brandon Brame Fortune, "Portraits of Virtue and Genius: Pantheons of Worthies and Public Portraiture in the Early American Republic, 1780-1820," (Ph.D. diss., University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 1986), 34-86; David C. Ward,

When the Philadelphia publisher Joseph Delaplaine published his *Repository of the Lives and Portraits of Distinguished American Characters* in 1815, his ultimate goal was to display the portraits and biographical sketches of the United States' most illustrious men. He complained that the "writers of Europe" had unfairly tried "to degrade the character of the natives of America." Delaplaine insisted that the people of the United States were "the immediate descendants of European ancestors." In the process, he excluded both African Americans and Native Americans from his vision of national identity. He then lamented how his countrymen had "been declared to be inferior, both in body and intellect, to those who are born in the eastern hemisphere." But he hoped his physiognomical portrait gallery would bely the claims of European authors by exhibiting the "transcendent greatness" of white Americans.²

Countless artists, publishers, and political thinkers heeded the same clarion call, intent on highlighting the voluminous foreheads, ample brows, and piercing eyes of the nation's most notable citizens. Almost invariably, the people whose portraits graced the pages of these elaborate books and adorned the walls of museum exhibits were wealthy, white, and male. These physiognomical portraits—and the supposedly scientific descriptions that accompanied them—suggested that the bodies of both white women and people of color were not capable of displaying the qualities of true republican citizenship. If visual galleries verified the mental and physical distinction of the republic's leading citizens, then the physiognomic theories underpinning them

Charles Willson Peale: Art and Selfhood in the Early Republic (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 82-89; Christopher Lukasik, *Discerning Characters: The Culture of Appearance in Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 127-140; and Catherine E. Kelly, *The Republic of Taste: Art, Politics, and Everyday Life in Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016, 159-194.

² Joseph Delaplaine, *Repository of the Lives and Portraits of Distinguished American Characters* (Philadelphia: 1815-1816), iv-v (for "transcendent greatness," see page 81).

allowed society's most powerful actors to rationalize social hierarchies by insisting that these inequities were rooted in scientific realities.³

Just as early national Americans devised a physiognomical vision of virtuous white male citizenship, they invoked scientific facial analysis to depict republican womanhood and convey an ostensibly objective standard of female beauty. These visions of ideal femininity almost always excluded women of color, focusing instead on elite and middling white women. As the "fair sex," proper republican women were expected to be both beautiful and pale. Their distinctiveness was not to result from their intellectual acumen or political virtue, but rather from their ability to be "a source of consolation, admiration, and information to a virtuous man." As the political writer Thomas Branagan put it, a model wife and mother would have a "comprehensive mind," as well as a "noble beautiful countenance beaming with dignity and grace." Paradigmatic traits included a "large arched forehead," which conveyed a modest intelligence, brilliant black eyes to demonstrate the "candour and generosity of her heart," and "placid and pleasing lips," which served to "point out the complacency and docility of her nature."⁴ Combining Enlightenment-era

³ For early nineteenth-century examples, see James Hardie, *The New Universal Biographical Dictionary* (New York: Johnson & Stryker, 1801-1805); John Sanderson, *Biographies of the Signers of the Declaration of Independence* (Philadelphia: R.W. Pomeroy, 1823-27); James Thacher, *American Medical Biography* (Boston: Richardson & Lord, 1828); James Herring and James Barton Longacre, *The National Portrait Gallery of Distinguished Americans* (Philadelphia: Henry Perkins, 1834-1839); and Stephen W. Williams, *American Medical Biography; Or, Memoirs of Eminent Physicians, Embracing Principally Those Who Have Died Since the Publication of Dr. Thacher's Work on the Same Subject* (Greenfield, M.A.: L. Merriam and Co., 1845).

⁴ Thomas Branagan, *The Charms of Benevolence and Patriotic Mentor; Or, The Rights and Privileges of Republicanism* (Philadelphia: Johnston and Patterson, 1813), 123. Branagan essentially plagiarized from Johann Casper Lavater's *Essays on Physiognomy; for the Promotion of the Knowledge and the Love of Mankind*, First American Edition (Boston: William Spotswood & David West, 1794), 174. For similar examples, see "A Friend to the Improvements," *Medical Abstracts: On the Nature of Health, with Practical Observations; and the Laws of the Nervous and Fibrous Systems* (London: J. Johnson, 1797), 809. It was also reprinted in Robert John Thornton, *The Philosophy of Medicine: Or, Medical Extracts on the Nature of Health and Disease*, 4th edition (London: C.

anatomical sciences with existing stereotypes about female beauty, Americans used physiognomy to portray middling and elite and middling white women as individuals who were capable of both moral and mental cultivation, but also as beings who lacked men's intellectual profundity. At the same time, these popular writers and political thinkers largely disregarded both poor white women and women of color. In doing so, they propagated an implicit message: laboring women were neither beautiful nor proper models of republican womanhood.

In the early national decades, both male and female writers argued for a "separate but equal" vision of the human mind, in which white men's brains were both powerful and profound, while white women's brains were perceptive, delicate, and beautiful. Between the 1830s and 1860s, however, scientific thinkers became more invested in delineating the precise mental and physical traits that purportedly distinguished the sexes. Women's minds, they argued, were fundamentally different from—and irrefutably inferior to—those of men. Like the physiognomic thinkers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, antebellum scientists argued that the mind imprinted itself upon the body. This meant women's external features would telegraph their internal attributes. But these thinkers also contended that women's only goal should be to serve as loving mothers and beautiful wives.⁵

Whittingham, 1799), 48; "Danger of Sporting with the Affections," *The New England Quarterly* 2, no. 1 (Boston), April-June 1802; and "Danger of Sporting with the Affections," *Philadelphia Repository and Weekly Register* 3, no. 34, August 20, 1803. Mason Locke Weems also published his own physiognomical vision of the perfect republican woman. See Weems, *The Lover's Almanac* (Fredericksburg, VA: T. Green, 1798). Weems plagiarized much of this piece from Samuel Jackson Pratt, *The Pupil of Pleasure*, 2nd Edition (London: G. Robinson and J. Bew, 1777), 219.

⁵ For some examples, see "Woman in Her Social and Domestic Character," *American Phrenological Journal* 1, no. 9, June 1, 1839; Alexander Walker, *Beauty; Illustrated Chiefly by an Analysis and Classification of Beauty in Woman* (New York: J. & H.G. Langley, 1841); Alexander Walker, *Woman: Physiologically Considered as to Mind, Morals, Marriage, Matrimonial Slavery, Infidelity, and Divorce* (New York: J. & H.G. Langley, Second Edition, 1840); "Article XLVII. Woman—Her Character, Influence, Sphere, and Consequent Duties, Education, and Improvement.

Feeling threatened by women's mounting public activism in the 1830s and 1840s, physicians and political thinkers insisted that women should remain within their "proper sphere," and they resented those who were bold enough to move beyond it. Female activists who advocated for the "rights of woman," they suggested, were defying the dictates of nature. Following this line of reasoning, they instructed men to pursue wives with physiognomical indicators of modesty and maternal fitness, rather than intellectual eminence. In scientific works, popular periodicals, and phrenological pamphlets, white men found assurances of their own mental superiority. They also encountered advice on how to identify the visages of suitable marital companions. Rounded features and chubby faces were the signals of an exceptional child bearer. By contrast, a high and broad forehead—paired with dark, piercing eyes—signified a woman who was more dedicated to intellectual pursuits than to domestic serenity. Only the former could deliver marital bliss and a happy home.⁶

Scientific thinkers in the 1830s and 1840s not only developed increasingly elaborate interpretations of male and female difference, they also cultivated robust scientific rationalizations for racial hierarchies. By the mid-nineteenth century, a large number of elite and middle-class white Americans believed that hierarchies of race, class, and gender were physiological in nature, and thus unchangeable. Combining

Number X," *APJ* 10, no. 8, August 1, 1848; Orson Squire Fowler, *Maternity: Or the Bearing and Nursing of Children, Including Female Education and Beauty* (New York: Fowler and Wells, 1853); Joseph Turnley, *The Language of the Eye: As Indicative of Female Beauty, Manly Genius, and General Character* (London: Partridge and Co., 1856); Samuel R. Wells, *New Physiognomy: or, Signs of Character as Manifested through Temperament and External Forms, and Especially in "The Human Face Divine"* (New York: Fowler and Wells, 1866); and James McGrigor Allan, "On the Real Differences in the Minds of Men and Women," *Journal of the Anthropological Society of London* 7 (1869): cxcv-ccxix.

⁶ For a representative example of this argument, see Walker, *Woman: Physiologically Considered* (New York Edition, 1840, particularly the arguments made by the "American Physician").

eighteenth-century physiognomic theories with newer disciplines such as phrenology and ethnology, American scientists used facial and cranial analysis to speciously suggest that the jaws, foreheads, and countenances of African Americans signaled their mental and moral inferiority. Such discourses not only made slavery seem more palatable, they also justified the social exclusion and political disfranchisement of free people of color throughout the United States.⁷

In a similar way, middle-class reformers suggested that it was possible to distinguish between the virtuous and the vicious poor, merely by examining their facial features. They likewise suggested that certain individuals might disclose a propensity for criminality in their countenances. In all of these instances, Americans marshaled physiognomic ideas to excuse discriminatory policies and naturalize existing hierarchies. Certain forms of inequality might be acceptable, it seemed, so long as they were rooted in anatomical and physiological realities. This was the impulse that made physiognomy attractive: the comfort that came from “knowing” that people’s social position could be seen on their very faces.

In some ways, though, physiognomy was a deeply democratic science. As a widespread discourse and popularly-accessible cultural phenomenon, facial analysis regularly filtered into popular conversations about human nature. It was not limited to the highly educated or economically privileged. As Sharrona Pearl has contended, physiognomy constituted a “slippery and flexible concept that changed with every

⁷ On scientific racism and how it changed in the 1830s and 1840s, see William R. Stanton, *The Leopard’s Spots: Scientific Attitudes toward Race in America, 1815-1859* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960); George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914* (Middletown, C.T.: Wesleyan University Press, 1987 [1971]); Stephen J. Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996 [1981]); and Ann Fabian, *The Skull Collectors: Race, Science, and America’s Unburied Dead* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

interrogation, every elucidation, every user, and every use.”⁸ Facial analysis meant a multitude of things to numerous people. It could shore up societal hierarchies or dismantle the very logic that justified their existence. This allowed subordinated individuals to defend their mental merit and assert their individual worth by using physiognomic rhetoric in unique and sometimes subversive ways. African Americans, for instance, used facial analysis in their quest for racial justice, and educated women adopted it in their efforts to validate the capacities of the female mind.

At first glance, physiognomy might seem unappealing to women. After all, both scientific and popular writers had typically invoked it to argue in favor of men’s mental superiority. But educated women adopted physiognomic discourses enthusiastically, reformulating them for their own purposes. Some of these women analyzed visages earnestly and empirically. Others only casually engaged in facial analysis, applying the science when it suited their needs. When they did so, they used popular sciences to discover beauty in the bodies of women they admired, regardless of how those women’s features might have been configured. By becoming practical physiognomists, educated women interpreted the female form in ways that validated their belief in the moral and intellectual equality of the sexes.

As an accessible discipline with imprecise rules, physiognomy allowed women to repurpose its doctrines in creative and idiosyncratic ways. For one, female physiognomists usually focused more intently on the flexible expressions and muscular movements of people’s countenances than on permanent skeletal structures and heritable features. They also tended to emphasize the “intellectual beauty” of

⁸ Sharonna Pearl, *About Faces: Physiognomy in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).

their female counterparts, even when those women lacked symmetrical faces or failed to adhere to conventional beauty standards. Finally, they suggested that moral or mental cultivation could beautify women's countenances, either by molding their features and expressions, or by radiating an ethereal essence of spiritual beauty through the visage. Through these reformulations of physiognomic theory, women emphasized the importance of internal characteristics, even as they searched for those traits in the external form. In doing so, they used physiognomy to value the female mind, despite the white male scientists who deployed the very same discourses to insist on men's mental superiority.

Just as educated white women analyzed the human body in flexible ways, antebellum moral reformers also used physiognomy to forge a middle path between environmentalist understandings of human nature and the starker forms of biological determinism that would triumph in the latter half of the nineteenth century. With the aid of popular sciences such as physiognomy and phrenology, reformers searched for effective ways to distinguish between the virtuous and the vicious poor, as well as between people they saw as hardened, recidivistic criminals and those they imagined as penitent and reformable wretches. This duality required an understanding of human nature that was both deterministic and flexible. On the one hand, elite and middle-class white Americans wanted to distance themselves from the "rabble," or the prostitutes, prisoners, and poor people who served as the targets of their reform efforts. On the other hand, the entire premise of their political agenda rested on the notion that human nature was perfectible. Moral reformers wanted to believe that the people they sought to "save" were capable of inner transformation. This resulted in complex and often contradictory ideas about the human mind, body, and soul.

It was anathema to republican principles to believe that birth dictated destiny. Still, elite and middle-class white Americans were willing to believe that a person's inherited physical features might, indeed, signal their internal capacities and their future trajectory. Reformers regularly argued that vice imprinted itself on the human form. At times, they even suggested that particular individuals were born with an innate predisposition to commit crime. But they rarely argued that vice itself was inevitable. Instead, they suggested that if everyone took proper precautions—by carefully cultivating virtuous traits over vicious ones—then it was possible to avoid a calamitous descent into degeneracy. Even after an individual had transgressed social norms, there might still be hope for redemption. Chaplains and moral reformers thus encouraged prisoners to read their bibles, strive for personal penitence, and follow the instructions of their self-imagined saviors. Sometimes, they went so far as to argue that positive moral changes would imprint themselves on the countenance, beautifying the face as the mind improved.

