

A CRITIC AT LARGE

HOW MARGARET FULLER SET MINDS ON FIRE

High-minded and scandal-prone, a foe of marriage who dreamed of domesticity, Fuller radiated a charisma that helped ignite the fight for women's rights.

By James Marcus

June 2, 2025





In 1839, Fuller launched her Conversations, gatherings for women that were a “cross between graduate seminar, professional symposium, and social network”; they sparked responses akin to those at a revival meeting. Illustration by Fanny Blanc

In the four and a half decades since its founding, the Library of America has issued not only the pillars of our national literature but such populist fare as the lyrics of Cole Porter and a volume devoted to “Peanuts.” This is certainly the right move—the jazzy and the colloquial are the very lifeblood of our culture. Still, it’s curious that it has taken until 2025 for these gatekeepers to anoint Margaret Fuller with a book of her own.

Chalk it up, perhaps, to Fuller’s blurry role in the canon. Although her brief life is richly documented, she often fails to come into focus. A sworn enemy of marriage who longed for a husband and child, a Transcendentalist who made a beeline for revolutionary Europe, an urable gossip and an erstwhile Platonist: she is all these things and is defined by none of them.

“Margaret Fuller: Collected Writings” (Library of America) should help to sharpen the picture. Its editors, Brigitte Bailey, Noelle A. Baker, and Megan Marshall, have embedded Fuller’s two books and a selection of her reportage in the context of her journals and correspondence. This seems like a wise approach for an author whose life speaks to us as eloquently as her work. It wasn’t enough for Fuller, in other words, to produce the first major feminist manifesto in American history. She also put flesh on its bones by breaking the rigid rules of gendered conduct whenever possible, which is why the pioneering activist Elizabeth Cady Stanton later described Fuller’s work as “a vindication of woman’s right to think.”

The Library of America has company in commemorating this extraordinary figure. Last year, Allison Pataki, who has previously written fictionalized lives of queens (Empress Elisabeth of Austria) and commoners (Peggy Shippen, the seductive, insanity-faking wife of Benedict Arnold), published

“Finding Margaret Fuller: A Novel” (Ballantine). And now we have Randall Fuller’s “Bright Circle: Five Remarkable Women in the Age of Transcendentalism” (Oxford). The author, a scholar and a distant relation of you-know-who, argues that the history of Transcendentalism has long been distorted by an undue stress on its marquee figures, all of them male. Instead, he insists, the movement

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owes just as much to its female participants, very much including Margaret Fuller. We appear to be in the midst of a Fuller moment. But what, more than two centuries after her birth, does she have to tell us now?

Some writers are youthful prodigies, some late bloomers. Fuller, in a typically paradoxical fashion, was both at once. She owed her early accomplishment to her father, Timothy Fuller, who was determined to turn young Margaret into a machine of erudition—a genius in pigtails. He knew that a girl born in Cambridgeport, Massachusetts, in 1810 would be denied the educational opportunities that could be granted to a boy. A product of Harvard himself, he decided to level the playing field for his eldest daughter.

“I was taught Latin and English grammar at the same time,” Fuller later recalled, “and began to read Latin at six years old.” Her father soon bulked up the curriculum with literature, mythology, music, philosophy, history, French, Italian, and Greek. In a forward-looking moment, he even considered assigning Mary Wollstonecraft’s “A Vindication of the Rights of Woman”—but changed his mind, figuring that an attack on traditional female domesticity might be taking his pedagogical program a little too far.

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As Megan Marshall recounts in her superb biography “[Margaret Fuller: A New American Life](#),” this routine left Fuller in a state of constant anxiety. When she went to bed, she dreamed of being trampled by horses or drowned in blood. She felt an alarming split between her outer life, dominated by rote memorizing and the paternal pat on the head, and the inner life of what was, after all, a child. “My true life was only the dearer,” she later wrote, “that it was secluded and veiled over by a thick curtain of available intellect.”

Another effect of such a curtain is to keep out other people. Fuller, like many a brilliant nerd, was initially awkward with her peers. “The girls supposed me really superior to themselves, and did not hate me for feeling it, but neither did they like me, nor wish to have me with them,” Fuller noted of her childhood.

