

**Victoria Woodhull-Martin and *The Humanitarian* (1892-1901):  
Feminism and Eugenics at the Fin de Siècle**

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<1>A new sixpenny monthly journal appeared in London and New York City in July 1892, offering readers a mixture of commentary on contemporary literature and culture, features about science and spirituality, and a generous measure of populist political content. The cover clearly signaled *The Humanitarian's* progressive agenda: not only did it boast an epigraph from Longfellow's *Song of Hiawatha* (Hiawatha "lived, and toiled, and suffered, / That the Tribes of men might prosper, / That *he might advance* his people!"), but it was also adorned with a trellis-like design that encompassed the motto "Man grows as higher grow his aims." And if this was not enough, the masthead also blazoned that this new paper was edited by Victoria Woodhull Martin (1838-1927).(1)

<2>For nineteenth-century readers on both sides of the Atlantic, the editor's name alone would have signaled that this was a publication worthy of their notice. Victoria Woodhull was the very antithesis of F. Scott Fitzgerald's later claim that there were "no second acts in American life." From a dirt-poor upbringing in rural Ohio, Woodhull rose to wealth and influence through careers as spiritualist, actress, stockbroker, newspaper publisher, political activist, and public speaker. At the height of her fame and influence, she commanded sufficient support to be elected president of the amorphous American Association of Spiritualists—and reelected twice. More importantly, she commanded sufficient support within the suffrage movement to be nominated as the first woman candidate for President of the United States, standing for office (illegally, as both her gender and her age disqualified her) on the Equal Rights Party ticket in 1872. However, the forces that had propelled her to such heights also rapidly undid her. The freethinking spiritualists warmly embraced her as a fellow traveler, but the more conservative women (and men) among the suffragists sternly distanced themselves from her more outrageous words and actions, especially her forthright defense of free love. When her brokerage house suffered losses and her newspaper began publishing muckraking exposés of brothels and the sexual exploits of supposedly upright public men (most notably popular preacher Henry Ward Beecher), many former supporters backed away, afraid of being associated with the "notorious Victoria." Between subsequent skirmishes with the law over obscenity charges, increasingly desperate financial difficulties, a failed marriage (she divorced her second husband, Colonel James Blood, in late 1876), and ill health, by the time her patron Cornelius Vanderbilt died in January 1877, Woodhull was in truly dire straits. Fortunately, Vanderbilt's children paid Woodhull and her sister Jennie C. Claflin to leave the country, so that they couldn't testify when Vanderbilt's will was

contested. As a result, the end of 1877 saw Woodhull and her extended family established in London, with new antecedents, a new spelling of their name (“Woodhall”), and plans to be henceforth respectable. The strategy worked: within only a few years, Tennie had married a title (Sir Francis Cook, baronet, a wealthy merchant), and Woodhull had married a wealthy banker, John Biddulph Martin.

<3>Readers who recognized Woodhull’s name on the masthead of the new magazine in 1892 must have been extremely curious about its contents, and they might reasonably have wondered whether *The Humanitarian* would be a direct successor to Woodhull’s earlier paper, *Woodhull & Claflin’s Weekly* (1870-1876). The *Weekly* had been expressly political. Boasting that it was “The only Paper in the World conducted, absolutely, upon the Principles of a Free Press,” the *Weekly* advocated a revolutionary “new government,” based on universal adult suffrage, redistribution of land, a nationalized bank, universal free education for children, and “A new sexual system, in which mutual consent, entirely free from money or any inducement other than love, shall be the governing law, individuals being left to make their own regulations; and in which society, when the individual shall fail, shall be responsible for the proper rearing of children” (“Prospectus for *Woodhull & Claflin’s Weekly*,” reprinted in Stern n.p.). In addition to supporting this new government of redistribution and sexual liberation, the *Weekly* also expressly bolstered Woodhull’s political ambitions, promising that the paper would “support Victoria C. Woodhull for President, with its whole strength; otherwise it will be untrammelled by party or personal considerations, free from all affiliation with political or social creeds, and will advocate Suffrage without distinction of sex!” (“Statement of Purpose,” qtd. in Gabriel 59).

<4>To a certain extent, Woodhull’s 1892 publishing venture did have affinities with her earlier one. *The Humanitarian* was indeed a political publication, and it would also support Woodhull’s abortive final campaign for president in 1892 (she also campaigned in 1880). But in *The Humanitarian*, Woodhull adopted a somewhat different approach to politics. The opening sentence of the magazine’s “Manifesto” promised expansively that *The Humanitarian* would discuss “all subjects appertaining to the well-being of humanity,” and the remaining text made clear that those subjects would be examined through a particular lens. “The children of to-day are the citizens of the future,” the “Manifesto” declares,

and their value as citizens will depend upon the sum of their inherited qualities and the education and training that they have received.

We recognize that the overworked, the badly bred, and the underfed will not have their higher faculties sufficiently developed to appreciate real value. We think the physically exhausted should not be allowed to breed in ignorance of the injurious effects that their depleted condition will have on their offspring. We think it right that every effort should be made by those who have the true interests of humanity at heart to teach the consequences of ignorance on those vital subjects. (Woodhull, “Manifesto,” 1)

As this opening article makes clear, the magazine’s promise to take a “scientific” approach to human development meant that it would focus on one of the most recent offshoots of Darwinian biological and social science: eugenics.

