

Island Queen: Frances Butler Leigh's *Ten Years on a Georgia Plantation Since the War*

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Unlike her famous mother, the British actress Fanny Kemble, Frances Butler Leigh lived and died in relative obscurity. She was Fanny Kemble's "other daughter," the youngest of the two little girls Kemble reluctantly left with their father, Pierce Butler, in 1845. The "ill-considered marriage" (Furnas 285) between the charming, hardheaded Shakespeare actress and the spoiled slaveowner ended in divorce in 1849, with custody of Sarah and Frances granted to their father. Sarah grew up to share her mother's northern sympathies and to give birth to Owen Wister, author of *The Virginian* (1902) and *Lady Baltimore* (1906), while Frances became a staunch Confederate, surely her father's child.¹ An infant when her parents spent the winter on the Georgia property that Fanny Kemble described in *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation in 1838-39* (1861), Frances returned with Pierce Butler to St. Simon's and Butler Islands, off the Georgia coast, in 1866, to assist her father in reclaiming the family plantations and to manage the former Butler slaves. After the war, a majority of the slave population had returned to the islands, though Pierce Butler had auctioned off 436 men, women and children in March

1. Though Frances Butler Leigh was also known as Fan and Fanny, I have chosen to call her Frances, to distinguish between mother and daughter.

1859, to pay off his gambling debts. A devoted daughter, Frances chronicles the first year in Georgia with her father, his death from malaria in 1867, and the subsequent seasons she herself reigned as "supreme dictator," in *Ten Years on a Georgia Plantation Since the War* (1883). Much to her mother's dismay, Frances struggled for a decade to make profitable the Butler family holdings, first alone, later assisted by her British-born husband, Rev. James Wentworth Leigh, who turned out to be a talented rice planter, his background notwithstanding. Leigh's desire to return to a "future appropriate to a well-born and widely liked Church of England clergyman" (Furnas 431) prompted the island queen he had married to give up her throne, though, she told Henry James in England, she remained "forever homesick for the islands" (xvi).

More than her marriage, not to mention the climactic and labor-related tribulations she records, caused, it seems, her dethronement. As a dutiful nineteenth-century wife, Frances defers at the end of her journal to her husband, who wraps it up with a series of letters and thus usurps authorial control. Moreover, her queen's English, so to speak, consistently clashes with the linguistic practices of the former Butler slaves. Though their voices reach us only through Frances' representational filters, they testify throughout *Ten Years* to a racial struggle concerning the function and meaning of language. While the literal, possibly unimaginative Frances assumes a mimetic relationship between signifier and signified, or between "language" and "reality," the African Americans around her engage in more fluid, downright poststructuralist operations. At the end of her journal, a rewritten Frances has lost and won various battles, including a linguistic one.

Upon her marriage to James Leigh, Frances ends her account, and her husband takes over the text, as he did the rice plantations. "I am monarch of all I survey," he writes from Butler Island in November 1873. "Our castle is a neat but not gaudy little frame house ..." (107). Apart from his use of royal imagery, the new King seeks to control his unruly material through logical arrangement. Rather than to relate his experiences as they occur, as his wife had done, Leigh structures his letters thematically: one on Christmas celebrations, one on the harvest festival, one on rice cultivation, one on the town of Darien, one on "The Emancipated African," etc. Within each letter, he proceeds chronologically, rationally. In "Our Island Home," for example, he proceeds from the interior of the Leighs'

dwelling to the exterior, then on to "the colony" consisting of the kitchen, servants' rooms, the laundry and dairy, and a turkey-house set in the corner of the yard. He continues with what becomes a thorough mapping of the island: "Behind the colony is Settlement No. 1, where the colored people (I believe this also is the correct term) reside" (108).

Leigh's parenthetical insertion demonstrates his self-conscious, deliberate linguistic choices. He refers as well to "our sable brethren," and again justifies his terminology parenthetically: "(I believe 'brethren' is the proper term in these free and enlightened days)" (107). Leigh's irony ensures, however, a comfortable distance to his underlings. Whenever his mask of political correctness slips off, he resorts to standard nineteenth-century racial slurs.

Though Leigh's systematic lists of workers, wages, rice crops, and cultivation methods provide valuable information about Reconstruction life, his descriptions of overgrown plantation homes, ruined orchards, destitute aristocrats and idyllic antebellum memories leave no doubt as to his (and his queen's) political convictions. He writes fondly of the beautiful houses of the antebellum rich, whose perfect Sea Island cotton crops no longer ornament plantation grounds. Regretfully, he concludes that "the late disastrous civil war changed all this" (126).

