
Radical Translations: Politics, Personal and Transnational, Presaged By Margaret Fuller's Dante, Goethe and George Sand

Kathleen Lawrence*¹

¹Georgetown University – United States

Abstract

In a letter of 1834 to close friend Almira Penniman Barlow, Margaret Fuller confided, "Experience! Why cannot I value thee, and make thee my peculiar household deity, as did our Master, Goethe?" Only twenty-four, Fuller was beginning a path to make wide-ranging experience her "household deity" as numerous foreign writers broadened her New England provinciality, including Italians Dante, Tasso, Petrarch, Ariosto, and Alfieri, French writers de Staël and George Sand, and, for Germans, Goethe as well as Lessing, Novalis, and Schiller. This paper will demonstrate the significance of Fuller's early fluency in European languages and literatures as preparation for revolutionary action on a personal and political level during her sojourn of 1847-50. Beginning in 1836, Fuller's autodidactic absorption of French, German, and Italian language enabled her not only to imbibe these works firsthand, "translating" them to her own uses and understanding, but also literally to translate selected works into English for a circle of avid New England readers. While her projected European sojourn of 1836 was cancelled due to her father's untimely death, her quiet months studying foreign language and literature in Groton would provide Fuller with the intellectual foundation for experience and action abroad, enabling her radical transformation during her Italian residence of 1847-50. Linguistic and literary bonds were the prelude to personal and cultural bonds in France and Italy, enabling Fuller to negotiate foreign difference at depths shut off from other expatriates, including writers such as Anna Jameson and Fanny Fern, and artists such as Thomas Cole, Horatio Greenough, William Page, and William Wetmore Story. Fuller's early exposure served as a catalyst to "translate" American democratic political texts into European contexts, inspiring her ultimately to fuse American republicanism with Risorgimento ideals.

*Speaker