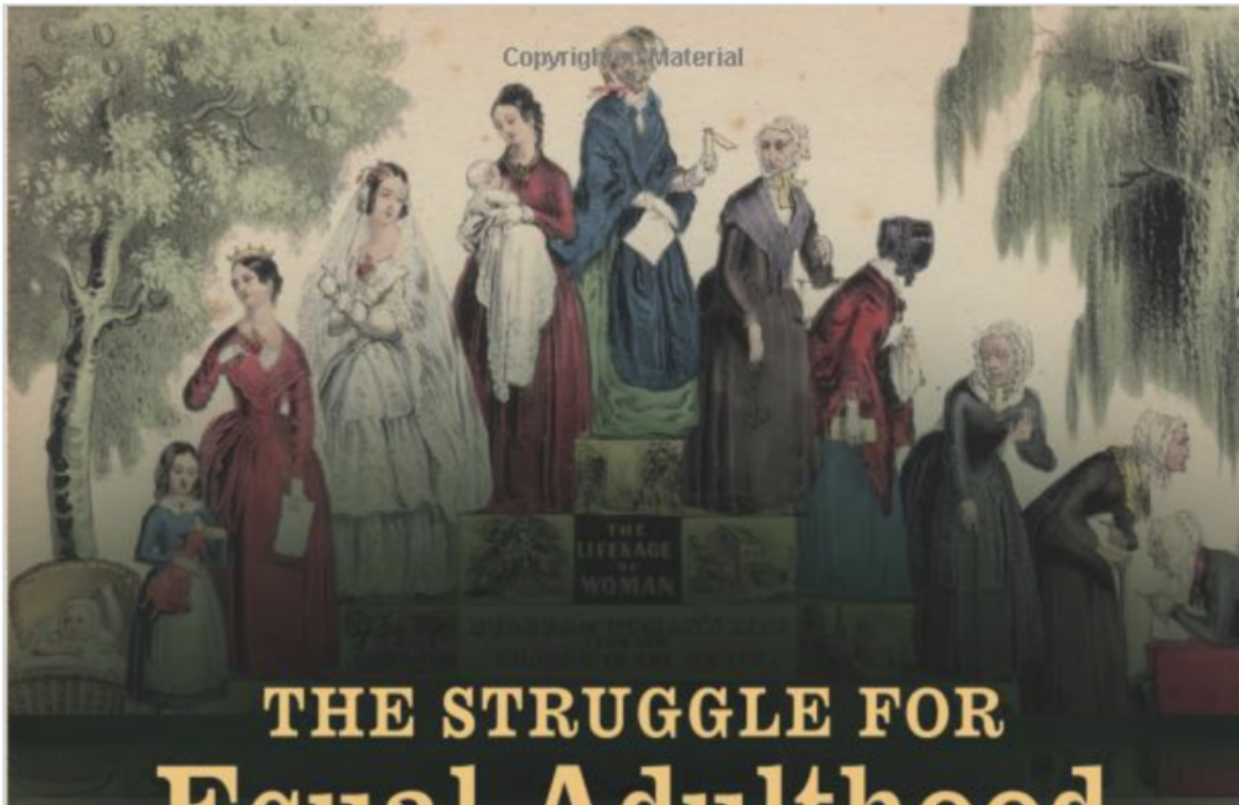
Who’s Mature Enough to Govern?



THE STRUGGLE FOR Equal Adulthood

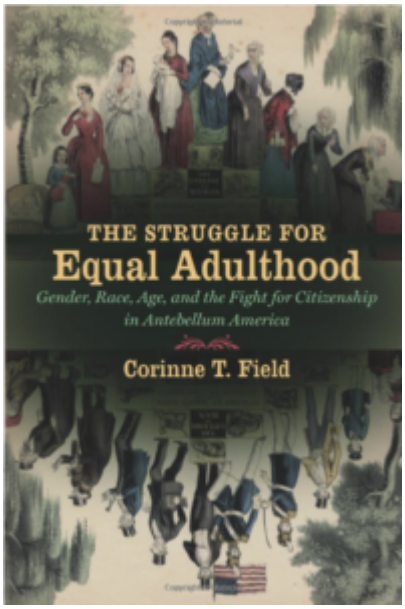
Gender, Race, Age, and the Fight for Citizenship in Antebellum America

Corinne T. Field

Corinne T. Field, *The Struggle for Equal Adulthood: Gender, Race, Age, and the Fight for Citizenship in Antebellum America.* Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2014. 260 pp., $32.95.

If you are not currently convinced that age should be a historical category of analysis alongside gender, race, class, and disability, Corinne Field's new book should go a long way toward persuading you. *The Struggle for Equal Adulthood: Gender, Race, Age, and the Fight for Citizenship in Antebellum America* advances the study of citizenship in the nineteenth-century United States by showing how the political significance of maturity and adulthood were at the center of women's and African Americans' efforts to expand democracy to its full meaning and potential.

Field's monograph follows a straightforward format. Each chapter uses a specific set of writings by leaders in the abolition, women's rights, or black rights movement to examine the connections between age, race, gender, power, and citizenship. Many of her subjects will be familiar to those interested in early American history—Abigail Adams, Mary Wollstonecraft, Frederick Douglass. Others—such as Pauline Wright Davis and Frances Harper—are worthy of introduction or further acquaintance. The prologue traces the origin of Anglo-Americans' association between maturity—embodied by white, middle-class men—and liberty during the Enlightenment. This grounds Field's project in the intellectual and political developments of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Although debates about coming of age and political power exist throughout history, Field identifies the unique circumstances of the early United States as a fruitful period for considering the connections between maturity and democracy.



