

Haverford College

## Haverford Scholarship

---

Faculty Publications

English

---

1996

### The Storied Facts of Margaret Fuller

Christina Zwarg

*Haverford College*, [czwarg@haverford.edu](mailto:czwarg@haverford.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarship.haverford.edu/english\\_facpubs](https://scholarship.haverford.edu/english_facpubs)

---

#### Repository Citation

Zwarg, Christina. "The Storied Facts of Margaret Fuller." *New England Quarterly* 69.1 (1996): 128-42. Print.

This Journal Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at Haverford Scholarship. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Haverford Scholarship. For more information, please contact [nmedeiro@haverford.edu](mailto:nmedeiro@haverford.edu).



---

Review: The Storied Facts of Margaret Fuller

Author(s): Christina Zwarg

Review by: Christina Zwarg

Source: *The New England Quarterly*, Vol. 69, No. 1 (Mar., 1996), pp. 128-142

Published by: [The New England Quarterly, Inc.](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/366307>

Accessed: 28-04-2015 18:37 UTC

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



*The New England Quarterly, Inc.* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The New England Quarterly*.

<http://www.jstor.org>



## Essay Review

---

### THE STORIED FACTS OF MARGARET FULLER

CHRISTINA ZWARG

*Margaret Fuller: An American Romantic Life, The Private Years.* By Charles Capper. (New York: Oxford University Press. 1992. Pp. ix, 423. \$39.95.)

Earth of our pot I smashed dogs me four flights—  
you are your biographer's best American woman . . .

—Robert Lowell

“To Margaret Fuller Drowned”

AFTER I finished writing a book on Margaret Fuller and Ralph Waldo Emerson, the Haverford provost asked me to share my research interests with students, faculty, and other members of the college community.<sup>1</sup> Given the recent spate of publications about Fuller, including Bell Chevigny's revised and important anthology, Robert Hudspeth's completed edition of her letters, and the award-winning biography by Charles Capper, I found myself inclined to reflect upon Fuller's various “returns” to historical memory.<sup>2</sup> The talk elaborated that theme for a good fifty minutes, and at its close a number of engaging questions emerged from the audience. Perhaps two of the most challenging were asked by scientists, though the power of their questions did not resonate for me until I took in hand the task of reviewing Capper's book.

The first question came from a chemist who asked for a brief account of Fuller's family background to help him ground my narrative of her work. Remembering how often details of Fuller's life had derailed a deeper understanding of her writing, I challenged my colleague to consider the value of his inquiry as a guide to her thinking. I startled a few people in the audience when I did so, and I believe I

<sup>1</sup>*Feminist Conversations: Fuller, Emerson and the Play of Reading* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).

<sup>2</sup>Bell Gale Chevigny, *Margaret Fuller's Life and Writings: The Woman and the Myth* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1994); Robert N. Hudspeth, ed., *The Letters of Margaret Fuller*, vols. 1–6 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983–95).

startled a few more when I made it clear that I would only be able to follow a narrative of the patrilineal descent in any coherent way and therefore preferred not to give a direct answer to the question. A second query was posed by a physicist, who asked most sincerely if "Fuller had any significant ideas" that would help him more readily understand her return to history. Having spoken for fifty minutes on that very topic, I was stunned by the question. Brushing aside the worrisome implication that I had been wasting everyone's time with my talk, I did my best to review the contents of my lecture in a few quick mouthfuls, laboring to make Fuller's complex, theoretical concerns still more accessible to this eclectic, general audience. I could have dismissed my colleague's query as a forlorn reminder of the breach between the "two cultures," but later the ideas generated by a careful reading of Capper's book made me realize that the second question, like the first, deserved a more careful, if not elaborate, response than the one I had mustered at the moment of its asking.