<5>That this subject was a particularly attractive one at the fin de siècle is supported by the fact that over the next decade, Woodhull would garner contributions from many of the important writers, politicians, political activists, and doctors and scientists of the age, including such instantly recognizable names as Grant Allen, Walter Besant, Sir Richard Burton, Edward Carpenter, Millicent Garrett Fawcett, Sarah Grand, J.A. Hobson, Ramsay Macdonald, Florence Nightingale, G. Bernard Shaw, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Ida B. Wells. The magazine's circulation figures are uncertain, but the depth and breadth of its readership is suggested by the range of press notices from both sides of the Atlantic that are quoted in its pages and in the end wrappers. (For example, the January 1894 issue cites approving notices from the *Bristol Times*, *Lady's Pictorial*, *Public Opinion*, *Vanity Fair*, *Christian Globe*, *The Gentlewoman*, *Vegetarian*, and *Health*, as well as a number of other regional and city newspapers from across the United Kingdom, plus some colonial and civil service papers.) Characterized by H.G. Wells as a collection of "popular preachers, popular bishops, and popular anthropologists [vying] with titled ladies of liberal outlook" (qtd. in Perry 12), *The Humanitarian's* writers delivered articles on a broad range of leftist and feminist issues that touched, in one way or another, on the improvement of the human race.

<6>Given its prominent feminist proprietor and the illustrious nature of its contributors list, it may seem strange that *The Humanitarian* remains virtually unknown. But scholars in fields as diverse as women's history, political thought, literature, and sociology have passed it by, and even Woodhull's biographers have tended to elide it. The likeliest reason for the magazine's neglect, even by those who would seem most likely to engage with it, must be its overt concern with the subject of eugenics. Scholars working in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries—the very period during which feminist scholarship (especially feminist recovery work) has emerged as an important critical force—have reacted with understandable revulsion to the more extreme policies adopted by earlier eugenicist institutions and governments, policies that included miscegenation laws, forced sterilizations and euthanasia for the developmentally disabled, and ultimately genocide. But in this effort to distance themselves from distasteful and even horrific practices, the same scholars seem to have sidestepped the fact that eugenics was embraced by many progressive thinkers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including feminists, who saw it as one more aspect of the positivist effort to improve human conditions by rational, scientific means. Woodhull's decision to proffer eugenics in a monthly magazine—a format usually reserved for more mainstream fare—highlights both the significance and the acceptability of the subject at the turn of the last century. *The Humanitarian's* pages, therefore, can help us to better understand the full context in which fin-de-siècle debates about sexuality, personal liberty, and national self-interest were playing out.

<7>Founded by Darwin's cousin Francis Galton, who coined the term in 1883, eugenics was the practice of "watching for the indications of superior strains or races, and in so favouring them that their progeny shall outnumber and gradually replace that of the old one" (Galton 479). As a broad-based social and political movement, eugenics was devoted to "the study of agencies under social control that may improve or impair the racial qualities of future generations either physically or mentally" (Galton, "Eugenics: Its Definition, Scope and Aims" [1904]: 82; qtd. in Greenleaf 269). As political historian W.H. Greenleaf explains, adherents of eugenics willingly embraced science, social work, and political action in their efforts to counter "the actual tendencies of the day which intimated a likely degeneration of the race" (269). That the human

race *was* degenerating was considered a commonplace at the fin de siècle, with the causes variously ascribed to poisoning (by stimulants and bad food), urbanization (which resulted in both overcrowding and overstimulation), and the ever-accelerating pace of a modern life driven by rapid technological advancements.(2) The 1902 report that sixty percent of those recruited to serve in the British Army during the Boer War had been deemed physically unfit for duty led to what Karl Beckson characterizes as “widespread soul-searching . . . accompanied by numerous government reports” about the substandard living conditions of the poor, as well as public denunciations by Kipling and others of the debilitating “sloth and pleasure-seeking” of the upper classes (377).

<8>At its height in the early twentieth century, the eugenics movement swept up individuals of all political persuasions. Greenleaf notes that in Britain, thinkers as diverse as “Wells, Wallas, Laski, Keynes, Balfour, and the young Neville Chamberlain looked to this branch of biology to achieve that qualitative improvement in human beings necessary for the advancement of national efficiency” (270). In 1900, the British Malthusian League adopted as its motto “Non Quantitas Sed Qualitas”—Not Quantity but Quality—an explicitly eugenicist sentiment (Anderson and Zinsser 2:415). In America, a Eugenics Record Office was created in 1910 as a research laboratory and publicity (or propaganda) center, and the eugenics section of the American Breeders’ Association drew sufficient support and membership by 1913 to spin off as a separate organization, the American Genetic Association (Hofstadter 162). Eugenacists on both sides of the Atlantic pursued similar programs of social and legislative reforms to effect their desired ends. Among the most commonly proposed policies in “human stirpiculture” (the designed improvement of the human stock) were changes in marriage laws, both to prevent “undesirables” from marrying and to encourage (often through special licensing) suitable mates; family allowances for genetically suitable parents; state custody of the developmentally or physically “defective”; improved educational opportunities; improved knowledge of and access to birth control; and compulsory sterilization of those deemed unfit to breed (Greenleaf 270). Woodhull herself advocated all of these proposed policies – her writings on this topic include two thirty- to forty-page pamphlets entitled *Stirpiculture; or the Scientific Propagation of the Human Race* (1888) and *The Rapid Multiplication of the Unfit* (1891) – as did many of the contributors to *The Humanitarian*. And these ideas were also broadly shared by many feminist activists and writers of the time, a fact which scholars such as Greta Jones, Lesley Hall, and Angelique Richardson have recently begun to explore.(3) As Ann Taylor Allen puts it, “eugenic theory was a *basic and formative, not an incidental, part* of feminist positions on the vitally important themes of motherhood, reproduction, and the state” (479, emphasis added).

