‘The Goddess of Liberty was Impure’.
Classical Tradition as a Reference Culture in Margaret Fuller’s *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*¹

Karen Dovell

HCM 3 (3): 53–81
DOI: 10.18352/hcm.490

Abstract
According to Foucault, classical authors ‘occupy a “transdiscursive” position’; in this sense, classical tradition emerges as a reference culture at different historical moments, while deriving from a shared historical a-priori, that of ancient Greece and Rome. The earliest inscriptions of ‘the classic’ defined the ‘genteel language’ of a social class (the classicii) as the ideal language for a first-class writer. This connection between privileged language and class reflects an early link between aesthetics and politics, the more so as ideas about ‘the classical’ re-emerge over time. However, as Foucault makes clear, discourse can also function as a means of resistance. In *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845), Margaret Fuller draws on her classical knowledge to assert the need for women’s representation in the antebellum era.

**Keywords:** classical tradition, Fuller, gender, Hellenism, Transcendentalist

Modernity, Antiquity, and Fuller’s Goddess of Liberty

According to Michel Foucault, classical authors such as Homer and Aristotle ‘occupy a “transdiscursive” position’; in this sense, Western classical tradition emerges as a reference culture at different historical moments, while deriving from a shared historical a-priori, that of
ancient Greece and Rome. The earliest known inscriptions of ‘the classic’ defined the language of those in the highest tax bracket (the classici) as the ideal language for a first-class writer (scriptor classicus). This connection between privileged language and class reflects an early link between aesthetics and politics, art and ideology, the more so as ideas about ‘the classical’ re-emerge and recirculate over time. Classical tradition was a central, if shifting, influence in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American culture. By mid-eighteenth century, the ‘New World’ had become associated with the concepts of translatio imperii (the westward progression of empire) and translatio studii (the classical knowledge that accompanies this progression). Together with Protestantism in the early national period, the translatio provided a founding myth of origins, as well as a cultural identity distinguished from the ‘Old World’. In the American revolutionary era, classical tradition provided ‘timeless models for guidance in republicanism and private and civic virtue’. Insofar as it conveyed a set of aesthetic and political ideals, classical tradition continued to have a significant impact throughout the early national, antebellum and Civil War periods. As Foucault makes clear, however, discourse can also be ‘a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy’. In Woman in the Nineteenth Century (hereafter WNC) (1845), a central text for early feminism in America, Margaret Fuller, journalist, essayist, and key member of the Transcendentalist circle, draws on her extensive knowledge of classical literature to assert her theories of gender dualism, the positive value of the feminine, and the need for women’s self-culture and representation in the early national era. Fuller’s concepts of gender transitivity anticipate the work of critics such as Judith Butler and Thomas Laqueur, who demonstrate the construction and contingency of gender. Her work resonates with that of contemporary philosophers such as Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous in rereading classical texts from a feminist standpoint. In WNC, Fuller challenges directly the binary dualism of male and female, even as she emphasizes the positive qualities attributed to specific gods and goddesses, and identifies those attributes as essentially masculine or feminine.

According to Gilbert Highet, classical tradition has constituted ‘an empire in the souls of western men’. His literary history, The Classical Tradition: Greek and Roman Influences on Western Literature, relates the role of Greece and Rome in the Western cultural imagination,
wherein the literature, aesthetics and philosophy of classical antiquity ‘helped to produce the intellectual unity of Europe and the two Americas’. Highet’s text also reveals the discontinuities inherent in classical tradition, as he delineates the changes in this discourse over time. While such accounts have attempted to conflate various classicisms into a relatively seamless tradition, more recent accounts historicize both the tradition and its originary texts, and consider gender, race, class and other categories of difference. Fuller’s work prefigures this postmodern approach in focusing on gender difference as a category of analysis in classical texts. At the same time, she draws on the cultural authority of classical tradition to support her claim that men and women possess the same ‘moral nature’ and ‘duty’ with respect to citizenship and virtue. Liberty, commonly depicted as a goddess in the nineteenth century, is ‘impure’ because men have failed to recognize women’s representation as integral to revolutionary and early national ideals.

Fuller’s career demonstrates both the range of her intellectual development and an ever-increasing social activism. Born in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1810, she worked as a schoolteacher after the death of her father in 1835. Fuller began to publish essays, articles, and book reviews in 1834. She joined the Transcendental Club in Boston in December 1838, and was appointed editor of the Transcendentalist journal, The Dial, from 1840 to 1842. Fuller travelled to Chicago and the Great Lakes, writing Summer on the Lakes in 1843, about her experiences on this trip, through which she learned of the lives of women and native Americans on the frontier. She then moved to New York and worked as a columnist at the New York Tribune. The editor, Horace Greeley, published her next book, Woman in the Nineteenth Century, based on an earlier Fuller essay, ‘The Great Lawsuit: Man versus Men, Woman versus Women’, a title ‘meant to suggest the tension between the ideal and the actual’. In addition to arguing for women’s rights as a necessary component of national virtue, she provides a race- and class-conscious reformist critique in discussing the injustices of slavery and prostitution.

Woman in the Nineteenth Century interweaves numerous classical references with Christian, Transcendental and Romantic elements, calling attention to female exemplars throughout Western literature and history. Fuller was concerned that the numerous and eclectic scholarly references would be difficult for readers to understand easily. Early
suffragists, such as Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lydia Maria Child, praised WNC, although they noted it was a demanding text. Fuller’s contemporary, Orestes Brownson, wrote in a negative review that the book ‘proves that the lady has great talkative powers, and that in this respect at least, she is a genuine woman’. But Greeley wrote that despite its difficulties, it was

the most commanding assertion yet made of the right of Woman to be regarded and treated as an independent, intelligent, rational being, entitled to an equal voice in framing and modifying the laws she is required to obey, and in controlling and disposing of the property she has inherited or aided to acquire … hers is the ablest, bravest, broadest assertion yet made of what are termed Women’s Rights.