Nevertheless, I made little headway on these matters until I encountered a review of a recent Darwin biography by George Levine, a well-known literary critic.<sup>3</sup> In his review, Levine considered the value Darwin's life narrative might hold for an understanding of his science. Levine's lively engagement with this issue drew me to another of his essays on Victorian scientific autobiography where he describes in greater detail how the rise of positivism made it possible to imagine that a scientist's authority depended upon the "death" of his subjectivity.<sup>4</sup> Levine shows far more subtly than I can demonstrate here how this secularized understanding of scientific authority both paralleled and challenged equally secularized notions of individual authority and creativity. The conflicting imperatives of these perspectives and their consequences for narrative form came to a head when accomplished theorists like Darwin indulged in autobiography. In such cases, the story of a life and the story of a scientific discovery became entwined so completely that the fine line between subjective and objective truths blurred in compelling and, in Levine's handling, instructive ways.

Thinking through this material, I saw how the two questions from the scientific community at Haverford emerged from these largely

<sup>3</sup>George Levine, "Darwin Revised, and Carefully Edited," *Configurations* 1 (1994): 191–202, a review of Adrian Desmond and James Moore's *Darwin* (New York: Warner Books, 1991).

<sup>4</sup>George Levine, "Objectivity and Death: Victorian Scientific Autobiography," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 20 (1993): 273–91.

unresolved perspectives and that both perspectives would come into play as I discussed my response to Capper's book. The chemist asking for more biographical information no doubt found my resistance strange, since he had deployed a traditional humanistic assumption concerning the value of one's background when he inquired about Fuller's family. When I asked him to consider how such reassuring narratives are often skewed by less than objective cultural assumptions, my response took on a strangely scientific character. (Indeed, this quest for greater "objectivity" has resulted in the introduction of theory to literary studies.) As a literary critic enmeshed in theory, I found it easy to suggest that the fiction of identity upon which he was depending needed reassessment (though I did not mean to imply that it should be dismissed). With this response, the second questioner no doubt felt justified in his demand for an account of the "real" substance of Fuller's intellectual legacy. Asking whether or not she had any "significant ideas" seemed like a fair question.

Reading about the legacy of positivism for narrative form, I realized that I could no more establish a familiar narrative for the second questioner than I could for the first, since the story of Fuller's work does not resemble anything like the story of Darwin's theory of evolution. Nor could I formulate her as a great system builder in the manner of many well-known, nineteenth-century thinkers, Marx and Freud among them, for Fuller's most valuable contribution to the world of analysis emerged in the interstices of familiar disciplinary boundaries, including the boundaries sharpening in the nineteenth century between the authority of individual experience and the authority of objective truth. It is arguable that Fuller's "phantom" hovers over today's critical scene because we only now begin to find those boundaries safe to cross, though my experience at Haverford reminded me that such crossings are still more redoubtable than I at first understood. I had no useful or recognizable fiction of identity for either of my scientific friends—not one for Fuller's life nor for her work.

I could not even make Fuller easier to understand by calling her an artist in the traditional sense of the term. Nor could I call her a woman writer in the now familiar sense; neither a George Sand nor a George Eliot, Fuller eschewed the life of a poet as well. I might have been content to describe her as an "intellectual prophet in the mode of her difficult mentors Carlyle and Emerson," as Capper does in his biography. But I knew from my own work with Emerson that we needed a slightly more extravagant characterization than this to de-

scribe her work faithfully. No one saw this categorical imperative more keenly than Emerson, who attempted to distance himself from Carlyle's narrative style in his own account of Fuller's enigmatic force.

In answering my physicist colleague, and in my lecture, I emphasized the way Fuller had changed our understanding of the process of analysis itself by focusing on a new way of reading the world around her. But such an abstract idea applies as readily to Darwin, Marx, and Freud, and without familiar narratives such as those that have been established for the work of evolution, Marxism, or psychoanalysis (albeit contentious and fractious ones at that), it remains difficult to supply a brief characterization of Fuller's unique contribution to the world of analytic thought.

