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THE FASHIONING OF FANNY FERN: A STUDY OF SARA WILLIS PARTON'S EARLY CAREER, 1851-54

by

AMY S. PORCHE

Under the Direction of Robert Sattelmeyer

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to trace how Sara Willis Parton achieved unprecedented literary celebrity status as Fanny Fern during the first three years of her professional career, 1851-1853. While most critics point to her famously lucrative contract with the most popular newspaper of the 1850s, the *New York Ledger*, in 1854 as the *beginning* of her fame, I argue that she had already fully *achieved* that fame and had done so by writing for small Boston newspapers and publishing a highly successful collection of her articles by 1853. Further, Fern was able to achieve such a high level of success because of a keen business sense, intuitive marketing savvy, an ability to promote herself, an original writing style, and a creative use of personas.

My study provides an important addition to Fern scholarship by addressing the largely overlooked early years of her writing career. To date, scholars either make no mention of her first three years or do so only to demonstrate the point that Fern achieved notable success when she signed a contract for one hundred dollars a column with Robert Bonner, publisher and editor of the *New York Ledge*r. Prior to that contract, Fern worked as a freelance writer for the Boston *Olive Branch* and the Boston *True Flag*, earning less than five dollars for each sketch she submitted. The critical assumption has been that her initial work prepared her for the fame she *would* achieve writing for Bonner, but in fact Bonner would not have hired her had she not already achieved significant fame, for Bonner hired only highly celebrated writers. My study explores how Fanny Fern became a famous writer. When she began writing, Fern wrote under a number of previously unknown pseudonyms for local newspapers, but within three years her distinctive style, rhetorical skill, and iconoclastic persona had made "Fanny Fern" a household name. Fern's unique ability to engage a popular audience, I would argue, is the principal difference between Fern and other famous contemporary women writers.

INDEX WORDS: Sara Willis Parton, Fanny Fern, *Olive Branch*, *True Flag*, *New York Ledger*, Robert Bonner, Nineteenth-century women writers

# THE FASHIONING OF FANNY FERN: A STUDY OF SARA WILLIS PARTON'S EARLY CAREER, 1851-1854

by

AMY S. PORCHE

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2010

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

While she is best known today for her 1854 novel, *Ruth Hall: A Domestic Tale of the Present Time*, it was the hundreds of articles that Sara Willis wrote for Boston newspapers from 1851 to 1854 that established her as a famous author and, more importantly, made her persona, Fanny Fern, a household word. Early in her career, Sara Willis *became* Fanny Fern—and just as Americans would later embrace the many facets of Mark Twain, without a conscious sense that Twain was a mask adopted by Samuel Clemens, they embraced the complex, critical, bold, and humorous figure of Fanny Fern. Writing to her as a real person, they praised, criticized, and asked for advice. Only three years into her writing career, she already had published two books. Knowing that they could depend upon the star power of the name Fanny Fern, her publishers included it in the title or stamped it on the cover.

Willis's writing during those early years, including her development of the Fanny Fern persona, has been little studied but, as my dissertation will show, it forms a critical chapter in Willis's literary biography and illuminates important aspects of mid-nineteenth-century literary and journalistic history. Both popular and controversial, Fanny Fern came to life precisely in the middle of the century, despite a cultural temperament that was highly skeptical of women's "rights" and fierce competition in the field of professional writing. The biographical facts of Willis's professional writing life contain inconsistencies. Two that stand out are the questions of when Willis actually began writing professionally and which writings are hers. Some critics mark the start of her career from the first article signed as Fanny Fern; others credit Willis with one or two additional pen names that Willis used prior to adopting the name Fern, and cite use of those pen names as a starting point. But no one has mapped out all of her writing in the early

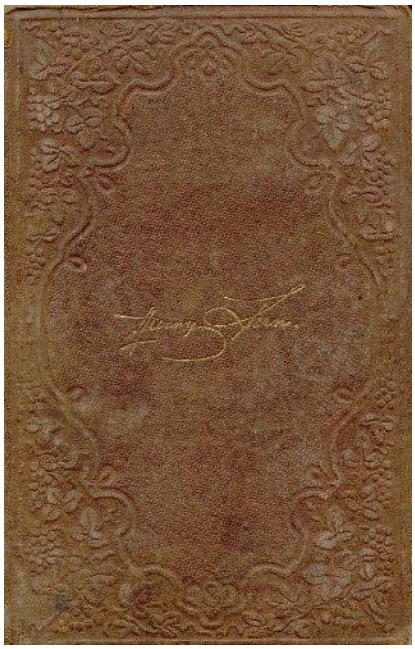

Figure 1: A First Edition book cover of *Ruth Hall*, 1854

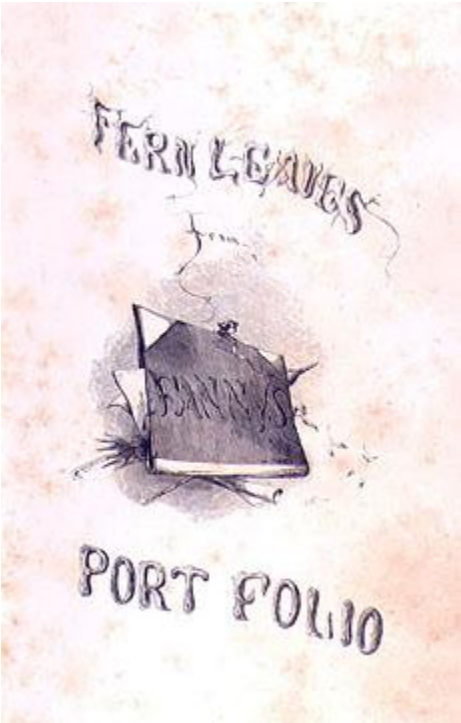


Figure 2: Frontispiece Illustration for *Fern Leaves from Fanny's Portfolio*, 1853

years, with all of the pen names, and with all of her trial tones, moods, and approaches. This dissertation will start from the first article, one that has been overlooked by other Fern scholars, and examine each year of her writing for Boston newspapers, as she became, week by week, an increasingly celebrated writer.

This dissertation will prove that weekly newspaper sketches from Willis's first four years of writing document the creation and development of America's first fully developed female literary persona. However, thus far those writings have remained unexplored. In fact, most scholarship about Fanny Fern focuses on only a small percentage of Willis's work: *Ruth Hall* and a sampling of her newspaper articles. Modern scholars do not know how to categorize Willis because they have not studied her work from the beginning. Scholars begin with *Ruth Hall*, a book that, from a biographical perspective, could not possibly have been written without her rich formative years in Boston, writing hundreds of weekly sketches for the *Olive Branch* and the *True Flag*. During that time, Willis wrote under many pen names, some of which are examined for the first time in this dissertation, before developing Fanny Fern as a fully integrated personality. Such limited study of Willis's writing has led to limited scholarly perspective. This dissertation offers the most in-depth study to date of the development of Willis's craft; it reveals a complicated, sometimes impenetrable, but almost always bold and new rhetoric that thus far has been under-examined—or overlooked almost entirely.

Beginning in the 1980s, a recovery movement began with women's studies scholars revisiting archives, looking for the forgotten popular women writers of the nineteenth century. While some of those writers were fully resurrected and their work put back into circulation and into the classroom, Fern was not among them. In fact, Gregg Camfield notes that the lack of Fern

scholarship is "remarkable, considering that Nina Baym called attention to Fern's work in her groundbreaking *Women's Fiction* in 1978 and that Mary Kelley made Fern one of her main subjects in the equally groundbreaking and important *Private Women, Public Stage* in 1984" (198).

Without a doubt, the inaccessibility of Fern's writing is the single largest barrier for prospective Fern scholars, as, unfortunately, no one has yet published a complete edition of Fern's newspaper articles. Such a collection should begin with her earliest work at the *Olive Branch* and the *True Flag* in Boston and continue through her last year at the *New York Ledger*. Until this occurs, the secondary criticism will remain sparse and largely inadequately informed. Furthermore, without a collected edition of her articles, Fern scholars would be writing to an audience that is largely unfamiliar with her work.

The first scholarly edition of Willis's writing was *Ruth Hall*, Willis's autobiographical novel, edited by Joyce Warren, Willis's biographer, in 1986. Warren's edition also includes a number of Willis's newspaper articles. Although this is, by far, the largest republished group of Willis's published newspaper articles, Warren's choice of articles does not include Willis's more challenging pieces, the ones that do not conform with a critically established view of Fern, particularly the ones that find deep fault with women. Gregg Camfield also makes this point, noting that, when reading Warren's selections, "one gets the impression that Parton [Willis] merely attacks men in their hypocritical abuse of power while she exonerates women. Nothing could be farther from the truth" (f.n. 16, 199).

If inclusion in American literature anthologies, such as *Norton* editions, indicates that a body of work has become canonical, then it was not until 1998 that Willis's newspaper writing

achieved such status. The fifth edition of the *Norton Anthology of American Literature*, volume 1, included Fanny Fern for the first time. She is placed with a group of "requested women writers" from the period 1820-1865 (Baym xxiv). Culled from the years 1857-58, during the period when Willis was writing for the *New York Ledger*, the chosen writings highlight the domestic and social satire for which she is known. The articles, among them the popular "Male Criticism on Ladies' Books," and "A Law More Nice than Just," are sharply satirical and give readers a strong sense of the Fanny Fern persona that many of her contemporary readers most likely would already have come to know, including her complex non-traditional gender views, which she introduced to the world a few years earlier in her Boston writing. However, because no Boston writings are part of the culled group, critics have not traced her later gender-themed writing to its less polished, early formations, leaving a gap in the panoramic view of Willis's professional career.

The 2004 fifth edition of the *Heath Anthology of American Literature* presents a few more Willis articles than are found in the *Norton* edition, but it places her in a section entitled "Literature and 'The Woman Question.'" While Willis's writing does create new kinds of questions about women's writing, as this study will explore, the *Heath* editors, Paul Lauter and Richard Yarbrough group her, ironically, with women's rights advocates Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Sojourner Truth, and Sara and Angelina Grimke—yet Fanny Fern explicitly criticized women who were part of the "women's movement." She never publically aligned herself with the very unpopular women's rights activist groups that were beginning to emerge in the Boston area in 1850. Moreover, Fern's writing was highly critical of women. Even though men became the target of many Fern-style barbs, she strongly condemned women, as well. While she often

described men as insensitive husbands and fathers, for example, just as often she portrayed women as co-conspirators who do nothing to change things, but in fact provide the means for their continuing abuse. In the midst of her criticisms, however, she did consistently support empowering changes for women within their private domestic lives and their public lives. Considering these sometimes conflicting themes, Willis's writing themes are not easily labeled or categorized, as the example of the *Heath* anthology demonstrates.

Indeed, Willis has been inaccurately labeled again and again. Willis was a renegade writer in a period when women writers primarily were adhering to the strictures of the sentimental style. She was also a cultural visionary, envisioning a society evolving toward a richer range of opportunities for women, one in which women could live fulfilling lives within or without the bonds of matrimony. Most of her readers were married women, however, and to those women, she wrote about alternate possibilities within the daily life of a marriage and of parenting. Her suggestions for a richer life ranged from small changes, such as taking in fresh air every day, to more existential changes that included freeing one's mind, even if one's body were "enslaved" to domestic tasks that overfilled the lives of wives and mothers.

Willis's gender critiques are unusual because she holds both men and women responsible for domestic problems and she questions the integrity of the social structures men and women have created, such as marriage, and of social causes, such as the women's rights movement, that ostensibly exist to improve women's lives.

"Tabitha," one of Willis's early pseudonyms, decides that men are more trustworthy and make better friends than women, and sees irony when an attendee at a women's rights convention voices support for men at the expense of women. Whether Tabitha decides that

women are designed to betray one another, or sees their behavior as the result of cultural expectations for them, she shows us the unfortunate disempowerment of women in a setting of potential empowerment.

Clearly, Willis's writing defies general categorization as merely the work of a "woman writer." She urged women to push established female gender boundaries into what traditionally was male territory. She did this when she occasionally signed her name with a male pen name, described instances of cross-dressing, and, through a series of letters, entertained a fictitious female suitor who mistakes the Fern persona for a male persona. While Fern says she could never love a woman, and lists all of the stereotypical misogynistic labels as her reasons, she offers that she might yet meet her female suitor when she becomes something supernatural, a witch who can fly on her broomstick. Repeatedly in her writing, she describes her contempt for the women whom she described as cold and untrustworthy, misled, and irrational. In one article she says she "has the same regard for her sex as men do for their wives," and she will not allow anyone to, as she says, "trash" them except for herself (*Olive Branch* March 6, 1852). Rather than championing women, her writing had a central theme of empowering women within the domestic setting, even if it is by wearing her husband's clothes while taking a walk, or by transforming into a third category—the supernatural female who lives outside the social traditions and expectations for women.

Like her subject matter, the genre of Fern's writing also is difficult to define. The *Norton* anthology introduction to Fern sums up her career by stating that she played "a unique and expanding role in American journalism and literature" (1707). Even though "journalism" is undefined, one level of meaning is made clear: journalism is not literature. However, the

question of how to define journalism remains, especially the finer points of how journalism differentiates from literature. Willis critic Laura Laffrado labels Fern's writing as "newspaper essays," and suggests that they are also "autobiographical" (82). These attempts to categorize Fern's writing into genres provoke more questions than they answer, pointing to the difficulty of defining the nuanced genre of newspaper columns and articles in the mid-nineteenth century.

One of the missions of this dissertation is to demonstrate through examples and analysis that, while labeling Willis's work may require creating new terms, Willis's newspaper writing, her "journalistic" writing, *is literary*. Her work fulfills many of the expectations readers have of literature. She created fictitious narrators, a strong sense of tone, most often witty satire, and often poetic symbolism in all of her writing. Using experimental rhetorical formats, Willis invented a new genre of "American journalism." To appreciate Willis's literary skills, one must consider Willis's use of pen names and her masterly use of a persona. In her earliest years as a writer, Willis created, used, and then consolidated various pen names into the persona of "Fanny Fern." This dissertation details her process of creating the "Fanny Fern" persona, which included articulating the consistent, if complex, viewpoint on domestic life I briefly described, using various pen names, both male and female. In that process, Willis took stock newspaper genres, such as the letter to the editor and the advice for the lovelorn column, and changed the rules. She penned fictitious letters to the editor—in essence, writing her own fan mail—under various names, which left readers with the impression that fans had in fact written the letters. Then she replied to those letters, sometimes responding as Fanny Fern, sometimes adding editorial notations seemingly made by the real editor, but actually made by yet another voice cleverly created by Sara Willis. She also wrote complaints about her sketches, signed with

fictitious names. Wittily, she responded to her fictitious critics, always coming across as the smarter and funnier of the two voices. Those exchanges were not only clever and entertaining; they also increased the exposure of Fanny Fern's name and prompted readers to think of her as a real person—thus demonstrating marketing savvy that ultimately would help Willis direct her own literary destiny.

Rather than studying the Willis of the early 1850s, who launched a writing career with nothing but her raw talent and creative genius, scholars look to the Fanny Fern of the *New York Ledger*, who, having already gained considerable fame, was propped up by the regularly printed praise of her famous editor, Robert Bonner. Perhaps the most repeated fact of Willis's career is the well-advertised, enormous salary she began to earn as a columnist for Bonner, an increase many times over what she was earning before. When she moved, in 1854, from Boston to Manhattan, the new publishing capital of America, her work appeared in a newspaper whose circulation numbers far exceeded those of the local Boston papers of her early years, and whose layout was far more sophisticated. The Willis to whom scholars generally refer, when they write about "Fanny Fern," is the one whose writing appeared with that of other famous contributing writers, including her own brother, Nathaniel P. Willis. If Fern scholarship looks only at the *Ledger* years, it will misrepresent Willis's real achievement, which was not that she was hired by a famous editor, but that her already established fame helped to launch Bonner's newspaper and contributed to its success. She arrived at the *Ledger* as a writer on her own merit—an established personality and a valuable commodity that would sell newspapers; Bonner showered her with the attention she already had earned.

What was it, then, about her writing that readers loved and that is worthy of study?

Writing as Fanny Fern, Sara Willis carved out a new kind of niche for "women writers." Modern critics are not the only ones who have had difficulty labeling and categorizing her work. I think it is equally important to note that her contemporary editors did not know where to place her, either. While a "women's" section existed in the Boston papers, Fern's socially critical themes and her bold persona did not fit in that section—she was not writing traditional hints for new brides. Nor did she fit with writers of the "women's movement," because she disagreed with their methods for advocating change for women, seeing them as too aggressive and hence sure to fail in their mission.

Fern, and the writings under her earlier pen names, often raised questions that required thought, but did not lead to ready answers. She questioned the power structure of the domestic world, the distribution of labor, and the value system instilled in young women. More than 150 years later, these issues are still undergoing a kind of metamorphosis and the results remain in flux. Fern's columns supported the institutions of marriage, family, and Christianity, but, in a much more daring way, they also took liberties that had not been taken before in popular Boston newspapers that supported conservative values. Vacillating between small irritations that spouses cause for each other and the larger theme of institutionalized sexism that caused tragedy in one life after another, Willis dissected the dynamics and criticized what had become her society's status quo. She took up a wide variety of subject matters, ranging from irritating cigar smoke to her condemnation of the subordinated life of middle- to lower-class women who sacrificed for their husbands and children, never knowing a day of independence.

From the very beginning, no matter the pen name she used, she was identifiable by themes with which she was well familiar because of her education under Catharine Beecher, the

leader in what was becoming known as "domestic science." These themes would become inextricably mixed into Willis's viewpoints about domestic life**.** Both women sought to improve the domestic lives of women and both women's philosophies went far beyond the proper techniques for washing linens and making hearth fires. While Beecher infused Christian morality into the role of a homemaker as the one who would keep an orderly, cheerful, moral home that befitted the new Republic, Willis infused the need for her culture to re-examine the arbitrary gender divisions that kept women at a disadvantage. Regarding the responsibility that weighed on American women specifically, Beecher wrote,

> No women on earth have a higher sense of their moral and religious responsibilities, or better understand, not only what is demanded of them, as housekeepers, but all the claims that rest upon them as wives, mothers, and members of a social community. An American woman who is the mistress of a family, feels her obligations, in reference to her influence over her husband, and a still greater responsibility in rearing and educating her children (44).

However, despite Beecher's elevation of women in their strong roles in the household, when Beecher aligns women's domestic responsibilities with their moral responsibilities, she implies that a woman's care for her husband and children is not a culturally imposed role but a divinely created role and she sinks domestic women even more deeply into an essentialized and narrow role of domestic responsibility. While Willis does not address women's moral roles directly, her writing illuminates the immorality and long-term harmful consequences, including death, when women have sole responsibility for the home, her husband and their children.

While many modern critics would like to put Beecher and Willis at odds with each other, by making Beecher partly responsible for creating a woman's sphere in the home, and by making Willis partly responsible for urging women to merge the gender spheres, they are not wholly at odds. Willis's domestic science is of the social kind, insight into the mind of a woman who could not see past her bread-making table. In Willis's view, Beecher's philosophy may have emboldened women with a newly fashioned rhetoric of domestic science, but it also kept them profoundly oppressed and entrapped by layers of cultural expectations.

## 1.1 Fanny Fern's Beginnings

The persona "Fanny Fern" was not used until September 1851, but Willis began writing in April 1851. Between April and August 1851, on different occasions, she wrote under the names Punch, Clara and Tabitha. In September 1851, she introduced Fanny Fern for the first time but continued to use other personas as well through March 1852. Reading editions of the *Olive Branch* and the *True Flag*, I found that during those months, her personas included Jack Plane, "s," Eva, Jack Fern and Fanny. Finding her writing in weekly newspapers is similar to a game of hide and seek. Among long columns of writing with more or less the same kind of rhetoric, a piece of Willis's writing, no matter the named author, simply stands out like a flashing light in a dark passageway. While I cannot prove with absolute certainty that Willis used many different pen names, or that she wrote her own fan mail, prior to consolidating into "Fanny Fern," all of the writings that I attribute to her during those early months bear her unmistakable satirical, jocular irreverence. I will also present other evidence that strongly supports my contention that the writings are Willis's.

When Willis introduced “Fanny Fern” to the public, the persona’s viewpoint and usually satiric tone were already well known to readers through her first six months of weekly writings under different personas. Far more sophisticated than the popular pen names of the time, “Fanny Fern” began as a tone and a viewpoint and evolved into a familiar persona with whom untold thousands of readers identified. She initially kept vague the details of her persona, “Fanny Fern’s,” life. However, because Fern emerged from an often used earlier persona, Tabitha, some characteristics were carried over into Fern’s persona. Like Tabitha, who was knowledgeable about marriage, but unmarried, Fanny Fern was too jaded by the double standards she saw in marriage to marry**.** At times during these early years, Fanny Fern called herself an “old maid,” and described herself as living in a boarding house and being friendly with the children in the building. At other times, she simply wrote that she was single. However, when Willis married her third husband James Parton in 1856, the year after she began writing for the *New York Ledger*, she presented Fern as a married woman.

One reason for her success was that her persona’s social position worked exceptionally well with Fern’s trademark humor. Showing a deft understanding of wit, she drew upon a longstanding rule of comedy, including satire, which holds that the comic has to appear inferior to the audience. Usually, the audience perceives the commentary as clever and amusing only if they see themselves as somehow superior to the commentator or the subject matter. Joyce Warren argues that Fern’s humor is never self-deprecating, only critical (Warren, “Performance” 18). While Fern does not directly demean herself, her persona is considerably humbled by her admitted social status. Since marriage and children were highly valued, an unmarried and childless woman would be lower in the social hierarchy. Additionally, since women were

expected to be demure and gracious, Fern's loud, judgmental voice also would be beneath the reader.

While irony is integral to her tone and style, Fern's attention to commonly experienced details also invites a comic effect. Specificity is more comical than generality, because readers have a greater opportunity to identify with the specific world a writer creates. In her sketches, Fern presented life's mundane details to great comedic effect. For example, she comments on anxiety in women by citing a "Mrs. Jones," who is a member of the class called "nervous ladies." This comical woman second-guesses her own decisions, however menial. She lies awake worrying when the sun might rise, and feels conflicted before a walk because she worries that it might rain—and so she spends her walking time wondering if she should bring an umbrella, rubber boots, or both. To finish her sketch with emphasis, Fern also writes a letter from a fictitious reader who complains that Fern has written about a woman she knows, and says that she in fact knows all the women Fern characterizes (*Olive Branch* Apr. 17, 1852). Fern uses the second character, the concerned naïve reader, to augment her humorous effect. Now her audience can feel superior to both Mrs. Jones and the naïve reader. While the naïve reader character apparently is oblivious, Fern and her audience share a deeper understanding of this "inside joke" that is beyond the ability of the naïve reader character to comprehend. In a way, Fern applauds her own skills at creating a caricature: She was so accurate that her fictitious reader confused the sketch with reality. She understands that to be a caricature, it has to resemble the actual but be generalized enough so that it does not resemble anyone specifically. Rather than pandering to her reader, as many writers did, she makes fun of those who cannot appreciate her wit. Selectively culling her readers, she invites only the insightful to "read" her

punch line. Ultimately, this aspect of her persona allowed her to bond with her readers, who were the "insiders" to her thoughts. Her use of comic satire serves other purposes as well.

