"If They Have a Moral Power":
Margaret Fuller, Transcendentalism, and the
Question of Women’s Moral Nature

Jamie S. Crouse

In the 1994 movie version of Little Women, Jo March participates in
an informal debate with a group of men over women’s vote that captures
well the various arguments on this topic in the mid-nineteenth century.
One man expresses the traditional view: “A lady has no need of suffrage if
she has a husband,” while another responds, “If women are a moral force,
shouldn’t they have a right to govern, and preach, and testify in court?”
Jo, however, responds to the illogic of both these arguments: “I find it
poor logic to say that because women are good, women should vote; men
do not vote because they are good; men vote because they are male, and
women should vote, not because they are angels and men are animals,
but because they are human beings and citizens of this country.” Though
the scene does not occur in Louisa May Alcott’s novel, the writers of the
movie made an effort, in keeping with Alcott’s novel, to place the movie
within the context of Transcendentalism, and this scene exemplifies an
important debate within the transcendentalist movement. This debate,
particularly the argument for women’s vote based on women’s moral na-
ture, matches closely with Emerson and other transcendentalists, while
Jo’s argument corresponds with Margaret Fuller’s position. Like Jo, Fuller
rejects an argument for women’s rights based on a superior moral status
for women. The question about women’s moral nature becomes a central
issue when examining the rhetoric of Fuller’s feminist argument within
the context of Transcendentalism.

Until only a few decades ago, Fuller’s position within Transcendental-
ism received little attention from the scholarly community. Relegated to
the margins of the transcendentalist circle as a minor figure whose writing
was found to be difficult and digressive, the scant attention she did receive
focused on her biography. However, with renewed interest in women’s
history, scholars such as Bell Gale Chevigny and David M. Robinson have
recovered Fuller’s position as a major figure within the transcendentalist
circle. In addition to her place within Transcendentalism, critics have also sought to reclaim Fuller's influence in the history of the women's rights movement, while others have re-evaluated the rhetoric and style of her writing, particularly based on oral and conversational traditions, and with a growing understanding of women's rhetorical strategies.

In situating my argument within these majors strands of Fuller criticism, I would like to place Fuller within the transcendentalist movement, building on Robinson's assertion that Fuller bases her argument for women's rights on the transcendentalist beliefs in self-culture, while also problematizing that relationship, since I wish to uncover a disagreement between Fuller and her fellow transcendentalists concerning the moral nature of women. Like Sandra M. Gustafson, I see Fuller subtly changing the premises of the cult of true womanhood to embody a much more radical argument than her transcendentalist counterparts, a difference much the same as Cynthia J. Davis argues exists between Fuller and the later women's rights reformers. As both Gustafson and Davis notice, Fuller refuses to base her argument on essential gender differences between men and women; instead, she develops an argument that comes close to the modern understanding of socially constructed gender roles. In particular, she rejects the popular belief that women have a superior moral nature. By looking closely at the dominant cultural understanding of women's nature and the roots of this argument, one can see the ways in which the transcendentalists and even some women's rights reformers incorporated these beliefs into an argument for women's rights. Then, by comparing these arguments to Fuller's *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, we can see how she repositions her argument to avoid the pitfalls of her contemporaries' arguments for women's rights by removing from the argument its premise of women's superior moral nature. Instead, Fuller argues for women's advancement as simply the development of human potential. In this way, she shows women's rights not as antagonistic to men, but as essentially related, since both men and women share a common human nature.

The dominant understanding of gender roles in the nineteenth century found its clearest expression in the cult of true womanhood but had its roots in a much longer tradition, one based on essential gender differences. This long tradition in western culture came to identify women primarily with the body and men with the mind; therefore, since the body is controlled by the mind, women's nature was considered inferior to men's and women's role to be subordinate to men. In the nineteenth century, as industrialism increasingly divided men's and women's work, a woman's sphere of influence was increasingly tied to the home, while men were concerned with the larger, public sphere. The belief then became that a
woman’s nature fitted her precisely for this domestic role. A woman’s bodily functions as wife and mother rendered her passive to the more powerful will of her husband; thus she became identified with the innate virtues of sympathy, altruism, selflessness, and spirituality (Maslan 42). The English doctor, William Acton, famous for his treatises on women’s sexuality, described the ideal wife and mother as “kind, considerate, self-sacrificing, and sensible, so pure-hearted as to be utterly ignorant of and adverse to any sensual indulgence, but so unselfishly attached to the man she loves, as to be willing to give up her own wishes and feelings for his sake” (114). Coventry Patmore’s long poem, The Angel in the House, written as an elegy to his wife, quickly became a cultural icon, popularizing this image of the ideal, selfless wife and mother. In circular reasoning, because of their biological roles, women were relegated to the home, and thus the virtues that typified a private, passive, and subservient role were claimed to be theirs innately.

