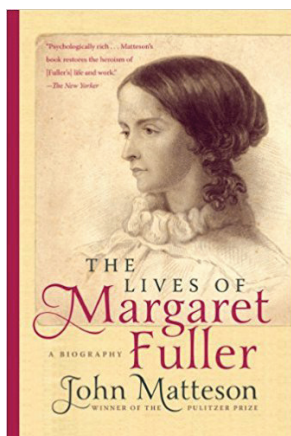




“BELIEVE AND TREMBLE”

A Note on Margaret Fuller’s Roman Revolution



1848, Europe’s year of revolutions, was also a revolutionary moment in the United States, for it witnessed the holding of the Seneca Falls Convention, the first formal gathering for the purpose of discussing the social and civil rights of women in America. A significant step on the road to Seneca Falls had taken place three years earlier when Margaret Fuller, the former editor of Emerson’s literary magazine *The Dial*, published *Woman in the Nineteenth*

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Century, an erudite and impassioned plea for female equality that had no precedent in American letters. Yet when the pioneering band of feminists gathered to ratify its Declaration of Sentiments at Seneca Falls, Fuller was thousands of miles away. The revolutionary movement to which she devoted her heart and toil that year was not the cause of American feminism, but the democratic revolution in Rome.

It was not her sympathy with the Italian freedom fighters that had lured her there. Rather, she was a journalist on assignment, sent to Europe to write essays of aesthetic and social criticism for Horace Greeley’s *New-York Tribune*. That she became America’s leading spokesperson for the Roman Revolution was, in some ways, an accident. Yet once she grasped the urgency of the moment and the glorious possibility that the Eternal City

might become a foothold for democracy in Europe, Fuller dived in. When the French, at the behest of the exiled Pope Pius IX, attacked the city, Fuller took charge of a hospital on the Isola Tiberina, caring for the wounded who had borne the battles. She wrote fervent columns for the *Tribune*, imploring her country to recognize the revolutionary government without delay. A difficult and problematic stylist for much of her authorial career, Fuller found her true voice in Rome. Her writings on the advent of the new order struggling to be born, infused with the tragic beauty of the moment, are the stuff of poetry: "Bodies rotten and trembling cannot long contend with swelling life. Tongue and hand cannot be permanently employed to keep down hearts [...] Soon you, all of you, shall *believe* and tremble" (Fuller, 1991: 322).

She was already, as it turned out, a confidante of the *sine qua non* of Italian revolutionaries, Giuseppe Mazzini, whom she had met at the school he had established during his exile in London for Italian boys who had suffered exploitation in the sooty metropolis. She had been present when Mazzini privately debated human rights with Thomas Carlyle, and she praised him in the *Tribune* as one who "take an interest in the cause of human freedom, who [...] look with anxious interest on the suffering nations who are preparing for a similar struggle [and] know that there can be no genuine happiness, no salvation for any, unless the same can be secured for all" (Fuller, 1991: 98). Mazzini cherished Fuller's counsel; only four days after his return to Italy in 1849, he came to her apartment and spoke with her for two hours, seeking her advice about the prospects of the revolution. To a friend, Fuller privately expressed the hope that "like the Magdalen I may at the important hour shed all the consecrated ointment on his head" (Fuller, 1988: 210).

Fuller had come to Rome with more than a grain of anti-Catholic prejudice, and she was initially disposed to see Italians as superstitious, reactionary, and incapable of sustaining political freedom. However, as she worked side by side with the revolutionaries, she came to see the progressive wing of Italian politics, more than any faction in her own country, as containing the world's best and most earnest soldiers in the fight for liberty. In her own country in 1848, the government was concluding an imperialist war

against Mexico, and its voters elected a slaveholder to the presidency for the sixth consecutive time.¹ In April 1848, she proclaimed that the spirit of the future “is more alive here at present than in America. My country is at present spoiled by prosperity, stupid with the lust of gain, soiled by crime in its willing perpetuation of Slavery. [...] In Europe, amid the teachings of adversity a nobler spirit is struggling—a spirit which cheers and animates mine. I hear earnest words of pure faith and love. I see deeds of brotherhood. This is what makes *my* America” (Fuller, 1991: 230). Fuller called on Washington to send a wise and cultured ambassador to work with the revolutionary assembly. She wrote, “Another century, and I might ask to be made Ambassador myself [...] but woman’s day has not come yet” (Fuller, 1991: 245). But Fuller did much to make the day of woman—and the day of a free, united Italy—draw nearer.

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1 Until July 1850, the month of Fuller’s death, every American president had either owned slaves or had had the last name of Adams.

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