



Educating Margaret: Puritanical Rhetoric in Emerson and Hawthorne

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According to the Garden of Eden myth, women played a crucial role in the downfall of man, and because of this have been distrusted throughout history and literature. It is not uncommon for this duality to play itself out textually. The struggle against this concept can be seen in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance*, and Ralph Waldo Emerson's "From the *Memoirs of Margaret Fuller Ossoli*." Both men feel an attraction to, and at the same time, are repelled by this woman who combines both aspects of the sinner and the saint. The rhetoric Hawthorne and Emerson use to describe women expose their hidden beliefs in good and evil, and women's role in the downfall of man. In addition, each man attempts to eulogize a woman who, because of their religious bias, embodies strong characteristics which they fear and are unable to deal with.

The binary of the female good and evil is seen throughout literature, and is discussed in Tracy Fessenden's "The Convent, the Brothel, and the Protestant Women's Sphere." In her article, Fessenden writes:

As sites for probing boundaries of private and public spaces, behaviors, and roles, the figures of the nun and prostitute both vex and bolster nineteenth-century constructions of legitimate femininity as domestic, maternal, pious, and separate from the workings of the market. The emergence of this discourse of woman's sphere marks a reversal in Anglo-American representations of women's sexuality since the seventeenth century: where Puritan theology had attributed greater carnality to women than to men. (453)

One of the reasons for the confusion writers such as Emerson and Hawthorne feel results from women entering new spheres. They are finding themselves in the workplace due to the Industrial Revolution; the

clear lines between a man's place and a woman's have become blurred.

Women were not only entering the workplace, but the sphere of education. This new behavior was generating a conflict in the status quo. In her article "The Woman Question: A Multi-Faceted Debate," Theresa DeFrances argues: "Knowledge, many men and women believed, defeminized women. Many ministers likened it to forbidden fruit because it opened the world to women at the expense of closing off heaven" (170). By associating women's education to forbidden fruit and the Garden of Eden, the educated woman becomes the new Eve, and her knowledge and assertion of rights become evil, and something we must protect society against.

Knowledge, education, and evil are all issues addressed in Norton Juster's *A Woman's Place: Yesterday's Women in Rural America*. This compilation of magazine articles, letters, and pithy sayings sheds light on the rhetoric used in the early to mid-nineteenth century. The knowledge of evil is addressed in an article from "Scribner's" titled "A Mother's Duty to her Girls." The author writes that women absolutely should be educated: "Purity means spotlessness, not mere ignorance. It is a mental poise – that attitude toward evil which can only be taken and maintained where a knowledge of evil exists. It is not what one knows that constitutes impurity, but what one loves," (S.B.H. 72). This article suggests that women must be educated insofar as they learn what evil is in order to avoid it. Education and woman's role in the home is also underscored in an article from "The Household" which makes the claim that the home is: "The domestic circle, the cherished home of the affections, and the dwelling place of every social virtue, was transplanted from Eden," (59) and that it is woman's "holy mission," (60) to protect and nurture the future generations. Woman must not give in to temptation again, and while she must be educated, it is only to "secure that degree of refinement necessary to fit them to move with grace and dignity in good society," (60). While these articles suggest that women should indeed have some access to education, it is the rhetoric of Eden and evil carefully woven throughout, that warn women of the dangers of knowledge, reminding them of their original failure.

This fear of knowledge can be seen in Emerson's description of Fuller. In his "Memoirs," he writes: "I, slow and cold, had come fully to admire her genius,

and was congratulating myself on the solid good understanding that subsisted between us, I was surprised with hearing it taxed by her superficiality and halfness" (389). While Emerson appears to be complimenting Fuller, his use of the words 'superficiality,' and 'halfness,' express his inability to deal with her complexities and differences. While he claims to respect her intelligence, his suppressed beliefs actually cause him to find fault in her knowledge.