The cult of true womanhood grew around promoting women’s role in the home and encouraging these virtues as distinctly feminine to the point that women were considered to have an innately superior moral nature. Ironically, however, this still related to their primary identification with the body. Their frail bodies, and hence frail virtues, relegated them to the domestic sphere, since any active involvement in the public sphere was thought to destroy their health and contaminate their purity. On the other hand, the shelter that they received in the home protected their virtues and equipped them to be the primary moral guides for their children. Jerome Loving, however, points out the double bind this belief produced since it “rendered the female politically inferior by proclaiming her superior as a mother and thus the keeper of social mores and religious principles” (26). This domestic realm was consequently valorized as a woman’s dominion and sphere of influence. Catherine E. Beecher, like many other women, argued for the importance of this role to any woman who would be ungrateful for her station in life. In her Treatise on Domestic Economy, she reasons on the basis of the social contract theory that democracy is founded on voluntary structures of power so that “society could never go forward, harmoniously, nor could any craft or profession be successfully pursued unless these superior and subordinate relations be instituted and sustained” (26). Women’s relegation to the home, she argues, is a voluntary submission, one that is for the good of the whole nation since women are the moral guardians of the home and of the young; thus women actually have the most important role in society. She writes, “It is equally conceded that the formation of the moral and intellectual character of the young is committed mainly to the female hand. The mother forms the character of the future man . . .; let the women of a country be made vir-
tuous and intelligent and the men will certainly be the same” (37). From this premise, she and others argued for a better education for women so that they could be better wives and mothers, more suitably equipped to be moral guides for their children.

This understanding of women’s superior moral nature became so culturally entrenched that even those who argued for a greater sphere of influence for women did so based on these premises. Along with arguments for better education, reformers often used this argument to call for women’s involvement in abolition, insisting that women’s deeper moral sensibilities naturally suited them for fighting against the great social evil of slavery. Even the early suffragists claimed women’s right to vote based on an understanding of women’s essential nature; the Declaration of Sentiments, presented at the women’s rights conference in Seneca Falls in 1848, shows a grounding in women’s “sentiments,” using language associated with the popular understanding of women’s nature. Davis points out that the voice behind the Sentiments uses pronouns that clearly pit “she” against “he” with essential and fixed differences, even an “essentialized woman ‘speaking in us’” (51). She argues that this voice comes from borrowing the language of natural rights handed down from Locke and Jefferson that inevitably led the original framers of the Declaration of Independence to conceptualize the “all men [who] are created equal” as white, male landowners; in the same way, the Declaration of Sentiments invokes a specific female body (51-52). This reliance on essential gender differences and especially the moral nature of women created problems for the women reformers because it could never be completely extricated from the argument that kept women within the domestic sphere. A letter from reformer Juliana Tappan to Anne Weston concerning the Grimké sisters’ speaking tour indicates this problem: “What do you think about it? Is it not difficult to draw the boundary line? On the one hand, we are in danger of servile submission to the opinions of the other sex, & on the other hand, in perhaps equal danger of losing that modesty, & instinctive delicacy of feeling” (qtd. in Garvey 122). In basing their platform of women’s rights on women’s supposed moral nature, by engaging in the public realm, they were in danger of losing precisely that foundation.

The transcendentalists, despite radical theological revisions, were surprisingly traditional in their acceptance of essential gender differences of women, even their supposedly superior moral nature. Nevertheless, for the most part, they supported women’s rights, as they also supported the rights of the slaves and the Indians, although they did not generally believe public activism to be the best means of achieving their goals. The extent that they supported the rights of women can be seen in their acceptance of Fuller as an intellectual into their circle, along with other women
to a lesser degree. Fuller was encouraged to take on the editorship of *The Dial*, and, under this venue, she published her first feminist treatise, "The Great Lawsuit: Man Versus Men; Woman Versus Women." This essay and the extended version, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, generally received positive reviews from fellow transcendentalists.

The only possible exception to the positive support Fuller received is Nathaniel Hawthorne, whose position within Transcendentalism is itself slippery. Fuller’s relationship to Hawthorne has been the source of much speculation ever since Julian Hawthorne posthumously published his father’s notebooks that included resounding criticism of Fuller’s character; however, the two were close friends during the years that Fuller lived in the Boston/Concord area. Two articles of note that attempt to reestablish the relationship and influence between Fuller and Hawthorne are Thomas R. Mitchell’s "‘The Mutual Visionary Company’: Nathaniel Hawthorne and Margaret Fuller" and Scott Ash’s "Rereading Antagonism as Sibling Rivalry: The Hawthorne/Fuller Dynamic." Even so, as recent scholars have pointed out, Hawthorne himself had a close relationship with Fuller, and we have no record of a negative reaction to her feminist works, and his now-famous critical remarks about Fuller occur eight years after her death. Therefore, it seems to be Julian Hawthorne’s portrayal of the conventionally masculine and anti-feminist Hawthorne that survives (Mitchell 110). Furthermore, Fuller’s increasing feminism did not become the catalyst of their falling out, as many critics have proposed, but, as Mitchell argues, their intimacy increased after her publication of "The Great Lawsuit." Fuller herself praises Hawthorne as one of those people who is able to balance both masculine and feminine traits. In a letter to Sophia Peabody, congratulating her on her upcoming marriage to Hawthorne, she writes, “If I ever saw a man who combined delicate tenderness to understand the heart of a woman, with quiet depth and manliness enough to satisfy her, it is Mr. Hawthorne,” and she predicts a marriage founded on "intellectual friendship" (Letters 3: 66), which she later praises in "The Great Lawsuit" as one of the highest forms of marriage.