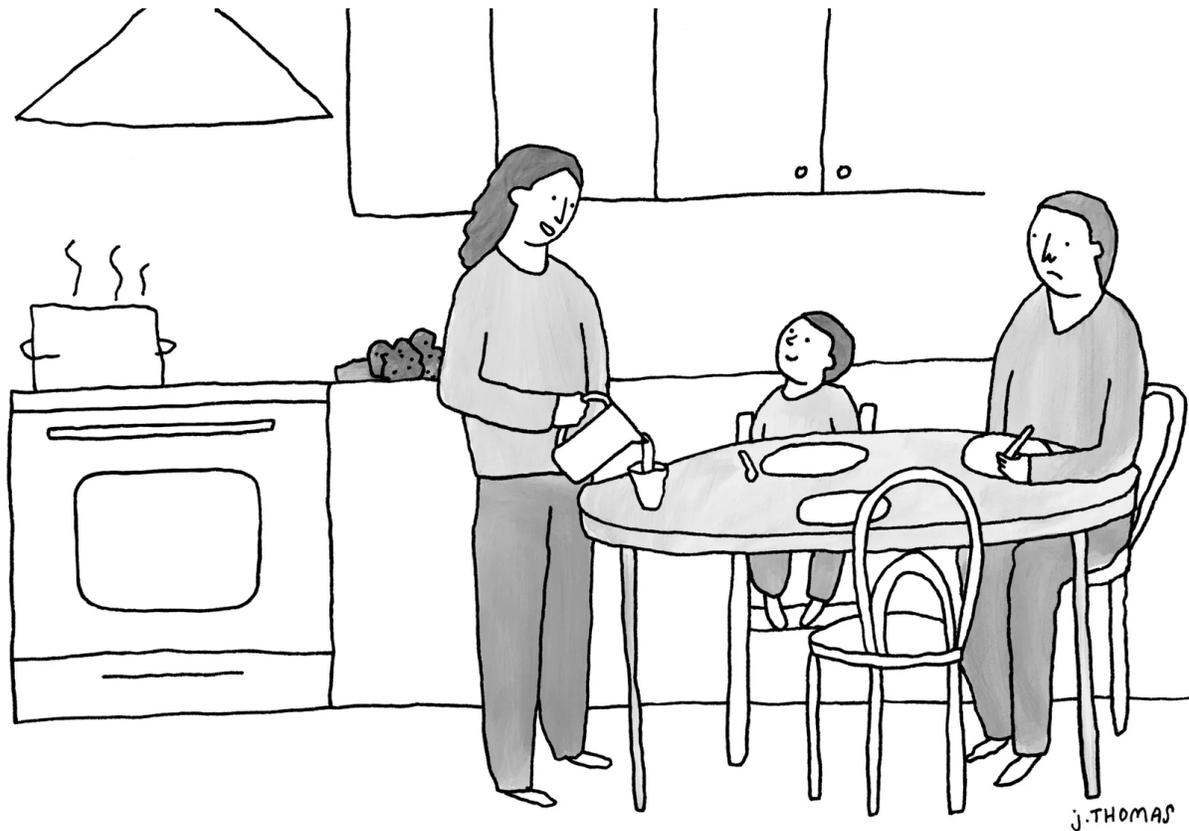
Here, sadly, a template was being set for Fuller’s existence as a social being. She was smarter than most people she would subsequently meet. This opened up a gap between herself and others—which was compounded by her appearance. Fuller suffered from a curvature of the spine, which made her slouch, and from myopia, which made her squint. As a girl, she was also tormented by a reddish blotchiness on her face, most likely from rosacea or acne. Intensely self-conscious about these physical flaws, Fuller resigned herself early on “to be bright and ugly.”

Still, when Timothy Fuller moved his growing family to a house in Cambridge proper, in 1826, his sixteen-year-old daughter made an amazing discovery. Her lavishly stocked brain, which she had so often viewed as a social stumbling block, had turned her into a scintillating conversationalist. Sarah Freeman Clarke, who would be a lifelong friend, noted that even as a teen-ager Fuller “told startling truths,” and, “though she broke down your little shams and defenses, you felt exhilarated by the compliment of being found out.”

None of this, as Marshall makes clear in her biography, solved the enormous problem of vocation. For a woman of Fuller’s talents, there was essentially nowhere to go, no obvious niche in the ecosystem of New England’s intellectual life. She could teach school (which she did), or assist in running the Fuller household, transplanted in 1833 to a farm in Groton and by then including six younger siblings (which almost killed her).