I was tempted, of course, to say simply that Fuller was a feminist. But because the word "feminism" is such a general term—one that did not exist in Fuller's lifetime—and because it has a contradictory and troubled status both in the scientific community and among feminists as well, such a characterization does far less than it might to disclose the depth of her contribution to the intellectual and social history of the United States. When we have a more fully elaborated history of feminisms than we do now, perhaps this description will prove more, rather than less, suggestive of her power. Certainly the goals of any new biography of Fuller might well include the intention to enhance our understanding of the value and history of feminism in the United States by means of the illustrative life of one of its leading figures. But biographies of Fuller have come and gone, and my sense at the time was that none had yet made it possible for me adequately to address the question of Fuller's significance.

Fuller may well be, as Capper asserts, "the most written-about woman in early American history," but she is also one of the least read authors of the nineteenth century. Her life story appears to have appealed to readers much more than her difficult and ambitious critical writing; thus, there have been many biographies and few critical studies of her work. Her death by shipwreck at the age of forty gave a dramatic sense of closure to that life, and, in a sense, the return of her body to a space just off this country's shores preempted the return of her analytic gifts. Therefore, I had come to view Fuller's appeal to biographers as a symptom rather than a release of the repressed narrative of her power.

I therefore turned to the Capper biography with some trepidation, though I was immediately relieved to see that he intended to reverse some of the more damaging trends of previous accounts. Most notable

was his determination to “get the facts straight.”<sup>5</sup> To this admirable goal he added the corollary of providing an account of “Fuller thinking and acting with others.” For Capper this meant integrating into her life story “what she believed, what she argued for, what she conceptualized” and “made into symbols.”

Having read many of the same primary and secondary texts of Fuller’s life, I knew how hard getting “the facts straight” could be. As a historian, Capper must have felt enriched by the wealth of traditional material available to him, for he barely grumbles about the truly random and unsorted mass of documents from Fuller’s life that have found their way to various archives, the Houghton Library foremost among them. Capper, of course, acknowledges his debt to Robert Hudspeth for the amazing edition of Fuller’s letters he has drawn from that mass. I, on the other hand, have indulged in resentful comparisons between the haphazard condition of Fuller’s works and the fastidious order of Emerson’s papers (both published and private) at Harvard. Even tracking down Fuller’s published writing takes considerable effort. Certainly, Capper is much more modest than he needs to be about the formidable task he set before himself when he embarked on this project.

Capper spends considerable time framing his narrative by describing several family generations previous to Fuller’s own as the first-born child of Margaret Crane and Timothy Fuller, Jr. We hear about her father’s famous tutelage and her early emotional attachments to men and women alike, particularly her relationships with Ellen Kilshaw, George Davis, James Freeman Clarke, Elizabeth Peabody, Harriet Martineau, Caroline Sturgis, and Sam Ward. We learn as well about the first few years of her interaction with Ralph Waldo Emerson, including their early work together on the *Dial*. For Capper, Fuller’s job as editor, with which he ends volume one of his study, marks the moment Fuller begins to assume her “public” role as intellectual prophet for the culture.

It also marks the moment when my story about Fuller really begins, for as I show in my study, her relationship with Emerson and her work on the *Dial* help to transform her interest in literature and translation into a sustained interpretive strategy. In my view, the task of the translator becomes the operative model for the task of reading and in-

<sup>5</sup>Capper nevertheless owes a great deal (as do we all) to previous biographies and especially to a complex text like Chevigny’s *Woman and the Myth*. Chevigny surely shares his desire to “get the facts straight” even as she boldly interrupts her biographical narrative to present Fuller’s voice.

terpretation in which Fuller engaged throughout her career. For Fuller, translation is less about a conquest of meaning, a mastery that subdues and potentially annihilates an alien set of values (hence everything that gets lost in translation), than it is about the proliferation of meaning, or everything that might be *found* when new values open to view within both languages. In criticism, as in translation, the task is to allow one's own language to be powerfully affected by the alien one, rather than to hold it constant. Thus Fuller's interest in translation guides her thinking through many cultural issues because she sees that a hermeneutic maneuver deriving its authority from a struggle for mastery over meaning has violent *historical* consequences. Equipped with this theoretical understanding of Fuller's work, I found myself in the strange position of knowing what I wanted Capper to say without knowing what he would actually do with this rich symbolic world that Fuller elaborates.