Notably, Hawthorne’s rather traditional conception of a woman’s moral nature and domestic role (exemplified in many of his female characters) seems to be the reason for his eventual condemnation of Fuller upon hearing the gossip about the scandal of her illegitimately conceived child and subsequent marriage. He records these thoughts in his journal:

There appears to have been a total collapse in poor Margaret, morally and intellectually . . . . There never was such a tragedy as her whole story; the sadder and sterner, because so much of the ridiculous was mixed up in it, and because she could bear anything better than to be ridiculous. It was such an awful joke, that she should have resolved—in
all sincerity, no doubt—to make herself the greatest, wisest, best woman of the age; and, to that end, she set to work on her strange, heavy, un-pliable and, in many respects, defective and evil nature, and adorned it with a mosaic of admirable qualities, such she chose to possess . . . . But she was not working on inanimate substance, like marble or clay; there was something within her that she could not possibly come at, to re-create and refine it; and, by and by, this rude old potency bestirred itself, and undid all her labor in the twinkling of an eye. On the whole, I do not know that I do not like her the better for it,—the better, because she proved herself a very woman, after all, and fell as the weakest of her sisters might. (156-57)

Hawthorne's complaint against Fuller turns on what appears to be an intrinsic flaw in her nature, a flaw that in the last sentence he ties to her nature as a woman. Clearly, Fuller disappointed him in the end because she failed to have the innately superior moral nature of a woman.

Emerson has also been accused of being an anti-feminist, since his positions on gender equality seem to have been fraught with ambivalence. Both Larry J. Reynolds and Christina Zwarg, however, argue for a greater appreciation of the support Fuller received from Emerson and for the mutual exchanges between them regarding women's rights. Zwarg claims that Fuller's relationship with Emerson was "complex, mutually empowering and interactive" (14). Indeed, Emerson, an intimate friend of Fuller, respected her intellectual capabilities. His theory of self-reliance and independence became empowering for women, and Fuller, in particular, flourished under his teaching. Reynolds points out Emerson's radical understanding of gender as fluid, masculine and feminine flowing and mingling with each other within an individual (25). Furthermore, Emerson valued traditionally feminine qualities such as intuition over the traditionally masculine qualities of reason and understanding as the superior way of knowing. As encouraging as this valuation may be to women, it nevertheless reinforces traditional stereotypes of femininity and masculinity, leading Margaret Vanderhaar Allen to label him as "antifeminist": "To his contemporaries Emerson seemed to be a progressive, enlightened thinker about women's rights, though in reality he was highly conventional and antifeminist" (36). She finally denounces him as a hypocrite: "We know now that Emerson's splendid exhortations about self-reliance and independence of spirit were not meant for women. He perceived women primarily as adjuncts to himself. He simply could not conceive that they might have or desire any independent existence, work, or thought" (42). This appraisal, however, seems an overly simplistic reduction of Emerson's thought. Certainly to label him as "antifeminist" applies contemporary standards anachronistically, making no distinction between the genuinely progressive elements of Emerson's thoughts.
about women and those who staunchly held to traditional beliefs about women’s inferiority. However, as Zwarg contends, ”Emerson has trouble making the subtle distinction between gender and sex that theorists have begun to make today. By contrast, Fuller’s unconventional experience as a woman enabled her to remind Emerson through her complex alignment with masculine activity that one’s sex, though seemingly fatal in nature, need not be restrictive in life” (33). Nevertheless, despite Fuller’s tutelage, Emerson’s view of women’s rights compares disappointingly to Fuller’s, most notably because he fails to question the conventional beliefs about women’s nature.

These beliefs show up most clearly and ironically in Emerson’s speech at the women’s rights convention in Boston in 1855. In the beginning of his address, he lays the premise of his argument in the unquestioned (and seemingly unquestionable) belief in the separate natures of men and women. Women are first more tied to the body than men, “more delicate than men” (405), “more vulnerable, more infirm, more mortal than men” (412). This identification leads to their particular virtues. He argues, “The general voice of mankind has agreed that [women] have their own strength; that women are strong by sentiment; that the same mental height which their husbands attain by toil, they attain by sympathy with their husbands. Man is the will, and Woman the sentiment” (406-07). This sympathy, intuition, or “oracular nature” (405), he grants, allows them to “learn so fast and convey the result so fast as to outrun the logic of their slow brother and make his acquisition poor” (406). Despite this qualification, Emerson’s conventional premise leads him to the conventional belief that this distinct nature suits women for “their organic office in the world,” that is the “care of the young and the tuition of older children” (408). Furthermore, he claims women’s special genius is to act as the “civilizers of mankind” (409), by which he means they have a decorative role in society as well as a “moral sense,” a “religious height which men do not often attain” (414). These arguments show Emerson’s thought to be thoroughly influenced by the conventional beliefs of his time; he quotes widely from Plato to Swedenborg to Patmore’s The Angel in the House to place his argument squarely within the mainstream understanding of women’s nature.

