

MARGARET FULLER, AS AN AMERICAN FEMINIST IN TRANSCENDENTALISM

America's first true feminist, Margaret Fuller holds a distinctive place in the cultural life of the American Renaissance. Transcendentalist, literary critic, editor, journalist, teacher, and political activist, ultimately turned revolutionary, she numbered among her close friends the intellectual prime movers of the day: Emerson, Thoreau, the Peabody sisters, the Alcotts, Horace Greeley and Carlyle—all of whom regarded her with admiration and sometimes even awe. Fuller was an integral part of the Transcendental community. Her writings and interactions with other Transcendentalists, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, William Henry Channing, and Nathaniel Hawthorne had an important influence on their own beliefs and writings.¹

As a proponent of woman's rights, a literary critic, a revolutionary, and overall, a Transcendentalist, Margaret Fuller was a "virtuoso."² A virtuoso, like the conductor of an orchestra, is able to direct a specific section as well as envisioning the entire symphony. Fuller had a significant immediate impact on her world. As she was able to envision the larger world around her, she was also able to have an impact on society as a whole.

Margaret Fuller received a higher education which was atypical for a girl, but was typical for boys in "Enlightenment-minded Unitarian Boston and Cambridge".³ Her education, which included an emphasis on ancient Rome, would have a profound effect on her imagination and her later identification with the Italian Revolution. Fuller was conscious of her higher education and believed that this signified that she was destined for a higher calling.

Margaret Fuller and other Transcendentalists focused on comprehending human nature. She believed that understanding human nature was the key to bringing about social reform. Through her writings, Fuller articulated the unique Transcendental approach of interpreting the world and belief in bettering the condition of humankind through the use of Enlightenment ideas of progress and Humanist ideas of the importance of Man. While Margaret Fuller embraced Transcendentalism, she did express some dissatisfaction with what she saw as a

¹ -Brownson, A.Orestes "Review of Summer of the Lakes" (October 1844), in *Critical Essays on Margaret Fuller*, ed. Joel Myerson (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co, 1980):p.3

² Abzug, Robert H. *Cosmos Crumbling: American Reform and the Religious Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994):P.4,5.

³ -Capper, Charles *The Private Years*, volume 1 of *Margaret Fuller: An American Romantic Life*:p.31.

lack of progress. This sense of dissatisfaction and her "longing for action" led her to seek other avenues of expression, and in 1839 the Conversations were born.⁴

Fuller was conscious of the differences between how society viewed men and how society viewed women. The purpose of the Conversations was to provide women with "some of the same intellectual benefits that the sphere of public activity denied to them supposedly conferred."⁵ Moreover, she wanted to improve the education of women and give them opportunities that they normally would not have. Part of this desire came through her experiences as a teacher and tutor and from educating her younger siblings. She assumed the role of the breadwinner after her father's death, which prevented her from being able to go to Europe as she had planned with Harriet Martineau in 1836. While she disliked teaching and believed it limited her in some way, her earlier experiences teaching could be seen as a training of sorts for the Conversations.

However, there were disagreements over the motivations behind and effectiveness of the Conversations. Emerson was under the opinion that they were simply Margaret Fuller "monologues." Harriet Martineau in her autobiography criticizes Margaret Fuller and her "adult pupils." While they "sat 'gorgeously dressed,' talking about Mars and Venus, Plato and Gthe, and fancying themselves the elect of the earth in intellect and refinement, the liberties of the republic were running out as fast as they could go."⁶ In other words, the Conversations ignored the realities of the immediate social problems; they were too much talk and not enough action.

Higginson points to the list of Conversation members to refute Martineau's criticism. He argued that the Conversations were important because a large percentage of the women became integrally involved in the abolition and women's movements, such as Lydia Maria Child. It is difficult for the modern scholar to come to a conclusion about the Conversations because no actual transcripts of the Conversations survived. We only have contemporaries' remembrances and interpretations of the Conversations. However, the Conversations are important because they reveal important aspects of Fuller's character and her ideas about reform, especially in malefemale relations. She believed that the Conversations would help women "To ascertain what pursuits are best suited to us in our time and state of society, and how we may make best use of our means for building up the life of thought upon the life of action."⁷

Another manner in which Margaret was able to bridge the gap between the male and female spheres was her work as editor of the *Dial*, the Transcendentalist mouthpiece and the "first thoroughly American literary enterprise."⁸ Her

⁴ Higginson, Thomas. *Margaret Fuller Ossoli*. p. 89.

⁵ Capper, Charles. "Margaret Fuller as Cultural Reformer: The Conversations in Boston," p. 515.

⁶ Martineau, Harriet. *Autobiography*. p. 378.

⁷ Margaret Fuller to Sophia Ripley, Jamaica Plain, 2:87.

