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Transcendentalist Women in Conversation: Margaret Fuller, Sophia Ripley, and “Woman”

Alice de Galzain

- 1 American female writers who fought for women’s rights in the first half of the nineteenth century did so in many different ways for, beyond the shared belief that social and intellectual discrimination of woman should end, every writer seemed to have her own idea about how greater equality should be achieved. Lydia Maria Child, for instance, did not always agree with her contemporaries on how far the notion of gender should be pushed. The New-Englander author of *Letters from New-York* (1841–1843) noted that “much of the talk about Women’s Rights offends both my reason and my taste. I am not of those who maintain that there is no sex in souls” (250). While she believed that there were essential differences between man and woman, Child insisted that those should not be used to justify the subordination of the latter. She denounced men’s uncontrolled tendency to aggression, lamenting “[t]hat animal instinct and brute force now govern the world, is painfully apparent in the condition of women everywhere” (247), and aligned herself with women’s rights precursor Mary Wollstonecraft, who first ascertained that in order to revolutionize the condition of woman one should also rethink the role of man.¹
- 2 Margaret Fuller also admired Wollstonecraft, to whom she paid tribute in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845), describing her as a “woman whose existence better proved the need of some new interpretation of Woman’s Rights than anything she wrote” (75). However, contrary to what Child or other contemporaries of Fuller such as Elizabeth Peabody argued against,² Fuller was very radical in her understanding of gender. In July 1843, she declared that “[m]ale and female represent the two sides of the great radical dualism. But, in fact, they are perpetually passing into one another” (2000 418). Blurring the lines between man and woman’s “separate spheres,” Fuller exposed gender as a social construct, thus anticipating modern gender theories by over a century. Of course, a chorus of women thinkers both preceded and inspired Fuller’s

ground-breaking treatise *Woman* as well as its shorter, earlier version “The Great Lawsuit. Man Versus Men. Woman Versus Women” (1843). As showcased by Phyllis Cole in “Fuller’s Lawsuit and Feminist History,” works by sisters Sarah and Angelina Grimké as well as, of course, Wollstonecraft are echoed in Fuller’s writing.

- 3 Despite adopting different approaches to the notion of gender, the texts written in the period leading up to the first women’s movement appear to have been “in conversation” with one another – a mode of exchange by which I mean the ripple effect of mutually inspiring works by women thinkers that also prompted similarly related discussions between women and men. Some of these discussions were formally organized, as is the case for Fuller’s Boston Conversations for which participants paid a fee, while others took the form of epistolary exchanges or of intimate conversations that were later recorded in journal entries.³ This essay focuses on Sophia Ripley’s article “Woman,” which was published in the *Dial* in January 1841 when Fuller was the editor, with a view to placing Ripley among that chorus of women’s rights defenders. Two years before “The Great Lawsuit” appeared in the same publication, Ripley called her readers to recognize that “[a]ll adjusting of the whole sex to a sphere is vain, for no two persons naturally have the same” and asserted that “[c]haracter, intellect create the sphere of each” (362). Opposing the predominant assumption that women belonged to a “separate” (and inherently inferior) sphere, Ripley’s powerful denunciation of well-established social conventions engages in conversation with the work of other Transcendentalist authors such as Fuller and Ralph Waldo Emerson in order to comment on issues related to woman’s individuality and education.
- 4 Ripley’s article originated from her participation in Fuller’s Boston Conversations – a series of discussions primarily for women that Fuller held between November 1839 and May 1844. Conversation was a type of exchange that Transcendentalists prized immensely and which Emerson defined in *Essays: First Series* (1841) as “a game of circles” that allows us to “pluck up the *termini* which bound the common of silence on every side,” and through which “[a]ll that we reckoned settled, shakes and rattles” (1980 184). Bruce Ronda notes that

[c]onversations, in their efforts to follow rules of engagement and their attempts to achieve brief collective harmony, together with their frequent breakdowns as codes shifted and participants broke out of their roles, may in fact be understood as the quintessential Transcendentalist expressive form. (21-22)
- 5 It is therefore no coincidence that Fuller chose that specific mode of communication for her project of conversations for women, whose goal was to “suppl[y] a point of union to well-educated and thinking women, in a city which, with great pretensions to mental refinement, boasts, at present, nothing of the kind” (1998 173), as she explained in a letter to Ripley in August 1839. Education for girls stood at the very heart of Fuller’s groundbreaking call for women’s rights. In fact, she believed it un-Christian to deny anyone an education, for enforced ignorance constituted, in her opinion, a rejection of God-given intellectual capabilities. After attending the eighteenth conversation, Peabody reported that “Miss Fuller thought it *impious* thus to speak of the gifts of God – immortal gifts of God – as if we had a right to tamper with them” (Simmons 217). In line with William Ellery Channing’s principle of “self-culture,” Fuller relied on the latter’s famous call to use our “nobler power, that of acting on, determining and forming ourselves” (11) in order to subvert the hegemonic masculine discourse of her times.