Emerson’s address, though, takes an unexpected turn when he applies these conventional beliefs not to their conventional end—that women should not be involved in public affairs—but rather to the idea that they should be given full freedom to pursue whatever involvement they wish. He argues, “They have an unquestionable right to their own property. And if the woman demand votes, offices, and political equality with men . . . it must not be refused” (419). He even anticipates that women’s vote would influence positively the reform politics that he supported him-
self (430). He answers the typical objections against women’s vote—those coming from the same premises that Emerson accepts—that they “want practical wisdom,” they represent a view “too purely ideal,” and they are in “danger of contamination” (421). He responds by arguing that women are as qualified or unqualified as men to vote and that politics is in need of a little idealism. The most significant objection is the danger of contamination, which he argues against by showing that women’s moral nature is needed because of the corruption of politics: “Let us have the true woman, the adorner, the hospitable, the religious heart, and no lawyer need be called in to write stipulations, the cunning clauses of provision, the strong investures;—for woman moulds the lawgiver and writes the law” (425). Emerson thus grounds his argument in the commonly accepted warrant of women’s superior moral nature, but he changes the conclusions of that warrant to actually argue for women’s rights. However, the unquestioning acceptance of this premise inevitably weakens the strength of his argument, leaving men still in a paternalistic role towards women. He concludes not by pressing for the better education of women, but for men, that they might better take care of their women:

For there are always a certain number of passionately loving fathers, brothers, husbands and sons who put their might into the endeavor to make a daughter, a wife, or a mother happy in the way that suits best. Woman should find in man her guardian. Silently she looks for that, and when she finds that he is not, as she instantly does, she betakes her to her own defences, and does the best she can. (426)

Despite the grand claims Emerson makes for expanding the rights of women, the internal flaws in his argument cannot sustain his claims. His conclusion brings women back to the place of dependence, essentially shutting them out of his own ideals of self-reliance and independence.

Emerson’s arguments for women’s rights based on the conventional understanding of women’s moral nature seem to have been quite representative of his followers as well. Bronson Alcott, for example, makes a similar argument in his memoir, Concord Days (1872). Written twenty years after Fuller’s death, Alcott’s reflection on the significance of her life and work in the current atmosphere of the women’s rights movement makes the claim that “the sex had no abler advocate” (77). He praises Fuller as “a sybylline intelligence that divined oracularly” (78), which, according to Alcott’s notions, was the highest compliment he could give. Nevertheless, he seems not to recognize the more radical propositions which Fuller made and falls back instead on rather traditional assumptions about women, that they are “the natural leaders of society in whatever concerns private morals” (78). He argues based on this premise that
women’s moral influence is actually needed in society: “her vote will tell for personal purity, for honor, temperance, justice, mercy, peace,—the domestic virtues upon which communities are founded, and in which they must be firmly rooted to prosper and endure” (79). Thus, like Emerson, Alcott accepts the argument for women’s rights, yet without questioning the presuppositions that were also used to deny them rights.

If Emerson’s and Alcott’s arguments only weakly accept the possibility of expanding women’s rights, acknowledging simply that men should not stand in the way of what women want, then, at least amongst the transcendentalists, Theodore Parker, the Unitarian minister known for his radical theology, carried the argument to a much stronger conclusion. He argued not only that women may participate in public life but also that they should. In his sermon, “The Public Function of Woman, Preached at the Music Hall, March 27, 1853,” Parker makes his strongest claims about the rights of women. Unlike Emerson, who does not fully carry out his belief in self-reliance in relation to women, Parker argues for women’s independence and sees women’s progress towards independence as positive: “Womankind is advancing from that period when every woman was a slave, and marriage of some sort was guaranteed to every woman, because she was dependent on man,—I say, woman is advancing from that, to a state of independence, where woman shall not be subordinated to man, but the two coordinated together” (567). Because he sees the value in women’s independence, he claims that women’s sole function is not domestic life. He admits that the current beliefs that make domestic duties women’s sole function has led to the “deplorable evil” of so many women rejecting marriage because they dislike domestic work (566-67). The problem, as he sees it, is that domestic work places unreasonable limitations on women’s natural abilities and is a “monstrous waste of the most precious material that God ever made” (566). In an astute historical observation, he recognizes that the Industrial Revolution had only recently separated men’s and women’s spheres of labor, that domestic labor was hardly tied to women’s essential nature, and that the lack of meaningful work, in fact, stunts women’s growth. Based on the transcendental belief that self-culture is a human right, it follows that “[w]oman has the same individual right to determine her aim in life, and to follow it; has the same individual rights of body and of spirit,—of mind and conscience, and heart and soul; the same physical rights, the same intellectual moral, affectional and religious rights, that man does” (574). Therefore, he argues that women ought to be able to pursue any career that they please, whether it be business, higher education, journalism, medicine, law, ministry, or politics (576-79).

Although at this point in his argument it seems Parker argues on the basis of a general human nature, when his argument turns from what
women may do to why women are needed in each of these spheres, his argument reveals the same premise in women’s unique moral nature. He believes the corruption and injustice in current society are directly related to women’s absence in these realms. He questions, “Do you think, if the women had had the control, ‘fifteen hundred men of property and standing’ would have volunteered to take a poor man, kidnapped in Boston, and conduct him out of the state, with fire and sword?” or “Do you think the women of Boston would shut a bright boy out of the High School or Latin School, because he was black in the face?” (580). The answer to these questions lies in the traditional understanding of the difference between the sexes:

She has moral feeling, affectional feeling, religious feeling, far in advance of man; her moral, affectional, and religious intuitions are deeper and more trustworthy than his. Here she is eminent, as he is in knowledge, in ideas, in administrative skill. I think man will always lead in affairs of intellect—or reason, imagination, understanding—he has the bigger brain; but that woman will always lead in affairs of emotion—moral, affectional, religious—she has the better heart, the truer intuition of the right, the lovely, the holy. (583)

Based on this distinction, he argues that every level of society—the family, the community, the church, and the state—needs the involvement of both men and women. Parker goes as far as this conventional thinking will take him: all communities, in order to achieve their highest potential, must have a balance of masculine and feminine elements, but his argument stops there. Individuals themselves, because of these innate gender differences, cannot find this balance within themselves.

