

Wendy Hayden, **Evolutionary Rhetoric: Sex, Science, and Free Love in Nineteenth-Century Feminism**, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2013, 259 pp., \$36.00 (paperback).

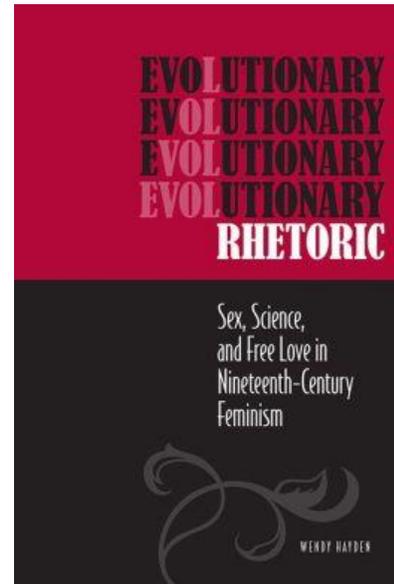
Reviewed by
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In *Evolutionary Rhetoric: Sex, Science, and Free Love in Nineteenth-Century Feminism*,

Wendy Hayden, an assistant professor of English at Hunter College of the City University of New York, argues that those advocating for what she labels “free-love feminism” in the 19th century contributed to an argumentatively complex and scientifically derived social movement. She situates her project as one of rhetorical recovery in that free-love feminists have long been grouped together with members of the larger (often patriarchal) free-love movement proper and have yet to be considered as unique discursive agents in their own right. Hayden differentiates between free-love feminists and 19th-century suffragists by contending that the former worked primarily for gaining women’s right to sexual self-determination and framed suffrage as a natural consequence of such a right rather than as a principal goal. In recovering, contextualizing, and analyzing the

speeches, articles, and pamphlets of 19th-century free-love feminists, Hayden performs a valuable and long-overdue service in the name of rhetorical history and the rhetorical representation of intersectional identities. While the mainstream women’s rights movement of the 19th century was composed primarily of middle-to-upper-class Anglo-Saxon women, free-love feminists were also Anglo-Saxon women but (notably) of working-class and/or impoverished backgrounds. Thus, their discourse has the potential to facilitate an increasingly comprehensive illustration of movement-oriented argumentation in that it represents diverse subject positions over time and during specific historical moments. Hayden dedicates her book to explaining how and why free-love feminists drew from the language of established and emerging scientific disciplines to argue against the institution of marriage, and—perhaps more importantly for those interested in the study of ethics, social justice, and identity politics—she considers “how their revolutionary rhetoric [ultimately] devolved into a rhetoric of eugenics” (p. 9).

On both methodological and structural levels, *Evolutionary Rhetoric* distinguishes itself in terms of clarity and accessibility. Hayden offers readers a relatively thorough discussion of the process she went through to identify and access texts for analysis. Noting, for instance, that she tracked down, contextualized, and analyzed many of the sources cited in primary free-love feminist texts, Hayden demonstrates that her approach to analyzing historical rhetoric involves attention to intertextuality from a critical rhetoric orientation—although, it should be noted, she does not explicitly use this language. In this way, Hayden’s work offers students of rhetoric a unique and compelling model for the study of social-movement discourse in and over time. In terms of structure, Hayden’s work is thematically organized and



demonstrates the value in consistency across chapters/case studies. Following an initial overview of free-love feminists themselves and their discourse, the book's chapters are divided so that they focus on one of five scientific fields of 19th-century study. Each chapter explicates, first, scientific discourse proper from the field at hand, then how this scientific discourse was reappropriated for lay audiences at the time, and finally, how scientific warrants from these conversations were taken up by free-love feminists to support their agenda in favor of sexual self-determination. This structure allows for easy comparison among warrants emerging from distinct scientific fields and, given that the chapters are also organized in a roughly chronological manner, delineates the narrative progression of the free-love feminist movement as a whole.