- 6 Now regarded as an extraordinary example of early feminist initiative, Fuller's encounters encouraged her female audience to reflect critically on all topics, including on "woman." As Rula Quawas pinpoints, the Conversations had a performative value for, "like contemporary lectures, [they] not only engaged the audience in a process marked by intellectual and emotional reciprocity, but they also supplied access to education from which women were excluded" (135). Originally written as homework for one of these sessions, Ripley's article deserves our attention for how powerfully it debunks the general assumptions about women that routinely circulated in antebellum America. In her article, Ripley indicts society's insistence on woman's "sweet religious sensibility, her gentle benevolence, her balmy tenderness" and questions reductive definitions of woman's destiny: "Is this woman's destiny? Is she to be the only adventurer, who pursues her course through life aimless, tossed upon the waves of circumstance, intoxicated by joy, panic-struck by misfortune, or stupidly receptive of it?" (316).
- 7 Ripley's call for woman's empowerment reads as a kind of reverberation of the objectives Fuller had set for her Conversations, which aimed "to answer the questions: What were we born to do? and how shall we do it?" (1998 173). Conversation was a fundamental aspect of Fuller's career: after all, its etymology, from the Latin *convertere*, to turn around, perfectly encapsulates the life of a thinker whose work contributed to inspire, amongst others, the rise of the women's rights movement in the United States. Fuller's work indeed had a major impact on the way in which her contemporaries wrote about "woman" – Christina Zwarg's monograph *Feminist Conversations* (1995), for instance, focuses on the way in which Emerson's conversations with Fuller shaped his views on woman. However, as Tiffany Wayne reminds us in *Woman Thinking*, it is also true that the
- social and intellectual history of Transcendentalism has been limited by a focus on Margaret Fuller as the only woman of ideas associated with the movement. Fuller usually appears as the only Transcendentalist concerned with women's issues, and her writing stands as the representative female and feminist voice of Transcendentalism. (15)
- 8 Seldom mentioned by critics, I believe that Ripley's article represents an important part of the Transcendentalist conversation on women's rights that both engages with Emerson's celebration of individuality and Fuller's feminist call for women's education. Offering an exploration of Ripley's feminist plea, I first examine how her argument is articulated around the dichotomy between "woman" and "muse," which she debunks in favor of more realistic and fairer visions of womanhood. Secondly, I compare Ripley's considerations on the reality of women in society with Fuller's and Emerson's statements on the matter, reflecting on the different ways in which Transcendentalists expressed their support for women's rights.

Impending Revelation: Ripley's Call for Women's Recognition

Of Transcendentalist Activities and Gender Dynamics

- 9 Speaking up for the cause of women's rights was a courageous act: as Fuller observed, it was an exercise "from which women usually shrink, because, if they express

themselves on such subjects with sufficient force and cleanness to do any good, they are exposed to assaults whose vulgarity makes them painful” (1998 67). After the publication of *Woman*, Child similarly commented that these were “subjects which men do not wish to have discussed, and which women dare not approach” (Fuller, 1998 220). With this in mind, it is important to note that Ripley’s “Woman” not only acted as a precursor to both Fuller’s “Great Lawsuit” and *Woman*, but it also preceded the women’s movement by almost ten years. In fact, according to the standard narrative, first-wave feminism begins with the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention, during which Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and many others signed the now famous “Declaration of Sentiment.” Before then, American society’s views on gender were based on the “Cult of True Womanhood” – an ideology which confined women to the hearth by circumscribing “womanhood” to notions of self-sacrifice, passivity, and marital love. As Susan M. Cruea explains, there was an inherent contradiction in the True Woman for while she “was assumed to be a pillar of moral strength and virtue, she was also portrayed as delicate and weak, prone to fainting and illness” (189). Ripley alludes to this in her article:

everywhere, we hear the same oft-repeated things said upon them by those who have little perception of the difficulties of the subject; and even the clergy have frequently flattered “the feeble sex,” by proclaiming to them from the pulpit what lovely things they may become, if they will only be good, quiet, and gentle, attend exclusively to their domestic duties. (314)

In other words, women at the time were solely associated with and praised for what related to the domestic (the maternal, the matrimonial, the ornamental); but it was time for women to be seen as a lot more than that.