In pursuit of her goals for women, Fuller wrote to Sophia Ripley, another member of the Transcendentalist circle, in August 1839, to propose a series of meetings, to be held in Boston between 1839 and 1844. Fuller hoped to draw an audience of reform-minded, ‘well-educated and thinking women’; her main purpose was to discover, through the proposed ‘Conversations’, ‘what pursuits are best suited to us, in our time and state of society, and how we may best make use of our means in building up the life of thought upon the life of action’.

Fuller’s call to action reflects her own commitment to social action. She traveled to Europe in 1846 as a foreign correspondent for the New York Tribune; after meeting Guiseppe Mazzini in England and Giovanni Ossoli in Italy, she became involved with their cause in fighting for a Roman Republic. As Larry J. Reynolds discusses, Fuller ‘align[ed] herself wholeheartedly with European democratic liberalism’. In addition to her work as a war correspondent, Fuller helped arrange emergency treatment for wounded soldiers. After the revolution failed, Fuller began to write a history of the struggle, but was forced to leave Italy in 1850. She was accompanied by Ossoli, with whom she had become romantically involved, and their infant son. Tragically, all three died on the return trip to America, in a shipwreck near Fire Island, New York. Fuller’s manuscript was never found, but Reynolds contends that ‘her dispatches remain one of the most stirring accounts of the people and events involved in the Italian revolutions of 1848–49’.

Her social activism demonstrates her concerns with the material aspects of
women’s lives and her willingness to put her own life on the line for an idealist, revolutionary cause.

In WNC, Fuller references elements of classical tradition to convey her commitment to civic virtue and social reform. The Goddess of Liberty, associated with both the American and French Revolutions, remained an iconic classical figure in American culture throughout the nineteenth century. Often depicted as Minerva, goddess of wisdom, or Hebe, goddess of youth, the figure was used to represent a variety of political sentiments, such as anti-secessionism in 1834 (Figure 1) or

![Figure 1](image.png)

*Figure 1. Jared Bell, Temple of Liberty (1834). This woodcut shows the Goddess of Liberty (centre) holding the Bill of Rights in her left hand, and a pole with liberty cap, symbol of freedom, in her right hand; she is flanked by Justice on one side and Minerva on the other; a native American and a farmer stand with Liberty at the altar, on which is written, ‘Preserved by Concord’, presumably a reference to the Battle of Lexington and Concord, April 1775, start of the American Revolutionary War. The liberty cap, also known as the Phrygian cap, was ‘the symbol of freedom and liberty commonly used in the nineteenth century and is seen in many places in the U.S. Capitol … the [cap] was seen as a mark of free men in classical Greece … centuries later, the freedom cap appeared in images during the American revolution and was used in American art and coins in the early nineteenth century’. The banner at the top reads ‘The Union Must and Shall be Preserved’, an anti-secessionist message (http://www.aoc.gov/blog/liberty-cap-art-us-capitol, Library of Congress).*
opposition to ‘foreign influence’ in 1848 (Figure 2). Fuller’s call for liberty is suggestive of the transnational, liberal democracy embodied on the cover of the popular 1858 song ‘Ode to Liberty. Cordially dedicated

Figure 2. Charles Parsons, United Americans of the State of New York (1848). Certificate of membership for the American Brotherhood or Order of United Americans, a nativist secret society. The Goddess of Liberty stands on a pedestal, holding a pole with liberty cap; she is surrounded by men wearing the society’s sash. Under a picture of George Washington, the motto at the bottom of her pedestal reads ‘Beware Foreign Influence’ (http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2003689252/ Library of Congress).
to all the human race’ (Figure 3). She identifies America as the potential site for the transformation of gender and race relations she envisions in her ideal of modernity; in calling for equal rights for everyone in the nation, she claims that ‘this country was born to elucidate a great moral law’.
Fuller’s proposal for such an ideal of equality and national virtue suggests S.A. Eisenstadt’s concept of an alternative modernity. As Eisenstadt asserts, ‘[t]he concept assumes that in any given situation there is a certain semi-dominant modernity, and which leads to the creation or emergence of an alternative modernity or modernities’. She insists on women’s role in what Jürgen Heideking delineates as a distinctly American ‘pattern of modernity, rooted in the colonial past and influenced by European Enlightenment thought [which] emerged during the American Revolution and the early national period’. Fuller claims that women are integral to the actualization of this American modernity; at the same time, her work is also transnational and cosmopolitan, in a moral or ethical sense. As Charles Capper notes, she was ‘welcomed [in Europe] like an American cosmopolitan … [and] in Italy, she saw in the Risorgimento’s struggle for Italian unity and independence the greatest possibilities for a synthesis of her liberal nationality, cultural cosmopolitanism, and aspirations for “experience” ’. Fuller’s social action reflects Gerard Delanty’s contention that ‘the origins of cosmopolitanism lie in an essentially moral view of the individual as having allegiances to the wider world’. Her cosmopolitanism is critical as well as moral; she critiques the denial of modern individual rights and agency to disenfranchised groups such as American women and slaves, and transnationally to Roman Revolutionary fighters.

Heideking shows that ‘the majority of Americans who participated in the founding discourse emphasized discontinuity from European origins and past’. Yet in the nineteenth century, Americans and Europeans continued to draw on the literature and history of ancient Greece and Rome as a source of authority, for models as well as antimodels in politics and culture. Although Fuller reportedly stated that she ‘had no desire to go back’ to an idealized classical past, she believed that ‘the Greeks ought to be respected for developing every human faculty into deity’. As Delanty demonstrates,

[any consideration of the legacy of antiquity has to account for the fact that the very notion of a classical age was a product of a later era and the relation to antiquity has not been constant … it would appear that the legacy of antiquity has been marked by ruptures as well as continuities to the extent that the very notion of a ‘Greco-Roman’ civilization is questionable.27]
This observation underscores the shifting and contingent operations of classical ‘tradition’ as a discursive formation. Still, as Caroline Winterer discusses in her study of classicism in nineteenth-century American intellectual life, the cultural emphasis on Rome in the early national period reflected an ‘imagined affinity between antiquity and modernity’, while in the antebellum period, there existed ‘a conception of ancient Greece as a corrective to the evils of the Jacksonian era, a remedy for political and civic corruption, materialism, anti-intellectualism, factionalism, and populist mediocrity’. Fuller drew on her classical knowledge to emphasize the achievements of women already accomplished, as well as to highlight a positive view of women, gleaned largely from her studies of classical mythology and German idealist thought.

