

# A Woman's Guide to Self-Reliance

As male writers pondered the destiny of man, Margaret Fuller explored the full potential of her own gender • **BY MEGAN MARSHALL**

— ILLUSTRATION BY GABY D'ALESSANDRO

**T**HE NEW ENGLAND writers Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau are household names today, credited with originating the American ideal Emerson termed “self-reliance.” Less remembered is their friend Margaret Fuller, who was every bit their intellectual equal. Yet of the three, Fuller is the easiest to imagine in contemporary America. Her breakthroughs in journalism, social reform and female self-determination have become part of the fabric of modern life.

Born in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1810, Fuller was the first child of an ambitious lawyer-politician who experimented with offering a boy's college preparatory curriculum to his very bright daughter. She read fluently at age 4, translated Latin at 6, and excelled in oral argument and persuasive writing, earning a reputation as a prodigy. By 15 she was “determined on distinction,” she wrote to a teacher. But how? Although Fuller's capabilities matched those of highly educated men, she couldn't attend college or enter a profession. Her close friend James Freeman Clarke wondered in his journal, “Why was she a woman?”

Fuller pondered the question, too. What did it mean to be a woman? Or, as she asked a group of Boston women during one of her famous weekly conversation circles: “What were we born to do? How shall we do it?”

By then she'd joined the group of spiritual reformers known as transcendentalists. The men in the group honored Fuller by making her the first editor of their influential journal, the *Dial*. Fuller shaped its contents, favoring literature, the arts and matters of the spirit over theological dispute. She introduced her own vision of the exemplary individual in a July 1843 essay titled “The Great Lawsuit: Man *versus* Men, Woman *versus* Women.”

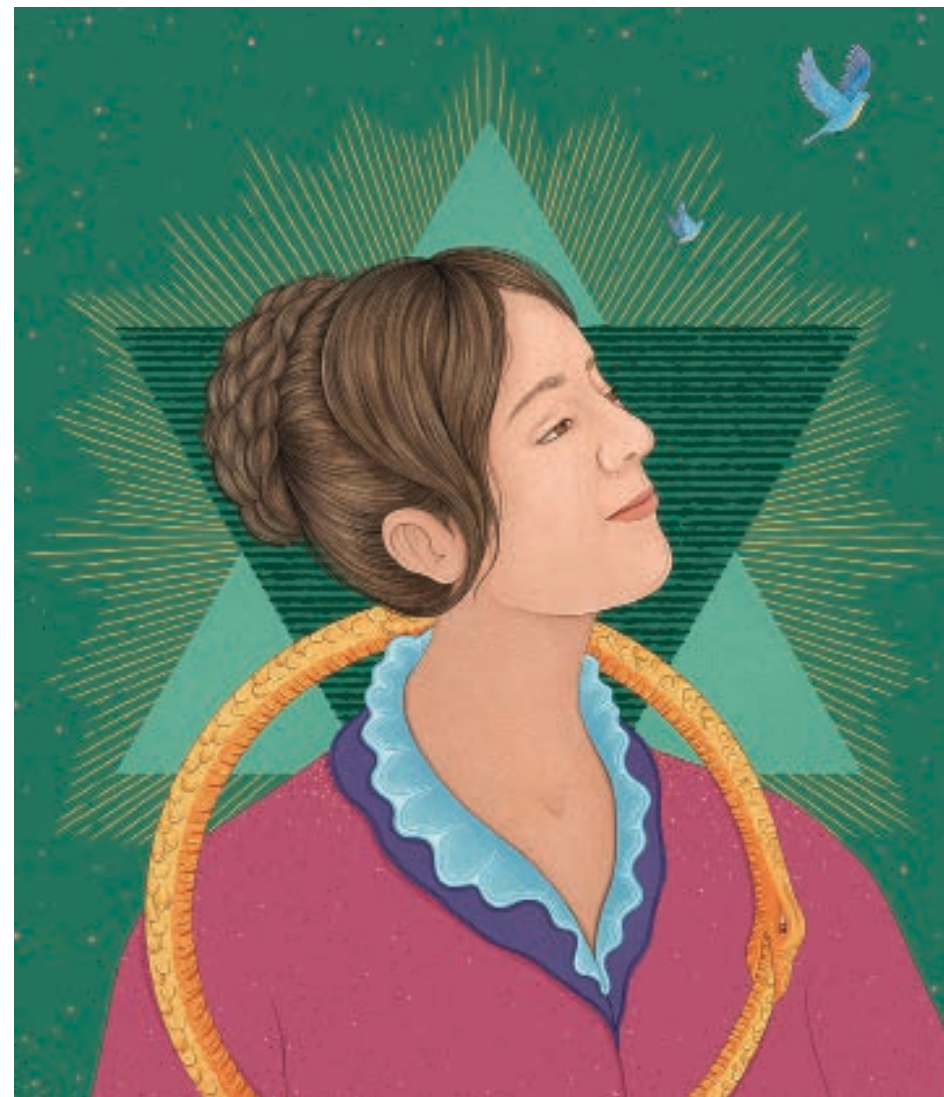
In the essay, Fuller drew on her experience of exclusion from higher education and the professions, while being labeled unfeminine for her superior intelligence. She argued that the “great radical dualism” of male and female was false: “There is no wholly masculine