- 10 In “Her Cause Against Herself,” Adam-Max Tuchinsky notes that, in the title of Emerson’s famous 1837 address “The American Scholar,” the adjective “American” stands for “democracy” for it was precisely the role of a public intellectual in a democratic society that Emerson was describing. Yet what was the role, or even the space, allowed to women in that democracy? Not only were women denied basic legal rights such as the right to own property, but they were also the object of social and intellectual forms of oppression. Many areas of the public sphere were closed to them – politics and higher education being the most emblematic of a long list. In the first half of the nineteenth century, women still were, for instance, excluded from the lecture stage: while present when Emerson delivered his speeches, women were confined to other sorts of platforms that were deemed more appropriate for them, such as “conversation.” As David Randall explains in *The Concept of Conversation: From Cicero’s Sermo to the Grand Siècle’s Conversation*, over the years conversation gradually went from being a widely respected intellectual form of expression to being denigratingly associated with what was then referred to as “women’s sphere.” A recent *Washington Post* article on “How women invented book clubs” shows that traces of that are still present in today’s society, where the “book club, dismissed as a feminine, frivolous time to drink wine and gossip is also a radical activity: a rare place where women have long been able to engage with the transformative power of books” (McHugh). Therefore, no matter how much Fuller’s *Conversations* were a success, it is important to bear in mind that it was one of the only genres that was considered “suitable” for women. Lectures, on the other hand, were regarded as more appropriately male and were, unsurprisingly, favored by Emerson and the other male members of the Transcendental Club (Henry David Thoreau, William Ellery Channing, etc.). The sense of

agency that derived from lecturing was seen as essentially “masculine” to such an extent that in “the eyes of their contemporaries, antebellum women risked their ‘womanhood’ by becoming public speakers” (Quawas 133). Quawas indeed remarks that by “[a]ssuming the authoritative position of lecturer and educator to adults” Fuller “was trespassing on male intellectual and professional domains” and as “a subverter of the rationale of the hegemonic masculine discourse, she was described in the same terms as the pioneering women abolitionists whose public appearances first provoked the American controversy over women’s right to speak in public” (133).

- 11 Although they were exceptional trailblazers in philosophical, religious, and social matters, one should try and avoid falling into what John Matteson has described as the “lazy but seductive habit of supposing that the heroes of American Transcendentalism were simply a crowd of twenty-first century liberals” (33). In fact, even though “every Transcendentalist was ready, and indeed had good reason, to assert that there was ‘no sex in souls’” (677) as Caroline Healey Dall explained in a lecture in 1895, men and women Transcendentalists lived very different sorts of lives depending on their sex. When, in March 1841, Sophia and her husband George Ripley (founder of Brook Farm) hosted the only series of Fuller’s Conversations that also involved men,⁴ it turned out to be quite an unsuccessful experiment, as it served to reveal the gender imbalance of the Transcendentalist group. Thanks to Dall’s notes on that specific series, we know that introducing men to the Conversations made both its participants and host suffer from the banes of unequal gender dynamics, as men started interrupting women and dialog became a lot less fluid than it used to be when Fuller’s audience was limited to her female students. As Dall reported, “Margaret [...] never enjoyed this mixed class, and considered it a failure so far as her own power was concerned. She and Mr. Emerson met like Pyramus and Thisbe, a blank wall between” (1895 13). It seems, in fact, as though men and women struggled to adjust to this very peculiar atmosphere of inverted gender dynamics: “Emerson,” noted Dall, “pursued his own train of thought. He seemed to forget that we had come together to pursue Margaret’s” (1895 46).
- 12 Fuller’s “Great Lawsuit,” which had been written so that “[a]s men become aware that all men have not had their fair chance, they are inclined to say that no woman have had a fair chance” (2000 7), had a strong impact on male Transcendentalists. After its publication in 1843, Emerson reported that “H.D. Thoreau, who will never like anything” thought “‘Miss F’s is a noble piece, rich extempore writing, talking with pen in hand’” (1939 vol. 3 183). Despite being complimentary in tone, the expression “talking with pen in hand” in Thoreau’s comment makes it sound condescending, for it undermines Fuller’s writing by portraying it as more casual and improvised in nature than it should. On the other hand, Emerson found “the piece very proper and noble, and itself quite an important fact in the history of Woman: It will teach us all to revise our habits of thinking on this head” (1939 vol. 3 183). The term “habits,” to which Emerson refers here in the first-person plural, is an allusion to that series of misconceptions about women that still altered men’s judgement, preventing the vast majority of them from seeing women as equals. As Matteson pinpoints:

Emerson wrote from within a culture that firmly associated womanhood with externality, both because perceptions of women were too often inseparable from female sexual characteristics and because women themselves were generally supposed to maintain a worldview fixated on outward appearances. (34)

It is precisely the set of “habits” mentioned by Emerson that Ripley wished to uproot in her 1841 *Dial* article on “Woman,” in which she debunked the concept of a “sphere of a woman” (314) and indicted its degrading and limiting nature.

