

## Book Reviews

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*Margaret Fuller: A New American Life.* By Megan Marshall. (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013. Pp. xxii, 474. \$30.00.)

Margaret Fuller has not suffered from a lack of biographers. Until recently, however, she was subject to a stereotyping that today we recognize as fundamentally sexist. Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Fuller's earliest biographer (1884), recalls that while a student at Harvard College he would see Fuller in the library "day after day, under the covert gaze of the undergraduates who had never before looked upon a woman reading within those sacred precincts." This image of a solitary Fuller sitting amid books at the nation's most prestigious institution of higher education illustrates the extent to which an intellectual woman was considered an oxymoron in the nineteenth century. The idea that Fuller was intruding on an exclusively male domain prevailed well into the next century. For instance, Mason Wade's 1940 biography approvingly cites Van Wyck Brooks's statement in *The Flowering of New England* (1936), a highly acclaimed volume of the region's literary history, that Fuller "was not so much a great writer, but a great woman writing." Wade also relegates her to the feminine role of the muse, or a "whetstone of genius," as he titled his study. Two decades later, Perry Miller took a different but equally demeaning approach in *Margaret Fuller: American Romantic* (1963). Though he acknowledged Fuller as the equal of her male contemporaries, he insisted that she could not be "dissociated from the hyperbolically female intellectualism of the period, the slightest invocation of which invites our laughter." Miller's portrayal had a still nastier edge. If Fuller's intellect had a blemish, so did her body. She was "monumentally homely." The hair was "stringy," the neck "abnormally long."

In the last four decades, several biographers have taken us well beyond these invidious descriptors. Belle Gale Chevigny (1976), Paula Blanchard (1978), Joan Von Mehren (1994), and John Matteson (2012) have presented Fuller and her many accomplishments without the stereotypes that measure learned women as lesser. Grounded in

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remarkably rich research and filled with illuminating interpretations, Charles Capper's two-volume *Margaret Fuller: An American Romantic Life* (1992, 2007) stands as the definitive biography. With these portrayals, readers have been introduced to an extraordinary individual's achievements. Poet, editor, translator, literary critic, and feminist, Fuller was regarded by her peers as one of the most brilliant members of a New England constellation that included Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, and Bronson Alcott. Author of *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, editor of the transcendentalist *Dial*, and columnist, literary editor, and foreign correspondent for Horace Greeley's *New-York Tribune*, Fuller was antebellum America's most famous woman of letters.

With the scholarship that is now available, one might ask if there is a need for yet another biography. The publication of Megan Marshall's *Margaret Fuller: A New American Life* answers in the affirmative. We learn how a nineteenth-century system of gender relations that divided the world into the masculine and feminine, the public and private, and the commanding and deferential made those who challenged its binaries deviants. Indeed, as Marshall tells us in the prologue, she herself initially applied the "radical dualism" of gender—Fuller's description of the distinction between private and public that privileged the latter. "For a time," Marshall says, "I believed I must write a biography of Margaret Fuller that turned away from the intrigues of her private life, that spoke of public events solely, and that would affirm her eminence as America's originating and most consequential theorist of woman's role in history, culture, and society" (p. xvii). But, as she immersed herself in her subject's letters, journals, essays, and books, Marshall came to "recognize the personal in the political" (p. xvii): the "personal," or the private, had shaped decisively the "political," or the public, stances Fuller took throughout her life. As Marshall argues persuasively, Fuller's support for engaged friendship originated from a desire for reciprocity beyond Ralph Waldo Emerson's capacity for connection; her defense of female agency developed in tandem with her struggle to free herself from traditional constraints; and her sympathetic position on behalf of the Roman Republic took shape during her relationship with Giovanni Ossoli, an Italian with whom she bore a child.

This interweaving of the private and the public led Marshall to write "from the inside, using the most direct evidence—[Fuller's] words, and those of her family and friends, recorded in the moment"

(p. xxi). Marshall has sought “the truth of the human heart,” as Hawthorne labeled the defining trait of the romance (p. xix), a strategy historians have long been told to avoid. In “Storytelling,” William Cronon’s aptly titled 2012 presidential address before members of the American Historical Association, he warned his audience about the difference between historians and those who create fictions about the past: historians adhere to rules of evidence that erect “a high wall between us and the inner emotional lives of the human beings about whom we write,” while the conventions of the craft “permit us to talk only about those actions and feelings of the person that have somehow been recorded in documents,” leaving any narrative of “innermost thoughts” to writers of historical fiction. Marshall’s decision to use the evidence Fuller has left us to gain insight into her emotional state, into those “thoughts,” is risky. It is no small testimony to Marshall’s skill and respect for her subject that the “high wall” remains unbreached. Not only does she elaborate on the documents with an impressive care and discipline, but she also fully acknowledges what are simply speculations. Marshall has designed her work for a general audience, and by the force of her graceful writing, her powerful characterization, and her narrative trajectory, she propels her interpretation of Fuller the individual, Fuller the woman, Fuller the activist, and Fuller the romantic into contemporary awareness and esteem.

