



“A Nondescript Monster”: Fanny Fern in Transatlantic Print Culture

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Abstract

Fanny Fern (real name Sara Payson Willis Parton) was one of the most profitable American columnists and novelists of the mid-nineteenth century. Fern sustained her celebrity status largely through unauthorised reprints of her articles in American and British papers. Consequently, her public image was for the most part constructed through those reprinted articles, which were usually framed by speculations about her private life. This article examines the implications and limitations of Fern's efforts to stabilise the dissemination of her public image in periodicals by using the relatively more stable form of the book. As a celebrity, she had limited control over the way she was publicly represented. As a woman in the public sphere, she was particularly vulnerable to slander and libel. The circulation of a spurious biography entitled *The Life and Beauties of Fanny Fern* (1855), alongside her sanctioned autobiographical novel *Ruth Hall*, profited from her literary brand while simultaneously undermining it. Examining how these competing narratives about Fern's private life – one fictionalised, one unauthorised – shaped her literary reputation at home and in England, this paper argues that textual representations as well as material market choices, including book bindings and advertising techniques, shaped authorship in the increasingly commercialised transatlantic literary market of the mid-century in ways that both benefited and imperilled the female writer.

Keywords

Fanny Fern; copyright laws; celebrity culture; authorial misappropriation; transatlantic literary market

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“A Nondescript Monster”: Fanny Fern in Transatlantic Print Culture

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Introduction

This article examines how competing unauthorised and fictionalised narratives about the private life of the popular American author Fanny Fern affect the construction of her literary brand in an increasingly commercialised transatlantic literary marketplace. My use of the term “literary brand” is twofold. It refers to the marketability of Fern’s pseudonym as synonymous with a certain kind of literary fare: feminine, sentimental and consistent with the values associated with the figure of the domestic woman. Literary branding also names Fern’s own deliberate if fraught effort to control public perception of her. Although “public image” and “branding” sometimes overlap, the term “brand” emphasises how the commercialisation of popular writers shapes their authorship and consequently influences the way their readers interpret their literary work. In this sense, branding signifies the fraught relationship between the market and the author.

The nineteenth-century literary market that amplified Fern’s pen name and consequently contributed to visibility of her literary brand was transatlantic in nature. As Meredith L. McGill rightly noted in her seminal work *American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting*, “although we have come to think of the classic works of mid-nineteenth-century American authors as national property, these texts emerged from a literary culture that was regional in articulation and transnational in scope” (2003: 1). Furthermore, nineteenth-century critics often measured Fern’s literary success against transnational paradigms. John S. Hart, for instance, elaborately quoted from American and British reviews and cited the sales of Fern’s books in both markets to justify anthologising and canonising her in *The Female Prose Writers of America* (1855: 472-5). Though Fern’s position as an American female writer has attracted a great deal of critical attention from Americanist scholars, the transatlantic aspect of her literary career has been largely overlooked. The current literary scholarship on Fern has re-evaluated the sentimental rhetoric in her fiction as a form of protest writing (Tompkins 1986; Harris 1988; Berlant 1991; Harker 2001), examined the relationship between her newspaper writing and novelistic representation (Pettengill 1996), analysed her position as a female professional writer

in American print culture (Kelley 1984; Laffrado 1997; Wright 2001; Gunn 2010) and broached the topic of her popularity in relation to celebrity culture of the mid-nineteenth century (Weber 2012; O'Neill 2017). Only Brenda R. Weber (2012) applied a transatlantic approach in her examination of Fern by tracing the responses of famous American and British authors to Elizabeth Gaskell's representation of female genius in *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857). My take on Fern differs from Weber's in that I am more interested in the implications of circulating Fern's works in the American and British press on shaping female authorship in the transatlantic literary marketplace.