Woman and the Muse

- 13 Together with recognition, Ripley and other women were clearly hoping to overthrow such limiting definitions of “womanhood” and aimed to open the eyes of both their male and female counterparts, as shown by the numerous allusions to the notion of “revelation” in their writings. After the publication of *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, for instance, Caroline Sturgis wrote to Fuller that “[i]t makes me sad that it is necessary such an one should be written but since it is so it cannot but do good to lift the veil as you have done – how hard a thing to do!” (qtd. in Fuller, 1998 207). Four years earlier, Ripley also expressed the wish that society’s perception of women could become more just. The metaphor of the lifting of the veil, symbolizing an imminent revelation, is present in Ripley’s text through the use of verbs like “penetrate” and of verb phrases like “tell the world” and “brought to light,” as she imagines a future where “[b]lessed indeed would that man be, who could penetrate the difficulties of this subject, and tell the world faithfully and beautifully what new thing he has discovered about it, or what old truth he has brought to light” (314). The combination of the idea of “revelation” and of “penetration” efficiently reminds the reader that it is gender dynamics that are at stake. Similarly, in an article entitled “Femality” that was published in *The Pathfinder* in March 1843, which Fuller quoted both in “The Great Lawsuit” and in *Woman*, we find an analogous desire of wanting to return to a somewhat pre-lapsarian state of gender equality: “the whole end of general, long-during revolution, is to restore the rightful association, with all its accompanying harmonies and beatitudes” (Vethake 35). According to *The Pathfinder* article, society had somehow forgotten about “the rightful association” of the sexes: the belief that a revelation would restore in it the knowledge of “harmonies and beatitudes” is evocative of a kind of Platonic type of reminiscence. Fuller was a keen reader of Plato, as she described in a letter to Sturgis: “Plato’s thoughts have, indeed, so passed into our intellectual life that I feel as if only returning to my native mountain air while with these philosophers and cannot be quite enough of a disciple (1995 vol. 2 40). Unity between the sexes, as outlined in Aristophanes’ myth in *The Symposium*, possibly provided Fuller with a picture of harmony between that also appealed to her when reading “Femality.”
- 14 For Ripley, the impeding “revelation” consisted in society’s overdue acknowledgment that a woman is simply not a “muse.” Her opposition to such idealization is uncompromising: “the poet’s lovely vision of an ethereal being, hovering half seen above him, in his hour of occupation, [...] is not woman, she is only the spiritualized image of that tender class of women he loves the best” (314). Of course, everyone understood the word “muse” as referring to either a Greek goddess or simply a guiding genius but, according to Ripley, some also tended to believe that woman was – or should be – similarly ethereal. Ripley’s article therefore warns us about the danger of such an idealization and repeatedly insists on the fact that the ideal woman, as is the one created by artists, is not real: the poet “knows [woman] not as she is and must be” (314). As noted by Barbara Welter, “[w]omanhood was believed to be, in principle, a higher, nobler state than manhood, since it was less directly related to the body and was more involved with the spirit” (95), which was in turn used as argument to

discriminate her. It is too easy, too cruel, Ripley explained, to set an unrealistic ideal for the whole sex and then condemn those who don't meet a canon that was not rooted in reality in the first place: "if the poet could ever be unkind, we should deem him most so when he reproves the sex [...] for its departure from this high, beatified ideal of his, to which he loves to give the name of woman" (314). As well as condemning such attitude, Ripley called for men to be supportive companions and for women to assert themselves as individuals, freeing themselves from the male gaze: "Her own individuality should be as precious to her as [man's] love. Let her see that the best our most sympathising friend can do for us is, to throw a genial atmosphere around us, [...] but our path can never be another's, and we must always walk alone" (317). This invitation to celebrate woman's "own individuality" reads as a feminist interpretation by Ripley of Emerson's earlier remarks in "The American Scholar" on "the new importance given to the single person" (1971 68).

- 15 In the article from *The Pathfinder* mentioned earlier, moralizing attitudes that simultaneously discriminate are also called out, as the author explains that "[a]t the time of, and evidently incidental to the FALL, clothing began; and with it, as a matter of course, moral concealment, deception, misrepresentation and falsehood". The author condemns the hypocrisy of those who "degrade Femality," defined as "significant of the whole expansive female world," "by every possible device and expedient; while a labored and hypocritical adoration is abundantly enacted towards *the sex*" (Vethake 35). It is worth noting that Fuller expressed a similar concern about male artists in "The Great Lawsuit" where she focused on one that, together with Emerson, she particularly admired, Dante Alighieri. She did not straightaway condemn idealizing love between woman and man: "In Italy, the great poets wove into their lives an ideal love which answered to the highest wants. It included those of the intellect and the affections, for it was a love of spirit for spirit" (2000 404). Fuller described how that "ideal love" that poets spoke about "was not ascetic and superhuman, but interpreting all things" and added that the Italian poet spoke of woman "not only as the bride of his heart, but the mother of his soul" (2000 404). However, Fuller also noted that "even with such men the practice was often widely different from the mental faith" (404) and highlighted the contrast between ideal life and real life, mentioning that "Dante, almost immediately after the death of Beatrice, married a lady chosen for him by his friends" (2000 405). After the death of his beloved in 1290, Dante had indeed married another woman called Gemma Donati (2000 426). Interestingly, Emerson once compared Fuller to Beatrice in his journal, where he wrote that "whilst Dante's 'Nuova Vita' is almost unique in the literature of sentiment, I have called the imperfect record [Fuller] gave me of two of her days, 'Nuovissima Vita'" (Fuller, 1998 191). That is perhaps foreboding of the critical way in which Emerson would later describe the presence of sentiment in Fuller's writing in the posthumous biography he wrote with James Freeman Clarke and William Henry Channing, *Memoirs of Margaret Fuller Ossoli* (1852). In a section of *Memoirs* entitled "Letters," Emerson summarized his critique of Fuller's writing declaring that "[i]n short, Margaret often loses herself in sentimentalism" (280). He added that although "[h]er integrity was perfect, and she was led and followed by love, and was really bent on truth," she was "too indulgent to the meteors of her fancy" (280). "Sentiment," from the Latin *sentire* (to feel), denotes a degree of physicality that Fuller juxtaposed in her writing to more idealized versions of "womanhood" (she used the Greek goddess Minerva, a symbol for strength, as an instrument for female