<9>Woodhull’s magazine therefore provides valuable insights into how eugenics was perceived by its early adherents and how it was intricately woven into contemporary progressive politics. While modern readers might expect a periodical so concerned with scientific matters to adopt a scientific garb (most scientific journals were published biweekly or quarterly with no-nonsense layouts), *The Humanitarian* is surprisingly ordinary looking and even inviting in design. Although it started out as a quarto with a fairly generic newspaper format, within its first year it evolved into a handsome octavo magazine format and expanded from 16 to 30 pages.(4) Major articles were usually signed and often featured a portrait of the contributor (or, in the case of an interview, the focus of the story). Besides feature articles, each issue also included book reviews (usually of sociopolitical or scientific works); reprints of various texts and lectures by Woodhull;

an “Open Column” of quotes from famous authors or scraps of verse; and a “Notes and Comments” column with roundups of material from other sources, plus notices of lectures, other events, and obituaries (especially from 1899 on). In the first series, there were also such standard periodical fare as “Child Culture” and “Medical” columns, but these were dropped when the new series began with volume 3. One recurring feature was the panel column, in which four to eight writers would contribute pieces on a given topic, such as “Should the Same Standard of Morality Be Required from Men as from Women?” or “The Economic Position of Women.” There was no letter column as such, but commentary on previous content was sometimes included in the “Notes and Comments” column, and feature articles sometimes responded to items published in earlier issues; for example, a series of pieces in 1894 on “The New Hedonism” engaged Rev. T.G. Bonney, Grant Allen, and George Ives.(5)

<10>The attractively laid out and illustrated pages, along with the varied departments, provide an initial impression that this is a fairly ordinary (if somewhat more elegant than usual) late-century periodical. It is only when one looks closely at the content of the magazine that one realizes its unusual emphasis. Although biographer Barbara Goldsmith claims that *The Humanitarian* was “a conservative publication” launched in the pursuit of “social acceptance” (441), a cursory review of the magazine’s pages shows that this is simply wrong. The contents deal overwhelmingly with progressive – even radical – social issues, including suffrage and sanitary reform, bicycling and other forms of physical fitness, horticulture and “child culture,” and also standard political questions focused on labor, emigration, and economics. The most frequent topic, however, is heredity, which is taken up in a variety of guises. For example, in the first volume alone are Woodhull’s “Manifesto,” as well as articles by her on “Humanitarian Government,” the “Humanitarian Platform,” and the “Aristocracy of Blood” (Woodhull’s euphemism for family planning); other related articles include “Civilisation and Crime” (by her husband, John Biddulph Martin), “Degeneration,” “Miracles of Physiology,” and one asking “Why Is Genius Rarely Transmitted?” Volume two includes essays on the physiological and social consequences of fatigue, on overpopulation, and pleas for “anatomical instruction” (code for sex education) in the schools. Even such standard magazine features as the book reviews and excerpts from other periodicals maintain *The Humanitarian*’s overall emphasis on physiology and breeding. For example, in a review of Zola’s *Doctor Pascal*, regular contributor W.H. Wilkins notes admiringly that Zola considers “that the majority of human beings are not free agents, but are influenced in varying degrees by one or another ancestral taint” (311) . And in a “Notes and Comments” item discussing a letter to the *London Morning Post* about horse-breeding, the author observes that “If such solicitude is exhibited to prevent the deterioration of animals, how much more important is it that some proper system should be inaugurated to prevent the propagation of unhealthy children?” (“The Return of Ormonde”).

<11>Michael W. Perry, who is one of the very few historians to write about either *The Humanitarian* or this phase of Woodhull’s career, notes that Woodhull was something of a pioneer in the field of eugenics. “She wasn’t the first to come up with the idea, or the first to write about it,” he explains, “but she may have been the first to stake her reputation on eugenics becoming a cause” (8). Perry points out that while Woodhull’s contributions to the field of eugenics were dismissed in the late twentieth century by historian Geoffrey Searle because of her lack of scientific standing (and her gender),(6) earlier she had been credited with having popularized the message of eugenics. For example, in an article about the 1912 International

Eugenics Congress in London, the influential *Pall Mall Gazette* credited Woodhull with being “the first one to impress upon the nation the importance of race propagation on scientific principles” (“Lady Eugenist,” *Pall Mall Gazette* [July 29, 1912]; qtd. in Perry 16). Perry further suggests that Woodhull’s paper and public speeches “may be of particular importance in explaining the later spread of eugenic ideas among women in the United States,” creating receptivity to the ideas that activists such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Margaret Sanger would later exploit (26).

