

Religion and Reform

1800–1860

"The Americans combine the notions of religion and liberty so intimately in their minds," noted Alexis de Tocqueville in the 1830s, "that it is impossible to make them conceive of one without the other." The antebellum religious revivals stressed a person's freedom to choose God's gift of salvation. Life everlasting became a matter of choice and not, as the Calvinists had proclaimed, the prerogative of God alone. Religious enthusiasm also inspired new religious sects, denominations, and utopian communities, like Joseph Smith's Mormonism. The spiritual excitement of the era combined with Jefferson's "inalienable right" to pursue one's happiness to produce a powerful devotion to individualism that had widespread repercussions.

This theme of individualism also influenced culture, politics, and reform. The transcendentalists used this ideal in creative ways, inspiring utopian communities and the campaign for women's rights. The political dimension of individualism, as glimpsed in the Jacksonian era, also liberated urban culture from the constraints of upper-class "respectability." Some, particularly advocates of women's and African American rights, used the language of individualism to strike blows against gender and racial discrimination and slavery. Others quickly saw the limits, even dangers, of excessive individualism: political turmoil, sectionalism, and social discord.

11-1 | A Transcendentalist View of Women's Rights

MARGARET FULLER, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845)

Margaret Fuller (1810–1850) was nurtured among the New England literary and philosophical circle known as the transcendentalists, and along with Ralph Waldo Emerson and others she became one of its leading interpreters. In this selection, from her 1845 book, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, Fuller reveals the extent of her philosophical commitment to transcendentalism and to gender equality, a stand in line with, but more radical than, calls for women's suffrage.

Of all its banners, none has been more steadily upheld, and under none have more valor and willingness for real sacrifices been shown, than that of the champions of the enslaved African. And this band it is, which, partly from a natural following out of principles, partly because many women have been prominent in that cause, makes, just now, the warmest appeal in behalf of Woman.

Though there has been a growing liberality on this subject, yet society at large is not so prepared for the demands of this party, but that its members are, and will be for some time, coldly regarded as the Jacobins of their day.

"Is it not enough," cries the irritated trader, "that you have done all you could to break up the national union, and thus destroy the prosperity of our country but now you must be trying to break up family union, to take my wife away from the cradle and the kitchen-hearth to vote at polls, and preach from a pulpit? Of course, if she does such things, she cannot attend to those of her own sphere. She is happy enough as she is. She has more leisure than I have,—every means of improvement, every indulgence."

"Have you asked her whether she was satisfied with these *indulgences*?"

"No, but I know she is. She is too amiable to desire what would make me unhappy, and too judicious to wish to step beyond the sphere of her sex. I will never consent to have our peace disturbed by any such discussions."

"Consent—you? it is not consent from you that is in question—it is assent from your wife."

"Am not I the head of my house?"

"You are not the head of your wife. God has given her a mind of her own."

"I am the head, and she the heart."

"God grant you play true to one another, then! I suppose I am to be grateful that you did not say she was only the hand. If the head represses no natural pulse of the heart, there can be no question as to your giving your consent. Both will be of one accord, and there needs but to present any question to get a full and true answer. There is no need of precaution, of indulgence, nor consent. But our doubt

Margaret Fuller Ossoli, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century and Kindred Papers Relating to the Sphere, Condition, and Duties of Woman* (Boston: Brown, Taggard and Chase, 1860), 28–30, 115–116, 174–176.

is whether the heart does consent with the head, or only obeys its decrees with a passiveness that precludes the exercise of its natural powers, or a repugnance that turns sweet qualities to bitter, or a doubt that lays waste the fair occasions of life. It is to ascertain the truth that we propose some liberating measures."

Thus vaguely are these questions proposed and discussed at present. But their being proposed at all implies much thought, and suggests more. Many women are considering within themselves what they need that they have not, and what they can have if they find they need it. Many men are considering whether women are capable of being and having more than they are and have, and whether, if so, it will be best to consent to improvement in their condition. . . .

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

More native is it to her to be the living model of the artist than to set apart from herself any one form in objective reality; more native to inspire and receive the poem, than to create it. In so far as soul is in her completely developed, all soul is the same, but in so far as it is modified in her as Woman, it flows, it breathes, it sings, rather than deposits soil, or finishes work; and that which is especially feminine flushes, in blossom, the face of earth, and pervades, like air and water, all this seeming solid globe, daily renewing and purifying its life. Such may be the especially feminine element spoken of as *Femality*. But it is no more the order of nature that it should be incarnated pure in any form, than that the masculine energy should exist unmingled with it in any form.

Male and female represent the two sides of the great radical dualism. But, in fact, they are perpetually passing into one another. Fluid hardens to solid, solid rushes to fluid. There is no wholly masculine man, no purely feminine woman. . . .

But if you ask me what offices they [women] may fill, I reply—any. I do not care what case you put; let them be sea-captains, if you will. I do not doubt there are women well fitted for such an office, and, if so, I should be as glad to see them in it, as to welcome the maid of Saragossa, or the maid of Missolonghi, or the Suliste heroine, or Emily Plater.¹

I think women need, especially at this juncture, a much greater range of occupation than they have, to rouse their latent powers. A party of travellers lately visited a lonely hut on a mountain. There they found an old woman, who told them she and her husband had lived there forty years. "Why," they said, "did you choose 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.

¹Saragossa. . . . Plater. Fuller draws from early-nineteenth-century European history, including the Spanish and Greek wars for independence and the 1830 Polish uprising, to identify these examples of female valor.

In families that I know, some little girls like to saw wood, others to use carpenters' tools. Where these tastes are indulged, cheerfulness and good-humor are promoted. Where they are forbidden, because "such things are not proper for girls," they grow sullen and mischievous.

Fourier² had observed these wants of women, as no one can fail to do who watches the desires of little girls, or knows the ennui that haunts grown women, except where they make to themselves a serene little world by art of some kind. He, therefore, in proposing a great variety of employments, in manufactures or the care of plants and animals, allows for one third of women as likely to have a taste for masculine pursuits, one third of men for feminine.

Who does not observe the immediate glow and serenity that is diffused over the life of women, before restless or fretful, by engaging in gardening, building, or the lowest department of art? Here is something that is not routine, something that draws forth life towards the infinite.

I have no doubt, however, that a large proportion of women would give themselves to the same employments as now, because there are circumstances that must lead them. Mothers will delight to make the nest soft and warm. Nature would take care of that; no need to clip the wings of any bird that wants to soar and sing, or finds in itself the strength of pinion for a migratory flight unusual to its kind. The difference would be that all need not be constrained to employments for which some are unfit.

I have urged upon the sex self-subsistence in its two forms of self-reliance and self-impulse, because I believe them to be the needed means of the present juncture.

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.

I wish Woman to live, first for God's sake. Then she will not make an imperfect man her god, and thus sink to idolatry. Then she will not take what is not fit for her from a sense of weakness and poverty. Then, if she finds what she needs in Man embodied, she will know how to love, and be worthy of being loved.

By being more a soul, she will not be less Woman, for nature is perfected through spirit.

READING AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. To what extent did Fuller's claim that there is "no wholly masculine man, no purely feminine woman" challenge prevailing ideas of men and women's roles in nineteenth-century society?

²Fourier: Charles Fourier, French philosopher and reformer, advocated for women's rights and inspired the development of several utopian communities in America, including Brook Farm in West Roxbury, Massachusetts.