

Fanny Wright: Rebel & Communitarian Reformer

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FRANCES WRIGHT DARED to take Thomas Jefferson seriously when he wrote "All men are created equal," and to assume that "men" meant "women" as well. John Stuart Mill, accordingly, called her one of the most important women of her day. Jeremy Bentham said she had "the sweetest and strongest mind that ever was lodged in a female body." The Marquis de Lafayette called her his beloved Fanny and paid court so openly he scandalized his circle of friends and even his own family. But other contemporaries labeled her the "Red Harlot of Infidelity" and a "voluptuous preacher of licentiousness." She was a woman profoundly at odds with the conventions of her time, and she was loved and hated with equal extravagance.

Born in Scotland in 1795, Wright came to the United States in 1818 and spent half her adult life here. She died in Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1852, after a lifetime devoted to promoting equality among the races and between the sexes. In 1825 she became the first woman in America to act publicly to oppose slavery. Twenty miles outside Memphis, Tennessee, she established the commune she called Nashoba. Its purpose was to discover and then to show others how slaves might be educated and responsibly freed. Like Robert Owen's New Harmony, it would be a model on which a free society could be built. On July 4, 1828, Fanny Wright became the first woman in America to speak in public to a large secular audience of men and women, and subsequently the first to argue that women were men's equals and must be

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granted an equal role in all the business of public life. She was the pampered daughter of a highly stratified class society in Great Britain, but she cast her lot in America with working people, risking her health, her fortune, and her good name to realize the promise of the Declaration of Independence. With a boldness rare in women of her day, she attacked in print and in lecture halls throughout the country an economic system that allowed not only black slavery in the South but what she called wage slavery in the North. Alexis de Tocqueville to the contrary, she saw that the United States was marred by growing extremes of wealth and poverty, and she knew that these disparities made an authentic republic impossible. With, perhaps, the exception of Walt Whitman, she wrote more powerfully about sexual experience than any other well-known American in the nineteenth century. For taking such positions and speaking forthrightly she was ruthlessly attacked in the press and became a pariah among women. To be called a "Fanny Wrightist" in the 1830's would have been roughly equivalent to being called a Communist in America in the 1950's.

And the crucial fact for us is that her story is not merely about the past. The hard questions she asked—questions about race, money, privilege, and power—are equally germane in 1980's America. Indeed in 1984, women stood on the verge of real political power as, by acclamation, the Democratic party nominated Geraldine Ferraro as its vice-presidential candidate, and women all over the United States came together to insist on a more generous and a more just society.

Fanny Wright was the first person in this country to argue publicly that women have a set of values different from that of men—one that inclines them as a whole to be more egalitarian, more cooperative, and less likely to resort to force as an answer to conflict. She believed that society would be askew unless and until women's values weighed equally with those of men. Ninety years after Fanny took such a position, Virginia Woolf began to say much the same thing, even more clearly and more eloquently. Now, almost fifty years later still, *Ms.* magazine (January 1984) has featured Carol Gilligan as its Woman of the Year for describing in her book *In a Different Voice* the way in which women "tend to see the world in terms of connectedness." "Survival," *Ms.* insists, "may depend on a revolution in values." All of which brings us back to Fanny Wright, whose political destruction in the 1820's and 1830's was an important weapon in the effort to silence American women in the succeeding generations.

Of course Wright's encounters with the phenomenon of "women's sphere"—the relegation of women and their influence to the home—were so far from being typical that they were probably unique. Since she was born in Scotland, brought up in England, and came to this

country for the first time when she was twenty-three, she had an angle of vision no native-born and -bred American was likely to find. By the time she left England she was odd even in her home context: she was a stunningly well-educated rebel against her own class. If there were other women brought up elegantly in Tory England to be ladies out of the pages of Jane Austen but who preferred America on the grounds that people were equal there, history has managed to remain remarkably silent about them. So one must be cautious about making general statements on the basis of what happened to the extraordinary Fanny Wright.

She was physically imposing—perhaps six feet tall at a time when, for example, the average Frenchman inducted into the army was under five and a half feet. She had a voice so strong she could be heard without microphone at the back of a hall crowded with upwards of 2,000 people. She had what seems to have been a nearly photographic memory and by the time she was twenty had read widely in the literature and philosophy of classical Greece and of the Europe and England of her time. She spoke French and had at least a reading knowledge of Italian. Though her health was frail when she was young and unpredictable in her later years, her physical endurance was remarkable. She traveled more widely than possibly any other woman of her time, under conditions that were always hard and often gruelling. Many days she rode her horse forty miles in the wilds of west Tennessee, and once the steamboat she took was snagged and abandoned for lost.