<12>Fin-de-siècle feminism had a complicated relationship with eugenics, one that has begun to be explored in the literary realm through attention to New Women writers. For example, Lisa K. Hamilton notes the effort in literary studies to distinguish between “decadence” and “degeneration,” and she shows how that distinction breaks down in the work of New Woman writers. While both New Women writers like Sarah Grand and male Decadents like Oscar Wilde “manipulated descriptive tropes drawn from sciences like physiognomy and degenerationism,” only the male writers “felt free to play with stereotypes and to embrace what society considered dangerous and pathological.” New Women writers, by contrast, “generally accepted the authority of pseudoscience, used it to underpin their warnings about dangerous sexual liaisons, and thereby disseminated its conclusions” (64). Although Hamilton asserts that even when they tried to appropriate medical and scientific authority to critique social norms (such as the sexual double standard), women writers were “caught” or “locked into” a cultural discourse that constantly reverted to binary essentialism, in which the norm was defined as “male, middle-class, and British” (77). However, it may be that, because of its focus on the improvement of the whole race through sexual selection and other means, the “pseudoscience” of eugenics actually opened a door for female agency that provided a counterweight to the general societal expectation of female passivity. In any case, the pages of *The Humanitarian* reveal how a range of conventional nineteenth-century tropes about womanhood, woman’s mission, and purity could be harnessed to a powerful (if sometimes disturbing) scientific and sociopolitical force.

<13>Woodhull’s own interest in eugenics had its roots in the condition of her son Byron, who was born with severe developmental disabilities, and also in her involvement in the spiritualist movement. According to biographer Lois Beachy Underhill, the sight of Byron’s face “rebuked her,” and Woodhull “spent the rest of her life trying to understand her son’s mental incapacity” (26-7). Woodhull laid much of the blame for Byron’s condition on the chronic alcoholism of his father (Canning Woodhull, her first husband), but she also believed that her extreme youth and inexperience was an important factor. She was barely sixteen when Byron was born, and as she explained in an 1874 lecture “Tried as by Fire,” at the time of her marriage she had been “ignorant of everything that related to my maternal functions” and “knew no better than to surrender my maternal functions to a drunken man” (qtd. in Underhill 260). Byron’s disability seemed to be a judgment on her. While the birth of a healthy daughter, Zula Maud, some years later was a great relief, it also gave rise to her belief “that only sexually-knowledgeable parents who wanted children should have them” (30), a belief that in turn informed her fervent support for free love, contraceptive knowledge, and, later, social engineering.

<14>As her reactions to her children's differences suggest, Woodhull was convinced that physical, mental, and emotional fitness were intricately bound together, a belief that may have been a legacy of her early career as a spiritualist. As a number of historians have noted, the spiritualist movement was an important incubator for women's social and political action in the nineteenth century.<sup>(7)</sup> The movement's emphasis on the role of the spiritual fueled powerful arguments for social and political change that would address the rights and needs of women, people of color, and the poor. As Marlene Tromp explains, adherents reasoned that if there was a "spiritual imperative" to abandon the "material benefit of a few . . . for the spiritual growth and physical well-being of the whole, then social change must occur" (192). Although the influence of spiritualism on Woodhull's overall political views is too complex to describe in detail here, there are several significant aspects that help illuminate her political trajectory. First, the social and political progressivism of the movement enabled Woodhull's own personal advancement, and her meteoric socioeconomic rise in turn served as an example of the liberation that was potentially open to anyone through spiritual self-awareness and openness to impressions, regardless of gender, race, or class background. Furthermore, the spiritualists welcomed a wide variety of "fellow searchers for new social truths," a miscellaneous group that included suffragists as well as "labor reformers, free lovers, free thinkers, single taxers, anarchists, populists, vegetarians, communists, and socialists" (Underhill 172). Woodhull would advocate for many of these other movements in her later political writings, and she would remain open to new ideas—including eugenics—that appeared to further the underlying goal of improving overall human development. Finally, the overlapping network of women and others who were active in both the spiritualist movement and in the suffrage movement provided Woodhull with a strong base of both moral and practical support. Underhill describes this network as a "secret sisterhood" that was signaled by the use of code words such as "intuition" or—importantly—"humanitarian," an umbrella term that was used to express "the nonmaterial values of spiritualism" (118). What Woodhull eventually came to define as "humanitarian government" and to put forward both in her presidential campaigns and in the pages of *The Humanitarian* was therefore a direct outgrowth of her earliest professional and political associations.

<15>Woodhull's notion of "humanitarian government" was most fully expressed in a seventy-page pamphlet by that name, published in London in 1890.<sup>(8)</sup> Although the pamphlet draws from the general values of spiritualism, it also introduces very forcefully the notion of "applied scientific knowledge for the benefit of humanity" (1). In the pamphlet, Woodhull asserts that government "should look after the *internal welfare* of its people" (emphasis added), explaining in quasi-genetic terms that there is an intimate link between the physical health of the citizen and of the state:

The nation which produced the highest type of man and woman had in it the *best germ* of true Government. A nation which appears the most powerful, yet has the greatest number of half-witted, of paupers, and of criminals as concomitants, is not the best governed. On the contrary, the *seeds of decay* have already taken root. If the Government is the representative of the people, the better the people, the better the Government; conversely, the better the Government the better the people must follow as a logical sequence. (40-41, emphasis added)

