From the 1770s through the 1860s, the sciences of physiognomy (the study of the human face) and phrenology (the study of the human skull) were everywhere in the United States, wielded by a diverse array of people. Physiognomists and phrenologists held public lectures and workshops to teach Americans how to analyze countenances and skulls. People produced analyses—if only in their diaries and letters—of the visages of public figures, statues, portraits, and even literary characters, searching for clues about their intelligence and character. Frederick Douglass sat for photograph after photograph, attempting to give the public indisputable evidence of his countenance. Prison reformers examined incarcerated individuals’ faces for signs of criminality or penitence. Women shaved the front of their hair or slicked their hair behind their ears to make their foreheads appear larger—emphasizing the intellectual “high brow” oft-cited by scientific treatises.

In Beauty and the Brain: The Science of Human Nature in Early America, Rachel E. Walker makes a compelling case for these and a myriad of other ways physiognomy and phrenology shaped the politics, culture, and society of the United States in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Walker argues that these sciences have not yet been recognized by many scholars of the early American republic as legitimate sciences in their day and thus as worthy of scholarly attention in the present. Many, she observes, have dismissed physiognomy and phrenology “as quirky forms of quackery that only briefly captured the American imagination” (p. 8). As a result, physiognomy and phrenology have been largely missing from major journals and textbooks in the field of US history. Beauty and the Brain thus is in part a call for physiognomy and phrenology to be taken on the terms they were taken by many Americans: as “legitimate knowledge systems” that, while not universally accepted by all, were “pervasive social practices and intellectual philosophies” (pp. 7-8).

[1] Undoubtedly, physiognomy and phrenology—precursors to biological essentialism—were entrenched in racist, sexist, and classist ideas of elite white male superiority. But as Walker argues
throughout *Beauty and the Brain*, that does not mean they should be ignored, as physiognomy and phrenology were also successfully co-opted by the very people they marginalized. In the hands of reformers, these sciences were tools that aided resistance to the unjust hierarchies and systems of the early republican and antebellum United States.

*Beauty and the Brain* begins with two chapters that trace the rise of first physiognomy and then phrenology. It proceeds with four chapters that show how physiognomy and phrenology were used to bolster causes throughout the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In 1755, Johann Caspar Lavater, a Swiss cleric, published a series of essays declaring that physiognomy—which had ancient roots—“could be a credible science” (p. 19). By the late eighteenth century, Lavater’s ideas were available to large American audiences via periodicals and English translations of his essays. Chapter 1 argues that in the early American republic, Americans used physiognomy to examine themselves and their leaders for signs of republican virtue. People could scan faces like George Washington’s—Charles Willson Peale’s portrait collection offered “a visual archive of American distinction”—for signs that their leaders were trustworthy and were the equal of their European counterparts (p. 26). Physiognomy also offered a sense of comfort for those with privilege in the early republic; by claiming that some people’s brains and bodies were superior to other people’s, physiognomy suggested that the hierarchies codified with the founding of the United States were just.

Phrenology built on the ideas of physiognomy but touted “a more empirical methodology” (p. 47). Phrenologists examined the shape of the skull to draw conclusions about the mind within. Phrenology was the brainchild of Franz Josef Gall, whose collaborator, Johann Gaspar Spurzheim, went on a lecture tour of the United States in 1832, where he “dazzled audiences with live brain dissections and anatomical demonstrations” (p. 47). Like her first, Walker’s second chapter shows how phrenology gained popularity in America and was used by many to justify hierarchies of race, class, and gender. Both sciences were popular at the moment of and in the decades following the United States’ founding because they allowed people to “visualize abstract characteristics” and therefore “delineate the bodily signifiers of national belonging” (p. 65). Appealing, too, was the inherent flexibility of both sciences. Their rules were “murky” and very much up to “individualized interpretations” (p. 43). For many people, as *Beauty and the Brain* goes on to detail, this “intellectual flexibility” provided an opportunity (p. 79).

Walker’s subsequent chapters show how those marginalized in part by the conclusions of physiognomy and phrenology wielded these sciences themselves, in pursuit of equality and reform. Chapter 3 shows how women—Black and white—used physiognomy and phrenology to subvert standards of idealized female beauty. Chapter 4 examines early feminists’ use of physiognomy and phrenology between the 1830s and the 1860s and the subsequent backlash from conservatives who poked fun at women’s hairstyles that emphasized their “manly brows.” This backlash, Walker argues, was not in fact about hair but about women making claims for their own intellectualism and equality to men. Chapter 5 shows how prison reformers used physiognomy and phrenology to claim not only that moral reform was possible for prisoners but also that so-called criminality was an inherent quality for some, readable on their visages and skulls. Finally, Walker’s sixth chapter focuses on Black and white abolitionists’ use of physiognomy and phrenology. Black reformers found these sciences at once useful and troubling; using physiognomy and phrenology, they could provide evidence that their race had the same intellectual capacity as any other. But in engaging with sciences rooted in racism, they risked confirming those conclusions.
Beauty and the Brain is an illuminating read for scholars of gender, race, and social reform in the early American republic and antebellum America. Understanding the language and popular appeal of physiognomy and phrenology—which Walker parses so clearly throughout the book—and its role in reform movements will undoubtedly be useful for scholars of the period who have likely come across references to “brows” before. Walker’s analysis of physiognomic and phrenological references in literature and art will also be of interest to literary and visual scholars. As a history of science, Beauty and the Brain echoes questions that have long circulated in the field: What counts as “science,” and why? What do we miss when we use the label of “pseudoscience” to dismiss knowledge systems that in the present are clearly discriminatory and unscientific? Beauty and the Brain shows that we miss a great deal. And that in the case of physiognomy and phrenology, we miss many instances of those who were most marginalized by popular sciences choosing to wield those sciences for the cause of their own liberation.

Note


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