Fern's double-speaking satirical voice often created ambiguity. Elizabethada Wright addresses this issue more directly than any other critic. She notes that "more often than not, it is impossible to determine whose side Fern is taking" (108). Wright concludes that Fern uses humor and irony in such a way that readers could interpret her writing in a way that best suited them. So that "those who wanted fun found it, and those who wanted lessons could find whatever lessons they wanted to find" (108). Her use of ambiguity is similar to the work of some of Fern's contemporary male writers, such as Hawthorne, Melville, and Poe.

To cite a classic example, in "Young Goodman Brown," the reader is left to wonder if Goodman Brown dreamed of his neighbors, pastors, and friends all gathering around a celebration of evil spirits, or if it actually happened. The psychoanalyst can evaluate Brown's subconscious desires and feelings and the historian can evaluate the story's lesson of hypocrisy among the Puritans. Even more interpretations are available. While Hawthorne was not concerned about offending his audience, he was using his literary skill to keep his meanings ambiguous, leaving the reader with much to consider.

## 1.2 Research

In order to find Willis' earliest writings, I spent two weeks at the American Antiquarian Society where I had access to copies of the Boston newspapers *True Flag* and *Olive Branch* for the years 1851-1854. Reading Willis's work in its original context made it evident that, even as early as 1851, her writing was so original that readers could identify it by its unique voice and

innovative rhetorical formats, even if her pen name initially changed frequently. By viewing the writings published around Willis's, I could follow the correspondence Willis would frequently have with a reader, another author, her editor, or, most often, with another of her personas. These writings were often in addition to her articles for the week and were printed on the editorial page. Usually brief and without any title or border to draw attention to their presence, and not always signed by "Fanny Fern," they are easy to overlook. The one consistent identifier is Fern's strong, satiric, exclamatory style of writing. All of the writings around hers were serious in tone, while hers were, as she herself notes under the signature, "Anonymous," "one step from the . . . ridiculous" (*Olive Branch* Aug. 28, 1852).

Initially, my main point of interest with Fanny Fern was to discover why she became not only popular, but actually the first celebrity American woman author. Her personal story, available to general readers, is amazing enough. She lives the "American Dream," outwitting her foes and reaching great heights of success in her professional life. After reading her early years of writing, however, what captivated my attention most was her visionary, imaginative writing, and her then-unfeminine capacity for self-promotion.

Having read her life's work, the newspapers in which much of her work was published, her novels and collections, and contemporary and modern critical commentary about her writing and her character, I hope I am able to make informed observations about the genesis of her career and sources of her unprecedented popularity. This journey, from anonymity and obscurity to a household name, occurred within three years. I will show that she accomplished this meteoric rise through unabashed self-promotion, ingenious creative writing skills, a likeable, highly developed persona, and the instincts and ability to create her own publicity**.**

Two major arguments will be put forth in this dissertation: the first is that Fern was already famous by the time she began writing for Bonner's major New York newspaper, and, second, that her formative years show us the creation of Fanny Fern, which led directly to her becoming a major literary force. Her fame, in turn, led to a lucrative contract with Bonner and publication of a bestselling semi-autobiographical novel, *Ruth Hall*. I have organized the dissertation chronologically, showing the important aspects of each year from 1851 to 1854. Chapter One leads up to Willis's first writing with a tracing of her family background and her educational training. Both of these biographical aspects play important roles in her writing. Her father introduced her to newspaper writing when she was a child. He published *The Youths' Companion*, and Fern occasionally contributed brief stories to it. Much later, two of her brothers would become newspaper publishers and editors. Even though she did not have her brother Nathaniel P. Willis's support for her writing, she did have the support of Richard Willis. In fact, it would be he who introduced Fern to the world as a "columnist" for his newspaper, the New York *Musical World and Times*, thus making her America's official first woman columnist.

Even though the name Fanny Fern was more well-known than Sara Willis, the biography of Willis continues to be a mainstream part of Fern scholarship. Part of the reason for that is that Willis had a famous brother, Nathaniel Willis, and another part of the reason is that she wrote about her life in *Ruth Hall*—and linked her personal life to her writing when she revealed in *Ruth Hall* that her writing career began out of necessity. However, it is important to note that Fern's writings do not read like the work of someone forced of necessity to write them. Her writings are filled with energy, delve into complexities with multiple personas, and take great risks with

new styles and approaches. None of these traits comes from necessity alone. They also speak to her desire and drive to write, to her intellect, and to her artistic talent and abilities.

When scholarship focuses too closely on Fern's biography, the view of her work becomes unjustifiably narrow. Fern criticism began with a biographical approach, attributing Fern's success to the hardships she had in life, as if those experiences had given her the kind of rhetorical talent she possessed. While they are important to understanding the life of Sara Willis, those losses—the sudden deaths of her daughter, then her husband, and her subsequent poverty and inability to care financially for her two surviving children—do not in themselves explain the rapid development of her writing abilities.

Joyce Warren, Fern's principal biographer, actually diminishes Fern's talents, for example, when she argues that Willis's desperate circumstances were the driving force behind her creativity:

> Isolated by scandal and poverty and desperate to keep her children, Fern must have felt that she had nothing to lose. And this, I think, is the principal reason why she could write so frankly. Her reputation could not have been more tarnished than it already was, and nothing was more terrible to her at that time than the threatened loss of her children. She wrote what she felt –without regard for propriety or femininity. It was her desperation and her nothing-to-lose mindset that enabled her to write uncommon discourse (Warren, "Uncommon Discourse" 54).

Implicit in this argument is the idea that Fern's writing was the rash outpouring of a desperate woman. Twice in this particular passage, Warren cites Fern's desperation as the reason Fern

wrote in an original, "uncommon," manner. Yet only a visionary thinker and writer could create an "uncommon" manner of writing, regardless of the motive. Fern deserves a good deal more credit for being the groundbreaking writer she was.

Chapter Two analyzes Willis's first writings in the *Olive Branch* and *True Flag* during her first year as a writer, 1851. While Joyce Warren contends that Fern's first article was published on June 28, 1851, under the pen name "Clare," titled "A Model Husband," I will argue that her first article came a few months earlier in April, written under the pen name "Punch," titled "Fallacies of the Gentlemen." My study will show that this article contains a style, tone and theme that would become trademarks of Fern. Willis's second article is also signed "Clare," followed by articles and letters to the editor signed as "Tabitha" during the summer of 1851.

Chapter Three analyzes Fern's writing during 1852. During that year, her inventive rhetorical skills heighten. She explores the personality of Fanny Fern in depth and in a public way through her writing. Her multiple-persona letters provide a view into Fern's self-defining process. Part of that process included a gender-identity-crisis. Fern creates a male persona, creates a reader who "mistakes" her for a male, and writes that she is "Sometimes a Jack and sometimes a Gill" (*Olive Branch* March 13, 1852). A key component of her self-defining writing is her awareness that her audience is interested to learn more about her, which means that her audience is merging the persona with the writer.

In Chapter Four, I analyze a complex collection of Fern's newspaper writings that went to make up Fern's first book, *Fern Leaves from Fanny's Portfolio.* The work is problematic for modern scholars because, unlike the majority of her writing, it seems to contain more sentimental, traditional writings than the non-traditional writings for which she is known. As a

result, this collection has been given scant attention. However, a closer look at the articles in the collection shows that her traditional writing was in fact non-traditional in its treatment of sentimentality. Fern provides more opportunities than death and marriage for her sentimental heroines, and while there are distinctive sentimental elements, they cannot be called traditional. After *Fern Leaves from Fanny's Portfolio* was published in June of 1853, 70,000 copies sold, which proves that Willis already had become a famous writer within her first years of writing for local Boston papers. She did leave her literary roots, however, and entered the New York literary scene by accepting an offer from the famous publisher, Robert Bonner, to write for his widely circulated *New York Ledger*. Her literary qualities, and the Fanny persona that readers loved, had matured and become so popular that in 1856 Bonner wanted Fern as a star feature writer, all to himself. He asked her to sign an exclusive contract for a weekly entry, for the now famous offer of one hundred dollars per article.

The dissertation ends with an epilogue that describes Fern's career after she became an exclusive writer for Bonner. After a couple of years, her position in the paper's layout changed from her page four "Fern Leaves" column to articles that would appear in different places in the paper each week. Her highlighted page four column gave way to the next literary star to come along. Her writing did not in any way weaken because of editorial changes. In fact, she maintained her popularity, and in addition to writing for the *Ledger*, published several more collections of her newspaper writings, as well as children's writing, *Fresh Leaves* in 1857, *Folly As It Flies* in 1868, *Ginger Snaps* in 1870 and *Caper-Sauce* in 1872, which was the year she died. After Fern died, with the exception of a biography written by her husband, James Parton,

who was well-known for other biographies, Fern disappeared from the printed page and from critics' attention for over a century.

While the publishing facts of Fern's career are well known—particularly those dating from the debut of her 1854 novel, *Ruth Hall*, this study examines what generally hasn't been explored: how she got started, and how she crafted both the writing and the persona that engendered her tremendous popularity and career longevity. This study seeks to give Fern all the credit that she is due, but focuses solely on her early years as a writer. These years reveal a complex process of rhetorical growth for Fern. They show how Fern synthesized various voices she created into the literary personality of Fanny Fern. Second, Fern kept the same persona name until her death in 1872, so its genesis is an issue that affects Fern's entire career. Third, and last, these early years are the least known to modern readers and the least examined by Fern scholars.

## 2 CHAPTER ONE – Before Fanny Fern: The Early Life of Sara Willis

The life of Sara Payson Willis is available to the general reader through the work of her two principal biographers, Joyce Warren, *Fanny Fern: An Independent Woman*, and Nancy Walker, *Fanny Fern.* Both biographers rely heavily upon her surviving letters and items pertaining to her personal life that Willis's great-grandchildren donated to Smith College library. Scholars writing about her personal life, such as her family life and her education, most often cite this source, which is known as the Sophia Smith Collection. Listed under Sara Parton and her granddaughter, Ethel Parton, 1862-1944, a children's author, the collection contains fifteen boxes of family drawings, photographs, albums, and letters. It includes the famous, much reprinted, letter from Willis's brother, Nathanial P. Willis, in which he suggests that she commence finding work other than writing and says that her writing is an embarrassment to him. The collection also includes samples of material from Fern's wedding dress, circa 1837.

With regard to Fern's career, the Sophia Smith Collection includes copies of contracts, publisher's checklists, statements, and advertisements. The specific publishing contract listed is the one between Fern and Derby Miller in 1853, presumably for the publication of Fern's first collection, *Fern Leaves*, series one ("Fanny Fern and Ethel Fern Papers").

Joyce Warren's biography of Sara Willis is by far the most extensive. Warren recounts Willis's formative years at home and her education at Catharine Beecher's seminary for women. She provides details of Willis's three marriages, her children, personal tragedies in her life, her initial writing career, and her extraordinary success as a popular newspaper writer—focusing primarily on her success once she moved to New York. Warren's description of Willis's early career, which is the focus of this dissertation, is limited to basic factual information. She also

describes Willis's several collections of writings that were published throughout her writing career. Warren includes many anecdotal stories about Willis that give the reader a sense of Willis as a young person and of her generally likeable, witty personality throughout her life.

Perhaps because of Warren's biographical account of Willis, almost every Fern critic has noted that the unfortunate events of Willis's life are intrinsically entwined with her writing career. Even though I will argue that Fern's successful career had less to do with her personal life than it did her own talent and marketing savvy, establishing some of the facts of Willis's life and providing a cultural context will set the proper stage for further analysis of her work. Fern is a product of a mid-nineteenth-century New England environment, and modern readers can appreciate her writing only within that context, specifically that of her mid-nineteenth-century New England domestic and journalistic beginnings.

Born in Maine in 1811 and reared in Boston, Sara Willis lived an early life of modest affluence. Her father was a journalist who edited a political newspaper in Maine, became a deacon of a Congregational church after moving to Boston, and thereafter dedicated his journalistic career to publishing religious tracts and devotionals. In 1816, he published a religious newspaper, the *Boston Recorder*, and in 1827 he launched the country's first newspaper for young readers, *The Youths' Companion*, which began as a children's section in the *Recorder* and developed into a full-blown newspaper. As a child, Sara Willis helped proof her father's papers and even wrote short pieces for publication (although none of these has been identified). This work prepared her to join a trend among women writers, most notably Lydia Maria Child, who wrote guidance articles for young readers. As an adult, Sara Willis would continue to intersperse articles for young readers in a repertoire geared mainly toward adult readers. Early in

her career, she published a collection for children, *Little Fern Leaves for Fanny's Little Friends*, in 1853. Once she was writing for the *New York Ledger*, articles for "Little Ferns" would appear in her regular column.

Figure 3: Banner of the *Youths' Companion*

## 2.1 Sara Willis's Formal Education at Catharine Beecher's Hartford Female Seminary

In addition to her exposure to and participation in the growing trend of newspaper publication, Willis's opportunity to develop her intellect was her most notable advantage in her early life. Along with her eight siblings, she was educated in religious schools. The particular school that Willis attended would influence her strongly throughout her life.

Willis attended Catharine Beecher's Hartford Female Seminary from 1828 to 1831; it was one of the best schools then available to women. The boarding school opened in 1823 and educated several hundred women. Catharine Beecher, its founder and principal, provided the kind of knowledge she believed a woman needed. Nicole Tonkovich notes that Beecher wanted the school to have a permanent endowment that would put it on par with institutions of higher

education for men, such as Yale, where her father and brothers had been educated. Consequently, she strove to offer her students a curriculum equal to that of men's colleges. The subjects taught at Hartford transcended the usual "ornamental branches" associated with women's education (such as needlework and dancing) and included the study of Latin, algebra, geometry, chemistry, geography, and mental and moral philosophy (Tonkovich xii-iii). Harriet Beecher Stowe, a teacher's aide while Willis was in school, remembers that Willis was not a fan of geometry and would use the pages of her textbook as curling papers for her hair (qtd. in Warren, *Fanny Fern* 31). The anecdote suggests that Willis is either eccentric or disinterested in more traditionally male subject matter. There is some room for both conclusions. Catharine Beecher would long remember Willis as being somewhat rebellious while a student at the seminary, and Fern later would argue against sending girls to school too early because it would stunt their imaginations and deprive them of the opportunity to play freely in the fresh air.

In fact, Willis was rebellious long before her years with Beecher. According to Warren, as a deacon's daughter, she lacked acceptable religious piety.

Told

> over and over again by her father and visiting clergymen that she was wicked and that if she did not make a religious commitment she would go to hell when she died, and although hell was often described to her in graphic scenes of horror, she refused to be frightened (Warren, *Fanny Fern* 11).

Warren notes that this kind of rebelliousness, a refusal to accept male authority at any level, was later seen in her journalistic work (Warren, *Fanny Fern* 14). All of these recollections of Sara

Willis as a rebellious young person strengthen the argument that it was not out of "desperation" that Fanny Fern wrote in an iconoclastic manner.

Warren and other Fern critics who followed have noted some of the other fortuitous benefits of attending Beecher's Female Seminary. For instance, Fern met the Beecher family, including Harriet Beecher Stowe, whose *Uncle Tom's Cabin* Fern would later review favorably in the *New York Ledger*. She met such Beecher friends as Lydia Sigourney, an eventual colleague at the *New York Ledger*, and the already popular novelist Catharine Maria Sedgwick. Warren notes that Willis's teachers, Zilpah Polly Grant, Mary Lyon, and, of course, Catharine Beecher, all "were innovative and farsighted pioneers in women's education," and that they "appreciated and encouraged [her] original and critical thinking" (Warren 42). While there is no recorded proof that she was inspired by them to become a writer, I believe that those creative and highly literate women, who would play substantial roles in American literary culture in their lifetimes, were positive role models. Willis did begin to develop her writing talents while at Hartford, however, and even submitted short pieces to local newspapers.

Only anecdotal accounts exist about Willis's relationship with Catharine Beecher. All of them describe Beecher's ambivalence about Willis; Beecher seemed to approve of Willis's notable writing skills but seemed somewhat frustrated by her lack of proper decorum. Accounts describe a rebellious Sara Willis who resisted adopting the modest and somber temperament that the Beecher school strived to instill in its pupils; she also resisted the religious education that the Beechers offered. Warren notes that Beecher had "conflicting feelings about Sara Willis" (Warren, *Fanny Fern* 42). She notes that Beecher appreciated her intellect but had a "desire to make her more conventionally passive and subdued" (Warren, *Fanny Fern* 42). Yet a parallel

temperament and a shared spirit of independence existed between Willis and Beecher. Warren summarizes Beecher's supposed conflicted feelings about Willis well.

According to Warren,

> Beecher's conflicting feelings about Sara Willis—her appreciation of her high spirits and brilliant mind, combined with a desire to make her more conventionally passive and subdued—are indicative of the paradoxical nature of Beecher's own concept of the role of women. On the one hand, she herself pursued an independent course and dedicated her life to the education of women. On the other hand, she retained the conventional image of women as passive, subordinate to men in all areas; she opposed political equality for women; and she maintained that her purpose in educating women…was to train them so they would grace their domestic station as wives and mothers (Warren, *Fanny Fern* 42).

Critics generally have not considered the connection between Beecher's pioneering work in the realm of domestic science and the satirical manner in which Willis, as Fanny Fern, later would write about this popular field of study by juxtaposing Beecher's theories with her own practical experience—yet the connection seems obvious. Beecher and the future Fanny Fern actually shared similar lifelong endeavors. Beecher endeavored to empower women within their domestic lives and Willis would pursue a similar purpose in her writing, but their methods would differ considerably. Beecher strove to educate women about how to fulfill their roles as wives and mothers better and more efficiently, whereas Willis would strive to publicize the negative results of women living under the kind of domestic restraints put upon them in her time and

place. Willis, however, never strayed completely from Beecher's domestic tenets. She never suggested that women abandon their domestic roles, only that they expand their mental and physical lives beyond the boundaries of societal expectations for them. Willis would often use the metaphor of women breaking loose from confinement—such as leaving the confinement of a stuffy house to take an evening walk in the rain, unescorted by a man—in order to emphasize her point about the larger macro-social level of women's confinement.

Domestic science was something in which Willis would become well versed under Catharine Beecher's tutelage. In fact, Beecher provided the most detailed guidelines on proper homemaking that existed at the time. Among the many subjects offered to her students, Beecher did not want to exclude a subject that she viewed as the most important one for women to learn: domestic housekeeping. Finding no suitable text on the subject, in 1841 Catharine Beecher published *Treatise on Domestic Economy* in Boston. It was the first guide to housekeeping ever published in America, and its three editions between 1842 and 1846 testify to its popularity. Catharine and her sister Harriet Beecher Stowe's subsequent text, *The American Woman's Home*, was not published until 1869, almost 20 years after Fern's 1851-54 articles on which I am basing my dissertation. However, that text was a compilation of several previously written books and articles, one of which was Catharine Beecher's *Treatise on Domestic Economy*. Willis, a Bostonian at that time and a former student of Catharine Beecher's, most likely would have been well familiar with its principal ideas. The *Treatise* "was a domestic encyclopedia" that sold nationwide, "was promoted through the network of teachers Catharine Beecher had trained, went through 15 editions between 1841 and 1856, and established Beecher as the nation's foremost authority on household practice" (Tonkovich xiii). Like the *Treatise*, *The*

*American Woman's Home* strove to be an instruction book for women, claiming that the reasons for the "disabilities and sufferings of their sex" exist because women are not "trained" for their "duties" as homemakers "as men are trained for their trades and professions." (Beecher 19). The term "duties" is used synonymously with "professions" (Beecher 19).

Beecher wrote the *Treatise* to train her students in domestic economy. It "propounded a philosophically and scientifically based system of household management and practice" (Tonkovich xiii). In fact, Catharine Beecher became a leading authority on the subject by recasting the familiar concept with a new perspective, new information, and a new name. The subject matter was housekeeping, but the new term was "domestic science." Willis's familiarity with Catharine Beecher's elaborate theories of domestic science became evident through Fern's career-long references to housekeeping. Based on her frequent references to the benefits of fresh air, for example, Fern demonstrates her agreement with at least one of Beecher's ideas for keeping a healthy home. Beecher's text went beyond merely cleaning and food preparation, however, and into the area of domestic relationships, arguing a connection between a well-kept home and well-reared children. On this issue, however, Fern's early writing would seethe with contempt.

Willis was particularly at odds with the idea that child-rearing should be the sole responsibility of the mother, and that the father should be completely sheltered from children's normal behavior, which might include crying, being rambunctious, and asking for constant attention. (Fern's "Model" series, which contains satirical descriptions of each family member's model role in the home, discussed in chapter two, is a good example of this critique.) She sharply critiqued a society that expected women, never men, to be the source of all

domestic harmony. She saw these cultural expectations as unfair and restrictive. She would draw repeatedly on images of confinement, for example, as a way of sounding this ideological refrain. Never easily defined, however, and perhaps because of Beecher's influence, Fern also wrote a series of "bluestocking" articles that described women who were able to be writers as well as being able to keep a perfectly orderly, clean, and harmonious home.[1]

Following the Civil War, the Beecher sisters expanded on the subject in *The American Woman's Home*, in which they associated an orderly home with nothing less than Christianity and the founding of a strong emerging Republic. The Beechers ask, "What, then, is the end designed by the family state which Jesus Christ came into this world to secure?" (23) They indirectly answer their rhetorical question by stating that the wife and mother's homemaking is the means of achieving that "family state," saying that their book's purpose is to "provide for the training of our race to the highest possible intelligence, virtue, and happiness, by means of the self-sacrificing labors of the wise and good, and this with the chief reference to a future immortal existence" (23). Their book examines aspects of domesticity ranging from cooking, nursing and sewing to caring for sick children and gardening.

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[1] Linda Huf's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman* describes the long-standing tradition of women who struggled to be writers as well as wives, housekeepers and mothers. She effectively argues that time and again, women were cautioned that they could not be both women and writers. Fern clearly struggles with this cultural perception, as her view on the subject vacillates between proving the theory wrong and, conversely, agreeing with the impossibility of managing both roles successfully. She never, however, argues that women should not be writers.