This confusion Emerson feels toward the feminine is not only directed at Fuller – his aversion is also expressed in his views on Nature. Emerson gives nature female qualities, even going so far as to refer to it as "she." Emerson explains:

Nature stretcheth out her arms to embrace man, only let his thoughts be of equal greatness. Willingly does she follow his steps with the rose and the violet, and bend her lines of grandeur and grace to the decoration of her darling child. Only let his thoughts be of equal scope, and the frame will suit the picture. A virtuous man is in unison with her works, and makes the central figure of the visible sphere. (33)

Through his description of nature, Emerson reveals his opinions of what a woman should be. She follows and is submissive, graceful, and allows a man to be the best he can be. She is the epitome of the saying "Behind every great man, there is a great woman." This is the role society has historically given to women, and while Emerson never explicitly claims he believes women should be subordinate, his rhetoric in many ways suggests this.

If one looks at the rhetoric Emerson applies to women and nature, his opinions become clear. When Emerson applies the feminine to nature, she is the "rose and the violet," she is "grace," and "grandeur." With the exception of the above quote, Emerson generally refers to nature as "it," and has strong opinions about the purpose of nature. Emerson writes: "Nature is thoroughly mediate. It is made to serve. It receives the dominion of man as meekly as the ass on which the Savior rode. It offers all its kingdoms to man as the raw material which he may mould into what is useful" (40). Emerson believes nature is to serve man, and by applying the feminine to nature, he has revealed a similar belief for women. Woman is made to serve and be subordinate to men.

This belief in women's roles can also be seen in the female character's of Nathaniel Hawthorne's The Blithedale Romance. The delicacy Hawthorne attributes to Priscilla is part of what Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar attribute to the "eternal feminine"

(816) in their essay, "The Madwoman in the Attic." It is Zenobia's lack of the feminine that makes her so dangerous. They write: "social historians have fully explored its part in the creation of those 'eternal feminine' virtues of modesty, gracefulness, purity, delicacy, civility, compliancy, reticence, chastity, affability, politeness ..." (816). Priscilla is the eternal feminine while Zenobia is the antithesis of the feminine. Hawthorne writes: "As for Zenobia, I saw no occasion to give myself any trouble. With her native strength, and her experiences of the world, she could not be supposed to need any help of mine" (74). Zenobia has strength and experience, what many consider to be masculine traits as opposed to Priscilla who has more feminine qualities. Therefore, Zenobia is one to beware of, while Priscilla is innocent and must be cared for.

These views have been reinforced, not just in the literature of the time, but in the scientific world as well. DeFrancis argues:

Biological sexual difference contributed to arguments about women and education. The education question shifted from *could* girls be educated to *should* they be (Hubbard xvi). A contradiction existed: nature, heredity, and biology dictated that women must be wives and mothers, yet society contended they must be taught how to perform these roles. (169)

This type of argument reveals that men felt even if women could be educated, they should not be. DeFrancis continues: "Even though women made strides by enrolling in colleges and universities, the curriculum was not only gender specific but also "sphere" specific. Women's colleges trained women for two roles: teaching and motherhood" (170). Therefore, in an effort to keep women dependent on the patriarchy, it was decided they should only be taught subjects that would keep them in their place. If knowledge other than what was deemed acceptable for women was encouraged, it would only lead to the further downfall of man.

There are some women, however, who did not capitulate to these ideas, and that is where the conflict can be seen. At the time Emerson and Hawthorne were writing, women were beginning to demand equality, and one of the leaders of this movement was Emerson and Hawthorne's close friend, Margaret Fuller. In her essay "The Great Lawsuit," Fuller writes:

And as to men's representing women fairly, at present, while we hear from men who owe to their wives not only all that is comfortable and graceful, but all that is wise in the arrangement of their lives, the frequent

remark, 'You cannot reason with a woman,' when from those of delicacy, nobleness, and poetic culture, the contemptuous phrase, 'Women and children,' and that in no light sally of the hour, but in works intended to give a permanent statement of the best experiences, when not one man in a million, shall I say, no, not in the hundred million, can rise above the view that woman was made *for man*, when such traits as these are daily forced upon the attention, can we feel that man will always do justice to the interests of a woman? (868)

Fuller has identified the rhetoric men are using in their efforts to keep women in their roles, and she argues against it in her essay. When Fuller argues that men view women as made 'for man,' and can therefore make no unbiased decision regarding women, she is in direct opposition to Emerson's argument that women and nature are meant to serve man, and this is what repels Emerson.