Woodhull continues to explain that the problem with modern nations is not “over-population” but “bad population”: the wrong people are reproducing (47). Rejecting the Malthusian analysis that the consequences of bad breeding will be solved by high mortality rates, Woodhull instead suggests that “A humanitarian Government would stigmatize the marriages of the unfit as crimes; it would legislate to prevent the birth of the criminal rather than legislate to punish him after he is born” (48-49). Effecting such an outcome would require denying marriage licenses “to anyone malformed or having a transmissible or communicable disease,” as well as to applicants who failed to demonstrate that “they understood physiology and had some visible means of subsistence” (55-56). Furthermore, birth registries should include “a description of occupation and physical condition of both parents . . . certified by physicians under the pay of the Government”; when the registered children in their own turn sought to marry, “this certificate should be produced before any marriage certificate could be obtained, thus insuring mutual benefit for all” (56). Woodhull claims in her conclusion that “humanitarian Government” as outlined in her pamphlet would “concentrate all that is noblest and divine in human nature” and “strengthen and revivify the life-giving principle (protean matter) into greater and more perfect types of human beings” (68).

<16>The relationship between the views expressed in Woodhull’s 1890 *Humanitarian Government* and in her magazine *The Humanitarian*, which began publication just two years later, is clear. (The pamphlet was reprinted early in the journal’s run.) *The Humanitarian*’s approach to eugenics often explicitly connects with feminist ideas, particularly relating to the nature of woman. For example, in an editorial address in the first issue of volume three, Woodhull explains that

The regeneration of humanity will not be complete until the light of knowledge shall have dawned on the darkness of ignorance and superstition that now enshrouds the world and benumbs the energies of mankind. The pioneer of the dawn must be the idealised woman, who through her perfect offspring will guide man in his aspirations to higher aims of life. She will henceforth hold aloft the crown of science, and will lead the nations of the world in their march towards the goal, towards the epoch foreshadowed by Tennyson, that shall see

“All diseases quench’d by Science, no man halt, or deaf, or blind;  
Stronger ever born of weaker, lustier body, larger mind.” (“To Our Readers” 1) (9)

Woodhull’s evocation of a spiritual, pure woman renewing the race through science is echoed in an 1893 essay on “The New Woman in Fiction and in Fact” by M. Eastwood. After dismissing popular caricatures of the New Woman, Eastwood describes an intellectual, moral, and loving paragon:

Young as she is she talks fearlessly and authoritatively on all and every subject of social depravity, for there is nothing which was hitherto hidden from her which she has not revealed. And since she knows the worst her soaring ambition will be content with nothing less than the reformation of the entire male sex. There are those who believe that the extreme remedy she is prepared to apply—that of refusing to unite herself in wedlock to the man whose morals are not as pure as her own—cannot fail in its salutary results. Her scheme of

reforms extends also beyond the fathers of the coming race and includes the weak and foolish sisters who have obstinately remained behind in their crumbling preserves. Observing how these laggards have taken to tippling of late, the ardent reformer vows that she will never rest until grocers' licenses have been abolished. That she is herself a total abstainer is not the least of her virtues.

Nor is there any grounds for the supposition that the cultivation of her head will be at the expense of her heart, that the extension of her interests to affairs outside the province which has been arbitrarily determined for her, will make her a creature unlovable and unloving. Does the root of the tree dwindle in proportion to the increased growth and extent of its branches? (Eastwood 378-79)

(Despite the mention of temperance in this piece, temperance was one progressive movement that does not appear to have drawn Woodhull's support or garnered much mention in *The Humanitarian* – perhaps surprisingly, as both her first husband and one of her sisters died of the effects of chronic alcoholism.)

<17>The New Woman is also the focus of an 1896 article by Mrs. C. Morgan-Dockrell. Again, the writer's first task is to dismiss caricatures in favor of the "genuine" item. Far from being "an intensely aggravated type of the unwomanly, unlovable, unlovely, untidy, undomesticated, revolting, shrieking, man-hating shrew of all the centuries," as depicted by Eliza Lynn Linton or Ouida, Morgan-Dockrell argues that the genuine New Woman is "verily an altogether new type . . . evolved from out the ages" (340). As with the other examples of the ideal, the genuine New Woman is a powerful force for the intellectual, moral, and physical evolution of the species as a whole, complementing and extending the masculine virtues with her own feminine ones. "One sex cannot effectually and efficiently cope with the business and affairs of humanity," Morgan-Dockrell claims: "In the intellectual sphere as in the physical there cannot be natural and healthy creation without the co-operation and amalgamation of all the mental attributes. . . . the needs and desire of the world . . . can only be naturally and effectually provided for by man and woman working harmoniously together" (344-45).

<18>Much in *The Humanitarian's* articles about women's roles is comparable to the feminist writings found in other progressive periodicals of the time, for example, in the pages of Margaret Shurmer Sibthorpe's *Shafts*. There are also some clear affinities with those branches of the nineteenth-century women's movement that focused on nursing and hygiene as ideal vehicles for women's social and political action. However, the reiterated theme of women's *evolutionary* responsibilities in the pages of *The Humanitarian* is unusual. The late century saw an increased interest in the scientific study of childhood and, by extension, motherhood. But "baby science" was more interested in what to do with children once they had entered the world than it was in how (or whether) they got there in the first place.<sup>(10)</sup> Furthermore, women's responsibility for "stirpiculture" is threaded throughout Woodhull's magazine's content, so that even literary essays and fiction reviews in *The Humanitarian* are colored by an emphasis on women's power to improve humanity through their choices of marriage partner or through their decisions to limit their fertility or even to embrace celibacy.