I discovered, however, that I could content myself with analyzing Capper's way of framing the facts of her "private" years which lead to this important moment, for I had a special interest in seeing how his account might support and enhance my own reading of Fuller and perhaps make it easier to explain that reading to my scientific friends. Divulging my peculiar perspective seems far better than denying it; it also explains why I kept generating a series of stories that I might have been tempted to weave into my own narrative about Fuller's work had I been able to read Capper's text before completing my own. The thought that these fantasies might help others whose thinking on Fuller is still in its formative stages provided me with a comfortable rationale. I was also driven by an impish sense of fair play, since Capper can now read *my* book as he prepares the next volume of his biography, should he so choose.

The crucial difference in our approaches to Fuller's life and work seems to be our understanding of what Capper calls "fantasy" and its relationship to the "real" world of the nineteenth century. Both of us want to recover a narrative of Fuller "thinking and acting with others," but we employ divergent strategies for recovering facts from our reading. I assumed that Fuller's symbolic and theoretical world would supply an ample number of clues to important aspects of the material reality of her world, while Capper begins with the familiar objects of her "experience" to elaborate her "ideas and fantasies of intellectual identity, both of herself and her culture." Reflecting on the interesting way both perspectives emerged in the questions from the scientific community at Haverford, I saw that Capper and I needed to keep our per-



spectives in conversation with one another in order to translate Fuller's power to a still larger intellectual community. Once again located at the border of several disciplines, we only had to follow Fuller's lead to find her there.

I took delight in some of the facts as they arrived in Capper's account. The storyteller in me no doubt resonated to the detail that Fuller's mother stood at an imposing 5 feet, 10 inches, but I also felt it provided a clue to a better narrative of "the ideas and fantasies of intellectual identity" at work in Fuller and her view of the culture. Of course, even the facts of Fuller's life are elusive, as Capper well knows. What does it mean, for example, that Fuller's mature height remains unknown? We hear from Capper that in her early years Fuller proudly described herself as a tall girl (5 feet, 2 inches at age ten), and Capper shows that strangers saw her that way as well. Yet we learn from still others, Emerson and Caroline Sturgis among them, that they found her "rather under the middle height." Accounts of Fuller's appearance vary considerably, and the ambiguity of her height suggests that some extremely fascinating responses were at play whenever Fuller came into a room. Whatever the reason for these responses, Fuller's elusive physical appearance returned me to a host of questions guiding my reading of Capper's narrative, questions I actually shared with the chemist at Haverford.

I might have satisfied the scientist with a synopsis of the family story told by Capper at the opening of his first volume. A much more detailed account of Fuller's Puritan ancestors than we have ever had, it is a valuable contribution to our understanding of one aspect of her background. The frustration I experienced upon reading about one Fuller generation after another (and the frustration I experienced with the chemist's question as posed) had to do with its restrictive quality. I kept thinking how refreshing it would be to begin instead with an account of the women and relatives from the mother's side of Fuller's family. This would have been a more problematic task, if only because family names would have turned around with each new marriage, but I believe it would have been a rewarding one. I do not mean to suggest that family stories of Fuller's father, his father before him, and the father before him did not have an important shaping influence on Fuller, for they surely did. But imagining the impact on Fuller of these other family stories seems equally important for comprehending her enormous reservoir of strength. Because the facts of these family legends are more difficult to track down, the explanatory power of the legends themselves too often becomes hidden or lost.