Fern adroitly honed in on the growing popularity of the subject of homemaking as a means of capturing her reader's attention. She then often would provide her unique perspective on the given subject with humor or satire. Her Boston readers would be especially familiar with Beecher's influential *Treatise* because of its multiple printings and its publication in their city, where Fern was writing. Further, the family name, Beecher, was well known: her father Lyman Beecher was a famous clergyman whose seven sons joined the public ministry, and his daughters Catharine and Harriet were both published authors. Hence, the Beecher name carried ideological resonance. Therefore, when Fern satirized some of Catharine Beecher's directions on homemaking, without naming Beecher or the treatise directly, she would accomplish what Fern did best. In an unsentimental way, she would grab her readers' attention by showing resistance to cultural expectations, and her critique resonated with the average woman who was unlikely to fulfill Beecher's tenets. In one instance, she writes a letter to her editor suggesting that she would "like to make a bonfire of all the 'Hints to Young Wives,' 'Married Woman's Friend,' &c and throw the authors after them" (*Olive Branch* Feb. 14, 1852). Most consistently, Fern satirizes the philosophy that underpins the Beechers' view of homemaking. The underlying value system was that a woman could learn everything a man could learn, but that a woman's role is in the home and so the knowledge she needs is different than what a man needs. Fern found this one-sided view of homemaking potentially burdensome, isolating for women and, as Sara Willis discovered after her husband's death, impossible without an income. In one article, Fern extols,

> Oh girls! Set your affections on cats, poodles, parrots, or lap dogs—but let matrimony alone. It's the hardest way on earth of getting a living—you never

> know when your work is done up…. Oh, you may scrimp and save, twist and turn, and dig and delve, and economise and die…. (*Olive Branch* Dec. 6, 1852).

While Fern resented that women were exclusively responsible for all matters of homemaking and child-rearing, she used Beecher's model of strong women, thriving in their domestic world, to empower women. For instance, she did not allow titles such as "lady" to prevent her from taking action in daily life. In one example, she takes issue with a statement she reads in the paper that "a lady" should not be seen outdoors when it is raining. If she must be outdoors, the rule states that she should wear "a neat pair of gaiter boots." Fern says that "in contempt of 'nice gaiter boots,' I put on a sensible pair of India rubbers and Sally-d forth" (*Olive Branch* Dec. 27, 1852). She partakes of the fresh air the Beechers promoted, but rather than acting prim and proper, she does not mind if her unladylike boots become muddy in the process. Chapter four of this dissertation describes the Beecher resonance seen in Fern's 1853 *Fern Leaves from Fanny's Portfolio*.

## 2.2 Willis's First and Second Marriages

While her father wanted his daughters to be educated, the ultimate purpose of female education in the mid-1800s was to make young women better wives and mothers. Willis's first two marriages gave her ample opportunity to put her "female education" to the test. In 1837, Sara Willis married Charles Harrington Eldredge, cashier of a large Boston Bank, and to her family, friends, and most likely to herself, she had fulfilled her life's destiny. In 1855, Fern would recount some of the details of their happy marriage in her novel, *Ruth Hall*. The reportedly happy couple had three daughters. Quite unexpectedly, they would experience a

horrible loss when their first child died at age six. With little time to recover from that tragedy, only one year later, in 1846, while Sara and her husband were vacationing, Willis's husband died rather suddenly of typhoid fever. Left with debts and without an income, she found herself in a desperate situation. Neither her father nor her husband's parents were willing to support Fern and their grandchildren. They merely urged her to follow her destiny as a woman once again and remarry, thereby putting her debts in the new husband's hands.

Not inclined to marry anyone in particular at the time, she sought traditionally feminine work. She applied for a teaching position but was denied. She mended and altered clothing, but it did not pay enough to support her children. Seeing no other choice, she agreed to marry a widower with two daughters. This decision would prove to be the worst one Fern would ever make. Her marriage to Samuel Farrington, in 1849, was not a happy one for either of them. Only two years later, Sara Willis left her husband. Farrington retaliated by falsely reporting that his wife was an adulterer. He eventually filed for divorce on the grounds of desertion. Her new status of divorcee, along with the scandalous rumors, further estranged her from her father and her first husband's parents. They were even less inclined to support her financially because they did not want to be associated with her notoriety. Willis's parents and in-laws were not her only potential sources of financial support, however. She also had two successfully employed brothers.

### 2.3 Willis's Financial Crisis Leads to (Fern's) Writing Career

At that very low point, in 1851, in another attempt to support her children, Sara Willis began writing. At last, she turned to the profession that was in some sense a natural choice for

her because it was in the family line: Her father published a paper and two of her brothers were editors. Nathaniel Parker Willis was the publisher and editor of the *New York Mirror*, and Richard Storrs Willis was the editor of the *Musical World and Times*.

One can speculate that had it not been a field traditionally dominated by men, she might have turned to it sooner. Once she did begin writing, however, she received strong criticism from her older brother Nathaniel. Better known as N. P. Willis, Yale graduate Nathaniel was well-known in New York during his professional life as a poet, highly paid magazine writer, critic, and editor and publisher. His career, like Sara Willis's, started in Boston. He was twenty-three years old when he launched the *American Monthly Magazine* in Boston in 1829 (Mott 1: 577). Essays, tales, criticism, poetry, and humor filled the magazine, and Willis was the sole writer (Mott, History 577). The magazine was a failure and Willis left it, and Boston, behind. As his sister would do some twenty-five years later, he moved to New York and joined the cadre of newspaper and magazine journalists there. Hired by the *New York Mirror*, he became its associate editor (Mott, History 578).

Sara Willis sent Nathaniel several of her articles, hoping he would publish some of them in the *Home Journal*, which he established in 1846. She knew that he had helped women writers gain some footing in a now competitive literary marketplace and hoped he would help her as he "had launched the careers of Fanny Forrester and Grace Greenwood" (Smith xxxi).

N. P. Willis had a strong personality with a healthy ego which repelled some and intrigued others. He was adept at stealing the literary limelight and was once said to be the "most-talked-about author in the United States" (Baker 4). Today, however, his main legacy

exists as a footnote to other literary authors (Baker 4), one of whom is his sister. Despite his own sense of importance within the literary world, the greatest irony of his life and legacy may be that his successes—and even the longevity of the *Home Journal*, renamed *Town & Country* and still published today—have been monumentally overshadowed by a rejection letter he wrote to his sister Sara. Nathaniel's harshly negative letter came at a time when Sara was desperately seeking his help. In this famous letter, Nathaniel tells Sara that, having read the samples she sent him, he deduced that her writings would satisfy only a Boston audience, nothing larger and more sophisticated as a New York audience. His reasons were that she "overstrain[ed] the pathetic" and that her "humor [ran] into dreadful vulgarity sometimes." Worst of all, he claimed that he was "sorry any editor [knew] that a sister of mine wrote some of these which you sent me. In one or two cases they trench very close on indecency" (Smith xxxi). Sara Willis saved the letter and it is preserved with other papers in the Sophia Smith Collection at Smith College. Scholars, having had ready access to this letter, have quoted its contents repeatedly and kept his refusal to help his sister at the forefront of his reputation.

Warren suggests that one reason for N.P. Willis's negative response was that some readers believed he was Fanny Fern, and he did not want to be associated with his sister's writing (Warren, *Fanny Fern* 94). She speculates that the strongest reason was his unwillingness to become involved in his sister's life since she was then divorced (Warren, *Fanny Fern* 94).

In an interesting twist of fate, her younger brother, composer Richard Storrs Willis, music critic and editor of New York *Musical World and Times*, unwittingly became Willis's ally. His publisher, Oliver Dyer, offered Sara Willis an exclusive writing contract. The contract was for one year and consisted of a column, "Fanny Fern's Column." It first appeared on October 9,

1852, and made Fern the first woman columnist. Her last column appeared in November of 1853 (Warren, *Fanny Fern* 105). Warren claims that Richard did not realize Fanny Fern was his sister, so he helped to launch her career unknowingly (Warren, *Fanny Fern* 104). Eight years younger than Sara, Richard studied music in Germany for six years following his graduation from Yale. Upon his return to the United States, Richard took up residence in New York, and he was perhaps unaware of the true identity of the popular Fanny Fern (Warren, *Fanny Fern* 104). There is no recorded information about the relationship between Richard and Sara.

One of the reasons Dyer gave Willis an exclusive contract was to force the editors of the *True Flag* and the *Olive Branch* to offer Willis more money for her writing. The ploy worked. Both papers offered small raises, Dyer released her from her exclusive contract and she wrote for all three papers for the next year. At that point, she finally was able to provide adequate financial support for her children (Warren, *Fanny Fern* 104).

Although N.P. Willis's denunciation of her work was devastating to Sara Willis when she first received her elder brother's letter, few stories end with such triumph. She ultimately proved his every assumption wrong.

Contrary to Nathaniel's prediction that she was incapable of becoming part of a greater literary scene and joining the New York literati, Willis would do just that and more. Living in Manhattan, she wrote alongside such other famous writers as William Cullen Bryant, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Henry Ward Beecher, George Bancroft, James Parton (the historian and biographer who would become Willis's third husband), and such women writers as Harriet Beecher Stowe and E.D.E.N. Southworth—famous writers who also were recruited by her *New York Ledger* editor, Robert Bonner. Fern's popularity far eclipsed that of Nathaniel, who would

become known chiefly as the man who turned his sister away in her hour of financial need—for reasons that proved to be entirely false.

Sara Willis first exacted some literary revenge by publishing the sketch, "Apollo Hyacinth," in none other than her brother Richard's *Musical World and Times* on June 18, 1853. In it she describes a man unwilling to help "even a brother or a sister" because "trouble 'bores' him." The sketch is an unflattering view of N.P. Willis and was recognized by the reading public for what it was (Warren, *Fanny Fern* 95). In it, Fern asks, "Just what did people do before the advent of newspapers to answer such pressing questions as 'whether Fanny Fiddlestick was Napthali Wilkin's sister?'" (qtd. in Baker 168). After that publication, lingering questions as to whether N.P. Willis was the identity of Fanny Fern were put to rest (Warren, *Fanny Fern* 95).

Willis would make Nathaniel's letter famous in *Ruth Hall* when she created a character, Hyacinth Ellet, who was based on him. The irony thickened when, after the publication of *Ruth Hall*, readers began to discover Fern's true identity, and that she was the sister of Nathaniel Willis. At that point, in the heights of her popularity, Sara Willis certainly triumphed over her brother's cruelty. In fact, she used Nathaniel's rejection letter to her advantage. Because Nathaniel was well-known, the letter became a piece of celebrity gossip, and, by the time *Ruth Hall* was published, readers were discovering "Fanny Fern's" identity as his sister.

In 1850, Susan Warner published *The Wide Wide World*, the novel most often cited as a benchmark of the popularity of women's writing because of its tremendous sales.[2] By 1851, Willis had joined a strong cadre of women periodical writers and novelists.

During her professional formative years of 1851-1854, when Willis simultaneously wrote for two similar Boston newspapers, *True Flag* and *Olive Branch*, as well as for her brother Richard's New York *Musical World and Times*, she experimented with many different pen names. Once she adopted the pseudonym of "Fanny Fern," "Fern" earned her designation as the "first woman columnist" because Richard printed an announcement in September 1852 that Fern would be writing a column exclusively for his paper. Soon, Fern published a column under the heading "Fanny Fern's Column."

Her work there would be short-lived, however, as she soon would become an exclusive writer for a much larger newspaper, the *New York Ledger*. In conjunction with that newspaper, an alternative, and erroneous, explanation of how Fern came to be America's "first woman columnist" exists. Most general descriptions of Fern's career link her contract with Robert Bonner with her start as a columnist. I do not know where the theory began, but it might be connected to a widely published Penguin edition of *Ruth Hall*. In the "Introduction," Susan Belsco Smith writes, "Under the terms of the agreement [with Bonner], Fanny Fern became their first woman to write such a column in the United States. . . ." (xvi). Belsco Smith does not

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[2] N.P. Willis's biographer, Thomas Baker, does not portray Fern in a positive light in his book, but regarding Warner, does note that "in the case of Sara Willis, however, Warner would meet her match (Baker 162).

elaborate on what "such a column" actually means. The only hint we have is in the previous sentence that says Fern's columns were signed, weekly columns. Fern did have a signed, weekly column, "Fern Leaves" in Bonner's paper, but only for two years, which was only a fraction of the time during which she contributed to the paper (1856-1872). Interestingly, most people identify her as a columnist, even though she wrote in this rhetorical format for only a brief period. During those years, her column appeared in the same place, page four, the editorial page, each week. Its title and her name were centered in a bold, thick outlined box. These demarcations and the consistent placement made her column easy to find. After two years, however, her writing appeared in different places each week and no longer carried a title. Her name, even, would appear at the end of the column. While there is no document that provides a written explanation of this change, by looking at Bonner's pattern of headlining his famous author contributors as a means of advertising, one can make a reasonable assumption that newer, more popular writers took her place in the column arena.

The vast majority of Sara Willis's work was published in her local Boston newspapers. She wrote for the *Olive Branch* first. Edited by the Reverend Thomas F. Norris, it was a conservative paper that catered to women readers by including many articles about domestic interests. Associating itself with Methodism, its front page banner claims devotion to "Christianity, Mutual Rights, Polite Literature, General Intelligence, Agriculture, and the Arts." While the header's wording was common for the time, it carries a certain irony because Willis, with her trademark tone—even then—of biting satire, was not a "polite" writer. Nevertheless, Norris hired Willis before she created the persona "Fanny Fern" and watched the simultaneous growth of her persona and his subscription base. Readers began buying the paper to read Fern's

articles. Similarly, the *True Flag* was published by Moulton, Elliott and Lincoln; it advertised itself as an independent weekly journal that aims to "instruct, to amuse, to benefit." Fern "amused" her readers, and certainly was a "benefit" to the paper's popularity. Within a year of her first contribution to the *True Flag*, editors gave her a column, "Fanny Fern's Department," helping to establish her pen name and persona with a regular readership.

A prevalent theme in Fern scholarship is the role of Willis's biography in her writing. Critics such as Baker and Warren argue that Willis's own personal traumas provided her with "ample material to win the hearts of a popular audience" (Baker 162). Perhaps more than anyone else, Warren argues for a direct link between Willis's life and the life of her literary, professional persona.

Based on my research, I would counter that Willis's 1851 articles do not support this theory. Willis never wrote about her own experiences directly, but rather generalized her own experience to speak to the concerns of the average man or woman. She did assume diverse roles in her lifetime: unmarried, married, widowed, with and without children, and with and without adequate financial support. But, while there certainly is a relationship between Sara Willis's life and the range of experiences her pen names describe for her reader, her writing cannot be so easily categorized. Willis chose such popular domestic subject matter as childrearing, housekeeping, dress fashion, and social etiquette—subjects typically relegated to women—and often used ideas put forth in Catharine Beecher's *Treatise* as a springboard. She presented those common subjects in an entirely unique manner, however. And I do agree with Warren, and other scholars, that Willis heroically used her personal misfortunes to create an artistically creative, culturally perceptive, often ingenious persona to make her points and engage her readers.

Her persona reflects her personal experience with a privileged life of domestic happiness, as well as with loss and poverty when her traditional training for marriage and motherhood began to hold less relevance. It reflects her personal frustration with the economics of being a woman. A widowed Sara Willis had to "earn" her living by marrying a man she did not love. The reliance upon marriage for money, and the humiliation of having to continually ask a husband for money, like a child dependent on a parent, was an experience she deplored. Through those varied experiences, she gained a broad perspective that gave her the voice of an "every woman." As a result, her persona understood the fantasy of domestic bliss, and often laughed at naïve young women who believed marriage would be the source of fulfillment for their lives. Willis understood widowhood, and was critical of society's tendency to marginalize widows from mainstream society; she understood unhappy marriages, and she understood both middle and lower economic class life. Her experiences gave her multiple perspectives about the life of women in varied circumstances – those in poverty, those married, widowed, divorced, as well as those who were mothers. Although she could have chosen various ways to describe her experiences, she astutely pursued one that would differentiate her from every other writer. In speaking through a cleverly crafted persona, she effectively addressed society's ills without personalizing them to Sara Willis. Her abilities transcended her personal experiences.

I think scholars have over-emphasized the biographical connection and given Willis far too little credit for her imaginative rhetorical skills. Warren, for example, disregards the schoolgirl Willis's early rebellion against societal norms, and clearly does not fully appreciate Willis's creative genius when she argues that Willis's desperate life circumstances were the driving force behind her creativity:

> Isolated by scandal and poverty and desperate to keep her children, Fern must have felt that she had nothing to lose. And this, I think, is the principal reason why she could write so frankly. Her reputation could not have been more tarnished than it already was, and nothing was more terrible to her at that time than the threatened loss of her children. She wrote what she felt – without regard for propriety or femininity. It was her desperation and her nothing-to-lose mindset that enabled her to write uncommon discourse (Warren, "Uncommon Discourse" 54).

Implicit in this argument is the notion that Willis's rhetorical genius was the random outpouring of a desperate woman. Twice in this particular passage, Warren cites Fern's desperation as the reason Willis wrote in an original, "uncommon," manner. Further, Warren implies that Willis's writing was unfeminine and improper for the period by noting that Fern was "without regard" for acceptable mannerisms. Through this implication, Warren seems to see Willis the same way Willis's contemporary critics viewed her, including her brother, Nathaniel, who was ashamed of her lack of "regard" for the period's decorum. I would argue that, to the contrary, Willis deftly tailored her subject matter, her "uncommon" conversational writing style, and her humor to her audience, which consisted not of the literary elite, but largely of ordinary women dealing with the issues and concerns of everyday life in the 1850s.

As her writing in the coming years would show, and as her popularity attests, Willis clearly possessed talent, humor, intelligence and ingenuity; her life experiences shaped her thinking and furnished her themes. It was her talent that enabled her to stand out among all other

newspaper writers of her time. And, as the coming chapters also will show, that talent is evident even in her earliest writings.

# 3 CHAPTER TWO – 1851: Willis Finds a Voice

During Willis's first several months as a writer, from April to September, 1851, she experiments with different pen names. Her use of pen names is quite sophisticated; at times she uses more than one pen name within a single article. This dissertation is the first exploration of the more than fifteen pen names that Willis created between 1851 and 1854—most of them in 1851—before she eventually settled on the single persona, Fanny Fern, almost exclusively. The experiments include not only the debut of Fanny Fern, but also a group of writings signed by Moses, "s," Tabitha, Jack, Harry, Dorca Dandelion, Jenny Jasmine, Patience Pepper, Nick Notion, Albert, and Sweet Pea. I found short sketches signed with these pen names while researching weekly editions of the *Olive Branch* and the *True Flag*. While no other scholar has linked her to all of these pen names, I believe the writing is Sara Willis's because the sketches bear unmistakable trademarks that distinguish her writing from that of all of the other writers for those publications. Additionally, none of these pen names reappears once Sara Willis adopts the persona of Fanny Fern, giving more credence to the conclusion that they were in fact her pen names. These personas helped shape the rich, formative years of her writing, while Willis was evolving her most famous and enduring pseudonym into a fully integrated personality.

All of these pen names, as well as others, were created by Sara Willis and, as I will demonstrate, they were the conduit for Willis's creating and maturing the persona of Fanny Fern. One persona's style and character flowed into another so that when Willis introduced "Fanny Fern" to the public in September of 1851, her viewpoint and typically satiric tone, along with a recognizable style, *already* would have been well known to readers through her previous six months of weekly writings under various pen names. Likewise, the many pen names Willis

would introduce after the debut of Fern would be recognizable by what was, by then, Willis's typical writing style.

Willis was not writing in a vacuum; she was among a cadre of women humorists—one of whom actually was the female persona of a male writer. One famous predecessor was the humorist writer Frances Whitcher, who created the well-developed persona, the Widow Bedott. Whitcher wrote during the mid-1840s, before Willis began writing, and passed away in 1852, just as Willis was launching her career; because Whitcher died in her thirties, her writing career lasted only five and a half years (Wade). A collection of her work was published posthumously in 1856, as *The Widow Bedott Papers* (Wade). Like Willis, her writing was satirical and about everyday life, but her emphasis was on life in New England villages and everyday people in those communities. Also like Willis, her characters were so recognizable and so richly developed that people in her community thought she was writing about people they knew. Critics note that Whitcher wrote "some of the best Down East or Yankee humor of the nineteenth century. Historians note that she and B.P. Shillaber [Benjamin Penhallow Shillaber, creator of the persona, Mrs. Ruth Partington, and an author to whom Willis refers in her writing] created the first fully developed humorous women characters in American literature and it is clear that Whitcher has stronger claims to historical priority than Shillaber" (Wade).

Shillaber's witty persona, Mrs. Partington, "became the very symbol of a rising middle class searching for a code of manners to follow in a new world suddenly dominated by cities and technology. She was the country bumpkin in the city and when Mrs. Partington talked, America laughed" (Robinson).

Another popular contemporary woman writer was Ann Sophia Stephens. A prolific writer, she produced some forty-five works of fiction and manuals on the domestic arts. Most of her writings were romance tales about Native Americans. She is linked with James Fenimore Cooper's series of Leatherstocking Tales, 1823-1841, and Catharine Maria Sedgwick's *Hope Leslie*, 1827. While none of her work appears in teaching anthologies, "she has become a fixture in guides and reference works on nineteenth-century women writers" (Hynes).

Like Fern, "Some now credit Stephens as having been one of the first generation of women writers to assert themselves as professional writers, entering their field of authorship for the sake of earning a good living rather than hiding behind a claim of literary philanthropy" (Hynes). Like Fern, Stephens was praised by critics for her writing skills. Also like Fern, she was criticized by some for her "questionable taste" (Hynes). "While nineteenth-century readers enjoyed reading Stephens' work, fastidious critics were not always sure that they should" (Hynes). While these writers may have prepared the way for Fern, Fern surpassed them in all areas. She surpassed them in the rhetorical sophistication of her persona, in her heights of hilarity, and her level of creativity.

## 3.1 The Early Pen Names

Willis's pen names themselves are worth exploring for their creativity and rhetorical genius. Her use of alliterative names among these early personas foreshadows her eventual choice of Fanny Fern. Regarding the double, alliterative, often flower-inspired names, the trend was a common one, but Fern later would criticize other writers for using this same formula for creating their own pen names. She saw it as infringement on her "Fanny Fern" name. However,

it is difficult to take Fern's critique entirely seriously since she brought a bouquet of those flowery alliterative names into existence herself. She was following a trend of other women writers such as Grace Greenwood and Fanny Forrester. Forrester was a protégé of N.P. Willis in the 1840s.

No critic has yet recognized that, from the beginning of her writing career, even through the voices of her earliest personas, Willis often used multiple personas to re-envision traditional genres of writing, such as the domestic narrative or sketch, the advice column, and the editorial. In the "letter to the editor" genre, for example, she would write her own fan mail or criticism under a different name, and then engage that fictitious interlocutor in discussion. Willis's originality was not in the rhetorical structure, such as a letter to the editor, but in her modification of its tone, content, and purpose. Her multiple-persona letters provide a view into Fern's self-defining process.

In the spring of 1851, Willis's first article was published in the *Olive Branch*. She was paid fifty cents for her first article for the *Olive Branch*, and later, when she was writing for the *True Flag* as well, she was paid two dollars an article by both papers (Warren, *Fanny Fern* 101). Determining exactly which article is Willis's first published work requires some sleuthing, because, for the first few months of her weekly articles, Willis wrote under different names. Willis never referred to her earlier articles and personas, so there is no definitive proof. Readers can judge only by the striking style, including satire, humor, frequent use of short, exclamatory sentences and side commentary, often separated from the text with parentheses or dashes. Additionally, Willis's themes were unique. In reading these newspaper editions, it was obvious to me that no one else writing for the *Olive Branch* made humorous observations about the

differences between men and women, such as their behavior, ways of communicating, and gender roles in society. She also was the only writer who raised serious objections to the roles, both public and private, that people played. Further evidence that these articles are Sara Willis's is that these articles all first appear in the newspapers she wrote for in 1851 when she began writing.