These were years of drift and depression. Still, Fuller kept up with her literary labors—and it was her translation of Goethe’s play “Torquato Tasso” that precipitated the next great sea change in her life, when a copy was placed in the hands of Ralph Waldo Emerson. The essayist and Transcendentalist kingpin was impressed. In July of 1836, he invited Fuller for what turned out to be a three-week visit to the Emerson household, in Concord, Massachusetts, initiating exactly the sort of transformative friendship that both parties relished.





“I’ll let the kitchen know about your broccoli sensitivity.”

Cartoon by Julia Thomas



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Yet problems crept into the relationship almost immediately. Despite their many affinities, these two personalities were almost diabolically engineered to create conflict. Fuller, after a childhood of emotional deprivation, always wanted more. The married Emerson, seven years older and soon to be a father, wanted less. He craved warmth, but, when it was offered, he usually backpedaled into his chilly solitude. It took many of these freeze-and-thaw cycles, over the course of many years, for the friendship to attain any sort of equilibrium.

In the meantime, Fuller was drawn deeper into Emerson's circle. First, there was a spell of teaching at Bronson Alcott's embattled, Boston-based Temple School, in 1837, for which she was never paid. Then she was offered a better gig. As she recorded in her journal on September 25, 1839: "It is now proposed that I should conduct a magazine which would afford me space and occasion for every thing I may wish to do."

This was *The Dial*, which became the Transcendentalist house organ. Fuller was one of the magazine's founders, and Emerson proposed that she be its editor. She was understandably thrilled. It was a great leap forward, even though it meant herding a crew of contributors and weeding out the excesses of Transcendental prose—the latter task made more difficult by the fact that she, too, was sometimes drawn to the gassy and gossamer tone of the Concord crew. During the next two years, she edited eight issues of what was basically an avant-garde quarterly, and contributed many pieces of her own. Fuller quit as a dismal pattern began to assert itself once again: she was never paid.

Even as her job at *The Dial* plunged her deeper into the heart of Transcendentalism, Fuller began to separate herself from the movement. For obvious reasons, she needed money. The lyceum speaking circuit had exploded in popularity, but women were largely barred from it. The author and abolitionist Lydia Maria Child, who was also a friend of Fuller's, expressed what was undoubtedly a mutual frustration: "Oh, if I was a man, how I *would* lecture! But I am a woman, and so I sit in the corner and knit socks."

Fuller came up with a solution of her own. In 1839, she launched what she called her Conversations. These were meetings of twenty-five or so women, each of whom paid the substantial sum of ten dollars to hear Fuller exercise her verbal brilliance in the course of a thirteen-week-long series, in semiprivate settings.

She couldn't have found a better showcase. Fuller already knew that conversing with other people fired her imagination in a way that the printed page sometimes did not. Speaking with men brought out her defiant side, as she noted in her journal: "They do not see where we got our knowledge and while they tramp on in their clumsy way we wheel and fly and dart hither and thither." With women, she was warm and supportive, insisting that such conversations must be a dialogue, a modest meeting of souls.

Randall Fuller is particularly good on these momentous exchanges. As he notes, the collegial atmosphere, so different from the jostling of alpha-dog males in public debates, brought out surprising contributions from the group. "Ideas the women had only vaguely considered in solitude suddenly gushed forth," he writes, "as if from an underground spring, dazzling them in the light of day."

Fuller's methods, then, were deeply connected to gender. But so was the subject matter of the Conversations, which attracted more than two hundred participants in the course of five years. Fuller often got the ball rolling by speaking on mythological, historical, or philosophical themes. Yet the discussion kept gravitating back to the subordination of women, a topic even her well-heeled listeners had no

trouble understanding.

It would have been bold enough for Fuller to lambaste the social conditions that made women into second-class citizens. But she was intent on going deeper: What were the differences between men and women that had produced these social conditions in the first place? Fuller believed that all people had a mixture of male and female qualities. (In her journal, she wrote that her dual nature made her a perfect friend for Emerson, since she was “enough of woman to sympathize with all his feelings, enough of man to appreciate all thoughts.”) Perhaps, she argued, it was simply the *distribution* of these qualities that separated the genders, rather than any sort of biological destiny.