The reader of Capper's biography first encounters Margaret Crane, Fuller's mother, through the word wife. The reader aware of Fuller's deliberate emphasis on the power of women through history in her famous *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* will understand that this presentation of her mother does not prepare us to know Fuller in quite the way she herself might have hoped. Indeed, even the narrative of Margaret Crane gets bogged down the moment her full name appears, for it is no sooner introduced than the reader is given a history of the (patrilineal) Crane family and thus fenced off from tales of the many (matrilineal) men and women of diverse names who were also among Fuller's ancestors.

Yet Capper's traditional start may also help to explain why the detail of Margaret Crane's height interrupted the flow just a bit and gave me a brief rush of euphoria. I remember feeling I was at last arriving at another type of material reality, a surprising one that could have emerged from Fuller's pen. If Margaret Crane has been something of a "nonentity" in other accounts of Fuller's life, as Capper avers, this detail implied that she would be more adequately described within his pages. And as Capper moves through Fuller's early years, he does give a more complete view of Fuller's relationship with her mother than we have previously had. Here he is aided by letters written between Fuller's parents, as well as Fuller's letters and journals. Margaret Crane's sharp and intuitive grasp of interpersonal relationships may be the most seductive aspect of her personality we glean from Capper's still relatively brief account. But I savored every fresh detail: the image of Margaret Crane's pipe-smoking mother; the news that Margaret Crane Fuller had a breast tumor (though we never find out if Fuller knew about it or how she responded); the earthy glimpse of Fuller's mother transplanting cuttings from her extraordinary garden wherever family members would reside, often replicating her garden in its entirety. Capper inaugurates an important recovery with these facts, one that I hope will encourage more readers to develop an ampler narrative (perhaps a novel!) about Margaret Crane Fuller, for the story of this nineteenth-century woman needs to be told with still more freedom.

We do learn something about Sarah Williams, Fuller's grandmother on her father's side, who grew up in a home with slaves. Apparently her father freed them upon his death with the command that each family member take a share of responsibility for their welfare. Capper does not speculate on what impact this story may have had on Fuller, though it is one of those irresistible details that I could easily imagine

weaving into Fuller's sense of identity. Neither do we learn why Fuller, named Sarah Margaret after the two most important women in her father's life, chose in her early adulthood to drop the name Sarah. There are clues in Capper's handling that Fuller thought Sarah an old-fashioned name, but one wonders still more about her striking persistence in establishing Margaret Fuller as her chosen name.<sup>6</sup> It certainly balances out the influence of both parents and even grants Fuller a special authority in the process. If this type of speculation draws us too far beyond the science of biography, it is a speculation set off by one of the delightful facts Capper's reader will meet along the way.

Of course, no one has done more to problematize the activity of recovering facts and fantasies of identity from an individual's life than Freud. Freud's determination to turn his theory of trauma and the unconscious into a science adds an interesting and, I think, useful dimension to any analysis of Fuller, since she became something of a theorist of trauma, both in her life and in the world around her. Moreover, Freud's desire to work from clinical experience to avoid what he called "wild analysis" was often frustrated by certain subjective aspects inherent in the process, a complication not unlike the one a critic encounters when making an analysis of Fuller and her "fantasies of identity." Freud was still attempting late in his life to establish how an analyst could be certain that he was in possession of an analytic fact. His "Constructions in Analysis" shows him responding to a scientist who complained that a patient would invariably find himself in a "no-win" situation with regard to the facts of analysis. If the patient denied the value of an analyst's construction, for example, the denial itself would be deployed as a "fact" for interpretation without due consideration of the denial's factual validity. A careful reading of Freud's essay lends ironic credence to his friend's complaint, since Freud's defensive denial gives us a chance to interpret his response in a way he might not like. Nabokov parodies the same issue in *Palefire*, when his egocentric narrator insists that the critic, after all, has the last word in any analysis. Small wonder that Freud returns to the issue of hallucination at the close of his essay, for the ghost of his denial seems to rise before him.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup>Of course, Fuller also dropped the final "t" of her mother's name, a matter about which others may care to speculate.