Hellenism, Gender, and Fuller’s Civic Virtue

Fuller read mythology as a discourse based on Greek religion, according to which the ‘gods and goddesses were forms typifying what was best in human nature’. Thus, she saw the positive, essentialized qualities attributed to mythological figures as attainable: ‘like Emerson, Thoreau, Parker and other thinkers of the time, she was intensely interested in the idea that humanity has the seeds of divinity within itself, that what is best in human beings is divine – in short, that men and women could become “as gods and goddesses”’. Fuller’s interest in mythology reflects the emergence of Hellenism in the United States during the early nineteenth century. While Revolutionary thought and politics referred mainly to Roman antiquity and seventeenth-century classical republican discourse, nineteenth-century classical tradition shifted towards an emphasis on Greek philosophy, mythology and ideals of democracy. The nascent American literary tradition and eventual emergence of Romantic and Transcendentalist discourses similarly entailed a rejection of neoclassical tenets, to assert an independent literary identity. Emerson, in his Phi Beta Kappa address at Harvard in 1837, ‘The American Scholar’, criticized the insularity of the traditional classical scholar and called for ‘self-trust’ rather than over-reliance on the ‘courtly muses of Europe’. In contrast to eighteenth-century neoclassicism, which had been informed by Roman revisions and transcriptions of Greek texts,
nineteenth-century Hellenism privileged the original works and artifacts. In Europe, the formalization of the discipline of classics, *Altertumswissenschaft* (Science of Antiquity), at the University of Göttingen in the late eighteenth century contributed to the elevation of Greek culture.32

Hellenism arose at the end of the eighteenth century:

in the context of nationalist disputes between France and the German states, and imperialist aggression by France and Britain against the Turkish empire ... there was still room for disputes over who had the strongest claim on classical Greece, but it was generally agreed among Northwest Europeans ... that they collectively held a monopoly on the Greek cultural heritage, and that this was crucial to the racial superiority which gave them a mandate to rule the world.33

*Altertumswissenschaft* designated an essential, autochthonous Greek purity and associated that purity with Northern-European influence. As Artemis Leontis asserts, the name ‘Hellas’ stands for Greece as a ‘geopolitical entity’; it also ‘represents the political, cultural and philosophical value of the Hellenic heritage for Western Europe’.34 As Leontis demonstrates, at that time, ‘the idea that Hellas is the harmonious origin of civilization became popular in the West; it also became a kind of *topos* of the Western imagination ... [to this day] it seeks to apprehend artifacts of the past while also producing out of these a “symbolic universe” that imposes meaning on the present’.35

By 1820, Hellenism was a distinct element in American culture, apparent in the ubiquity of Greek Revival architecture, and in popular support for the Greek War of Independence. Greek Revival architecture ‘overtook Roman Revival, becoming the first style of architecture to appear across the nation. Greek Revival architecture … cloaked the newness, changeability and materialism of American culture with an aura of sanctity, linked it with the land of liberty and aesthetic creativity, and evoked an intimation of something eternal’.36 In Europe and America, the Greek War of Independence against Turkey in 1821 gave rise to a strong movement of philhellenism, appreciation for modern Greece in its struggle to become a democracy.37

Although some Americans were opposed to any classical learning, others began to travel to Greece, and some went to Germany to study
Altertumswissenschaft. However, attempts to incorporate German methods into American schools were largely unsuccessful. Though contested, the curriculum remained largely unchanged, and New England colleges lacked the resources to establish Altertumswissenschaft as an academic discipline.\textsuperscript{38}

The value of classical studies was debated in the early national period, and the relevance of the traditional Latin-based curriculum was called into question. Classical education, which had been characterized by rote learning and an emphasis on Roman and Latin texts, was viewed as impractical by those who argued for a more utilitarian education, with the growth of public education in the post-Revolutionary era. Alexis de Tocqueville, in Democracy in America (1831), expressed the view that classical literature was elitist.\textsuperscript{39} Moreover, while in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries accords were reached between New England Puritans, who viewed the classics as pagan, and advocates of classical studies, who addressed these concerns by asserting that such studies inculcated useful knowledge and virtue, the Second Great Awakening in the early national period brought charges of paganism from evangelical Protestants.\textsuperscript{40} Despite calls for educational reform, however, the classical curriculum remained unchanged in most colleges and grammar schools in New England.\textsuperscript{41} Classical tradition remained significant as a reference culture throughout the antebellum and civil war eras.