In this sense, her thinking is strikingly modern. Souls were essentially androgynous, albeit with numerous gradations. The main goal, she exhorted her audience, was to junk the old, stale distinctions. Women should make moral decisions, for example, as human beings, rather than peering through the distorting lenses of traditional femininity. Otherwise, they would sink into what Fuller called “the depths of sentimentalism.”

Randall Fuller calls the Conversations a “cross between graduate seminar, professional symposium, and social network,” as well as “the foundation of what we now call the women’s rights movement.” They were, clearly, all these things. But the engine of the whole enterprise was Fuller’s intensity and charisma, which prompted responses more akin to those at a revival meeting. As one awestruck audience member

put it, Fuller had “opened the book of life and helped us to read it for ourselves.” She hadn’t, in other words, assaulted her listeners with the kind of factual cornucopia that she had been forced to absorb as a child. She made knowledge, or even consciousness, into a communal effort.

In 1843, Fuller began a four-month, post-*Dial* journey to the American Midwest. Most of the time, she was accompanied by friends. But she spent ten days exploring Mackinac Island, in Michigan, on her own—a daring move for a middle-class woman of her era. This was still wild country, and Fuller set off with the express purpose of producing a book about her journey. Travel writing was not a Transcendentalist genre. The movement’s key players were armchair visionaries—or, like Henry David Thoreau, determined to see the universe in the minimal acreage of a New England village.

The result of her travels was “Summer on the Lakes, in 1843,” published in 1844. Fuller turns out to be an excellent nature writer, pinning flora and fauna and leviathan-sized Midwest clouds to the page. She sees, too, how the scale of the landscape modified the psychology of its white settlers, who were more accustomed to the close quarters back East. “Here a man need not take a small slice from the landscape,” she writes, “and fence it in from the obtrusions of an uncongenial neighbor, and there cut down his fancies to miniature improvements which a chicken could run over in ten minutes.”

The rawness of the terrain near the Rock River, in Illinois, strikes Fuller as a divine statement. She declares that “there was neither wall

nor road in Eden, that those who walked there lost and found their way just as we did, and that all the gain from the Fall was that we had a wagon to ride in.” There are many other such memorable moments. The author also varies the texture of the book by inserting poems, quotations, dramatic dialogue, a veiled account of her unhappy days at boarding school, and a lengthy digression on the German mystic Friederike Hauffe, who claimed to be clairvoyant and to communicate with spirits.

For some readers, all this will be an invitation to go AWOL. The book hangs together better once you recognize its real nature: not so much a straight travel narrative as a disguised autobiography, or confession, or gender polemic. As the fictional Fuller muses in Allison Pataki’s novel, “Summer on the Lakes” is “a work of female adventure, written by a woman who went on her own into parts unknown,” as well as a “philosophical pondering of what we carry with us from our own natures.”

This seems accurate enough. Such a hybrid can easily accommodate Fuller’s foundational misery as an adolescent and her commitment to ecstatic perception. Fuller is also alert to the domestic arrangements made by white settlers and Native Americans alike. How are men and women supposed to live together? The question was not only anthropological but highly personal, since the author still longed for a suitable companion.

Gender relations, in fact, lay at the heart of her next book. “Woman in the Nineteenth Century” was published in February of 1845 and

became an immediate hit, selling out its first printing of fifteen hundred copies within a week. It was a scandal and a landmark, introducing many new readers to what Lydia Maria Child, one of its early reviewers, called “a contralto voice in literature: deep, rich, and strong.”

As it happens, “Woman in the Nineteenth Century” contains some of the same obstacles as its predecessor. Again, Fuller opts for a loose and accumulative sense of structure, only slightly less rigorous than a tossed salad. The tone is lofty, sometimes opaque. Part of the problem for modern readers is that we now expect a cultural bombshell to be, well, explosive. But political speech in the nineteenth century, as testified to by any number of senatorial addresses, tended toward the oratorical and long-winded. Elevation was the preferred tool for changing minds. So Fuller, too, keeps shifting her diction into high gear.

Her basic argument is simple enough. Men have been ruling the roost for almost all of recorded history. It is now time for women, “the other chamber of the heart of life,” to take their turn in what Fuller calls “the full pulsation.” She goes on to make her argument in more specific terms, of course. She examines four different kinds of marriage, most of them defective in one way or another. What makes a marriage work, in her view, is a joint mission between equals: two minds joined by “the only contract that can permanently avail, of a common faith and a common purpose.”