As an eclectic discourse, physiognomy was ideologically flexible enough to account for new deterministic impulses while also validating older, more malleable understandings of human nature. For this reason, it proved appealing to marginalized Americans who sought to defend their moral and intellectual character. For instance, despite the fact that physiognomy had served as the intellectual foundation for scientific racism, both African Americans and white abolitionists embraced this discipline as they challenged slavery and spotlighted the racial inequality that plagued the United States. In particular, black intellectuals in the antebellum North viewed physiognomy as a pragmatic alternative to the discriminatory ethnological discourses that were being propagated by white scientists in the middle decades of the nineteenth

century. Building on the physiognomical theories of Johann Caspar Lavater and Petrus Camper—and on phrenological theories—white ethnologists had long argued that people of color exhibited retreating foreheads, protruding jaws, and thick lips. They described these characteristics as signals that African Americans were morally and mentally inferior to white persons. But instead of rejecting physiognomic theory entirely—or trying to refute its scientific legitimacy—free people of color instead chose to coopt it for their own purposes. In their hands, physiognomy functioned as a usable tool for undercutting scientific racism and defending the moral and mental capacities of African Americans, whether free or enslaved.

In the 1850s, Physiognomic descriptions became ubiquitous in abolitionist novels and newspapers, as well as in African American periodicals. Authors usually engaged in two major strategies: they either highlighted the countenances and capacities of eminent black Americans, or they used the principles of physiognomy to argue that black faces and brains were capable of improvement. Thinkers such as Hosea Easton and James McCune Smith suggested that when enslaved people were emancipated—and when free people of color gained access to more social, political, and educational opportunities—their minds would become more cultivated, making their faces more physiognomically attractive in the process. Through such arguments, they reformulated a racist science to argue in favor of racial justice.⁹

⁹ See, for instance, Hosea Easton, *A Treatise on the Intellectual Character, and Civil and Political Condition of the Colored People of the U. States* (Boston: Printed and Published by Isaac Knapp, 1837); Frederick Douglass, *Claims of the Negro, Ethnologically Considered* (Rochester: Daily American Office, 1854); James McCune Smith, "Civilization: Its Dependence on Physical Circumstances," *Anglo-African Magazine* 1, no. 1 (New York), January 1859: 5-16; McCune Smith, "On the Fourteenth Query of Thomas Jefferson's Notes on Virginia," *Anglo-African Magazine* 1, no. 8 (New York), August 1859: 225-238; and William Wells Brown, *The Black Man, His Antecedents, His Genius, and His Achievements* (New York: Thomas Hamilton, 1863).

Black intellectuals found physiognomy expedient because it was a widespread and popularly-accessible discipline. Almost anyone could become a practitioner. It did not require a medical degree (which was out of reach for most people of color) or a laboratory full of expensive equipment. Physiognomy was also a discipline that appealed to both laypersons and professionals. By the 1830s and 1840s, it had not only infiltrated popular culture; it had also influenced the most elite and influential scientific theories on race. This meant that African Americans were able to embrace an enormously influential and broadly recognizable language while simultaneously challenging elite thinkers with the same physiognomic code that had served as the basis for their own ideas about race and human difference.

As African Americans' uses of physiognomy reveal, facial analysis was a malleable science of character detection that allowed different groups of Americans to rationalize some of the most complex, contradictory, and hypocritical values that defined their society. Inherent in its doctrinal flexibility were both inconsistencies and ambiguities. Although physiognomy enshrined the notion that internal capacity exhibited itself through the external form, it also allowed for the belief that moral and intellectual cultivation could transform physical features, making individuals more beautiful as their minds improved. In the end, people conceptualized the connection between beauty and character differently depending on their racial, class, or gender identity. White women, for instance, used physiognomy to argue that intellectual cultivation would magnify their beauty, while African Americans thinkers relied on it to claim that emancipation, education, and political equality would improve the facial features of people of color. In a similar way, physiognomy allowed elite and middle-class reformers to insist that poor people, prostitutes, and prisoners were capable of

personal betterment. By stressing the mutability of the body and the mind, these groups espoused a scientific understanding of human nature that emphasized every human's capacity for mental and physical improvement. In the process, they also challenged emerging notions of biological determinism, which stressed the heritability and ineradicable nature of people's bodies and brains.

Still, when subordinated Americans engaged with popular sciences such as physiognomy and phrenology, it came at a price. As Audre Lorde recognized, it is often impossible to dismantle the master's house by relying on the master's tools.¹⁰ Despite their eagerness to reformulate physiognomy for their own purposes, both white women and African Americans tacitly acceded to the notion that perhaps it *was* possible to discern internal character through an examination of the external form. Although they interpreted the human body in unique—and cleverly defiant—ways, they also helped solidify a broader commitment to the legitimacy of the human sciences and the invasive imperative that undergirded them: the desire to scrutinize people's bodies and scientifically rationalize existing social distinctions.

Even reformers' emphasis on mental and corporeal mutability provided a framework for rationalizing and reifying social distinctions. If people could beautify their bodies and their minds through hard work, grit, and an assiduous desire for self-betterment, then who were they to blame for their current inadequacy but themselves? One's faith in the body's changeability did not always translate into a commitment to universal human equality. Despite the pervasive cultural belief that both humans and society were improvable, reformers, politicians, and medical professionals often

¹⁰ Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1984), 110-114.

hinted that white women, people of color, poor people, criminals, immigrants, and the insane were simply second-rate beings with inferior bodies that justified their social, political, and economic subordination.

By the 1870s, elite intellectual thinkers had stopped taking physiognomy seriously as a science. Despite this fact, both American and European intellectuals developed alternative disciplines for studying human difference, which included craniology, evolutionary biology, and physical anthropology (to name just a few). Thinkers such as Francis Galton published medical treatises proclaiming that traits such as genius and criminality were congenital realities with physical manifestations. Criminologists such as Cesare Lombroso similarly insisted that prostitution, criminality, and mental illness were heritable characteristics, visible in the human face.¹¹ Meanwhile, evolutionary biologists such as Herbert Spencer attempted to compare the world's various populations by providing aesthetic evaluations of their bodies.¹² Anatomists and anthropologists, for their part, feverishly collected skeletons and measured skulls, ranking human remains by race in hierarchical taxonomies. By the late nineteenth-century, a new crop of sexual scientists—including thinkers like George J. Romanes and Havelock Ellis—began fixating on the physiological differences between male and female bodies. These men wanted tangible evidence of “truths” they already believed to be true. Women were suited for motherhood and not

¹¹ See Francis Galton, *Hereditary Genius: An Inquiry into its Laws and Consequences* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1869); Cesare Lombroso, *Criminal Man*, trans. Mary Gibson and Nicole Hahn Rafter (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006 [1876]); Lombroso, *The Man of Genius* (London: W. Scott, 1891); and Lombroso, *Criminal Woman, the Prostitute, and the Normal Woman* trans. Mary Gibson and Nicole Hahn Rafter (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004 [1893]).

¹² See Herbert Spencer “Personal Beauty,” *Leader* 5, nos. 212 and 216 (April 15, 1854 and May 13, 1854). Both essays discuss the intersections of race, gender, and physiognomy.

intellectual distinction. They were sure of it. And they would “prove” it through physiological and anatomical examinations of female bodies and brains.¹³

Few of these thinkers fancied themselves physiognomists—at least not in the eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century sense of the term. Yet all of them built on physiognomic theory, silently perpetuating some of its most basic doctrines, even as they diligently distanced themselves from the “quackery” of the past. These men imagined that they were fashioning more quantitative—and thus more reliable—methodologies for studying human nature. In truth, they were merely validating physiognomy’s imperative to embody human difference, stripping the science of its previous malleability while enshrining its most deterministic impulses.

Even today, anthropologists, psychologists, and art historians continue to recycle physiognomic ideas. Some scientists, for instance, have averred that people’s criminal propensities, reproductive fitness, sexual orientation, or mental health status might be visible in their facial features. Unlike their forebears, these contemporary researchers rely on new technologies like facial recognition software and functional neuro-imaging in an attempt to dispassionately prove their findings through empirical methodologies.¹⁴ But we should remember that eighteenth- and nineteenth-century

¹³ For scholarship on the rise of anthropology, evolutionary biology, and “sexual science” in the late nineteenth century, see Russett, *Sexual Science*; Rachel Malane, *Sex in Mind: The Gendered Brain in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Mental Sciences* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2005); Carla Bittel, *Mary Putnam Jacobi and the Politics of Medicine in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); and Kimberly A. Hamlin, *From Eve to Evolution: Darwin, Science, and Women’s Rights in Gilded Age America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

¹⁴ Carl Senior, at the National Institute of Mental Health, has argued that facial beauty conveys one’s reproductive fitness, writing, “facial beauty is an honest signal of the genotypic and phenotypic quality of the bearer.” See Senior, “Beauty is in the Brain of the Beholder,” *Neuron* 38 (May 22, 2003): 525-528. For other studies that attempt to discern internal traits from facial features, see Justin M. Carré, Cheryl M. McCormick and Catherine J. Mondloch, “Facial Structure Is a Reliable Cue of Aggressive Behavior,” *Psychological Science* 20, no. 10 (October 2009): 1194-1198; Mirella Walker and Thomas Vetter, “Changing the Personality of a Face: Perceived Big Two and Big Five Personality Factors Modeled in Real Photographs,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 110,

physiognomists likewise believed they were engaged in a pragmatic and objective endeavor. At the very least, the impulse that sustains modern research is largely the same as it was in the past: the effort to visualize intangible differences and make the world more legible in the process.

Science is seductive. Human beings want to believe that if we commit ourselves to the dispassionate process of observation and experimentation, we will be able to discern objective truths about the natural world and our place within it. Empirical research holds out the promise of impartiality and rationality. It gives us hope that we might someday transcend the bounds of human fallibility and impartially understand the realities we inhabit. But if we want to use science responsibly, we should first interrogate and reckon with some of its most unsavory historical legacies. Only then—when we disentangle all the moments of contestation and cooptation that characterized the development of modern science—will we be able to craft more ethical methodologies for analyzing the world and the diverse populations who inhabit it.

no. 4 (2016): 609–624; Raluca Petrican, Alexander Todorov, and Cheryl Grady, “Personality at Face Value: Facial Appearance Predicts Self and Other Personality Judgments among Strangers and Spouses,” *Journal of Nonverbal Behavior* 38 (2014): 259–277; Clare A.M. Sutherland, Lauren E. Rowley, Unity T. Amoaku, Ella Daguzan, Kate A. Kidd-Rossiter, Ugne Maceviciute, and Andrew W. Young, “Personality Judgments from Everyday Images of Faces,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 6 (October 2015): 1–11; Leslie A. Zebrowitz and Joann M. Montepare, “Social Psychological Face Perception: Why Appearance Matters,” *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 2/3 (2008): 1497–1517; R. Thora Bjornsdottir and Nicholas O. Rule, “The Visibility of Social Class from Facial Cues,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 113, no. 4 (2017): 530–546; and Yilun Wang and Michal Kosinski, “Deep Neural Networks are More Accurate than Humans at Detecting Sexual Orientation from Facial Images,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (forthcoming).

Epilogue

What if we could discern someone's sexual orientation, merely by examining their facial features? Perhaps this is an odd question to ask at the end of a project about early American physiognomy. At the very least, it seems like an artefact of antiquated physiognomic theories. But according to two modern researchers, this question is not only answerable—it is also a legitimate subject of scientific inquiry. In a recent and provocative paper, Dr. Michal Kosinski and Yilun Wang, an Assistant Professor and graduate student at Stanford University, claim to have devised a system for identifying sexual orientation in the countenance. After concocting a computer algorithm to analyze the minute details of people's pictures, they are now insisting that sexual orientation has recognizable anatomical manifestations.¹

Scientific papers rarely penetrate the public consciousness. But this study has been different. Months before Kosinski and Wang's paper was formally published, it had already attracted a firestorm of media attention. Thousands took to debating it on Twitter and Facebook. Numerous publications—including the *New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The New Yorker*, *The Guardian*, and *The Economist*—published articles rehashing its major findings.² Meanwhile, some of the United States' most

¹ See Yilun Wang and Michal Kosinski, "Deep Neural Networks are More Accurate than Humans at Detecting Sexual Orientation from Facial Images," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 114, no. 2 (February 2018): 246-257. A preprint of this paper resulted in so much furor that the researchers released a detailed explanation of their study. See "Authors' Note: Deep Neural Networks Are More Accurate than Humans at Detecting Sexual Orientation from Facial Images," <https://docs.google.com/document/d/11oGZ1Ke3wK9E3BtOfGfUQuuaSMR8AO2WfWH3aVke6U/edit> (accessed: November 21, 2017).

² For some examples of the media attention this study has garnered, see Heather Murphy, "Why Stanford Researchers Tried to Create a 'Gaydar' Machine," *New York Times*, October 9, 2017; Eugene Volokh, "Giving new meaning to the term 'gaydar' — or perhaps to 'Turing test'?" September 9, 2017; Alan Burdick, "The A.I. 'Gaydar' Study and the Real Dangers of Big Data," *The New Yorker*, September 15, 2017; "Advances in A.I. Are Used to Spot Signs of Sexuality," *The Economist*,

influential progressive organizations condemned both the research and the people who support it. Both GLAAD and the Human Rights Campaign banded together to denounce the findings as “junk science,” demanding that Stanford distance itself from “research that is dangerously flawed and leaves the world—and in this case, millions of people’s lives—worse and less safe than before.” For many Americans, the stakes of this project are high and its findings are both problematic and invidious. What, then, did Kosinski and Wang find? And why has it been so controversial?³

Their secret lies in a computer program, which combines recent developments in facial recognition software with the insights of computer scientists who study both big data and artificial intelligence. The researchers began by collecting profile pictures from online dating sites. Individuals who indicated they were “looking for” same-sex partners were classified as “homosexual.” Those who were seeking out opposite-sex partners were labeled “heterosexual.” The researchers then grouped all the “gay” faces together and combined all the “straight” faces in a different collection. With the help of “deep neural networks” (a computer-driven mathematical system that quantifies and interprets facial features), they produced a “composite face” for each group.

September 9, 2017; Sam Levin, “New AI Can Guess Whether You’re Gay or Straight from a Photograph,” September 7, 2017; and Levin, “Face-Reading AI Will Be Able to Detect Your Politics and IQ, Professor Says,” *The Guardian*, September 12, 2017.

