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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

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.

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.