This statement, which may now strike us as anodyne, offended a good

many of her friends, including the married ones. Some readers also failed to appreciate the way Fuller explicitly tied the liberation of women to that of both enslaved Black people and Native Americans. This, too, was more daring than it may seem today. During the eighteen-forties, the antislavery movement was splintering over the question of whether such crusades should be compartmentalized, either for tactical reasons or because some of its male adherents felt that women should stay out of politics altogether. Some even quoted from St. Paul: “Let women keep silence in the church.” To Fuller, however, all these struggles were inseparable—and silence was not an option.

This emancipatory impulse unites the disparate materials in the book. So does the plainer, sharper, satirical tone that intermittently enlivens the author’s prose. At one point, she mounts a marvellous defense of bachelors and spinsters, existing as they do on the fringes of conjugal life. “The business of society has become so complex,” she writes, “that it could now scarcely be carried on without the presence of these despised auxiliaries; and detachments from the army of aunts and uncles are wanted to stop gaps in every hedge. They rove about, mental and moral Ishmaelites, pitching their tents amid the fixed and ornamented homes of men.” Here the hyperbole is delicious, tart, and doubtless truer to the tone of Fuller’s speaking voice.

So is her reiteration, near the end of the book, that women must seek their own higher purposes, without the guidance of their male counterparts. Fuller is not a separatist by any means, but she is wary of the default relationships between man and woman, which had

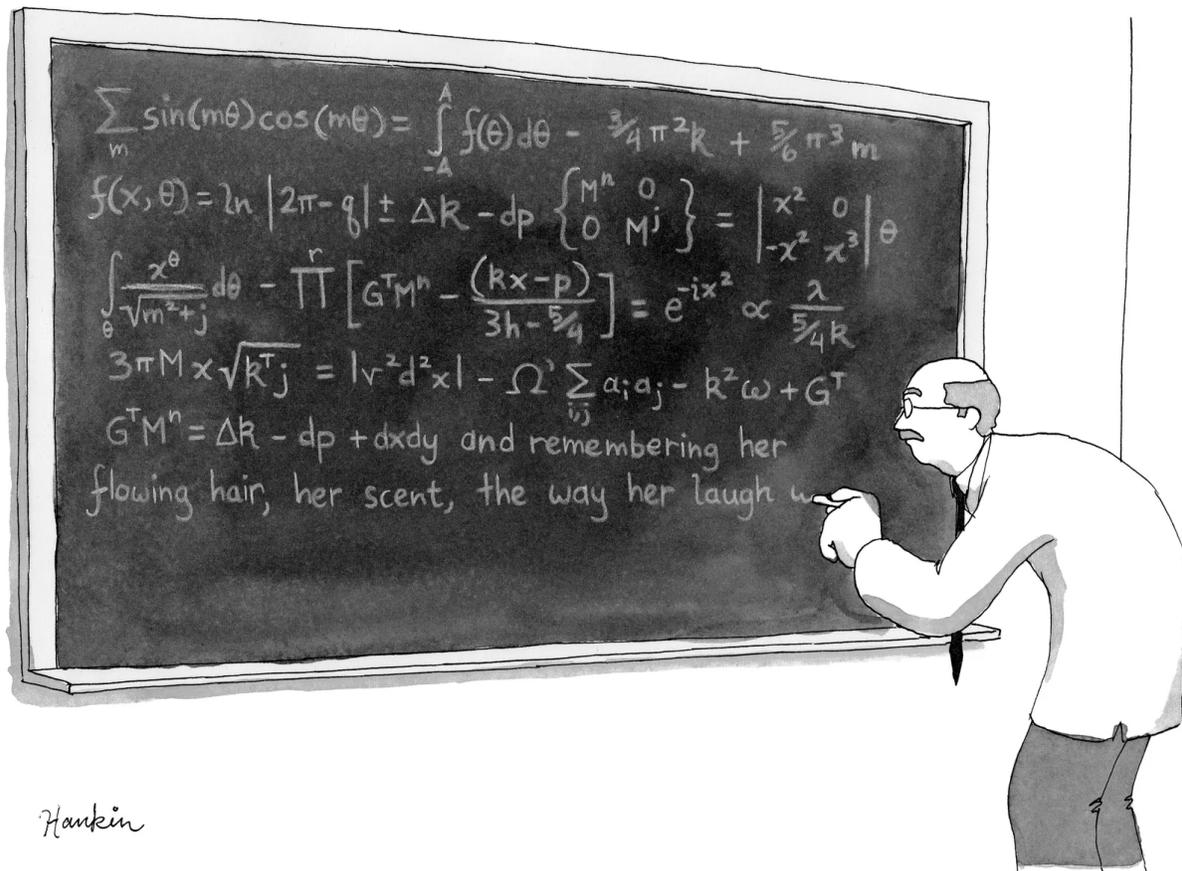
hobbled her own progress since childhood. “I wish woman to live, *first* for God’s sake,” she exclaims. “Then she will not make an imperfect man her god, and thus sink to idolatry.”

