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“Everything by Turns and Nothing Long”

Configurations of Female Selfhood in
Fanny Fern’s Early Periodical Writing

I’m a regular “Will o’ the Wisp”; everything by turns, and nothing long. Sometimes I’m an old maid, sometimes a wife, then a widow, now a Jack, then a Gill [sic], at present a “Fanny.” If there’s anything I abominate it’s sameness.

—Fanny Fern, *Olive Branch*, 3 Mar. 1852

PUBLIC CONSTRUCTION of Fanny Fern, the feminine, mocking pen name adopted by Sara Payson Willis, began September 6, 1851, when “The Little Sunbeam” was published in the Boston *Olive Branch*, “the weekly paper that launched Fanny Fern’s career as a national mass-cultural phenomenon” (Homestead 154). Until Willis’s identity was maliciously disclosed by a disgruntled editor over four years later, readers repeatedly wondered aloud and in print whether “Fanny Fern” was a man writing under a woman’s name or an unruly woman. Even after Willis’s identity became public, false photographs of “Fanny Fern” were sold, other women continued to be identified as Fanny Fern, impostors toured the lecture circuit under the name, and for the rest of her career readers wrote requesting details of Fern’s appearance.¹ The extended, complex reaction activated by the early periodical writings of Fanny Fern marks cultural anxieties regarding female scripts of identity and agency located outside prevailing constructions of femininity in the nineteenth-century United States.

Chapter 1 focused on a single text that initially was privately circulated: Sarah Kemble Knight’s constructions of conventions of women’s voice and domain in the “amateur” genre of the journal. This second

chapter considers Fanny Fern's early periodical writing in order to understand how the regularly recurring publication of an author's writing—its scheduled, familiar discourse—promoted repeated redefinitions and reconfigurations of the (female) self. The 1825 publication of and response to Knight's *Journal* reveal contours of a larger cultural discourse concerning gender and representation. This discourse, as I argue in the previous chapter, inflects subsequently published nineteenth-century U.S. women's texts. Chapter 2 extends my examination to detail the cultural moment that allowed publication of Fanny Fern's writing and made possible the establishment of a sustained relationship between Fern and her readers.

The discussion in this chapter draws on works from Fern's periodical writing beginning in 1851, when her work was first published, until 1854. In 1854 significant financial incentives led Willis to temporarily pause in her writing for periodicals while she added the genre of the novel to her hitherto exclusive writing of periodical pieces.² The publication of that novel, *Ruth Hall* (1854), coincided with public revealing of Fern's identity. Once Willis resumed periodical writing, her use of fictive female personae was transparent. My interest here is in early periodical writings in which Willis repeatedly enlists strategies of female representation. These works were published prior to Willis's crossing genres into the novel and prior to her public identification as Fanny Fern. This focus allows consideration of women's writing in a popular form and, given the anonymity that Willis then inhabited, enables exploration of gender flexibility permitted within that popular genre. Perhaps equally important is that, as Melissa Homestead notes, Fern's "*Olive Branch*, *Musical World & Times*, and *True Flag* columns (i.e. those published before her fictionalization of that portion of her career in *Ruth Hall*) remain largely unexamined" (151). My focus provides an important opportunity for consideration of this neglected period of Fern's writing. My investigation of Fern's early periodical writings magnifies then-current cultural practices displaying the modifications, anxieties, and penalties activated by women's published writing in the nineteenth-century United States.

This chapter discusses Fern's early periodical writing in four parts: first, a consideration of generic conventions of periodical writing and women's autobiographical writing, as well as the multiple representations enabled by the periodical piece; second, Fern's biographical and cultural contexts; third, a discussion of female elasticity and representations of the woman periodical writer in Fern's early writings; and finally, a concluding section regarding gender, genre, and voice.

I.

My reading of Fern's early periodical writing employs the poetics of women's autobiography to examine the poetics of women's periodical writing. Discussions of the former emphasize vexed issues of prevailing gender assumptions and corresponding authorial constraint and elision. Lauren Berlant's apt observation that "[s]entimental female autobiography . . . raised the possibility that under the 'woman' lurked something horrible, a residual 'female' whose knowledge and desire was not entirely caught up in the patriarchal domestic economy" ("The Female Woman" 437) identifies the uneasiness and suspicion with which readers greeted female autobiographical writing. Nancy K. Miller's cogent reading of women's writing as "a defense and illustration," a negotiation of conventional ideas about women, and "a poetics calling for another, freer text" (263) points to the woman writer's suppressions in her text and to inherent difficulties of writing the (female) self under constraint. While mindful of such restrictions, Sidonie Smith foregrounds the power of publication to enable the woman writer to "establish the discursive authority to interpret herself publicly in a patriarchal culture" (*Poetics* 45).

In this chapter I extend such valuable considerations of the poetics of women's autobiography to considerations of women's periodical writing, and I situate women's periodical writing beyond an "iconic representation of continuous identity" (47). That is, I examine ways in which the regular, routine appearance of the periodical piece allowed the woman writer's repeated redefinitions and reconfigurations of self. I read this intersection of gender and publication as enabling the woman writer to profess various (self-) representations. Put another way, the poetics of women's periodical writing enabled gendered constructions beyond a single female self inventing assorted personae to suit her rhetorical purposes. I argue that rather than reinforcing a binary view of female selfhood and writing, one alternating between a putatively real self and the façade, the poetics of women's periodical writing provided a space for revisions of notions of unitary female selfhood. These revisions foregrounded a mutable self as vital for successful female navigation of patriarchal systems.

For Sara Willis, writing as Fanny Fern, a columnist whose sex-gender identity was the subject of readers' heightened conjecture, periodical writing encouraged her to construct multiple female representations. As Homestead has observed:

Under the sign of the Fanny Fern pseudonym, Fern's early sketches offered a multiplicity of voices and identities to readers from sentimental to satiric and all shades in between narrated in the third person, "soliloquized" in the voice of a named character, spoken by an unidentified first person, or spoken in the first person voice of "Fanny." (176-77)

Homestead identifies the significance of the various personae Fern inhabits in her early periodical writing. These include an unfairly criticized stepmother ("The Model Stepmother"), a newly married wife ("The Tear of a Wife"), an observant passerby ("The Stray Lamb"), and a child ("Thanksgiving Story"), among many other selves. I supplement Homestead's observations by noting that within and across these assorted female representations, Fern persuasively appealed for readers' sympathy. Christine Ross's observation that Fern "appear[s] to have recognized, to some degree, the social construction of identity" (87) suggests Fern's understanding that audience interaction with her writing would be inflected by their assumptions regarding, for instance, the gender and situation of the personae she employed. Diverse declarations of identity in Fern's early periodical writing prompted the reader to rely on her or his subjective readings of the writer as accurate; that is, readers assigned varying identities to Fern based on their own assumptions and anxieties. Correspondingly, Fern's varied female representations helped establish a relationship between Fern and her readers as she activated their goodwill for the individual selves she sympathetically imagined.

