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## REFERENCES

Randall Fuller, *Bright Circle: Five Remarkable Women in the Age of Transcendentalism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024, 416 p., ISBN: 9780192843630 (Print); £24.99.

- <sup>1</sup> *Bright Circle* tells the story of five remarkable women whose ideas helped shape the intellectual, literary, philosophical, religious, and political landscapes of the nineteenth-century United States. Mary Moody Emerson (1774-1863), Elizabeth Palmer Peabody (1804-1894), Sophia Peabody (1809-1871), Lydia Jackson Emerson (1802-1892), and Margaret Fuller (1810-1850) are the five protagonists of this magnificent biography. Beautifully written and uniquely enriched with a large number of color illustrations (eighty in total), Randall Fuller's vivid portrayal of the lives and careers of these exceptional thinkers, writers, and activists is bound to captivate both specialist and non-specialist audiences.
- <sup>2</sup> Titled after the "bright circle" of women who assembled in Elizabeth Peabody's bookshop to participate in Margaret Fuller's famous "Conversations"—a series of discussions by and for women, which ran for five years in the early 1840s—Randall Fuller's book celebrates these women's contributions to Transcendentalism and US culture, depicting how they defied the constraints of nineteenth-century gender norms and asserted themselves as prominent intellectuals in antebellum society. By emphasizing the concept of "circle," which has been a leitmotif in Margaret Fuller studies for quite some time,<sup>1</sup> Fuller inscribes his work in a half-a-century-long tradition of feminist scholarship, conducted by Bell Gale Chevigny, Phyllis Cole, Joel Myerson, to name a few, who started the mastodont task of resurrecting the work of these women

writers during second-wave feminism. It also follows in the footsteps of a number of groundbreaking biographies, such as Cole's *Mary Moody Emerson and the Origins of Transcendentalism* (2002), Patricia Valenti's *Sophia Peabody Hawthorne* (2004; 2015), Megan Marshall's *The Peabody Sisters* (2005) and *Margaret Fuller: An American Life* (2014).

- 3 *Bright Circle* convincingly and engagingly relates how the Transcendentalist movement's foundational ideas, long solely ascribed to Ralph Waldo Emerson, William Ellery Channing, Henry David Thoreau, Theodore Parker and so forth, were in fact shaped as much by women as they were by men. Choosing to name Lydia Jackson Emerson "Lydia" instead of the traditionally adopted version "Lidian"—as Ralph Waldo Emerson, her husband, liked to call her—reflects the author's overall desire to break free from long-lasting male-dominated narratives about these women's stories. While they were long referred to merely as "friends" or "wives," and considered secondary within a movement led and carried forth by "male genius," Fuller reverses such narrative completely. In fact, there is almost no talk about marriage or private life in the book's introduction: Randall Fuller's focus is on these women's careers and on their "brilliant if often forgotten contributions to the culture of the United States" (7).
- 4 In the opening chapter, titled "Mary Moody Emerson Among the Stars," Fuller compellingly relates the life of the pioneer of Transcendentalism. "A completely original precursor" (9), Mary Moody Emerson, who was a generation older than the rest of the bright circle, is the exceptional thinker and writer from whom Transcendentalist philosophy originated. Mary Moody "recognized the importance of Romantic thought before almost anyone in America" (9)—she was a profoundly passionate reader of William Wordsworth—and celebrated the individual's capacity to be at one with nature and the divine. Mary Moody's name pervades the entire book for so major was her impact; she played a defining role in the emergence of Transcendentalism, namely because she mentored one of its leading figures, her nephew Ralph Waldo. Indeed, she is the person to whom Ruth Haskins Emerson entrusted her young son when his father William died of tuberculosis, leaving her destitute and full of debts. Mary Moody and Waldo shared a deep intellectual bond, and Fuller goes into great detail about how their ongoing correspondence played a pivotal role in Waldo's development as a writer and thinker: Emerson's *Nature* (1836), Fuller asserts, "[is] Mary's as much as it is Waldo's" (63). The question of whether this constituted "appropriation" is one that the chapter grapples with, and while Fuller does not give a definite answer, he concludes, rather diplomatically, that "[w]e do not have an adequate term for this generative process of imitation" (51).
- 5 Following Mary Moody's search for the "Stars," *Bright Circle*'s second chapter takes us to an earthlier kind of locus: "Elizabeth Palmer Peabody at 13 West Street." Allowing us quite literally into the premises of Elizabeth's childhood home, her "fifth-floor chamber overlook[ing] slate roofs and dusty elms and the cobbled Boston streets" (80), the chapter begins with a powerful rendition of Eliza Peabody's feminist vision for her daughter's education and culminates with the establishment of Elizabeth's West Street bookshop, the heart of the Transcendentalist club and meeting place of Fuller's Conversations. As Randall Fuller explains, by creating the bookshop, Peabody "had created the conditions for the Bright Circle of women who would shape the contours of transcendentalism and help build American feminism" (127). In addition to describing Peabody's genial intellect and her entrepreneurial and unstoppable dynamism, Fuller insists on the importance of Peabody's contributions to American theology: "Elizabeth's