She was also brave. During her career she and those who came to hear her were threatened, jostled, nearly stampeded, and even stoned. Fire warnings were called in crowded halls when she was lecturing, and a Quaker admirer wrote the papers that she stood on stage like the calm eye at the center of the storm. On one occasion in 1838, during the last period when she spoke in New York City, 10,000 people crammed the streets, and the entire police force had to be called out to protect her and her followers.

Now, this is obviously not the sort of woman whose experience one can offer up as typical. But neither can she be dismissed as merely odd. Part of her importance lies, I think, in her innocence and credulity: for reasons peculiar to her personal history she put her faith in ideas. She was left an orphan when she was two and a half—within a period of three months both her parents died—and by the time she was twelve, her brother, her uncle, and her grandfather had died as well. She grew up despising the aunt who was her guardian, while discovering her vital life in the written and spoken word. She learned when she was only a child that people could die or betray, but ideas, she thought,

were enduring. She therefore *believed* Thomas Jefferson when he wrote "All men are created equal." Americans of her time presumably knew not to take him literally—knew that Jefferson did not mean to include black people or women of any race in his grand statement. But Fanny did not so understand him. When she acted on the convictions that the Declaration of Independence encouraged her to hold, she unwittingly exposed the powerful forces that worked in America to keep women excluded from the democratic promise of equality and that belied that promise in other ways as well. In this sense her experience was typical: she uncovered hard realities about American democracy that held true for every other woman but that few if any others had yet had the temerity or the occasion to expose.

Her first serious challenge to American institutions and sensibilities came at Nashoba, her commune outside Memphis. As I said earlier, she hoped to create a model there to demonstrate how slaves could be responsibly educated, and then freed without significant financial loss to those who owned them. She took as her equal partner in this venture a man called George Flower, who had been ten years' experience as a farmer on the frontier, and had been on the winning side in a brutal battle against forces that wanted to call a convention to rewrite the Illinois constitution to permit slavery. In the fall of 1825 Fanny and Flower published a description of their proposal and an appeal both for funds and for slaves whose owners were willing to give them up. The only response they got to the latter was from a South Carolinian who had been willed a family of eight female slaves, a mother and her children, and who sold them to Fanny for his expenses in bringing them to Memphis. A Quaker merchant in New York donated some merchandise for a store, and those two contributions were all the help they got from the outside world. The evidence suggests that the planters around Memphis did what they could to hinder them, but for months their project seemed quite promising.

Disease and, if I am correct, sexual conflicts between Fanny, Flower, and Flower's wife Eliza damaged that promise dramatically. But what destroyed Nashoba was something that happened when Fanny went to Europe to recover from a fever that had threatened her life. James Richardson, one of the trustees, sent portions of a log he kept of Nashoba business to Benjamin Lundy's *Genius of Universal Emancipation*, and he ended it by saying that he had begun to live with a quadroon woman there named Josephine Prevot. This was of course a bare-faced proclamation of both "free love" and miscegenation. The outrage this revelation provoked prompted Fanny to cancel what remained of her European plans, and on the ship coming back she wrote what she called her "Explanatory Notes on Nashoba." In it she

said that black people would be the equals of whites if they were brought up together and educated as equals; that miscegenation might be the answer to the race problem in America; that marriage required women to forfeit their individual existence and allowed men to assert powers over them arbitrarily, and therefore it would have no force as an institution at Nashoba; that sexuality was "the strongest and at the same time, if refined by mental cultivation, the noblest of the human passions"; that the principle on which Nashoba would be conducted was "that men are virtuous, in proportion as they are happy, and happy in proportion as they are free." With such phrases she explicitly ruled out religion as an institutional presence there and implicitly dismissed it as a guide to the virtuous and generous life.

This was 1827, and the response should have been predictable to almost everyone but Fanny Wright. The outcry the Nashoba address inspired was apparently at least as angry as what followed Richardson's indiscreet publication, and a man in New Orleans told a friend of hers that Wright might discover one morning that her throat had been cut. From that time on, editors periodically quoted from the "Explanatory Notes" or referred to it to discredit her. A Cincinnati newspaper mentioned her celebrated circular on the blending of the straight and the curly-haired races, and one New York editor became so incensed and wrote about her with such venom that his words are shocking even today.

