

REVIEW: *WOMAN IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY*

[CHARLES FREDERICK BRIGGS]

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I T will be a happy time for the world, but especially happy for the reading part of it, when people shall be content to accomplish, in the shortest time possible, whatever they may feel themselves called to do. TIME FLIES, should be inscribed on the door-posts of every author's dwelling. An emblematic figure, like that in the Hall of our National Legislature, does not appear to be sufficiently striking, though it tells the hours as they fly, the author who writes to amuse, may write as long as he can amuse, even though he should write tales longer than the *Grand Cyrus*¹, or *Sir Charles Grandison*²; but the author who writes to instruct, cannot write too briefly, for we have much to learn, and but little time to learn in; one third must be given to sleep, another third, at least, to labor, and the rest to study, to amusements, to writing, and talking, and sight-seeing. the time that the best of us can devote to reading, is but short, and therefore, we cannot afford to read books with lack method, or which contain more words than are necessary to convey the author's meaning, provided he have any. That Miss Fuller is justly chargeable with wasting the time of her readers, her most devout admirer cannot deny. Her book consists of two hundred pages, but all that it contains of her own suggesting, might be fairly compressed into a third of the space. The title is a misnomer to begin with; the one under which the essay was once published, "The great Law-suit, Man vs. Men: Women vs. Women" was

¹ Seventeenth century novel. *Artamènes; or, The Grand Cyrus, an excellent new romance. Written by that famous wit of France, Monsieur de Scudéry [pseud.], governour of Nostrre-Dame, And now Englished by F. G.,egent.* by Madeleine de Scudéry, 1607-1701. Mentioned by Briggs here for its length, *The Grand*

² *The History of Charles Grandison* is a lengthy epistolary novel written by Samuel Richardson, author of *Pamela*.

much better, because, having no particular meaning, it created no improper expectations.³ Miss Fuller informs us that she changed it because it was not understood; she will have to change the present one, for an opposite reason. We keep looking for woman of the nineteenth century, but we find only a roster of female names from Pantheia⁴ to Amelia Norman⁵. The propriety of the title is more doubtful from the following passage in her preface.

“By man, I mean both man and woman. I lay no special stress on the welfare of either. I believe the welfare of the one cannot be affected without that of the other. My highest wish is that this should be distinctly and rationally apprehended; and the conditions of life and freedom recognised as the same for the daughters and the sons of time.”

The style is somewhat stilted, but the thought is just and philosophical, and proves Miss Fuller to be a thinking, right-judging person. Why could she not, then, since she thinks so correctly, call her book *Man, or Society in the Nineteenth Century*, and so plead in a straight forward manner in behalf of man, without any specialties about woman's rights or woman's wrongs, as though she had rights or wrongs, which are not also the rights and wrongs of men. We certainly did not expect from a woman of Miss Fuller's natural and acquired powers, the wretched cant which we hear so often from men, who, having no claim upon man, seek for the sympathies of women, and from women, who, having as little claim upon the sympathies of men, try for it by speaking in the name of their sex, about woman's mission, woman's influence, and woman's rights; and we have not been disappointed; she seems to entertain a wholesome horror of the whole tribe of shallow canters. But then, if we do not misapprehend her, which we are not sure of, she has errors of her own which are more dangerous, because [they are] not so shallow as the others. She forgets, or rather seems

³ *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* originally appeared under this title in 1843 in *The Dial* (1840-1929), a transcendental magazine edited by Fuller. It was later expanded and republished as a book in 1845; Briggs reviews this republished version.

⁴ Briggs refers here to *The Cyropaedia*, an embellished biography of the Cyrus the Great of Persia, founder of the Achaemenid Empire, written in the 4th century B.C. by Xenophon of Athens, a student of Socrates. Pantheia is the wife of the (likely fictional) King of Susa, Abradatus; she commits suicide after learning of her husband's death in battle.