man, no purely feminine woman.” All must be permitted to realize their unique capabilities to the utmost, she concluded, in order to achieve “fulness of being.”

The month her *Dial* essay appeared, Fuller was traveling through Illinois, Michigan and Wisconsin to gather material for her first book, *Summer on the Lakes, in 1843*. In this eyewitness account of America's fast-developing West, Fuller sympathized with overworked pioneer wives while deploring the treatment of Native Americans—the region's “rightful lords”—and the destruction of old-growth forests. She attended a gathering of Chippewa and Ottawa tribes at Mackinac Island, conversing with the Native women in sign language and joining them in pounding their breakfast cornmeal. She wandered the prairies and rode the rapids to offer vivid natural descriptions and raise her readers' environmental awareness. Thoreau praised her “rich extempore writing; talking with pen in hand”—an approach he went on to take in his own books, which were yet to come.

When the New York City newspaperman Horace Greeley urged Fuller to expand “The Great Lawsuit” into a book, the result—*Woman in the Nineteenth Century*—sold out its first printing in a week. The book included accounts of female inmates at Sing Sing Prison, many of them jailed for prostitution. Fuller considered them “women like myself, save that they are victims of wrong and misfortune.” Her book exhorted men to “remove arbitrary barriers” and allow women to pursue any profession they wished, from

**“WHERE THESE TASTES ARE INDULGED, CHEERFULNESS AND GOOD-HUMOR ARE PROMOTED. WHERE THEY ARE FORBIDDEN, THEY GROW SULLEN...”**



#### UNIFYING VISION

A portrait of Fuller, inspired by her 1845 *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, which argued for equality of the sexes. The book's opening illustration featured mystical symbols of harmonizing opposites, including the Ouroboros, a snake eating its own tail.

scholar to sea captain. She recalled watching young girls happily using carpentry tools. “Where these tastes are indulged, cheerfulness and good-humor are promoted. Where they are forbidden, because ‘such things are not proper for girls,’ they grow sullen and mischievous.”

After Greeley hired her as a front-page columnist for his *New-York Tribune*, Fuller published more than 200 articles—cultural reviews and features on the city's asylums, as well as editorials that opposed the death penalty and supported Black voting rights and Irish immigration. In 1846, she sailed to Europe as the *Tribune's* foreign correspondent. There, she covered the European revolutions of 1848 and directed a hospital in Rome for the wounded. In July 1850, she sailed back to the United States with a new Italian husband and a child, only to be shipwrecked in a violent storm off Fire Island. All three perished. Fuller was 40 years old.

Had she lived, Fuller was expected to preside over the first National Woman's Rights Convention, held in Worcester, Massachusetts, in October 1850. Instead, the more than 1,000 delegates and speakers—including Sojourner Truth, Lucretia Mott, Lucy Stone and Frederick Douglass—honored Fuller with a moment of silence, mourning the loss of “her guiding hand—her royal presence.”

Because Fuller didn't live to lead the campaign her book inspired, she was largely written out of history. But her life's work helped people find common humanity across gender and class. Fuller asks us not to remove ourselves in practicing Emersonian “self-reliance”; rather she urges finding ourselves as individuals in a greater whole. As she wrote in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, “I must beat my own pulse true in the heart of the world; for *that* is virtue, excellence, health.” ♦

IMAGE SOURCE: NPG