<19>An 1894 article on “The Immorality of the Religious Novel” illustrates how the influences of genetics and sociology are present even in discussions of literature. In the article, Jerusha D. (Mrs. Aubrey) Richardson argues against what George Eliot had so wittily dubbed the “white-neckcloth species” of fiction, those novels with clerical heroes and ostensibly unobjectionable moral content that were frequently given to impressionable young girls as suitable reading.<sup>(11)</sup> Richardson argues that these novels are far from suitable, and she is particularly scathing about their unrealistic treatment of large families. “If the abnormally large family with its physically degenerating members must be depicted, the picture should be truthful and complete,” she complains, “The shame and misery of unhealthy marriages and reckless propagation, as well as their possible pathos, should be clearly shown, and the physical, mental and moral deprivations which large families and limited means have to undergo, should bear their part in the story” (123). Richardson also denounces the “wicked” practice of glorifying marriages between young girls and “elderly” men, describing what she claims are the real-life consequences of such unions in terms that echo Woodhull’s explanation of her son’s disability:

It is now an acknowledged scientific fact that unions between persons possessed of any marked physical weaknesses or congenital defects, even though those persons be the most ardent and devoted of lovers, prove directly baneful to their children and indirectly disastrous to the race. And it is a fact, not perhaps generally admitted . . . that persons lacking the attraction of mental sympathy and the welding force of mutual love, result in the production of offspring both morally and mentally inefficient. (125)

Richardson denies that truthful accounts of such subjects would deform fiction by introducing too strong an element of didacticism, arguing instead that a truthful account would be no more inartistic than a false one.

<20>In a similar vein, an unsigned 1895 review of M<sup>é</sup>nie Muriel Dowie’s *Gallia* complains that “as an illustration of the teaching of scientific propagation,” the novel “is spoiled by the fact that the authoress has not picked up more than the merest smattering of her subject.” Dowie’s heroine is depicted as being socially and scientifically progressive because she chooses a mate not for love but for his apparently ideal breeding points: “He is fine, and strong, and healthy, clever, and ambitious.” But the reviewer notes that there is a catch:

if there be anything in inherited qualities or inherited tendencies he has his drawbacks as the ideal father of an ideal child. He has “sown his crop of wild oats,” he has kept a mistress, and has not behaved particularly handsomely to her, he is mean and selfish, somewhat avaricious, and not particularly straightforward. . . . these considerations do not carry weight with [*Gallia*], and they do not appear to have been reckoned with by the authoress, notwithstanding the way in which she prattles about heredity. (“*Gallia*” 327)

<21>Unlike Dowie, *The Humanitarian*’s contributors do not “prattle” about heredity: they tackle it with an evident sense of mission. Yet while much of the eugenics-related content is in keeping with the articles already described, there are some more alarming moves that may explain the magazine’s cursory treatment even in biographical studies of Woodhull. One of the most disturbing lines of discussion, and one that trails through the magazine’s pages over a five-year

period, relates to the treatment of epileptics and others deemed mentally “defective.” While other articles in the magazine’s run, including those by Woodhull herself, clearly assert that the mentally and physically unfit should not be allowed to procreate, a short item entitled “Wanted a Lethal Chamber” in the March 1895 “Notes and Comments” section goes much further. Describing a farm set up in Buckinghamshire for the care of epileptics, the piece begins by praising the humane and enlightened treatment of the inmates, noting that “nourishing food, good air, occupation and ‘common interests and sympathies’ appear, as might be expected, to exercise a beneficial effect” (“Wanted” 232). However, the writer speculates that in light of the undesirability of “the propagation of epileptic children,” not seclusion but euthanasia might be indicated. “We hear a great deal about the painless extinction of life in the lower animals,” the author posits, “Why should not the theory be applied to those who through a hereditary curse, are physically and mentally lower than the animals. The survival of the fittest can only be brought about by the elimination of the unfit. It is not a colony but a lethal chamber which is wanted” (232).

<22>Far from generating an outraged response, this proposal instead garnered a number of supportive commentaries. For example, in a February 1896 article entitled “A Lethal Chamber for the Unfit,” a contributor identified only as “S.” declares that those who are “so diseased, deformed, or ill-developed as to preclude the possibility of their begetting desirable additions to the community, should be denied the right to essay the experiment” (“S.” 105). The author defines two main categories of the disabled: those who have a hope of rehabilitation and a full life, and those without, a group that includes “idiots,” “epileptics,” “vacuous dements who are hidden away in asylums, workhouses, and other such homes of the living dead,” “hopelessly chronic melancholiacs,” and “hopeless maniacs” (109). Claiming to be writing “in all seriousness and reverence,” “S.” recommends that those in the latter category be directed to “the lethal chamber”—a fate that “my experience . . . among the relatives of such, assures me that they would welcome with thankfulness” (111). “S.” argues that this proposition is actually deeply respectful of life. “Why should we grant painless death to our suffering dogs and refuse it to suffering humanity?” the author asks rhetorically (112).