Determining how Fern's name operates as a literary brand requires a consideration of her position as a celebrity. This is because literary brands emerged alongside promotional strategies that used the names of celebrity authors to predict sales and establish customer loyalty in a lucrative yet unstable literary marketplace. Only two studies examine Fern as a celebrity: Brenda Weber's *Women and Literary Celebrity in the Nineteenth Century* (2012) and Bonnie Carr O'Neill's *Literary Celebrity and Public Life in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (2017). Weber approached Fern's "multivalent famous female author" protagonists through the lens of the gendering of celebrity culture (2012: 75). She argues Fern's representation of various models of authorship in her fiction was a strategic move that challenged the idea of a single authorial identity for the famous female writer and consequently paved the way for additional representations of the woman writer that depart from Victorian codes of femininity (75). O'Neill researches the relationship between nineteenth-century American celebrity culture and the emergence of the "personalization" of the public sphere (2017: 2). She analysed the way Fern's periodical writings established a sense of intimacy with her readers. Fern's publicity, as O'Neill contends, permitted her to momentarily evade pervasive gender presumptions and ultimately cement her public identity in the generic form of periodicals, which were usually associated with masculinity (155). Weber and O'Neill provide compelling analyses of Fern, but they overlook a crucial element in constituting Fern's celebrity: the role of the media in distributing her name. As Tom Mole helpfully explains, modern celebrity culture is a "cultural apparatus" constructed through the intersection of three elements, "an individual, an industry and an audience", to "render an individual personally fascinating" (2007: 1). Earlier studies, notably those by Michael Newbury (1997) and Melissa J. Homestead (2001), provide useful insights into the nature of the print industry in shaping Fern's authorial persona. However, these studies are primarily preoccupied with the American literary marketplace. I aim to expand their scope by including an analysis of the British literary market in comparison to the American one.

Fern's bestselling books were the products of an already established but unstable reputation constructed chiefly through the pervasive complex editorial practice of reprint among American and British papers. As a business courtesy, editors in newspapers and periodicals had established a system of exchange to compensate for lax copyright laws by including source credit and occasional complimentary paragraphs praising the paper in which the reprinted piece had first appeared.¹ Consequently, as Meredith L. McGill and Ryan Cordell have shown, the names of source papers often replaced authorial bylines, problematising Romantic notions of authorship (Cordell 2015: 418; McGill 2003: 174). In contrast, papers that reprinted Fern's articles often kept her name in isolation from the source paper in a move that gestured towards her growing celebrity. The consistency of maintaining authorial attribution, at times even to pieces she did not write, suggests part of the articles' value emerged

¹ The courtesy principles also governed the book industry, and several established publishers created an extra-legal system of "trade courtesy" to regulate the reprints of foreign works. Robert Spoo provides a detailed analysis of this practice in *Without Copyrights: Piracy, Publishing, and the Public Domain* (2013: 13-64).

from their association with the name of the popular columnist. The remarkable thing about these unsanctioned reprints is that they were often framed by speculations about her private life. Consequently, Fern's literary brand was constantly reshaped in ways she had no control over in the complex reconfigurations, replications and revisions of articles correctly and spuriously attributed to her.

Her books then offered her the opportunity to stabilise the dissemination of her public image. She published four books during the years of her invisibility – that is, when her identity was still unknown to the public. These are selections of her articles in the two-volume *Fern Leaves from Fanny's Portfolio* (1853-1854), the collection of short stories for children *Little Ferns for Fanny's Little Friends* (1854) and the autobiographical novel *Ruth Hall* (1854). I contend that Fern's early publications served two purposes. They capitalised on her celebrity by amplifying the visibility of her pseudonym, and they hinted at their author's efforts of self-fashioning in their depiction of several examples of female heroines who, like their creator, pursue writing as a profession and eventually gain transatlantic fame. Within the safe space of fiction published in the relatively more authoritative form of the book, Fern found the opportunity to negotiate her position as a female literary celebrity. As a celebrity, she could not have full control over how she was represented. As a woman, she was vulnerable to libel and slander, especially as a twice-married woman estranged from her family and having to support herself. The circulation of a spurious biography, *The Life and Beauties of Fanny Fern* (1855), published anonymously within a few months of the publication of Fern's *Ruth Hall*, undermined her efforts to control her public perception. The book sabotaged Fern's efforts at branding the authorial self by revealing her identity to the public and defaming her by blending biographical facts with slanderous insinuations about her manner of living. *Life and Beauties* also capitalised on the appeal of her literary brand by incorporating several of her articles that lacked copyrights and coating its unflattering depiction of her with an air of authenticity by imitating a genre she had used in the two volumes of *Fern Leaves from Fanny's Portfolio*. Though this spurious biography certainly falls under the category of libel, Fern did not seek redress from the legal system for unknown reasons. It is clear that contemporary copyright regulation had nothing to say about the kind of libellous reuse of Fern's writings. In fact, inadequate copyright laws facilitated the kind of defamation Fern was subjected to by failing to protect her own words against unauthorised reuse. How nineteenth-century copyright laws shaped Fern's literary brand becomes even more complicated when we consider the drastically different ways American and British publishers chose to present *Life and Beauties* to their respective audiences. Thus, the circulation of Fern's literary brand encapsulates the opportunities and limitations of the professionalisation of writing for women and demonstrates the marketability of female writers in the second half of the nineteenth century. Simultaneously, it reveals the complexity and precarity of establishing female authorship in an increasingly commercialised transatlantic literary marketplace.