At other times, Fern selected subjects for her periodical writing and adopted tones that provoked speculation about her sex-gender identity. For instance, one early column criticizes widowers who remarry quickly ("The Model Widower"); another piously prescribes a zealously self-sacrificial wifehood ("How Woman Loves"); and another features a dying husband who is worried that his wife will be unprotected after his death ("Dark Days"). The male-centered topics of such writings encourage an essentialist reading of the author (since the columns concern men, they must be written by a man). Also, the perspective employed in such writings is authoritative in tone and so suggests access to male agency. Periodical writing, then, enabled Fern to multiply present the (female) self and to write from an ambiguous sex-gender identity. Homestead clearly identifies central features of this part of Fern's early periodical writing as "Fern's self-conscious construction and promotion

of a persona in dialect with her periodical context and her readers” (164). I would add to that mix by reinforcing the role of the wide range of brief prose forms Fern employed in her periodical writing—essays, letters, paragraphs, and soliloquies, among others. Such an array further enabled Fern to sustain that dialect among her periodical context and reading audience.

For Willis, Fanny Fern was a fictional representation of a self, authorized to speak to a series of real and imagined readers. Her weekly column was instituted in September 1852, fifteen months after her first periodical piece had been published. The subsequent regular publication of her writing permitted her to consider topics of cultural significance. Further, regular publication enabled her to revise expectations about what constituted appropriate female speech and behavior, all while writing anonymously and androgynously. Sidonie Smith’s observation that “an autobiographer may shift the grounds of self-representation and respond to cultural expectations about appropriate female speech and behavior” (*Poetics* 54) underscores the potential generic flexibility within women’s autobiographical writing. Correspondingly, I see Willis, in Fern’s early periodical writings, extending from the sentimental to the satirical and from the conventionally feminine to the conventionally masculine, each piece promoting a self or selves represented by that specific topic. Multiple narratives of Fanny Fern emerge from Willis’s representation of female and male selves and from her representation and modification of Fern’s selves as manifest in voice. These diverse narratives provided Willis with effective strategies for reconfiguring female selfhood as necessarily multiple for women to negotiate patriarchal forms and practices.³

II.

Sara Payson Willis was born in Portland, Maine, on July 9, 1811, the daughter of Nathaniel Willis and Hannah Parker Willis. Her father was a strict Calvinist deacon and founder and editor of *The Recorder*, the nation’s first religious paper. Fern attended Catharine Beecher’s Female Seminary in Hartford, Connecticut. She married Charles “Handsome Charlie” Harrington Eldredge on May 4, 1837. Her daughter Mary was born in 1838, followed by Grace in 1841, and Ellen in 1844. Until 1846, when she was thirty-five years old, she led the conventional life of a privileged white middle-class woman.

A series of personal tragedies activated Sara Willis's voice as a periodical writer and led to the gender flexibility of Fanny Fern. First, her younger sister, Ellen, died of childbirth complications in February 1844. Soon after in March 1844 her mother died. A year later, in March 1845, her oldest daughter, Mary, died. These family deaths devastated Willis and significantly depleted her female community. It was, however, her husband's sudden death in 1846 that collapsed her domestic and economic security. Prior to his death Charles Eldredge had invested heavily in a risky business venture and had subsequently lost a related lawsuit. After he died, his creditors claimed his assets, leaving Willis virtually destitute. Her father (who had remarried after her mother's death) and her in-laws broke with established custom by refusing to provide financial support to Willis and her surviving daughters.⁴

In the absence of a male provider and family support, Willis initially worked within limited economic scripts available to a woman of her race and class status. She tried unsuccessfully to obtain a position as a schoolteacher. She attempted to earn money by sewing but could not make enough to support her children. In 1849, having exhausted other avenues and at her father's urging, she agreed to what turned out to be a disastrous second marriage. After two years she created a scandal by separating from her abusive husband; they were divorced two years later. Forced by poverty to grant custody of one of her daughters to her former in-laws (i.e., Charles Eldredge's parents), Willis, finally and desperately, began writing for periodicals. She appealed to her brother, well-known poet and editor Nathaniel Parker Willis, for help in publishing her writings. His curt refusal and criticism strengthened her resolve to succeed as a writer.

Willis's first periodical writings were published anonymously, but she soon began to use the pseudonym Fanny Fern. Over time her pieces were published in various periodicals and became increasingly popular: "Seventy thousand copies of her first book, *Fern Leaves from Fanny's Portfolio* (1853)," a collection of her periodical writings, "sold in America within a year of its publication, and another twenty nine thousand copies sold in England, making *Fern Leaves* one of America's first best-sellers" (Temple 131). A lucrative contact to write a novel resulted in the thinly veiled autobiographical text, *Ruth Hall* (1854), "Fern's second book, [which] sold equally well" (131). Upon publication of *Ruth Hall*, an angry editor who had lost the rights to publish Fern's periodical writings vindictively revealed her identity.⁵ Rather than damaging her career, the sensationalistic exposure of her identity increased Fern's book sales

and popularity. In 1855 Fern signed an exclusive contract with Robert Bonner's weekly paper, the *New York Ledger*. In 1856 she married biographer James Parton. For the rest of her life she continued to be a famous, very financially successful, prolific writer.⁶

Willis's gender-specific attempts at economic survival—family support, remarriage, teaching, sewing—had failed to provide her with more than, at best, a meager financial income. They had succeeded, however, in exposing her directly to class-inflected anxieties of women's restricted economic opportunities.⁷ Had Charles Eldredge lived and prospered, Willis would have been much less likely to experience the harsh realities that often menaced the untethered middle-class woman. Alison Easton identifies prevailing assumptions that would have attended the widowed Willis's search for paid employment: "To work for money was to advertise one's lack of a male protector, without whom (such was deemed the threat of masculine sexuality) the female would only with difficulty remain 'pure'" (221). Willis was ultimately able to escape such gendered dangers as a result of the phenomenal literary success of Fanny Fern. However, having been sensitized to the complicated anxieties and perils with which the woman wage worker contended, she never forgot them and, it could be argued, never fully recovered from her experience of them.⁸ Berlant observes that for the rest of Willis's life, Willis associated "her writing with other more typical women's work: that of housewives, seamstresses, prostitutes" ("The Female Woman" 431). I would add that Willis's continued alignment of her writing with more conventional women's work underscores the psychological trauma of gendered vulnerabilities associated with that work. Willis's literary success provided significant protection from the more material vulnerabilities such as sexually transmitted diseases, residence in tenement housing with its accompanying dangers, and physical threats faced by solitary working women at work and on the streets.