It is easy, and certainly fashionable, to speak of Fanny Wright as ahead of her time, and even ahead of ours. And it is right to do that. Nevertheless much of what she said was true in principle then, and remains so now. The commitment she took from eighteenth-century thinkers to rationality, tolerance, and patient discussion was a crucially important commitment without which civilized public dialogue is not possible. The process of discrediting her was therefore not only a shabby chapter in American history; it was also at one with the process of evading conflicts and dangerous imbalances of power at the heart of American society. And putting off solutions to those conflicts and imbalances has been costly in the extreme.

The issue she confronted then that remains the most inflammatory is probably that of miscegenation. What she meant was that if all human beings were the same color the race problem would no longer exist, and in that she was patently correct. Her problem as a political theorist—one she shares with others—was how to get from here to there. In this instance she did not seem to see the problem, or rather she saw it only intellectually. Not only did she have the near-indifference to race that marked her distinguished relatives in Scotland

and her mentor, the Marquis de Lafayette, but she also had close friends who were married across racial lines. (In both cases, the husband was white and the wife black, and a daughter of one of those marriages was her namesake.) The position she took was at least in part a response to Southern hypocrisy and an attempt to protect black women in the South from gross sexual exploitation by white men. Furthermore, in the 1820's she believed that blacks had as much right to live in the United States and even to rule it as did whites. She had apparently very cordial relations with black people in this country, and in Haiti she was celebrated as a great benefactress of the black race.

What seemed obvious and simple to her, however, struck others differently, and the hysteria around racial mixing was so extreme that by late in the 1830's she concluded that intermarriage could not be the solution to the race problem in America because it ran so violently counter to the general sentiment in the country. Pressures within both the white and black communities against intermarriage remain intense, and those who defy them must be very strong indeed.

It is unnecessary here to count the cost of the United States of its failure to solve the race problem; but the death toll of more than half a million in the Civil War that began less than a decade after Wright's own death is only the most obvious and dramatic measure of that cost. It is perhaps idle to speculate about what might have been if the men who occupied the command posts of American society had taken up her ideas with the seriousness and goodwill with which they were offered—if reflection and subtlety had marked her reception, rather than contempt and ridicule. But it may be useful to realize that those who attacked her in the 1820's suggested no solution to the dilemma of slavery other than colonization, a response which was clearly insufficient. And it is important to see how they used Fanny Wright to give a message to other American women. They used her to say that women must not venture bold opinions on any subject of major cultural or political importance. They used her to say that morality for a woman must be circumscribed by the walls of her home and the teachings of her church. They used her to say that a woman who persisted in disagreeing with them would be destroyed.

It has also been fashionable to blame Fanny Wright, rather than the editors and preachers who attacked her, for the dampening influence her name came to have on women. Whoever invented the term "blaming the victim," however, did her a service, because she or he put the matter in a more nearly just perspective. And while those who discredited her have become the mere curiosities of history, many of her ideas remain as vibrant and pertinent as ever.

Still, there is no way to measure her effect on women. Largely through accounts in her newspaper, the *Free Enquirer*, we know that

many came to hear her speak and that scores of the bolder ones accompanied her to the platform. In June 1830 a New York editor, Major Mordecai Noah, observed ruefully that her audiences were packed, that at least half of those who came were women, and that her ideas had had far greater influence than he had dreamed. Quaker women of the Hicksite persuasion were among her greatest admirers. But in the course of researching Wright's biography, though I wrote well over a hundred letters of inquiry and spent months in libraries and historical societies, I turned up no record of these Quakers' response to her. Eventually we may find testimony from one or several of them; meanwhile we are left to imagine what it meant to them to see a woman stand up publicly to talk eloquently and intelligently about the major issues of her day. On the basis on my own experience, and that of my friends, I am inclined to believe that a courageous woman's example led them to think that they could do it too; that Fanny Wright made them understand that because women demonstrably had the ability, they therefore had the right and even the obligation to take on roles of major importance in their society. It was not what Wright did or said that discouraged them in that belief. It was the way men treated her, and the way women like Catherine Beecher followed them in attack.

