

Margaret Fuller

Margaret Fuller (1810-1850) was a famous Unitarian essayist best known for her book *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* and her editing, with Ralph Waldo Emerson, of the Transcendentalist literary magazine *The Dial*. Born at a time when women's opportunities for formal education were extremely limited, Fuller received a comprehensive classical education from her eccentric father, Timothy Fuller, a lawyer who served in the U.S. Congress. Being a woman she was unable to attend Harvard, as her male peers did. Nevertheless, with the help of friends



Margaret Fuller

she learned what the formal students learned. At a time when many New England Unitarians were fascinated with new developments in German philosophy, Fuller was particularly fluent in German and widely read. As a result, Emerson asked her to edit *The Dial* magazine, starting in 1840. *The Dial* published articles by Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and other Transcendentalists. It published non-Christian texts by Confucius, Zoroaster and others. It also published Margaret Fuller, including the articles which became the book *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, which was published in 1845 when Margaret was 35.

In that book, Fuller argues that women and men have overlapping characteristics. In particular, some women will do well at traditional male occupations.

"But if you ask me what offices they may fill, I reply—any. I do not care what case you put; let them be sea-captains, if you will. I do not doubt there are women well fitted for such an office, and, if so, I should be as glad to see them in it, as to welcome the maid of Saragossa, or the maid of Missolonghi, or the Suliote heroine, or Emily Plater."

[The four women mentioned above, one Spaniard, two Greeks, and one Pole, were all Joan of Arc type heroes fighting for nationalism. Fuller joined their ranks herself in the 1849 Rome revolution.]

"I think women need, especially at this juncture, a much greater range of occupation than they have, to rouse their latent powers..."

"In families that I know, some little girls like to saw wood, others to use carpenters' 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".



Emily Plater, Polish Cavalry Officer

Politics of Liberation

Fuller believed that the struggles for freedom of women, slaves, and oppressed European nationalities like the Jews and the Irish were fundamentally the same struggle.

(Note: In 1844, when this was written, anti-slavery activists were trying to prevent Texas from joining the Union as an additional slave state.)

"Week before last, the Gentile was requested to aid the Jew to return to Palestine; for the Millennium, the reign of the Son of Mary was near. Just now, at high and solemn mass, thanks were returned to the Virgin for having delivered O'Connell [Irish nationalist leader] from unjust imprisonment, in requital of his having consecrated to her the league formed in behalf of Liberty on Tara's Hill. But last week brought news which threatens that a cause identical with the enfranchisement of Jews, Irish, women, ay, and of Americans in general, too, is in danger, for the choice of the people threatens to rivet the chains of slavery and the leprosy of sin permanently on this nation, through the Annexation of Texas!...

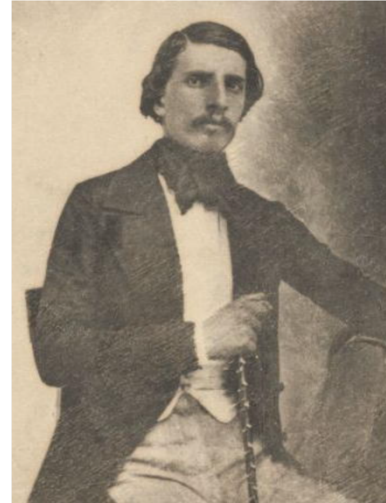
"Women of my country!... have you nothing to do with this? You see the men, how they are willing to sell shamelessly the happiness of countless generations of fellow-creatures, the honor of their country, and their immortal souls, for a money market and political power. Do you not feel within you that which can reprove them, which can check, which can convince them? You would not speak in vain; whether each in her own home, or banded in unison...

"This cause is your own, for, as I have before said, there is a reason why the foes of African Slavery seek more freedom for women; but put it not upon that ground, but on the ground of right."

Woman in the Nineteenth Century was a best-seller. Horace Greeley, owner of the New York Tribune, one of the country's leading papers, hired Fuller to write regular columns for the front page, in which she advocated social reforms. In 1946 Greeley sent Fuller to Europe as the newspaper's first foreign correspondent, reporting on both politics and culture. Fuller had great sympathy for revolutionary movements, Italian unity and independence in particular. She fell in love with Giovanni Ossoli, an impoverished Italian aristocrat and dedicated revolutionary. They may or may not have married but they definitely had a child together. In 1849 they participated in a revolution attempting to drive the Pope from Rome. Giovanni and Margaret fought together on the barricades. The revolutionaries actually held Rome for six months, before being defeated by a French army. In 1850, after the failure of the revolution, the family sailed together from Europe to New York. Approaching New York, the ship was wrecked in a storm off Fire Island. Margaret, her husband and her child were all killed.