Textual Portraits of the Celebrity Fanny Fern and *Ruth Hall*

It was in periodicals that Fern's name was amplified to ultimately become a recognisable literary brand. The system of exchange that granted her a readership beyond the Boston papers *Olive Branch* and *The True Flag* had also reshaped her public image in ways she had not anticipated. The result was the dissemination of textual portraits of the popular American columnist that, at times, complicated the image of the feminine domestic writer Fern depicted in her fiction. Her strategy was to use a relatively more stable form – the book – to counter the narratives circulated in American and British papers that laid claim to her private life, albeit with conflicting outcomes. The form of the book provides several advantages for shaping

authorial personae. They are more permanent as material objects compared to the ephemerality of periodicals. Furthermore, texts originally published as books were, arguably, more legally protected against authorial misappropriation than periodicals because their publishers were more willing to seek copyright protection. Indeed, Fern – along with her publisher Derby – were careful to maintain the copyrights of her books in the United States and in England, preventing their piracy (Low 1853: XVI.478). However, as I will show, nineteenth-century copyright regulations in the book industry were far from being adequate in preventing unsanctioned books that borrowed Fern's name and works.

Fern's early books, the two volumes of *Fern Leaves from Fanny's Portfolio*, include several stories that feature a female author character as the main protagonist. Examples are "A Chapter on Literary Women", "A Practical Blue-Stocking", and "Our Hatty". Yet, the link between Fern and her heroines in *Fanny's Portfolio* was not readily apparent to the contemporary reader as it was the case in her later work *Ruth Hall*. This was chiefly because the reader of *Ruth Hall* was guided by both literary and extra-literary hints to establish the connection. There are notable parallels between the eponymous heroine Ruth and her creator. Both women are popular columnists who write under a *nom de plume* to support themselves and their children financially. The fact that Fern wrote out of financial necessity was probably already known by the typical reader of her articles. The reader would soon discover that Ruth, and implicitly Fern, was unjustly treated by her family and in-laws whose personal (and financial) interests conflicted with aiding a widowed woman with two young children. The association between Fern and Ruth was further highlighted in the way the novel was presented to the public. First, the advertising campaign attempted to capitalise on the public interest in Fern's private life by claiming that the novel reflected its author's life. Publishers Mason and Brothers denied that the novel was autobiographical after tactically using the same characterisation to promote it (Geary 1976: 388). Second, contemporary critics insisted on reading the novel as an account of Fern's life. The editor of the American *Godey's Lady's Book*, Sarah Josepha Hale, for instance, refused to review the novel because of Fern's satirical treatment of her own relatives. Hale then asserted that the magazine "never interfere[s] in family affairs" (1855: 176), blurring the line between reality and fiction. Similarly, the British paper *The Era* commented on the novel as being "more bold sometimes than we quite admire. Is not Fanny Fern a sister of N. P. Willis?" ("Literature" 1855b). By the time *The Era* reviewed *Ruth Hall*, Fern's real identity had already been revealed to the public, primarily because of the publication of the unauthorised biography *The Life and Beauties of Fanny Fern*. Like many other critics, *The Era* does not evaluate *Ruth Hall* as a literary work but treats it as an autobiography of its author. Consequently, *Ruth Hall* was "Fanny Fern" to contemporary readers.