Even William Ellery Channing, the Unitarian minister whose ideas became the foundation of transcendentalist thought, and whom Fuller herself praises for his treatment of women, seemed unable to see beyond the traditional notions of women’s nature. Channing’s own emphasis on all human beings as souls became a significant point for Fuller’s argument. She writes, “He regarded [women] as souls, each of which had a destiny of its own, incalculable to other minds, and whose leading it must follow, guided by the light of a private conscience. . . . Thus all beings were treated by him with an equal, and sweet, though solemn courtesy” (Woman 112). She goes on to tell how his interaction with several women’s rights reformers encouraged his own support of women’s development, believing in an optimistic future that would correct the current injustices against them (113). Channing’s nephew, William Henry Channing, who collected and edited his uncle’s papers, provides similar commentary on his uncle’s attitude toward women: “Especially with women of high and
enlarged tempers, whose minds were trained by study and experience, did he joyfully feel himself at home. . . . And his profound reverence for women’s nature and function gave that charm of unaffected courtesy to his manner, look, and tone, which won them liberally to exchange their cherished thoughts, as with an equal” (609). Notably, though he treats women as equals, he still considers them as having an essential nature and function as women. Of course, the comment also reflects on William Henry Channing’s own beliefs, though he was also a close friend of Fuller and later a strong supporter of the women’s rights movement. The elder Channing’s comments in a letter to the Misses Roscoe make this belief in women’s nature and function clear: “I always think that a woman looks on such a house with something of the feeling with which a sovereign surveys his empire, and not without some reason, for within that little province, home, her power is as absolute, and its order and happiness are even more dependent on her wisdom and virtue” (qtd. in Channing 610). His respect for women clearly included a belief in the domestic function and virtuous nature of women.

From these representatives of the transcendentalist circle, we can see that Transcendentalism, on the whole, though in varying degrees, was supportive of women’s rights. These men clearly encouraged women’s development and the expansion of their involvement in society. Nevertheless, they never questioned the traditional belief that men and women have separate, distinct, and essential natures, and that women are, by nature, more intuitive, emotional, and moral. Therefore, when examining Fuller in the context of Transcendentalism, we can see not only the ways in which her arguments are indebted to transcendentalist beliefs, but also the ways in which she radically departs from her fellow transcendentalists.

Fuller grounds her argument on the transcendentalist understanding of the primacy of spirit over matter. She draws on Channing’s belief in human beings as souls, though Emerson, Alcott, and others emphasized human beings’ spiritual nature as well. This understanding of a primary spiritual nature has important implications for Fuller’s feminist argument, since it directly contrasts with the long tradition of identifying women with the body and men with the mind or will; thus, she immediately short-circuits the following conclusion that places women as body in subjection to men as mind. In her conceptualization of all human beings as souls, everyone is subject only to God. She writes, “If the negro be a soul, if the woman be a soul, appareled in flesh, to one Master only are they accountable. There is but one law for souls, and if there is to be an interpreter of it, he must come not as man, or son of man, but as son of God” (Woman 37). She recognizes that the identification of women as bodies has led to such notorious abuses as daughters who are sold into mar-
riage as mere property and beaten as animals by their husbands or fathers (71). In her view, a truly equal marriage cannot exist unless both partners consider each other as "another soul, which, if not eternal in themselves, must eternally affect [one's own] growth" (71). Davis remarks on the radical implications of this rhetorical move by Fuller:

In fact, in Fuller's Woman, an abstract generic "soul" displaces concrete gendered essences as that which is constrained within bodies, whether male or female. The net effect of this is that in Woman, Fuller unites far more than she divides men and women. While Fuller's emphasis on soul may be directly attributed to Transcendentalism rather than to some radical feminism, the fact that it is after all a woman arguing for the disembodied, transparent I (ball?) pushes Transcendentalism's potential radicalism into territories where no beard nor bard had gone before. (45)

Davis rightly notices that Fuller carries transcendentalist thought beyond where any of the other followers were willing to go, because in identifying the spirit as primary, biological differences become secondary and inconsequential, thus laying the ground for seeing men and women with similar natures rather than different.

Fuller's emphasis on the spiritual nature of all humans leads her to claim the right of transcendentalist self-culture for women equally as for men. Speaking through the persona of Miranda, Fuller makes this logical claim: "Religion was early awakened in my soul,—a sense that what the soul is capable to ask it must attain, and that though I might be aided and instructed by others, I must depend on myself as the only constant friend. This self-dependence which was honored in me, is deprecated as a fault in most women. They are taught to learn their rule from without, not to unfold it from within" (Woman 40). Since this human right is often denied to women by the men in their lives, she argues that women "must leave off asking [men] and being influenced by them, but retire within themselves, and explore the ground-work of life till they find their peculiar secret" (121). Even if this process means women must temporarily give up marriage, they must find their own independence and cultivate themselves from within, by their own resources. This suggestion contrasts with Parker's view that singleness was a "deplorable evil" (567) that he recognized grew out of unfavorable conditions for marriage, whereas for Fuller it was at least a necessary evil for achieving self-reliance. Furthermore, it contrasts even more sharply with Emerson's statement that "[w]oman should find in man her guardian," that her current independence is a necessary evil until men become better guardians (426). Thus, while Robinson rightly locates Fuller's argument in the self-culture tradition that shows "their shared intellectual context" (93), he fails to notice that there were signifi-
cant differences in their application of these principles, and that placing Fuller within this context tends to blur important distinctions between Fuller and other transcendentalists.