Warren argues, and all other Willis scholars have used the same misinformation, that Willis's first article was "The Model Housewife," published on June 28, 1851, in the *Olive Branch* and signed as "Clare." The assumption that this article is hers is a safe one because Willis wrote a "Model series" over a two-year period and all except the first one, "The Model Housewife" were signed as Fern.[3] However, I believe her first article actually was published on April 12, 1851. Entitled "Fallacies of the Gentlemen," it was signed "punch." With discrepancies among scholars as to when Willis actually began writing, I think it is important finally to establish exactly when her first article was published. "Fallacies of the Gentlemen" is also important to study because it previews techniques Willis subsequently would refine during her early career, among them a technique she used frequently—that of introducing different rhetorical voices within the same article.

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[3] Warren notes that Fern would write the following articles: "The Model Minister," "The Model Lady," both published on April 24, 1852; "The Model Editor," published May 22, 1852; "The Model Doctor," published June 26, 1852; and "The Model Step-Mother," published August 7, 1852, all published in the *Olive Branch*. (Warren. Introduction. *Ruth Hall* endnote 3, xxxviii). However, Warren does not include another article from this series, "The Model Baby," published in April 1852 in the *Olive Branch*.

### 3.2 Willis's First Writing

While "punch" is the writer of the article, she acts not as the writer, but, rather, as the editor. "punch" comments only on someone else's work, which also happens to be Willis's. This first article mirrors the creative rhetorical techniques to which she will return throughout that first year. She uses more than one voice or character in one article, and she includes editorial commentary on what she has written, acting as both writer and critic. Thematically, she states clearly what she will discuss in future articles. Disagreeing with the belief that women's spheres should be solely domestic, she says she is "tired of such nonsense." She expounds on the degradation of a wife having to ask for money, a theme she will explore again in several articles, and she makes a few references to large families in which the wife presents her husband with an heir once a year, but the husband does not want to take financial responsibility for his ten children. A husband's unwillingness to help his wife with the responsibilities of child care becomes a frequent refrain in Willis's, and soon to be Fern's, articles. Here is a transcription of the article:

Fallacies of the Gentlemen

(By a lady who unfortunately knows them only too well.)

That women are only born to be slaves. That dinner is to be ready for them the very minute they come into the house.

That a lady's bonnet can be put on as quickly as a gentleman's hat.

That we can dress in a minute, and ringing the bell violently has the effect of making us dress one bit the quicker.

That they are the "lords of the creation" –

(Pretty lords, indeed!)

That nothing can be too good for them; for I am sure if you were to put a hot joint before them every day, they still would be dissatisfied, and would be grumbling that you never gave them cold meat.

That they know our age so much better than we do ourselves. (It's so very likely!)

That music can be learnt without practicing, and that it is necessary for them to rush out and to slam the door violently, the very moment we begin to open our voices, or to run over the last new polka.

That sleeping after dinner promotes conversation.

That they know what dress and bonnet becomes us so much better than we do.

That it is necessary to make a poor woman cry because a stupid shirt-button happens to be off. I declare that some men must believe that their wives cut off their shirt-buttons purposely, from the savage pleasures they take in abusing them for it.

That we are not allowed to faint, or to have the smallest fit of hysterics, without being told "not to make a fool of ourselves."

That housekeeping does not require any money, and if we venture to ask for any, that it is pleasant to be met with all sorts of black looks and insinuations as to "what we can do with it all;" or very agreeable to be told that we will be "the ruin of him some day," – (I should like to see the day!)

> That the house never requires cleaning, or the tables rubbing, or the carpets beating, or the furniture renewing, or the sofas fresh covers, or in fact, that anything has a right to wear out, or to be spoilt, or broken; and, in short, that everything ought to last forever!
>
> That a poor lone woman is never to have any pleasure, but always, always to stop at home, and "mind her children." – (I'm tired of such nonsense.)

One of the most notable aspects of the article up to this point is the words separated by parentheses. Those words come from a different voice than the speaker of the non-parenthetical words. The words serve as commentary to the main body of the text, which is also a commentary. The parenthetical commenter signs the article by putting her name, "punch," in parentheses. By doing so, she visually connects the commentary in the article to the pen name, "punch." The other voice comes from the "fair correspondent." The "fair correspondent" as a name is mentioned in the final paragraph, and comes from a third voice that sounds like an editor. In the final paragraph, the unnamed speaker writes,

> "Our fair correspondent says she thinks the above fallacies are enough, for the present, and we certainly agree with her; but if the gentlemen show anymore of their airs, she declares that she will give them a lot more." –(punch)

This second voice uses "we" to refer to a collective editorial voice, whereas the "fair correspondent" uses "we," throughout the article, to refer to women collectively. Willis's two characters each speak as part of their own group. As a result, Willis avoids first-person assertions, with a few exceptions marked off by parentheses, and gives a sense of being once-removed from direct responsibility for making these assertions. Further, by revealing at the end

that her words are being reprinted by "punch," the original speaker, a nameless "fair correspondent" is removed yet one level more from her reader. The creative ending, "she will give them a lot more" (punch), ends the article with an assertion of strength, a punch, and with the strength of giving herself her own editorial approval of her opinions.

### 3.3 Willis Experiments with Contradictory Views

Just as she writes with more than one rhetorical voice, those voices often offer different, if not contradictory, opinions. Because Fanny Fern eventually would be known as an opinionated writer, examining this earlier period when her views were not always consistent gives the reader insight into the process of how newspaper column writing began for Willis. These early writings also show that she experimented with different techniques for expressing her views, grabbing readers' attention, challenging readers to think, and perhaps even helping herself to figure out where she stood on issues by presenting them in this fashion.

Regarding the condition of women, for example, the predominant subject of her writing, she displays variant views. She both supports and disparages women. On several occasions, Willis, as the conductor of these alter-egos, accuses women of being judgmental and aloof and she claims she dislikes them intensely. However, on other occasions, she describes them as heroes and martyrs for laboring in the home under the tyranny of men. Her views are problematic for anyone trying to label Willis a feminist or even a women's rights advocate. While she demonstrates a deft understanding of cultural stereotypes and their damaging effects—she often writes about the irony of double standards between men and women, as well as the injustice of reducing people to labels, such as old maid, widow, mother, and wife—she

alternately perpetuates the same stereotypes when describing women. A strong example of the conflicting tension between views of women can be seen with the persona, "Tabitha." Introduced on August 2, 1851, "Tabitha" writes three items that appeared in the *Olive Branch*; one is a letter to the editor, one is an article titled, "The Model Wife," and the third, two weeks later, is based on a comment from a women's rights convention. In the letter to the editor, "Tabitha" claims she is an unlucky old maid, yet, ironically, "Tabitha" is also the signature for "The Model Wife." And, although both articles carry the same pen name, they appear to hold contradictory views of women. The letter plays upon every stereotype of the unmarried woman:

> A Letter to the Editor
>
> Mr. Editor,
>
> I was born under an unlucky star – how should it be else when the day of my birth was Friday. Why any other day in the week wouldn't have answered my mother's purpose as well as this, I never could understand. However, as to that, 'tis useless to speculate, 'tis sufficient for me to know that it sealed my deal.
>
> I've been unlucky ever since I was born; I was unlucky to have been born at all, unluckier still, to have been born a woman, and the very concentration of ill-luck, since I could not choose my sex that I must needs have been born a fright! For between you and I, and the door-post, Mr. Editor, a woman might as well cut her throat at once, if she isn't pretty. But to my story – I hadn't tried my lungs in this world many hours before I caught the whopping cough of a woman who "came to look at the dear baby."

> Then as to getting married! I should as soon have thought of asking for the Presidency – but very much to my astonishment I was one evening introduced to a gentleman (it was in the dark) who seemed quite interested. By avoiding him in the day-time, I kept up the illusion. If he called at that time I was sick, or out. Well, I thought my star in the ascendant at last. The wedding evening was fixed – every thing ready (the room dimly lighted, or course) when, alas! The marriage license had been mislaid, and could no where be found! 'Delays are dangerous.' The next morning the impatient bridegroom called to tell he had procured another license; of course, I could not refuse to see him – he saw me by daylight! And you will not think it a circular singumstance (as Mrs. Partington might say,) that I this day sign myself AN OLD MAID,
>
> And very unfortunate at that. – Tabitha

While Warren establishes that Willis wrote under the name of Tabitha in 1851, she does not mention this letter to the editor, which I found while reading through editions of these newspapers. I cannot be certain of the reason why Warren does not include this letter, but she might have omitted it because the letter is problematic.[4] It seems to run counter to Willis's personas' cultural beliefs. Rather than going against the stereotype of the unattractive "old maid," which is part of a culture that values married women more than unmarried women and thereby values women who are in the domestic sphere more than women who are not, she exploits the stereotype and uses it for humor. Further, Willis (Tabitha) makes an inexplicable comment that she was unlucky "to have been born a woman." Willis abandons her more

[4] I have found no reference to this letter in any Fern scholarship.

dominant theme of reversing the gender hierarchy and makes a comment that supports an extreme position on the other side. However, squeezed into the a-typical commentary is the line, ". . . a woman might as well cut her throat at once, if she isn't pretty." This one line resonates with the Willis to whom readers have already been introduced and would hear from hundreds of times more. The tone is dark with the mention of suicide; the persona Fern will draw upon the same image the following year when she tells a reader that she writes only because she does not have a razor blade handy—and its seriousness makes it stand out amid the slapstick humor found in every other line of the letter. It's worth noting that, in this early piece, Willis references "Mrs. Partington." As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, this "American Mrs. Malaprop" was created by Benjamin Penhallow Shillaber (1814–90) of *The Boston Post* and forms the central figure in at least three books, *The Life and Sayings of Mrs. Partington* (1854), *Partingtonian Patchwork* (1873), and *Ike and his Friends* (1879)" ("Early Humorists"). Her reference demonstrates that she was aware of other popular newspaper humorists and the comic potential of the blathering woman. While the persona, "Mrs. Partington," was popular, the author, B. P. Shillaber, never reached the heights of wit or level of sophistication that Fern achieved.

In "The Model Wife" article that follows, "Tabitha" delves into Willis's common theme of criticizing domestic inequality. She describes a wife and mother who embodies devotion to her family. Instead of describing this woman in the abstract with such terms as "loyal, generous, and thoughtful," she applies the theory to an actual domestic setting:

> She don't know a word of French, Italian, or German, never reads anything but "Hints to Married Women," and the "Cookery Book"—don't play on the piano, don't keep but one girl, does half the washing and ironing, makes all

> the cakes and pies, cuts her husband's vests, her own dresses, mends all the stockings, turns her husband's pants inside out and hindside before when they get shabby, does all the marketing, buys the wood and coal, never goes out except Sunday, don't know whether small or big bonnets are worn, keeps awake nights, never sleeps day-times, always looks pretty, never *looks* tired, wears a smiling face though every bone in her body aches, and presents Mr. Snooks with an heir once a year. Wouldn't speak to any man but her husband for the world – likes to see *him* talk to all the pretty women. Rocks the cradle and darns the stockings in the *forenoon*, then darns the stockings and rocks the cradle in the *afternoon*! – stays at home in the evening and mends her husband's old trowsers while he goes to hear Jenny Lind – sits up in the rocking chair half the night, nursing young Snooks, for fear it will disturb papa – has a great inward sensation of goneness in the morning, nevertheless rises at 5 o'clock, takes out a clean shirt for Mr. Snooks, washes the faces, combs the heads of the nine little Snookses, scrubs their *eighteen little dirty hands*, and nurses the baby while papa is shaving, for fear its crying will make him cut his face with a razor. Helps the nine and her husband all breakfast time, then eats a cold egg and some burnt toast when they are gone! Thinks her husband an *Adonis*, a *Solomon*, a *Joseph* – is perfectly willing that he should engage himself to be married coming home from her funeral, and hopes No. 2 will be more *worthy* of such a treasure than ever *she* was.

The fact that Willis ends with the woman's funeral emphasizes her strong disagreement with her culture's expectations for women. Even in death, the woman, who displays no human

emotions such as jealousy, has only her husband's best interests in mind. She hopes he finds another "coming home from her funeral" who is an even better "model" than she was. Fern's sarcasm grows with each line of the article, but the sentiments are not exaggerated: this kind of description was indeed the "model" for nineteenth century women.

The cause of the woman's death appears to be linked with exhaustion. In her exaggerated stereotypical role of wife and mother, she keeps her physical limitations secret from her husband, and adds to her already full schedule of domestic responsibilities when she "wears a smiling face though every bone in her body aches, and presents Mr. Snooks with an heir once a year."[5]

Further, the woman does not ask her husband for help with the children at night because she does not want to disturb his sleep, despite her own exhaustion: The "model wife" "sits up in the rocking chair half the night, nursing young Snooks, for fear it will disturb papa." As in her "Fallacies of Men" article, Willis criticizes the father for not wanting to be involved in the child's care. Finally, she seems to imply that Mr. Snooks himself is one of the "model wife's" children because he, too, needs help washing, dressing and eating as much as the children need help:

> [The wife] takes out a clean shirt for Mr. Snooks, washes the faces, combs the heads of the nine little Snookses, scrubs their *eighteen little dirty hands*, and

[5] Willis uses the same line "an heir once a year" in her first article, "Fallacies of Men." Along with the other similarities I described earlier, the use of this line was another piece of evidence that Willis was "punch."

> nurses the baby while papa is shaving, for fear its crying will make him cut his face with a razor. Helps the nine and her husband all breakfast time….

Willis intertwines Mr. Snooks' needs, a clean shirt, peace while shaving, and help with breakfast, with "the nine little Snookses'" needs. Willis draws a clear parallel between men and children, both having a childlike dependence on the wife.

Two weeks later, Willis again airs conflicting views of women, echoing comments from "Tabitha's" August 2nd letter to the editor. In an article published on August 16th, she draws upon a quotation from a women's convention in Akron, Ohio, that claims women have more love for men than other women. The signed author of the article, "Tabitha," wholeheartedly agrees. In this article, "Tabitha" enlightens the reader about why she does not like women:

> A young lady in the Woman's Rights Convention, in Akron, O, made the following remark 'For my own part I love man, individually and collectively, better than a woman, and so I am sure does every one of her sex, if they would only utter their real sentiments!'
>
> Reach out a long arm from Akron, my dear, and shake hands, for those are my sentiments, better expressed. For a long while, I made it a point of conscience – 'sink or swim- live or die – survive or perish,' right or wrong to defend my own sex; but there is a point where 'forbearance ceases to be a duty,' and I must 'speak out in meeting,' now, if I do get my eyes scratched out, or have a rain of broomsticks about my ears, or get expelled the sisterhood, (which last would punish me about as much as it used to—to place me on a seat with the boys, for whispering in school). But to the point I have seen a thousand women who would

bear unflinchingly, poverty, scorn, contempt, suffering of every kind, even personal abuse from the man of her choice, loving him all the more devotedly, and following his fortunes with a fortitude and patience truly angelic – but –where is the woman, who, when a sister is unjustly slandered, or spoken against, does not oftener circulate the story, than seek to defend or excuse her? Who in such a case is the first to turn Levite, and "pass by on the other side?" Who the hardest to convince of the truth? Woman!

> No—no, show me a woman who will be through every ordeal, the unwavering, unchanging friend to her own sex, that she knows how to be to the other, and I will walk a pilgrimage to Mecca, with peas in my shoes, to see her! I have neer seen that curiosity, perhaps 'Barnum' has. No! no! one male friend is worth a dozen female – and then they are so grand to keep a secret – you might as well try to strike fire out of a pail of water, as to make them tell it!
>
> I know many think the existence of women a necessary evil, but that's only a notion. Now there was Eve– think of the mischief she has done! We might have been in the Garden of Eden to this day, who knows? – without ever paying to see a menagerie – bears, hippopotamuses and crocodiles right at our elbows; no gowns to make, no stockings to darn, no cooking to do, no necessity for taking ether, if she had only let that apple alone.

Showing a change in viewpoint, the article reveals that the narrator once was a defender of women, but has since changed her mind and now feels free to "utter her real sentiments" as the woman in Akron, Ohio, suggests. Even the speaker at a women's convention makes a note that her heart is foremost with men, not women. Tabitha agrees, but only because of a pattern of behavior that the Akron speaker's words reflect. The speaker says she has yet to find a woman who is an "unchanging friend to her own sex...."

While her words are serious, her tone is not, but her tone does not diminish her sincerity. She appears to be sincerely angry about a pattern in women's behavior. The incongruity between her tone and her words creates ambiguity about the narrator's actual feelings. Further, the humor deflects the accusatory tone regarding women and may well have deflected her readers' potential anger.[6]

Willis began her career just at the beginning of a "Women's Movement." The now famous Seneca Falls Convention met in 1848, led by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott. During the convention, attendees signed their names to a list of women's rights in support of women's rights, even though their efforts would later be derided by the press. Part of the movement was women's suffrage. While suffragists would not prevail in Fern's lifetime, or

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[6] Claire Pettengill argues that Fern uses humor, at least in the humorous articles Pettengill chose for analysis, to evoke "smiles rather than anger from readers" (70). A. Cheree Carlson argues the same point, stating, "One 'safe' manner in which to violate the rules was to do so in a humorous spirit. If attacks on true womanhood were 'all in fun,' fewer readers would be angered" (75).

even in the nineteenth century, their meetings, writings, speeches and presence would spark debate about equal rights and equal citizenship into the popular culture. Even though Willis's negative portrayal of her society's roles for women resonated with the ideas that birthed formal women's movements, Willis's pen names, and eventually the pseudonym Fanny Fern would never formally align with them because she would have risked alienating readers. Even though she did not name the movements, or the people involved, she did agree with many of their ideas. She, too, advocated a practical dress code for women, including the wearing of pantaloons; she, too, believed in a more equal distribution of domestic labor, and while she never wrote about the subject of divorce, considering the difficulties of her own divorce, surely she was sympathetic to new views of divorce laws, which women's rights groups supported, that allowed women to initiate a divorce for circumstances such as abuse and chronic alcoholism.

The political temper of the anti-women's rights groups, which were by far the majority, can best be illuminated by a contemporary newspaper item, not written by Willis, but one that echoes contemporary popular sentiments. Over 150 years ago, a short poem entitled "The Rights of Women" appeared in the July 19, 1851, issue of a provincial Boston newspaper, the *Olive Branch*, the same paper for which Sara Willis wrote. The poem, printed in a Methodist paper whose header claimed it was "Devoted to Christianity and Polite Literature," among other conventional ideas, argued against women's suffrage:

The Rights of Women

O woman, then go on, and know

the secret lies within;

Not at the Senate or the polls

Hast thou one right to win…

Woman behold thy mission still,

To soothe, to watch, to pray.

The poem is titled with what was then an increasingly popular phrase, normally associated with women's suffrage, yet the content of this poem clearly advocates anti-women's suffrage views. While women's rights were—since the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention—becoming a familiar idea, they were not yet a reality; nor were they popularly endorsed by either men or women. However, even though the general public was cool to the idea, the public role of women in nineteenth-century America was a persistently common theme. Terms such as "rights," in regard to women, were frequently used, but just as frequently redefined. As the above poem alludes, the specific right in question here is the constitutional right for women to vote. History, of course, has established that this right would not exist for another 70 years or so.

When Willis became a published author, she would write about improving women's lives in the domestic sphere, but would stay away from improvements that were unpopular and encroached upon the public sphere, such as suffrage. She chose popular subjects, and avoided alienating her readers during a time of sharply divided opinions regarding enlarging the public roles of women's lives. David S. Reynolds notes that by "the mid-1850s the women's movement had prompted a backlash of harsh criticism, mainly from men, [and] the rebellious woman writer was forced to disguise her feminism, to express it indirectly by fusing it with Conventional appearances" (403). Willis's humorous and satirical disguises contributed in large measure to her uniqueness among women writers of her time. As "Tabitha's" letter and articles

clearly illustrate, Willis began using those disguises as early as 1851—and would continue using them effectively throughout her career.

On several occasions, she described the new Women's Rights Movement's overt calls for change as a misguided, sure to fail, approach. In her sketch, "A Little Bunker Hill," which was included in her 1854 collection, she begins the article with the following quotation:

> No person should be delicate about asking for what is properly his due. If he neglects doing so, he is deficient in that spirit of independence which he should observe in all his actions. Rights are rights, and if not granted, should be demanded.

She does not attribute the quotation to a person, but suggests that it is a creed of the Women's Rights Movement. She says the quotation has a "little 'Bunker Hill' atmosphere about that!" She speaks directly to her women readers with "my dear woman, 'female rights' is a debatable ground; what you may call a 'vexed question.'" Fern's humorous tone mirrors her advice that the women stop demanding and start playing a game with men. The game includes looking "'umble," and being "desperate cunning." She tells them to "bait" the men with "submission, and then throw the noose over the will." She says that through experience she has learned that "the more we 'demand,' the more we shan't get them." Further, she argues that there is "no sort of use to waste lungs and leather trotting to SIGH-racuse about it. The instant the subject is mentioned, the lords of creation are up and dressed; guns and bayonets are the order of the day. . . ." (346). As this example demonstrates, Fern clearly believes in the value of humor. Her own tone and style advocate making the decision makers, or, as she writes in the above example, "the lords of creation," laugh and then going about living her life in the way she sees fit, as though the

power structures, such as law makers, business men, and public opinion, would be distracted by their laughter and not notice that Willis had changed the rules. Willis's decision to make humor and satire the dominant traits of her persona would carry her to heights of popularity.

Her humor worked partly because of the simple reason that most people enjoy laughing. Camfield argues that nineteenth-century American humor was a "safe" way to confront the major social changes of that era. He notes that Fern uses the comic sketch "as a way to express disappointment in domesticity" (ix). He says that she expresses her "frustrations" by finding in "humor a way to humanize a system that [she] detest[s] in direct proportion to how much [she] value[s] it" (ix). Fern saw that Women's Rights advocates were despised by both men and women. Their seriousness was threatening.

Not all of her writing was about domesticity and the plight of women. Some of Fern's earliest writing includes pieces that were written for children but could also be appreciated by adults. They are about children, but they maintain the same level of interest as her pieces for adults.

An example is "The Young Cook," found under the section entitled "Youth's Department" in the *Olive Branch* on September 27, 1851. This article is about a young girl who wants to help the household cook, but is also interested in reading her book while cooking. The result is a chaotic experience. The lesson seems to be that cooking while reading does not work well. The sketch largely consists of a conversation between the young cook and the household servant, Dinah. Dinah is an African American woman and Fern uses a dialect to represent her accent. Presented as a comic character, Dinah appears to be exasperated with the young cook. The young cook presents herself ready for kitchen duty and Dinah says: "– (showing the whites

of her eyes in the most extraordinary manner)—'Yes, missy, but is dat a cook book sticking out of your apron pocket?" Her writing here is similar to the dialectic writing of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, published a year later in 1852, which Fern would favorably review. Whitcher, who wrote earlier than Fern and Stowe, relied heavily on dialect in her writing; Widow Bedott's words were all written with a dialect. Elsewhere, Fern uses a dialect to convey the particular Fern tone. It is casual, dropping letters from words and purposefully misspelling words to convey an informal relationship with the reader.

