

Bigger Bodies, Bigger Brains: The Nineteenth Century's Other Ideal of Womanhood

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“My idea of a perfect woman, nobly planned, is a pleasant face, a bright eye, a graceful figure with a good sized waist, arrayed in clean well-fitting calico...with a broom in her hand,” declared a male opponent of Elizabeth Cady Stanton in the *Phrenological Journal* in January, 1870. “For the edification of this man, and the world at large” rejoined a personal friend of Stanton’s, “allow me to say that Mrs. Stanton has a pleasant face, a good figure, a sizable waist--sometimes wears calico...and is said to be as thorough and systematic a ‘sweepist’ as she is a ‘talkist’.”

So deeply ingrained in our modern culture is the belief that small waists and slenderness are requisite to feminine beauty that it is nearly impossible for modern scholars to get past their personal amusement when dealing with the varying attitudes toward the body which developed among Americans in the middle decades of the Nineteenth Century. Although the slender ideal, characterized by historian Lois Banner’s steel-engraving lady, persisted in certain sectors of American society throughout the nineteenth century, the health reform movement and its new ally, phrenology--the so-called science of the mind--proved remarkably effective in introducing a startlingly different ideal in other sectors. This new ideal was broader, stronger and more competent. Its waist was unfettered, its arms rounded and plump, its bust line expansive. Inspired by the Venus de Milo, the Venus de Medici and countless other full-bodied portrayals of mythic women in art, the ideal honored size and substance, muscularity and physical competence.

This stronger, larger, more robust ideal of feminine beauty grew from the grafting of phrenology, neo-classicism, and Lamarckianism to the mid-century expansion of physical culture for women. Practical phrenologist Orson Fowler championed the aesthetic shift, asserting bombastically, “Natural Waists, or No Wives,” in his widely circulated *Phrenological Journal*. Health reform literature

followed Fowler's lead and spilled over with phrenological references and subtleties.

Although the new ideal was embraced by Stanton and others within the women's rights movement, it did not loose all the bonds. The larger, stronger body was, on the one hand, evidence of a move toward greater social equality, since women of size and substance were not as likely to be regarded as child-like and dependent; such women were seen as more serious, more competent and possessed of greater authority. On the other hand, the new ideal was still centered largely on woman's maternal capacities. The uncorseted waistline did improve women's vitality and allow women greater mobility, but it also suggested enhanced maternal function. The ideal's fixation with the large bosom suggested a continued interest in woman's nurturant capacities. Furthermore, such an ideal continued the sexual objectification of woman's body. Reflecting woman's social ambiguity at mid-century, the new ideal had emancipatory, maternal and erotic aspects.

One of the most interesting features of this ideal was the newfound importance of strength. Among health reformers and woman's rights advocates, strength became synonymous with health and was viewed as a facilitator of feminine power in daily life and the culture at large. Woman's rights activist and hydropathic reformer Harriett Austin told a lecture audience in 1860, "And women are not only entitled to have strong muscles and robust health as truly as men are, but without these their lives may be in larger or lesser measure lamentable failures."

As physical strength became an issue in health-reform literature for women at mid-century, it enabled them to participate in a new type of purposive exercise: heavy weightlifting or the health life. This paper argues that the writings of American phrenology's primary visionary, Orson Squires Fowler, played a significant role in helping women achieve this new, powerful physical ideal and that because of his interesting phrenological approach to womanhood, the hygienic exercise system known as the health lift found rapid, widespread acceptance.