Furthermore, Fuller attacks the legitimacy of the arguments for women’s special moral nature, exposing the underlying motivations behind this reasoning as only another means of keeping women under men’s control. She refutes this common view of women’s nature in her imagined conversation with the trader. The trader resents any efforts to expand women’s rights, arguing, “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.” He makes the common claim about women’s domestic role based on her virtue of selflessness: “She is too amiable to desire what would make me unhappy, and too judicious to wish to step beyond the sphere of her sex.” That her virtue is really an imposed submission becomes clear when he claims he is the head of his wife, as he is the head and she the heart. Clearly the head must rule over the heart; the two are not separate but equal powers. Fuller’s response to this rhetoric makes this hypocrisy clear: “But our doubt 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 . . .” (Woman 29). Selflessness, according to Fuller, is not a virtue at all, only masked passivity. She also shows that women’s “excessive devotion” (175) to their husbands, rather than being one of their great virtues, is in actuality a vice, a kind of idolatry. She states, “I wish Woman to live, first for God’s sake. Then she will not make an imperfect man her god, and thus sink into 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 love” (176, emphasis in original). Women’s excessive devotion follows from a weak sense of self, one that she implies results from being placed in a lesser position; real love, on the other hand, can only be cultivated between equals.

Fuller also exposes the fallacious logic that keeps woman at home to protect her virtuous character, the argument that woman’s public involvement would contaminate her. Fuller represents those holding this view as saying, “The beauty of the home would be destroyed, the delicacy of the sex be violated, the dignity of halls of legislation degraded by an attempt to introduce them there. Such duties are inconsistent with those of a mother” (34). She responds by recognizing that the supposed need to protect women’s “virtues” draws on the equation of virtue with physical frailty, the “ludicrous pictures of ladies in hysterics at the polls, and senate-chambers filled with cradles” (34). Yet she turns the tables on this
argument, pointing out the double standard applied to women: “Those who think the physical circumstances of Woman would make a part in the affairs of national government unsuitable, are by no means those who think it impossible for negresses to endure field-work, even during pregnancy, or for sempstresses to go through their killing labors” (35). Women are hardly as frail, physically or emotionally. Fuller shows, as many would like to believe they are in order to keep them tied to the home.

In contrast to the argument that woman’s nature suits her naturally for domestic life, Fuller argues that nothing intrinsic in woman’s nature makes this her natural sphere. Domestic work, like any other, should be chosen voluntarily, rather than imposed on women as their inevitable function in life. She analogizes from Penelope and Ulysses: “Let Ulysses drive the beeeves home, while Penelope there piles up the fragrant loaves; they are both well employed if these be done in thought and love, willingly. But Penelope is no more meant for a baker or weaver solely, than Ulysses for a cattle-herd” (44). Moreover, if a woman does not feel suited for domestic work, it should not be forced on her: “all need not be constrained to employments for which some are unfit” (175, emphasis in original). Indeed, she admits that as many as one third of women may be more suited for traditionally masculine pursuits (175) because women, no more than men, are by nature suited for only one type of labor. “Let them be sea-captains, if you will” (174), she quips, when questioned about what professions should be open to women.

Although Fuller refutes the basis of the argument for women’s special moral nature, she also recognizes the power of this rhetoric in encouraging women’s participation in reform movements. Significantly different from the other transcendentalists’ use of this argument, Fuller uses it only as an expedient rather than a necessity. She writes, “Women who speak in public, if they have a moral power, such as has been felt from Angelina Grimke and Abby, Kelly—that is, if they speak for conscience’ sake, to serve a cause which they hold sacred,—inevitably subdue the prejudices of their hearers, and excite an interest proportionate to the aversion with which it had been the purpose to regard them” (110-11, emphasis added). Fuller seems to have no problem with allowing women to make use of the popular belief in women’s moral power if it will advance their cause, yet she never bases her argument for women’s involvement on this premise. For example, she recognizes the similarity between the fight against slavery and the fight for women’s rights but says their fight for rights should be their own: “There is a reason why the foes of African Slavery seek more freedom for women” (167), ostensibly because women’s supposed moral power would aid them in their cause, but Fuller says, “put it not upon that ground, but on the ground of right” (167). Women should be given their
rights on no other grounds than that it is simply right. Nevertheless, she
tells the women, “If you have a power, it is a moral power. The films of
interest are not so close around you as around the men” (167); therefore,
they should use whatever leverage they have in the causes of justice, but
it cannot be the grounds for their involvement.