Fern wrote a collection of children's stories in 1854 titled, *Little Ferns for Fanny's Little Friends*, writing to her young readers as "Aunt Fanny." These stories aren't the arena where she shines the brightest. Most of them are predictable, sleepy tales about the comings and goings of young children. By far, more than her other writings, these writings are sentimental in style. Unlike "The Young Cook" and other articles directed toward a mixed audience, these stories are written purely at a child's level. They are repetitive and rely on simple sentences. . She writes,

> I wish I was a grass-hopper! I ain't happy. I am tired of this brown stuff dress, and these thick leather shoes, and my old sun-bonnet. There comes a nice carriage, - how smooth and shiny the horses are; how bright the silver-mounted harness glitters; how smart the coachman looks, in his white gloves. How nice it must be to be rich, and ride in a carriage; oh! there's a little girl in it, no older than 1, and all alone, too! (17).

### 3.4 The Transition to Fanny Fern

"Fanny Fern" first appeared as Willis's pen name in September of 1851 in an article for the *Olive Branch's* Youth Department, entitled "The Little Sunbeam." A week later, another sketch appeared under the name "Fanny Fern," also in the Youth Department, entitled "The Young Cook," as described earlier. Ironically, "Fanny Fern" made her debut with what is for recent scholars her least popular style of writing: sentimental pieces written for children. Even more interesting is the fact that these two sketches were far different from the sketches she had written that very summer under different pen names.

Willis's decision to use one name consistently for her persona was beneficial for her career. Having one name gave readers a way to find Fern's writings every week and it gave critics a way to discuss her work. However, as her writing over the next year would show, Fern was still uncertain about this persona's identity, specifically about her views on women and gender roles. During the following year, in 1852, Fern would refine her persona, but irony and inconsistency would be a notable part of that process, particularly as she experimented with the use of male personas and questioned the parameters and definitions of gender.

At the same time, Fern's talent became apparent to an important contemporary critic in 1852, even as her increasing popularity became an irrefutable fact with the growth of an approving Fanny Fern audience. She further demonstrated the former and capitalized on the latter with a shrewd career move that boosted her salary tenfold. Because Sara Willis maintained Fanny Fern as her primary pseudonym from this point in her career henceforth, I will begin to refer to her as Fanny Fern. In fact, this is in keeping with Willis's biography. Her friends and family referred to her as Fanny Fern; the name Sara Willis faded away completely.

# 4 CHAPTER THREE – 1852: Eva's Proposal

1852 was a year of two major developments in the evolution of Fern's persona, both of them complex: (1) her simultaneous use of multiple personas and formats, and (2) changes of gender in her personas.

While Fern began using multiple personas in her first year as a writer, she develops and hones that technique significantly in 1852. Fern begins writing multiple articles from different personas that would be published over a series of weeks, and usually would be about Fern herself. These innovative articles often would include fan letters to Fern, letters to the editor about Fern, or letters about subject matters that would provoke an answer from Fern. While she signs these letters with different names, and while no extant manuscripts have been discovered that offer definitive proof that these letters were her writing, their tone strongly matches Fern's own, they are usually preposterous, they are signed by implausible names, and Fern follows them up with tongue-in-cheek responses.

Her penchant for changing genders is reflected in proposals of marriage from both female and male personas, letters written from a male persona, and Fern's own musings as to whether she herself is male or female. While these developments often are displayed simultaneously, I will analyze them separately, as each contains several implications.

Fern's early articles shows that she eschewed the intellectual essay, the reform tract, and, most notably, the reinforcement of traditional roles for women. Instead, she took a bit from each of these rhetorical formats and themes and created new rhetorical styles and forms. Finding

labels and descriptions for what Fern created is a challenge, because her work does not fall into a recognized genre. In an article concerning women's nineteenth century periodical writing, Claire Pettengill provides useful terms to describe the rhetorical nature of newspaper columns. She says they are "fluid," and provide a "dialogical relationship—not only with one another but with other forms of writing—the dynamics of which in turn reveal some of the social, political, and literary values of the cultural context within which writing acquires meaning" (66). Pettengill's observation succinctly accounts for what Fern accomplished by placing her inventive forms of writing next to traditional forms of writing. When she wrote letters to the editor about herself, signed with a fictitious name, and then answered those letters, or when she wrote letters signed with "Fern" to her own editor, she was calling attention to the traditional rhetorical relationship between reader and periodical as well as to her ideas, and, most of all, to herself.

These formats ultimately were self-promoting, as they called attention to her name—her persona—and gave the impression that readers sought her advice and felt a personal connection to her. She wrote letters to her own editor in the form of a sketch. In the *True Flag*, she writes a column called "Indulgent Husbands," a sketch that she reprints in her *Fresh Fern Leaves* collection. She quotes her editor, who apparently said that "A husband too indulging is apt to make an impertinent wife." In response, she writes

> Now, how did you know that, Mr. True Flag? Bachelors never cut their wisdom teeth. But 'tis as true as gospel. If you did take it on credit, I endorse it. A husband should always wrap himself in a mantle of dignity, —never step off his pedestal to be communicative or facetious. The very minute you do it your wife will take advantage of it. (*Fresh Fern Leaves* 373)

In a non-traditional manner, she thus addresses her own editor in a public letter. She humorously undercuts his authority by noting that he is a bachelor, and traditionally unwise, particularly about marriage. No other letter to the editor from that time and in that paper compares with Fern's in tone and content.

She wrote opinion and advice columns in formats similar to traditional opinion and advice columns. Like the letter-to-the-editor format, while these formats were not unique in themselves, Fern made them original by, in many cases, writing both the letter and the response. Her imaginative characters, who wrote letters, and her responses to them mimicked the tone of the surrounding text, but the letters and responses varied in content to the point that they bordered on the absurd and became social satire.

## 4.1 Who is Fanny Fern?

Fern embodied such a range of personas in her first years as a writer, along with maintaining the central persona of "Fern," that she and her readers experienced some confusion about the real Fanny Fern. Even though Fern went to great lengths to separate the persona "Fanny Fern" from herself as the writer, her persona would always be viewed as a real person. This transition from pseudonym to fully fleshed persona was a literary first in American literature, and its likes would not be seen again until Mark Twain.

Her personality was not without complexity. Initially, she writes that she hasn't even determined a gender for Fanny Fern, saying she is "sometimes a Jack and sometimes a Gill," and that she is "rather mystified myself, on that point. Sometimes I think, and then again, I don't

know!" (*Olive Branch* March 13, 1852). For the remainder of her life she would be known as a "Gill" who was acting like a "Jack."

Addressing the gender identity question in a more somber tone, she creates the voice of a critic who finds fault with a woman in the role of editorialist. She implies that the basis of such discrimination is nothing short of evil. In "All About Satan," her critic cries out that, "Women are getting altogether too smart now-a-days; there must be a stop put to it! People are beginning to get alarmed! …. The fact is, women have no business to be crowding into the editorial chair" (*Olive Branch* Oct. 23, 1852). In the darkest passage of the column, the critic suggests that men can keep a closer watch on women if the women are at home "year in and year out, in that old calico wrapper, in that old rickety rocking-chair, with the last new twins in her arms . . ." Here her title becomes clear. Fern views the bias against successful working women as evil because it perpetuates an oppressive domestic cycle of housekeeping and child bearing and rearing. Even though this article contains a strong indictment against mainstream society, her double-speaking satirical voice leaves her article's meaning ambiguous. Elizabethada Wright addresses this issue more directly than any other critic. She notes that "more often than not, it is impossible to determine whose side Fern is taking" (108). Wright concludes that Fern uses humor and irony in such a way that readers could interpret her writing in the way that best suited them. So that "those who wanted fun found it, and those who wanted lessons could find whatever lessons they wanted to find" (108).

One of her more complex serialized editorials addresses marriage proposals. In a series of articles not addressed by previous scholars of Fern's writing, she exploits the popular customs of Leap Year brought to challenge conventional gender roles in marriage proposals. The year 1852

was a Leap Year, and for the entire month of December 1851, *Olive Branch* included numerous references to the impending time when tradition allows women to make marriage proposals to men. Condescending articles abounded, encouraging the "ladies" to get a husband while they can, lest they end up as old maids. Fern finds fault with her society's idea of a humorous reversal. To Fern, the public is missing an opportunity to examine the popular tradition of courting, proposing and marrying that gives men the power to initiate a marriage contract and prescribes that women should wait patiently. Fern saw the tradition as arbitrary and often inefficient. Through comical exchanges of letters, Fern exposes a culture that is afraid to change, yet willing to create a fantasy-time that is fun because the concept is so preposterous. In the process, Fern actually exposes how disadvantaged women are because they may not initiate a marriage proposal. Readers were likely to find the letters comical, even though both genders are criticized in this series—men for taking domestic power and women for letting them—because the criticism lay beneath the surface of the tangle of stories told through her various personas. Consequently, readers might not have discerned Fern's pointing finger.

Like characters in a dramatic production, Fern's characters have personalities and they interact with one another. In this case, they are naïve and comical because they do not seem to know the "real" rules about Leap Year, mainly that it is all for fun. Her characters take the tradition seriously and write to Fern to share their often disastrous experiences. These hapless folks include a young maid, a working-class girl who, readers most likely would presume, lacked the social guidance to know better than to actually ask her love interest for his hand in marriage; a widow with children whose life experience has made her more sensible than romantic; and the "average" bachelor, who shares his particular perspective.

Ultimately, her women do not fare well: either they receive an unfavorable response, they propose to the wrong gender, or they have become undesirable marriage partners. The following letter comes from "Hella," whose proposal is met with silent shock.

> Messrs. Editors—Noting in your paper of the 10th inst. An article of encouragement to the ladies, respecting their Leap Year privileges, I venture to send you a line of my own experience.
>
> Eight years since, (I was 18 then,) I determined to make an effort towards matrimony. Accordingly, I went through with what I considered an appropriate formula with a cousin, preparatory to a grand attempt upon some susceptible swain.
>
> One bright afternoon I found myself in agreeable proximity to a young gentleman, to whom I resolved to make my wishes known; or in plain words, I asked the man if he would marry me, I wish you could have seen the look he gave me. "Ah! Who shall paint that gaze?" The largest, wildest pair of blue eyes I ever saw stared me in the face then. Poor fellow! Such a look of horror and amazement as his countenance wore, you never conceived of. Brutus' at the sight of Caesar's stalwart specter was placid in comparison. I had heard of second sudden transformations from youth to age, of black hair turning gray in a single hour of fright, and I fairly trembled before my victim.
>
> The result is, I am single still; for, whenever I would make a second attempt, those wildly dilated eyes, (I do not think he has ever closed them since,) and that ghastly visage, have appeared to my mental vision –(Providence protect

> me from the reality) – and my courage fails. A plain blank, "No," –aye, or half a dozen of them, would not have intimidated me in the least. I am getting old; what shall I do? Hella

The Editor responds:

> We would advise Hella to propose to a blind man this year.

The fact that the woman proposed at all makes her a comic character, Leap Year or not. Rather than thinking she is doing something socially unusual, she only wonders why more women are not taking advantage of the year's special "privilege." The man in the story is also a comic character because of his response. Fern seems to be suggesting that most men would not react well to a woman proposing marriage.

Another character is added to the performance with a letter signed by "Moses." Moses writes that he would be happy to marry Hella. By doing so, he takes the power of the proposal away from the woman and places it back with the man. He adds to the silliness of the letters by saying that he in fact knows the first man she proposed to, and tells her that the man, in fact, "loved her and would have married her, if she had not slighted him after she saw the contortions of the face, caused by a stitch to his side, which caught him at the instant she proposed." The man who was once viewed as afraid, now is seen as overly sensitive. The states of emotion normally assigned to women are assigned to this representative man in Fern's imaginative world.

These articles are merely a warm-up for the highlight of her "Leap Year" mishaps. The centerpiece of her drama features a woman who, taking advantage of Leap Year, proposes to Fern herself. Fern enacts a dramatic reversal of social order when she creates a dialog between a woman who proposes marriage to "Jack Fern." Fanny Fern responds in a letter saying she is not

a “Jack,” but rather a “Gill.” Then, in an unexpected turn of events, the woman writes again and says she would be willing to marry her nonetheless. Fanny closes the discussion by saying she would never love a woman, that the gender brings character flaws Fern could never tolerate. What begins as a highly provocative discussion of power-relations in marriage thus ends in a harsh dismissal of women. Deciphering Fern’s actual point becomes challenging.

The first letter addresses “Jack Fern”; it is written by a woman who mistakenly believes Fern is a man:

> Lowell, Mass., Dec. 22d, 1851
>
> Jack Fern, Gent: —My dear Sir, —Do pardon a stranger for now addressing you.
>
> If I could only wait for Leap Year, an apology would not be deemed requisite. But indeed you are so good-natured in your bachelor troubles that I cannot resist the impulse to sympathize with you one moment.
>
> How I do wish it was Leap Year! I would even risk a refusal, and pop the question at once.
>
> I would come to the shrine of a true manly heart,
> I would kneel in devotion, and there ask a part;
> But where such a shrine? —’tis heard, I ween,
> To find the blessed altar ’mid humanity’s scene.
>
> But there is enough of poetry, and so, with all good wishes, I am, my dear sir, very respectfully yours, [E.

To set up the series, Fern writes an article signed as “Jack Fern.” She includes the “Fern” in the “Jack Fern” to make the connection between herself and Jack. The reader would know

that "E," who is later identified as "Eva," has proposed to another woman, Fern. She is writing on December 22, 1851; Leap Year would begin in 1852. Fern was providing a prelude to the coming year's topic.

Fern responds to "E" with the following:

To Jack Fern's Lowell Correspondent of *Olive Branch*:

> Bless your soul, my dear girl, I'm no more of a "Jack" than you are! I'm a poor, long-faced, draggle skirted, afflicted, down trodden female; crouching and whimpering my way through the world, like the rest of the sisters. Can't do anything I want to, cause it "never'll do."
>
> Before I was ten years old, I saw what it was all coming to, and the result has fully answered my juvenile expectations. If I had been allowed any choice in the matter, I should undoubtedly have been a "Jack" rejoicing at this minute in a pair of unwhisperables, and a Kossuth plumed hat; but there's where I was wronged in the commencement. It's a great mistake; for my sympathies and tastes are all Jack-ish. Now I can tie a cravat, or trim a pair of whiskers to a charm. I know exactly the difference between a swallow-tailed coat, and 'Other kind! A bad setting waistcoat gives me fits; and without the aid of a tailor, I know whether the pantaloon strap fits properly under the boot; and at what angle the hat should be perched on the head. Also, that a gentleman should always lift his hat from his head when bowing to a lady, (unless his wig is fastened to it) and keep his coat buttoned up to his chin if his chest is finely shaped, though the thermometer may be up to boiling point! But as to gowns and bustles, and corsets, and whalebones,

> couldn't I shake mother Eve? Was there any particular necessity for her munching that Paradisiacal apple?
>
> And now my dear girl I wish to my soul I was a "Jack;" for your sake and my own, too. I could make love to you better and faster than you ever dreamed of! Wouldn't I make havoc? It's very distressing to me, to have raised expectations I can't realize, but truth compels me to subscribe myself your suffering sister, "Jack," alias Fanny Fern
>
> P.S. I don't know why I should be so apologetic either; don't you suppose it's any disappointment to me (as the case stands) to receive a female offer? I tell you it aint anything else! F.F.

These exchanges between personas entertained readers, created name recognition, and public interest, but they also provided an optimal forum for satire. Her "Eva, " named after the first woman, is a bewildered member of a stereotyped society in which all women want to marry and have children and all men secretly want to live as bachelors, but will give in to the seductive games of women and become husbands and fathers. On the subject of marriage, Fern seems to be suggesting that because of gender issues in marriage (not unlike the conflicts in the Garden of Eden, of which "Eva's" name reminds us), same-sex marriages, just like male attire, are preferable to heterosexual marriages. Fern admits that she is more knowledgeable about donning men's attire than women's. Even more transgressively, she says she could be a better romantic partner for E than anyone she had ever considered ("I could make love to you better and faster than you ever dreamed of!"). But, like her frustration with women's attire, ("But as to gowns and bustles, and corsets, and whalebones, couldn't I shake mother Eve?") she resigns herself to

the life of a woman, with all of its restrictions. She does not offer any solution to improving her lot in life as a woman, telling Eva that she (Fern) is no different than Eva, and is her "suffering sister."… And even though she wishes "to her soul" that she were a "Jack," ultimately she rejects the male role Eva has placed her in. Despite her experimenting with a same-sex marriage proposal in her Eva exchanges, Fern seems to fall right back into the role of the "old maid waiting for a proposal" when her postscript says she is *disappointed* that the marriage proposal came from a woman, implying that if it had come from a man, she would not be disappointed.

Even with that looming sense of resignation, Fern does not end the exchange of letters. Pushing this unorthodox exchange even further, Fern continues when she has E decide that she does not mind if Fern is a woman, and rather than retracting her offer, she extends it once again: The January 24, 1852, issue of the *Olive Branch* includes a letter from Eva to Fanny:

> Lowell, Jan. 16th, 1852
>
> My Sweet Fanny – Shall I make use of your own frank style? Indeed you wrong me in supposing I am disappointed; believe me, I love you as Fanny far better than I could as Jack.
>
> Your lively lines have excited a smile, and for that, many thanks, for I do love the cheerful heart; and Jack or Fanny who, in easy, pure and lovely strains, can make a kindred spirit glad, deserves to be immortalized. And now, my sister, if we cannot get any one to make love to us, why, we can just love one another.
>
> I would not be egotistical, and so will say nothing about how well, or how fast the reins of Love's Chariot would be held in my hands. But it is Leap Year now, and methinks there are some Jacks not quite imaginary; and if I should

> happen to address the counterpart of Fanny's graphic picture, hitting the dear soul's fancy, and a "Kossuth plumed hat" should answer the summons, I know you will rejoice with me most heartily.
>
> They say the moon is made of green cheese,
> And love is made out of a summer's breeze,
> And when we get spliced away it will go,
> But who will believe it: I won't I know,
>
> And so, Fanny dear, I will not apologize; for I can almost hear your merry laugh, and know just how you looked when you received your first "female offer."
>
> Affectionately yours, Eva

Even though Eva says she will borrow Fern's "frank style," one that is masculine—playing on the double meaning for frank and the name Frank—and bold, the article's rhetoric is distinctive from Fern's speaking style. Eva's "Love's Chariot," "methinks," and "soul's fancy" distinguish Eva's character's writing from Fern's. Additionally, Eva's assertion that Fern's sense of humor is attractive provides Fern an opportunity to define her role as social critic rather than comic writer. Fern responds, "You labor under the hallucination that I felt merry when I wrote all that nonsense! Not a bit of it; it's a way I have, when I can't find a razor handy to cut my throat!" Fern also reinforces the reasons she cannot love women:

> My Dear Eva: -- Bless your soul. I can't love a woman! I had as life take a dose of physic! It was never intended I should; it's a waste of powder: life is too short for such a folly! If Adam had proposed, I'd talk about it. There's no use in

> mincing matters, my dear: (I never could tell a lie and I have tried more than a hundred times) women never make decent friends to their own sex.

The last line is a surprise. Because Fern seems to argue that a same-sex marriage was never "intended" by God, one would expect that her objections would be moral in nature. However, her last indicates that a lack of compatible friendship is her main objection. She objects so strongly that nature would have to change its course before Fern would reconsider the offer:

> and some fine day when the clouds are weeping themselves dry, and the wind is tearing the trees up by the roots, and the chimneys are emigrating from one house to another, and nothing else is stirring, save the spirit of the storm and myself, I'll take my patent umberil and come to "Lowell" like a witch on a broomstick, and see what you look like!

Physical nature is symbolically linked to human nature. It is the very nature of women that must change, in Fern's view. To underscore her point, her postscript references a woman's nature.

The storm, an upheaval in nature, would be the conduit for Fern visiting Eva. With the "spirit of a storm," Fern will come "like a witch on a broomstick" to see her. In this reference, she describes a destructive storm that transcends into the "spirit" of the storm, which metamorphoses Fern into a woman no longer bound by society's rules, a witch who lives by supernatural rules. Fern also takes an opportunity to distance Fanny Fern the author from Fanny Fern the persona. She says Eva "labors under the hallucination" that Fern felt merry when she wrote her articles. In fact, she says she felt suicidal. Eva, or any reader, would almost certainly label Fern as merry since the majority of her articles were humorous and her persona acts

impervious to life's difficulties. However, in this brief passage, she reclaims her seriousness, if not despair, about her subject, marking a strong distinction between person and persona. It is a rare moment for Fern, exposing her personal self, particularly in a vulnerable way. While her characters often respond to Fern's commentary in letters, none responds to this letter and its complex meaning.

Adding yet another level of message complexity, Fern pens this postscript:

> P.S. Poor Mr. Norris! What a scrape he's got into! We shouldn't either of us be true to our woman nater, if we let each other have "the last word." I shan't give in. [F.F.]

Fern appears to satirize her own pattern of taking the last word in her conversation, saying that they could not marry because they could not *both* have the last word. She ends the letter exchanges with Eva with a stronger tone than her earlier resignation, an adamant stance that women cannot change. "Poor Mr. Norris," indeed. Fern's reference to the *Olive Branch*'s editor is appropriate, considering that he allowed Fern to publish a potentially scandalous series of articles about same-sex marriage that undoubtedly would offend almost all of his conservative Boston readers. Given those facts, I would venture that neither Mr. Norris nor the majority of readers saw past the humor and slap-stick comedy, simply because the underlying points, printed in the newspaper, were culturally far ahead of their time and, therefore, unrecognizable for what they were.

## 4.2 The Ladies' Section

For reasons that may be obvious, Fern's work does not appear in the "Ladies' Section," at least not under the name "Fern." Perhaps Fern's admission that she would never say "obey" in her wedding vows, not even with a gun pointed to her head (*Olive Branch* February 28, 1852), kept her out of that section. The articles in that section were not signed, except for an occasional "Young Ladies' Friend," or initials alone or "from another paper," so it is difficult to know exactly who wrote for that section. The section was devoid of subjects pertaining to work, politics, business, or banking, and was filled with subjects pertaining to the domestic sphere.

The sectioning of the newspaper by gender reflected a growing trend of the 1850s. In New York, women could visit the "Ladies' Oyster Shop," the "Ladies' Reading Room," as well as their own windows at banks and post offices (Burrows and Wallace 798). Theoretically, the segregation would provide a sense of power for women, with their own domains outside the home. In reality, it only reinforced societal expectations of women and made the contrast between the men's world and their world all the more obvious. They had their niches, but the men had the rest.