On Marriage

Margaret Fuller personal life was unusual. She was widely considered to be an outstanding conversationalist. She had close, intense, highly intellectual relationships with many people, men and women, including well-known figures such as Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allen Poe, genderfluid French writer George Sand, and Adam Mickiewicz, the Polish national poet. Yet these relationships did not include physical sex of any sort. Fuller remained a virgin until she met Ossoli at age 38.



Giovanni Ossoli

In her writing Fuller emphatically rejected traditional sex roles, at least when they were imposed. She nevertheless believed that a perfect marriage, a true harmony of man and woman, was at least theoretically possible. She developed a theory that there were four ascending level of marriage. At the lowest was daily life, managing the chores. Next was mutual adoration. A good couple worship each other. The third was intellectual companionship. Then...

"The fourth and highest grade of marriage union is the religious, which may be expressed as pilgrimage toward a common shrine. This includes the others: home sympathies and household wisdom, for these pilgrims must know how to assist each other along the dusty way; intellectual communion, for how sad it would be on such a journey to have a companion to whom you could not communicate your thoughts and aspirations as they sprang to life; who would have no feeling for the prospects that open, more and more glorious as we advance; who would never see the flowers that may be gathered by the most industrious traveller! It must include all these."

For Margaret, Ossoli apparently filled the bill. Many of her friends, including Emerson, thought that Ossoli, although a genuinely nice guy who loved Margaret, was nowhere near her intellectual equal. But for Fuller mutual fierce commitment to the Romantic cause of Italian nationalism provided a needed "pilgrimage to a common shrine".

European Nationalism in New England

Margaret Fuller's beliefs and personal life reflect a split between two visions of the ideal life, a split that divided Unitarians of the 1840s and continues to divide Unitarians today. For most Unitarians, the goal of life was self-development. This mostly results from education, broadly conceived. This could include the study of human history or direct contemplation of Nature. Individual responsibility is paramount.

For many others, the goal of life was to lose one's self in a greater cause. For most Unitarians of Fuller's time, the greatest cause was the abolition of slavery, but equality for women and freedom for oppressed nationalities, both European and Native American, were important too.

Most Unitarians saw virtues in both perspectives. But it was certainly something Unitarians argued about. The tension is illustrated by Fuller's life, her evolution from Emersonian Transcendentalism to Romantic Nationalism. Another example is the variety of Unitarian reactions to the German revolutionary exile, Karl Follen, who became the model for Friedrich Bhaer, who marries Jo at the end of the great Unitarian novel, *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott.

Karl Follen (1796-1840) was a leader of the German "youth" movement, a movement of revolutionary nationalists famous for black outfits, torchlight parades and book-burnings. When one of his comrades used a dagger to murder a popular writer in 1819, Follen had to flee Germany. He ended up in Boston where he taught German language and philosophy at Harvard and later became a Unitarian minister.

Karl Follen and actors portraying Friedrich Bhaer in *Little Women*



Karl Follen



William Shatner



Gabriel Byrne



Louis Garrel

Follen's politics, with its romantic enthusiasm for violence, was no secret. A famous poem of his read::

A band of men is seen descending
To the dark and gloomy wood
By the torches flickering light;
Quiet in their look, but fearful is
Their black and simple dress;
No glittering show in them you see,
Save the glitter of their daggers.

This is very far from anything Unitarianism's peaceable leader William Ellery Channing would ever write. Yet Follen and Channing were great friends. According to Elizabeth Peabody's eyewitness account of Channing's dinner parties, they would debate such questions as when it was permitted to kill innocent people to advance a political cause. Follen advocated for abstract principles while Channing supported individual relationships.

Coda

Margaret Fuller became famous in 1845 and died in 1850. Her fame coincided with an exciting time for American and European progressives. In 1848, while Fuller was in Europe, one of her students, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, organized the Seneca Falls Women's Rights meeting. Fuller was scheduled to speak at the next women's rights conference. 1848 was a year of revolution throughout Europe, a revolution in which Fuller was at the heart of the action. Fuller's death was a sad event in an exciting time for her many friends and admirers.



Plaque on Fuller's House in Rome