

Notes

- ¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Sovereignty of Ethics," in *Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Edward Waldo Emerson (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin, 1903-1904): 10, 552n. In this lecture-essay proper, Emerson declares that "Luther would cut his hand off sooner than write theses against the pope if he suspected that he was bringing on with all his might the pale negations of Boston Unitarianism" (204).
- ² Margaret Fuller to William Henry Channing, *The Letters of Margaret Fuller*, ed. Robert N. Hudspeth, 6 volumes (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983-1994), 2:173.
- ³ Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792 edition), ed. Carol H. Poston (New York: Norton, 1987), 22.
- ⁴ Remark reported by Elizabeth Peabody (?) in summary of Fuller's 1839-40 Boston conversation series, in Margaret Fuller, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Larry J. Reynolds (New York: Norton, 1998), 175. This edition includes a valuable collection of pertinent Fuller writings as well as nineteenth-century impressions and modern critical perspectives on her and her work.
- ⁵ George Eliot, "Margaret Fuller and Mary Wollstonecraft" (1855), in Fuller, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, 233.
- ⁶ Fuller, *Woman*, 10.
- ⁷ Fuller, *Woman*, 12.
- ⁸ Fuller, *Woman*, 18.
- ⁹ Fuller, *Woman*, 28.
- ¹⁰ Fuller, *Woman*, 35.
- ¹¹ Fuller, *Woman*, 48.
- ¹² Fuller, *Woman*, 57.
- ¹³ Fuller, *Woman*, 68.
- ¹⁴ Fuller, *Woman*, 69.
- ¹⁵ Fuller, *Woman*, 20.
- ¹⁶ Fuller, *Woman*, 24.
- ¹⁷ Fuller, *Woman*, 103.

Margaret and Her Sisters

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I am truly honored to have been invited to General Assembly to speak on this panel about Margaret Fuller, joining three eminent scholars of Unitarian-Transcendentalism, one of whom, Charles Capper, has spent decades researching and writing about Margaret Fuller's life. You might find it puzzling, though, that we are here celebrating the Bicentennial of perhaps the most influential woman with roots in the Unitarian church, a woman whose most significant writing spoke directly to women, and who herself taught women to speak out—yet our panel of experts is mostly male.

For Margaret Fuller, however, this should be no surprise. Margaret Fuller was, in certain significant ways, what we used to call at the height of the 1970s' Women's Movement, a "male-identified" woman. She was educated from early childhood by a proud and possessive father who gave her the notion that her brilliant mind, the mind he had cultivated in her, was a man's mind. And she accepted this idea. She would always be torn between—or attempting to reconcile—what she saw as her rational, dispassionate masculine intellect with her intuitive, feeling, feminine nature. This duality became the foundation of Margaret Fuller's feminism, which was really a kind of humanism: all of us, women and men, she believed, have both feminine and masculine qualities that deserve to be drawn out, brought into communion, into balance and harmony, for us to be truly fulfilled, for society to reach the highest degree of civilization.

We know that Margaret Fuller cultivated close, sometimes fervent, friendships with women, and benefitted from significant female

mentors, but if we were to go to a party with her, especially when she was younger, we would probably find her deep in conversation with a man, maybe even a circle of men. From her father, who was a lawyer and a politician, she had learned to hold forth, to deliver well-reasoned arguments, to launch verbal assaults — like a lawyer or a politician — which of course, at that time, before there were any female lawyers or politicians, was to reason and speak like a man. Fuller's conventionally masculine facility with words was what made her conversational powers so startling, and she enjoyed the opportunity of male company to put these skills to use. One aim of her famous Conversation classes for women may have been simply to cultivate in her female friends the ability to talk with her as men could.

Fuller's struggle to balance what she saw as her masculine mind and feminine nature brought her into fellowship with a number of men who struggled, on their side, with what we might call "the bonds of manhood" — who found it liberating to speak confidently and to be understood by a woman with similar, if inverse, conflicts, who was not their lover, wife, sister, or mother, but a true peer. For Ralph Waldo Emerson, James Freeman Clarke, and a number of other men, Margaret Fuller provided this kind of "peership," and both sides profited.

After she died, three of her closest male friends — grief-stricken and anxious to shape the memory of this complex, controversial woman with whom their lives had been so deeply entwined — rushed to write her biography. This was the two-volume *Memoirs of Margaret Fuller Ossoli*, written and compiled by Emerson, Clarke and William Henry Channing, which appeared in 1852, two years after her death. Another thirty years would pass before a woman who had known Fuller, though not terribly well, would write her biography. This was Julia Ward Howe's *Margaret Fuller*, published in 1883. Twelve years later, in 1895, Caroline Healey Dall published her journal record of one series of Fuller's conversations, *Margaret and Her Friends*. So, you could say that the gender balance on this panel is just about right — or at least it mirrors the history of biographical writing on Fuller during the first half-century after she died.