However, Willis's lifelong alignment of her writing with more conventional women's work also evokes the emotional resonance of her past terrifying experiences as a widowed, financially needy mother. When Willis had occupied that position, the middle-class white woman's cultural scripts she had initially turned to relied on customary aid for distressed women. Such charity was not legally codified, but to a significant degree it was culturally expected. After the failures of these class-specific female assistance models, Willis notably modified her negotiation of dominant cultural gender constructions by rejecting (failed) conventional avenues of assistance; she instead began to access the independent and androgynous. When known as a poor widowed

mother, Willis was at best an object of charity. "Fanny Fern," perhaps male, perhaps female, was popular where Willis was shunned, and she was sometimes viewed as masculine where Willis was always viewed as feminine.⁹ Through Fern, Willis gained entry to masculine agency and the opportunity to intervene in gendered and economic limitations.

Early success of Fern's writing for periodicals emerged partially from the popular growth in the mid-nineteenth-century United States of regularly published literary papers. These papers, published on daily or weekly schedules, resembled newspapers in appearance. Increasing literacy rates, growing urban populations, and national transformation of publishing technology had potently mixed to create a growing, lucrative market for periodical publication.¹⁰ For example, as David Reynolds has detailed, U.S. newspaper publication increased from 200 newspapers in 1800 to 2,526 newspapers by 1850 (46). Correspondingly, as Mary Kelley has recently written, "By 1840, there were 1,500 periodicals in circulation. During the ensuing decade, the innovation of the penny press and the publication of weeklies prepared the ground for the emergence of weekly newspapers that contained little other than fiction" (*Learning to Stand* 58). The resulting greatly expanded readership prompted significant shifts in previously genteel agreements among periodical publishers and editors. Competition, often fierce, for readers and writers unsettled what had been the kinder, gentler world of male-dominated publishing.¹¹

Kelley valuably summarizes the gendered aspect of the evolution of mid-nineteenth century U.S. periodical publishing:

Women played an equally important role in the emergence and development of America's periodicals. Beginning in the last decade of the eighteenth century, the number of periodicals published in the United States increased sharply. This was also the decade in which periodicals dedicated to women's patronage entered the literary marketplace. (*Learning to Stand* 57)

A byproduct of these varied changes in periodical publishing was the assumption that female writers would attract female readers and so add to a periodical's popularity and circulation numbers. This assumption provided women writers with unprecedented access to periodical publication "within a burgeoning women's culture industry" (Berlant, "The Female Woman" 441).¹² Like Willis, other white middle-class women also discovered a desire to earn a regular income by writing for publication. As women's periodical writing was increasingly published, these

writings provided additional models for other women to aspire to and to emulate. Berlant's recognition of women's desire to engage "the contested conditions of public enunciation under which Fern and many of her sister writers labored and profited" (429) identifies the attractions of public voice as well as of paid employment. For economic reasons as well as for less-material incentives, middle-class white women were drawn to respond to gendered cultural scripts expected by typically male periodical publishers and editors. Their resulting writings reshaped contours of nineteenth-century U.S. periodical writing. They created an accepted, highly visible public place for women writers, a place that has been sustained throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century in the United States.

Periodical writing served as a particularly appropriate site for Willis's literary sensibilities. Its required length allowed for brief commentary without extensive research or writing. Its regular publication invited immediate response to current topics. And periodical publication encouraged cultivation of a recognizable voice to expand a periodical's readership in a time of highly competitive circulations. Gale Temple's close analysis of Fern's skill at attracting readers individually and as a group asserts that "Fern successfully mines each individual reader's sense of being misunderstood and thwarted in her individuality, and Fern's popularity results from her ability to isolate and appeal to those individuals as a 'mass,' as a consumer group" (146). I would add that Fern's ability to appeal to a wide range of readers was importantly supplemented by the then-common practice of publishers freely reprinting work that had been initially published in other papers. Homestead details the practice of "newspapers routinely appropriat[ing] American-authored works first printed in other American newspapers or magazines," describing how editors "with scissors in hand . . . would review copies of the exchange papers and select items for inclusion in his (or, more rarely, her) own, giving the typesetters clippings from other papers from which to set type" (155). This practice resulted in the progression of Fern's early periodical writings from their initial publication in the Boston papers the *Olive Branch* and the *True Flag* to their "quickly mov[ing] beyond this localized audience through the mechanism of reprinting, finding their way into other weekly papers . . . and daily newspapers across the country" (Homestead 155).

While neither Willis nor her editors received monetary payment for such reprintings, both indirectly benefited from the increased popularity that resulted from national dissemination of Fern's name and writing. As Homestead writes:

Although the circulation of the *True Flag* and the *Olive Branch* was largely local, they clearly saw the exchange system and Fern's wide reprinting as opportunities to attempt to build their subscription lists. As part of an informal quid pro quo, editors who copied from exchange papers were expected to "puff" the papers from which they copied and to publish information on how to subscribe to them. (158)

As a result of the familiarity of Fern's voice to readers, Willis was able to repeatedly increase the amount of money she was paid for her writing. In 1855, Robert Bonner, owner and editor of the popular *New York Ledger*, hired Willis at an unprecedented \$100 per column to write exclusively for his paper. He then "paid \$2,000 for a full page advertisement in the [rival] *New York Herald*" (McGinnis 6). That advertisement featured just one sentence printed repeatedly down the entire page: "Fanny Fern writes only for the *Ledger*." Bonner made it plain that Fern's voice was now exclusive to readers of his *New York Ledger*. That is, though the *New York Ledger* had registered copyrights of Fern's works (as had the *Musical World and Times*, but not, however, the *Olive Branch* and *True Flag*),

the benefit to be gained from publishing Fern's sketches was the association of Fern's name with the name of the paper as an "original contributor." Copyright or no copyright, none of them [the various editors] expected or even desired that Fern's sketches appear "exclusively" in their papers, instead seeking the widest possible reprinting of her sketches through exchange. (Homestead 162-63)

Bonner also shrewdly publicized Fern's salary to his readership, reinforcing the emotional and monetary significance of that well-known female voice.¹³ Readers responded to this promotion, "for years . . . mobb[ing] the offices of the *Ledger* on the day the paper came out, eager to be the first to see what Fanny Fern had to say" (Warren, Introduction xxxi). Such marketing strategies were (successfully) intended to cultivate connections between Fern and the *New York Ledger's* readers in order to increase circulation numbers. Nicole Tonkovich's detailing of the intersection of the woman writer's public identity and public voice reads "the 'author's' name . . . [as] a trademark that guarantees a particular product and in the process marks itself as suitable for a particular reading constituency" (57). I would add that on another, less visibly commercial level, these tactics also served to develop an enduring relationship concerning (self-) representation between Fern

and periodical readers. A primary component of this relationship was the pliable female self readers came to expect from Fern, one who in the elasticity that defined her provided a model for women's endurance of cultural norms.