Fuller had moved to New York City at the end of 1844, after Horace Greeley, the founder of the New-York *Tribune*, offered her a job as literary editor. An ardent fan of his new hire, Greeley not only co-published “Woman in the Nineteenth Century” but initially insisted that Fuller live in his tumbledown mansion in Manhattan’s Turtle Bay. There she was scolded by the nutritionally chaste household for drinking coffee and wearing leather gloves.

Despite her job title, Fuller was primarily a writer, making her the only full-time female reporter in the *Tribune’s* newsroom, and perhaps in American journalism as a whole. During her first two years at the paper, her style continued to sharpen, in part to meet the demands of a tabloid audience. (“Newspaper writing is next door to conversation,” she decided.) Noting Balzac’s chilliness, she asserted that “he must originally have had a heart, or he could not read so well the hearts of others.” Longfellow’s poetry struck her as “a tastefully arranged Museum, between whose glass cases are interspersed neatly potted rose trees, geraniums and hyacinths, grown by himself with aid of indoor heat.”

At the same time, she became more of a political animal. She visited the city’s jails and insane asylums, exposing their abuses in what were early examples of muckraking. What troubled her most was the way in which incarcerated people were made to feel that they had been

erased from society. In a sense, their banishment was simply a heightened version of the semi-invisibility conferred upon women, and Fuller's fellow-feeling gave the pieces an added pathos. She had come a long, long way from the bucolic life in Concord.



Hankin

Cartoon by Charlie Hankin


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She was about to go farther still. In August of 1846, she boarded a steamship for Europe. Fuller had been watching the Continent's social unrest for some time, and writing about it in the *Tribune*. "The

cauldron simmers,” she observed, “and so great is the fire that we expect it soon to boil over, and new Fates appear for Europe.” What she found there, during the initial leg of her Grand Tour, was a level of adulation her own country had often withheld. Fuller was known as the controversial author of “*Woman in the Nineteenth Century*,” and she consorted with a crowd of A-listers: William Wordsworth, Matthew Arnold, Harriet Martineau, George Sand, Thomas Carlyle, Frédéric Chopin.

What happened next seems like the stuff of fiction. Having travelled to Rome, Fuller struck up a romance with a skinny, diffident twenty-six-year-old named Giovanni Angelo Ossoli. He came from an aristocratic Italian family, but he had neither money nor the slightest command of English. In fact, he had little education at all, which made him an unlikely consort for Fuller, who was also ten years older. You could say this was an inversion of the Jamesian formula: here, European innocence was offering itself up to American sophistication. Fuller was also inverting her previous ideas about exalted companionship, which was supposed to rely on a “supersensual” commingling of inner lives—no organs involved. Whether they were ever legally married is unclear. But they certainly became parents, with the birth of Angelo Eugene Philip Ossoli, in September of 1848.

By then, her fate was wrapped up in the political cauldron she had foreseen two years earlier. As civic unrest ripped its way through Europe in the spring of 1848, it finally reached Rome, where the populace rose against Pope Pius IX and announced the formation of an independent republic. Fuller was anything but a detached foreign

observer. She was the wife of a Roman citizen, who had joined the insurgent militia. She was also a passionate believer in the uprising who happened to be covering it for the *Tribune* in her capacity as America's first female war correspondent.