The controversy created by the autobiographical reading of *Ruth Hall* instantiates a moment when a literary celebrity did not always have full control over the way she was represented. It is unclear whether Fern agreed with her publisher to promote the novel as autobiographical. What is clear, however, is that she had intended for it to be self-referential and self-representative. She probably did not anticipate the backlash to such a decision. The events of *Ruth Hall* resemble the writer's life with one important omission: her second marriage. This deliberate erasure is understandable because of Fern's vulnerable position as a woman whose reputation would be seriously damaged if news about her divorce were to be known. Fern seemed to be aware of this. She was always reluctant to speak about the details of her unsuccessful marriage to Farrington to even those closest to her, as her daughter Ellen Parton recalled (Parton 1899). Furthermore, Fern confessed in later years that she wrote *Ruth Hall* against her better judgment (Eckert 1934: n.p.). One is tempted to argue that her discomfort with the novel was less due to its reception as autobiographical and more due to the

criticism such reception had generated which threatened her efforts at branding. The reviews I have cited above often linked unfilial acts to unfemininity in clear contrast to the feminine author-characters that Fern depicts in her work. Even those reviewers who praised *Ruth Hall* were taken aback by the way the novel does not comply with the general characterisation of women's writing of the period. Unlike the condemnation that he showed to the so-called "scribbling women," Nathaniel Hawthorne praised Fern because she "writes as the Devil was in her; and that is the only condition under which a woman ever writes anything worth reading" (1910: 3.78). Consequently, these reviews, whether they condemned or complimented Fern, either masculinised or desexualised her, complicating her efforts to feminise the authorial self.

The plot of *Ruth Hall* carefully inscribes a model of literary achievement to avoid masculinising the female author. The novel provides numerous examples of this, but I have chosen to focus specifically on the representation of the business setting because it is where Ruth's femininity is most at risk, given that such a setting is presumably within the male sphere. When rival editors approach Ruth seeking the exclusive rights to her work, she is described as "a novice in business-matters," and only "common sense" helps her through the editors' negotiation (Fern 1854: 109). Nevertheless, this scene paradoxically emphasises Ruth's shrewdness as a professional author. First, she refuses to change her *nom de plume*, "Floy," because it is "foolish to throw [the reputation she gained from her pen name] away by the adoption of another signature" (109). Second, she refrains from disclosing the humble remuneration she received from her current editor. This tactical move gives her the advantage of bargaining for a higher and steadier salary. Third, she sets her own working terms. She insists on contributing only two articles per week instead of the eight she used to write for her previous magazine. This arrangement, Ruth believes, will give her the opportunity to write better pieces without compromising her health by working long hours. Common sense alone is not enough for setting such conditions; sufficient knowledge of the nature of the literary marketplace is needed. Ruth is, contrary to Fern's description of her, a canny businesswoman who is willing to exploit the growing currency of her authorial name to benefit financially and improve professionally. By denying her protagonist any business knowledge, Fern is ensuring that Ruth does not possess any masculine attributes through her link to the business world, a sphere presumably reserved for men.

Responses to *Ruth Hall* show that readers frequently engaged with both the character in the fiction and the personality of the author. This was, after all, a possibility of which Fern was aware and tried to exploit in her writing strategy. This strategy involved placing her text between concealing and revealing herself. Her choice to depict an author-character for her first novel, in book form no less, was not arbitrary. *Ruth Hall* functions as a textual self-portrait oriented towards stabilising the dissemination of its author's literary brand in a more authoritative and durable form compared to the ephemerality of periodicals. This is further manifested in the novel's self-conscious acknowledgment of readership beyond the United States. As noted in the novel, Ruth's articles were widely circulated in "England, Scotland, Ireland, – wherever the English language is spoken" (Fern 1854: 291). This suggests that Fern was aware of her readers across the Atlantic, and her book was addressed to them as much as to those in the United States. Though the backlash that *Ruth Hall* received was partly caused by its unconventional plot, its circulation alongside the counternarrative, and ostensibly more authoritative, text *The Life and Beauties of Fanny Fern* contributed to this reception. Only by examining the two texts together can we fully understand the implications of Fern's attempts in shaping female authorship in transatlantic markets.