⁵ On November 1st, 1843, eighteen year-old former domestic servant Amelia Norman attempted to plunge a dirk knife into the chest of wealthy merchant Henry Ballard outside of the Astor House Hotel in New York. Two years earlier, Ballard had pursued, seduced, and impregnated Norman, and after the birth of her child, abandoned her and the newborn in a brothel. Norman sought support in raising the child from Ballard in October of 1843, but Ballard refused; his cruelty provoked her assault the next day. Norman was arrested and accused of battery and assault with intent to kill, but was acquitted after a sensational trial.

to forget, that God created man male and female, notwithstanding the declaration in her preface, which we suspect, contains, like the postscript of a woman's letter, the fact which she intended to put into the body of her work. She is dissatisfied that women are not men, and takes offence at the term "women and children"; words which to us sound sweeter for being spoken together. She is offended that women should esteem it a compliment to be called masculine, while men consider it a reproach to be called feminine. "Early I perceived," she says, "that men, in no extremity of distress, ever wished themselves women." Of course not. It is the law that woman shall reverence her husband, and that he shall be her head. We may love those whom we protect, but we can never wish ourselves in their place, although we naturally wish to be like those from whom we receive protection. The wish of Desdemona that Heaven had made her like Othello, it is the sweetest touch of nature in Shakespeare. Some have doubted what she meant, but they have only to read her wish by the light of revelation, and her meaning is clear. Miss Fuller says:

"I have urged on woman, independence of man, not that I do not think the sexes mutually needed by one another, but because in woman, this fact has led to an excessive devotion, which has cooled love, degraded marriage, and prevented either sex from being what it should be to itself or the other. * * * * [sic.] that her hand may be given with dignity, she must be able to stand alone."

This, we conceive to be the radical error of Miss Fuller's reasoning, and directly opposed to the law of nature, of experience and revelation. She says,

"A profound thinker has said, 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."

He was a very shallow thinker, or a joker.⁶ It would be as reasonable to say to say that none but a deaf man could give a true idea of music. Woman is nothing but as a wife. How, then, can she truly represent the female character who has never filled it? No woman can be a true woman, who has not been a wife and a mother. These are not accidental characters like those of mistress and servant, which may be thoroughly understood without being acted; but they are the natural destiny of man, and if she is kept from them, her nature is distorted and unnatural; and she sees things through a false medium. Her report, therefore, of a character which she never filled, must be received with distrust.

It is not easy to discover from Miss Fuller's essay what her precise ideas of the true relation of man and woman are; although on some points she is sufficiently distinct. Mrs. Jamieson⁷, with true womanly feeling, said that she would prefer being Mary of Scotland to Elizabeth of England; but Miss Fuller would prefer being the termagant Queen and swearing

⁶ It's not clear to whom Fuller and Briggs are referring here. Near this passage in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, however, Fuller mentions Italian poet and novelist Alessandro Manzoni in connection with independent women and virginity.

⁷ Anna Brownell Jameson (1794-1860), author of *The Characteristics of Women* (1832)

by “God’s teeth.” Colonel Emily Plater⁸ and Madame George Sand⁹ sound pleasantly in her ears. “If you ask me what offices women may fill,” says Miss Fuller, “I reply any; let them be sea captains if you will.” Very good, let them. We have a queen of England, and England claims to be mistress of the seas; let us have a woman Admiral. But we take sides with Spinoza¹⁰, and answer that woman cannot command. She lacks the chief qualities of a commander. She cannot invent. She is an apt imitator, but cannot originate; and therefore we have no fears that we shall ever see women in our halls of legislature, or in command of our ships or armies. “A party of travellers lately visited a lonely hut on a mountain. There they found an old woman that told them she and her husband had lived there forty years; why, they said, did you cho[o]se so barren a spot? She did not know, it was the man’s notion. And during forty years she had been content to act, without knowing why, upon the man’s notion. I would not have it so”; says Miss Fuller. In the name of all that is monstrous, what would she have? Would she have the woman to leave her husband, or would she have the husband abandon what he believed to be for his interest to do, to satisfy a whim of his wife? She is not bound to provide for him, but he is bound to provide for her, and therefore he must be allowed the privilege of following his own business in his own way, unless she can advise him better; but he must be the judge of the advice. The old woman was a true woman and a good wife, who had no thought but to please her husband. Women who have any other thoughts have no business with a husband, If there is anything clear in revealed and natural law, it is that man is the head of the woman. All the beauty, all the harmony, all the happiness of life is centred in this truth. The most perfect woman that the world has ever known, one who was tried as no other woman was ever tried, who was endowed by nature as few women have ever been endowed, the sweetest, purest being that ever bore the name of woman, counted herself nothing but the wife of her husband, would know no law but his will, no happiness but his love; and when his love grew cold, and he became dead to her, though living, she still remained true to him. The world has abounded in Ephesian widows¹¹, but there has been only one Eloisa.¹² Yet Eloisa is the true type of perfect woman. But Eloisa is not the type of Miss Fuller’s ideal wife: she is better pleased with such a wife as

⁸ Emilia Plater (1806-1831), Polish noblewoman and revolutionary. Famous for her engagement in the November Uprising, she attained the rank of captain in the insurgent Polish forces.