III.

Fanny Fern's direct, engaging, polemical writing voice was immediately recognizable to nineteenth-century U.S. readers. Indeed, even today, reading through copies of the *New York Ledger*, one finds Fern's writing to be readily identifiable well before reaching her name at the end of a column. Fern's familiar voice enabled her to put pressure on and to expand certain conventional generic boundaries of periodical writing. Readers' recognition of Fern's voice and their desire to read more of what she had to say allowed Fern to discuss an extensive range of often transgressive subjects in her periodical writing. Robert Bonner, publisher of the *New York Ledger*, encouraged Fern's often outspoken stance and made it a policy never to edit or to condense her writing (Warren, "Uncommon Discourse" 64).¹⁴ Because readers typically privileged Fern's voice over her subject matter, Fern was to a degree authorized by readers to consider and write on topics that extended beyond those viewed as appropriate for women writers. In early columns, for instance, Fern variously promoted rights of women and children ("All's Well"), criticized social hypocrisy ("Summer Friends, or 'Will is Might'"), and constructed multiple narratives of identity ("What Mrs. Smith Said"). Such subjects, in addition to being disruptive choices for a writer who might be female, worked to intensify reader interest in Fern's sex-gender identity.

Public attention to and questioning of Fern's identity encouraged Willis's investigations of female representation in her periodical writing. In Sidonie Smith's observation, in women's autobiography the process of "self-interpretation emerges rhetorically from the autobiographer's engagement with fictive stories of selfhood" (*Poetics* 47). Correspondingly, I argue that in women's periodical writing the process of self-representation emerges rhetorically from the woman writer's engagement with fictive stories of female selfhood. The autobiographer's collaboration, then, is between the created self and the constructed, imagined culture. For Willis the construction is between her multiple voices and her real and imagined readers. Fern consistently rejects the false notion of unitary female selfhood in favor of female elasticity.

For instance, in "Self-Conquest" (28 Feb. 1851, *Olive Branch*), Emma is simultaneously a happy bride, "a pretty young thing," a loving daughter, a nervous daughter-in-law subordinate to an oppressive mother-in-law, and an unruly woman admiringly viewed by her husband as "struggling with trial, day by day, suffering, enduring, gaining the victory over her own spirit, silently and uncomplainingly." Tensions among Emma's various selves are temporarily muted by her submission and then somewhat more permanently relieved by the purchase of a house distant from her mother-in-law. Similarly, in "The Invalid Wife" (16 Oct. 1852, *Olive Branch*), an unnamed woman is concurrently a wife, a female physically recovering from the birth of her ninth child, a mother, and a patient rendered helpless by an authoritative female nurse. The temporarily bedridden woman longs to assert her desires over the nurse's orders; unable to do so, she cries privately in frustration, enduring her situation until she regains or—in this open-ended piece—fails to regain her health.

Such scripts for representation of multiple female selves are extended in "Dark Days" (4 Dec. 1852, *Olive Branch*) where Janie Grey is a widow, prey to unscrupulous men, and a mother too poor to pay for the heat that would save her child's life. Again a woman inhabits multiple scripts, and again it is only her ability to flexibly inhabit these roles that allows her at least temporary survival. That survival is unflinchingly stark—her husband has died despairing that she will be dangerously vulnerable without him, and she has been helpless to prevent her child's death. Janie Grey continues to exist, for the moment, but her future is ominous. In all three of these early periodical pieces—"Self-Conquest," "The Invalid Wife," and "Dark Days"—Fern's women simultaneously inhabit multiple roles: none is a coherent female self. Indeed, the employment of manifold representations works to keep any one representation of a self destabilized. Constructions of these pliable multi-selved women contribute to the flexibility of Fanny Fern's own identity—she may be any or all of these roles—and to her taxonomy of female representations.

Just as Fern's representations of a female self are elastic, so too is the language of her early periodical pieces, which extends from the sentimental to the satirical. For instance, pathos dominates the child's speech that begins "Thanksgiving Story" (20 Nov. 1852, *Musical World and Times*): "Mary!" said the younger of two little girls, as they nestled under a coarse coverlid, one cold night in December, 'tell me about Thanksgiving-day before papa went to heaven. I'm cold and hungry, and I can't go to sleep.'" The children speak quietly but are overheard

by their mother who weeps onto “the coarse garment, upon which she had toiled since sunrise.” This scenario corresponds with construction of the woman writer as a mother compelled by harsh economic circumstances to begin writing after her husband’s death in order to feed her children. As such, it invokes a female script readily recognized by nineteenth-century U.S. readers: the domestic, delicate woman whose maternal feelings force her—as nothing else could—to violate middle-class strictures by revealing herself publicly. The piece’s beginning activates readers’ constructions of femininity regarding the woman writer. As Alison M. J. Easton argues, it also reflects that Willis “knew from personal experience the fragility of that middle-class life and understood it as a construction” (223). In contrast to her more satirical writings, Fern’s voice in her sentimental writings often reflects self-consciousness regarding assertions of conventional femininity. Having violated cultural norms, a woman may find that unexamined reinscription into these norms is impossible.