From her first published essay, ‘In Defense of Brutus’ (Boston Daily Advertiser and Patriot, 1834), through her last letters from Rome, Fuller’s writing and career demonstrate her lifelong engagement with classical texts. In November 1839, she began to hold her ‘Conversations’ in Boston; the first topic covered was Greek mythology. She published poems with classical themes, as well as literary criticism in which she commented on classical aesthetics and Romantic Hellenist texts. As Fuller gleaned from her reading of classical myth, the literature of ancient Greece and Rome reflects the binary separation of masculine and feminine as an organizing principle for culture. In antiquity, according to classical scholar Luc Brisson, ‘the sexual difference constitutes an essential criterion when it comes to mapping the animal world and organizing the group relations that ensure the survival of the human race in particular and the species in general’.\textsuperscript{42} Although the content of these gender categories changes over time, classical tradition nonetheless transmits a ‘binary dimorphism’ of gender that maintains the
feminine as a negative category. This difference was also inscribed by means of the division in classical myth between ‘woman’ and ‘the feminine’, reflected in the gap between mortal women and the goddesses: as classicist Froma Zeitlin observes, ‘between the mortal and the immortal realm, femininity can be split between a primary role in the domain of the gods and a secondary, devalued one in the world of human affairs’. Since femininity was defined by passive behaviour, women in Greek antiquity were excluded from the enactment of civic virtue, the ability to fight in wars in defence of the city-state (*polis*), which exemplified citizenship. Masculinity was defined by active behaviour, particularly in warfare.\(^{43}\) The classical concept of virtue, defined as both ‘public spirit for the public good’ (including death in war, if necessary), as well as private, moral virtue, became an important element in classical republicanism, which later informed American revolutionary thought. Early Americans believed that the promotion of virtue would guard against corruption and ensure the historical existence of the republic. As Linda Dowling points out, the feminine (*effeminatus*) is negative or null within this tradition, in contrast to masculinized civic virtue as an ideal of citizenship.\(^ {44}\) Moreover, Joy Rouse contends,

> it is paradoxical that [from 1836 to 1846] Fuller’s work and commitment to civic virtue were developing alongside the growing emphasis in mainstream society on individualism and economic competition ... the paradox is that she claimed the individualist notion of self-culture as a right for marginalized citizens, which ultimately led her to a call for social change.\(^ {45}\)

Fuller’s classical references encourage social action as civic virtue and self-culture for women.

In the early nineteenth century, proponents of the cultural ideal of ‘Republican Motherhood’ upheld classical education for women, to help them maintain civic virtue in the domestic sphere. As Linda Kerber asserts, ‘the Republican Mother integrated political values into her domestic life. Dedicated as she was to the nurture of public-spirited male citizens, she guaranteed the steady infusion of virtue into the Republic’. Fuller was given a rigorous classical education by her father, Timothy Fuller, a Harvard graduate, Unitarian clergyman and four-term member of Congress, who ‘chose to indoctrinate his daughter in the republican virtues of Rome as well as America’.\(^ {46}\) In addition to knowledge
of the classics, inculcated through strict repetition and recitation, Fuller also ‘came out of this training with a wide knowledge of history, of the works of Thomas Jefferson, of English literature, of mathematics and of Biblical scholarship, far beyond that of the young men of her circle who were moving toward Harvard, with but a modicum of the erudition she so painfully mastered’. As a result of this education, ancient Greece and Rome took on specific and opposed meanings for Fuller, as she discusses in ‘Autobiographical Romance’. Fuller also learned the gendered terms associated with Roman classical tradition and masculinized virtue:

ROME! it stands by itself, a clear Word. The power of will, the power of fixed purpose is what it utters. Every Roman was an emperor ... man present in nature, commanding nature too sternly to be inspired by it, standing like the rock ... every thought put on, before it dared issue to the day inaction, its toga virilis.

As Steele contends, ‘denied the means to achieve political or social power, she came to see that such “Roman” imperialism ignored the needs of women ... in the place of reverie, her father had taught her a “heroic” but self-denying discipline’. Of the Roman authors Fuller studied, Ovid was a favourite, because he wrote about mythology; she wrote that Ovid, in the Metamorphoses, ‘gave me not Rome, nor himself, but a view into the enchanted gardens of the Greek mythology ... every thought of which man is capable, is intimated there’. Through Greek literature, especially mythology, she found possibilities for self-expression. Greece represented free imagination and aesthetic harmony, in contrast to the severity of Rome: ‘the law of life in that land was beauty, as in Rome it was a stern composure’.

In another essay, ‘A Transcendental Defense of Classical Metres’, Fuller supports classical education for inspiration, rather than strict imitation:

A growing prejudice prevails in the more living and larger portion of our society against the boasted advantages of a ‘classical education’ ... Yet there is a beautiful propriety in referring back to the Greeks and Romans, could this but be done with intelligence and in harmony with the other branches of culture. It is only pedantry and indolence that make this dangerous ... [Greece and Rome] brought some things to a perfection that the world will probably
never see again. We must not lose the sense of their greatness because our practice is in a different sphere ... metres are nothing except the harmonious movements of a mind deeply conscious of the universal harmony ...\textsuperscript{30}

Fuller recommends studying classics in order to understand the concept of ‘universal harmony’.\textsuperscript{51} She believes that only the poet, along with ‘the lover’ and ‘the artist’, was capable of ‘representing women fairly at present ... [and was] likely to view her nobly. The father and the philosopher have some chance of liberality; the man of the world, the legislator for expediency, none’. If women were granted rights and representation, she asserts, ‘a ravishing harmony of the spheres would ensue’.\textsuperscript{52} Fuller was concerned to emphasize the feminine as integral to this harmony, in accord with Romantic thought, and in keeping with her own understanding of classical tradition. Her reference to ‘harmony’ highlights the Transcendentalist theme that recurs throughout her works – most notably in \textit{WNC} – of the importance of correspondence and balance of the material and the spiritual in all things.\textsuperscript{53} Here again, Fuller makes it clear she is not advocating strict neoclassical imitation. She expresses the belief that American literature should be as great as classical, but in its own way. To that end, Fuller defends classical education for inspiration, and if properly taught, without ‘pedantry’ and with relevance to contemporary life.\textsuperscript{54}

Fuller suggests the benefits of classical knowledge in one of her earliest published essays, ‘Classical and Romantic’, which appeared in the \textit{Western Messenger} in December 1835:

The terms Classic and Romantic, which have so long divided European critics, and exercised so powerful an influence upon their decisions, are not much known or heeded among us ... yet is [the Muse’s] lyre by no means unheeded, and if it is rather by refining our tastes than by modelling our tastes that she influences us, yet is that influence far from unimportant ... Then shall music answer to and exalt the national spirit, and the poet’s brows shall be graced with the civic as well as the myrtle crown.\textsuperscript{55}