⁸ Higginson, Thomas. *Margaret Fuller Ossoli*. p. 130.

appointment as editor in 1840 shows the respect the Transcendentalist community had for her. It was, in Fuller's favored expression, the "sign of the times" that she was a woman and held the position of editor. The name of the journal is significant because, like a dial, the journal indicated and marked the progress of society. The editors stated that it will be such a Dial, not as the dead face of a clock,...but rather such a Dial as is the Garden itself, in whose leaves and flowers and fruits the suddenly awakened sleeper is instantly apprised not what part of dead time, but what state of life and growth is now arrived and arriving. The Dial was also significant because of the theoretical essays published during its years of operation. It served as an important medium for articulating Fuller's unique point of view on male-female relations, the role of women in society, and above all, human nature. Fuller's essay entitled "The Great Lawsuit. Man versus Men: Woman versus Women" speaks of the "liberation" of the sexes from society-imposed separation of spheres.

Moreover, in the cosmopolitan city of New York, Margaret Fuller witnessed first-hand poverty, the working conditions of men and women, hospitals, insane asylums, and the prisons of Sing-Sing and Blackwell's Island. Her time spent in New York also introduced her to and made her familiar with labor interests. Here she also articulated her ideas about gender relations and revealed her views on marriage and equality. Fuller envisioned a fluidity in terms of what was the proper role of a man and the proper role of a woman. She writes, "Male and female represent the two sides of the great radical dualism...There is no wholly masculine man, no purely feminine woman."⁹

Unlike other women of the day, such as Lydia Maria Child and Catherine Beecher, who argued that women were more moral than men, Fuller discounted this theory and instead argued that men and women were both capable of being equally moral.¹⁰ Instead, Fuller (radically) envisioned a world in which women and men could unequivocally be anything. Girls could one day become senators or sea-captains, and there is no reason why boys could not grow up to be milliners. Fuller saw the concept of separate spheres as "arbitrary barriers" which prevented true equality. Woman's highest aspiration in life was not, as Charles F. Biggs claimed, to be a wife and a mother. In fact, Fuller argued against marriage if a woman could not find a partner who would treat her as an equal. She argues that "no married woman can represent the female world, for she belongs to her husband. The idea of woman must be represented by a virgin." Woman in the Nineteenth Century reveals Fuller's unique views on men and women and reflects the tension that existed in this period between the sexes. Another important radicalization that her dispatches and letters reveal is her attitude toward American slavery and her sense of this injustice. It is impossible to separate Fuller's

⁹ Fuller, Margaret. *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*. p.161.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 96.

attitude towards the Revolution and her attitude toward American slavery. The clear parallels she saw between the African slaves and the Romans can be seen in a letter to William Henry Channing. Disappointed in the outcome of the Revolution, Fuller writes, "You felt so oppressed in the slave-states; imagine what I felt at seeing all the noblest youth, all the genius of this dear land, again enslaved."¹¹

It is significant that Margaret Fuller actively participated in the revolution instead of simply theorizing about revolution on an intellectual level. She assumed nursing duties, continued informing the American public about the revolution, and on April 20, 1849 became the director of the Fate-Bene Fratelli Hospital.¹²

Here, Fuller encountered resistance from men who believed that women did not have a place in the Revolution. During her return voyage from a three-year sojourn in Italy, the captain of her ship died of smallpox. The inexperienced first mate who took charge ran the ship aground in a storm just 100 yards off Fire Island. Fuller, her husband Marchese Giovanni Angelo d'Osso, and their one-year-old son all drowned before they could be rescued. Their bodies were never recovered, Nor was the manuscript on the Italian revolution she was carrying with her. Moreover, Fuller's life encompassed the major figures and major reform movements in both America and Europe. She was able to transcend certainly the gender boundaries, but also the ideological boundaries, of her day.

Մարգարեթ Ֆուլլերը որպէս ամերիկյան ֆեմինիստ և տրանսցենդենտալիստ

Սառա Մարգարեթ Ֆուլլերը (1810-1850թթ.)՝ ամերիկյան ֆեմինիստ և տրանսցենդենտալիստ, պայքարում էր սեռային հավասարության համար: Նա կարողացավ իր ազդեցությունը թողնել այնպիսի տրանսցենդենտալ հեղինակությունների վրա, ինչպիսիք են Ռալֆ Ուոլդո Էմերսոնը և Բրոնտեն Ալբրեթը: Նրա մտորումների առանցքային գաղափարը շատ նման է բուդդայականության հայեցակարգին: Մարգարեթ Ֆուլլերը և այլ տրանսցենդենտալիստներ կենտրոնացան մարդկային բնության ընկալման վրա: Նա հավատացած էր, որ մարդկային բնության ընկալումը այն բանալին է, որը կբերի սոցիալ բարեփոխումների: Ֆուլլերի աշխատությունները այդ օրերին ընդունվեցին կիև ակտիվիստների և կանացի իրավահավասարության կողմնակիցների կողմից՝ օգնելով կանացի իրավունքների համար մղվող շարժմանը:

¹¹ Fuller to William Henry Channing, Rieti, Aug. 28, 1849, in *Memoirs*, 2: 269.

¹²- Fuller, Margaret. *Transatlantic Crossings in a Revolutionary Age*, "Appendix."p:242.