In adjusting to this change from a life he never experienced firsthand, he expects, apart from his escapades into new terminology, that the former Butler slaves accommodate themselves to his symbolic systems. In his account of the harvest festival, he hears the African Americans' shout as "a sort of dirge or hymn" and also sees the dining and dancing harvest workers through colonial glasses. Like Mary Louise Pratt's seeing man, he emphasizes the plentiful resources, characteristically through lists: "stewed oysters, sweet potatoes, rice, rounds of beef, ham, bacon, hominy, oranges and coffee." The dinner guests, generically described as befits the colonial gaze, he associates with absence and difference: "There were no toasts after dinner, as the fashion of toast-giving has not yet reached this part of the world, and probably would not have been understood by the sable guests." The after-dinner celebration of the new barn "was not done, as you might be led to suppose, by loud hurrahs ..." (114). To discontinue African American practices that he finds "heathenish" (115), he teaches the children the Catechism and practices with them the Old Hundred and other hymns. "I think in time we shall

get a fair choir," he writes, indulging in a vision of cultural change: "Fancy a choir of small frizzle-headed little n-----s in white surplices!" (109-10, my ellipsis). By measuring Butler Island inhabitants by his own cultural standards, Leigh moves from irony to ridicule and ultimately associates African American liberty with chaos.

Leigh's first letter thus begins by stressing both the geographical and especially the linguistic isolation in which he finds himself, "miles away from our friends on your side of the water, and yet hearing every day the same language spoken, although it must be confessed in a very peculiar and hardly intelligible manner; by our sable brethren" (197). Set in the margin of discursive systems, African Americans should not attempt to control the center, as in the states of Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina. "These states," Leigh notes, "are placed completely under negro rule, and scenes occur in the state legislature *which baffle description*" (emphasis added). To the island king, black political and linguistic power equals indescribable chaos: "The negroes have it all their own way, and rob and plunder as they please" (133).

James Wentworth Leigh's letters follow the concluding chapters of his wife's journal, entitled "Abdication" and "A New Master," respectively. The island queen had already, as she saw it, spent a decade in staving off chaos, yet she divided her linguistic loyalties between her mother and James Leigh. Like Fanny Kemble, Frances leans towards polyphony, for example in mixing her journal with letters and commentary added later. She also invites other voices into her text, not least the many African American ones around her. In the dramatic tradition of the Kembles, she records dialogs and conversations, and even casts herself in various roles: dutiful daughter, experienced planter, struggling businesswoman, supreme dictator, submissive wife, to mention only her most prominent parts.

In Fanny Kemble fashion, she also relies on metaphor in describing the landscape and region to which she too came as an outsider. Accompanying Pierce Butler to the funeral of James Hamilton Couper, a neighbor Fanny Kemble liked and respected, Frances describes the simple, desolate church as a symbol of the fallen South. She crosses a plank over broken-down steps to enter the church, whose falling roof allows the sun to stream down upon the funeral party. Northern soldiers have carved their names in the wooden seats, and outside, weeds, bushes, and moss

like tangled cob-webs bar access to the freshly dug grave. Not only does Frances show traits of her mother's poetic sensibilities in the comparison of cob-webs to grey moss, she constructs the desolate scene as metaphor, "a fit illustration," she writes, "of this people and this country" (22).

Like Fanny Kemble in *Journal of a Residence*, written three decades earlier, Frances reveals a distrust of masculine (linguistic) authority. Upon the arrival of northern agents in 1868, Frances attempts to prevent her laborers from attending voters' meetings—not, she argues, "because I cared in the least which way they voted, but because it interfered so terribly with their work" (51). Frances appeals to the military commander of her district, General Meade, to ask for protection from "these political disturbers and agitators" (52). A first letter from the general reinforces her own position, which she subsequently communicates to the African American labor force: no political meetings, voting after three p.m., with all tasks completed beforehand. A second letter from General Meade takes a different approach and advises Miss Butler not to prohibit her workers from leaving early: "The theory of my order is that no restraint is to be put on the labourer to prevent his voting" (57). Miss Butler scorns, however, this masculine revision, and indignantly decides to disregard the general's second message. She pockets the letter and proceeds to order her laborers to work first and vote later (59). If her appeal to the powerful general in form, but not in content, echoes her mother's pleadings with Pierce Butler, Frances' usurpation suggests her father's influence.

The Confederate loyalties Pierce Butler communicated to his youngest daughter combined with Fanny Kemble's distrust of authority in Frances' approach to Reconstruction politics. Her northern brother-in-law, Dr. Owen Wister, who accompanied her to Georgia in 1867, had to take the Oath of Allegiance in order to have St. Simon's island property restored to the family under the law, since Frances herself could not be induced to do so. "The whole thing," she writes, "was so preposterous." She elaborates with a vehemence worthy of her mother on the irony of the situation. Not only had her brother-in-law never previously visited the South, but, out of strong Republican convictions, he had voted first for Lincoln, then for Grant. He had throughout the war supported the North and even volunteered his services when, threatened by Lee before Gettysburg, Pennsylvania had needed troops. And, Frances goes on, his wife had

sympathized with the North to the extent that for a while no southerners entered their house. "What a farce it all was!" she concludes (42).