<sup>7</sup>I want to thank David M. Sachs for conversations concerning the consequences for clinical practice of Freud's objectivist account of the psychoanalytic method. I especially want to thank him for sharing with me chapter drafts from his forthcoming study, *Healing Conversations*.

But if we are really interested in recovering the fictions of identity that Fuller elaborated both for herself and her culture, we cannot afford to place her in this type of “no-win” situation. The only way to avoid doing that is to open ourselves to new ways of reading her, new ways of seeing how she may sometimes provoke our own defenses as we listen to her and accounts about her. Just as the science of psychoanalysis has broadened to include the analyst’s subjectivity, so, too, the science of biography or literary criticism needs to be attentive to fictions of identity at play in the task of analysis. I found that an unusually productive insight emerged whenever I let Fuller, or the ensemble we call “Fuller,” including the field of ideas surrounding the name, perform as my analyst just a bit. This is another way of saying that I learned to be more attentive to those moments when I became defensive in the presence of this conceptual field, or what Capper calls the “phantom” of Margaret Fuller.

One of the most powerfully defensive strains in Capper’s biography appears when he recites the litany of critical comments made about Fuller over the years. These denigrating stories cover and, in a literal sense, disguise almost everything there is to know about her—her appearance, her manner of speaking, her style of writing, her emotional ties, etc. Until now, every reader of “Fuller” has had to contend with this material (there is so much of it), and Capper no doubt decided that he would be ignoring vital “facts” were he to exclude it from his account. But I think he could have dispensed with this means of framing her apparently always stunning and surprising presence. Capper’s description of Emerson’s advice to Fuller concerning her preface to the first *Dial* issue seems apt. Give up the apologetic style, Emerson told Fuller, eschew defenses and present the underlying reasons for the magazine in bold and confident tones. Such advice is always easier to offer or report than to follow, for I too found the swamp of gossip and petty response to Fuller deflecting vital attention away from her intellect. Yet I also realized that giving in to this other material oddly nourished it, while the more important “Fuller” remained caught in a “no-win” situation. I found it much more satisfying to deny the factual value of these descriptions (save, perhaps, for what they might tell us about those surrounding Fuller) and to invent new ways of talking about the unquestioned fact of her extraordinary analytic power.

Capper recovers his focus just a bit when he establishes Fuller’s empathic responsiveness as her most powerful interpersonal skill. In the process, he nearly turns her into a model psychoanalyst: despite her own obvious gifts for conversation, she could be an extraordinarily attentive and engaged listener. Capper tells us, following Emerson’s

lead, that in her presence, ordinary defenses and decorum seemed to drop away. Where Fuller gained this sensitivity remains a mystery, though it is my fantasy (assisted by the details of Capper's biography) that the women in her background aided in developing this aspect of her personality, perhaps as much as did her broadly directed reading and translating skills bequeathed to her by her father.

Out of Capper's recognition of Fuller's empathic range emerges one of the most engaging accounts of Fuller's teaching that I have ever read. After her father's death, she assumed his share of responsibility for the large family left behind, and teaching was one of the early ways she supported herself and them. Aligned first with Bronson Alcott, whose experimental and innovated educational methods also earned him the disdain of many, she went on to be a central figure in Hiram Fuller's Providence school and later to establish her famous seminars, or "Conversations," in Boston. Capper astutely describes Fuller's responsive, demanding, and transforming pedagogical style. Any woman who has found herself teaching at the university level will especially appreciate his nuanced reading of the sometimes conflicting pedagogical imperatives Fuller's students imposed upon her. Fuller, of course, did not have the opportunity to teach in a university, though her Boston seminars were often aimed at that level: Capper also unveils some wonderful new discoveries along the way. I did not know that Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Paulina Davis, or Sarah Sturgis Shaw, the mother of Robert Gould Shaw, had been among Fuller's students. Details like this lend a kind of heartbreaking aura to the story, for it reminds the reader that Fuller would not be alive to take a more direct part in the events these students would go on to experience and define. At the same time, these very details challenge us to show still more vividly and elaborately the influence her teaching so obviously had.