In addition to the issues Wright raised so powerfully in the "Explanatory Notes on Nashoba," she dealt with two others that were crucially important at the time, and remain so. One was the influence of religion on public life. The other was the power of money to undermine democracy. As for the former, her own faith had not survived her youthful questioning of it. As Katharine Anne Porter said of the venerable Thomas Hardy, the worm of original sin was lodged in her mind, of all fatal places, and it took her out of the tradition of orthodoxy into that tradition of equal seriousness, of equal dignity, and of equal antiquity, namely, the great tradition of dissent. She went, as Hardy did, not so much by choice, as by compulsion of belief, with the "enquirers" rather than with the "believers." During Wright's adolescence, furthermore, she took offense at the Church's behavior as an institution. She saw the ways the established Church sanctioned the rich as they defrauded the poor, in the first instance during the enclosure movement in Dawlish in Devonshire, and later during the Highland clearances in Scotland, when thousands of peasants were torn from their ancestral homes to make way for the Duke of Sutherland's sheep.

In the United States she took the position that faith was a private matter with which no one had the right to interfere, but like John Stuart Mill after her, she insisted that faith and moral behavior were

entirely separable affairs, noting on more than one occasion that several of the American Founding Fathers could not be called Christians. Nevertheless, her attack was not on faith as such, but rather on what she called "priestcraft." It was the gruesome influence of revival preachers in the Ohio Valley, particularly on women, that prompted her to take to the public platform for the first time in the summer of 1828. As she described it, there was a "sudden combination of the clergy of three orthodox sects, a *revival*, as such scenes of distraction are wont to be styled. . . . The victims of this odious experiment on human credulity and nervous weakness, were invariably women. Helpless age was made a public spectacle, innocent youth driven to raving insanity, mothers and daughters carried lifeless from the presence of the ghostly expounders of damnation." Wright decided on hearing about all this that "since all were dumb," she would "take up the cause of insulted reason and outraged humanity." Subsequently she attacked the diversion of moral energy from pressing social problems to speculations about the hereafter, and the use of precious money for building churches and sending missionaries abroad rather than for ending poverty and disease at home.

My account thus far does not suggest the *manner* of Fanny Wright's attack on the churches, and I must confess that on occasion it was somewhat less commonsensical than the impression I may have given above. Someone once said that Robert Owen had a blank where his political sense ought to have been, and I rather think Fanny had a vacuum. In the monologues I have carried on with her over the years I might have been overheard saying things like "Fanny, didn't you know what would happen to you if you said it that way?" and "You really got what you deserved for being to arrogant." But uneasiness about her manner tends to obscure the essential soundness of so many positions she took.

During this period—the 1820's and 1830's—Protestant Christianity and respectability were becoming intertwined. Revivalist preachers like Lyman Beecher and Charles Finney attacked Fanny Wright at the same time that they used religion, whether cynically or not, to secure their own social positions and to justify the patent economic inequities of American society. Kathryn Sklar's biography makes it clear that Catharine Beecher, Lyman Beecher's daughter, used Christianity for the purpose of her own social advancement, as a means of insinuating herself into the drawing rooms and confidences of "the best people" in whatever place she happened to find herself. Her brutal attack on Fanny Wright, which became the prototype of the attack by conservative American women on those who differ, was consistent with her social-climbing. Using religion as an excuse for cruelty in ways that

would become painfully familiar, she wrote of Wright, "There she stands, with brazen front and brawny arms, attacking the safeguards of all that is safe and wise in law, all that is pure and lovely in domestic virtue. . . . I cannot conceive any thing in the shape of a woman, more intolerably offensive and disgusting." Similarly, the abolitionist Tappan brothers, Arthur and Lewis, whose money had been made by means of what Wright called wage slavery in the North, came at her in self-righteous disregard for the ambiguities of their own moral position. In short, Fanny had been quite right in imagining that the Second Great Awakening threatened the freedom of thought she considered crucial to the democratic experiment in America. The growth and proliferation of Protestant sects during her lifetime guaranteed that cultural conservatism would prevail, that important questions about the distribution of wealth, and about personal autonomy and the conditions necessary to it, were not likely even to be asked, much less to be entertained generously.

There is of course a case to be made for the reform connections of evangelical Protestantism, and one can find it made in many books on the period. The dark side is more often than not obscured: its anti-intellectualism, and in consequence its inclination to divide the world into good and evil; its self-righteousness; its intolerance. As John Stuart Mill so clearly described in *On Liberty*, it is vulnerable in the extreme to manipulation by hypocrites. And as for its influence on women, many have learned to regret their practical and emotional subordination to the male clergy and the channeling of their compassion into forms that are often sentimental and superficial. At the very least, the absence of charity with which so many of its spokesmen dealt with Fanny Wright betrayed the teachings of Jesus. And he or she who would argue that Protestant Christianity conquered its dark side 150 years ago would be a hardy soul indeed.