empowerment); and yet that degree of physicality, as Ripley states in her article, was often rejected in favor of often male-produced purified visions of women.

Transcendentalists in Conversation: Of Social Expectations and Woman's Education

Of Contemplative Lives and Faithful Wives: Discordant Visions of Womanhood

- 16 Even for Transcendentalists, there were expectations linked to women specifically that differed from those related to men. In Emerson's writings, women are indeed often associated with poetry, as is the case in a letter he wrote to Fuller in June 1840: "A woman in every part beautiful is a *practical poet*, is she not? awakening tenderness & hope & poetry in all whom she approaches" (1939 vol. 2 336). Echoes of that can be found in Emerson's first official address on "Woman," written for the Second Annual New England Women's Rights Convention in 1855, where the association between women and poetry is reiterated:

There is no gift of nature without some drawback [...]. More vulnerable, more infirm, more mortal than men, they could not be such excellent artists in this element of fancy if they did not lend and give themselves to it. They are poets who believe their own poetry. They emit from their pores a colored atmosphere, one would say, wave upon wave of rosy light, in which they walk evermore, and see all objects through this warm-tinted mist that envelops them. (2008 160)

- 17 Emerson's views on women's rights were progressive for his time and he always openly declared himself in favor of women's vote; however, his remarks appear particularly problematic when compared to the more radical stances adopted by some of his female contemporaries. After listening to Emerson's lecture on "Being and Seeming," Child perceived double standards that she felt Emerson was unjustly setting for women and men: in *Letters from New-York*, she recounted how he had "urged women to *be*, rather than *seem* ... [for] all this *seeming* world would not *gain hearts* like *being* truly what God made them" (237). Child expressed her disapproval: although the "advice was excellent, [...] the motive, by which it was urged, brought of flush of indignation over my face" (237). She explained that while "[m]en were exhorted to *be*, rather than to *seem*, that they might fulfil the sacred mission for which their souls were embodied; [...] women were urged to simplicity and truthfulness, that they might become more *pleasing*" (237). One could make a similar point about Emerson's definition of "women" as "poets who believe their own poetry" in the aforementioned 1855 address, in which Emerson stated that women have an inherently poetic nature, an innate tendency to receive inspiration. That essentialist view of womanhood is not surprising for the time; however, what is worth noting, is that Emerson's argument that women are "poets who believe their own poetry" equates their artistic sensitivity to a certain type of weakness ("drawback"), which suggests women's vulnerability ("more infirm") and implicitly serves to justify their inferiority to men ("more mortal than men"). While the anaphoric repetition of the adjective "more" - "more vulnerable, more infirm, more mortal" - reinforces the idea of women's supposed weakness, phrases like "emit from their pores" and "warm-tinted mist that envelops them" hint at a certain passivity inherent in women, as if their talent were something they display inadvertently. At some other point in the address, Emerson also states that "Man is the will, and Woman

the sentiment” (2008 158). Now, as Len Gougeon commented in one of the first articles published on the subject, for “Emerson, the power of sentiment is not insignificant. In fact, it is an expression of mankind’s intuitive strength and divinity,” which for women “expresses itself in marriage, art, and education, and through those activities, women play a fundamental part in shaping society” (580-581). Unfortunately, as Gougeon also suggested, “[i]t is this sensitivity that Emerson fears will be compromised if women pursue a more public role” (580-581): in fact, as he wrote in a letter to Paulina Wright Davis in 1851, Emerson believed that “[p]erhaps I am superstitious & traditional, but whilst I should vote every franchise for women, —vote that they should hold property, vote, yes & be eligible to all offices as men—whilst I should vote thus, if women asked, or if men denied [...] these things, I should not wish women to wish political functions, nor, if granted assume them” (qtd. in Gougeon 575). Such were the barriers that stood between women and equality in antebellum America for, even within the most progressive circles, men were still reluctant to grant the opposite sex all the rights afforded to male citizens. Emerson’s apologetic opening – “[p]erhaps I am superstitious & traditional” – suggests that he was at least aware of the limitations of his own thought on the subject.