Other details are equally suggestive and revealing. We learn from Capper, for example, that in her classes Fuller sometimes had daughters of mill owners. Now, I understand why I have never been able to find Fuller tendering an opinion about the *Lowell Offering* or the *Voice of Industry*, two periodicals written in the early 1840s by mill-workers, including among them members of the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association. I do not, however, thereby endorse Harriet Martineau's judgment that Fuller sometimes found herself outside the "real" or significant movements of her culture. Such a view contradicts Fuller's gathering interest in class and economic issues worldwide and her concern for racial prejudice in the United States.

Certainly it is impossible to read the “Female Department” of the *Voice of Industry* without attending to many of the same themes found in Fuller’s “Great Lawsuit,” the initial version of *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*. Neither Fuller nor the Lowell workers acknowledge one another directly, yet their mutual interests are far from casual. Indeed, a historian would find herself in interesting territory if she were to map out the “fantasies of identity” being reshaped by both the Lady and the Mill Girl in consistently reinforcing ways.

Capper provides a strong reading of the complex and strained relationship that developed between Fuller and Martineau after Martineau visited the United States, though once again I found it more provocative than complete. One provocative detail in particular struck me: Harriet Martineau was tall. It is of course impossible to know what meaning this fact held for Fuller, but I couldn’t resist thinking it bore an uncanny relation to Fuller’s complex, and perhaps enduring, response to Martineau’s critique of Boston in her *Society in America*. When Martineau described the city as one “mired in ‘caste,’ ‘pedantry’ and ‘Cant,’” Fuller took exception. Yet many clues in Capper’s account suggest that she did so by permanently absorbing into herself a small part of Martineau’s critique. The simple word “cant,” which Martineau so sharply uses, provides tempting support for this thesis, since it is a word that Fuller deploys rather strikingly in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*. There Fuller inserts a quote from John Sterling that aptly captures the response I am trying to describe: “Realize your cant, not cast it off.” It always seemed to me that Fuller enjoyed the pun on “can’t” in Sterling’s quotation. Now, I begin to know more about the source of that surmise. Bronson Alcott was pilloried by Martineau as the most “dangerous example of Boston Cant,” and Fuller, who developed many of her early ideas about teaching through her experience with him, worked carefully to transform that fault into a virtue. After reading Capper’s deft treatment of Fuller’s faithful, yet somewhat ambivalent, support of Alcott, Fuller’s elaboration on the word “cant” in *Woman* appears a complex double homage to Boston and Martineau. Fuller’s internalized sense of Martineau’s challenge is only speculation on my part, though I confess that the “fact” of Martineau’s height lured me to it. Introduced earlier to Fuller’s towering mother, I was tempted to imagine both her parents hovering in the shadow of Martineau’s physical presence and Fuller driven by that shadow to name what *could* be done about real social change.

Even though the name Zwarg is one vowel away from meaning “dwarf” in German, there are many tall people in my family. (These

too are storied facts!) Such information may explain why Capper's unwitting return to the issue of height tickled the fantasy artist in me. If it is tempting to suggest that Matineau's unusual size stimulated Fuller's critical faculties, it is still more speculative to imagine her response to the grand figure of Abraham Lincoln. Such wild imaginings are *surely* fictions of identity too wobbly to establish, yet they sometimes lead back to somewhat sturdier speculations. Because of her untimely death, we will never know what Fuller would have done with the critique of value being articulated by Lincoln and Frederick Douglass, yet it is clear from her interest in the critique of value issuing from socialist and communist sects in Europe that an extraordinary merging of these two interests might have resulted. My own desire imaginatively to construct that merger enabled me to recognize that what Fuller had actually accomplished in this regard during her lifetime needed to be stated with more precision.