Authorial Misappropriation and Transatlantic Representation in *The Life and Beauties of Fanny Fern*

The publication of *The Life and Beauties of Fanny Fern* was well timed, appearing amid the controversy that *Ruth Hall* had generated. The book not only confirmed the autobiographical aspects of Fern's novel but also provided a list of names on which the characters were based ([Moulton] 1855: 66). Thus, it functioned as a sequel that helped readers interpret the novel. *Life and Beauties* is now presumed to be the work of Fern's former editor at the Boston *True Flag*, William Moulton; a large portion of the book first appeared in his paper as part of a smear campaign that began shortly after the publication of *Ruth Hall* (Warren 1992: 112; Walker 1993: 1). Moulton intended *Life and Beauties* as an act of vengeance for Fern's caricatured depiction of him as the unethical and exploitative editor Mr. Tibbetts in *Ruth Hall*. Yet, Moulton's book does not merely unpack the mysteries of Fern's novel; it serves another function. It exploits Fern's literary brand (by amplifying her pen name in the title) and plays on the possibility of branding (in its reference to her "life and beauties"). He does this by tactically taking advantage of the lack of copyright for Fern's early articles to authenticate his uncomplimentary portrayal of her and by using her own words (often heavily edited) against her. The fact that copyright laws at the time did not prevent Moulton's audacious reuses facilitated, and even substantiated, libellous claims over Fern's private life. The issue of inadequate copyright laws in the publication of *The Life and Beauties of Fanny Fern* did not only include incorporating and modifying unauthorised reprints but also extended to influence the manner in which the book, and by implication its author, appeared to American and British readers. Therefore, Fern's literary brand was shaped by extraliterary factors as much as by textual representations.

The Life and Beauties of Fanny Fern reveals the gendered limits of a lucrative and successful writing strategy – one that for the most part had established Fern's reputation as a professional author and domestic woman. Moulton defames Fern with the same savvy strategy she previously had used – that is, by depicting various models of authorship. These include her brother N. P. Willis, her heroine Ruth and of course Fern herself. The first chapter reveals her real identity as "Sara Payson Willis" (11), juxtaposing her against two male figures, her father and brother (11). Her father, Nathaniel Willis, is introduced as one of the "respectable citizens of Boston, now a man well advanced in years, [who made] a great sacrifice only parents can guess, to give his sons and daughters that education which is a poor man's noblest legacy" (11-12). Moulton tactically presents him as a caring father, which contradicts Fern's fictionalised depiction of him in *Ruth Hall* as the heroine's indifferent and parsimonious father, Mr. Ellet. Her brother is described as "the brilliant essayist and poet," although as the narrator insists, Willis's fame does not require any introduction (11). The rest of the book is dedicated to attacking Fern's integrity and morality by questioning the veracity of the events depicted in the novel. Moulton stresses that unlike her heroine, "no starving necessity had compelled her to resort to the pen" (44). She is nothing like "the graceful heroine of *Ruth Hall*" in her appearance and personality (20). Instead, she is a flirtatious widow of questionable virtue who lives luxuriously, gaily entertaining men (but not women) in her private chamber (27-36). This representation of Fern presents her as a salacious woman who does not conform to societal norms. It also questions her literary talents, instead suggesting she is a producer of a commodity whose hunger for fame motivates her to harm those nearest to her. Ironically, *Life and Beauties* portrays Fern as one of the "nondescript monster[s]" – the precise figure her own fiction repudiated (Fern 1853: 177).

To further validate this version of Fern, Moulton links the credibility of his narrative to the legitimacy of his reprints, which equate statutory laws with ethical practices. The aforementioned biographical sketch appears only after a carefully written preface in which Moulton lays out the legality of his actions, stressing that he has “infringed on no one’s copyright” by including a selection of Fern’s articles (iv). His claim is correct. Like many others, the editors of the *True Flag* and *Olive Branch* did not take the steps necessary to secure the copyrights for the pieces published in their papers, which made them available for reprints. Using similar legal language, he justifies the morality of his revelation of Fern’s identity and emphasises that “the lives of distinguished men and women have always been accounted public property” (iii). His statement turns both the work and the life of the author into commodities for public consumption. Of course, Fern’s position as a *female* celebrity is central in his efforts to injure her reputation. After all, he does not reprint those articles for their aesthetic value – rather, his aim is to use them as a testimony for Fern’s character, being “communications of her own lips” that substantiate “the most prominent incidents of her [Fern’s] eventful career” (iv). The reader would soon discover that by “eventful career,” Moulton is nodding towards Fern’s scandalous position as a divorced woman and making extensive use of the stigma that comes with such a status to harm her.