³ Drew Anderson, “GLAAD and HRC call on Stanford University & responsible media to debunk dangerous & flawed report claiming to identify LGBTQ people through facial recognition technology,” *GLAAD*, September 8, 2017, <https://www.glaad.org/blog/glaad-and-hrc-call-stanford-university-responsible-media-debunk-dangerous-flawed-report> (accessed November 21, 2017); and Curtis M. Wong, “Queer Groups Condemn Study Claiming Computers Can Tell If You’re Gay From Photos,” *HuffPost*, September 8, 2017. Far-right news forums also joined the fray. See Charlie Nash, “‘Junk Science’: LGBT Groups Attack Scientific Researchers Who Created Gay-Detecting AI,” *Breitbart*, September 13, 2017.

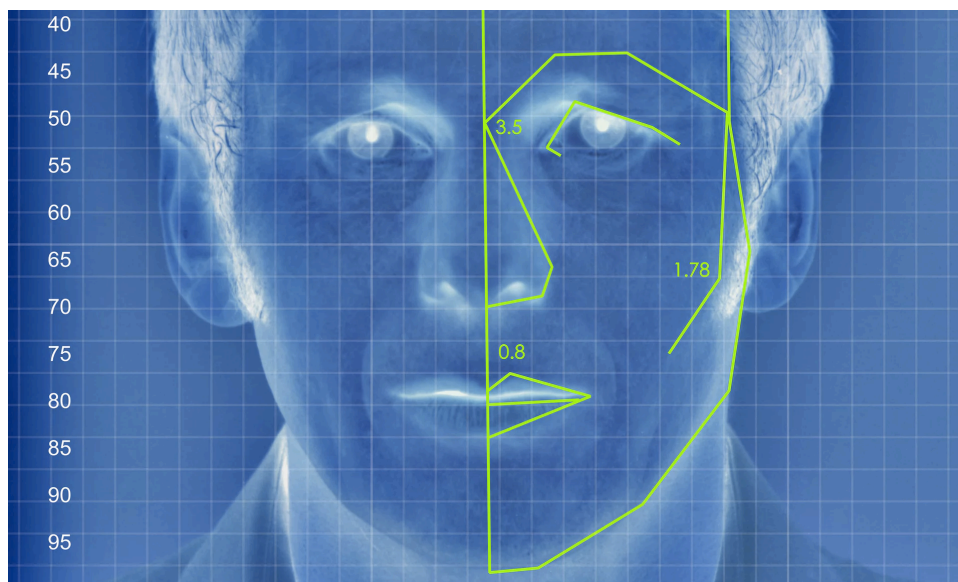


Fig. 7.1. “An illustrated depiction of facial analysis technology similar to that used in the experiment,” Illustration: Alamy, printed in Sam Levin, “Face-Reading AI Will Be Able to Detect Your Politics and IQ, Professor Says,” *The Guardian*, September 12, 2017.

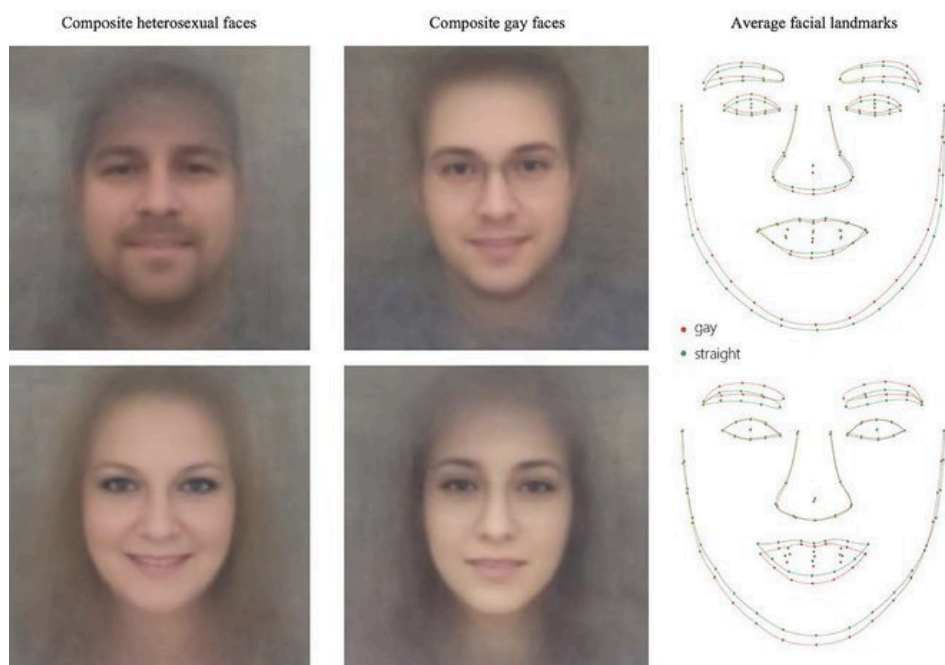


Fig. 7.2. “Composite faces and average face outlines produced by averaging faces/outlines classified as most likely to be gay or straight,” in Yilun Wang and Michal Kosinski, “Authors’ Note: Deep Neural Networks Are More Accurate than Humans at Detecting Sexual Orientation from Facial Images” (2017).

To put it more simply, Kosinski and Wang took a group of profile pictures from dating websites and classified them in two separate datasets, one “gay” and one “straight,” based on the researchers’ own understanding of how sexual orientation works. Next, they asked the computer program to generate a generic heterosexual countenance and a generic homosexual countenance. Kosinski and Wang never asked their subjects how they imagined their own identities. Nor did they control for the possibility of bisexuality or other more fluid forms of sexual orientation. And, while they studied both male and female subjects, they did not include any people of color in their data set.

At the most basic level, Kosinski and Wang assumed they could reliably tell whether a person was homosexual or not by recording what sexual partners they were looking for online. They then compared individual visages with the composite portraits that the computer had generated. When presented with two faces—one gay and one straight—the computer program could identify an individual’s homosexual identity 81 percent of the time for men and 71 percent of the time for women.⁴ With these results in hand, Kosinski and Wang have expressed confidence that their “gaydar machine” can pinpoint the corporeal manifestations of homosexuality in the human countenance. They have gone even further than this, too, professing that sexual preferences may be biological in nature. When explaining the meaning of its results, the paper cites “the widely accepted prenatal hormone theory (P.H.T.) of

⁴ Accuracy levels decreased when they ventured “into the wild,” as the *New York Times* put it. When the computer program compared random Facebook profiles with the generic countenances—rather than using the pictures that had been used to generate the composite images in the first place—accuracy levels decreased to 74 percent. See Murphy, “Why Stanford Researchers Tried to Create a ‘Gaydar’ Machine,” *New York Times*, October 9, 2017.

sexual orientation,” which rests on the idea that fetal exposure to certain hormones shapes one’s sexual preferences.⁵ Numerous scholars and scientists quickly pushed back against the notion that this theory was “widely accepted,” arguing that it was contested at best, and at worst, “a mess.”⁶

For many LGBTQ activists, this research feels both threatening and unnecessary. There are numerous countries in the world that could conceivably rely on these findings to identify—and perhaps persecute—individuals who do not adhere to heteronormative ideals. Some people have also cautioned that Kosinski and Wang’s research represents a revitalized form of physiognomy, which they see as a long-discredited pseudoscience. Other critics have simply pointed out that the study’s findings have not been replicated. They have also highlighted methodological flaws in its research design.

For their part, Kosinski and Wang maintain that facial recognition software, artificial intelligence, and big data are the tools of the future. They also insist that if they hadn’t asked these questions, then someone else would have done so eventually. Kosinski, for instance, pointed out that he did not personally design the facial analysis program that ultimately served as the basis for the project. Other people had already been using it. He simply repurposed it to ask a new question. Kosinski asserted, moreover, that anyone could have easily developed this technology. “The question is,” he asked, “can you live with yourself if you knew it’s possible and you didn’t let anyone know?” Still, it is unclear what this research does to protect vulnerable

⁵ Wang and Kosinski, “Deep Neural Networks are More Accurate than Humans at Detecting Sexual Orientation from Facial Images,” 6.

⁶ For a summary of the scientific pushback against this theory, see Murphy, “Why Stanford Researchers Tried to Create a ‘Gaydar’ Machine,” *New York Times*, October 9, 2017.

members of the queer community. His question also sidesteps an array of more complicated political, historical, and methodological questions.⁷

Before grappling with the issue of whether physiognomic investigation is itself legitimate, there are numerous problems with this research. At the most basic level, its claims rest on the assumption that “gayness” and “straightness” are not only intrinsic and unchangeable identities, but also biological characteristics that are visible in the human body (and also, apparently, in a surface-level examination of online dating profiles). As Michel Foucault first demonstrated, “homosexuality” is not simply a stable physiological predisposition but rather a historically contingent and culturally constructed concept. Until the latter decades of the nineteenth century, most people did not assume that an individual’s sexual preferences or behaviors fundamentally determined that person’s identity. Sexuality, after all, is both fluid and unstable. If it is perhaps shaped by biological propensities, it is also invariably influenced by a diverse array of social and cultural realities.⁸

For a moment, though, we can sidestep these challenging questions about whether sexual orientation is an inherited or socially-constructed identity. That still leaves more basic quandary: are Kosinski and Wang essentially claiming that the

⁷ For a discussion of criticisms of the study and Kosinski’s responses, see Anderson, “GLAAD and HRC call on Stanford University & responsible media to debunk dangerous & flawed report,”; Wong, “Queer Groups Condemn Study Claiming Computers Can Tell If You’re Gay From Photos,” *HuffPost*, September 8, 2017; Murphy, “Why Stanford Researchers Tried to Create a ‘Gaydar’ Machine,” *New York Times*, October 9, 2017. Kosinski and Wang are not the first researchers to argue that sexual identity might be visible in the human countenance. See, for instance, S.M. Hughes and R. Bremme, “The Effects of Facial Symmetry and Sexually-Dimorphic Facial Proportions on Assessments of Sexual Orientation,” *Journal of Social, Evolutionary, and Cultural Psychology* 5, no. 4 (2011): 214-230; and M. N. Skorska, S.N. Geniole, B.M. Vrysen, C.M. McCormick, and A.F. Bogaert, “Facial Structure Predicts Sexual Orientation in Both Men and Women,” *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 44, no. 5 (2015): 1377-1394.

⁸ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* (New York: Random House, 1978).

eighteenth- and nineteenth-century physiognomists were right all along? In many ways, their research points to yes. And they are not alone.⁹ Despite the uproar over the findings in this paper, Kosinski and Wang are not the only scientists currently relying on facial recognition software to make claims about individual identity and human personality. Their research attracted international attention because it has ramifications for a hot-button political issue: LGBTQ rights. But these scholars are not unique merely in suggesting that countenances convey character. When the Kosinski and Wang paper was published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, it was just one of many recent articles in which researchers have developed comparable methods for discerning people's personality traits by examining their physical features.¹⁰

It is tempting to dismiss physiognomy as a disreputable form of pseudoscientific quackery—the relic of misguided practitioners from a less enlightened era. Even so, physiognomic ideas have persisted in contemporary science. In the past fifteen years, studies on face perception have proliferated in the fields of Psychology, Neuroscience, and Evolutionary Biology. Social scientists have

⁹ Two scientific researchers published an article addressing this very question. See D.S. Berry and S. Browlow, “Were the Physiognomists Right? Personality Correlates of Facial Babyishness,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 15, no. 2 (1989): 266-279.

¹⁰ See, for instance, Justin M. Carré, Cheryl M. McCormick and Catherine J. Mondloch, “Facial Structure Is a Reliable Cue of Aggressive Behavior,” *Psychological Science* 20, no. 10 (October 2009): 1194-1198; Mirella Walker and Thomas Vetter, “Changing the Personality of a Face: Perceived Big Two and Big Five Personality Factors Modeled in Real Photographs,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 110, no. 4 (2016): 609–624; Raluca Petrican, Alexander Todorov, and Cheryl Grady, “Personality at Face Value: Facial Appearance Predicts Self and Other Personality Judgments among Strangers and Spouses,” *Journal of Nonverbal Behavior* 38 (2014): 259–277; Clare A.M. Sutherland, Lauren E. Rowley, Unity T. Amoaku, Ella Daguzan, Kate A. Kidd-Rossiter, Ugnė Maceviciute, and Andrew W. Young, “Personality Judgments from Everyday Images of Faces,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 6 (October 2015): 1-11; and R. Thora Bjornsdottir and Nicholas O. Rule, “The Visibility of Social Class From Facial Cues,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 113, no. 4 (2017): 530-546.

conducted important work, illustrating how cultural assumptions about physical beauty influence how people appraise the mental attributes, personality traits, and leadership skills. As this research reveals, facial characteristics shape how men and women select romantic partners and how voters choose politicians. They also mediate how teachers perceive their students' intellectual capacities and how people both perceive and negotiate racial difference.¹¹

But some contemporary scientists have taken these ideas further. Now aided by modern technologies like facial recognition software and functional neuro-imaging, they have resuscitated older physiognomic theories. Carl Senior, at the National Institute of Mental Health, has argued that facial beauty conveys one's reproductive fitness, writing that "facial beauty is an honest signal of the genotypic and phenotypic quality of the bearer."¹² Others have argued that facial structures can reveal if a person will engage in aggressive behavior, or even indicate if they identify

¹¹ For just a few examples, see Itzhak Aharon, et. al., "Beautiful Faces Have Variable Reward Value: fMRI and Behavioral Evidence," *Neuron* 32 (November 8, 2001): 537-551; Sean N. Talamas, Kenneth I. Mavor, and David I. Perrett, "Blinded by Beauty: Attractiveness Bias and Accurate Perceptions of Academic Performance," *PLoS One* 11, no. 2 (February 2016); Jennifer L. Eberhardt, Nilanjana Dasgupta, and Tracy L. Banaszynski, "Believing Is Seeing: The Effects of Racial Labels and Implicit Beliefs on Face Perception," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 29, no. 3 (March 2003): 360-370; Charles C. Ballew and Alexander Todorov, "Predicting Political Elections from Rapid and Unreflective Face Judgments," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 104, no. 46 (November 2007): 17948-17953; Anthony C. Little, Robert P. Burniss, Benedict C. Jones, and S. Craig Roberts, "Facial Appearance Affects Voting Decisions," *Evolution and Human Behavior* 28, no. 1 (January 2007): 18-27; Leslie A. Zebrowitz and Joann M. Montepare, "Social Psychological Face Perception: Why Appearance Matters," *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 2/3 (2008): 1497-1517; Lisa S. Scott and Alexandra Monesson, "The Origin of Biases in Face Perception," *Psychological Science* 20, No. 6 (June 2009): 676-680; Daniel E. Re, et. al., "Looking Like a Leader: Facial Shape Predicts Perceived Height and Leadership Ability," *PLoS One* 8, no. 12 (December 2013); and Karin Wolffhechel, et. al., "Interpretation of Appearance: The Effect of Facial Features on First Impressions and Personality," *PLoS One* 9, no. 9 (September 2014).