Underpinning her argument for women’s rights, then, is not the belief
in women’s unique moral nature; rather, she bases her argument on an
understanding of gender that is much more socially constructed than in-
nate. Therefore, she radically reconceptualizes the argument for women’s
rights by changing the underlying premises. Davis makes this point:

Fuller, in fact, explicitly distinguishes a woman’s gender from her na-
ture at a time when the two were fast becoming synonymous: hence in
Woman she contends that “what woman needs is not as a woman to act or
rule, but as a nature to grow, an intellect to discern, as a soul to live freely
and unimpeded . . . .” Here, the freedom and lack of impediments she
believes to be guaranteed any soul are conferred upon woman precisely
by identifying her as soul versus the traditional identification of woman
with (or as) body. Fuller’s treatise provides women with a loophole of
retreat from the increasingly essentialized and pathologized woman’s
nature . . . . (38-46, emphasis added)

As Davis argues, by resting her argument on the belief in human beings
primarily as souls, Fuller is able to remove herself from the slippery slope
that led to an understanding of women’s nature, even her peculiarly
moral nature. Although she did not have the theoretical vocabulary that
modern feminists have, her language implies a surprisingly modern un-
derstanding of gender as constructed rather than essential. To be sure,
she is not entirely consistent in this understanding, but the implications in
her thought lead in this direction and clearly lead away from the popular
thought of her day, even beliefs that were unquestioned by her typically
radical transcendentalist friends.

Fuller’s belief in gender roles as largely constructed no doubt sprang
from her own personal background. Educated by her father like a boy,
Fuller herself became a living experiment in the social construction of gen-
der. In her early years, her father cut her off from women’s culture, from
feminine manners to the sentimental novels young ladies were given to
read (Douglas 264). Though in later childhood there was some effort to
correct this trend, Fuller developed many traits associated with masculin-
ity, particularly an abrupt, bold manner and an acute intellect. This gave
her something of an identity crisis as a young woman, of which she notes,
“A man’s ambition in a woman’s heart is an evil lot” (Memoirs I: 229), yet
she also appreciated the opportunity it gave her to develop aspects of her
nature that were not encouraged for most women. She also writes, “I love
best to be a woman; but womanhood is at present too straitly-bound to
give me scope. At hours, I live truly as a woman; at others, I should stifle”
(I: 297). She uses the metaphor of clothing to describe gender, as if it were
something she could take on and off, depending on what suited her at
the time, certainly not as an innate nature. Her appreciation for George
Sand and other women who have “a manly grasp of mind” led her to seek
out examples of people who can “combine a man’s mind and a woman’s
heart” (qtd. in Chevigny 58). However, she also argues that intelligence
should not be considered a masculine trait: “Let it not be said wherever
there is energy or creative genius, ‘She has a masculine mind’” (Woman
43). In herself and others, she began to see that socialization was more
responsible for what was seen as woman’s nature and that with better
socialization women could develop the positive qualities that were associ-
ated with both femininity and masculinity.

In Woman in the Nineteenth Century, she develops this line of reasoning
by positing that woman’s nature actually has two sides—which she identi-
fies as Minerva and the Muse—both traditionally feminine and masculine.
The Muse exhibits the characteristically feminine trait of intuition, but in
Minerva, “Woman partakes of the masculine” (116). Since the masculine
side of women has been impeded developmentally, Fuller focuses on the
need for women to cultivate this aspect of themselves. She argues, then,
that masculinity and femininity are not two separate natures only existing
in the biological sexes, but both are aspects of human beings that should
coexist within individuals: “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” (115-16). Therefore,
Fuller goes well beyond Theodore Parker and other transcendentalists
who argue for greater participation of women in society because there
needs to be a balance of masculine and feminine qualities in all human
communities.

Although this may be Fuller’s strongest statement against the es-
sentialized natures of men and women, she does not consistently follow
through with this reasoning. Later on, she steps back from the radical im-
plications of this last statement and suggests that the balance of masculin-
ity and femininity is never entirely possible. She writes, “These two sides
are supposed to be expressed in Man and Woman, that is, as the more and
the less, for the faculties have not been given pure to either, but only in
preponderance” (169). This passage leads some critics to think that Fuller
comes back to the conventional belief in essentialized natures. Mary E.
Wood claims that she “returns repeatedly to conventional nineteenth-cen-
tury notions that masculine and feminine characteristics are essential and
distinct, even if those characteristics may inhabit either men or women” (9). Similarly, Davis qualifies her argument for Fuller’s understanding of constructed gender: “This is not to say that Fuller didn’t often subscribe to rather conservative notions of masculine and feminine traits and capabilities” (47). Although Fuller may not be entirely consistent, her argument overall leads more strongly away from conventional notions of separate and distinct natures. In fact, in this last passage where she makes the most conventional distinction between masculine and feminine as “Energy and Harmony; Power and Beauty; Intellect and Love” (169), she identifies these binary oppositions rather unfortunately with the masculine and feminine when the main thrust of her argument is that these are eternal virtues that are expressed in both men and women. That they tend not to be distributed equally may be more of an observation than a prescription. In “Margaret Fuller, The Eternal Feminine, and ‘The Liberties of the Republic,’” Fritz Fleischmann responds to this passage: “Fuller’s conventional language belies the intensity of her struggle to break up the boundaries of restrictive gender definition, a struggle which eventually leads her to separate what I have called the Eternal Feminine from actual women” (51). In agreement with Fleischmann, I see Fuller’s tendency toward abstraction, seen in her re-labeling women as souls, as a movement away from seeing women’s nature in concrete, essentialized terms. Moreover, logically, if men’s and women’s separate natures spring from biological difference, there would be little room for the fluidity of gender that she sees as possible and desirable.

