

WOMEN IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

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(Second Notice)¹

The great defect of Miss Fuller's book² is a want of distinctness. We can easily discover that her chief concern is to help remove the evils which afflict society; but we cannot discover any hints of the means by which they may be removed. She is sufficiently learned, sufficiently vigorous, and sufficiently earnest, but not sufficiently plain and direct. We have too much of the Scandinavian mythology and the Greek tragedy, and too little of what the book professes to deal with—woman in the nineteenth century. The most direct writing is on a topic that no virtuous woman can treat justly, because she must of necessity be imperfectly informed; it is exceedingly painful to read a portion her work, which we feel must have been painfully produced; and though we cannot but respect her for her courage in printing it, we regret that she should have felt herself bound to do so, since no good can possibly result from it. There are a thousand existing evils in society which a woman may freely censure, and a thousand topics of pervading interest which she may freely discuss, with profit to her sex, without verging towards those that the innocent had better not know the existence of. We wished that Miss Fuller had loosened the fibula of her arrows, and let them fly at the practices which are, indeed, the direct cause of the lewdness which she deplures, instead of treating of the

¹ The phrase "Second Notice" refers back to an earlier printing of either the same article, or a different, initial piece of the same article. This particular "Second Notice" refers to the first part of the article, also written by C.F. Briggs and published in *The Broadway Journal* on February 15th, 1845.

² The book in question is *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, originally published by Margaret Fuller (1810-1850) as an article in *The Dial* entitled "The Great Lawsuit. Man versus Men. Woman versus Women", in 1843. Fuller then added a bit more to the work and published it as a full book in 1845. In it Fuller advocated not only for women's rights, but those of African Americans and other minorities in the community. It was received with a great deal of controversy at the time, but is now considered one of the major works in American Feminism.

lewdness itself, which she can only know by hearsay, and of course but imperfectly comprehend.³

The only way in which any good can be rendered to society, is by making woman more womanly and man more manly. To make sailors of women and milliners of men, is to have imperfect sailors and imperfect milliners. The advocates of woman's rights who are for putting men and women on a level, point to France as proof that women are capable of performing all the duties of men; but they would hardly be willing to accept of the morals or the politics of France, which they must do if they adopt her practices. The difference between the sexes in this country is all in the favor of women: the law of courtesy grants them every thing, and the law of the land gives them more than they could ask. The privilege of voting is one which they could not exercise if it were granted, and it is the only privilege that is withheld from them⁴. No change can bring them any good, or at least no greater privileges than what they enjoy at present. Men labor for little else than to make women happy; the cream of every enjoyment is skimmed for their express use, while the sour milk is drank by their lords; the instincts of the mass can be trusted more safely than the speculations of any individual. Men and women fall naturally into their proper spheres when let alone, and there can be no need of any violent revolutions to displace them from their true positions. The restraints which Miss Fuller complains of as hindering women from becoming blacksmiths, sailors, and soldiers, are the restraints which nature has imposed, and which can never be overcome. As we have already said, the mind of women is not endowed with the elements of command, because she cannot originate. There are no other restraints to her doing so, but her own weaknesses. Miss Fuller glories in the "triumphs of female authorship"; but we know of no women who can claim the merit of originality. And we have no peculiar "signs of the times" in any work which has appeared from a woman's hand. In the Arts, where the creative faculties are tested, woman have done nothing. Drawing and painting are considered a necessary part of every woman's education, but the world has produced no famous woman-artists of any kind; yet their way of life peculiarly fits them for artistic employment. There are no restraints upon women in any civilised country, to prevent her becoming an architect; yet we have never heard of but one architectural work, and that a very recent one, produced by a female. All women are instructed in the rudiments of music, yet we have no female composers.

³ While this article was initially published anonymously, research into Edgar Allan Poe's later writings reveals this article was written by Briggs. In a critical review of Margaret Fuller's body of work published in *The New York Literati* in August, 1846, Poe stated: "Holding these opinions in regard to 'Woman in the Nineteenth Century', I still feel myself called upon to disavow the silly, condemnatory criticism which appeared in one of the earlier numbers of 'The Broadway Journal.' That article was *not* written by myself, and *was* written by my associate, Mr. Briggs" ("Sarah Margaret Fuller", pg. 72). Later on in the article, Poe goes on to call Fuller's work "thoughtful, suggestive, brilliant", which doesn't fit well with the relatively negative review found here. This indicates that Poe not only didn't along with Briggs, but may have disagreed with the review altogether.

⁴ Women wouldn't gain the right to vote until the Nineteenth Amendment was passed in 1920. Many feminist studies track Fuller's publishing of *Women in the Nineteenth Century* as a key moment in feminist theory that helped build historical momentum to women's suffrage.

The employments of women are distinct from those of men, and the more perfect that society becomes, the more distinct they will grow. Therefor, instead of its being a cause of complaint that women are compelled to be women, it should be hailed as a sign, indeed, of the incoming of better times.