¹² Carl Senior, "Beauty is in the Brain of the Beholder," *Neuron* 38 (May 22, 2003): 525-528.

as Democrats or Republicans. And still others have claimed that a person's social class is visible in the countenance.¹³

As modern scientists reinvigorate physiognomic theories—using computer algorithms, artificial intelligence, and big data to investigate human difference—we should remain both cautious and critical of ostensibly empirical findings that attempt to anatomize social relationships or rationalize existing inequities. Contemporary researchers are asking many of the same questions that preoccupied many of their post-Enlightenment predecessors. What does it mean to be human? And what makes people different from one another? Moreover, how might we better understand human nature by visualizing and quantifying it? For a recent crop of scientists, these seem like solvable queries that might be settled through systematic examinations of the visage and the internal characteristics it supposedly reveals.

Perhaps modern researchers are onto something. Perhaps personality traits truly are both stable and heritable. And perhaps these characteristics really do leave indelible marks on the human countenance. But perhaps modern scientists are simply using new methods to grapple with very old conundrums. The fact that nineteenth-century physicians used similar ideas for such nefarious ends should give us pause before we revive these claims in the twenty-first century.

¹³ Justin M. Carré, Cheryl M. McCormick and Catherine J. Mondloch, "Facial Structure Is a Reliable Cue of Aggressive Behavior," *Psychological Science* 20, no. 10 (October 2009): 1194-1198; Nicholas O. Rule and Nalini Ambady, "Democrats and Republicans can be Differentiated from Their Faces," *PLoS One* 5, no. 1 (January 2010): e8733; and R. Thora Bjornsdottir and Nicholas O. Rule, "The Visibility of Social Class From Facial Cues," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 113, no. 4 (2017): 530-546.

Appendix A: *Female Physiognomists*

Women mention “physiognomy” or who refer to Johann Caspar Lavater:

1. **Abigail Adams**, 1770s-1790s
 - *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive*, Massachusetts Historical Society. <http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/>. MHS.
2. **Clara P. Balch**, 1827-1828
 - “Apollonian wreath” [commonplace book], Mss. S559, BA.
3. **Theodosia Burr**, 1800s
 - Van Doren, Mark, ed., *Correspondence of Aaron Burr and His Daughter Theodosia*. New York: Covici-Friede, 1929. NAWLD.
4. **Margaret G. Cary**, 1800s-1840s
 - Curtis, Caroline G, ed., *The Cary Letters*. Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1891. NAWLD.
5. **Bathsheba H. Morse Crane**, 1840s-1880s
 - *Life, Letters, and Wayside Gleanings, for the Folks at Home*. Boston: J.H. Earle, 1880.
6. **Sarah Fowler Morgan Dawson**, 1860s
 - Dawson, Francis Warrington, ed., *A Confederate Girl’s Diary: Sarah Morgan Dawson*. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1913. NAWLD.
7. **Elizabeth Sandwith Drinker**, 1790s
 - Crane, Elaine Forman, ed., *The Diary of Elizabeth Drinker*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1991. NAWLD.
8. **Lucretia Fiske Farrington**, 1830s
 - “Notebook for 1834,” Mss. S143, BA.
9. **Rebecca Gratz**, 1790s-1840s
 - Gratz Family Papers, 1750-1974, Series III, Mss.Ms.Coll.72, APS.
10. **Mary Hassal**, 1800s
 - *Secret History: or, the Horrors of St. Domingo, in a Series of Letters Written by a Lady at Cape Francois, to Colonel Burr, Late Vice-President of the United States*. Philadelphia: Bradford & Inskeep, 1808. NAWLD.

11. **Frances Anne Kemble (Butler)**, 1830s
 - Butler, Frances Anne. *Journal of a Residence in America*, Vol. 1. Philadelphia: Carey, Lea, and Blanchard: 1835.
12. **Lucy Larcom**, 1860s
 - Addison, Daniel Dulany, ed., *Lucy Larcom: Life, Letters, and Diary*. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, and Co., 1894.
13. **Sara Jane Lippincott**, 1850s
 - “Diary of Sara Jane Lippincott,” in *Haps and Mishaps of a Tour of Europe*. Boston: Ticknor & Co., 1854.
14. **Anna Cabot Lowell**, 1810s-1890s
 - Diaries (Ms. N-1512), and Extract Book, n.d. Ms.N-1513. MHS.
15. **Josephine Preston Peabody Marks**, 1890s
 - Hopkinson, Christina, ed., *Diary and Letters of Josephine Preston Peabody*. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, & Co., 1925. NAWLD.
16. **Harriet Story White Paige**, 1830s
 - *Daniel Webster in England: Journal of Harriette Story Paige, 1839*. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, & Co., 1917. NAWLD.
17. **Elizabeth Peake**, 1870s
 - Peake, Elizabeth. *Pen Pictures of Europe*. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co., 1874. NAWLD.
18. **Harriet Preble**, 1810s-1850s
 - Lee, R.H, ed., *Memoir of the Life of Harriet Preble: Containing Portions of Her Correspondence, Journal and Other Writings, Literary and Religious*. New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1856. NAWLD.
19. **Sara Tappan Robinson**, 1850s
 - Robinson, Sara Tappan Doolittle Lawrence. *Kansas: Its Interior and Exterior Life*, 4th ed. Boston: Crosby, Nichols, & Co., 1856. NAWLD.
20. **Catharine Maria Sedgwick**, 1830s-1860s
 - Charles Sedgwick papers, 1813-1908. Ms. N-853. MHS.

- Dewey, Mary E, ed., *Life and Letters of Catharine M. Sedgwick*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1871.

21. Charlotte Sheldon, 1790s

- “Diary of Charlotte Sheldon.” In Vanderpoel, Emily Noyes, ed., and Buel, Elizabeth C. Barney, comp., *Chronicles of a Pioneer School from 1792 to 1833, Being the History of Miss Sarah Pierce and Her Litchfield School*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1903. NAWLD.

22. Lydia Huntley Sigourney, 1830s

- Sigourney, Lydia Huntley. *Letters to My Pupils, with Narrative and Biographical Sketches*, 2nd ed. New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1853.

23. Rachel Van Dyke, 1810-1811

- McMahon, Lucia and Deborah Schriver, eds., *To Read My Heart: The Journal of Rachel Van Dyke, 1810-1811*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015.

24. Emma Hart Willard, 1830s

- Willard, Emma Hart. *Journal and Letters from France and Great Britain*. Troy, NY: N. Tuttle, 1833.

25. Frances Elizabeth Willard, 1860s

- “Diary of Frances Elizabeth Willard.” In *Glimpses of Fifty Years: The Autobiography of an American Woman*. Chicago: Woman’s Temperance Publication Association, 1889. NAWLD.

26. Mary E. Willard, 1850s

- “Diary of Mary E. Willard.” In *Nineteen Beautiful Years: or, Sketches of a Girl’s Life*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1864. NAWLD.

27. Sister Saint Francis Xavier, 1830s-1850s

- Corbiniere, Clementine De La, ed., *The Life and Letters of Sister St. Francis Xavier*. St. Louis, MO: B. Herder Books Co., 1917. NAWLD.

Other women who use facial analysis to discern the character of others:

1. **Mary Ware Allen**, 1830s
 - School Journals of Mary Ware Allen, in Allen-Johnson Family Papers, 1759-1992, Mss. Octavo Volumes 23-26, MHS.
2. **Nancy Dunley Anderson**, 1860s
 - Anderson, James House, ed., *Life and Letters of Judge Thomas J. Anderson and Wife*. Columbus, OH: F.J. Heer, 1904.
3. **Sarah Connell Ayer**, 1800s-1830s
 - *Diary of Sarah Connell Ayer*. Portland, ME: Lefavor-Tower Company, 1910.
4. **Clara P. Balch**, 1827-1828
 - “Apollonian wreath” [commonplace book], Mss. S559, BA.
5. **Margaret Van Horn Dwight Bell**, 1810
 - Max Farrand, ed., *A Journey to Ohio in 1810: As Recorded in the Journal of Margaret Van Horn Dwight*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1912.
6. **Elizabeth Blackwell**, 1840s and 1850s
 - Blackwell, Elizabeth. *Pioneer Work in Opening the Medical Profession to Women: Autobiographical Sketches*. New York: Longmans & Co., 1895.
7. **Eliza Southgate Bowne**, 1790s
 - Cook, Clarence, ed., *A Girl's Life Eighty Years Ago: Selections from the Letters of Eliza Southgate Bowne*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1887. NAWLD.
8. **Phoebe George Bradford**, 1830s-1840s
 - Wilson, W. Emerson, ed., *Phoebe George Bradford Diaries*. Wilmington, DE: Historical Society of Delaware, 1975. NAWLD.
9. **Sally Bridges**, 1840s-1860s
 - Bridges, Sally. Autograph Book, 1849-1863. Mss. Am.8702. HSP.
10. **Mary Virginia Early Brown**, 1830s-1840s
 - Brown, Mary Virginia Early. Autograph Album, 1833-1846. Mss1 Ea765a 177. VHS.
11. **Ann M. Cary**, 1800s-1810s
 - Cary Family Diaries and Commonplace-Books, 1798-1817. Ms. N-2356. MHS.

12. **Margaret G. Cary**, 1810s-1850s
 - Curtis, Caroline G. *The Cary Letters*. Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1891. NAWLD.
13. **Virginia Cary**, 1830s
 - Cary, Virginia. *Letters on Female Character, Addressed to A Young Lady on the Death of Her Mother*. Richmond, VA: Ariel Works, 1830. NAWLD.
14. **Elizabeth (Betsy) Champlain**, 1790s-1820s
 - MacMullen, Ramsay, ed., *Sisters of the Brush: Their Family, Art, Lives & Letters*. Privately Published by Ramsay MacMullen, 2012.
15. **Eliza Way Champlain** 1810s-1850s
 - MacMullen, Ramsay, ed., *Sisters of the Brush: Their Family, Art, Lives & Letters*. Privately Published by Ramsay MacMullen, 2012.
16. **Ann Greene Chapman**, 1810s-1820s
 - Chapman, Ann Green. Notebooks and Diary, 1813-1825. Mss .S532. BA.
17. **Lucy Chase**, 1840s
 - Papers of Lucy Chase, Folder 3, Diary fragments, 1841-1847. In Chase Family Papers, c. 1787-c. 1915, Mss. Boxes C, AAS.
18. **Mary Anna McGuire Claiborne**, 1830s
 - Claiborne, Mary Anna McGuire, Album, 1834–1836. Mss5:5C5253:1.
19. **Elizabeth C. Clemson**, 1820s
 - Clemson, Elizabeth C. Autograph Album and Commonplace Book, 1824-1828. Mss. Am.046. HSP.
20. **Frances Cornelia Barbour Collins**, 1820s-1830s
 - Collins, Frances Cornelia Barbour, Scrapbook, 1827–1833. Mss5:7C6933:1.
21. **Elizabeth Leslie Rous Comstock**, 1850s-1880s
 - Hare, Catherine, comp., *Life and Letters of Elizabeth L. Comstock*. Philadelphia: John C. Winston & Co., 1895.
22. **Susan Fenimore Cooper**, Various Locations, 1830s-1850s.
 - “Diary of Susan Fenimore Cooper.” In *Journal of a Naturalist in the United States*. London: Richard Bentley & Son, 1855.

23. **Emma Cullum Cortazzo**, 1860s-1870s
 - E.H. Shartle, ed., *Emma Cullum Cortazzo, 1842-1918*. Meadville: 1919.
24. **Sophia Coutts**, 1830s-1870s
 - Sophia Coutts, Album, 1836–1873. Mss5:5C8377:1.
25. **Julia Cowles**, 1790s-1800s
 - Vanderpoel, Emily Noyes, ed., and Buel, Elizabeth C. Barney, comp., *Chronicles of a Pioneer School from 1792 to 1833, Being the History of Miss Sarah Pierce and Her Litchfield School*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1903. NAWLD.
26. **Bathsheba H. Morse Crane**, 1840s-1880s
 - *Life, Letters, and Wayside Gleanings: For the Folks at Home* (Boston: James H. Earle, 1880).
27. **Clara Crowninshield**, 1830s
 - Hilen, Andrew, ed., *Diary: A European Tour with Longfellow, 1835-1836*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1956.
28. **Kate Cumming**, 1860s
 - Harwell, Richard Barksdale, ed., *Kate: The Journal of a Confederate Nurse*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998.
29. **Caroline Elizabeth Wilde Cushing**, 1820s
 - *Letters, Descriptive of Public Monuments, Scenery, and Manners in France and Spain*. Newburyport, MA: E.W. Allen & Co., 1832.
30. **Sarah Fowler Morgan Dawson**, 1860s
 - Dawson, Warrington, ed., *A Confederate Girl's Diary: Sarah Morgan Dawson*. Boston, MA: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1913.
31. **Maria Kittredge Whitney Degen**, 1850s
 - “Diary of Maria Kittredge Whitney Degen.” In *Diary of a Grand Tour of Europe and the Middle East, 1850-1852*. 3 vols. Alexandria, VA: Alexander Street Press, 2002. NAWLD.
32. **Susan Helen DeKroyft**, 1840s
 - *A Place in Thy Memory*. New York, NY: J.F. Trow printer, 1850.
33. **“Miss Donaldson,”** 1830s
 - Cheney, Ednah D., ed., *Louisa May Alcott: Her Life, Letters, and Journals*. Boston: Roberts Bros., 1889.