first three essays on the Hebrew scriptures represent an important moment in American intellectual history” (96). He writes in great depth about her friendship with the Reverend William Ellery Channing, whose sermons Peabody contributed to inspire, and sets the record straight by highlighting that it was Elizabeth Peabody, not Frederick Henry Hedge, who first coined the term Transcendentalism.

- 6 In keeping with Fuller’s desire to portray these women’s stories outside of male-dominated narratives, the chapter “Sophia Peabody’s Cuba Journal”—note the absence of her husband’s surname in the title—relates Sophia’s development as an artist and a writer, centering on her fascinating descriptive accounts (comprising 56 letters and a total of more than 900 pages) of the time she spent in Cuba, where she moved with her sister Mary in 1833 to recover from poor health. Fuller reminds us of how exceptional Sophia Peabody’s achievements were—“she was among a handful of women in the United States to make a living as a painter”—and highlights how her Cuba journal, “part travelogue, part bildungsroman, part memoir [...] is also one of the earliest works of transcendentalist nature writing we have, anticipating Waldo Emerson’s *Nature* by two years and Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* by more than a decade” (129). Fuller is also very clear about what the Cuba Journal did not do: Sophia rarely addressed the reality of slavery and the entire economy that profited from slaves’ labor, for “[s]he considered art and politics incompatible and showed little interest in the island’s economy and history” (153). Furthermore, Fuller meticulously traces the transformation in Sophia’s perspective on women’s roles—from her initial involvement in Margaret Fuller’s *Conversations* to her later disavowal of feminist ideals after marrying Nathaniel Hawthorne, when she criticized *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845) and left painting behind in favor of a more traditional domestic life.
- 7 The opening pages of *Bright Circle*’s fourth chapter are a testament to Randall Fuller’s beautifully evocative prose: the chapter begins with a rich and immersive account detailing the harsh winter conditions (the biting cold temperatures, the snow-covered roads) that Lydia Jackson Emerson had to brave when she commuted from Concord to Boston to attend Fuller’s *Conversations* in November 1839. Such description illuminates a rarely considered reality: the physical challenges women faced simply to participate in cultural life. Another notable fact about the chapter’s opening section is that it is almost entirely void of references to Lydia’s famous husband. Focused on Lydia’s political views, Fuller delays any mention of Ralph Waldo Emerson until four pages in. The chapter, titled “Lydia Jackson Emerson’s Marriage of Heaven and Hell,” does eventually tell the story of their union—from the marriage proposal and joyful early years to the birth of their children. It also confronts the devastating loss of their five-year-old son Waldo, and Lydia’s growing annoyance with Transcendentalism that led to her writing “Transcendental Bible,” “the most trenchant critique of transcendentalism written by someone within the movement” (231). But in his rendering of Lydia Jackson’s life, Fuller steadily holds his focus on *her* views, her outspoken support for the cause of women’s rights and abolitionism. That being said, the chapter, though centered on Lydia, says a lot about Waldo as well. Namely, we learn that “Lydia was always more radical in politics” than her husband (331). As Fuller compellingly explains, Lydia “was not Aunt Mary: she did not provide Waldo with a vocabulary—a way of *seeing* the world. But she offered him something else: a conscience” (243).