We believe that Miss Fuller admits the truth of our argument in the following passage, although we are not sure we comprehend her meaning:

“The especial genius of woman I believe to be electrical in movement, imitative in function, spiritual in tendency. She excels not so easily in classification, or recreation, as in an instructive seizure of causes, and a simple breathing out of what she receives that has the singleness of life, rather than the selecting and energizing of art.”

Among all the “signs of the times” which Miss Fuller takes note of, there is none so encouraging as the following:

“A woman of excellent sense said it might seem childish, but to her one of the most favorable signs of the times was, that ladies had been persuaded to give up corsets.

It is a most favorable sign indeed, and the next generation of men will be all the better for it. But we should be glad to see the candy saloons and worsted warehouses of Broadway disappear along with the corset stores.

Miss Fuller has a great passion for heroines. Among all the females that she has selected for emulation, not one has been taken from the pure feminine creations of Walter Scott⁵. To combat a postulate of Spinoza⁶, she has extracted a long poem from W.E. Channing⁷, a character of a woman from the tragedy of Festus⁸, and a monstrosity—Mother Perpetua, from Eugene Sue. We see no need of a resort to fiction, while there are Catherines, Elizabeths, and Isabelles in abundance.

There are many admirable little episodes in the book, which ever and anon appear, like springs of sweet water bubbling out a sterile soil, and charm us by their sparkles and music. There are too few of passages like the following:

“Only in a clean body can the soul do its message fitly. The praises of cold water seem to me an excellent sign of the age. They denote a tendency to the true in life. We are

⁵ Walter Scott (1771-1832) was a Scottish novelist and poet who published a number of works, many of which focused on the knightly idea of chivalry, such as *Ivanhoe* or *Rob Roy*. These kinds of works seem to be the focus of Briggs’ writing here, where the male protagonists typically fought in the name of one woman, these being the “pure feminine creations” Briggs speaks of.

⁶ Benedict de Spinoza (1632-1677) was a Dutch philosopher who is often credited as one of the key figures in the movement of Rationalist thought. His Latin work *Ethics* is widely considered to be one of the most influential books on philosophy, which identified the concepts of God and Nature, taking the inverted stance that Nature was the true **creator of the Universe**.

⁷ W.E. Channing (1817-1901) was a transcendentalist poet who published work around the time that Fuller was working on *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*. However, his relationship with her runs thicker than that: he also released a collection of poems in *The Dial* where Fuller was an editor and was married to her younger sister, Ellen.

⁸ Refers to the poem *Festus*, published by Philip James Bailey (1816-1902) in 1839. Fuller would go on to review the work in *The Dial*; while she disliked some aspects of it, she was known to have loved the work overall despite some of her criticisms.

now to have, as a remedy for ills, not orvietan⁹, or opium, or any quack medicine, but plenty of air and water, with due attention to warmth and freedom in dress, and simplicity in diet. Every day we observe signs that the natural feelings on these subjects are about to be reinstated, and the body to claim care as the abode and organ of the soul.”

These passages are of greater import than Miss Fuller seems to be aware of, or she would dwell longer upon them, and draw more profitable reflections from them than she has done. The well-being of the body is the great end of all moral teaching, and if this truth were most distinctly comprehended, the moral preacher would not so often preach to so little purpose. It is the too frequent way with moral philosophers and religious teachers, to exalt the dignity of the soul, by treating its habitation, the body, with contemptuous neglect, and it is a very rare thing to find a healthy soul shrined in a gaudy tabernacle. God has affixed the several penalties against any abuse of the body, not only in the natural laws, but in his revealed laws; yet in the days of ignorance and superstition, as well as in these days of knowledge and refinement, men have thought they were doing God a service by mortifying and lacerating the form which He had created in his own image. The most pale, unhealthy, decrepit, and consumptive men in the country, are the denizens of theological seminaries, who waste their vital energies in the vain illusion of studying God’s will. They should be, if they rightly interpreted His will, the rosiest, healthiest, happiest men in the world. Man’s first offence, which brought death into the world, was a wrong done to his own body; he ate forbidden fruit. Whether the Mosaic cause of the fall be typical or literal, the lesson which it teaches is the same. It was a violence done to his own body that brought suffering upon man, and caused his expulsion from Eden. If we are to be restored to Paradise, the body must be restored to its pristine destiny and beauty, by abstaining from the forbidden fruit which destroys it. Shall we neglect the study of God’s law, then, for the laws of health? By no means: the law of God is the law of health. Paul preached nothing to Agrippa, but righteousness, temperance, and judgment.

There are some things in Miss Fuller’s book, which startle us by their strange sound, and set us a-thinking what they can possibly mean; for instance: “if there were more Marys there would be more virgin mothers;” and some others, equally enigmatical. Miss Fuller is of opinion that the ideal of woman is expressed to a greater height and depth in German literature, than elsewhere, and gives the themes of three ballads, as instances; one of which is as follows, a legend of Drachenfels.