In arguing for the influence of ‘the Muse’s lyre’, Fuller counteracts the negative status of the feminine embedded in Roman classical tradition. In claiming the importance of the Muse, and the feminine, in American culture, she extends the classical role of the Muse beyond
inspiration, to an active role in social change. In the first of her series of ‘Conversations’ in Boston, Fuller was interested in looking at Greek mythology as a means of exploring different aspects of gender and the feminine. She approaches Greek myth as symbolic, typological and representative of idealized and gendered attributes, as is reflected in the 1839–1840 series of discussions transcribed by Elizabeth Palmer Peabody. In these ‘Conversations’, Fuller began to articulate some of the gender theories she later spelled out in \textit{WNC}:

Miss Fuller asked what was the distinction of feminine & masculine when applied to character and mind. That there was such a distinction was evident or we should not say ‘a masculine woman’, &c Miss Fuller thought that the man & the woman had each & every faculty & element of mind – but that they were combined in different proportions.\textsuperscript{56}

Fuller suggests Coleridge’s view when she contrasts ‘the hard intellectual-ality of the merely \textit{mannish} mind’ with the ‘\textit{feminine} poet’ who uses bird imagery (which she interprets as feminized) ‘as the symbols of his fairest thoughts’.\textsuperscript{57} From her own readings, Fuller derived a way to convey her message about women’s possibilities, based on the cultural authority of classical tradition. As Julie Ellison contends in her discussion of Fuller’s use of this discourse in the Boston ‘Conversations’, Greek mythology provided a ‘familiar romantic demonstration of figurative thinking as the basis of culture: forms of the mythology ... are great instincts, or ideas, or facts of the internal constitution, separated and personified’.\textsuperscript{58}

Fuller finds ‘unison in variety, congeniality in difference’ in the idealized images of women and men in Greek mythology:

We are told of the Greek nations in general, that woman occupied there an infinitely lower place than man. It is difficult to believe this when we see such range and dignity of thought on the subject in the mythologies, and find the poets producing such ideals as Cassandra, Iphigenia, Antigone, Macaria, where Sibyline priestesses told the oracle of the highest god, and he could not be content to reign with a court of fewer than nine muses. Even victory wore a female form. But whatever were the facts of daily life, I cannot complain of the age and nation, which represents its thought by such a symbol as I see before me at this moment. It is a zodiac of the busts of gods and goddesses, arranged in pairs. The circle breathes the music of
a heavenly order. Male and female heads are distinct in expression, but equal in beauty, strength and calmness. Each male head is that of a brother and a king, -each female of a sister and a queen. Could the thought, thus expressed, be lived out, there would be nothing more to be desired.59

In Greek mythology, Cassandra, Iphigenia, Antigone and Macaria were heroic and self-sacrificing women. Fuller’s citation calls attention to women’s potential, as does her inscription of the ‘Sibylline priestesses’ (associated with Apollo, the ‘highest god’), the nine muses (of literature, the arts and sciences), and the female goddess of victory, Nike. She cites other goddesses, including Ceres, Proserpine, Diana and Vesta, as representative of idealized and positive femininity. Fuller contravenes the negative effeminatus with examples of positive attributes she ascribes to the feminine in classical myth.

Referencing ‘Orpheus’: Classical Tradition and Fuller’s ‘Great Radical Dualism’

The balanced dualism Fuller identifies in the circle of gods and goddesses reflects another aspect of the nineteenth-century turn to Greece: the cultural significance of the Orpheus myth and the construction of ‘Orphic tradition’ at the time. In addition to focusing attention on the strong female exemplars she finds in Greek mythology, Fuller draws on Ovid’s version of the myth of Orpheus to assert the integral role of ‘the feminine’ within the ‘heavenly order’ she describes.

Orpheus was a famous poet and musician whose words and music could tame the wilderness and bring order out of chaos. Orpheus lost his wife, Eurydice, when she was bitten by a snake and died; he descended to Hades to bring her back from the dead. His words and music charmed the gods of the Underworld and he was permitted to bring Eurydice home, but he lost her again when he disobeyed the warnings of Persephone, Queen of Hades, not to look back at Eurydice until they were out of Hades. After this ‘second death’ of Eurydice, Orpheus was inconsolable and traveled the world, forsaking all other women. According to myth, this infuriated the women of Thrace, who tore him apart and threw his severed head into the sea. His head floated away, still calling Eurydice’s name.
Fuller addresses the problem of women’s representation and civic virtue in her treatment of the Orpheus myth. Orpheus was a central figure in the nineteenth-century cultural imagination; according to Transcendentalist thought, and to Emerson in particular, he was the archetypal poet whose creative power unifies spirit, word and thing. This archetypal poet has special significance for Fuller, in that she believes his power and desire to unify these elements leads to recognition and inclusion of the feminine. Fuller was familiar with some of the texts and beliefs associated with Orphism, a highly contested area in classical studies. Radcliffe G. Edmonds, for example, understands ‘Orphism as a category within the history of scholarship rather than a “thing” that existed in antiquity’, and claims that ‘modern scholars of religion … have fabricated an Orph-ism, a category for all the religious phenomena associated with the name of Orpheus. This modern Orphism … distorts in important ways the evidence of the way the ancient Greeks used the name of Orpheus’. Nonetheless, as Edmonds demonstrates, it is possible to identify the specific texts understood as ‘Orphic’ in Fuller’s time, and to consider their cultural resonance.