As for Wright's insight into the power of money to undermine the promise of democracy, she came to it only gradually, contrary as that line of inquiry was to virtually all the forces in American society. Her attention to the subject was fitful, and the record of her thoughts about it incomplete. But early in her career as a speaker she talked about the power of money to buy the loyalties of preachers and editors. In mid-course she began to confront the problem of unequally owned wealth. A republic was impossible, she insisted, when wealth was so misunderstood and money so maldistributed: "While ... enjoyment is calculated by the luxury of the few instead of the ease of the many . . . while human beings count but as an appendage to the machinery they keep in motion . . . think not that canals and railroads are to advance the nation, nor that steamboats and spinning-jennies

are to save the world." Further along still, she acknowledged that money and wealth were two quite separate phenomena: that money was self-perpetuating and that wealth in the form of human time and energy and skill was too often wasted because of the inequities of social organization. After a brief flirtation with the Jacksonian position on hard money and state banks, she took to calling money nothing more than a governing tool and looked to a time when it would be banished from human societies. She believed that as monopoly, or big business, absorbed the state's wealth, so it usurped its power. It ruled the press, subsidized political parties, decided elections, and corrupted public officials. It governed the government and made a mockery of freedom.

At the heart of her questions about money and power lay the question of whether American society was to benefit the few or the many, and had that subject been widely agitated 150 years ago, with the vigor Wright brought to it and from her angle of vision, those of us who resist economic determinism might indulge the hope that powerful economic interests would not now be so deeply entrenched. She was absolutely right, however, in her belief that wealth would become ever more powerful and more concentrated, for though the corporate revolution occurred after her lifetime, she in some measure predicted it. She would not be surprised to know that large firms have grown enormously in absolute size, or that those economic sectors dominated by large firms, such as manufacturing and utilities, have increased at the expense of the others, and that even farming has become "agribusiness." She would be dismayed, but not surprised, to know that in 1977, in manufacturing, the 200 largest firms controlled 60 percent of all assets—up from 45 percent in 1945. She would deplore the fact that such wealthy special interests have come so to dominate American politics that partly for that reason so few people bother to vote; indeed, of all the world's democracies, only Botswana has a consistently lower voter participation rate than the United States.

Like so many people in the nineteenth century, Fanny Wright believed that education was the key to solving all human problems, yet from the far end of the twentieth century it is hard to look back on that faith without impatience. It was George Steiner who said: we are those who come after; we know that a man can spend the afternoon reading Goethe and Schiller, play Bach and Mozart in the evening, and go the next morning to his job at Auschwitz. But if the reed Fanny Wright leaned on was weak, we have found no others that are reliably stronger. She thought American society was perfect in its design because its Constitution allowed for peaceable change. Furthermore, she believed not so much that she had found the answers, but that she

had located many of the crucial problems, and that their solutions were possible with education and good faith. We cannot build a tolerable society without some such belief. She was ready to learn as well as to teach, but those who made her into a pariah destroyed the chance that her talents and energies and ideas could be used, as she hoped they would be, to shape a more livable world. She spent the last twenty years of her life in something like intellectual and emotional isolation, and the absence of community and shared ideas damaged her work. Some of what she wrote then was nonsense, in part because no one she trusted was there to give her ideas the rigorous critique she needed—in part because political ideas conceived in a vacuum are not likely to stand the test of reality.

Fanny was used, as noted above, to show women what would happen to them if they ventured into public life. We have no way to measure the consequences, but it seems likely that multitudes of women were thereby discouraged from developing an important side of their characters and that American society suffered from the loss of the contribution they might have made. As the institutions men shaped became more powerful, they became more entrenched and inflexible, and therefore increasingly hard to change. In 1848, in her last and major work, *England the Civilizer*, Wright argued that men and women had to have an equal voice in government before a just and generous and peaceful society could be achieved. Virginia Woolf said much the same thing in 1938 when she wrote *Three Guineas*. I am convinced that both of them were right, and that our survival may depend on our being able to hear them now. Their faith in women may prove a will-o'-the-wisp. It may be that we do not have time enough left. But to ignore them now is to consent to sure destruction.