- 18 In response to this kind of problematic reverence, Ripley stated that there was nothing ideal in the vision of woman as aloof from everything. In a swift rhetorical move, she attempted to redefine the concept of “ideal woman” herself and described her as someone who is totally immersed in culture:

Thought should be her atmosphere; books her food; friends her occasional solace. Prosperity will not dazzle her, for her own spirit is always brighter than its sunshine, and if the deepest sorrow visits her, it will only come to lift her to a higher region, where, with all of life far beneath her, she may sit regally apart till the end. Is this the ideal of a perfect woman, and if so, how does it differ from a perfect man? (366)

- 19 Over and over, Ripley debunked the vision of woman as someone who lives a purely “contemplative life,” reminding her readers that women do, in fact, work: she openly critiqued the invisibilization of women’s domestic labour, pinpointing “that in the spot where man throws aside his heavy responsibilities, his couch of rest is often prepared by his faithful wife, at the sacrifice of all her quiet contemplation and leisure” (315). As Wayne remarks, domestic labour took a toll on “individual thinkers” like Ripley and Fuller, “[b]ut, unlike the majority of their peers, all eventually found themselves in circumstances that either allowed them some freedom to pursue writing and lecturing or, in fact, financially compelled them to pursue such activities in order to support their families” (Wayne 76). In Ripley’s article, the point made about women’s work is very interestingly combined with a plea in favor of woman’s contemplative life. On the one hand, Ripley deplores that “if there is a being exposed to turmoil and indurating care, it is woman, in the retirement of her own home” for her “life is usually bustle and hurry, or barren order, dreary decorum and method, without vitality” (316). On the other hand, she argues that woman “should be seen [...] calmly contemplating beauty in all its forms, studying the harmony of life, as well as of outward nature, deciding nothing, learning all things, gradually forming her own ideal” (317). Ripley hoped that women would be able to benefit from contemplative life as much as men did and in that way she also indicted the false belief that a life of domesticity equalled a life of intellectual satisfaction. Her reference to Emerson’s writings on contemplative life is implicit; while in “The American Scholar,” Emerson stated that “[a]ction is within the

scholar subordinate” (1971 94), he added in 1850 that “[i]f I were to compare action of a much higher strain with a life of contemplation, I should not venture to pronounce with much confidence in favour of the former. Mankind have such a deep stake in inward illumination” (1987 266). While Emerson deemed it less satisfactory, he nonetheless viewed the domestic sphere as belonging to both men and women – Leslie Eckel explains that “[b]y exploding the idea of ‘home’ in his early lecture on ‘Home,’ Emerson reframes the domestic sphere as a shared habitation for men and women in their pursuit of a ‘deeper Home’ that sheltered both physical selves and spiritual principles” (191). Interestingly, the corollary to that finding according to Eckel is that “[o]nce the home is endowed with global significance, mere housework becomes drudgery for women as well as for men – a point Emerson underscores in a chapter on ‘Domestic Life’” (191). Although Eckel compellingly demonstrates that Emerson saw the “home” as a locus of private transformation regardless of gender, I believe that the home also functioned as the fulcrum of essentialist views, which he expressed in his women’s rights addresses. Describing woman’s “organic office,” Emerson stated in 1855 that because of women’s nature,

[t]he life of the affections is primary to them, so that there is usually no employment or career which they will not, with their own applause and that of society, quit for a suitable marriage. And they give entirely to their affections; [...] lose themselves eagerly in the glory of their husbands and children. (2001 19-20)

In his “Discours Manqué,” a second address on women’s rights written after 1865, he reiterated: “The part which women play in education, in the care of young, and the tuition of older children, is their organic office in the world” (2001 17).

A Transcendentalist Call for Women’s Rights: Ripley on Education and Self-Assertion

- 20 Commenting on domestic life, Ripley suggests the oppressive conviction that woman only exists as “a faithful wife” had somehow entered the mind of women themselves, as a sort of self-confidence crisis: she acknowledges this by stating that “[v]ery few of her sex suspect even how noble and beautiful is that which they legitimately occupy, for they are early deprived of the privilege of seeing things as they are” (315). In a letter to Fuller written in July 1839, Emerson made a similar observation and remarked: “Is it not wonderful what inspirations women have... If they would only hold themselves at their own price, if they would not subdue their sentiments, the age of heroes would come at once!” (1939 vol. 2 210-211). In both Ripley’s and Emerson’s depictions, women appear as lacking the confidence to believe in their own powers and as unaware of their capabilities. Certainly, this was the clear consequence of gender discrimination: as Ripley explains, “[w]oman is educated with the tacit understanding, that she is only half a being, and an appendage” (315). Yet that oppressive teaching seems to have penetrated women’s mind at a much deeper level which might be best explained through Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of “symbolic violence”. According to Bourdieu, “symbolic violence” is

a gentle violence, imperceptible and invisible even to its victims, exerted [...] not in the pure logic of knowing consciousness but through the schemes of perception, appreciation and action that are constitutive of habitus and which, below the levels of the decisions of the consciousness and the controls of the will, set up a cognitive relationship that is profoundly obscure to itself. (Burawoy 113)

In other words, symbolic violence is a form of oppression that the oppressed “chooses” unconsciously to perform on him- or herself. Forced to live in ignorance and told repeatedly to stay out of the public sphere, women started believing that themselves.