34. **Amy Fay**, 1860s-1870s
 - Pierce, Fay, ed., *Music Study in Germany: From the Home Correspondence of Amy Fay*. New York: Macmillan & Co., 1913.
35. **Margaret Fuller**, 1840s
 - *Love-Letters of Margaret Fuller, 1845-1846*. New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1903. NAWLD.
36. **Anna D. Gale**, 1830s
 - Gale, Anna D. Journal A. Octavo Volume 1. In the Gale Family Papers (1828-1854), Mss. Octavo Vols. G, AAS.
 - Kopacz, Paula. "The School Journal of Hannah (Anna) Gale." *Studies in the American Renaissance* (1996): 67-113.
37. **Anne MacVicar Grant**, 1800s
 - Correspondence between Anna Cabot Lowell and Anne MacVicar Grant. In the Anna Cabot Lowell papers, 1795-1810. Ms. N-1581.
38. **Rebecca Gratz**, Pennsylvania, 1790s-1840s
 - Gratz Family Papers, 1750-1974, Series III, Mss.Ms.Coll.72, APS.
28. **Charlotte Forten Grimke**, 1850s
 - Stevenson, Brenda, ed., *The Journals of Charlotte Forten Grimké*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.
29. **Mother Theodore Guerin**, 1850s
 - Mug, Sister Mary Theodosia, ed., *Journals and Letter of Mother Theodore Guerin*. Saint-Mary-of-the-Woods, IN: Providence Press, 1937.
30. **Eliza Paul Kirkbride Gurney**, 1840s
 - Mott, Richard F., ed., *Memoir and Correspondence of Eliza P. Gurney*. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co., 1884.
31. **Amelia Ryerse Harris**, 1860s
 - Harris, Robin and Terry Harris, eds., *The Eldon House Diaries: Five Women's Views of the 19th Century*. Toronto, ON: Champlain Society, 1994.
32. **Mary Hassal**, 1800s
 - *Secret History: or, the Horrors of St. Domingo, in a Series of Letters Written by a Lady at Cape Francois, to Colonel Burr, Late Vice-President of the United States, Principally during the Command of General Rochambeau*. Philadelphia: Bradford & Inskeep, 1808.

33. **Sophia Peabody Hawthorne**, 1860s
 - Hawthorne, Sophia Peabody. *Notes in England and Italy*. New York: G.P. Putnam & Son, 1869.
34. **Elizabeth Hale Gilman Hoffman**, 1820s-1830s
 - *A Family History in Letters and Documents*. St. Paul, MN: Privately published, 1919.
35. **Julia Ward Howe**, 1840s-1880s
 - Richards, Laura E., Maud Howe Elliot, and Florence Howe Hall. *Julia Ward Howe, 1819-1910*. 2 vols. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, & Co., 1915.
36. **Susan Mansfield Huntington**, 1810s
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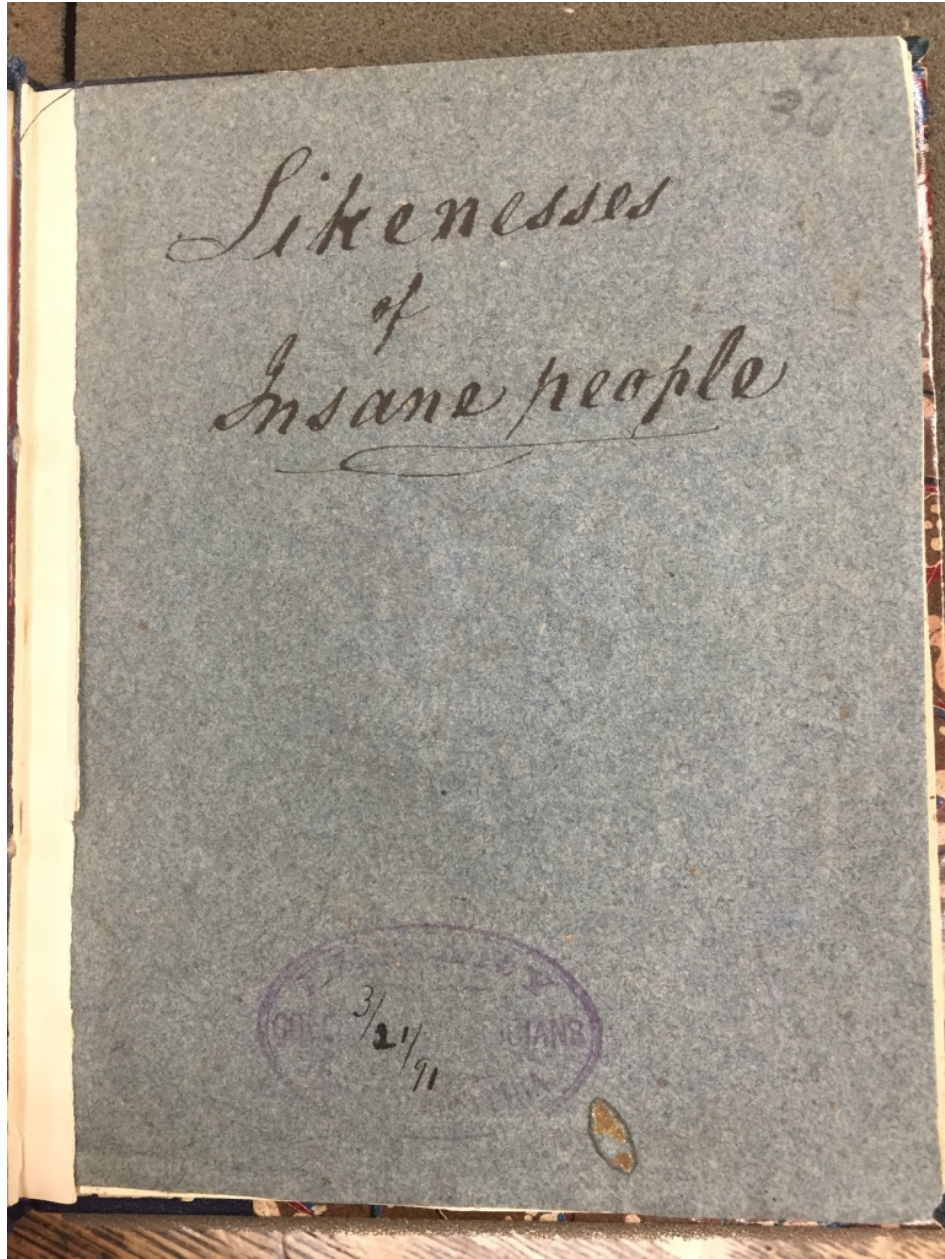
18. **Susan L. Wattson**, 1830s

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19. **Ann Willson**, 1820s

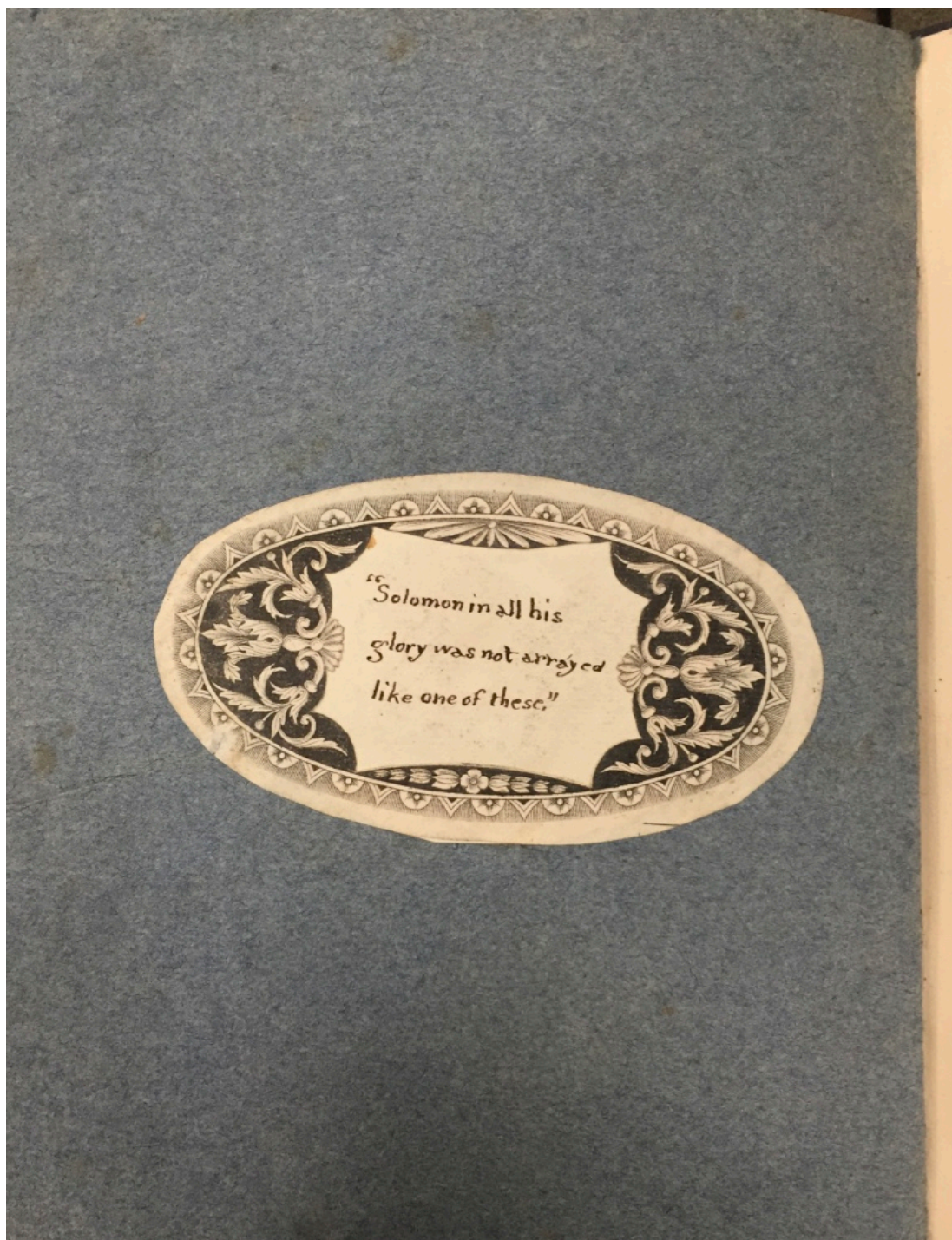
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Appendix B:
"Likenesses of the Insane"



This Appendix includes sketches that Dr. John Kearsley Mitchell collected during his time working at a mental hospital in Philadelphia.

To access this manuscript collection, see "Likenesses of the Insane, taken for Dr. Jn. K. Mitchell during his service at the Pennsylvania Hospital," 1827-1834, Mss. 10a/133, College of Physicians of Philadelphia.



51539
 Likeness of the Insane
 taken for Wm. T. Mitchell
 during his service at the
 Pennsylvania Hospital - 9.5. fine
 1827. to 1834 —