Granting the privileges of adulthood based on assumptions about race and gender allowed political leaders to celebrate equality while denying it to the majority of the population.

In the first chapter, Field shows how prominent female writers viewed the ideology of republicanism. The shift from birthright to consent as the foundation of political participation extolled the significance of maturity for white men's rational development from subjects to citizens. But women and African Americans remained "perpetual minors" in the eyes of the community and the state (22). By analyzing the work of Abigail Adams, Phillis Wheatley, and Mary Wollstonecraft, Field shows how women's inability to achieve intellectual and moral leadership as they aged became a critique of men's commitment to republican principles. By examining how these writers understood "that women could not make a transition to adulthood on the same terms as men," Field establishes the connection between maturity and liberty that was at the heart of America's democratic experiment (49).

Against the backdrop of the Jacksonian enfranchisement of the "common man"—a white male adult who possessed "the structures of the mind and the qualities of the heart" to maintain the nation's liberty—Field examines "the political significance of chronological age" (53-54). Analyzing the writings of Frederick Douglass, David Walker, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, chapter 2 shows how these activists used the expansion of white male suffrage and the political empowerment of propertyless white men as a wedge to insert their call for expanded citizenship. If age, rather than wealth, was to be the measure of republican commitment, it should apply equally to women and African Americans as to white men.

Chapter 3 begins Field's investigation into the organized women's rights and antislavery movements that began in the 1840s and continued during the Civil War era. As activists within these interrelated movements advanced the citizenship claims of white women and African Americans, the significance of age and maturity revealed tensions within the alliance. Reform movement leaders challenged slavery and disenfranchisement by pointing to the emancipation received by white men at age twenty-one. But when it came to prioritizing white women's or African American men's advancement, activists fell back on stereotypes of maturity based on gender or race.

In chapter 4, Field explores popular ideas of life course, "the timing and sequence of transitions such as getting married and entering the workforce" (176 n.20), as a backdrop for activists challenging the boundaries of race and class that kept women and African Americans from achieving adulthood. Writers such as Pauline Wright Davis, Frederick Douglass, and Frances Harper worked to free African Americans from the state of perpetual dependence. They argued that fulfillment of one's potential on the life course could come only from the independence that white men took for granted. Here Field gives more weight to the economic conditions that produced gender and race inequality around the meaning of age. She also discusses the pseudo-science of racial difference that prompted many white Americans to view African-descended people as naturally inferior. This economic and intellectual context makes this chapter one of the

strongest in the book.

Chapter 5 follows the fate of the campaign for equal adulthood after the Civil War. During Reconstruction, the image of the valiant black soldier was pitted against the virtuous white mother in a battle over who was more qualified for citizenship. Women's rights and African American rights activists tried to keep their alliance focused on equal political and social opportunity regardless of race or gender at age twenty one, but white male politicians appeared to favor granting suffrage to black men based on their military contributions. So, white and black women offered their own arguments for enfranchisement based on competing conceptions of gender, race, and maturity. By the 1870s, the alliance of equal adulthood fractured into internal conflicts over whether men or women, blacks or whites, educated or uneducated could best chart the nation's future.

During Radical Reconstruction, the political rights of adult men—both black and white—were enshrined within the constitution. In chapter 6, Field discusses how this advancement for former enslaved men left women as perpetual minors. Instead of embracing adulthood as an equal standard for all people and viewing maturity as a universal experience, activists emphasized gender and race stereotypes to protect their group's rights and interests. Even as white women and African Americans gained incremental rights and opportunities, they were unable to unseat white patriarchy from its position of dominance.

The Struggle for Equal Adulthood shows us how democracy brought the promise of equality, but spread it unevenly through the nation. Granting the privileges of adulthood based on assumptions about race and gender allowed political leaders to celebrate equality while denying it to the majority of the population. Through the political power of maturity, democracy expanded the authority of young, propertyless white men and age requirements emerged as a solution to the arbitrary nature of aristocracy. Overall, Field gives us a deeper understanding of democracy in the nineteenth century by showing how activists recognized the privilege of adulthood built into the early American political system.

The significance of Field's scholarship extends well beyond the primary focus of her study of citizenship and politics. The power of adulthood includes not only formal political rights, but also opportunities for participation in the public sphere, recognition in the home, and respect in the realm of commerce. Using the perspective of age and maturity, Field's study of the politics of age removes the artificial boundary between the personal and the political, or the so-called private and public spheres. She shows how nineteenth-century activists "connect[ed] otherwise disparate demands for political rights, control of their own labor, sexual autonomy, cultural power, and family authority—all of which were things adult white men claimed for themselves but regularly denied children, men who were not white, and all women" (5). Maturity was the lynch pin of power in nineteenth-century America, and scholars can take the lessons from Field's study to many other topics in early American history.

Corinne Field makes an important contribution to early American history by

showing how maturity became a new way to enforce racial and gender hierarchy within the republican environment of the nineteenth century. Adulthood seemed like a democratic measure of power and civic participation, but it was subject to the less-visible discrimination based on stereotypes of who possessed maturity. With age as a category of analysis, scholars can see how patriarchy and white supremacy were entwined features of nineteenth-century democracy.

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