By challenging the premise of women’s unique nature, Fuller’s argument for women’s rights can actually directly attack how this way of thinking is detrimental to both women and men by exposing the double standard that logically comes out of assuming women to have the more moral nature. First, she makes the case that women’s moral nature is actually a result of social conditioning. If women are expected to behave more virtuously, with greater purity and selflessness, then they are trained from childhood in these behaviors. After making her argument that masculine and feminine qualities do not exist in perfect balance, she goes on to explain the cause of this imbalance: “Man, in the order of time, was developed first,” and woman, being under his care, was treated as a servant; thus, “[t]he children of this unequal union showed unequal natures” (Woman 170). She posits environmental factors as the cause for the different natures of men and women. Furthermore, the suffering women have faced because of their inferior position to men actually created favorable conditions for their moral development: “For, as too much adversity is better for the moral nature than too much prosperity, Woman, in this respect, dwindled less than Man, though in other respects still a child in
leading-strings” (171). This development, she reasons, led to unequal moral natures, and, thus, by keeping women in inferiority, men have actually hindered their own development. She argues, “But yet—his habits and his will corrupted by the past—he did not clearly see that Woman was half himself; that her interests were identical with his; and that, by the law of their common being, he could never reach his true proportions while she remained in any wise shorn of hers” (171). Thus by arguing for women’s rights, by extension, she argues for the better development of the human race as a whole.

The major effect that this unequal development of men and women has had, she argues, is the sexual double standard that demands sexual purity of women but assumes men to have a nature less inclined to chastity. She questions this assumption, “Is not manliness to thy thought purity, not lawlessness” (135, emphasis in original). Nevertheless, she represents how a young woman engaged to a man of questionable character is introduced to the sexual double standard, warned by a male friend “that he was in fact of that class [a Satyr], and not fit for such familiar nearness to a chaste being” but advised that “women should know nothing about such things,” and she is even led to believe that “all men were faulty at some time in their lives; they had so many temptations” (135-36). Yet Fuller argues, agreeing with a man of “unbroken purity,” that “the world would never be better till men subjected themselves to the same laws they had imposed on women” (136). She also represents the argument of Mrs. Child, who “was successful in arresting the attention of many who had before shrugged their shoulders, and let sin pass as necessarily a part of the company of men. They begin to ask whether virtue is not possible, perhaps necessary, to Man as well as to Woman” (148). Men, she argues, must accept a moral nature equal to that of women, that assuming themselves to be less moral by nature allows for an atrocious double standard that denies men the full responsibility for their actions.

In addition, the moral double standard inevitably affects the moral nature of women as well. She describes how women are given in marriage to men with poor moral reputations whom they cannot trust or respect, which destroys any possibility of a good marriage (152-53). Women in these marriages are also put in a double bind because they are expected to exert a moral influence in the home and also expected to submit to their husband’s rule (150). Moreover, she considers the problem of prostitution as resulting from exactly this double bind. Women are taught to submit to and even to encourage the sexual desires of men, whom they consider to be uncontrollable; thus, she shows fashionable ladies to be little different than street prostitutes (145-46). To combat this societal problem, women must be taught a “genuine self-respect, and above all, what the influence
of Man tends to hide from Woman, the love and fear of a divine, in preference to a human tribunal" (147). Granting women independence and self-culture, she reasons, can only have positive effects on both women and men.

Thus, the radical nature of Fuller's argument comes out of seeing the natures of men and women as inextricably related rather than seeking to divide them and treat each as separate and distinct. While most of the transcendentalists argued for women's rights while still adhering to conventional beliefs of women's nature, Fuller dismantles their arguments, exposing the faulty premises they are founded on. She chose not to fight with the double-edged sword of women's supposedly superior moral status because she saw that that sword inevitably cut down both women and men. Rather, she chose an argument that sought to unite, to see all human beings as souls in need of freedom to develop as souls. In this way, she applied the principles of Transcendentalism more consistently than any of her transcendentalist peers, and for this she deserves respect not only for her radical contribution to the women's rights movement but also as a major thinker within the transcendentalist movement.

Baylor University
Waco, Texas

Notes
1 See Marie Oleson Urbanski's "Margaret Fuller's Woman in the Nineteenth Century: The Feminist Manifesto"; Fritz Fleishmann's "Margaret Fuller, the Eternal Feminine, and the 'Liberties of the Republic'; Phyllis Cole's "Stanton, Fuller, and the Grammar of Romanticism"; and the collection of essays in Margaret Fuller's Cultural Critique: Her Age and Legacy.

2 Sources to note are Urbanski's "Woman in the Nineteenth Century: Genesis, Form, Tone, and Rhetorical Devices"; Judith Mattson Bean's "Conversation as Rhetoric in Margaret Fuller's Woman in the Nineteenth Century"; P. Joy Rouse's "Margaret Fuller: A Rhetoric of Citizenship in Nineteenth-Century America"; Annette Kolodny's "Inventing a Feminist Discourse: Rhetoric and Resistance in Margaret Fuller's Woman in the Nineteenth Century"; Ann Douglas's The Feminization of American Culture; and Sandra M. Gustafson's "Choosing a Medium: Margaret Fuller and the Forms of Sentiment."

Works Cited
Acton, William. The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs in Youth, in Adult Age, and in Advanced Life: Considered in their Physiological, Social, and Psychological Relations. 4th ed. London, 1865.


Davis, Cynthia J. "What 'Speaks in Us': Margaret Fuller, Woman's Rights, and Human Nature." Fleischmann 43-54.