Part of Fern's comic quality was derived from the difference between her work and articles such as one would read in the "Ladies' Section." As one critic notes, in the nineteenth century, a "common comic device was to place a sensible right-minded young woman in the middle of a group of fashionable fools, or vice versa" (Carlson 312). Fern was the sensible woman, and at the same time her readers could play the role of the group who surrounds the fashionable fool, be it the husband, the father, or an authority figure. Her subject matter might seem light-hearted to most readers, but her role reversal was quite serious.

Following the theory of the sensible critic and the fashionable group, she would question the rules of the "fashionable group." Since Fern literally was surrounded by "fashionable," or socially acceptable articles, she took ideas from the surrounding columns and unabashedly satirized their underlying values. In one instance, Fern questions a line from a "Hints on Etiquette" article that asserts "widows have equal rights with married women." Realizing the absurdity in the printing of this statement, or the notion that one has to be told this precept of human decency that makes its way under the heading of etiquette, Fern simply writes "Well, I'm glad of it for their sakes!" Unbeknownst to her readers, she is a widow herself, but maintains her distance by using "their" rather than "our." Her simple response reminds the reader of the other option, not having equal rights. Indicating that widows imprison themselves, she wonders "if they know it," and that they ought to "wake up their privileges" (*Olive Branch* July 10, 1852).

### 4.3 A Strategic Career Move

Although Fern by now had built a large fan base among her Boston readers, she still was writing for 50 cents a column. In September of 1852, she made a strategic career move that subsequently enabled her to negotiate for five dollars a column with her Boston publishers: She briefly became an exclusive columnist for her brother, Richard Storrs Willis, editor of the New York *Musical World and Times*. As discussed in Chapter One, his publisher, Oliver Dyer, hired her and gave her a column under the heading "Fanny Fern's Column." Fern has been designated as the "first woman columnist" specifically because her brother printed an announcement in September 1852 that Fern would be writing a column exclusively for his paper. Her employment there was brief, however, and she soon returned to the Boston papers at substantially higher pay.

This career move demonstrates not only that she was a savvy marketer and shrewd business woman, but also that she was becoming a saleable publishing commodity.

Contemporary reviews refer to her growing popularity and provide evidence that her fame was well-established, indicating that her early years as a writer were the ones responsible for her fame and that she already had achieved celebrity status well before signing her contract with Bonner in 1855. Her success, of course, would have been based on her Boston newspaper weekly contributions and two series of collections of those newspaper articles.

An 1852 review of her columns speaks of the precarious balance she held with her readership, and also of her popularity. The reviewer was Sarah Josepha Hale, editor of *Godey's Lady's Book* from 1837 to 1877. The magazine was a longstanding, very popular and well-respected periodical. Hale exerted great influence over her many women readers, and attracted popular women writers to her magazine's pages. Signourney, Child, and Sedgwick were among the magazine's prominent contributors (Mott, *History* 350), and the magazine itself was considered to be the "most prominent of all the women's magazines of the period" (Mott, History 350). Hale was conservative and avoided divisive content (Mott, History 350). Her editorial philosophy could be the reason why, in November of 1852, Hale notes that Fern has "thousands of admirers," but will keep them only if she "minds her p's and q's, and does not become too much of a coquette" (*Godey's Lady's Book*, November 1852). The review is mixed. Saying that Fern should not

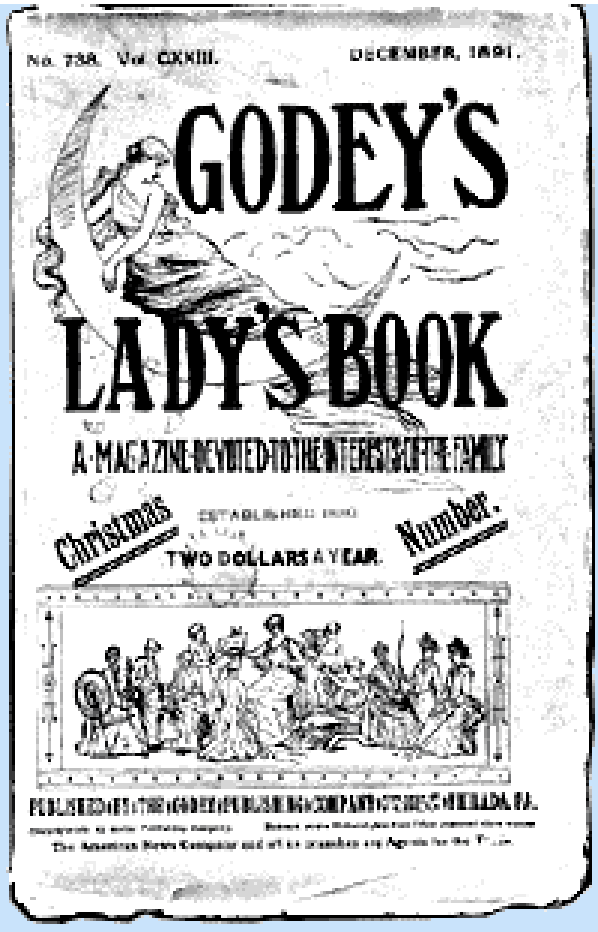


Figure 4: Cover of Sara Hale's influential *Godey's Lady's Book*

become “too much of a coquette” implies that she already is somewhat of a coquette in the sense that she is unserious, too playful. On the other hand, Hale could see Fern’s great potential for maintaining a successful writing career.

In Hale’s view, Fern was walking a dangerous line with respect to female decorum because Fern often described men as self-absorbed and egocentric, and on a number of occasions she described women as fickle and, worst of all, complicit with a cultural system that encouraged

gender inequality. Moreover, she adopted a hearty, rather than the more culturally preferred delicate, tone. However, perhaps Hale could foresee continued success because of Fern's unique rhetorical approach. Hale herself held a conservative view of women's roles, so the particular fault she finds with Fern is consistent with her beliefs. In light of Hale and Fern's ideological opposition, Hale's encouraging comments gain significance.

Examining Willis's writing, the source of Hale's praise and note of caution, showed me that Willis's work had become increasingly complex and had moved away from what could be called traditional writing, and especially from generally accepted female writing.

Given the often eccentric themes of her articles, along with her sometimes cryptic wording, the question of why Fern became popular is a significant one. I would argue that Fern was strategic about maintaining that popularity. First she created a persona that was socially inferior to the reader, and therefore non-threatening. Second, she consistently disarmed her reader with humor. Third, she drew upon her skill at creating ambiguity, creating a space for oblique satire and social commentary.

It was often impossible, for instance, to determine whether her words actually were insulting to the reader. Like the "old maid" Tabitha, whom she introduced to readers in 1851, Fern for a very brief period in 1852 describes herself as a member of one of the most marginalized groups of women her society has created: the "spinster." She declares herself "one of the persecuted class, denominated old maids." She says, however, that she is happily unmarried and would not "touch a child with a pair of tongs" (*Olive Branch* July 3, 1852). Since Fern was actually a widow with two children, she clearly was speaking from a persona's voice, not from a personal one.

Ironically, she describes herself as "Going *quietly* about the world, taking care not to jostle [her] neighbors, or hit against any of their rough angles," remaining "cheerful, contended and happy" along the way (*Olive Branch* Feb. 14, 1852, emphasis mine). Her words are both ironic and true. She frequently jostled her readers with her content, was anything but quiet, and often aimed for their "rough angles," but through her persona, she was able to remain on the outskirts of domestic life and create an illusion of objectivity. It is from this non-threatening, comical vantage point that she critiques traditional societal roles.

Perhaps to ensure that her reader not overlook her serious ideas, she occasionally becomes overtly, and dramatically, serious. In January 1852, as she has done before, she writes her own fan mail, which praises her sense of humor. Her letter to Eva, described above, is, in part, a setup for Fern's dramatic response, in which she informs Eva that she has mistaken Fern's satire for jokes and that she did not feel "merry" at all, but that she writes in that "way" when she "can't find a razor handy to cut [her] throat!" (*Olive Branch* Jan. 31, 1852). Hence, during her formative writing years, she distinguishes her persona from the comic who entertains, and puts herself in the category of the more serious satirist. Her comment suggests a despairing outlook, or as Greg Camfield suggests, one that is filled with rage. He writes, "Humor to Parton. . . is an alternative to rage as an appropriate response not only to the constraints of domestic ideology, but also to her own ambivalent acceptance of those constraints" (Camfield 61). Claire Pettengill argues that Fern uses humor, at least in the humorous articles Pettengill chose for analysis, to evoke "smiles rather than anger from readers" (70). A. Cheree Carlson argues the same point, stating, "One 'safe' manner in which to violate the rules was to do so in a humorous spirit. If attacks on true womanhood were 'all in fun,' fewer readers would be angered" (311).

In articles like "Owls Kill Hummingbirds," Fern's rage dominates her writing. In this piece, she analyzes the marriage of a humorless husband and a lighthearted wife. The wife loses her personality, "plodding through life with him to the dead-march of his leaden thoughts." Fern ends the article, and the year of 1852, with the advice that women marry men who can laugh because "Owls kill hummingbirds!" (*True Flag* Dec.11, 1852). In many ways, Fern is the lighthearted wife and society or all of patriarchy itself? (i.e., not just "society") is the "humorless husband." Fern critiques the "husband" as he appears in various forms, as editors, critics, courtship traditions, and even other women.

In the following year, 1853, further proof of Fern's popularity and her large readership of approving fans would become evident with the publication and sales of *Fern Leaves*, series one and two. These bound and elaborately designed gift books would be very successful in the marketplace.

# 5 CHAPTER FOUR – 1853 and 1854: *Fern Leaves from Fanny's Portfolio*

By 1853 Fern's popularity had given her the readership she needed to publish her first collection of sketches in a book format, *Fern Leaves from Fanny's Portfolio*. With U. S. sales exceeding 70,000, the collection offered indisputable proof of an approving readership.[7] *The Scarlet Letter* was considered a best seller only a couple of years earlier when it sold out its initial printing of 2,500 copies. The career boost provided impetus for Fern's pivotal move from Boston to New York City in June 1853. That geographical change put her in the heart of what was becoming the new center of the American publishing market and took her away from what was becoming a more peripheral and provincial market in Boston. The move also reflected her status as a writer. No longer writing as many articles as she could every week for two local newspapers, she would gain national attention from her new book and her new locale. In New York, she would be working among well-established writers, the New York "literati." Fanny Fern was moving away from the fringe and into the mainstream of American writers.

Just prior to her move, *Fern Leaves from Fanny's Portfolio* was published by Auburn: Derby & Miller. Six months later, a second book was published, *Fern Leaves from Fanny's Portfolio Second Series*. The first *Portfolio* contains two parts, a combination of both new and previously published sketches and narratives. The second *Portfolio* is almost the same length as the first, but with all of its sketches contained in a single section. While the consequent

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[7] Warren reports that Fern sold 70,000 copies in the United States and 29,000 in Britain (Introduction xvi), for total sales of 99,000. Other sources round the total to 100,000. Either figure supports the conclusion that her text was popular and experienced notable success.

heightened literary reputation and financial gains were important for Fern's career, the first collection is equally important from a critical perspective. It has drawn critical attention because its two parts seem to contain a dichotomy of writing styles and themes. While the articles in part two are consistent with Fern's outspoken persona and style, the pieces in part one seem to be cast in the traditional sentimental style and to treat more conventional themes.

In August of 1853, *Godey's Lady's Book* announces that Derby & Miller are advertising a publication of Fern's book. The editor says "we have no doubt that the book will be met with a rapid sale."[8]

In 1854, a review of *Fern Leaves from Fanny's Portfolio Second Series* met with a favorable review from *Godey's Lady's Book*:

> Every one that is, every one in the habit of reading newspapers has read, and consequently admired at least a few of the long and short essay and paragraphs, and memorable remarks, which, like flashing meteors, have shot athwart the literary firmament from time to time, to the amazement, in particular, of a certain class of quiet writers, who for a time have been left to wander in the gloom of the past. But, unlike meteors, which fade away after a brief flash, Fanny's flashes are designed for preservation, and are carefully collected together

[8] The book would be reprinted in 1857 as the *Blue and Gold* edition. *Harper's Weekly*, having recognized her celebrity status by that time, gave the book a rave review, writing that Fern was "undoubtedly the most brilliant paragraphist living" and that her short essays had a "vivacity and originality not attained by any other English writer" (*Harper's Weekly*, September 9, 1857).

> and made to form a brilliant galaxy for permanent usefulness and lasting admiration. Her originality, industry, and proficiency in all departments of life and human knowledge are wonderful, indeed, and therefore wonderfully widespread is her popularity. She is, besides, very bold and independent in her strictures on men, women and every object else that comes in her way, and she has the courage to say things which almost any common thinker might think, but which very few, perhaps, could put upon paper in the same nervous and striking language. Hence, no doubt, in a great measure, Fanny's popularity with the multitude of readers.

In this review, the editor, Sarah Josepha Hale, describes the very characteristics that captivated contemporary and modern readers. Significantly, Hale notes that Fern's style is "bold and independent" and that she writes about subjects "very few" could put upon paper, even though they might have had the same thoughts. The editor notes that her language is "nervous and striking." Hale uses "nervous" to denote a kind of courage, rather than the modern sense of unsettled and afraid. These comments, therefore, provide some proof of the originality of Fern's style and indicate that she stood apart from other writers in both style and content. It also indicates that Fern's views on "men, women and every object else that comes in her way" were outside the bounds of conventional thinking. Even if her thoughts were ones that "almost any common thinker might think," Fern still stood apart from others because she actually wrote about them in a public sphere.

In that sense, the editor was prophetic, noting that Fern would be "brilliant" in a permanent way. Also of note, the editor mentions the "multitude" of Fern's readers. In only two

years' time, Fern's popularity increased from "thousands" of readers in 1852 to a "multitude" of readers in 1854. Hale also calls attention to Nathaniel Hawthorne's appreciation of Fern when she writes that Fern's successes have been "to the amazement, in particular, of a certain class of quiet writers, who for a time have been left to wander in the gloom of the past."

No analysis of Fern's contemporary critical reception would be complete without including the most famous contemporary "review" she would receive. In 1855, after Fern wrote *Ruth Hall*, Nathaniel Hawthorne spoke favorably of Fern in a letter to his publisher, William Ticknor, that ironically refers to an earlier letter containing strongly unfavorable views of women writers as a group.[9]

He was irritated that the "trash" of women writers dominated the market, leaving little room for his work. As popular women novelists were a new phenomenon, Hawthorne made note of their comparative success:

> America is now wholly given over to a d----d mob of scribbling women, and I should have no chance of success while the public is occupied with their trash – and should be ashamed of myself if I did succeed. What is the mystery of

[9] Fred Lewis Pattee, in his 1940 book, *The Feminine Fifties*, agrees with Hawthorne's assessment of women writers during the mid-nineteenth century period. He entitled a chapter with a reference to this particular letter, calling chapter 11, "A D----d Mob of Scribbling Women." Pattee holds Hawthorne in high regard, but cannot understand Hawthorne's view of Fern, whom he calls the "most tearful and convulsingly 'female' moralizer of the whole modern blue-stocking school" (110). Nineteenth-century scholars often cite Pattee as the first person to formally characterize and describe the increase in women's writing during the 1850s.

> these innumerable editions of the *Lamplighter*, and other books neither better nor worse? –worse they could not be, and better they need not be, when they sell by the 100,000 (110).

Hawthorne speaks directly of Maria Cummin's *The Lamplighter*, which sold 90,000 copies. (Close behind, Fern's novel *Ruth Hall* sold more than 70,000 copies in the first year of publication.) By comparison, *The Scarlet Letter*, published in 1850, sold around 10,000 copies during its first decade in print. Fern was hardly the only successful woman writer on the market. She was a contemporary of Harriet Beecher Stowe, whose far more successful *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had sales in the 300,000 range. Susan Warner's *Wide Wide World* sold over 100,000 copies. In his second letter to Ticknor that same year, Hawthorne reflected on his earlier comments about women writers and made a famous exception regarding Fern:

> In my last, I recollect, I bestowed some vituperation on female authors. I have been reading *Ruth Hall* and I must say I enjoyed it a good deal. The woman writes as if the devil was in her; and that is the only condition under which a woman ever writes anything worth reading. Generally women write like emasculated men, and are to be distinguished from male authors by greater feebleness and folly; but when they throw off the restraints of decency, and come before the public stark naked, as it were –then their books are sure to possess character and value. Can you tell me anything about this Fanny Fern? If you meet her, I wish you would let her know how much I admire her (xxxiv Introduction, Smith).

Hawthorne obviously appreciates Fern's original style, viewpoint, and fresh perspective of domestic life. While an analysis of *Ruth Hall* is outside the scope of this project, if Hawthorne were to look back at Fern's first two years of newspaper articles and her *Fern Leaves* collections of articles, he would find many sketches that would find their way, with only such slight alteration of character names, into *Ruth Hall*. The features that distinguished Fern from other women writers were well-established before publication of *Ruth Hall*. In fact, I contend that the reason her novel did in fact rank among the best-selling novels of the day was that she already had established her persona and developed a faithful readership.

In the anthology, *American Satire,* editor Nicholos Bakalar ironically places Fern directly after Hawthorne, her only male writer supporter. The Preface makes note that "until recently," Fern had been "only as a minor sentimentalist. But her highly popular columns were ferociously funny, sharply satirical, and by nineteenth-century standards extremely 'unfeminine'" (162). Published in 1997, Bakalar may be referring to Warren's 1993 biography of Fern as the catalyst for Fern's new classification as a satirist when he writes "until recently." However, Hawthorne, Fern's contemporary, recognized Fern's outstanding and unique writing style and content a full century before Warren wrote about her. Further, there is no contemporary written critique that describes Fern as a "minor" writer. It was not until Fred Lewis Pattee's *Feminine Fifties*, published in 1940, that Fern's literary and cultural stature would be seriously diminished. Bakalar's inclusion, then, of the resurrected and reconsidered Fern as a satirist shows how influential Pattee's work had been prior to Warren's biography of Fern. Likewise, it also represents the kind of cursory description often associated with Fern during the twentieth century. Additionally, Bakalar, partially erroneously, writes in the Preface that Fern

"wrote an outspoken newspaper column at a time when women writers were supposed to stick to writing 'feminine' novels" (162.) While Fern's columns were "outspoken," other women were

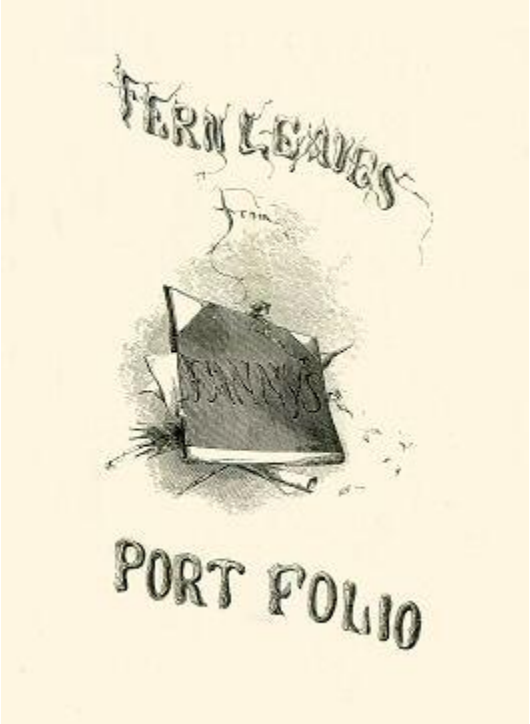


Figure 5: Half title page from the first *Portfolio*

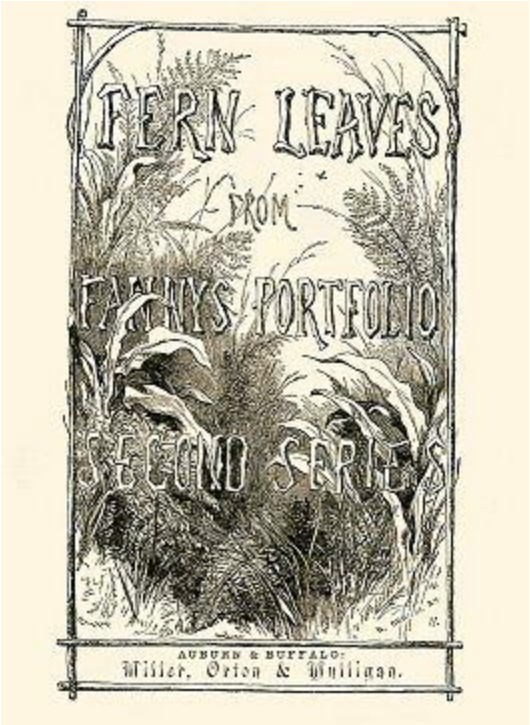


Figure 6: Half-title page from the second series

also writing and publishing at the same time. Whether it was poetry, advice columns, instruction books on housekeeping and child rearing, or even gossip columns, Fern was hardly the only woman writing out of the novel genre. Not to denigrate Bakalar's anthology, since it was not intended to be a study of Fern, but rather a study of satiric writing itself, but cursory and only partially accurate statements about Fern unfortunately dominate secondary literature regarding Fern's work.

While contemporary reviewers often squirmed over Fern's non-traditional writings, her modern critics have stammered over Fern's sentimental pieces. But this part of her repertoire serves as an important link in her development as a persona and a writer, and I believe the critical reception of her work, both contemporary and modern, is pertinent to understanding Fern's work during this period. Her traditional writings tend to be slighted by scholars who

emphasize her non-traditional style and proto-feminist observations. Fern's more conservative writing periodically emerges between the years of 1851 and 1853, but with her non-traditional writing also present, and outnumbering the conservative writings, critics could perhaps justify omitting them from their analysis. It is with her *Fern Leaves* collection, however, in which the seventy-eight traditional writings in the first part considerably outnumber the forty nontraditional articles in the second, that critics must reckon.

Because Joyce Warren is Fern's most prolific modern critic and because her work serves as a biographical source for other Fern critics, her analysis of Fern's collection is cited more often than those of other critics. In her biography of Fern, Warren uses the sales of *Fern Leaves* as evidence of her popularity. She also cites positive reviews that *Fern Leaves* received, but she does not analyze its contents. Regarding *Fern Leaves*, she addresses what she sees as a contradiction in writing styles by stating, without any referenced evidence, that in Fern's "first books," her editors "put in an inordinate number of sentimental pieces and toned down some of her satirical writing" (Introduction ix). The only records of *Fern Leaves* that Warren produces are those that describe the financial contract that Fern signed with Mason Brothers, not ones that document editing and creative privileges that Fern may or may not have agreed upon. Warren does admit that Fern "could also write traditionally" (ix). In that case, Warren is giving Fern responsibility for that writing style but not for its strong presence in *Fern Leaves*. Lastly, Warren suggests that it was Fern's sentimental pieces that gave Fern "respectability, perhaps enabling her work to be published in the first place" (ix). Warren's overall view of Fern's sentimental writing is negative. She does not criticize it directly, but her inference that it was a vehicle that allowed Fern to publish implies that it was a necessary evil that would be better to

ignore than to analyze. Warren's dismissal of Fern's sentimental writing style does a disservice to Fern scholarship because it excludes the possibility that Fern, a product of the sentimental nineteenth century, found the style appealing and, at times, a good medium for her ideas.

