
Frances Wright, Women's Public Oratory, and Transatlantic Reform

Whitney Womack Smith*¹

¹Miami University – United States

Abstract

Frances "Fanny" Wright (1795-1852) was a ubiquitous figure in transatlantic reform, speaking on behalf of the abolition of slavery, women's rights and universal suffrage, women's sexual freedom, free public education, socialism, and worker's rights. The daughter of a wealthy Dundee manufacturer, Wright's obsession with the U.S. began after reading Botta's History of the War of the Independence of the United States. As she explained, "from that moment my attention became rivetted on this country, as on the theatre where man might first awake to the full knowledge and the full exercise of his powers." She first toured the U.S. in 1818 and became a citizen in 1825, although she frequently traveled back to Europe. In the "theatre" of America Wright found the "full exercise of [her] powers" through her oratory on the public stage. She spoke to "promiscuous assemblies" of men and women in packed halls throughout the nation. Stepping outside the rigid gender binaries led to public castigation. Catherine Beecher objected to Wright's "great masculine person, her loud voice, [and] her untasteful attire." The pejorative term "Fanny Wrightist" was applied to nineteenth-century women who advocated for equality or violated gender norms. This paper considers Wright's performance in transatlantic context, exploring her challenges to gendered notions of the public sphere and her influence on the decisions of transatlantic women reformers to speak (or not to speak) publicly.

*Speaker