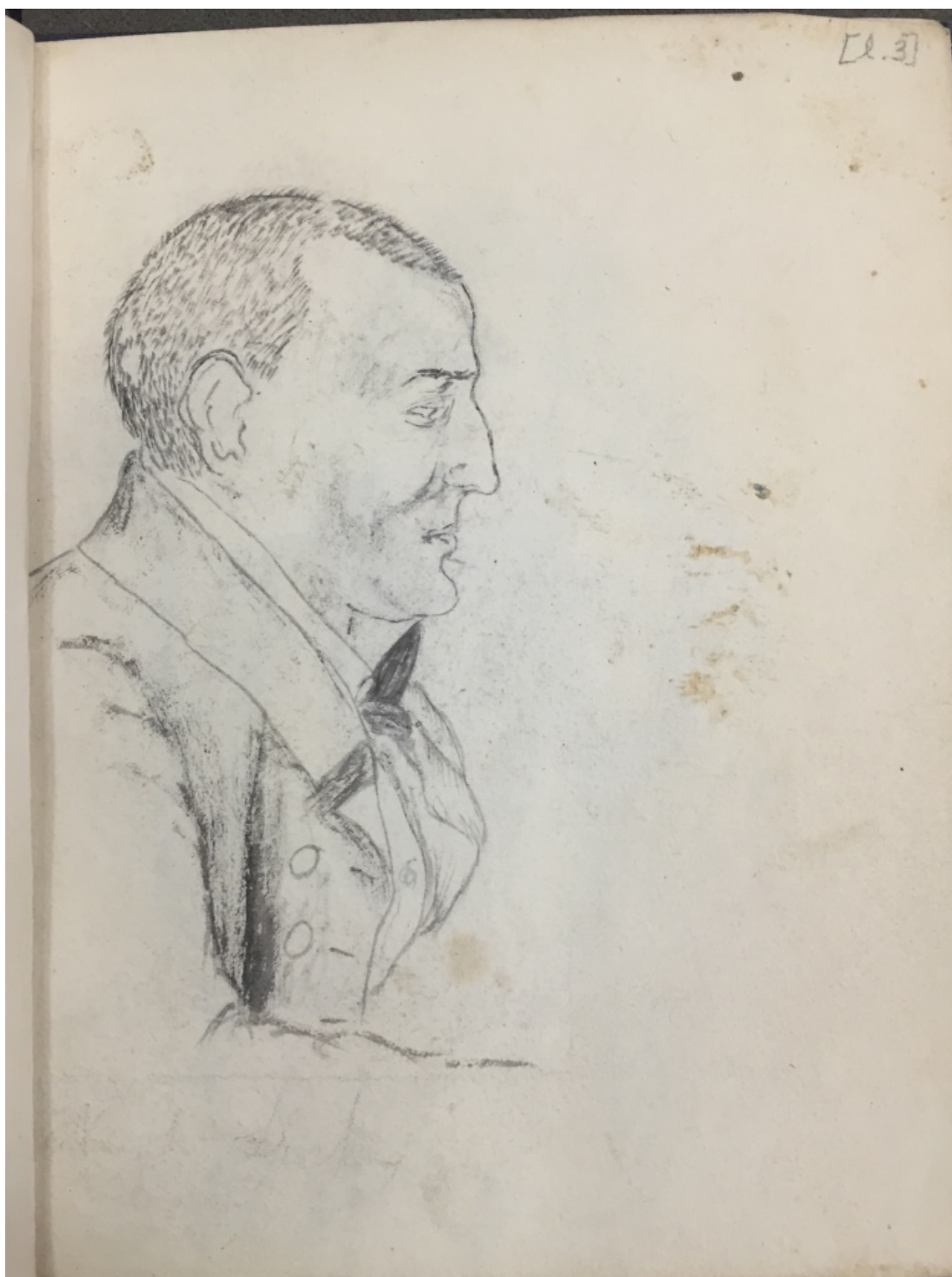
Presented by
 Wm. Mitchell

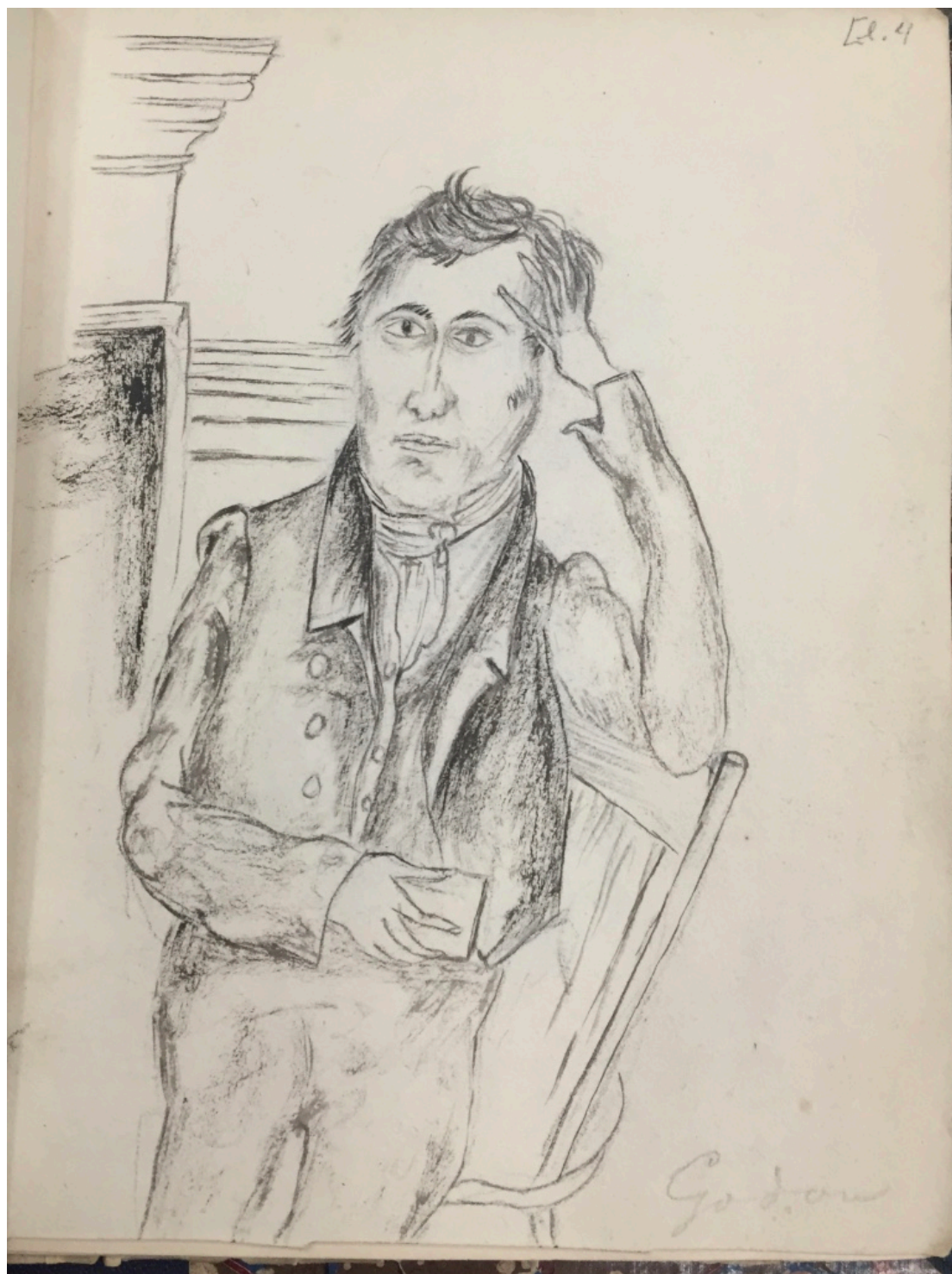
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[l. 2]



Alice Kugent





[Pl. 5]