The writings attributed to Orpheus were popularized by German and British NeoPlatonist scholars, chiefly Thomas Taylor, an important source for Emerson. As Richardson notes, Fuller knew Taylor’s work; she also knew the original classical texts which refer to the myth of Orpheus. Evidently, she preferred her own translations and readings of classical literature. Writing about Taylor’s translation of a description of Isis (by the second-century Roman philosopher Apuleius), in Appendix A of WNC, she contends that ‘the foreign English of the translator, Thomas Taylor, gives the description the air of being, itself, a part of the Mysteries. But its majestic beauty requires no formal initiation to be enjoyed’. This remark demonstrates that she was aware not only of Taylor’s work, but also of the mystery religions of Greek antiquity. It is also highly likely that Fuller knew Goethe’s Urwerte, Orphisch (1817). She further reveals her knowledge in asserting that ‘In Greece, Ceres and Proserpine, significantly termed the “great goddesses,” were seen seated side by side. They needed not to rise for any worshipper or any change; they were prepared for all things, as those initiated to their mysteries knew’.

As R.A. Yoder discusses, elements of Orphism informed Transcendentalist thought:
Emerson’s conception of poetry and the poet belongs to a special Romantic tradition ... At the heart of The American Scholar is a giant imported myth, so widely assimilated by European muses from ‘an unknown antiquity’ that any search for an ultimate source is probably beside the point. Emerson’s ‘old fable’ of the ‘One Man’, the original whole as distinguished from subsequent fragments, is a version of the traditional ‘universal man’ ... Orpheus represented the reflexive or self-conscious activity of the imagination, the power by which man distinguishes himself as the single artificer of the world in which he sings ... when he sang, all the rocks and trees and wild beasts arranged themselves in order around this central man.65

For Emerson, ‘Orpheus serve[s] primarily as a principle of synthesis or reconciliation of differences ... [therefore, the true poet] most nearly embodied the Universal Man, “for the poet is representative. He stands among partial men for the complete man” ’.66 While Yoder rightly asserts that ‘any search for an ultimate source [for the idea of the ‘One Man’] is probably beside the point’, insofar as he demonstrates its permutations over time, the defining feature of Orphic tradition nonetheless remained the concept of gendered dualism in primordial fusion, the division necessary for propagation, and the perpetual desire for reunion.

Fuller’s understanding of Orphic tradition was based on a central premise of originary dualism in all primordial beings. In classical Greek texts Fuller is known to have studied, Orphism is associated with dual sexuality and gender transitivity. Fuller drew on concepts of Orphic dualism and romantic idealism to formulate her theories of gender fluidity and difference. Juxtaposing the contemporary plight of women with national ideals of liberty, she points to the failure of democratic ideals and of the founding word, in asking for ‘true democracy’ for women. Fuller addresses these problems with her theory of gender fluidity and transitivity: if the feminine is represented, and Orphic union can take place, then both civic virtue and individual self-culture are possible. She retains and extends the classical concept of civic virtue in service to the state, via ethical concerns for the community and the disenfranchised.

After postulating a positive feminine integral to Orphic unity, Fuller goes on to conceptualize a gender dualism that nonetheless admits difference. As Capper notes, ‘great radical dualism’ is Fuller’s term for
the problematic binary opposition of gender she seeks to change. Fuller ascribes gendered characteristics to male and female goddesses, but this essentialism is accompanied by her insistence on the ideal ‘two-fold nature’ of every person, and by her assertion that these two sides ‘are perpetually passing into one another. Fluid hardens to solid, solid rushes to fluid. There is no wholly masculine man, no purely feminine woman’.67 She problematizes gender binaries with her assertion that people have both masculine and feminine characteristics, and that these may be unfixed or unstable.

Fuller’s comments on fluid gender boundaries suggest the successive and simultaneous dual sexuality associated with Orphism in her time. Her main sources for this aspect of Orphism include Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Plato’s *Symposium* and Proclus’ version of the work attributed to Orpheus, *Sacred Speeches in 24 Rhapsodies*.68 As Brisson notes, the *Metamorphoses* contains references to six instances of sex change in mythical beings.69 Fuller knew the *Metamorphoses* well, and cites it in both WNC and ‘Autobiographical Romance’. She mentions the theme of metamorphosis towards the end of WNC, asserting that ‘an idea not unknown to ancient times has of late been revived, that in the metamorphoses of life, the soul assumes the form, first of man, then of woman’.70 According to Brisson, Ovid was the only Latin author to recount the story of Hermaphroditus, the first androgynous being according to Aristophanes’ myth in Plato’s *Symposium*. Fuller certainly read the *Symposium*, and it is likely she also knew the myth of Hermaphroditus from Ovid. Ovid was also the only Latin author to write of Tiresias, the blind prophet of the Oedipus myth, who underwent gender transformations, mediating between gods and men, and also between men and women. Gender transitivity ‘made it possible for [Tiresias] to establish a connection between the world of men and that of women. It is as if a being that transcended the oppositions around which real life was organized must symbolize that transcendence in the opposition that was of the greatest importance for human beings: the opposition between a man and a woman’.71

Fuller knew the Oedipus myth, since she refers to it specifically in WNC; as with the myth of Hermaphroditus, it is likely she also knew the myth of Tiresias from her study of Ovid. At a minimum, it is certain she knew Book IX from the *Metamorphoses*, since she cites a remark by Jove from that section at the beginning of WNC. Book IX includes
Ovid’s version of the myth of Iphis, a woman whom the goddess Isis turned into a man, in answer to the prayers of her mother, who had raised Iphis as a boy to protect her.