Months earlier, “Hints to Young Wives” opened with “Shouldn’t I like to make a bon-fire of all the ‘Hints to Young Wives,’ ‘Married Woman’s Friend,’ etc., and throw in the authors after them?” (14 Feb. 1852, *Olive Branch*). In this piece Fern’s beginning disparages texts and authors that appear to promote some of the same narratives she herself cultivates in her sentimental periodical writings. However, Fern quickly moves beyond titles to focus on social conditioning performed by these texts. She describes her “little neighbor who believes all they tell her is gospel truth” and so rushes to greet her husband “the minute she sees [him] coming up the street . . . as if she hadn’t another minute to live.” Fern compares the young woman’s frenzied attentions to her husband to those of “a cat in a fit” and with brusque sympathy calls her a “poor little innocent fool!” whose excessive devotion results in her husband’s contempt for her. Fern ends with an anecdote in which her younger self, mending her husband’s coat, found in the pocket a

love-letter from him to my dress-maker!! I dropped the coat, I dropped the work-basket, I dropped the buttons, I dropped the baby (it was a female, and I thought it just as well to put her out of future misery) and then I hopped up into a chair in front of the looking-glass, and remarked to the young woman I saw there, “F-a-n-n-y F-e-r-n! if you—are—ever—such—a—confounded fool again”—and I wasn’t.

From the first sentence to the last, this brief periodical piece inscribes a female community (the young neighbor, Fern’s younger self, her infant

daughter, her female readers, and by extension all women) inevitably vulnerable to received notions of female self-sacrifice. When Fern's younger self "hopped up into a chair in front of the looking-glass" to address her image, she rejected such subservience and literally and figuratively stood to recognize and to educate herself. Fern portrays zealous female marital devotion as destructive self-denial that soon results in male contempt, disloyalty, and disrespect. The essay serves as a cautionary lesson for women, one illustrating dangers of entering marriage ardently ready to sacrifice the self.

Other early periodical writings by Fern cultivate similar stances. For instance, "Everybody's Vacation Except Editors" (14 Aug. 1852, *Olive Branch*) and "The Tear of a Wife" (28 Aug. 1852, *Olive Branch*) feature a sarcastic woman writer deriding the unacknowledged privilege of (male) editors and of husbands. "Everybody's Vacation Except Editors" is fronted with the unattributed quotation, "Everybody is having a vacation except editors." Fern then assertively begins the piece with "I should like to have the editor who wrote that, look me in the face, answer the following 'catechize,' and then dare whine after that fashion!" The subsequent catechism itemizes perquisites and special attentions an editor receives, such as invitations to "railroad celebrations, water excursions, balloon ascensions, anti-slavery fights"; tickets to "circuses, concerts, and theatres"; fruit ("pears and nectarines, strawberries, grapes, peaches and melons"); pies and slices of wedding cake; enough free books for "a magnificent library"; flattery from "all the big and lesser literary lights, male and female, constantly revolving round him"; and "pretty bouquets when he is sick from his lady contributors." The privilege accorded the male editor is measured here in material goods and sycophantic attention presented to him at no monetary cost. Within the essay's default codes of patriarchy and capitalism, to receive goods free of charge marks one's (male) status. Just as husbands in "Hints to Young Wives" devalue the marital devotion they do nothing to earn, so here male editors similarly devalue goods they do nothing to earn and discontentedly remark solely on what they do not receive (a vacation). Only Fanny Fern, by implication doubly devalued as a woman not a man and as a writer not an editor (i.e., a member of labor rather than management), recognizes, itemizes, and protests such unequal treatment.

"The Tear of a Wife" serves as the site of yet another facet of assumptive male privilege. The piece opens with the unattributed quotation, "The tear of a loving girl is like a dew-drop on a rose; but on the cheek of a wife, is a drop of poison to her husband." The essay begins by

addressing new brides, sarcastically cautioning that “whether you have anything to smile at or not; one thing is settled—you must not cry! Never mind back-aches, and side-aches, and head-aches, and dropsical complaints, and smoky chimneys, and old coats, and young babies! Smile! It flatters your husband.” Fern’s quick list sketches the conditions of these women’s lives and recognizes the degree of false cheer required for them to ignore such realities. She then shifts her address to the portrait of an ungrateful, weeping young wife implied by the essay’s opening quotation:

Besides, you miserable little whimperer! What have you to cry for? A-i-n-t y-o-u m-a-r-r-i-e-d? Isn’t that the *summum bonum*,—the height of feminine ambition? You can’t get beyond that! It is the jumping-off place! You’ve arriv!—got to the end of your journey! Stage puts up there! You have nothing to do but retire on your laurels, and spend the rest of your life endeavoring to be thankful that you are Mrs. John Smith! “Smile!” you simpleton!

Fern’s precise critical reading of the quotation uncovers the absolute rejection of any self demanded by the movement from “loving girl” to “wife.” A sign of a self as slight as one tear—prior to marriage prosaically read as “a dew-drop on a rose”—is, postmarriage, no less than a toxic reproach to a husband. Months earlier in her “Hints to Young Wives,” Fern argued that such wifely subsuming of self leads to a husband’s disrespect. Here Fern goes further, savagely mocking the proscription that with marriage a woman has “got to the end of [her] journey”—that is, that a wife exchanges whatever limited selfhood she may have been perceived as having for the single, subordinate identity of her husband’s grateful wife.

Within such acerbic pieces from her early periodical writing, Fern frequently returns to falsely romanticized notions of marriage. In “A Whisper to Romantic Young Ladies” (12 June 1852, *True Flag*), Fern enlightens unmarried young women who trust the portrayal of marriage that they read in romance novels. Fern tells them that after marriage if a husband “*smile[s]* on anything short of a ‘sirloin’ or a roast turkey, you are a lucky woman.” After deriding ways that romance novels leave out wearisome realities of middle-class domestic life, Fern cautions, “But this humdrum life, girls, is another affair, with its washing and ironing and cleaning days, when children expect boxed ears, and visitors picked-up dinners. All the ‘romance’ there is in it, you can put under a three-cent piece!” (qtd. in Warren, *Fanny Fern* 296). In all four

early periodical pieces—"Hints to Young Wives," "Everybody's Vacation Except Editors," "The Tear of a Wife," and "A Whisper to Romantic Young Ladies"—Fern employs sarcastic language and an exasperated tone of lived experience. Elizabethada Wright argues that in such essays "Fern's irony is particularly difficult to read" largely due to Fern's "provid[ing] nudges and winks everywhere in her work; thus everything would seem to be ironic" (102). Indeed, in such columns Fern's use of irony is extravagant and even omnipresent. Fern ironizes in her early periodical writing in the service of provoking young women to recognize and comprehend restrictive realities of socially sanctioned positions typically assigned to women.