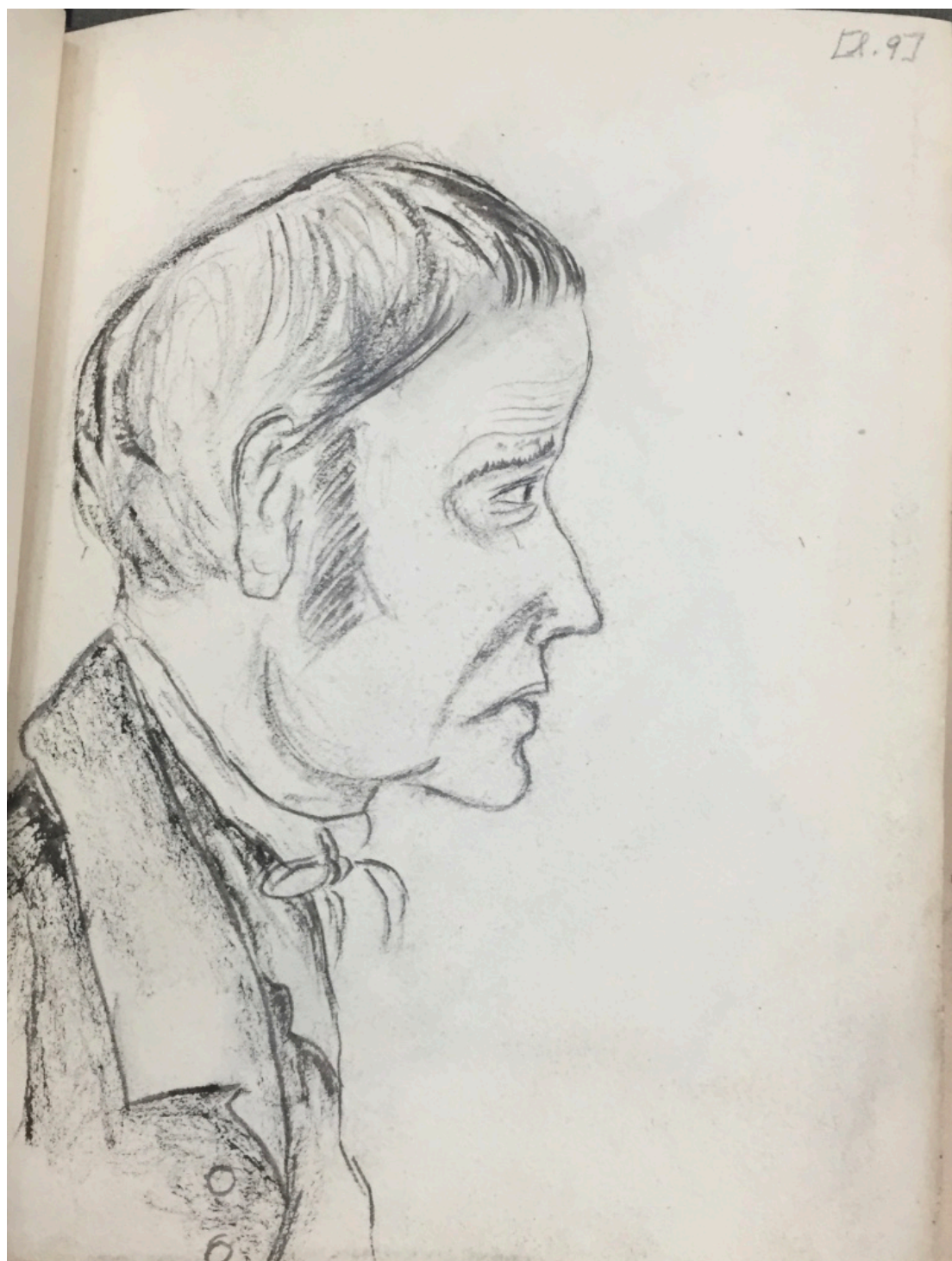


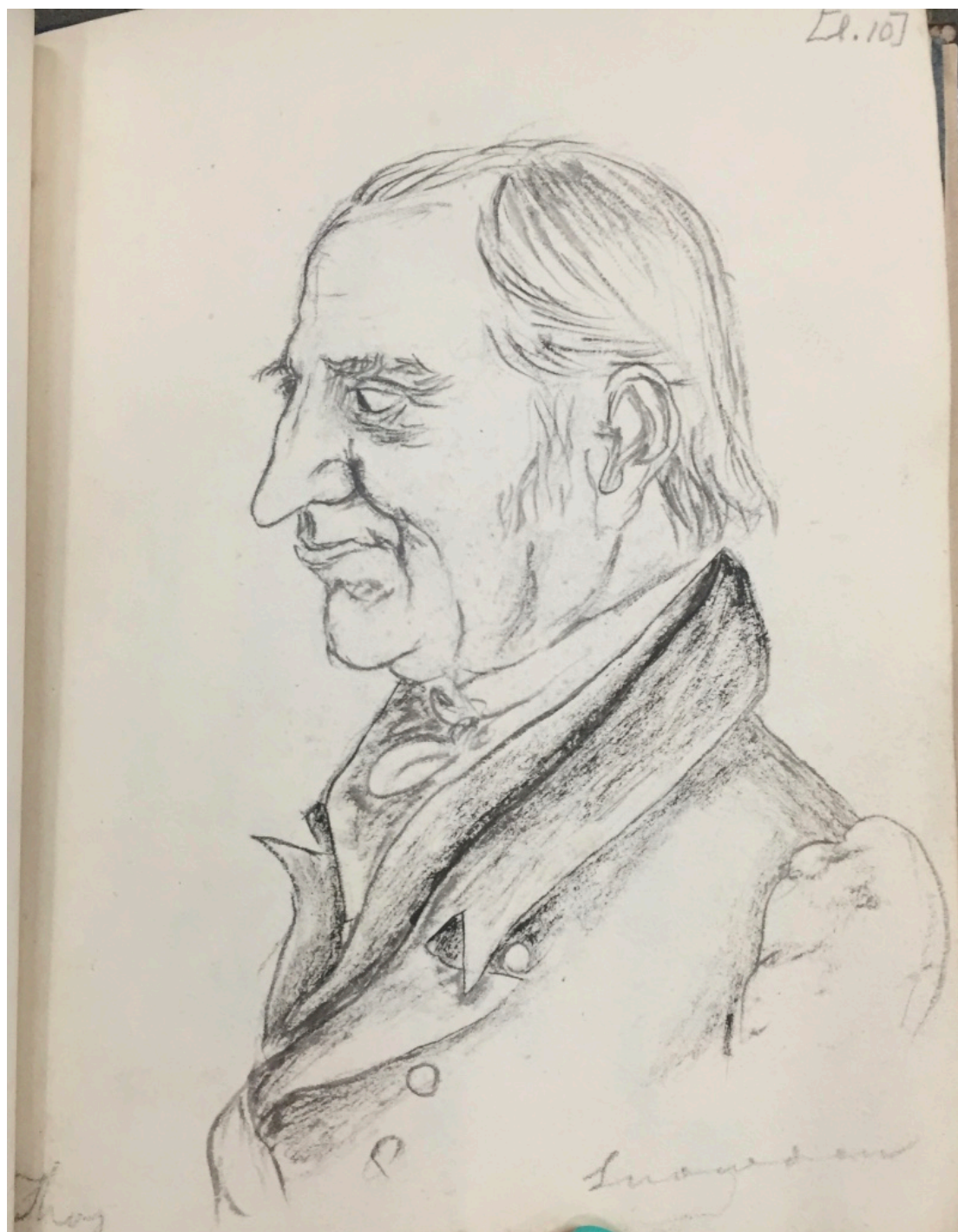


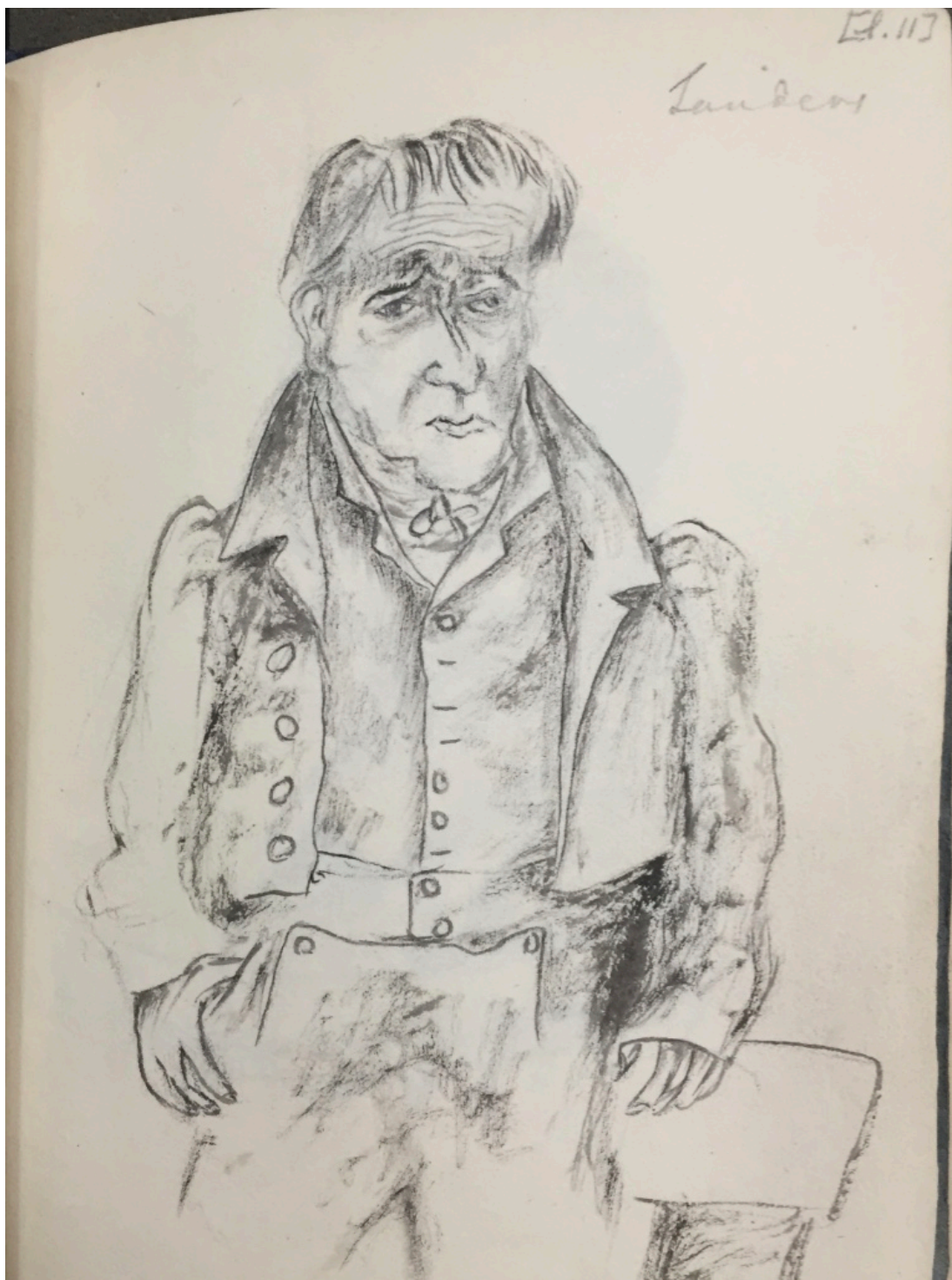
[L. i]



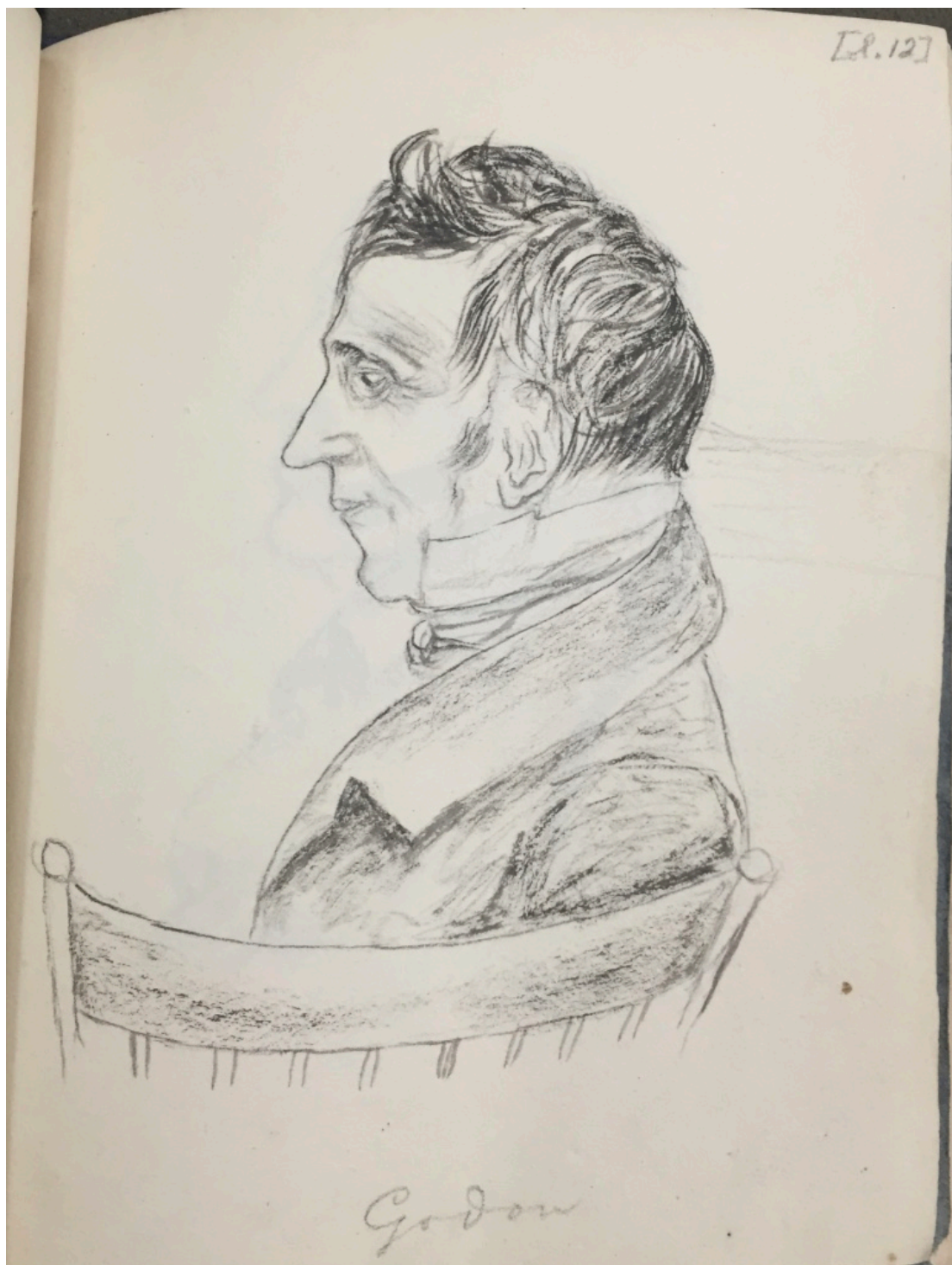




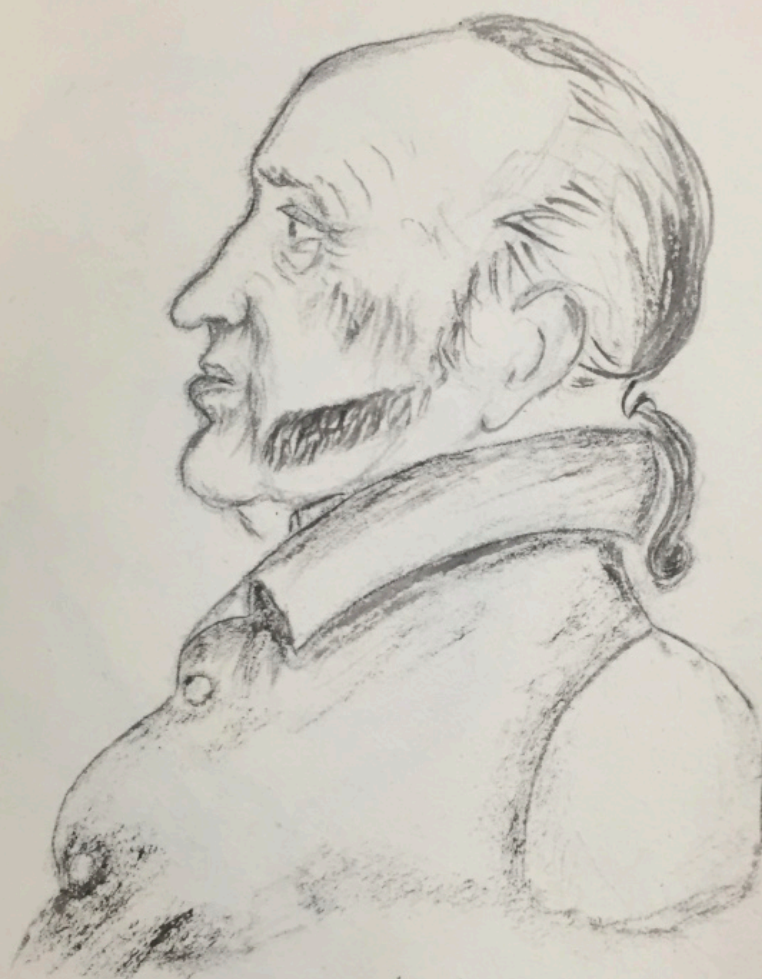




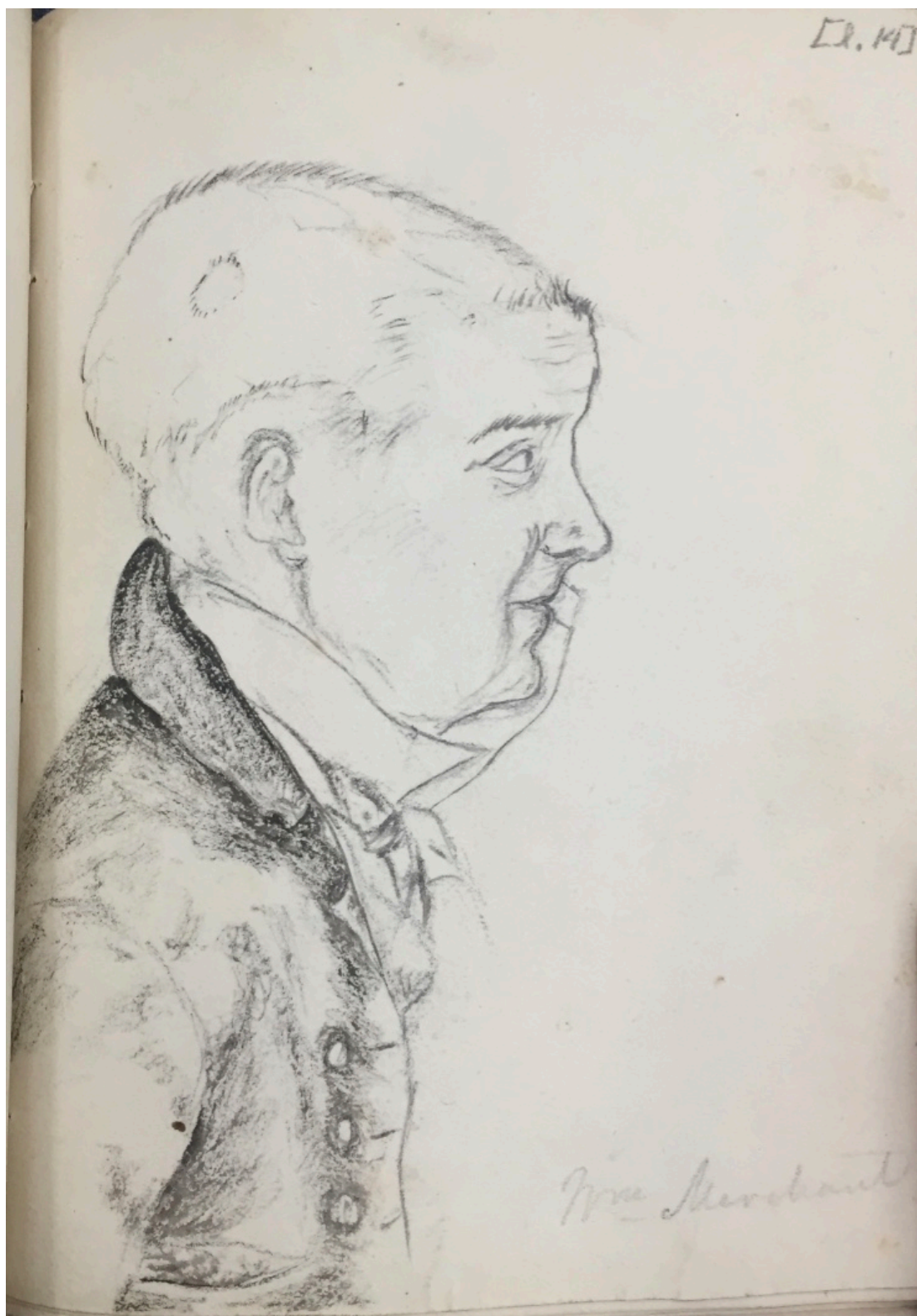
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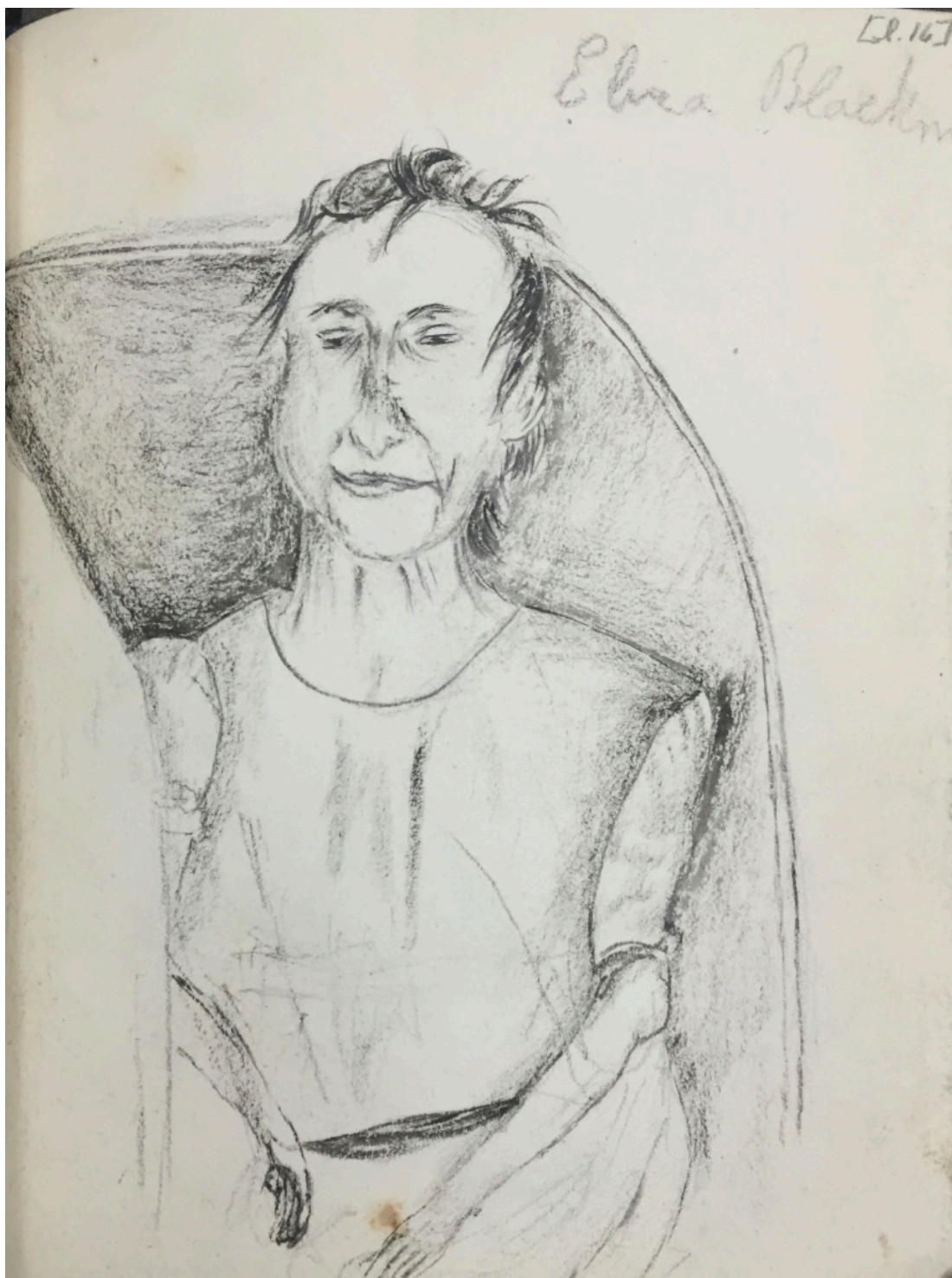
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Mr. Scott