Although the book shields itself from any violation of Fern’s authorial rights, the lack of copyrights over her newspaper articles meant Moulton had the liberty to modify them as he pleased while keeping them attributed to her. In one case, he retitled one of her published columns from “Fanny Fern on Matrimony” (Fern 1852) to “Mrs. Farrington on Matrimony” ([Moulton] 1855: 162), thus addressing her by the name of her former husband, Samuel P. Farrington. Moulton’s alterations did not stop with editing the title of one of her articles to reference her divorce. He had completely rewritten the article to attribute to her rather unconventional views towards marriage. By no means is this intended to suggest Fern’s newspaper articles did not have their own share of nonconformity – she was outspoken about topics such as venereal diseases and prostitution when women were not supposed to know, let alone publicly speak, about these issues (Warren 1992: 291). However, her bold articles began to appear when the image of the conventional femininity with which she attempted to align herself at the beginning of her writing career was no longer sustainable following the publication of *The Life and Beauties of Fanny Fern*. Nonetheless, I suggest Moulton’s claim of authorship over those articles should be approached critically, especially given his book’s purpose.

Tracing the genesis of Moulton’s “Mrs. Farrington on Matrimony” in Fern’s body of work reveals that the original piece first appeared as part of her regular contributions to the Boston *Olive Branch* in 1852 under the title “Fanny Fern on Matrimony” (Fern 1852). The issue of whether Fern herself or her editor, Thomas Norris, chose the title is unclear. What is clear, however, is that she found the article still relevant to her readers a year later and included it in *Fern Leaves from Fanny’s Portfolio* under the title “Aunt Hetty on Matrimony.” She made several modifications in addition to the title – most significantly, substituting the first-person narrator “Mrs. Fern” to “Aunt Hetty” and changing the recipient of the narrator’s advice from the reader to unidentified “girls” chatting over their “embroidery and worsted work” (Fern 1853: 307). The overall message remains the same. “Mrs Fern” and “Aunt Hetty” alike warn newly married women against devoting all their affection to their husbands; otherwise, their husbands will lose interest in them. Fern’s critique of matrimony implicitly condemns a patriarchal society that promotes toxic gendered roles where women alone are expected to be the emotional providers in a relationship. The fact that “Aunt Hetty” gives her

seemingly unwanted advice to stop the young girls from “building air-castles and talking of lovers and honey-moons” (Fern 1853: 307) in the revised version means the reader has the liberty to interpret it as a reflection of Fern’s own views or as a comical sketch of a spiteful woman who utters her words out of envy. Her revisions to “Fanny Fern on Matrimony” then hint at a sense of caution over her self-representation when she published in book form compared to her newspaper writings.

While Fern’s critique of society made itself somewhat inconspicuous by targeting individual practices, Moulton’s “Mrs. Farrington on Matrimony” was relatively more direct, using suggestive language to question the sacrament of marriage. Moulton’s version of the article begins with an editorial commentary that reminds the reader of Fern’s unsuccessful marriage; in case the title was not clear enough, the commentary stresses that “FANNY has ‘tried it,’ and she knows” (162). Presenting her as an expert in a field in which she had presumably failed leans towards ridicule. The article then proceeds to imitate her journalistic writing style by beginning with a quotation, to which she responds:

“Sambo, what am your ’pinion ’bout de married life? Don’t you tink it de most happiest?”
 “Well, I’ll tell you ’bout dat ere—’pends altogether how dey enjoy themselves.”