⁹ Amantine-Lucile-Aurore Dupin (1804-1876), known by her pseudonym George Sand, was a French novelist known for her numerous high-profile affairs and scandalous habits, including frequent crossdressing.

¹⁰ For more of Baruch Spinoza on the equality of women, see his *Political Treatise*.

¹¹ Reference to an unfaithful woman via one of the tales in Petronius’ *Satyricon*, in which a widow in the city of Ephesus establishes herself at the tomb of her recently demised husband to mourn him only to fall in love with a soldier posted nearby.

¹² Héloïse d'Argenteuil, here called Eloisa. One half of a famous medieval romance, Héloïse was a renowned scholar of her period and the wife of Pierre Abélard, whom she purportedly continued to love even after his castration. Briggs’s attempt to invoke the paradigm of marital fidelity here is actually quite ironic given evidence from Héloïse and Abélard’s correspondence that show Héloïse’s rather radical opinions on matrimony.

Madame Roland¹³, whose equality with her husband, and congeniality of tastes and employments, made her his companion and friend. She was, in truth, no wife at all, at least, to him, and she fully exemplified the truth which Miss Fuller denies, that love is a necessity with woman.

“This is one of the best instances (the marriage of Madame Roland) of a marriage of friendship. It was only friendship, whose basis was esteem; probably neither party knew love, except by name;” says Miss Fuller. But Thiers says; “Elle respectait et chérissait son époux come un père: elle éprouvait pour l’un des Girondins proserits une passion profonde, qu’elle avait toujours contenue.”¹⁴



¹³ Noted French revolutionary and Girondist.

¹⁴ Quoted from Adolphe Thiers, historian of the French Revolution. “She respected and cherished her husband like a father; she felt for one of the proscribed Girondins a deep passion which she had always contained.”

EDITOR'S NOTE

“I STILL FEEL MYSELF CALLED UPON”, wrote Edgar Allen Poe in an 1846 review of Margaret Fuller, “to disavow the silly, condemnatory criticism of [Woman in the Nineteenth Century] 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.”¹⁵ This is the piece of criticism to which Poe refers; it appeared anonymously in the “Reviews” section in the March 1st and March 8th editions of *The Broadway Journal*. As this and a number of other biographical incidents reveal, Poe’s working relationship with Briggs—Poe was hired as an assistant editor not long after the *Broadway* was founded in 1845—was not altogether smooth. Poe would later call Briggs (in circulated print, no less) “grossly undereducated”, and add that he “has never composed in his life three consecutive sentences of grammatical English” (Miller, 156). Poe included with his disavowal of Briggs a favorable review of Fuller and *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, and praised Fuller both for her singular ability in writing it and for her courage in publishing it. Briggs’ harsh review is a notable example of the kind of resistance Fuller’s work faced upon its publication, and indeed the kind of resistance she and the other transcendentalists often encountered from their less progressive peers. A brashly negative review of what would become a seminal work, Briggs’ piece is an illuminating sample of both the antebellum social climate and of the gender equality conversation as it existed within it.

Fuller herself enjoyed a successful career as a journalist, critic, and women’s rights advocate. She numbered among, and regularly associated with, much of the antebellum literary elite, and her considerable intellect was recognized (often grudgingly) by both her male and female contemporaries (Miller, 139-171). Henry David Thoreau, for instance, reviewed *Woman* and Fuller quite favorably, as did many other notable figures of the period (Dickenson, 40-41). *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* is one of the major documents in the history of American feminism, and together with the rest of Fuller’s works, life and letters, it enjoys a lasting and well-documented legacy in scholarship today.

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¹⁵ This particular disavowal, and indeed many of Poe’s other breezy personal remarks about Briggs, can be found in the 1846 series “The Literati of New York”, printed in multiple editions of *Godey’s Magazine and Lady’s Book* (1844-1848)

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