The eldest of Timothy and Margaret Fuller’s seven children, the younger Margaret was born in Cambridgeport, Massachusetts, in 1810. Her father—a graduate of Harvard College and a lawyer by profession—took responsibility for his daughter’s education and instructed her as if he were preparing a son for his alma mater, schooling her in Latin and Greek and adding French and Italian to her curriculum. Fuller herself counterpointed the study of languages with the volumes of Shakespeare, Cervantes, Moliere, Fielding, Smollett, and Scott that filled her father’s library. At Boston’s Lyceum for Young Ladies and Miss Susan Prescott’s Seminary in Groton, Massachusetts, Fuller, whose educational maturity had already taken her well beyond her classmates, proudly displayed her intellect and independence. The consequences were predictable. Misunderstood by some, mocked by others, she “made up [her] mind to be bright and ugly” (p. 28), as she recorded in her journal. Nonetheless, Marshall shows, Fuller did find female friends—Prescott, Ellen Kilshaw, Lydia Maria Child, Eliza Farrar, all older women who served as mentors. These friendships provided the model for the ties she later forged

with younger women such as Cary Sturgis and Anna Barker, her “divinest love” (p. 61).

After Fuller returned from Miss Prescott’s Seminary in 1825, she remained with her family in Cambridge and moved with them to Groton in 1833. She continued to pursue the studies she had begun with her father, and she joined Unitarian minister and friend James Freeman Clarke in studying Goethe, a reading experience that was immediate and intense and also provided the bridge to her career as a woman of letters. She embarked on a translation of the German poet, playwright, and novelist’s *Torquato Tasso* and started to write criticism, poetry, and fiction. In 1835, three of Fuller’s literary essays were published in Clarke’s magazine, *The Western Messenger*, and a story appeared in the *New England Galaxy*. But just as her career was beginning, it seemed Fuller would have to cast it aside. In October 1835, Timothy Fuller died from cholera, leaving his family with slender means of support. This loss, Marshall reveals, left her with a “deeper sense of isolation, but also of mission” (p. 91). Fuller determined to take her father’s place—supervising the family’s affairs, managing the education of her siblings, and earning an income—and decided to become a teacher, first at Boston’s Temple School under the tutelage of Bronson Alcott and then at Greene Street School in Providence, Rhode Island. But after three years of teaching, she told Emerson she could not sustain both “a worldly and a literary existence.” She elected the latter. Accepting Emerson’s invitation, she agreed to edit the newly founded *Dial* and began offering a series of classes, or “Conversations,” for adult women, in which they were to consider “the great questions. What were we born to do? How shall we do it?” (pp. 132–33). Emerson, Marshall tells us, supposed that in initiating the “Conversations” Fuller had been motivated not only by monetary concerns but also by a “passionate wish for equal companions” (p. 141). In the latter she was successful. As she told a friend about the meetings, “There I have real society” (p. 141). The questions Fuller posed and the exchanges that followed became a basis for her fifty-page *Dial* essay “The Great Lawsuit. Man versus Woman, Woman versus Women.” During the revision process, the piece “sp[un] out beneath [her] hand” (p. 219) and tripled in length, published as *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* in 1845.

The volume completed, Fuller was now ready to enter the ranks of Horace Greeley’s editors at the *New-York Tribune*. Recalling Fuller’s now famous declaration “let them be sea captains if they will,” Marshall notes that “choosing to work as a journalist for a prominent New

York City daily was scarcely less ambitious for an American woman in the nineteenth century than becoming a sea captain" (p. 234). Fuller broadly defined her position as literary editor, reviewing poetry, theology, fiction, philosophy, and history. Increasingly, as Marshall shows, she also served as an advocate for social reform with the intention "to read, to hear, to see what the *Tribune's* many subscribers could or would not, and then to shape an instructive message from her experience" (p. 238), a responsibility she would undertake again as the paper's foreign correspondent. Fuller's initial interest in Europe's museums and cathedrals was displaced by her engagement in the struggle for a unified and independent Italy. Her identification with the Italian Revolution was deeply personal. Shortly after her arrival in Rome in the spring of 1847, Fuller met Giovanni Ossoli, a penniless Italian nobleman ten years her junior. By the fall they had become romantically involved, and within a year they had a son, Angelo. Marshall is exactly on the mark when she emphasizes: "Whatever else Margaret might say, or not say, afterward, she had chosen Giovanni for pleasure, the most radical act of her life so far" (p. 309). This personal choice was entwined with Fuller's political decision to throw in her lot with the revolutionaries. The fires of revolution, which had blazed across Italy, had been extinguished by the summer of 1849. Fuller wrote to her brother Richard: "Private hopes of mine are fallen with the hopes of Italy. I have played for a new stake and lost it" (p. 350).

Less than a year after the fall of the Roman Republic, Fuller, Ossoli, and Angelo left Italy for America. Sailing on the *Elizabeth* on 17 May 1850, they reached Fire Island, New York, sixty-three days later. Only three hundred yards from shore, the storm-tossed *Elizabeth* was wrecked on a sandbar. Fuller, Ossoli, and Angelo perished. In the obituary that he wrote for the *Tribune*, Horace Greeley took Fuller's measure. "America," he declared, "has produced no woman who in mental endowments and acquirements has surpassed Margaret Fuller" (p. 384). Megan Marshall has sought to give Fuller's extraordinary life "a little space," as she asked from Emerson, in order that the "sympathetic hues would show again before the fire, renovated and lively" (p. xxi). She has succeeded.

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