(162)

She replies with “Sambo! Sambo! Be quiet! You needn’t *always* tell the truth. White folks don’t” (162). She then warns Sambo not to be fooled by appearances “*Oh! y-e-s, Sambo, matrimony is a ‘blessed institution,’ so the ministers say (find ’em in fees, you know!), and so everybody says – except those who have tried it?*” (163). The article uses gender and racial stereotypes to undermine Fern’s position on marriage and implicitly debase her authority as a writer, the majority of whose works self-consciously set themselves in the domestic sphere. Although such a portrayal might not seem harmful to the modern reader, we should not forget the cultural context of Moulton’s “Mrs. Farrington on Matrimony.” If we assume his intended audience was those who had read Fern’s works, that is a middle-class white readership; he could not jeopardise the creditability of his unflattering narrative of Fern by injuring nineteenth-century genteel culture. Moulton’s method then is to be suggestive, requiring his audience to read between the lines.

The issue of authorial misappropriation in Moulton’s book is further complicated when one examines the way American and British publishers presented the book to potential readers. The anonymity of *The Life and Beauties of Fanny Fern* presents Fern as the only attributed author, thus allowing publishers to either play on or disregard this possibility. I argue their decision as to whether to attribute the book to Fern is related directly to statutory copyright laws, revealing the impact of extra-literary factors on shaping female authorship in transatlantic print culture. Publishers on both sides of the Atlantic tried to capitalise on Fern’s growing celebrity with strikingly different methods. One method is using the materiality of the book. As with Fern’s own books, the bindings of the American and British editions of *Life and Beauties* are symbolic; they reflect a broader trend in mid-nineteenth century publishing practices in which the binding becomes integral to the book as a whole. Covers were designed to reflect a book’s content, establish its tone and – most importantly – attract readers. The covers of the American and British editions of Fern’s books (as well as Moulton’s) are somewhat different in the sense that they are not simply reflections of their content; they provide a reflexive commentary on the author whose name is intertwined in their titles. The materiality of the British editions of Fern’s books corresponds with those published in the United States (see Figure 1).

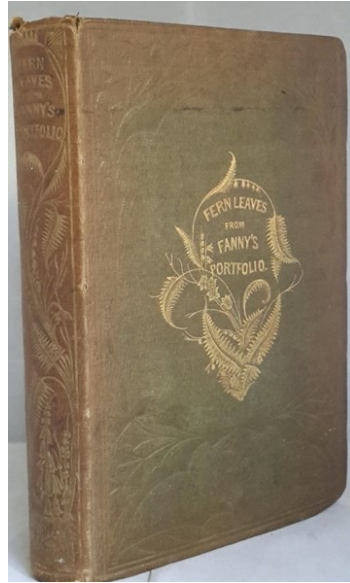


Figure 1: Fanny Fern, *Fern Leaves from Fanny's Portfolio* (London: N. Cooke, 1853).

<https://www.abebooks.com/Fern-Leaves-Fannys-Portfolio-Illustrated-Birket/1372860298/bd#&gid=1&pid=1>

The crafty use of a gold-foil stamped vignette featuring ferns, usually complemented by the book's green binding, clearly plays on Fern's pen name. This visual play mobilises two sets of associations. First, the incorporation of the fern engraving nods to the author's gender. The association of nature with female writers is not arbitrary; language signifying nature was often used in the nineteenth century to emphasise feminine qualities (Seaton 1995: 19). Second, it demonstrates the currency of Fern's pseudonym. As these bindings suggest, the significance of her works emerges not only from their aesthetic value but also from the fact that the celebrity "Fanny Fern" had composed them, which consequently contributes to and demonstrates the branding power of her pseudonym. Hence, Fern's bookbindings were designed tactically to perform complex functions, including signalling her celebrity and associating her with an acceptable model of female authorship by stressing on her femininity.



Figure 2: Anonymous, *The Life and Beauties of Fanny Fern* (New York: H. Long & Brother, 1855).

<https://torontoreviewofbooks.com/2011/12/life-and-beauties-of-fanny-fern-unearthing-a-forgotten-literary-feud-of-the-1850s/>