Fuller cites Proclus, fifth-century Greek Neoplatonist: ‘Proclus teaches that every life has, in its sphere, a totality or wholeness of the animating powers of the other spheres; having only, as its own characteristic, a predominance of some one power’.\(^72\) She also suggests this tenet in asserting that ‘these two sides are supposed to be expressed in man and woman, that is, as the more and less, for the faculties have not been given pure to either, but only in preponderance’.\(^73\) Fuller illustrates her concept of gender transitivity:

History jeers at the attempts of physiologists to bind great original laws by the forms which flow from them … In vain! Nature provides exceptions to every rule. She sends women to battle, and sets Hercules spinning; she enables women to bear immense burdens, cold, and frost; she enables the man, who feels maternal love, to nourish his infant like a mother … soon she will make a female Newton, and a male Syren.\(^74\)

The reference to Hercules further demonstrates Fuller’s awareness of the theme of gender exchange in classical mythology. According to Greek myth, Hercules ‘fell in love with Omphale, queen of Lydia, and led a submissive life spinning wool; she wore his lion’s skin, and he dressed as a woman’. Orphic dualism and successive dual sexuality provide her with ways to theorize outside the prescribed boundaries of separate spheres ideology and Republican Motherhood; she also suggests the performativity of gender.\(^75\) This is evident in her assertion that women should take up, ‘for a while, the armor and the javelin’.\(^76\) In so doing, women enact the ‘Minerva’ aspect of gender, which Fuller associates with masculinity in women.

Fuller cites exemplars from classical myth, including goddesses, muses and virgins, to propose alternate constructions of the feminine. She discusses the essential qualities of masculine and feminine in terms of ‘energies’: '[The feminine is] electrical in movement, intuitive in function, spiritual in tendency … Such may be the especially feminine element, spoken of as Femality. But it is no more the order of nature that it should be incarnated pure in any form, than that the masculine energy should exist unmingled with it in any form'.\(^77\)
Fuller associates femininity in men with Apollo, perhaps because he is the god of music as well as prophecy, both related to successive dual sexuality in classical myth. She associates femininity in women with ‘the Muse ... the unimpeded clearness of the intuitive powers which a perfectly truthful adherence to every admonition of the higher instincts would bring to a finely organized human being. It may appear as prophecy or as poesy’. Through Apollo, male poets experience and convey this same intuitive power; according to Fuller, it is essentially feminine.

Fuller asserts that the ‘two aspects of women’s nature’ [are] represented by the ancients as Muse and Minerva’. She identifies Minerva, goddess of wisdom and war, as the essentially masculine element in women. Minerva, known as Athena in Greek mythology, is part of the Roman pantheon. Fuller believes most women have ‘a preponderance’ of the characteristics she attributes to the Muse, but contends they should develop the “Minerva side” for “inner harmony”’. In order to do so, she recommends a period of withdrawal from social and sexual relations: ‘Grant her, then, for awhile, the armor and the javelin. Let her put from her the press of other minds and meditate in virgin loneliness’. Minerva was a virgin, as were Diana and Vesta, whom Fuller also cites. She advocates celibacy as a temporary measure through which women can reach their full potential before entering into marriages that may subsume them.

In order to attain Orphic unity, she asserts, each person in a couple must develop themselves as fully as possible. She suggests ‘virgin loneliness’ as a form of self-culture that will ultimately benefit the state of marriage. This ‘self-sufficiency’ offers an alternate model to Republican Motherhood and True Womanhood, a temporary refusal of the domestic, separate sphere. Fuller does not wish to eradicate marriage, but to change ‘the weakening habit of dependence on others’. She cites heroic virgins from classical myth as examples of ‘self-sufficing’ women with ‘virgin minds’, who can make sacrifices and take action to help themselves and others. These goddesses, with essential masculine as well as feminine characteristics, are integral to the Orphic sphere. She looks to young people with hope for the future, imagining ‘a youth and a maiden’ with ‘minds so truly virgin’ that they are ‘without narrowness or ignorance’, and envisioning, in the final appendix to WNC, a ‘sacred marriage’, informed by an ideal of a ‘Union in the Soul’.78
Extending her argument to the case for women’s rights, Fuller asserts that as this whole [humanity] has one soul and one body, any injury or obstruction to a part, or to the meapest member, affects the whole ... if [the two-fold growth of man, masculine and feminine], were in perfect harmony, they would correspond to and fulfill one another, like hemispheres, or the tenor and bass in music.

She introduces the subject of women’s rights immediately following her discussion of Orpheus and Eurydice, contending that ‘as the principle of liberty is better understood, and more nobly interpreted, a broader protest is made in behalf of Woman’. Fuller’s emphasis on the Orpheus myth and on the need for Eurydice’s self-representation suggests the importance of speech and representation for all women. In addition to focusing attention on strong female precursors in classical mythology, and recalling the necessity of the feminine for true unity, she reminds readers that insofar as women are denied full citizenship, civic virtue is also at stake.

Fuller clarifies her concept of difference within Orphic dualism and union, which will lead to the fulfillment of national ideals; she asserts that the ‘totality or wholeness’ of which Proclus writes will become possible when, like the gods and goddesses, ‘each comprehends and apprehends all the others ... arbitrary limits and ignorant censure [will] be impossible; all will have entered upon the liberty of law, and the harmony of common growth’. Fuller reiterates these ideals as she claims that ‘now the time has come when a clearer vision and better action are possible. When man and woman may regard one another as brother and sister, the pillars of one porch, the priests of one worship … And it will do so if this land carry out the principles from which sprang our national life’.

Fuller draws on classical tradition as a reference culture to make claims on behalf of women and the disenfranchised, for the unity and virtue she envisions in her alternative modernity.

Notes

1 Margaret Fuller, Woman in the Nineteenth Century: An Authoritative Text, (ed.) Larry J. Reynolds (New York, 1998 [1845]) 13. I would like to thank
Marc Fellenz, Joy Mahabir, Rebecca Resinski, Janet Simpson, and the anonymous reviewers of HCM for their insightful comments on earlier drafts of this article.

2 Michel Foucault, ‘What is an Author?’, in Donald F. Bouchard (ed.), Language, Counter-Memory, Practice (Ithaca, 1977) 131. For a concise summary of Foucault’s concept of historical a-priori, see Simon During, Foucault and Literature (London, 1992) 95–113. On the concept of ‘reference cultures’, see the Call for Papers, Conference on ‘Reference Cultures and Imagined Empires in Western History’, Global Perspectives, 1815–2000. Utrecht University, Netherlands, 11–13 June 2014. As the call states, reference cultures ‘may assume a role as benchmark or model, both positive and negative, in the international circulation of ideas and practices … [and] offer a model that other cultures may imitate, adapt, or resist’. As defined in the call for papers, the term ‘reference culture’ provides an apt description of the way this tradition has worked in relation to power, and as a model for American culture that has also been resisted and appropriated in various ways.