But Margaret Fuller's friendships with women fueled her feminism and made her whole. She loved women, sometimes it seemed, almost as a man would, boasting of her "magnetic power over young women"; or as a foreign traveler finding her way in a new country, the

country of women; or as an exile returning to her homeland, a territory she wanted to reclaim, reform and rejuvenate.¹

Margaret Fuller had female mentors, all of whom she made her friends, despite sometimes great age differences. The first, in childhood, was a family friend named Ellen Kilshaw, a single woman in her early twenties, visiting America from her native England in search of a husband. Ellen Kilshaw was "accomplished"; she painted in oils and played the harp. Margaret wrote later that the tones of Ellen Kilshaw's harp "are still to me the heralds of the promised land I saw before me then."² Ellen Kilshaw also brought ominous portents of what trading oneself on the marriage market could involve. When Ellen returned to England, still single, news of a broken engagement and her "mortification" in having to work as a governess before eventually marrying, filtered back to ten-year-old Margaret.³

In her late teens and early twenties, Margaret fell under the influence of two extraordinary women, both writers — first Lydia Maria Child, a novelist eight years older than Margaret, who would go on to become one of America's great abolitionists — and then Eliza Farrar, the wife of a Harvard math and science professor, a highly educated woman who presided over a weekly salon for Harvard students and was a renowned arbiter of taste and proper behavior. Eliza Farrar published a popular advice manual called *The Young Lady's Friend*. Although Lydia Maria Child was a radical, and Eliza Farrar an enforcer of convention, Fuller learned from both of them that a woman of conviction could find the means to get her message out.

Soon Fuller assumed the mentor role herself, forming deep friendships with younger women. In this case she elevated them to her stature, made them more than what they thought they were — "She was a balloon of sufficient power to take us all up with her," it was said.⁴ Two such women were Anna Barker and Caroline Sturgis — both of them beautiful and wealthy, as Fuller was not. Caroline was a poet and painter, Anna a muse to all who met her. Their wealth and, in Caroline's case, an absent mother who was mentally ill, gave them a certain independence of movement, a rootlessness. They both needed Margaret, and she needed them — needed their minds to engage with, to "mold," as she might have said.

Fuller's impulse to mentor, together with her experience of having been mentored, combined to make the famous Conversations such

a success. The women who attended were both younger and older than Fuller, and included some of the most talented women of her time and place. The three Peabody sisters — Elizabeth, with her formidable intellect; Sophia, a painter and sculptor soon to marry Nathaniel Hawthorne; and Mary, a writer, educator, and one day the wife of Horace Mann — were among them. All of these women gathered to study together, to ask each other and attempt to answer Margaret Fuller's famous question: "What were we born to do?"

I will never forget the moment, as I was doing research on the Peabody sisters in a library archive in the 1980s, when I came across a manuscript that apparently few people had ever read before, or at least not carefully. This sheaf of papers turned out to be a copy of Elizabeth Peabody's notes as a participant in the first series of Margaret Fuller's Conversations. For nearly a hundred years the only record of Margaret Fuller and friends conversing had been Caroline Dall's book, and Dall had described only the one series of discussions that had been opened up to men. Everyone agreed at the time that these co-ed sessions had not gone well. So here, in these handwritten pages, was the real thing. Anyone can read this document now; it has been transcribed and edited by Nancy Craig Simmons.⁵ But at the time that I first came across it, reading this little-known manuscript was for me (to revive another phrase from the Age of Aquarius) a mind-blowing experience. I felt like I was like eavesdropping on history, being transported back to a day in Boston in 1839.

What follows is a short portion of this manuscript, which may help readers experience what I felt that day. These are Elizabeth Peabody's notes from a session near the end of a year-long series. Fuller had asked the women to write essays on "the intellectual differences between men & women," and they had spent the previous session discussing some of the essays.