In Emerson's poem "The Sphinx," there is some interesting rhetoric that reflects Emerson's confusion of and fear toward strong women. Textually, Emerson uses a good deal of paradox, suggesting his confusion at the various roles of women. Some of these paradoxes are "Out of sleeping a waking, / Out of waking a sleep" (13-14); "Life death overtaking" (15) and "Under pain, pleasure -- / Under pleasure, pain lies" (99-100). But he also suggests blame towards the female for the fall of man in the lines "The fate of the man-child; / The meaning of man; / Known fruit of the unknown;" (9-11). He suggests that this type of mysterious woman is his muse: "I am thee me to name? / I am thy spirit, yoke-fellow, / Of thine eye I am eyebeam." (110-112), and he suggests that her riddle can never be answered because she won't allow it:

Thou art the unanswered question;
 Couldst see thy proper eye,
 Always it asketh, asketh;
 And each answer is a lie. (113-16)

The language Emerson uses here suggests his perplexity at women like Margaret Fuller who go against everything he believes in, yet is so attractive to him.

While Emerson deals with his confusion and fear of strong women, Hawthorne finds a way to mourn them and at the same time warn them. According to Henderson, the Puritans, because they believed the "God's election," saw death as more of a lesson to the living, not associating good deeds with salvation. In the declining days of Puritanism, however, they rejected this. In this period, it was believed that "the

living are to learn from the example of the deceased and follow in her path" (493). What do you do when the woman who has died is so far from the ideal? How do you eulogize her? You hold her up as a warning, like Hawthorne does with Zenobia, as opposed to an example of the ideal. Henderson also writes: "This glistening goddess stands as a warning to the audience, the horror of an impious woman. And what befalls such a woman? She dies a terrible death and goes unmourned....She dies repenting her short-sighted life." (494-95). In order to teach a lesson about what the "ideal" woman is, she must be punished in some way.

The character of Zenobia is used by Hawthorne as a way to eulogize Margaret Fuller, and also, as a warning to other women like her. Hawthorne makes Zenobia's death unattractive:

Of all modes of death, methinks it is the ugliest. Her wet garments swathed limbs of terrible inflexibility. She was the marble image of a death agony. Her arms had grown rigid in the act of struggling, and were bent before her, with clenched hands; her knees, too, were bent, and – thank God for it! – in the attitude of prayer!...She knelt, as if in prayer. With the last, choking consciousness, her soul, bubbling out through her lips, it may be, had given itself up to the Father, reconciled and penitent. (216-17)

Zenobia, the antithesis of the "eternal feminine," has not only died in this horrible manner, she has finally repented. As Henderson argues:

"The death of a fallen woman is understood as a deserved punishment, rather than a tragic loss. The consequence is that funeral oratory for women, especially in the colonial and early national periods, is devoted to constructing an ideal image of female identity" (487-88).

Therefore, while Zenobia is not the "ideal," by asking repentance, she can be properly mourned while she is also punished.

Often, when one opens a book, one does not think about the impact the words might have upon society, or how the language might influence theirs as well as future generations. While Emerson and Hawthorne undoubtedly felt themselves enlightened men, a thorough study of their rhetoric shows us that the vein of Puritanism runs deep and is hard to escape. Women struggle against this rhetoric even today as they continuously break down and beat against the barriers thrown up against them. Emerson and Hawthorne, no doubt, had a deep respect for Margaret Fuller, yet were unable to negotiate the

conflict between what they had been taught and what they must have felt instinctually for this strong woman.

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