- 21 With woman deprived of fundamental rights, Ripley deplorably declared that in “our present state of society woman possesses not; she is under possession” (315). In her plea, Ripley explained how a proper education would put an end to this state of numbness in which woman found herself silent and confined, for Ripley knew that while “[h]is wish is law, hers only the unavailing sigh uttered in secret” (316). The use of the word “law” indicates that what was happening within the walls of the home was also reflected at state-level, in a democracy which still did not recognize woman as a complete, dignified entity. Ripley’s lucidity with regards to the dynamics of gender oppression is astounding: “In the common course of events she [woman] is selected as the life-companion of some one of the other sex; because selected, she fixes her affections upon him, and hardly ventures to exercise upon him even her powers of observation” (364). Ripley’s powerful indictment makes clear that without the ability to reflect critically, which she would develop through a proper education, woman would never be free. Through a series of vigorous rhetorical questions, Ripley asks: “Why is she not encouraged to think and penetrate through externals to principles?” (317). Her exhortation to educate women comes with a kind reassurance to those who fear such a drastic change: “The faults of those she loves should never be veiled by her affection, but placed in their true relation to character, by the deep insight with which she penetrates beneath them. With high heroic courage, she should measure the strength” (317). Ripley and fellow Transcendentalists – female and male – understood very well that it was fundamental that women were granted the right to education: the fact that the verb “penetrate” is repeated four times in Ripley’s article epitomizes her belief in the pivotal importance of education in the fight against gender discrimination. In *Woman*, Fuller was indeed uncompromising about the fact that “it should be acknowledged that [women] have intellect which needs developing; that they should not be considered completed if being of affection and habit alone” (56). When the idea of a series of conversations came to her, Fuller similarly outlined the need “[t]o systemize thought and give a precision in which our sex are so deficient, chiefly, I think because they have so few inducements to test and classify what they receive” (1998 173). She knew how important it was to allow women to develop critical thinking and to compensate for a purposeful, societal lack of institutions that would do the same: with her *Conversations*, Fuller aimed indeed at “supplying a point of union to well-educated and thinking women in a city which, with great pretensions to mental refinement, boasts at present nothing of the kind” (1998 86).
- 22 Aware of the privilege of having received an education, Ripley, Fuller, and other women continued to extend that opportunity to those who weren’t as lucky. In 1844, one year after “The Great Lawsuit” appeared in the *Dial*, Fuller visited the women prisoners of Sing Sing. The experience left a strong (positive) mark on Fuller, and she compared meeting these women with her discussions for women in Boston: “They were among the so-called worst, but nothing could be more decorous than their conduct, and frank too. All passed much as in one of my Boston Classes” (1995 vol. 3 237). In the same letter, written to Elizabeth Hoar in October 1844, Fuller acknowledged that her “path had been a favored one” compared to the majority of women of that time. With regards to the standard of women’s education in the first half of the nineteenth

century, Fuller represented in fact an exception: her father Timothy had brought her up in a way that was most often reserved only for boys – by the age of ten, Fuller could read in several European languages. As she would later describe in her “Autobiographical Romance,” Fuller’s upbringing was as rigorous as it was exhausting for a young child: despite being such a bright and talented young woman, however, Fuller did not go to Harvard College like her brothers and male friends did. She did, nonetheless, become the first woman granted access and reading privileges at Harvard’s library. Similarly, Ripley was a rare example of a highly educated woman; however, she was also denied a college education, unlike her husband who was in his final year at Harvard Divinity School when they first met. Fuller’s – and Ripley’s – commitment to women’s education was utterly democratic in that it went beyond class and aimed to fight discrimination of gender, race, or poverty. A month after her visit, Fuller wrote directly to the women inmates of Sing Sing and asserted, once again, the redemptive quality of culture:

I hope you will accept these books as a token that, though on returning to the world you may have much to encounter from the prejudices of the unthinking, yet there are many who will be glad to encourage you to begin a new career, and redeem the past by living lives of wise and innocent acts, useful to your fellow-creatures and fit for being gifted with immortal souls. (1998 205)