<23>The express advocacy of euthanasia for “defectives” also appears in a 1900 “Notes and Comments” item. “The Painless Extinction of ‘Defectives’” remarks approvingly Dr. W. Duncan McKim’s recently published *Heredity and Human Progress* (1899), which argues for “a gentle painless death” for the “unfit,” a category that includes “idiots, imbeciles, epileptics, habitual drunkards, and insane criminals; most murderers, and such criminals, whatever their offence as might through their constitutional organization appear very dangerous, and criminals who might be adjudged incorrigible”—a fairly comprehensive list indeed (“Painless” 442). With an evident lack of a sense of irony, the writer admits that McKim’s “is certainly a ‘drastic remedy,’” but also points out that “to readers of this magazine it will not come as a novelty.” The personal tone of self-congratulation in the text that follows suggests that Woodhull may have been the author:

one may suspect Dr. McKim of being a diligent student of the Humanitarian for the subject has been over and over again discussed in these pages, and its urgency was pressed home by the Editor more than a quarter of a century ago. It marks an advance in public opinion, however, to find a physician of the eminence of Dr. McKim writing such views boldly over his own signature, and to see that his book is brought out under the auspices of the leading

American publishers, Messrs. Putnam. We hasten to add that, while accepting the general scheme of Dr. McKim's book, we do not bind ourselves to approve all its details. The evil is too complicated and of too long standing to be settled off-hand. But we rejoice that it is now possible to proclaim on the house-tops scientific opinions which formerly had to be whispered with bated breath. All honour to those brave pioneers who were martyrs to the cause of truth. (442)

The general astonishment (or even horror) that modern readers may experience when reading these approving comments about McKim's proposals might serve to mask what are perhaps the most important aspects of this article: the fact that McKim's work was published by a very mainstream American publisher, and also that the editor of *The Humanitarian* believes that the ideas put forward in the magazine's pages, while certainly progressive, were not very far outside the general run of public opinion.

<24>However, while the ideas expressed in McKim's book may not have shocked late-century eugenicists and readers of *The Humanitarian*, they were not in fact majority opinions. N.O.A. Kemp observes that "eugenic euthanasia" was the "epitome" of the most draconian measures advocated by the eugenics movement. Sharing the Greek root for "good" (*eu-*), both eugenics and euthanasia offered assessments of who was worthy of life, with eugenicists judging who was "better-not-born" and euthanasiasts judging who was "better-off-dead" (47-48). Kemp notes that

while eugenists generally believed that it was more desirable and effective to work through a regulation of the birth rate, eugenic policies could be designed to reduce the number of defectives in society by putting them to death. A measure as extreme as these was highly contentious and understandably eugenic literature in which proposals of this nature were advanced were not plentiful. (48)

In fact, Kemp cites only a few such works: an 1894 paper by Oxford professor F.H. Bradley in the *International Journal of Ethics*, which makes a Darwinian argument in favor of what Kemp calls "social surgery" (the removal of diseased parts of the societal organism), and Dr. Charles E. Goddard's 1901 lecture on "Suggestions in Favour of Terminating Absolutely Hopeless Cases of Injury or Disease." Like McKim in America, Goddard, a member of the Eugenics Education Society, separated out the very worst cases of mental and physical incapacity and argued that caring for them was misguided. "These sufferers were 'an insult to God's beautiful creation, and their existence surely should not be tolerated in this, a more enlightened time!'" he expostulated (qtd. in Kemp 49).

<25>Thoughtful turn-of-the-century progressives saw where such ideas tended. For example, George Bernard Shaw, who contributed to *The Humanitarian*,<sup>(12)</sup> addressed the Eugenics Education Society in 1910 with a lecture that seemed to advocate but instead satirized the notion of "Murder by the State." Kemp reports that Shaw claimed eugenics "would finally land us in an extensive use of the lethal chamber. A great many people would have to be put out of existence simply because it wastes other people's time to look after them" (55). Describing this episode, James Alexander explains that Shaw disliked what social Darwinism had done with the concept of natural selection, and that he "sought to demonstrate that natural selection could not explain

the evolution of man after he became conscious" (177). Similar views were expressed by Bertrand Russell in his reassessment of late-century social Darwinism (167-69).

<26>Yet despite the unsavoriness of this particular strand of eugenic thinking in *The Humanitarian*, the magazine's more general claims for the role of conscious thought in human evolution should reengage scholarly interest in its pages. For along with the magazine's focus on the physical advances of the human race, there is also a genuinely heartfelt celebration of humanity's intellectual and moral progress. For example, as the new century began and *The Humanitarian* entered what would be its final year of publication, Woodhull reflected on the nineteenth century's achievements. She celebrated two particular advances in engineering, steam and electricity, writing that they had surpassed even the printing press in helping to make "the whole world kin." "It is difficult for us to imagine what human society was in the days before railways and steamboats and telegraphs," she writes, but nothing else "had done so much to revolutionise preconceived ideas, to reduce racial and national antipathies, and to bring home to us the fact that all men are brothers" (Woodhull, "New Century" 61). She also celebrated the advances in women's political emancipation, "which has already done so much to raise the race" (Woodhull, "Women" 61). And in her valedictory essay, Woodhull recapped her public career, noting that all the "phases" of her life had shared the touchstone of strong and considered advocacy of feminist principles, rooted in the belief that "the advancement of humanity depended on the advancement of women." Reflecting on the particular achievements of *The Humanitarian*, Woodhull credited her magazine's policy of "discussing freely and frankly any question which might tend to ameliorate and elevate the lot of mankind" with having allowed *The Humanitarian* to be among the first periodicals to introduce into contemporary discourse many controversial topics and ideas. With pride, she noted that many of these "questions which at the time I first dealt with them, required unusual courage to grapple with" had since "come to be freely discussed on the platform and in the Press" (Woodhull, "Farewell" 381-82).