In Chapter 1, Hayden offers an overview of the larger free-love movement and the earliest free-love publications, and then she distinguishes the free-love feminist movement as one dedicated specifically to women's sexual freedom and rights. One can deduce from this chapter that free-love feminists themselves neither banded together nor conceived of their ideology as necessarily separate from the larger free-love movement. In this respect, this study invites continued consideration about the implications of constituting a social movement that its own adherents did not explicitly formulate as such. Whether or not readers agree with Hayden's contention on this front, her biographical and contextual contributions in this chapter concerning eight distinct free-love feminists remain valuable in terms of distinguishing how these individuals situated their causes in accordance with other bona fide social movements, including woman suffrage, social purity, and anarchism. From the more well-known members of the movement, such as Angela Heywood and the notorious Victoria Woodhull, to the less recognized Juliet Severance and Lois Waisbrooker, Hayden identifies individual free-love feminists' rhetorical contributions, discursive strategies, and personal ideological proclivities. She previews the remainder of the book's chapters by arguing that the free-love feminists overviewed in her book drew from scientific warrants—warrants that were used in other contexts to fight against feminist agendas—to further their cause. Hayden uses the rest of her book to consider how free-love feminists reappropriated knowledge claims that were often used against them to support their own arguments.

Chapter 2 focuses on free-love feminist appropriations of evolutionary theory, specifically Charles Darwin's theory of sexual selection, wherein males in the natural world are said to compete for female attention and females are said to be responsible for selecting their mate and thereby furthering the evolutionary progression of the species. Hayden points out that other aspects of Darwin's theories—his idea that females are arrested in their evolutionary development—were often used at this time toward what she calls "antifeminist" aims (p. 59). Nevertheless, free-love feminists, including Lillian Harman and Tennessee Claflin (Woodhull's less-publicized sister), drew from Darwin's scientific topoi to argue that women had to be unconstrained by marriage laws and economic concerns to exercise the choice upon which evolution depended.

In Chapter 3, Hayden demonstrates how free-love feminists appropriated the language of physiology, which, although it was not a new or emerging scientific field, was nonetheless pervasive throughout 19th-century medical and lay discourse. Hayden contends that free-love feminists used the prevalent physiological claim that women are controlled by their reproductive organs as a warrant for the idea that women need unencumbered, stimulating sex to maintain their health and, ultimately, the health

of the next generation. In Chapter 4, Hayden accounts for the popularization of germ theory and the corresponding rise of bacteriology. She illustrates how free-love feminists drew from literal and metaphorical depictions of disease to frame marriage and the married couple as unhealthy.

Hayden's final two chapters focus on the fields of embryology and heredity/eugenics and emphasize the subtle shift that took place in free-love feminist discourse—from that targeting women's sexual self-determination to that targeting the propagation of healthy Anglo-Saxon children. The language of embryology allowed women's rights activists in general (and free-love feminists in particular) to argue that because women's bodies are the site of complex cellular development, women must have control over their bodies for that process to unfold in desired ways. More specifically, free-love feminists contended that conception and pregnancy must occur under favorable, pleasurable, and freely chosen conditions for the sake of the life emerging from those conditions. These sorts of claims, Hayden argues, functioned to shift the free-love feminist agenda to one interested primarily in women as mothers. Her chapter on heredity furthers this argument by demonstrating how free-love feminists at the end of the 19th century argued that women should have the right to sexual self-determination because superior offspring are produced in freely chosen relationships. Although several free-love feminists fought against this argumentative turn, claiming that so-called scientific motherhood would enslave women just as the institution of marriage had, Hayden demonstrates that eugenic appeals ultimately subsumed free-love feminist discourse and overwhelmed the movement's original goals. By 1907, Hayden maintains that public arguments in favor of free-love feminism were rarely in evidence and losing their persuasive traction.

On the whole, *Evolutionary Rhetoric* offers scholars of health and science communication, rhetorical history, gender and feminist studies, and argumentation a wonderful overview of how a seemingly nonscientific discourse drew from a diversity of scientific fields to further its reach and highlight its credibility. Hayden's book complements and extends existing studies on women's rights discourse in the 19th century and calls attention to the unique role that Anglo-Saxon working-class women played in fighting for their own sexual self-determination and in furthering the eugenic agenda that reached a devastating head in the century that followed. Hayden's attention to detail, contextual framing, and argumentative mapping, not to mention her seemingly racy subject matter, makes for a compelling pedagogical tool and will no doubt function as inspiration for the next generation of scholars dedicated to science and health communication, rhetoric, and feminist history.