Frances seems particularly offended by the discrepancy between language and "reality" in Dr. Wister's taking the Oath. As a northerner, he should not have to swear his allegiance, a signifier needing a Rebel signified. In a final statement on the Couper funeral and the fallen South, Frances reveals both the political convictions she shared with her father and her linguistic beliefs: "Some day justice will be done, and the Truth shall be heard above the political din of slander and lies, and the Northern people shall see things as they are, and not through the dark veil of envy, hatred and malice" (23). The youngest Miss Butler mourns the Lost Cause and hopes for at least a rhetorical redemption. She also promotes an unelastic notion of truth, of the relation between "things as they are" and things represented.

With a mimetic conception of language, Frances cannot help notice the relation between social and linguistic change: "The old negro drivers ... are now called captains, out of compliment to the changed times" (28). Yet, like the spouse she would eventually import, she imagines change as an African American move towards dominant linguistic practices. When the captains report the work of their gangs each night, Frances listens attentively for progress, both in terms of labor and language: "It is very amusing to hear them say, as each man's name is called, 'He done him work;' 'He done half him task;' 'Ain't sh'um' (have not seen him)" (29). Her amusement and her translation articulate her sense of (linguistic) superiority.

Like her husband, Frances believes the African American population to inhabit a pre- or extralinguistic realm, far removed from her own languagescapes. "I generally found," she concludes upon failing to induce Cato to churn butter, "that if I wanted a thing done I first had to tell the negroes to do it, then show them how, and finally do it myself" (29). The queen's English, in short, fails within African American linguistic territory, where language and "res" engage in more fluid relations. The queen thus notes about her underlings that "they always were perfectly good-tempered, and received my orders with, 'Dat's so, missus; just as missus says,' and then always somehow or other left the thing undone" (29). Her verbal intercourse with the African American labor force confirms her notion of a cultural and linguistic gulf between the races: "to see them in

one of their excitements, gesticulating wildly, talking so violently that no one on earth can understand one word they say, you would suppose they never could be brought under control again" (61-62).

Also the King observes, with characteristic irony, the discrepancy between signifier and signified in African American language use, especially when the signifiers originate in European/American discourses. When, on one occasion, his "mistress" requests an old wedding preacher to use the Prayer Book Service to marry a couple, James Leigh recounts that "he would read through all the Rubrics, and was going on through the Service for Visitation of the Sick, when he was judiciously stopped" (111). As Leigh sees it, the preacher was literate, but "he did *not* understand." What both the Leighs do not understand is the preacher's hybrid conception of signifier-signified relations: the Wedding Service and the Service for Visitation operate on similar discursive levels and accordingly might both signify the marriage vows.

Clashes between planters and laborers originate, of course, in conflicts of interest, but peak in moments of linguistic difference. As in the "old times," some sort of emotional contract exists between the races, if nowhere else then in Frances' imagination. In August of 1867, Pierce Butler had died in Georgia, apparently due to a habit of procrastination that had kept him on the island into the fever season (Furnas 409). Frances found comfort in the words of his former slaves. Though (or because) she compares them to "sheep without a shepherd" (37), their marginal position within (her) language strengthens the emotional bond she believes to tie the races together: "Their love for, and belief in my father, was *beyond expression*, and made me love them *more than I can say*" (39, my emphases). In one interpretation, Frances' colonial gaze sees the African Americans as blank pages upon which she might inscribe her own love and sorrow. As with Pierce, a servant she takes North one winter, the African American body signifies a signified of Frances' own choosing.

The labor contract Miss Butler wants her workers to sign nonetheless brings out financial as well as linguistic conflicts. With her firm belief in signs, and in unambiguous links between "res" and representation, Frances trusts that workers' signatures on the bottom line will help ensure their continued labor. She insists, in short, on her contract: "I was firm, and said, 'No, you must sign or go away.' So one by one, with groans and sighs, they put their mark down opposite to their names, and by five I had

them all in" (44). The laborers, however, do not share her allegiance to text. The St. Simon's people, she writes, "would 'work for me till they died,' but 'would put their hand to no paper'" (45). While they agree, it seems, on the signified of the arrangement, they resist Frances' signifiers, and insist on their own: "the people poured in and poured out, each one with long explanations, objections, and demonstrations. I saw that even those who came fully intending to sign would have their say ..." (44). African Americans on the island engage in signifyin', their gestures, objections, and questions constituting floating signifiers, inscriptions of empowerment. When Frances impatiently interrupts a potential worker, he insists on having his say: "Top, missus, don't cut my discourse" (45).