<27>Amanda Frisken claims that as a political figure in the 1870s, Woodhull served as a model of the "public woman," one who showed by example that it was possible for American women of any background to achieve economic independence and exercise political will. Although those on both sides of the suffrage debate were divided about their support for or excoriation of her, Woodhull nevertheless "set a precedent for future challenges to the sexual status quo" (103). I would suggest that while Woodhull's advocacy for the controversial science of eugenics may have similarly divided public opinion in Britain in the 1890s, her effort to address this subject through the medium of the sixpenny press also challenged both contemporary and modern conceptions of what kinds of content should sit side by side on what kinds of pages. *The Humanitarian* challenges readers to make sense of the complex interrelationships between many strands of progressive thought at the end of the century – to try to understand how a publication that urges many positions we now deem laudable, including sexual and political liberation, can also urge serious consideration of death chambers for epileptics. Yet even as it challenges us to reconsider the set of acceptable political ideas at the turn of the previous century, Woodhull's magazine also helps to demonstrate the growing power of women in the press at that time – as both object and subject, writer and editor – to comment on and participate in a variety of sociopolitical activities, not just those traditionally considered either feminine or feminist.

## Endnotes

(1) I will refer to Victoria Claflin Woodhull Martin as simply “Woodhull” throughout, as that is the name by which she was and remains best known.<sup>(^)</sup>

(2) See, for example, Max Nordau’s 1892 *Degeneration*, which prompted major debates in the press. Greta Jones locates eugenics within “a general social discourse on the failing health and neurasthenia of the nation” and ascribes the relative popularity of eugenics at the turn of the century to “its ability to harness fears about the physical and mental decline of the race” (484).<sup>(^)</sup>

(3) Jones’s 1995 article on women, eugenics, and the medical profession is one of the first to seriously engage with the intersections between feminism and eugenics in Britain; Lesley Hall has looked more generally at the feminism within the history of sexuality and contributed the essay on feminism and eugenics in the Galton Institute’s 1998 volume on the history of eugenics;

and Angelique Richardson has focused on the connections between eugenics and the New Woman, especially as expressed in the work of Sarah Grand.(^)

(4)The remaining two pages of the thirty-two consisted of wrappers with advertisements, which are extant in the British Library run from 1894 on. Advertisers included Hunt & Roskell, jewelers; Jewsbury & Brown's Oriental Tooth Paste; S. Fisher scissors; Allcock's Corn Plasters; and Mellin's Food for Infants and Invalids, the last being the most consistent advertiser throughout the magazine's run. After John Martin's death, the number of adverts dropped off significantly, presumably because Woodhull's inheritance readily covered the production costs. (^)

(5)Grant Allen scholars appear to be among the few familiar with *The Humanitarian*, probably because his work so frequently appeared in its pages.(^)

(6)Dismissing Woodhull as an “embarrassment to sober men like Galton” and “an engaging charlatan,” Searle declares that she “had no authority to pontificate on matters of human inheritance.” He ridicules her for “ill-informed and nonsensical” ideas about heredity (although the examples he cites from her pamphlet *The Rapid Multiplication of the Unfit* were fairly common Lamarckian misunderstandings of inheritance, not dissimilar to ones that appear in Darwin's earlier works) and concludes that “It was the backing of *responsible and established scientific men* which was essential to the progress of eugenics” (5-6, emphasis added; see also footnote on page 20).( ^)

(7)For a discussion of the role of women in the spiritualist movement, see Catherine Albanese (especially 235-36).( ^)

(8)Woodhull outlines a broader political agenda in an 1870 speech entitled “A Page of American History: Constitution of the United States of the World,” which was reprinted in 1872 as *A Constitution for the United States of the World Proposed by Victoria C. Woodhull*; portions were also reprinted in excerpted form in *The Humanitarian* in 1892-93. In the five “Declarations” that precede the actual constitution text, Woodhull expresses her desire “to erect a government which shall be the center around which the nations may aggregate, until ours shall become a Universal Republic.” Broadly libertarian, this government would be based on the equality of all citizens, with one important caveat: “All persons are born free and equal, in a political sense (*in every sense except heredity*), and are entitled to the right to life . . . and to liberty and the pursuit of happiness; and these shall be absolutely unabridged, *except when limited in the individual for the security of the community against crime or other human diseases*” (emphasis added; reprinted in Stern n.p.). (^)

(9)This quotation from “Locksley Hall—Sixty Years After” turns up as an epigraph in a surprising number of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century socialist, utopian, and eugenicist publications.(^)

(10) Sally Shuttleworth describes how late-century scientific interest in child development threatened an area of traditional female authority, and how writer-editors like Ada S. Ballin sought to establish a kind of scientific motherhood (see, especially, 213-15).(^)

(11) See Eliot's "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists" (*Westminster Review*, 1856), reprinted in Robinson.(^)

(12) Shaw was one of eight panellists who contributed essays on the question of "The Problem Play: Should Social Problems Be Freely Dealt with in the Drama" in the May 1895 issue of *The Humanitarian* (6.5: 342-55). At six pages, Shaw's was by far the longest contribution.(^)

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