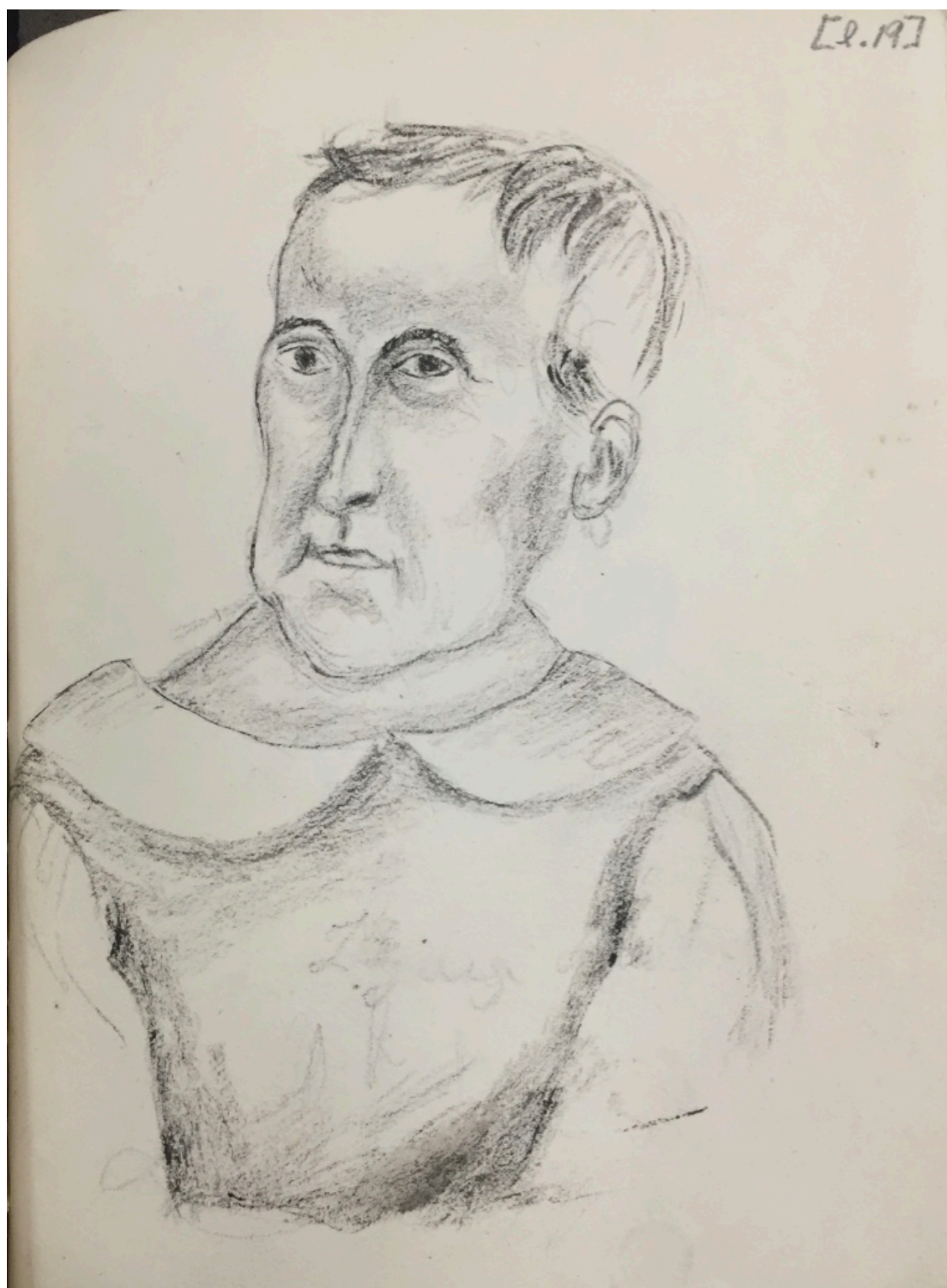


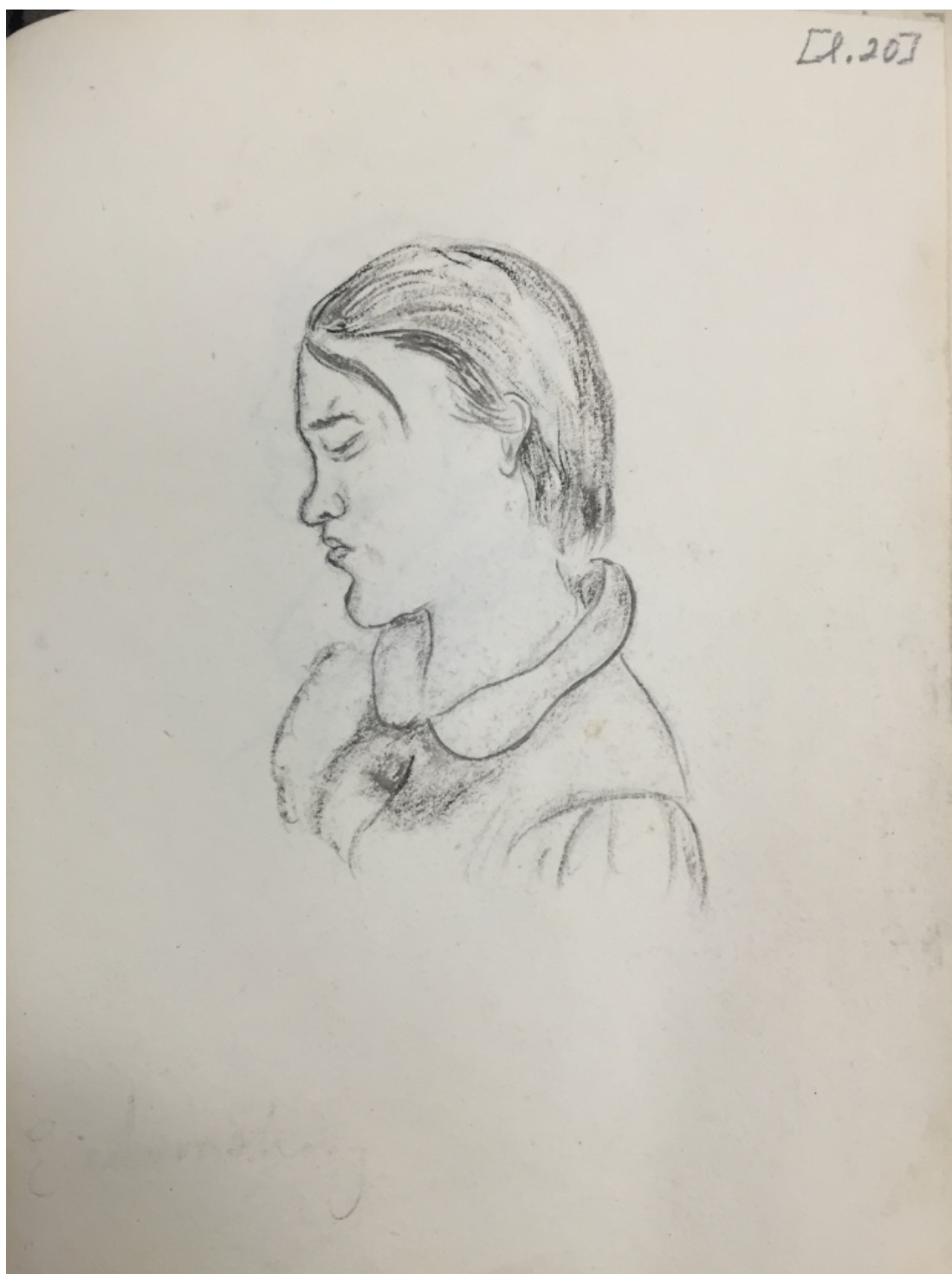


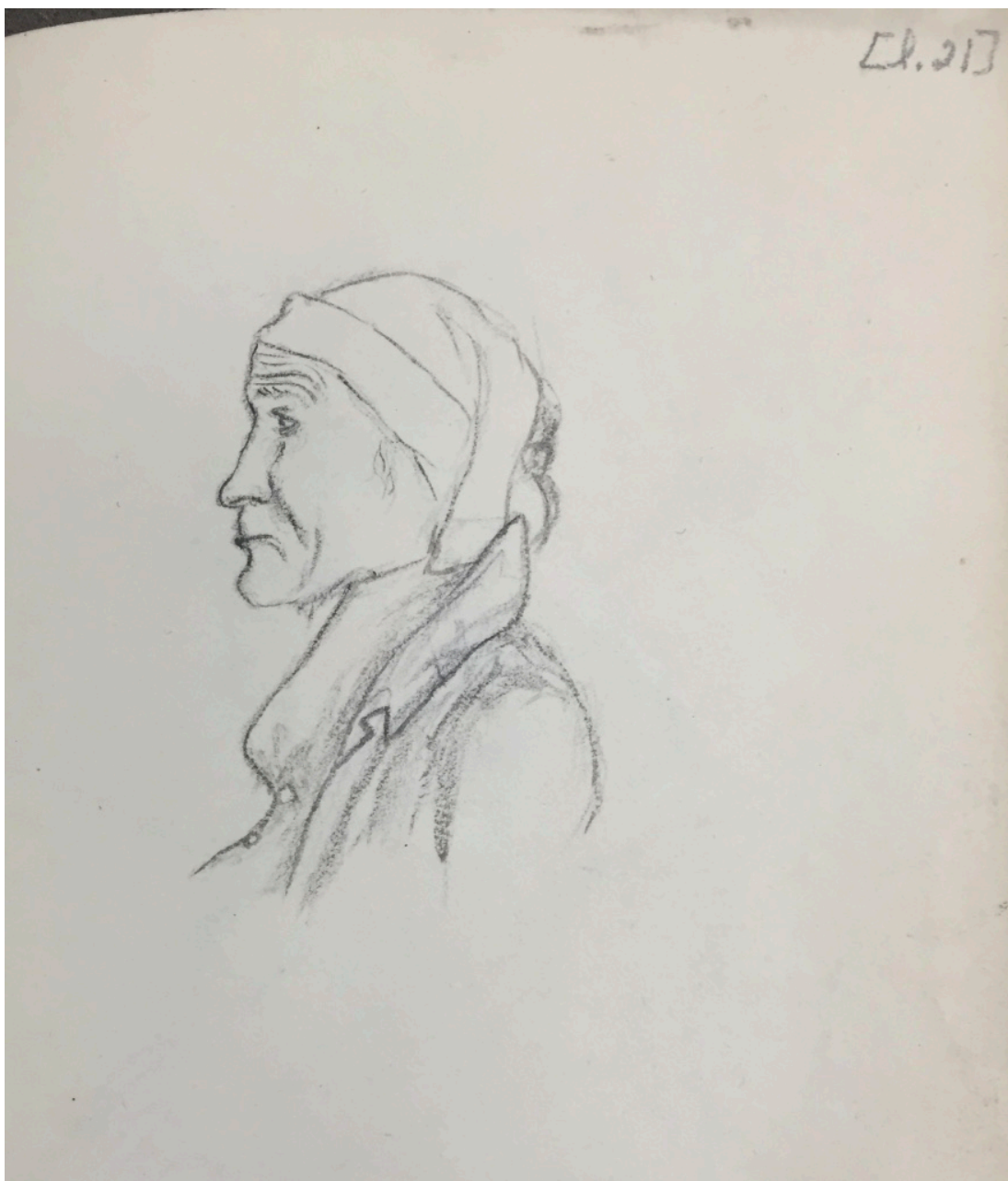
















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