- 23 The work of women Transcendentalists like Ripley and Fuller should be regarded as acts of social reformism, for they attempted to create a space for women which did not exist before. While Fuller’s *Conversations* encouraged women to rethink their role in society by countering the common belief that women were mere “ornaments” (Simmons 217), Ripley’s article on “Woman” insisted on the pivotal role of education and urged readers to view women as intellectual beings. Not only do the works of Transcendentalist women appear to have been in conversation with one another, but the circular exchange also impacted the wider Transcendentalist community. Published in January 1841, Ripley’s article preceded just by a few months the creation of the famous utopian, Transcendentalist community Brook Farm. As Sterling Delano explains, Brook Farm women enjoyed freedom from the prevailing social and religious expectations that defined the “Cult of True Womanhood” in antebellum America. And just like Ripley’s ideas shaped that experiment, Brook Farm in turn influenced Fuller, who “had visited the West Roxbury community in October 1842, months before ‘The Great Lawsuit’ was published in the *Dial*” (153).
- 24 In the longer term, by calling out society’s discriminatory practices and asserting the need for a fair rebalancing of the polis, writings like Fuller’s and Ripley’s inspired women for decades to fight for their rights. Fuller confuted the prevailing claim that woman was inferior to man stating that “[t]here is no wholly masculine man, no purely feminine woman” (1998 69); she revolted against the fact that women should find themselves in a state of forced ignorance and subsequent inferiority and touched upon the notion that gender might be more socially construed than people liked to think. The way in which Dall reflected back on Fuller’s death, in a lecture on “Transcendentalism in New England” delivered almost fifty years after the incident, shows how strong an impact Fuller had on the history of the first women’s movement: “The tragedy of 1850 swallowed carelessly much that we held precious; but it promised more, and the glory of Margaret’s life did not perish” (680). What’s more, Fuller became a major reference for second-wave feminists and echoes of *Woman* can be heard in Simone de Beauvoir’s famous statement that “[o]ne is not born, but rather becomes, a

woman” (283). As recent studies conducted by Cole and other scholars have shown, we know that the mark of Fuller’s theories on the history of feminism can be traced up to Judith Butler’s gender performativity and beyond. With this article, I hope to have provided supporting evidence that will allow us to add Sophia Ripley to the list of precursors to the first American women’s movement and to later moments of feminist history.

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NOTES

1. See "Hailing a New Man: The Rights of Women, Constructions of Masculinity and Solidarity" by Katharina Rennhak, in which she "suggest[s] that in *Rights of Woman* and *Wrongs of Woman* Wollstonecraft invests quite some energy in the project of reforming heterosexual males, since without a reconstruction of masculinity the 'revolution in female manners' does not seem possible" (183).
2. For a comparison of Peabody's and Fuller's views, see Judith Strong Albert's "The Debate in Women's Studies: Contradictory Role Models in The Nineteenth Century – Margaret Fuller and Elizabeth Peabody."
3. See, for instance, Fuller's 1842 and 1844 journal entries on her conversations with Emerson in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century: An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds, Criticism* (1988).
4. Caroline Healey Dall's notes from that specific series appear in a book entitled *Margaret and Her Friends: Or Ten Conversations with Margaret Fuller upon the Mythology of the Greeks and Its Expression in Art, Held at the House of the Rev. George Ripley Boston, Beginning March 1, 1841*, published in 1895.

ABSTRACTS

This essay focuses on Sophia Ripley's 1841 article "Woman," which was published in the *Dial* two years before Margaret Fuller's "The Great Lawsuit. Man Versus Men. Woman Versus Women" appeared in the same publication. Originally written as homework for one of Fuller's Boston Conversations (1839-1844), Ripley's plea in favor of women's right to education perfectly epitomizes the polyphonic nature of feminist social advances in antebellum America. Inspired by Fuller's feminist reinterpretation of William Ellery Channing's concept of "self-culture," viewing education as a means to improve woman's condition, Ripley's text debunks the concept of "separate spheres" and urges readers to consider women as intellectual beings rather than through the prism of the idealized, unrealistic "muse." Inscribing Ripley's article as part of the feminist stride of the Transcendental movement, I will illustrate the similarities between Ripley's

argument, Fuller's, and that of other women Transcendentalists, while also confronting it with what Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote on the subject.

Cet essai s'intéresse à « Woman », article écrit par Sophia Ripley et publié dans la revue transcendentaliste *Dial* en janvier 1841, deux ans avant que n'y paraisse le célèbre essai de Margaret Fuller « The Great Lawsuit. Man Versus Men. Woman Versus Women ». À la fois dans sa conception et dans son contenu, le texte de Ripley illustre parfaitement la nature polyphonique des avancées féministes qui marquèrent la première moitié du XIX^e siècle aux États-Unis. Initialement rédigé comme devoir pour une des célèbres Conversations de Fuller (1839-1844), « Woman » est un appel en faveur de l'éducation des femmes qui s'inspire de la réinterprétation féministe du principe de « self-culture » de William Ellery Channing par Fuller. Fortement opposée au concept sexiste de « sphères séparées », Ripley critique ceux qui idéalisent la femme au point de l'élever au rang de « muse » et appelle les lecteurs à remplacer ce type de vision idéalisatrice et délétère par une définition plus réaliste et digne. En inscrivant Ripley dans la lignée féministe du mouvement transcendentaliste, l'essai entend examiner la façon dont ses propos font écho à ceux de Fuller et d'autres femmes transcendentalistes, mais cherche aussi à mettre « Woman » en perspective avec ce que Ralph Waldo Emerson a écrit à ce sujet.

INDEX

Subjects: Hors-thème

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