Miss Fuller's 18th conversation was also upon women — there not having been time enough to read all the articles before. She began with saying that she had looked over all the remaining pieces & ... that she was delighted with the elevation of thought in all. All spoke of men & women as equally souls — none seemed to regard men as animals & women as plants. This caused a general laugh, & she repeated seriously that she constantly heard people talk as if men were only animals &

women were only plants — That men were made to get a living — to eat & drink — and women to be ornaments of society — as if these were the ultimate aims of being. Parents in educating their sons had in view as the main objects, that they should be able to make money ... & that their daughters should be graceful pretty accomplished — & *have a good time* ... We constantly heard that it was not well to cultivate this or that faculty — because in the boy's case it would not contribute especially & certainly to his worldly success — & in the girl's case because it might make her discontented as a woman — Miss Fuller thought it *impious* thus to speak of the gifts of God — the immortal gifts of God — as if we had a right to tamper with them — as if they were not to be received gratefully — to be held as the most precious trust — & to be cultivated — [w]hatever worldly disadvantages — whatever temporary sufferings their cultivation might involve —

Here one of the women asked a question — what about a boy who had a talent for poetry? Fuller responded: "... if her son were a Poet — she should wish him to cultivate the divine gift though it would inevitably keep him poor always ..."

Then Elizabeth Peabody, herself, asked — what about women of genius? Wasn't it true that women with higher aims and talents suffered from a "tragedy of limitation"?

[Fuller] declared the belief that if women *wanted to have a good time* as the *first thing*, they must ignore their higher faculties. Thought & feeling brought exquisite pleasures — pleasures *worth* infinite sacrifices — but they inevitably brought sufferings — The Idea of Perfection in a world of Imperfection must expose the one who had it to pain — But this pain was of value — it quickened thought & feeling to deeper & higher discoveries — The young soul true to itself, desired — *demanding* in its unfoldings the *Universe* — it wanted to reform society — to know every thing — to beautify every thing & to have a perfect friend —

In her pioneering book, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, published five years after this Conversation took place, Fuller addressed her readers as "my sisters." By then she had gone miles beyond her early mentor Eliza Farrar to write not about what was proper for women, but about what was just, and what would help them to grow. In one remarkable passage, she asked what, really, was the difference between fashionable women

who wasted their lives in flattery and vanity, and women incarcerated for prostitution, a group whom Fuller had sought out and would soon write about in her work as a reform-minded journalist. Both were “shut up in a prison,” she saw. If anything, the “fallen” women had greater virtue of the sort Fuller cared about; “they had misused less light,” she explained. And she urged her “sisters” who were her readers to “offer beauty, talent, riches, on the altar” and devote their “unbroken energy, to win and to diffuse a better life.”⁶

These words sum up Margaret Fuller’s life story: devoting unbroken energy to winning and diffusing a better life. In her final years in Europe, she continued to seek out strong women as models and friends, from the French novelist George Sand, to the poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and the politically powerful Marchioness Constanza Arconati Visconti. “These ladies take pleasure in telling me of spheres so unlike mine and do it well,” Fuller wrote to Caroline Sturgis.⁷

In *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, Margaret Fuller famously demanded on behalf of women: “Let them be sea captains, if they will!” These oft-quoted words invite us to imagine a different end for her than the fate she met. Sometimes I envision one of her “sisters,” maybe her “perfect friend,” at the helm of the *Elizabeth* — the ship that went down off Fire Island — rather than the bumbling first mate Henry Bangs. The name of the ship, Margaret had told Elizabeth Barrett Browning, “I accept as a good OMEN.”⁸ With her “sister” as pilot, Margaret might have been carried safely to shore.

Notes

¹ *The Letters of Margaret Fuller*, ed. Robert N. Hudspeth, 6 volumes (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983-1994), 6:261.

² Quoted in James Freeman Clarke, Ralph Waldo Emerson, William Henry Channing, *Memoirs of Margaret Fuller Ossoli* (BiblioBazaar, 2006, reprint of 1857 edition), 1:28.

³ Quoted in Charles Capper, *Margaret Fuller: An American Romantic Life, The Private Years* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 43.

⁴ Clarke, et al., *Memoirs*, 1:75.

⁵ Nancy Craig Simmons, “Margaret Fuller’s Boston Conversations: The 1839-1840 Series,” in Joel Myerson, ed., *Studies in the American Renaissance, 1994* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1995), 217-218. The original manuscript is held at the American Antiquarian Society in Worcester, Massachusetts.

⁶ Margaret Fuller, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century and Kindred Papers relating to the Sphere, Condition and Duties, of Women* (New York: Norton, 1971; reprint of 1855 edition), 146-147.

⁷ Quoted in Charles Capper, *Margaret Fuller: An American Romantic Life: The Public Years* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 341.

⁸ “Quoted in Capper, *Public Years*, 50.