The thread of multiple and elastic female representations running throughout Fern's early periodical writings is foregrounded in a series of essays published in the *Olive Branch* with "model" in the title, including "The Model Beau," "The Model Lady," and "The Model Grandmamma," among other "models"—female and male, positive and negative. For instance, the woman in "The Model Widow" and the man in "The Model Widower" (both 26 June 1851, *Olive Branch*) are each callous, vain, inattentive parents fixated on remarrying quickly. The woman in "The Model Step-Mother" (7 Aug. 1852, *Olive Branch*), however, is loving, caring, selfless, and vilified, particularly by other women. Each essay provides a separate female model for women readers to either emulate or reject. Taken together, the model essays form a guidebook of recommended (sometimes by negative example) pliable female scripts in nineteenth-century U.S. culture. That Fern continued the model series of essays over a period of months suggests their resonance and popularity with gendered assumptions of her audience.

These representations throughout the early periodical writings sustain an ongoing narrative between Fern and her readers. Willis regularly confronts cultural representations of women in her early periodical columns, at various moments evaluating, rejecting, embracing, and sympathizing with them. At the same time, these representations enable Willis to portray the woman periodical writer's own multiple narratives of selfhood.

The success of Fanny Fern's self-representations figures in the response of a Salem woman who wrote to the *Olive Branch* "that she did not care about Fern's identity: 'I know what you are to *me* . . . a kind, loving sister, with a flashing smile that breaks through the drolleries, making me long to shake hands with you'" (28 Aug. 1852; Warren, *Fanny Fern* 100). Fern's unwavering refusal to provide one unified self for her audience authorizes readers to "know" Fern in accordance with

their own beliefs and desires. As Berlant writes, “By providing a formal structure of identification through the example of her own ‘personal journalism,’ the expression of Fern’s personality becomes the model for that kind of individuated expression she aims to enable the reader to imagine in herself” (“The Female Woman” 445).

An 1853 editorial in the *Olive Branch* trivialized gendered speculations that circulated around Fern’s early periodical writing:

It makes not one iota of difference whether Fanny Fern is a *he* or a *she*, it cannot be denied that she (we call her *she* in virtue of her *nom de plume*,) has written some of the most beautiful fragments and “prose poems” in her piquant off-hand style, to be found in the English language, to say nothing of the dashes of genuine humor which some of them contain. Crusty, crabbed and sour anatomical specimens of editors may say what they please, Fanny Fern is, and will continue a popular writer, for she writes from the *heart*, and it will reach the hearts of those who read. (5 Mar. 1853)

By 1853 Fern’s various positionings of a self in relation to nineteenth-century U.S. social arrangements worked to refigure gendered restrictions regarding her writing. Fern’s early periodical writings opened a cultural space for Fern and for every female reader to envision herself as a person as well as a woman, a mother, and a writer. The editorial proclaiming that “it makes not one iota of difference whether Fanny Fern is a *he* or a *she*” refers directly to Fern but at the same time speaks indirectly about/to all women when it privileges an emotive “heart” over sex-gender identity. In addition, the fictive stories of female selfhood that Willis employs, as well as the gender flexibility of her writing, work to aid her in investigations of the woman writer’s voice. In Miller’s precise observation, “female autobiographers know that they are being read as *women*” (“Women’s Autobiography” 262). Correspondingly, I argue that Willis knows that readers desire to read Fanny Fern as a woman. Her rhetorical acknowledgment of “the fact of her femininity as a social reality” (“Women’s Autobiography” 263) is initiated with her invention of the feminine yet ironic name Fanny Fern.

Willis publicly constructs Fanny Fern as multiple, destabilizing any one self-representation of Fern; each representation is then incorporated as a possible aspect of Fern’s self. For instance, Willis mixes her early periodical publications with notions of the middle-class family when she writes about articles that have been falsely published under her name: “Never wrote one line of the above-named articles, which

are traveling round the country, with a host of others like them. The way that *illegitimate Ferns* are smuggled into *my well-regulated family*, while *my own mental children* are kidnapped and baptized by aliens, is very curious to witness" (23 April 1853, *True Flag*; italics mine). Willis constructs Fern as an attentive mother ("well-regulated family") and her columns as her offspring ("my own mental children"). Writings falsely attributed to Fern are presented as aspects of a self and as children who are born out of wedlock ("illegitimate Ferns"). Columns of Fern's that have been pirated and assigned to other authors are portrayed as permanently abducted children ("my own mental children are kidnapped and baptized by aliens"). Individually and collectively, all personae in this dizzying familial mix of a mother and her variously legitimate, illegitimate, and abducted children constitute "Fanny Fern." Appropriately, no father—as persona, metaphor, patriarchal agent, or anything else—is listed as a member of this "family" or as part of "Fanny Fern."

A few months later in the *Musical World and Times*, Fern writes of encountering a boy selling copies of her essay collection *Fern Leaves from Fanny's Portfolio*. He "assured me it was 'the book of the season—forty thousand already sold!—presses running night and day, but the demand not supplied,' etc., etc.

"Who wrote it?" I asked.

"Fanny Fern," the boy replied.

"Who is she?" said I.

"Don't know," said the peripatetic little bookseller. "She's first this person, and then that: now a man, and then a woman; somebody says she's everybody, and everybody says she's *some*." (13 Aug. 1853)

Fern's strategic use of a young boy (a "peripatetic little bookseller"), one of the lowest and youngest laborers in the market economy, enables her to illustrate how common awareness of her provocative ambiguity has become. Her popularity is such that "everybody says she's *some*." That Fern herself (as always, incognito) is able to question the boy regarding authorship of her own book without his realizing who she is further underscores the ambiguity of her identity. Readers who have imagined a "real" Fern stage-managing fictive personae to suit her needs are again confronted with Fern's ambiguous multiple selves.

Fern's early periodical writings repeatedly render a single "true" self-representation impossible, often in response to readers' conjectures regarding Fern's identity. Just as authenticity of Sarah Kemble Knight's *Journal* was questioned for years after its 1825 publication, so Fern's

identity was repeatedly contested. For example, a reader wrote an inquiry in verse to the *Olive Branch* (10 Apr. 1852) that began:

Oh mirth-provoking Fanny,
Pray tell me if you will,
What sort of being you really are,
And whether a Jack or a Jill.

The reader's desire to know "what sort of being you really are" implies a single answer to that question if only Fern will choose to provide it. But for Willis, female identity must be multiple. To promote a unified female self is not only false but also dangerous. Confronted with the culture's gendered demands, white middle-class women are forced in self-defense to perform the multiple and pliable. Willis's rhetorical insistence on the necessity of a performative female identity signifies her view of female identity in general as well as her perception of her own identity. Though many women will fail to successfully navigate the larger culture, for Willis an elasticity of representation is crucial for even the chance to survive. Willis's constructions of Fanny Fern in her early periodical writing serve as her workshop for arguing, cajoling, considering, lecturing, and testing on the subject of female identity as well as on the subject of her own identity.