Her dispatches home, the last work she ever published, are full of fire. Alas, what she ended up covering was ultimately a defeat, as the French rushed in to put down the Roman republic. Fuller reported on the bombardments, the casualties at a field hospital, and the awful aftermath: "A pair of skeleton legs protruded from a bank of one barricade; lower a dog had scratched away its light covering of earth from the body of a man, and discovered it lying face upward all dressed; the dog stood gazing on it with an air of stupid amusement." The language is vivid, exact, as if she were anticipating Mathew Brady's images of Civil War carnage. The late bloomer had finally found her *métier*.

But now it was too late. After the failure of his cause, the penniless Ossoli was forced to leave Rome, and it was up to Fuller to decide their next move. "The American in Europe, if a thinking mind, can only become more American," Fuller had earlier declared, and now she wanted to go home. It was unclear what her husband, with his meagre English and messy legal status, would do in America. It was also unclear whether Fuller, who was already working on a big journalistic history of the Roman revolution, could earn enough to support them.

Fuller would never again set foot on American soil. She and her family boarded the cargo ship *Elizabeth*, in Livorno, in the spring of 1850. On July 19th, the ship broke up amid a violent storm, having run aground on a sandbar just three hundred yards off Fire Island, New York. America, then, was visible to Fuller as the ferocious winds destroyed the vessel. So, too, was Fuller visible to the gathering crowds on the shore: a distant figure in a white nightgown, handing her nearly two-year-old child to a crew member before a wave swept her overboard.

The body of the child, whom they called Nino, eventually washed ashore. No trace of Fuller or Ossoli was ever found, nor was the manuscript of her Roman chronicle, although a friend recovered a waterlogged trunk containing her papers and scavengers plundered the wreckage, which included large quantities of silk, almonds, and marble. They also found a seven-foot statue of the pro-slavery firebrand John C. Calhoun, a cargo that Fuller, who admired its sculptor, might have nonetheless despised.

What of Margaret Fuller's remains—literary, political, spiritual? For Allison Pataki, the protagonist of “Finding Margaret Fuller” is one in a long line of unconventional women whose stories have been suppressed or sidelined. It's not that Pataki is writing feminist polemics. Quite the opposite: her novels are sweeping, rapid, crinoline-crammed specimens of historical fiction. Her account of Fuller's life includes shafts of wit—her description of the young Thoreau as a “feral Pan” is spot on—and pays lavish attention to the natural world, which I imagine would have pleased the author of

“Summer on the Lakes.” Yet one also senses a desire to smooth out some of the oddities of Fuller’s existence, to make her story into a kind of romance.

The first chapter begins with the heroine’s early encounter with Emerson; since the record shows that he was initially put off by her appearance, I very much doubt he touched her temple or stuck a flirty flower in her hair. Nor does Pataki dwell much on Fuller’s own sense of being an ugly duckling, which surely fuelled her hyper-cerebral approach to reality, not to mention her skittishness toward sexual intimacy. The effect is to make this unconventional woman slightly more conventional. She is a creature whose blood swells and veins throb (a lot), but who seems unlikely to have written the peculiar and permanent books that Fuller did.

Randall Fuller gets closer to the core of his subject’s personality simply by focussing on her conversational impulse, and on her ecumenical vision of society. America’s first feminist icon would have found identity politics a hard pill to swallow. She tended to resist essentialism of any kind. Hence her view that gender was not an insuperable barrier but almost an accident; as she wrote in “Woman in the Nineteenth Century,” men and women were “perpetually passing into one another.”

Yet Fuller found her own identity—as a woman *and* a writer—to be a source of confusion, and sometimes constriction. “At hours,” she wrote, “I live truly as a woman; at others, I should stifle; as, on the other hand, I should palsy, when I would play the artist.” Here, she is

selling herself short. Fuller was not the first female author in American literature, and, since her talent was of a slow-germinating kind, we will never know what wonders she might have produced after her return to America. Yet she managed to fuse those two roles so completely in the public eye that they could never again be separated. Her epitaph might be a line she inscribed in her journal, after studying a portrait of the French *salonnière* Juliette Récamier: “It seems when you see a woman in a picture with a book, that she is doing exactly that for which she was born.” ♦

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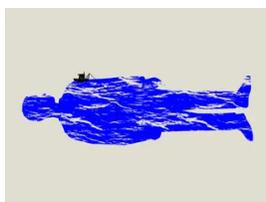
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