“A youth is sitting with the maid he loves on the shore of an isle, her fairy kingdom, then perfumed by the blossoming grape vines, which draped its bowers. They are happy; all blossoms with them, and life promises its richest wine. A boat approaches on the tide; it pauses at their feet. It brings, perhaps, some joyous message, fresh dew for their flowers, fresh light on the wave. No! it is the usual check on such great happiness. The father of the Count departs for the crusade; will his son join with him, or remain to rule their domain, and wed her whom he loves? Neither of the allied pair hesitate a moment. ‘I must go with my father.’ ‘Thou must go with thy father.’ It was one thought, one word. ‘I will be here again,’ she said, while the prophetic sense said ‘no.’ And there she waited, and the grapes ripened and were gathered into the vintage, and he came not. Year after year passed thus,

⁹ *Orvietan*: A medicinal concoction that is typically held to be a universal antidote against poisons, popular in the 17th and 18th centuries. This can be found in the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

and no tidings; yet still she waited. He, meanwhile, was in a Moslem prison. Long he languished there without hope, till at last, his patron saint appeared in a vision and announced his release, but only on condition of his joining the monastic order for the service of the saint. And so his release was effected, and a safe voyage home given. And once more he sets sail upon the Rhine. The maiden still watching beneath the vines, sees at last the object of all this partial love approach. Approach, but not to touch the strand, to which she with outstretched arms had rushed. He dares not trust himself to land; but in low heart and broken tones, tells her of Heaven's will; and that he, in obedience to his vision, is now on the way to a convent, on the river bank, there to pass the rest of his earthly life, in the service of the shrine. And then he turns his boat, and floats away from her and hope of any happiness in this world, but urged, as he believes, by the breath of Heaven. The maiden stands appalled, but she dares not murmur, and cannot hesitate long. She also bids them prepare her boat. She follows her lost love to the convent gate, requests an interview with the abbot, and devotes her Elysian isle, where vines had ripened their ruby fruit in vain for her, to the service of the monastery, where her love was to serve. Then, passing over to the nunnery opposite, she takes the veil, and meets her betrothed at the altar; and for a lifelong union, if not the one they had hoped in earlier years."

We have marked several passages for quotation, which our limits which will not allow us to make. Miss Fuller writes vigorously, but womanly; she has gathered together the materials for a very profitable book; but they are so loosely arranged, and so pervaded with threads of error, that as a whole we doubt whether the work will be productive of much either of good or of evil. It will, however, have one good effect. It will cause her to be more generally known than she has been; for although the reading public have been familiar with her name since the first appearance of the "Dial,"¹⁰ they have had but an imperfect conception of the exact quality of her min



EDITOR'S NOTE

There are a number of fascinating things going on in this review taken from *The Broadway Journal*, but the key issue is not in the review itself but the complicated circumstances that arose

¹⁰ Margaret Fuller worked as an editor at *The Dial* from 1840-42.

between Poe and Briggs when it came to who published the article. As touched on before, the two men shared a complicated history throughout their time together at *The Broadway Journal*. Essentially Briggs first brought on Poe due to his great literary popularity, but over time Poe's feelings regarding the periodical grew complicated when he wasn't well paid. Eventually things turned sour when Briggs became unhappy with Poe's behavior, and Poe seemed to have left. Then in a strange turn of events, Poe found himself back at *The Broadway Journal* as the sole owner, without Briggs on board in any way. These constant fluxes in who worked for the other seemed to give the men a great dislike for one another, resulting in Poe's comments in the *Literati*. Furthermore, *The Broadway Journal* had closed eight months prior to Poe's remarks about Briggs, indicating Poe must have felt quite strongly about the incident to write about it much later.

What this issue relates to is the idea of voice and identity when it comes to the periodicals of this time period, and how they functioned with the individual. In publications like *The Broadway Journal* it was commonplace to identify oneself as "we" when taking a particular stance in any kind of writing; "We regret that she should have felt herself bound to do so", and so on ("Woman in the Nineteenth Century", pg. 145). This type of identification lends the periodical a kind of voice and identity that links all the editors together under one masthead. What's interesting though is what occurs when an individual steps out of the shadow of the larger voice, and identifies himself or herself as an individual. Poe did this when he made those comments in the *Literati*, making a point that he was not a part of what had been written at the time, which can be seen as a complete detachment from that particular volume of *The Broadway Journal*. This raises the question of identity in the public sphere when it comes to how information from publications like this is doled out. Is there a difference between an individual telling the public something versus a larger publication? Each can take on their own personality; even in the digital age of today, this can be seen in examples like political affiliation when it comes to a newspaper or network that provides daily news. An individual can do the same thing, but may have a harder time gaining traction when it comes to a following of devoted readers. On the other hand, the voices of the individual sometimes get lost in larger formats like *The Broadway Journal*. This complex relationship doesn't seem to be sorting itself out any time soon, but the periodicals of this time period help point out key issues in regards to the public sphere that are still present today.

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