3 Frank Kermode, The Classic: Literary Images of Permanence and Change (Boston, 1983) 15. See also Pierre Bourdieu, Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, 1984) 228. The literature of the classical canon exemplifies what Bourdieu terms ‘cultural capital’, as a site of privileged knowledge that has been presented as autonomous, confers cultural authority, and is potentially convertible to what Marx termed productive economic capital. Insofar as it is a form of cultural capital, classical knowledge and tradition have been regulated and delimited by hierarchies of difference, as I discuss in this essay. On the concept of ‘invented tradition’, which ‘automatically implies continuity’ with a past reiterated in discourse, see Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds), The Invention of Tradition (Cambridge, 1983) 1–14.

On the connection between the *translatio* and empire, see Anders Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny: American Expansion and the Empire of Right* (New York, 1995).


Michel Foucault, *A History of Sexuality*, volume 1 *The Will to Knowledge*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York, 1980) 100–101. In ‘The Practical Theorizing of Michel Foucault: Politics and Counterdiscourse’, Mario Moussa and Ron Scapp assert that although Foucault has been ‘criticized for lacking a theory of agency, his theory of counterdiscourse encourages what they call ‘radical agency’, through which the ‘formerly voiceless might begin to articulate their desires – to counter the domination of prevailing authoritative discourses’, see Mario Moussa and Ron Scapp, *Cultural Critique* 33 (1996) 87–112, 88. Furthermore, Foucault writes that discourse ‘is not divided between accepted discourse and excluded discourse … [but may be understood as] as multiplicity of discursive elements’, *The Will to Knowledge*, 100. As a reference culture, classical tradition has had a hegemonic as well as a counterdiscursive function, contingent on standpoint and context.

Individual self-culture, in its Transcendentalist and Emersonian sense, was intended ultimately to benefit society as a whole. As Joy P. Rouse asserts, Fuller extends this idea to include the disenfranchised, who are excluded from the means of self-development; she ‘revises self-culture’ as a form of civic virtue. See Rouse, ‘Margaret Fuller: A Rhetoric of Citizenship in Nineteenth-Century America’, in Gregory Clark and S. Michael Halloran (eds), *Oratorical Culture in Nineteenth-Century America: Transformations in the Theory and Practice of Rhetoric* (Carbondale, 1993) 117–120.


12Larry J. Reynolds, ‘Introduction’ in Fuller, *WNC*, x.

13See, for example, Fuller, *WNC*, 220.


16Fuller, *WNC*, 173.


The discourse of Hellenism served many purposes in the nineteenth century; as Frank Turner and Richard Jenkyns make clear, Germany and England wanted the explicit connection with Greece, in order to serve nationalist purposes, while G.W. Clarke points to the romantic, literary identities modelled on Hellenist values and ideals. David J. DeLaura notes that in *Culture and Anarchy*, Matthew Arnold presented Hellenism as the necessary counterbalance to English ‘Hebraism’, to stabilize his notion of ‘culture’. See Linda Dowling, *Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford* (Ithaca, 1994) 3; see also G.W. Clarke (ed.), *Rediscovering Hellenism: The Hellenistic Inheritance and the English Imagination* (Cambridge, 1989); David J. DeLaura, *Hebrew and Hellene in Victorian England: Newman, Pater and Arnold* (Austin, 1969); Richard Jenkyns, *The Victorians and...

38 Reinhold, Classica, 182.
39 Ibid., 175.
40 Quoted in Reinhold, Classica, 328–29.
44 Dowling, Hellenism and Homosexuality.
46 Perry Miller, Margaret Fuller: American Romantic (Baltimore, 1963) x.
47 Fuller, ‘Autobiographical Romance’, 149.
49 Reynolds, WNC, xvi.

51 Miller, *Margaret Fuller*, 207.

52 Ibid., 20.

53 Ibid., 20.

54 Dickenson, *Margaret Fuller*, xiv–xv.


56 Fuller, *WNC*, 176.

57 Fuller, *WNC*, 31.


59 Fuller, *WNC*, 31–32.


63 Fuller, *WNC*, 110.

64 Ibid., 28.


66 Ibid., 9.

67 Fuller, *WNC*, 68–69.

68 Ibid., 205–207.


70 Fuller, *WNC*, 104.


72 Fuller, *WNC*, 99.

73 Ibid., 69.

74 Fuller, *WNC*, 69.


76 Fuller, *WNC*, 72.

77 Ibid., 68.

78 Ibid., 136.

79 Ibid., 101.
About the Author

Karen Dovell is Associate Professor of English and Academic Chair of the Department of English and Humanities at SUNY Suffolk Community College. Her research and teaching interests include American literature, composition, and gender studies. Her dissertation, ‘Classical Tradition and Difference in Works by Phillis Wheatley, Margaret Fuller, and Emily Dickinson’ (Stony Brook University, 2004), explores the discursive role of classicism in mid-eighteenth to late-nineteenth-century American culture. Her essay, ‘The Interaction of Classical Traditions of Literature and Politics in Works by Phillis Wheatley’, appeared in John C. Shields and Eric Lamore (eds), New Essays on Phillis Wheatley (Knoxville, 2010). She was Project Director/grantwriter for a SUNY Conversations in the Disciplines Conference, ‘Digital Humanities and the Transformation of Scholarship’, in March 2013. She presented ‘Classical Thermopylae in Works by Emily Dickinson’ at the EDIS Conference in August 2013, and is working currently on a study of classical tradition in the American Renaissance.

E-mail: dovellk@sunysuffolk.edu