An editorial (28 May 1853) in *The Musical World and Times* joined the national conversation regarding gendered complications signaled by Fern's voice. (In another Fern-related layering of identity and anonymity, *The Musical World and Times* was then edited by Willis's brother, Richard Storrs Willis. Though Storrs Willis had not initially known that his sister was "Fanny Fern," he had learned of her identity by this point.) The editorial defended Fern against those who argued that "the writer of such searching, forcible, and, withal, common-sense articles as sometimes came from the unknown pen, must be a man;—the public being unwilling to give femininity credit for the power and courage necessary for their production" (Warren, *Fanny Fern* 101). The editorial's rendering of "power and courage" as qualities readily available to both women and men points to the gendered work that had already been accomplished by Fern's early periodical writing. In this editorial, public discussion of Fern's identity served as the occasion for considerations of what was and what was not definitionally female and male.

Nineteenth-century U.S. advertising campaigns for Fern's writing collections and novels (*Ruth Hall*, *Rose Clark*) later capitalized on the multiplicity of representations active in Fern's early periodical writing.¹⁵

Ranney's, a New York bookstore, used an advertisement titled "Fanny Fern Blown Up But No Bones Broken" in *Harper's Weekly* (27 Feb. 1858):

People start in great amaze,
 From their eyes they wildly gaze,
 Crying as they hurry past,
 "Fanny Fern is gone at last!"
 Keep cool, people—'tis not so—
 Fanny Fern is still the go [*sic*].
 'Twas a Fanny Fern afloat,
 Name bestowed upon a boat.
 Read the choicest works of Fanny
 Get a book and gift from Ranney. (McGinnis 20)

Indeed, as Fern's iconic cultural status evolved, a range of objects were named after her, including, among others, babies, cigars, an opera libretto, perfume, a steamboat, and a train car. The mix of things named for Fern was as wide and as various as her audience had become. Given that diverse audience, objects named after Fern benefited by being perceived as at least potentially more desirable. Fern's name was assigned to marketable commodities in order to attract the purchasing attention of the many consumers familiar with her name, writing, and popularity. Babies named after Fern received her name as well as the popular currency that her name carried. By their existence, such varied namesakes further extended Fern's many identities as well as her discourses of publicity and self-fashioning. I would argue that particularly in these early years of her literary popularity, Sara Willis was no more or no less a namesake of Fern's than, for example, the steamboat or the opera libretto. Indeed, in retrospect, it seems overdetermined that in 1856 Sara Parton would be forced to go to court to establish sole legal ownership of the name "Fanny Fern."

Early periodical writings reflect Willis's awareness of her readers' assumed scripts regarding white middle-class women in general and Fanny Fern in particular. At times the tone and subjects of her early periodical writing reinforce readers' gender expectations. At other times the tone and subjects evade or problematize those expectations. The shifting voice and topics of Fern's early periodical writing support Willis's suggested revisions of women's cultural narratives. Unlike the female autobiographer, the female periodical writer may repeatedly interpret and reinterpret the female voice. Willis's audience lends her authority to interpret the woman writer's role in nineteenth-century U.S. culture.

Consequently, a mutual, extended dialogue develops between writer and readers. Fern provokes, readers imagine, Fern responds, readers re-imagine. Fern and readers of her early periodical writing jointly attempt to navigate the complexities of female positioning. Within the single text of her *Journal*, Sarah Kemble Knight insisted repeatedly and contradictorily on her status as a conventional woman. Within the repeated texts of her early periodical writing, Fern insists on her status as an unconventional and ambiguous (wo)man.

Mutability is essential to Willis's construction of Fanny Fern. It marks her conviction that a performative female identity is crucial. Further, multiple roles that Willis assigns to Fern signify Willis's perception of her own identity. It is Willis's generic choice of periodical writing that enables her multiple and repeated representations of female identity. However, periodical writing forces Willis to recognize the dismaying truth of what is required for middle-class U.S. white women to survive. Were Willis writing a novel, for instance, the novel would provide generic space for development and resolution. Even if the resolution were to be falsely positive, Willis would still have had the therapeutic exercise of writing such a possibility. Instead, Willis's early periodical writing functions individually and collectively to compel her to comprehend the reality of women's negotiations of repressive culture. The regular publication of periodical writing is such that Willis cannot even momentarily elide the truths she rehearses.

Willis draws on a combination of fiction and autobiography for her early periodical writing. The next chapter in this study will show Louisa May Alcott also mixing the fictional and autobiographic in *Hospital Sketches*. Other nineteenth-century U.S. white female authors write nonfictional, almost realist accounts of their lives. This should not suggest that undue emphasis be placed on the constructed, permeable line between the fictional and the putatively nonfictional. However writers or readers may classify a text or parts of a text as fictional or "true," all women in this study engage degrees of autobiographical writing. In all cases, as Willis would have clearly recognized, women—in their lives, in their writing—had to practice an elasticity of self-constructions to survive.

IV.

Periodical writing served as a site for a woman writer to experiment with notions of a self without that self becoming perceived as an immu-

table subject position. The sometimes complex and coded intersection of gender and voice allowed for disclosure of a self without corresponding private exposure. In the mid-nineteenth-century United States, the meeting of gender and publication marks complicated and sometimes deeply desired divisions among women's various selves. Fern's voice in her early periodical writing revealed ambiguous body contours under her pseudonymous "veils." As I have argued, the scheduled, familiar discourse of the periodical piece and the fictive stories of selfhood imagined of Fern by readers engendered investigations and articulations of various representations of a female self.

