

The Wild Woman of Cincinnati: Gender and Politics on the Eve of the Civil War

Emily Muhich
emuhic1@lsu.edu

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Review

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Muhich, Emily

Pierson, Michael D. *The Wild Woman of Cincinnati: Gender and Politics on the Eve of the Civil War*. Louisiana State University Press, 2023. HARDCOVER. \$40.00 ISBN 9780807178720 pp. 200.

In his new monograph, *The Wild Woman of Cincinnati: Gender and Politics on the Eve of the Civil War*, Michael D. Pierson explores the case study of a “Wild Woman” show in order to illuminate political and sectional difference in Antebellum America. The exhibition Pierson focuses on features a supposedly feral white woman captured in the borderlands of Texas by Captain J. W. C. Northcott. Silent and scantily clad, the nameless Wild Woman attracted visitors intent on deducing if the exhibition was true or a hoax. For 6 weeks in the summer of 1856, Cincinnati hosted this popular entertainment show before a group of community women approached a judge who ultimately arrested the Wild Woman and an attendant on lunacy charges. While on trial, a group of doctors examined the woman’s body to speculate about her reproductive history, assuming it held a clue to unlocking the woman's mental state. Ultimately, the court sent the Wild Woman to an asylum where she stayed a short time before recovering her ability to speak, leaving apparently cured. This story became a venue through which Pierson explored how social reformers and political parties painted the situation to reflect their own views about gender and power in Antebellum America.

Pierson, a professor at the University of Massachusetts, Lowell and the author of *Lt. Spalding in Civil War Louisiana: A Union Officer's Humor, Privilege, and Ambition*, broke his argument into four chapters. In the first chapter, Pierson analyzes the almost-certainly fictitious story that Northcott advertised to attract and illicit attention for the show. The daring tale of

tracking, evasion, and capture played into white racial anxiety and the urban male nostalgia for the old version of masculinity that involved self-reliant men in the wild with full sexual access to women. Pierson contends that this tale appealed to white Cincinnatians looking to reinforce their own inherent mastery. Not to ignore the female perspective, the second chapter delves into the women from a near-by community who caused the show to shut down. Convinced that the Wild Woman was either an inappropriately dressed sane participant or a genuine feral person, these concerned women sought medical attention for the Woman, demonstrating the community power Antebellum women held to facilitate actions in their community. In court, a group of 11 doctors chloroformed the Woman to examine her, looking for signs of childbearing. To have born a child, the Woman must have conformed to gender expectations in the past and was likely faking anything that did not fit within those boundaries during the show. If childless, they contended, the Woman was likely insane. They did not consider the possibility that a childless woman could participate in a hoax nor that a woman with a child could experience mental illness. Pierson concludes that the Woman “was a blank slate in a feminine shape upon which, time and again, men wrote what they thought women were and what they valued in them.” (56)

Pierson displays the most clever application of this event in Chapter 3, as he compares Democrat, Republican and Know Nothing newspapers to discuss the way parties understood social and gender norms. Democratic papers emphasized the ways the Woman must have been complicit in the hoax but largely viewed her as a sexual object, which Pierson understands to be an example of the Democrats position that women were male possessions, devoid of political prowess. Republicans, conversely, depicted the Woman as a victim of a man imbued with too much power, fitting with their general view that government needed to control the excesses of powerful individuals in society, especially slaveholders. Finally, Pierson explored the Know

Nothings who could not come to any consensus on the story, fitting as the party did not know how to handle women in general. This penultimate chapter allowed Pierson to make the most specific and skillful application of the Woman's story to national politics. In his final chapter, Pierson explores the voice missing from the book thus far: the Woman's. As the historical record documented neither her name nor other biographical information, Pierson explores each possibility: that the Woman truly was feral; that she experienced mental illness and needed help; and that she worked in the show as an actor, complicit in the farce. On page 123, Pierson admits that he would like to believe the last, as it affords the Woman the most agency, but that all eventualities only ever involve women trying to help the Woman. Pierson curiously leaves out the male doctors and male judge from this conclusion who, though late to help the Woman, did ultimately send her to get help at an asylum.

Throughout the book, Pierson demonstrates skill at using a relatively short and local affair to speak to sectional differences in gender and power in the nation. The book is logically laid out, attaching themes to different moments in the saga and clearly denoting them in different chapters and sections. He is also diligent at indicating when he leaves the firm footing of fact to include speculation, as he promised on page 3 of his introduction. At times, Pierson includes a bit too much transparency about the writing and organizing process causing him to lose some of the narrative power of this engaging tale. Ultimately, however, Pierson did an admirable job with a small source base to write a compelling history of gender politics in the partisan world of Antebellum America, particularly in his chapter on party politics.

Emily Muhich is a PhD Candidate at Louisiana State University. She is writing a dissertation on American culture and education policy entitled *Your Eyes Shall Be Opened: Cultural Conflict Over Public Education in Kentucky, 1904-1989*.