On the other hand, Nancy Walker is more open than Warren to a view of Fern that includes sentimental writing. She writes about Fern's use of traditional styles, although she does not mention the *Fern Leaves* collection specifically. Of Fern's use of the traditional style, she notes that it would have increased her popularity with readers (Walker 49). Walker argues that readers loved Fern's "ability to write both tearfully sentimental accounts of dying children and the virtues of motherhood, and witty, pointed, satires about issues of concern to nineteenth-century women" (*A Very Serious Thing* 49-50). Part one of the collection contains many examples of the domestic sagas that Walker describes.

David S. Reynolds is one of the few voices to register an opinion on the entire collection. He sees the different voices in parts one and two as another example of Fern's rhetorical innovation (Reynolds 403). In fact, Reynolds credits Fern with groundbreaking originality, saying that in *Fern Leaves*, "for the first time in American literature, a woman writer showed that conventional appearances could be donned and shed like changeable masks" (403). He calls her "zestfully mercurial," a writer who is "by turns cute, coy, vindictive, prissy, erotic, motherly, feminist – everything but shy and retiring" (403). His analysis, however perceptive, also shows his unfamiliarity with Fern's newspaper career: The *first* time such donning and changing of masks occurs is in her *Olive Branch* and *True Flag* articles. Her changing of personae and names was as dramatic then as it ever would be in Fern's career.

Quite differently, Anne Wood criticizes Fern's sentimental writing as much as any Fern contemporary criticized Fern's non-traditional writing. She describes the two halves, saying "In Part II, we leave the 'Fern' behind and encounter the 'Fanny'" (Wood 19). She says that part one is:

> packed with tales of lonely widows and dying and saintly children, who are described with a sentimental abandon which might make even Mrs. Sigourney blush: 'How sublime! How touching! Holy childhood! Let me sit at thy feet, and learn of thee.' (11).

It is my contention that Woods and others overlook Fern's particular brand of sentimentalism. While the sketches in part one do include many traits of heavy-handed sentimentalism, Fern strongly resists traditional plot lines for her women characters. Instead of allowing them to languish, she invigorates them with an increased number of options for their lives. Further, she takes the prevailing views of domesticity, particularly as defined by her former teacher, Catharine Beecher, and shows that its idealism does not often match reality. In all, while the sketches do contain sentimental ideas, descriptions, characters and plots, they are actually revisions of the traditional sentimental style and of domestic roles.

An important distinction between Fern's style of sentimentalism and other writers' portrayals is the difference between True Womanhood and Real Womanhood. These modern terms define different sets of values for women that contemporary culture upheld. The women characters in the narratives of series one did not live the values of True Womanhood, which typically were reinforced in sentimental literature, but, rather, they lived the values of Real Womanhood. Fern wrote in a sentimental style, but not with sentimental ideology. In a manner

similar to the gender-specific spaces of the nineteenth-century, in print and in commerce, the style becomes aligned with women-only writers and readers. Lauren Berlant notes that the "sentimental culture" found in these writings "established a broad audience of women, aiming to stake out a safe feminine space, a textual habitus in which a set of emotional, intellectual, and economic styles, knowledge's, and practices might be formulated in common and expressed with pleasure" (434). If so, then in part one Fern brings her reader into a comfortable "space," but one that she has redesigned.

Fern's characters find endings consistent with Real Womanhood. While no one has made that argument for Fern, an applicable critique for a different text comes with Frances Smith Foster's article, "Harriet Jacob's Incidents and the 'Careless Daughters' (and Sons) who Read It." Foster distinguishes two types of womanhood in Jacob's narrative. She argues that Jacobs discovers that *True Womanhood* leads to a certain death, while *Real Womanhood* allows for survival. True Womanhood evokes images of the "pale, delicate, invalid maiden and the four female principles of domesticity, piety, submission, and purity" (Foster 92). On the other hand, Real Womanhood required that a woman not sacrifice herself, but instead resist and survive (Foster 100). Similarly, the women in Fern's narratives often remain in the domestic realm, and often defer to men, but they do not sacrifice their lives with lethargic passivity. In that way, Fern's "traditional" sketches share common ground with her more progressive themes.

Critics have overlooked Fern's "Introduction" to the collection. It serves an important purpose, exemplifying the connectedness between the traditional and non-traditional of parts one and two by foreshadowing this pattern. In the "Introduction," Fern draws upon the traditionally required feminine modesty seen in American literature since Anne Bradstreet published her

poems in the seventeenth century. Like so many women writers before her, Fern insists she never intended to write a book, and would have refused to do it if she had been aware of her actions. She asks, "How, then, came the book to be written? Some one may ask. Well, that's just what puzzles *me."* She references her contemporary, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and writes in "the dialect of the immortal 'Topsy,'" saying she "'spect it growed!" Topsy's word "growed" complements the image of "ferns," and, in fact, Fern claims that the collection's articles grew into existence quite apart from her efforts. She says her sketches are like fern leaves, "gathered at random, in shady spots, where sunbeams seldom play, and which I little thought ever to press for your keeping." If Fern's writing process is likened to gathering flowers, the publishing process is like pressing those flowers. Fern uses a sophisticated play on the word "press" to suggest a flower press to preserve her collected fern leaves and also a printing press to preserve her words in a collection entitled *Fern Leaves*. These metaphors impart an organic quality to her conception of a book. In that light, she remains in the domestic sphere. However, in another light—one that suggests alignment with a powerful bestselling author (Stowe) and a printing press that would help make Fern a bestselling author—Fern is in the professional sphere.

While this guise of self-effacement seems to differ markedly from her fearless persona seen in early newspaper columns, I regard it as one of many examples of ambiguity so often seen in her work. She is also modeling some of the advice she gives her readers in the collection. In the article, "Wasn't You Caught Napping?," for example, she tells women to "play possum and wear the mark of submission" as they become an integrated force in society. She says there is "no use in rousing any unnecessary antagonism." Noting specifically that she heeds her own advice, she claims it is more successful than the tactics of the new and widely distrusted

"Women's Rights Convention." In her "velvet shoes," she will get to her goal just as quickly as if she "tramped on rough-shod" (380-1). Fern's "velvet shoes" are a reference to femininity, as required by her culture, as well as to the popular expression "an iron fist in a velvet glove." This "velvet" feminine is passive and mild-mannered, but as Fern's words indicate, her motives are aggressive nonetheless.

In the opening story of her collection, "The Still Small Voice," Fern writes a narrative that seems to be about a domestic scene, but is actually a critique of formulaic sentimental novels. She describes an economically privileged child, Charley, who stares out the window at the "stereotyped street panorama, till his eyes were drooping with weariness" (11). He tries to get his mother's attention, but he cannot because she is engrossed in reading "the last new novel." He returns to the window and sees what his mother could be reading about. He watches a funeral procession pass by his home, and, to make matters even bleaker, discovers that the funeral is for a child. By including so many sentimental clichés, Fern is writing a parody of traditional sentimental narratives. The boy who looks at the scene is like the reader looking at the page; like the reader, the boy sees a "stereotyped" setting until his eyes are "drooping with weariness." The mother actually reads a popular novel while the child watches sentimental plot formulas come to life on the street below him.

When the boy says, "Mamma, must *I* die, too?," the mother dismisses his question but later finds the words, "must I die, too" staring at her from every page of her novel (12). The mother becomes distressed and the narrator says, "Death, why it is a thing she has never thought of" (12). The mother's statement seems preposterous, considering that the last new novel most

certainly featured death prominently in the plot. In addition, the mother becomes like her child, who is also baffled by the thought of death.

For Fern, popular novels are uninteresting and, she suggests, the female readership is as unsophisticated as the stories themselves. While Fern's story can be read and interpreted literally, the alternative reading brings interest to what otherwise would be the very kind of tired stereotypical story that Fern critiques.

One of the most significant differences between Fern's sentimental style and the more traditional sentimental style is that her protagonists do not have to die as a result of either their mistakes, or the mistakes of others. The typical heroine's only "revenge" is the brief guilt that her enemies feel when they see her coffin in a funeral march (e.g., *Charlotte Temple*). Fern's solution to the quandaries of many women characters is the same one she found for herself: financial success through work. Fern mixes fiction and nonfiction when she revisits her own actual success through her fictional characters. A repeated scene in part one of the collection is a moment when the antagonist, who at one time lorded over the vulnerable protagonist, stands slack-jawed as he watches the heroine surpass him in social or economic status, or in talent and intelligence. In all cases, the protagonists are no longer victims and the antagonists lose all of their power over them.[10]

Best of all, Fern's characters do not have to fade away from life collapsed in a snow bank, dying amid an audience of tearful mourners. Rather, in Fern's renditions, the only

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[10] She repeats this *success through perseverance* theme in *Ruth Hall*, where critics have noted that her heroine does not end in a triumphant marriage, but with a nice, large paycheck and one hundred shares of bank stock.

mourners are the antagonists, as they sit shamefully in the light of their gross misjudgment of the protagonist.

While her women characters are more empowered than women traditionally were, the sketches still include some vestiges of the True Womanhood tenets so prevalent in Fern's culture. For example, her characters' lives revolve around the men in their lives. In part one, a young girl is able to leave the attic, to which she has been banished, only when her father discovers his daughter's great talents; as in Willis's own life, a young woman's life is temporarily destroyed when her husband dies; a young wife is at the mercy of her husband's wishes as to whether she will have to endure her mother-in-law's unforgiving criticism. Additionally, the women characters do not stand up and speak out against persecution, they do not make autonomous decisions, and they do not disregard the wishes of the men in their life. In other words, they remain "True Women" who live largely in the domestic sphere. The difference is that they are able to stay within the boundaries of True Womanhood as well as live out alternative, far less tragic, narrative endings. The curtain no longer closes with the funeral march.

## 5.1 Fern's New Vision for Womanhood

Rather than revolting against True Womanhood, Fern nurtures an alternative view, Real Womanhood. Such is the case in "The Widow's Trials," a story that later appears in a modified version in *Ruth Hall*. In this version, as seen in the *Fern Leaves* Collection, Janie Grey is left destitute after the death of her husband. She turns to her wealthy Uncle John, who is also an editor of a newspaper, and begs for a job (not financial assistance). He refuses to help her, and

so Grey publishes her work elsewhere and becomes a great success. The uncle is a thinly-disguised combination of Fern's father-in-law and her brother, N.P. Willis, the editor of the *New York Mirror* newspaper who refused to help his sister. In "The Widow's Trial," the uncle tells her he has "plenty who will write for nothing," and that the "market is overstocked." Further, he says she does not have any talent. These comments directly reflect the ones Willis made to Fern in his now infamous letter. In *Ruth Hall*, those comments come from the brother character, Hyacinth. Eventually, the uncle praises her and is eager to claim her as a niece. She has the final word, though, saying that where his "heart should have been, there was a decided vacuum" (24). Fern empowers not only the character, but also herself by modeling the young woman's success so closely after her own.

Fern creates a much younger version of herself in "Our Hatty." In it a young girl, secretly a talented writer, is ostracized by her family and is made to spend her time alone in the attic. The plot seems ready-made for the typical ending: her parents discover their mistake, run to embrace their daughter, but, alas, they arrive too late because Hatty is already dead from neglect. In Fern's radically different version, however, Miss Tabetha (a clear reference to Fern herself because it is a name that she had used in 1851 as one of her pen names in the *Olive Branch*), intervenes. She finds Hatty very much alive and discovers that she is a talented writer. Miss Tabetha recognizes Hatty's talents because, as she tells Hatty, she is a blue-stocking herself. Hatty's moment of triumph does not come posthumously when her witless parents grieve over her pale body, but instead comes when she presents her father with a signed, anonymously published copy of poems, the very ones he was recently admiring and inquiring about the identity of the author. When her father discovers this talent is his own prodigal daughter, he

feels deeply ashamed. Hatty is so generous that she comforts him, rather than gloating in his tears. Fern's young writer can live in what the reader can presume to be continued success. Fern allows herself the fictional opportunity to play the hero and do for Hatty what her own family would not do, offer encouragement to an isolated Willis. Hatty's banishment to the attic recalls the "madwoman in the attic" stereotype of 19th century fiction, the most prominent being Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*. Rochester's wife, Bertha, is considered "mad" and is locked in the attic, only to be burned alive in a house fire.

In another eventual *Ruth Hall* story, "Self Conquest," a new bride has to endure her critical mother-in-law. She eventually is freed from the situation when she and her husband move away from the immediate vicinity of her mother-in-law. The real success in the story is revealed in the title. The new bride overcomes her desires to lash out at her mother-in-law and to blame her husband for the situation. As a result, she is rewarded for her unselfish actions. Likewise, in *Ruth Hall*, Ruth initially lives on her in-laws' property and while her husband, Harry, is at work, she endures her mother-in-law's criticisms about her housework and cooking. Harry is oblivious to the problem, but agrees to move away to their own home.

Making success, rather than a pitiful death, an acceptable and attractive alternative for her heroines is a strong shift away from traditional endings. Her women do not have to follow the fate of their predecessors in popular late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century novels such as *The Coquette*, *Charlotte Temple*, or *Hobomok*; nor do they have to find success in marriage, as previous heroines do, and as Fern's family expected her to do. They can remain autonomous and have a socially acceptable future. From a didactic view, Fern offers women alternatives from the lives they have been told to live.

## 5.2 Fern's Link to Feminism

While it seems ironic to discuss feminism while analyzing Fern's more traditional writings, it is these writings that challenge critics who want to label her a feminist, even if it is an anachronistic term. If critics define Fern's feminism as a program seeking to enrich women's lives, then Fern is a feminist. However, such a statement does not define what Fern considered enrichment. One critic sidesteps the feminist label by saying it was difficult to "state whether Fern considered herself a feminist; however, it is clear that her works served a feminist purpose" (Wright 108). Fern wanted women to find freedom from oppression within their lives, while maintaining solidarity with the Christianity and good citizenship that her culture associated with a woman's roles in society: the wife, mother and housekeeper. However, she also provided a counter perspective to the hegemonic view that homemaking was a life not only of destiny but of bliss as well. Fern seems particularly concerned with making women's lives healthier and more fulfilling. Her characters leave the confines of the attic, as in "Our Hatty," and find success beyond society's expectations for them.

As in part one, part two of the *Portfolio* demonstrates Fern's subversive views on Christian homemaking, which are manifest through characters who resist the enslavement of their bodies and minds to cooking and cleaning. In "Mrs. Croaker" of part two, Mrs. Croaker gives another wife advice on "managing" her husband and her housework. She says that "to-day I had a loaf of cake to make. Well, do you suppose, because my body is in the pastry-room, that my soul needs to be there, too? Not a bit of it! I'm thinking of all sorts of celestial things the while" (*Fern Leaves, first series* 384). While the words are plainly spoken and the event rather

trivial, the meaning is not unlike the inspiring soliloquy of Fredrick Douglass who, in his contemporary *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, recalls a turning point in his life when he discovered that while he may be a slave in fact, he would no longer be a slave in mind. Likewise, Mrs. Croaker may be chained to the kitchen counter, but subversively maintains a private inner life that is free from her earthly concerns and filled with "celestial things." When her husband brings her "plump down, in the midst of [her] aerial flights, by asking the 'price of the sugar [she is] using," she does not share her private thoughts with him, but instead uses reverse psychology to tempt him to leave the house. She tells him she hopes "he wouldn't think of going out to catch his death, such weather; – that if he wasn't capable of taking proper care of himself, I should do it for him; – that I was very lonesome, rainy days, and that I wanted him to stay at home and talk to me." Apparently, as soon as her husband learns that his wife wants him to stay with her, he "flared up directly,– just as I expected,– and in less than five minutes, he was streaking off down street, at the rate of ten knots an hour" (*Fern Leaves, first series* 384). She concludes by telling her friend that "no woman should be married till she is thoroughly posted up" in the area of human nature (384). While Mrs. Croaker is ostensibly controlled by her husband, she resists the traditional role of a submissive wife by reversing the power structure. Mrs. Croaker's understanding of "human nature" includes the idea that her husband will resist taking advice, or directions, from his wife. She also assumes that her husband will not detect her motives. Ultimately, however, the wife is still dependent upon the husband. In order for her plan to work, the husband has to take the action of leaving the home.

This unromantic view of marriage pervades other stories in part two as well. She sometimes uses satire to urge men to be better husbands, but in most sketches, her persona talks

about "managing" domestic life, not improving it. Her view is that women can improve themselves, but only if they can free themselves – even if only mentally – from the oppressive aspects of marriage and homemaking.

In contrast to "Mrs. Croaker," a "Practical Blue Stocking," from part one, portrays a marriage that must be managed, but in this story the woman is in a more ideal scenario because her husband allows her to be a "blue stocking," a pejorative term from the second half of the eighteenth-century that described women, often unmarried, who preferred a life of intellectual rigor, which could include writing, rather than one focusing on domesticity. If a woman were to embrace both the intellectual and the domestic, then one would imagine that one of those areas would suffer. In this sketch, however, the woman is "practical" and intellectual, which means her home is spotless and her husband and children are well cared for.

To emphasize the rarity of such a woman, a man is invited to the home of a friend whose wife is a professional writer. Because of her occupation, he expects the home to be in disarray; instead, he finds a perfectly kept home with little evidence of the wife's writing habits, such as ink stains or strewn paper. In fact, there was not a particle of dust to be seen…the windows were transparently clean; the hearth-rug was longitudinally and mathematically laid down; the pictures hung 'plumb' upon the wall; the curtains were fresh and gracefully looped; and, what was a greater marvel, there was a child's dress half finished in a dainty little work-basket…. (101). Fern's working wife and mother is devoted to her family first, and is not merely a good housekeeper, but a perfect housekeeper. Her professional work occupies only a small writing table, and, by extension, only a small part of her time.

Writing in a time when women writers were becoming commonplace, Fern creates an arguably hyperbolical vision of a woman who can maintain the civilizing standards expected of strong Christian women of the Republic and yet be successful in her professional writing life.[11] The woman does not achieve a "balance" between home and career, but keeps the home as her dominating concern with her writing as her secondary concern. The inkstand is a small feature of the home, suggesting that her writing is but a small portion of her life and even of low priority. Fern notes the spiritual nature of her good housekeeping skills when she says that the visitor is impressed with Mrs. Lee's orderly home but withholds praise because his "evil bachelor spirit whispered in his ear, –'Wait a bit, she's fixed up for company; cloven foot will peep out by and by!'" (100). The visitor looks for signs of the devil on Mrs. Lee, but because her home does not betray any untidiness, he has to admit his wrong view to Mr. Lee, saying, "James, I feel like an unmitigated scoundrel!" for having doubts about Mrs. Lee's ability to be both a writer and a homemaker. To complete the spiritual imagery, Mr. Lee replies that she is his "guardian angel" because her earnings kept them out of bankruptcy, which consequently repaired his "broken" spirit (100). To further praise his wife, Mr. Lee comments that during the time when his wife saved the family financially, "no parental or household duty was neglected; and her cheerful and steady affection raised my drooping spirits, and gave me fresh courage to commence the world anew" (100).

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[11] The Beechers dedicate *The American Women's Home* to "The Women of America, In Whose Hands Rest The Real Destinies of the Republic, as Moulded By the Early Training and Preserved Amid the Maturer Influences of Home. . . ." (sic)

The measure of this woman's success, though, is not monetary gain or public attention; rather, it is the white-glove test of her housekeeping skills. Like her home, Mrs. Lee is neat in appearance, without a trace of ink on her hands, and she cooks a meal that is "perfect" (103). Further, she picks up a common thread among women writers, namely the excuse for writing. James Lee tells his visitor that when he was in ill-health and in debt, his wife began writing and raised the money they needed. He notes that even though they are financially sound now, she continues to write so they can save for the future (104). Her writing endeavor is culturally acceptable because she writes for legitimate family needs, not for herself.

While Fern's characters physically fulfill their household duties, Fern resists the idea, made clear in Catharine Beecher's *Treatise*, that women should also maintain good cheer, despite the happenings in the home. In Chapter XIII of the *Treatise*, "On The Preservation of a Good Temper in a Housekeeper," Beecher writes the following:

> There is nothing, which has a more abiding influence on the happiness of a family, than the preservation of equable and cheerful temper and tones in a housekeeper. A woman, who is habitually gentle, sympathizing, forbearing, and cheerful, carries an atmosphere about her, which imparts a soothing and sustaining influence. . . . (148-9).

The woman's emotional influence described in this passage is an extension of the well-established belief that a woman should provide a positive spiritual influence to the other members of the home. By contrast, as the chapter later explains, her severe temper, her visible signs of unhappiness on her face, or any raising of her voice, can make the best of homes unhappy homes. Responsibility for domestic peace, if not bliss, rests squarely on the woman.

While Fern does not openly disagree with Beecher's ideas, she does present another viewpoint for readers to consider: the effect of the husband's temperament on the family. Fern often writes about the unhappiness a man can bring to the family. Although her tone is often humorous, her underlying frustration is real. Her anger seems to center on the notion of one-sided responsibility for the family's happiness. She addresses this double standard in a sketch in Fern's second series of *Fern Leaves from Fanny's Portfolio,* in the article, "The Time to Choose."

As she often does, Fern includes a quotation at the top of her sketch and then uses the sketch to build a response. The quotation in this sketch, credited to the "Young Man's Guide," reads

> The best time to choose a wife is early in the morning. If a young lady is at all inclined to sulks and slatternness, it is just before breakfast. As a general thing, a woman don't get on her temper, till after 10 A.M. (261).

This argument reflects an underlying agreement with Beecher because it also presumes that a wife *should* be happy and presentable, even in the morning hours. The "Young Man's Guide" does not say that men are also required to be cheerful. Beecher presumes that they will not be and encourages her reader to "be prepared to buffet ill-tempers from other family members, and to expect interruptions in her efforts to maintain an orderly, calm household." Fern finds injustice in this double standard. In "The Time to Choose," she does not defend women, but rather points out men's propensity for ill-tempers in the morning hours. She turns the tables and suggests that "Any time 'before ten o'clock,' is the time to choose a husband –perhaps!" (261).

Describing men in the morning hours, she writes:

> Men never look slovenly before breakfast; no, indeed. They never run round in their stocking feet, vestless, with dressing-gown inside out; soiled handkerchief hanging out of the pocket by one corner. Minus dickey –minus neck-tie; pantaloon straps flying; suspenders streaming from their waist[b]and; chin shaved on one side, and lathered on the other; hair like porcupine quills; face all in a snarl of wrinkles because the fire wont kindle, and because it snows, and because the office boy don't come for the keys, and because the newspaper hasn't arrived, and because they lost a bet the night before, and because there's an omelet instead of a broiled chicken, for breakfast, and because they are out of sorts and shaving soap, out of cigars and credit, and because they can't 'get their temper on' till they get some money and a mint julep (261).