- 8 In “The Tempests of Margaret Fuller,” Randall Fuller evocatively retraces the arc of Fuller’s life, alternating between compelling analyses of the inner states of mind that agitated her, such as the unrequited love for both men and women she described in her letters and journals, as well as the geographical movements and political motions that marked her brief yet very intense life. Just as in every other chapter of this group biography, Fuller pays great attention to the nature of the upbringing that forged such a revolutionary and courageous character. He delves into the kinds of books that Margaret’s father, Timothy Fuller, liked to read, highlighting his interest in works such as Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), but he also describes the reading habits of her mother, Sarah Margaret Crane, who, like Mary Moody Emerson, was very fond of Germaine de Staël. A lot has been written (including by Margaret herself) about her father’s education, but Randall Fuller’s remarks about how she decided not to replicate the latter’s intense and rigorous schooling with her own child are important: “she resolved to treat her child differently than she had been treated by her father, refusing to set expectations for his development or intellect” (312). The same degree of attention is also paid, of course, to Margaret’s own reading and writing habits: through extensive quoting, Randall Fuller’s fifth chapter traces both the unfolding of Margaret Fuller’s life as well as the evolution of her literary voice, showing how her move to New York in 1845 led her into a new direction as a writer. Randall Fuller underscores the significance of this new phase of her life, stating: “New England was not the only thing she left behind. She also abandoned transcendentalism [...] [and] questioned the core tenets animating these thinkers” (296).
- 9 As throughout the rest of the book, Fuller’s portrayal of Margaret’s life—which continues into the epilogue—says a lot about her community of friends and literary peers, too. Commenting on her years in Italy and her untimely death in a shipwreck in 1850, Fuller points out that some of her friends went as far as to consider her death a “happy ending,” given Fuller’s decision to marry an Italian man (as opposed to an American) and the uncertain timing of their marriage and the birth of their son: “what had once been a warm community now became judgmental and censorious” (316). In the book’s epilogue, the author also makes a deliberate effort to affirm that the community of proto-feminists to which Mary Moody Emerson, Elizabeth and Sophia Peabody, Margaret Fuller, and Lydia Jackson belonged extended well beyond these five names. Fuller expands his circle by writing about Paulina Wright Davis and Elizabeth Oakes Smith, and ultimately concludes the book with Caroline Healey Dall. A student and admirer of Margaret Fuller, who also participated in the Conversations, Dall spent years defending Fuller’s memory from what she felt were unjust, partial, and unforgiving accounts: she criticized the severity of the comments Emerson had made in *Memoirs of Margaret Fuller Ossoli* (1852), and she stood up against Julian Hawthorne’s attacks on Fuller’s reputation in the 1880s and 1890s. In his epilogue, Fuller quotes one of Dall’s lectures in defense of Margaret Fuller, titled “Transcendentalism in New England” (1895), about which he states: “Dall had made an important point: the nation’s first philosophical and literary movement owed its existence as much to a group of women as to the men who confidently assumed the mantle of spokespersons” (352). By ending the book there, Randall Fuller offers a subtle yet profound reminder: that truth has long been voiced—by women and by a few men—but history and literary tradition have systematically silenced and obscured those voices. The way in which *Bright Circle* brings these voices back to life is nothing short of remarkable.

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## NOTES

1. See Judith Strong Albert, *Minerva's Circle: Margaret Fuller's Women* (2010), as well as Brigitte Bailey, Katherine P. Viens, and Conrad Edick Wright (eds.), *Margaret Fuller and Her Circles* (2013).
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