In my work, I had already elaborated something of that accomplishment by describing Fuller's "reading before Marx" as proleptic and less restrictive than that which would become known as Marxism. Yet even this idea seems too limited to me now, for one might as readily say that Fuller knew how to "read before Freud" in the same provocative way, since she became increasingly attentive to what I would like to call the "work of trauma" at all levels of culture, both material and psychological. Certainly one thing is true: Fuller's transforming power, her ability to "realize" the "cant" of culture in many of its persistent appearances and disguises, emerged through her extraordinary reading habits and skills. Capper shows us how these reading skills developed under her father's tutelage and concludes that her voracious reading had an unsystematic character because she was not trained as men were in the university. While this movement beyond the familiar boundaries of discipline became a virtue and is characteristic of Fuller's thought, it also explains why she has been difficult to read and why her theoretical relationship to reading is problematic to define or describe.

Writing to a youthful, yet already accomplished, daughter, Timothy Fuller once advised:

When you have true taste you will read more for the fine sentiments & imagery than for the story or narrative of any work of fiction. In all such books the narrative being false, is not worth reading for its own sake; but when it is full of just thoughts & poetical figure expressed in elegant style, then it is worth the time of the reader. But unfortunately unthinking girls read with precisely the contrary view—the story is all they regard all they remember—

perhaps many of them even skip over all such passages as interrupt the story a moment. [P. 30]

When Timothy Fuller urges his daughter to rise above what he takes to be a petty way of reading, he helps her to resist a type of rote response. That he chooses to label this negative approach feminine may be more of a blessing than a curse, for Fuller is equipped both to value her father's advice *and* to critique the easy gender assumption upon which that advice depends. One can only speculate how Fuller attained her simultaneously aversive and empathic reading style. From Capper's description of the letters written by Margaret Crane, however, one can imagine that Fuller's comfort with this type of duality owes something to her mother's way of viewing the world. We begin then to see how the stories from Fuller's mother (and her mother before her) may be as important to our understanding of her as other, more familiar tales of her father's world and his influence. Both contribute to Fuller's innovative method, which depended always upon locating the cant of such advice and realizing its broadest meanings. With this method, this translating skill, Fuller gained the ability to consider how traumatic and limiting experiences might be transformed into promising possibilities for social change.

The quotation also seems oddly designed to assist me with my response to the two scientists. Had I been able to provide the first questioner with a richer account of the virtues of reading more deeply into and beyond the familiar plot lines of a thinker's life, I might have answered the second questioner by explaining how Fuller was one of the first to articulate the tiered complexity of this type of reading. For Fuller the activity of reading was, as I mentioned earlier, less about the conquest of meaning than about the proliferation of meanings, even conflicting ones, since she knew how narratives often contain within them contradictory or untranslated news of trauma and desire.

Certainly one way of reading the world cannot be allowed to conquer all others, as it has in many early studies of Fuller herself. Because his narrative continually invites the reader to work beyond the material and the reading he supplies, Capper provokes new questions about Fuller. What, for example, can we make of the death of Arthur, Fuller's brother, killed in the Civil War only hours after volunteering for a dangerous mission on the day of his discharge from the Sixteenth Massachusetts Infantry? Capper tells us that Arthur was the brother who edited and published some of his sister's work posthumously. If he edited her writing in a way that we now find overly protective, he



nevertheless appears to have been compelled to live up to his potential by the force of her language, a force that we begin with Capper's aid to see driving others to the same type of action. Thus Capper's new festival of "fact" about Fuller's life beckons a broader story of Fuller's influence. Insofar as it does so, Capper's biography is prospective, reminding us of Emerson's faith that a *true* account of Fuller would provide an "essential line of American history" or even, perhaps, an account of the "true romance which the world exists to realize."

Christina Zwarg, *Associate Professor of English at Haverford College*, is the author of *FEMINIST CONVERSATIONS: FULLER, EMERSON AND THE PLAY OF READING*. She is 5 feet, 8½ inches tall.