Though Frances takes comfort in her role as mistress and in organizing the workers as in "old times," Reconstruction race relations nonetheless force her to "read" her laborers just as they continue to read their masters. In her account of the "dogged patience" (45) she musters to have the contract signed, she dwells on William, who withholds his signature because he will not work on Saturdays. He leaves her office with a flourish of his large umbrella, only to return an hour later, in Frances' formulation "with the umbrella shut, which I thought a good sign" (46). In the changed social order of Reconstruction, planters and laborers engage in mutual readings, or, indeed, misreadings.

Mary Louise Pratt's contact zone almost becomes a war zone as the queen takes up arms against (linguistic) insurrection. In 1868-69 she takes to sleeping with a loaded pistol by her bed. She records in her journal the changed behavior of African Americans on the island. They take to calling former owners by their last name, without titles or terms of respect. With undue familiarity, they address Frances herself as "Miss Fanny," and further annoy their former mistress by carrying guns, working only as they please when they please, keeping their hats on in her company, and not touching them when passing her on plantation grounds (72).

Frances discusses issues of work and violence within a linguistic and cultural frame, modes of address signifying the insubordination, or worse, white southerners fought to stave off. In Frances' phrase, "I felt the whole time that it was touch-and-go whether I or the negroes got the upper hand" (72). With Tunis Campbell, Frances' nightmare of African American rule seemed to come true, and over a three- or four-year period gave planters, in her phrase, "infinite trouble" (74).

To alleviate this trouble, Frances changes her modes of expression. Amidst the contract negotiations, she throws a full-fledged hysterical fit—"from fatigue and excitement," as Fanny Kemble's daughter and Thérèse De Camp's granddaughter explains. Other than articulating herself physically, like the Kemble women, and, in Frances' representation, the former Butler slaves, she revises her language to accommodate her workers. In a reversal of (linguistic) power, they speak while Frances tries to stay silent. She further exchanges statements and orders with questions: "now I just stand perfectly quiet until they have talked themselves out, and then I ask some simple question ..." (62). While this strategy works to show the laborers "how foolish they have been," Frances also loses influence, as when she attempts to keep the freedmen till three o'clock on election day: "It was useless," she admits. "My words were powerless" (52).

With some division of linguistic power, the queen and the islanders negotiate un/happily until the king takes over. At the end of the "Abdication" chapter, Frances Butler surrenders her pages to James Leigh, who becomes the undisputed master of everybody. "The negroes," writes Frances in her last chapter, "after trying what sort of stuff he was made of, became very devoted to him." She also records a compliment, one negotiator to another. One of the old men, she informs us, notes that "Miss Fanny (me) made a good bargain dat time" (106).

If Leigh apparently becomes the major source of linguistic control, as African American and female voices fade from the journal, his letters serve, however, his queen's purposes. She brings him in as key witness, to authenticate her own interpretations. "I cannot do better," she concludes, "than add [his letters] to this account of mine, as they will show how everything at the South struck the fresh and unbiassed mind of a foreigner who had no traditions, no old associations, and no prejudices ... to influence him" (106). Her own influence she chooses not to mention, but with language as authoritative as that of the King, she reinserts herself in the final pages of the published journal, the African American voices she chooses to quote reestablishing her reign: "We your people, missus" (157). These voices reach us, to be sure, through her only.

Even in exile, the former island queen held on to considerable power. She had, after all, married a man whose linguistic sensibilities matched her own. Leigh's maps and lists all testify to his trust in order, as well as

the Old Order, and like Frances before him, he sought with his own language and culture to prevent the chaos that nature and Reconstruction politics threatened to bring about. He thus tempered his wife's scepticism concerning utterances from other races—male or African American. Both husband and wife expected a mimetic relation between word and “res” and, when they ran out of linguistic resources (and rationales), left the island together. James Wentworth Leigh sailed for England with his wife and his mother-in-law in January 1877.

Both Fanny Kemble and James Leigh accommodated themselves to Frances' words and personality. The opinionated Kemble held her tongue around her opinionated daughter (Wright 197, Bell 443). As she wrote about Frances to her older sister Sarah, "I have never been able to forget her furious outbreak of temper in Paris and am much too afraid of challenging another of the same sort to speak to her with any freedom about anything" (Bell, 443; cp. Wright 197). James Leigh, in turn, took to spending evening hours in his study. Joining the Leighs and Fanny Kemble in Stratford on the Avon around Christmas 1877, Henry James found Frances, "(except for strength of will) ... inferior to both her mother and sister." She hated, he observed, her English life, including the English, and kept "rubbing it unmercifully into her good-natured husband" (Bell 438). Frances' ten years in Georgia had come to an end, but the voice of *Ten Years on a Georgia Plantation* remained, in a sense, her own.

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