Though my discussion in this chapter concerns Willis's early periodical writing, I wish to turn briefly to recent critical responses to *Ruth Hall*, which interestingly read the characterization of the novel's main character, Ruth/Floy, against multiple personae of Fern's early periodical writing. Homestead observes that the "multiplicity and instability of 'Fanny' as a print phenomenon" seen in the early periodical writing "is missing from Fern's fictionalization of that experience" in *Ruth Hall* (177). Likewise, Kristie Hamilton's close analysis of *Ruth Hall* maintains that by employing a single fictive persona in the book, Fern

escaped the contemporary censure of being classed as a "political writer" by creating a character, Ruth Hall, who embodied at once middle-class, "feminine" respectability and American individualism, even as Ruth's consciousness and values were transformed by a growing recognition of the collective vulnerability and subjection of women. (89)

Homestead and Hamilton identify the character Ruth Hall as a single, somewhat coherent fictive persona adopted by Fern. Their readings point to Willis's rhetorical movement away from the multiple personae seen in her early periodical writing. Such curtailing of the multiple and varied to the singular and consistent is further discussed by Homestead, who argues that "Fern created that stable proprietary self [that is, of Ruth Hall] only after successfully exploiting a different mode of authorship and circulation in her early years writing for weekly periodicals" (153). Homestead sees the character of Ruth Hall representing "a new, more stable Fern who would author-ize future book and periodical manifestations" (153).¹⁶ I agree with Homestead's reading and further suggest that Willis's approach to performative aspects of female identity insisted upon in her early periodical writing was recast as she wrote *Ruth Hall*. In the turn to the genre of the novel, Willis gained length and extended development. The range of female mutability enabled by

brief forms of periodical writing was to a degree displaced by portrayals of penalties assigned to women who had failed to adequately perform required aspects of female identity. *Homestead* recognizes this movement in her reading of the character of *Ruth Hall* as “a new, more stable Fern.”

Correspondingly, Hamilton reads *Ruth Hall*

as a record, critique, and partial analysis of the mechanisms by which bourgeois domestic ideology effected the in-group surveillance and policing that would ensure the continued identification of womanhood with certain narrowly defined activities and with a particular socioeconomic status. All women who fell, or were forced, outside these limits could be dismissed as deviant. (103–4)

Once in the genre of the novel, Willis used the length and development of the novel to extend her brief periodical discussions regarding the necessity of female mutability. Hamilton's reading of *Ruth Hall*'s notions of female deviance underscores what I argue is Willis's perception of her own identity as potentially fragile. That perception needs to be viewed through the experiential trajectory of Willis's adult life. In a sweep of death, tragedy, and grief, Willis had been changed from a complacent, economically secure wife and mother of three living children to a culturally stigmatized, poverty-stricken, widowed mother of two living children. Whatever Willis had accepted as secure about her family, husband, class status, and reputation was at best destabilized, at worst dismantled, within the space of months. The gendered deviance assigned to her, especially by other women, educated Willis regarding female fragility, particularly her own. The genre of the novel allowed Willis to write her way from requirements of female mutability seen in her early periodical writing to typically dire consequences for women who one way or another were deemed to have failed to perform well enough.

In autobiography, as Sidonie Smith observes, “there have always been women who cross the line between public and private utterance, unmasking their desire for the empowering self-interpretation of autobiography as they unmasked in their lives the desire for publicity” (*Poetics* 44). Nineteenth-century U.S. women's periodical pieces written across boundaries of female utterance configure this generic form as a means of self-interpretation. However, unlike the female autobiographer, the female periodical writer simultaneously unmask and masks the self, repeatedly representing and revising a voice. Separation between the

woman writer's public and private voice was not, as modification of the periodical piece by Willis and others suggests, arbitrary and binary, though nineteenth-century U.S. women writers may have felt it as such in their attempts to declare a consistent "I" in a repressive patriarchal culture. Rather, a spectrum of female self-representation occupied the space between public and private voice.

Fern's nineteenth-century U.S. women's early periodical writing allowed Willis to reveal herself through her writing and also to represent herself as a woman her culture wanted her to be. Michel Foucault's discussion of the confession's production of truth leads to an individual being "authenticated by the discourse of truth he was able or obliged to produce concerning himself" (58). Fern produced her confessions, her discourses of truth, to authenticate, transform, and disguise concepts of self and gender. For readers, in Berlant's reflection, "one woman's disclosure of the frustrations of everyday life ennobles the lives of other women: moreover, the complaint installs woman's writing as a part of an ongoing pedagogy about how to negotiate the contested life of femininity" ("The Female Woman" 445).

After Willis crossed generic boundaries to write *Ruth Hall* and *Rose Clark*, and after Fern's identity was revealed, Willis continued to write as Fanny Fern until days before she died. The lengthy *New York Ledger* editorial on her death, written by her long-time editor and friend Robert Bonner, reads in part:

Who was Fanny Fern? began to be the question of the day. The secret of her identity was so well guarded that the most inquisitive could not get track of her and the myriad suppositions, guesses, announcements, denials and discussions which were published on the subject greatly enhanced the public interest. (9 Nov. 1872)

Having reprised the sensation regarding Fern's identity that had been activated by her early periodical writing, Bonner praises Fern's character, lists her book publications, and then, throughout the second half of the editorial, includes quotations from a range of personal notes Willis had written to him "during the many years of Fanny Fern's connection with the *Ledger*." Rather than selecting from among Fern's periodical pieces, two novels, essay collections, or indeed any of her published writings, Bonner instead quotes from her personal correspondence to him.¹⁷ The quotations drawn from Fern's notes to Bonner foreground her opinions regarding motherhood, charity, religion, and gratitude. Such subjects and Bonner's selection of Fern's remarks on them implicitly

inscribe Fern as a conventional white middle-class woman. Though Bonner's editorial on Fern's death recalls the earlier furor over her gender, it also insists on construction of Fern as what Bonner, in the second sentence of the editorial, names "the embodiment of American womanhood." Bonner's editorial on Fern's death maintains the discourses of publicity and self-fashioning that Fern had begun to evoke early in her literary career. It is fitting that the editorial concludes not with Bonner's writing but with a quotation from Willis's writing in a 25 January 1870 note to Bonner signed, "Yours Fanny Fern."

Long after the anonymity and androgyny provided by her pseudonym and capitalized upon in her early periodical writings had collapsed—when Sara Willis (by then Parton) signed personal letters "Fanny Fern" and had sued for and won exclusive rights to the name—Parton continued to write as Fern.¹⁸ Though the pseudonymous veil was now transparent, it still enabled her to write, to figure, and to refigure a self. Willis had initially discovered female agency and representation through her composition of Fern's early periodical writings. Ultimately, she modified the periodical writer's project for her personal project, using it to reflect and transform concepts of self, gender, and women's voice.

In the next chapter I continue my examination of women's autobiographic writing and female representation, turning more explicitly to constructions and explorations of sex-gender identity. Using Louisa May Alcott's early work *Hospital Sketches*, I consider intersections of form and gender that Alcott discovers in her work as a writer and as a nurse in a Civil War hospital. In a moment when Sarah Kemble Knight's *Journal* and Fanny Fern's periodical writings were in print and continued to provide un/conventional representations for and of women, the outbreak of the Civil War resulted in possibilities and opportunities for women in a changing nineteenth-century U.S. culture beyond what either Knight or Fern had imagined.