Fern describes the private domestic life that was never publicly written about. She describes the person as seen before he is fully dressed and ready to join the public world. Fern's husband is demanding, easily angered, and ungrateful. Notably, the wife and children are not the ones who upset his morning. He is the only one described in the piece. Unlike Beecher, Fern places the ideal of keeping good cheer next to the reality of domestic life.

In "A Model Husband," which is included in series two of her *Portfolio*, Fern uses hyperbole and sarcasm to describe a wife who devotes herself to her husband despite his bad behaviors of drinking, smoking and keeping late hours. She says that if she were this particular man's wife, she would be a "model wife:"

> I'd hand you your cigar-case and slippers, put away your cane, hang up your coat and hat, trim your beard and whiskers, and wink at your sherry cobblers, whisky punches, and mint juleps. I'd help you get a "ten strike" at ninepins. I'd give you a "night key," and be perfectly oblivious what time in the small hours you tumbled into the front entry. I'd pet all your stupid relatives. . . . I'd let you 'smoke' in my face till I was as brown as a herring, and my eyes looked as if they were bound with pink tape. . . . (116).

As with "A Time to Choose," Fern juxtaposes the prevalent domestic theories alongside domestic realities. In this light, the wife's style of devotion seems absurd, and even suggests the rage that Camfield sees not very far below the surface of Fern's comedy. Beecher probably would not condone any husband's drinking, staying away from home throughout the night, or smoking, but her *Treatise* does not stipulate exceptions for a wife's good cheer.

In Fern's article, "How Is It?" from her second series *Portfolio*, published six months after the first collection, she sets the tone for the piece with the exchange, "Well, Susan, what do you think of married ladies being happy?" "Why I think there are more AIN'T than IS, than IS that AIN'T (118). The speaker tells Susan that she is an "unprincipled female" for having that opinion. The speaker then enumerates some of the joys of marriage by describing the messy, cluttered habits of men and how a wife spends her time cleaning up her husband's messes. Beecher views messiness of this sort as just one of the interruptions a wife must expect, and that its burdensome effect should be thought of as a challenge, rather than a nuisance, one that raises her homemaking to a level of difficulty that gives respectability to her homemaking skills, as

skills are required to keep up with a husband's contrary behavior. Fern, on the other hand, views the husband's slovenly behavior as unacceptable because it causes the wife's unhappiness.

She encourages her skeptical friend, Susan, to think about the benefits of adding an "MRS" to her name, a "little prefix not to be sneezed at." She writes:

> Think how pleasant to go to the closet and find a great boot-jack on your best bonnet; or 'to work your passage' to the looking-glass, every morning, through a sea of dickeys, vests, coats, continuations and neckties; think of your nicely-polished toilette table spotted all over with shaving suds; think of your 'Guide to Young Women,' used as a razor strap. . . .
>
> Think of coming up from the kitchen, in a gasping state of exhaustion, after making a batch of his favorite pies, and finding five or six great dropsical bags disembowled on your chamber floor, from the contents of which Mr. Snip had selected the 'pieces' of your best silk gown, for 'rags' to clean his gun with. Think of his taking a watch-guard you made him out of YOUR HAIR, for a dog-collar! Think of your promenading the floor, night after night, with your fretful, ailing baby hushed up to your warm cheek, lest it should disturb your husband's slumbers; and think of his coming home the next day, and telling you, when you were exhausted with your vigils, 'that he had just met his old love, Lilly Grey, looking as fresh as a daisy, and that it was unaccountable how much older you looked than she, although you were both the same age.
>
> — Think of all that, Susan (*Portfolio*, second series, 118-9).

In Fern's description, not only does the woman contend with matters of neatness and cleanliness, she also contends with a husband who seems to have no awareness of his surroundings, no sense of his wife's physical exhaustion or her emotional state, and no awareness of his child's health. Furthermore, he is thoughtless when he compliments his former love and does so by simultaneously insulting his wife. As a finishing touch, he finds his wife's aging, weary appearance a mystery, "unaccountable." While Fern is writing with her trademark hyperbole, she is also giving realistic descriptions of what an unequal distribution of domestic labor would be like. Beecher only describes "interruptions" that provide challenges, but Fern elaborates on those "interruptions" by describing "strewn neckties" and constant messes. Fern provides examples and Beecher speaks in generalities. In the *Treatise*, Beecher tells women to prepare themselves for the temptation to be irritable:

> a woman [should] calculate on having her best-arranged plans interfered with, very often; and to be in such a state of preparation, that the evil will not come unawares. So complicated are the pursuits, and so diverse the habits of the various members of a family, that it is almost impossible for every one to avoid interfering with the plans and taste of a housekeeper, in some one point or another. It is, therefore, most wise, for a woman to keep the loins of her mind ever girt, to meet such collisions with a cheerful and quiet spirit (151).

Fern's "How Is It?" describes those daily "interferences" and describes the "collisions" a woman will face. Instead of viewing them as the solemn duty of a wife, Fern sees them as an obstacle to achieving a happy marriage.

Fern's sketch explores a division between the husband and wife that exists at a deeper level than merely the distribution of labor. This man and wife are psychically divided, unaware of each other's concerns and thoughts. Not even a good-tempered wife can cheer the husband. Yet, Beecher tells her reader that there is, in fact, "secret social sympathy, which every mind, to a greater or less degree, experiences with the feelings of those around, as they are manifested by the countenance and voice" (*Treatise* 149). In "How Is It?," Fern's husband appears unaware of the wife's moods, good or bad.

While Fern describes many examples of marital inequality, which was progressive by itself, she is direct in the sketch, "Young Mothers and Sunshine." Any reader familiar with Fern's work could deduce that the title is satirical. She begins by quoting the following:

> FOLLY. For girls to expect to be happy without marriage. Every woman was made for a mother, consequently, babies are as necessary to their "peace of mind," as health. If you wish to look at melancholy and indigestion, look at an old maid. If you would take a peep at sunshine, look in the face of a young mother.

Fern responds with the following:

> 'Young mothers and sunshine'! They are worn to fiddle strings before they are twenty-five! When an old lover turns up, he thinks he sees his grandmother, instead of the dear little Mary who used to make him feel as if he should crawl out of the toes of his boots! Yes! my mind is *quite* made up about *matrimony;* it's a *one-sided* partnership.

With her reference to marriage as a "partnership," and her complaint that it is a "one-sided" partnership, she moves beyond the literary boundaries of sentimentalism and beyond the cultural

directives of Catharine Beecher. Neither camp includes "partnership" in its definitions of marriage. Fern is looking forward toward a cultural shift that would not begin to occur for another century.

In 1854, Fern agreed to write a novel with Mason Brothers publishers, who promised "extraordinary measures" to promote the book—with their promotional investment providing yet another indication of Fern's established fame. That same year, a mammoth ad campaign began for *Ruth Hall*. These successful publications—*Fern Leaves from Fanny's Portfolio*, *Fern Leaves from Fanny's Portfolio Second Series*, and now *Ruth Hall*—ultimately led to her best-known career move when Robert Bonner approached Fern about writing exclusively for his newspaper, the *New York Ledger*.

# 6 EPILOGUE: Fern Forgotten

Within a year after the 1854 publication of *Ruth Hall*, the disgruntled editor of the *True Flag*, William Moulton, anonymously published *The Life and Beauties of Fanny Fern*. Moulton was angry at Fern's negative portrayal of him as Mr. Tibbets in *Ruth Hall*. Mr. Tibbets is a patronizing, slow to pay, parsimonious editor, who is unmoved by Ruth's financial burdens. Another sore point with Moulton was the fact that Fern had signed an exclusive contract with Robert Bonner at the *New York Ledger*. Undoubtedly, Moulton knew that *True Flag's* circulation, which increased after Fern began writing for him on a weekly basis in 1851, would quickly decrease without Fern as one of his writers. Moulton's book purported to portray the "Real Fanny Fern." The editor clearly understood that her fame rested on her readers' approval of the persona of Fanny Fern. Quite deliberately, the text attacks her persona, suggesting that it is "real," and that the author and the persona are one and the same. Because Fern was so adept at creating her persona, general readers, seeing only the mask, would be oblivious of the real person writing behind that mask.

Moulton's book, of course, bolsters my argument about the high level of fame and success Fern achieved before she signed her contract with Bonner. In his retaliatory book, Moulton reprinted excerpts of Fern's articles in such a way that he skewed her ideas, taking them out of context, in order to present her in the most unflattering light possible. Since copyright laws were nonexistent, Moulton could republish her work without permission. *The Life and Beauties of Fanny Fern* was the most elaborate negative press that Fern ever would receive. There are no records of how many books Moulton actually sold, but book reviews give some indication that the book was popular, at least enough for a second edition in 1857, two years after

its debut. *Godey's Lady's Book* advertised *The Life and Beauties of Fanny Fern* in its April 1855 edition, in which the reviewer writes:

> A SPICEY BOOK. The "Life and Beauties of Fanny Fern." Recently announced by Messrs. Long & Brother, is likely to excite a good deal of interest. Orders for it, we are assured, are pouring in at the rate of one thousand copies a day.

Of course, this unsubstantiated claim is not enough evidence to support an argument that the book was in fact a top-selling book. What it does imply, however, is Fanny Fern, who needed no introduction in the review, was famous enough to "excite a good deal of interest."

In the May 1855 edition of *Godey's Lady's Book*, the following advertisement appeared:

> From H. LONG & BROTHERS, New York, through T.B. PETERSON, Philadelphia:
>
> THE LIFE AND BEAUTIES OF FANNY FERN. All who have read "The Life of Fanny Fern," by herself, will, of course, read this volume, which purports to give the other side of the question; at least, the book will not disappoint those who are admirers of this lady's writings, as it gives a large number of her early effusions, now first collected.

The "Life of Fanny Fern," written by herself, is a reference to *Ruth Hall*. By that time, word had circulated that the "novel" was autobiographical. That knowledge was apparently so widespread that the publishers do not even mention the title *Ruth Hall*, but rename it as "The Life of Fanny Fern." To entice readers, the publisher advertised that Moulton's book contained never before published articles. Ironically, by including that claim, which Fern said was false, he is complimenting her in order to disparage her. He knows that the reading public likes her so much

that they are more likely to buy his book if they have the chance to read something new by Fern. Hence he tried to bolster the sales of his book by appealing to her fans. Making Fern a scandal, however, did nothing to diminish her popularity. Fern understood the irony, and made a public comment that she resented the book using her work to promote itself. Thus she reminds readers that it is her work, after all, that made the book interesting.

Moulton goes straight to the heart of cultural values for women, and attempts to prove that Fern is not a "True Woman" in the sense that Barbara Welter defined the term. The "True Woman," possessed piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity (21). Hinting that she lacks piety, he suggests that her grief for her first husband was brief and cured by the attention of another man, her second husband. Raising a question about her purity, he also claims that she is flirtatious. In regard to submissiveness, he claims that she was impertinent with her father and father-in-law by being unreasonable after her first husband died and after her second husband left her. He suggests that she is unable to manage a home when he states that she was never in poverty, but only living a less lavish lifestyle. He claims that she is dishonest and that her unflattering portraits of her father and brother are unwarranted, and illustrate her ingratitude. He blames her divorce from Samuel Farrington on her unwillingness to follow Farrington's financial terms. He also suggests that her divorce demonstrates her lack of respect for the home and for family. By systematically raising questions about her character, Moulton hoped to turn her faithful readers against her.

Fern makes Ruth, in *Ruth Hall*, a "True Woman" who, in addition to the usual life, also enters the economic world. Her entrance into the work world is out of necessity, of course, and it is rather understood that could she have her former life back, meaning that her husband would

still be alive and would still be the economic supporter of the family, she would take it instantly. Fern takes pains to show that Ruth tried more conventional means of supporting herself, such as teaching or sewing, but that it was impossible to support herself and her children on such low wages. All of these points helped make her acceptable to a reading public. That being the case, Moulton hopes to undo that public approval by systematically attacking her character.

Secondly, he addresses her love for and her feelings of grief for her first husband. Ruth's loss would have surely elicited sympathy from the readers. She describes a kind of noble and humble period of grieving. In one scene, she is actually forced to sell some of his clothing, even though she wanted to keep them as reminders of him. These actions and feelings would add to her "True Womanhood" ideal. In an attempt to make the reading public feel unsympathetic toward Fern, *Life and Beauties* notes that she did not feel grief when her husband died. Moulton says she had difficulty after her husband died only because it is "hard to sink like a star behind the hills of adversity—to pass suddenly from a gay and splendid career into the obscurity of a more common-place and quiet life" (27). Further, Moulton writes that "the very power of love that bound her to her first husband" caused her to "open the welcoming doors to the advances of a new suitor" (28). Since Fern did not include her second marriage in *Ruth Hall*, she did leave herself open to criticism. By implying that she was in fact fickle and unfaithful in her second marriage, Moulton makes her portrayal of fidelity and grief in *Ruth Hall* appear to be a sham, suggesting that Fern's real life was more like a mockery of marriage than a testimony of love and faithfulness.

Moulton's chapter "Fanny Fern at Home" pits Fern directly against her personal character. He notes "Fanny Fern's writings are expressive of her character" (31). He then

describes her Boston home and says her company is overbearing, noting that "some women don't wear well" because their "conversations are like 'Fern Leaves' – brilliant enough at first, but presently wearisome, and insipid" (32). He attacks her right in the central nervous system of the "True Woman," her home. Not only is she spoiled and insincere; she is also a poor hostess, and at times unlikable.

His original input soon ends and he begins handpicking columns, providing sarcastic commentary before and after. Often, his commentary is so damning that it reaches absurdity. He discredits her portrayal of her father in *Ruth Hall*, linking her with Goneril and Regan of *King Lear* (63). This portrayal of a spiteful woman would directly contrast acceptable behavior. Finally, in what becomes the absurd in name-calling and insult-slinging, he titles a chapter "All About Satan," a title he took from one of Fern's writings, and the editor writes "Now who in the world is so fit to deliver a discourse on the subject, as so intimate an acquaintance?" (103).

Personal criticism of Fern extends to the present day. Shockingly, David Reynolds provides the following largely unsubstantiated evaluation of Fern's character:

> Parton was reportedly shifty and manipulative by nature. A friend recalled that in conversation she was 'witty and pathetic by turns, now running over with fun, and now with tears.' She never kept a close friend for more than two years, she was married three times, she was disowned by her father because of her rebellious nature, and she had a strained relationship with her brother (404).

In my review of Fern scholarship, I have found Reynolds' description of Fern to be by far the harshest—and unapologetically sexist. Further, the inclusion of this description is befuddling

because it does nothing to support his central argument about Fern's contribution to women's literature. Even worse, his one credited source is Moulton's text.

Nonetheless, the two advertisements in *Godey's Lady's Book* imply that Fern herself was a celebrity in the year 1855, that *Ruth Hall* was a top-selling book, and that *Life and Beauties* needed to piggyback on Fern's popularity and the popularity of *Ruth Hall* in order to solicit sales. For the purposes of arguing that Fern had achieved celebrity status prior to working for Bonner, these advertisements provide supporting evidence.

The August 1857 edition of *Godey's Lady's Book* includes an advertisement for a new edition of *Life and Beauties*. Although its date is beyond the scope of my study of Fern, the ad supplies additional evidence of Fern's early fame and also suggests that Moulton's book sold well:

> THE LIFE AND BEAUTIES OF FANNY FERN. We understand this to be a new edition of a work originally intended to exhibit the peculiarities of the celebrated authoress Fanny Fern, as seen at home, in the street, and in the church, and also to furnish a key to the rise, rapid progress and wonderful success of her literary labors.

This advertisement provides some evidence that the popular image of Fern indeed was that of someone who had risen quickly through the ranks of literary popularity. Also, this advertisement tries to appeal to the public's voyeuristic interest in celebrities' lives. While the book was intended to be disparaging, and there is a veiled reference to that in the word "peculiarities," the ad, like earlier promotional items, appeals to her fans who would be interested in knowing the "real" Fern. A modern day equivalent would be selling exclusive "inside" looks at the private

lives of Hollywood movie stars. The most salient point for my study is, again, that the writer of the advertisements assumes that Fern is famous enough that people would want to know more about her personal life.

Moulton's work did not diminish Fern's success. On May 19, 1855, Robert Bonner, editor of the *New York Ledger*, announced in his paper that he had secured a contract from Fanny Fern, "the most popular authoress in this or in any other country" (qtd. in Warren 145). At the time, Bonner had just recently purchased the *New York Ledger* and was interested in making it one of the largest circulating papers in New York. In order to capture readership, he hired well-known writers. Fern was the second person he hired. Clearly he expected her to cultivate readership.

Fern remained with Bonner's *New York Ledger* for the next twenty years, where her weekly contributions were no longer experimental, but rather maintenance of her established persona. Her enormous fees were the result of unwavering negotiations with Bonner. Initially, in 1855, Bonner offered to pay Fern twenty-five dollars for a column, and she consistently refused to become an exclusive writer for the *New York Ledger* until he raised his offer to one hundred dollars per column. Warren does not give Fern credit for negotiating the higher salary, but casts the exchange as one in which Fern honestly declined and, much to her surprise, was offered an exorbitant salary that she could hardly refuse. Since she began her career, only four years prior to the *New York Ledger*, earning fifty cents a column, it is clear that Fern was interested in earning more money for her work. If her financial gains were not through deliberate tactics, then one would have to argue that she was ignorant of her own commercial value. To the contrary, Fern knew her worth and had begun negotiating for higher pay from employers before she

started working for Bonner. Moreover, Bonner was a shrewd business man, less interested in charity than in business success.

While writing for the *New York Ledger*, often two or three articles a week, Fern also published several collections of her work, including three additional collections: *Fresh Leaves* in 1857, *Folly as It Flies* in 1868, and *Ginger-Snaps* in 1870. Also she published a collection of columns she had written specifically for children, *The Play-Day Book* in 1857, and *A New Story Book for Children* in 1864. In 1856 she published a second novel, *Rose Clark*.

Readers liked her so much that they remained faithful to her over the years of her career; her name alone continued to spark interest, although, even within the short span of two years, more currently popular writers upstaged her. She remained a star writer her entire life, but in a growing, competitive marketplace, the sensational aspect of her celebrity persona waned after two years. While still a weekly contributor, Fern was no longer a featured columnist for the *New York Ledger* after two years.

The change in the location of her contributed writings and the loss of her boxed column title is not mentioned in any Fern biographies or career descriptions. From my research the omission appears to have begun with Warren. Warren makes the statement that she was a columnist for the *New York Ledger* for twenty-two years, but she never mentions that Fern lost the special features of her "column" after two years and became a weekly contributor of two to three articles per week. I believe that other scholars took that statement for granted, and the misleading information has been reprinted ever since. Given the fact that Bonner consistently featured the most popular celebrities of the literary world, it is a safe speculation that her popularity was somewhat diminished by newer writers. Regardless of her status, she remained a

prolific writer for the remainder of her life. She usually wrote two articles a week, every week, with only a few weeks' vacation during the summer. Additionally, she wrote anonymous pieces that were tucked into columns here and there in different editions. Her unmistakable tone, however, usually betrays the author, anonymous or not. Regular readers of Fern's work most likely would have identified them as hers.

The main body of her work is written in the venue in which she worked best, weekly writings for the Boston newspapers and then for the *New York Ledger*, and she did so right up to her death from cancer on Oct. 10, 1872. All of the major newspapers reported her death, and the *New York Ledger* printed an obituary outlined with a heavy black border. Not only would Bonner honor her in the permanent annals of the *Ledger*, but he also bought a large tombstone for her grave bearing the name "Fanny Fern," with the dates of her birth and death. By the time of her death, the name Fanny Fern had become the name family, friends, and colleagues would use. Sara Payson Willis Parton had become Fanny Fern.

Despite her great popularity and enormous success during her lifetime, after Fern's death, Fern's name would soon all but disappear from the printed page.

In the years immediately after her death, her husband, James Parton, wrote a memorial volume about his wife, which garnered some critical attention.[12] He wrote a Preface stating that he included "a liberal selection of the best of her pieces." He noted that some of them were printed over twenty years prior and would be new to "young readers." His observation hints at a desire to rekindle Fern's popularity with a new generation of readers, but that would not be the

[12] Parton's *Memorial* is out of print. For this project, I used an edition housed at The American Antiquarian Society.

case. He also appeals to the seasoned Fern reader by noting he has included a "considerable number of pieces hitherto uncollected; for as I have elsewhere recorded, she continued to write until within a month of her death."

Parton included anecdotes from her career that emphasize her popularity and literary importance. He recalls that he and Fern were robbed six times, and that Fern publicly appealed to the thieves in her column questioning why they continued to rob a home that did not have valuables to steal. Parton suggested that they instead rob her editor, Bonner, since, she guessed, he would have more for them to steal (67). Within that week, Parton reports, Bonner's home was indeed robbed (68). Parton lets future generations know that even criminals read her column, and, it seems, took her advice.

Parton also revisits Fern's historically high salary, noting that it was so high many people thought it was a fictional anecdote. He assures them that is was true, that Fern really was that marketable, that popular.

However, despite the memorials and despite her twenty-six-year relationship with readers, Fern was quickly forgotten. The virtual absence of critical attention lasted for almost a century.[13] Then, with Warren's publication of *Ruth Hall and Other Writings* in 1986, Fern began to attract a modest number of literary scholars.

That attention includes approximately one hundred articles and books combined. The vast majority of these publications do not focus on Fern alone. Instead they include Fern in a study of the period, including women writers, domestic writing, and journalism in the 1850s. Only a few

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[13] Robert Paul Eckert wrote the now obscure *Friendly, Fragrant Fanny Ferns* in 1934. It was part of a biographical series.

dissertations have focused solely on Fern, and, more pertinently, none has examined Fern's strategies for becoming a celebrity writer. From a more popular perspective, fewer than ten Web sites include information about Fern. These sites usually list brief biographical information, a brief list of her published works and four or five secondary works, but fail to describe what exactly was ingenious about her work. Given the hundreds, if not thousands, of Web sites devoted to authors, this number is conspicuously small.

## 6.1 Future Fern Projects

Fern scholarship is likely to remain minimal until a carefully-edited collection of her work is published, which should include a selection of her early articles in the *Olive Branch* and the *True Flag*. These articles are the scarcest of all her work. There are far fewer hard copies of these newspapers than the *New York Ledger*. Because these articles trace the birth and maturation of America's first celebrity author, whose creative, self-promoting, mold-breaking work is beyond compare, I think the importance of a collected edition is evident.

I believe that a cultural edition, one that includes essays about the important role of women writers in the nineteenth-century marketplace, and describing the domestic themes women writers often visited, would provide the reader a sense of how Fern differed from other writers. She entered a highly competitive marketplace with no prior publishing experience, critics barking over her shoulder, and a salary of less than five dollars per column. Within three years, she created a highly developed persona, an original writing style, and an ability to promote

herself that would dramatically alter her professional life. As I have argued, Fern indeed chose to be a different kind of writer with a different vision for women, and thus propelled herself to celebrity status.

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