While these choices were made by Fern's publishers, they nevertheless conformed to the brand she was committed to circulating. By contrast, the American and British editions of *Life and Beauties* exploit the design of Fern's books to undermine this model of female authorship, albeit on different levels. The cover of the American edition of *Life and Beauties* had the curious choice of depicting the rod of Asclepius – featuring the single serpent entwined around a branch (see Figure 2). The engraving's location in the centre of the cover compels the reader to look at it. Moulton's text does not clarify why this engraving adorns its cover, probably because at that time, publishers rather than authors often chose bindings. Such a choice is of particular interest because the rod of Asclepius was often associated with medical publications in the mid-nineteenth century (Friedlander 1992: 109-26). It is true that nineteenth-century bookbinders often used whatever stamp they had in hand. Yet, the way in which H. Long & Brother publishing firm generally deployed book covers suggests that their choice was not arbitrary. A year prior to the publication of *Life and Beauties*, for instance, the firm published a book entitled *The Rappers: or, the Mysteries, Fallacies, and Absurdities of Spirit-Rapping, Table-Tipping, and Entrancement* (1854) by an anonymous author with a peculiar cover that featured six people engaging in a séance. Therefore, H. Long & Brother, as a publisher of popular literature, purposefully used a combination of textual and visual elements in their promotional strategy.

Why then did the firm go with the interesting choice of the rod of Asclepius for a book cover even though *Life and Beauties* was clearly not a medical text? Turning to the text itself, Moulton refers to Fern in one instance using medical terms, describing her as “a keen dissector of the human heart” when alluding to her “flirtatious” nature ([Moulton] 1855: 14). Possibly, H. Long & Brother wanted to elaborate on this line of thinking, presenting Fern as a moral disease that *Life and Beauties* is meant to dissect, and they suggestively did this by using the medical symbol as a book cover.

The advertising notice of the American edition of *The Life and Beauties of Fanny Fern* reflects a similar endeavour, aiming towards warning the unaware public about Fern. Although *Life and Beauties* also contains selected articles attributed to Fern, H. Long & Brother chose to amplify the book's scandalous aspects by focusing on the biographical sections that the book includes. One advertisement contains a series of rhetorical questions: “Who is Fern?” “Is Ruth Hall Fanny Fern or someone else?” “If Fanny Fern is not Ruth Hall, who is Fanny Fern?” (“New Publications” 1855: 5). It promises readers they can find a “true history” of Fern in *Life and Beauties*. The book, as the advertising promises, “lets us into many secrets ... showing Fanny in her true colors, proud, ambitious, and heartless” (5). This advertisement deliberately positions the reader to challenge the model of female authorship established in *Ruth Hall*. It first acknowledges the novel as a self-portrait of Fern and then dismisses it as a mere self-portrait: rooted in self-perception with no ties to reality. Therefore, the American edition of *Life and Beauties* consciously presents and promotes a scandalous version of Fern and turns scandal into a commodity for eager readers' consumption.

Conversely, the cover of the British edition of *Life and Beauties* completely omits the book's scandalous aspects and instead implicitly attributes the book to Fern. This sleight of hand occurs on two levels. First, the British edition of the book references her pen name by including a fern stamp on the cover, resembling the bindings of Fern's authorised works (see Figure 3). Second, this edition of *Life and Beauties* has the same binding to the British edition of Fern's novel *Ruth Hall*, both complementing with ferns illustration on their cover. The books were published by the same publisher Knight & Son in England. Charles Knight of the Knight & Son even promoted the two works in the same advertising note presenting them as being written by the same author (see Figure 4).

When advertising Moulton's book, Knight emphasised that it included a selection of Fern's articles. The fact that the book also contained "an authentic [n]arrative of her life" was of secondary importance (Low 1855). Therefore, Knight & Son completely excluded from their advertisements the scandalous aspects of *Life and Beauties* and chose to present it simply as another book by Fern.

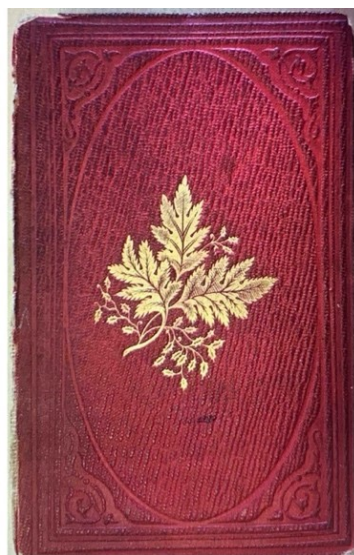


Figure 3: *The Life and Beauties of Fanny Fern* (London: Knight & Son, 1855) © British Library Board, General Reference Collection 12354.a.34. Used with permission

Uniform with "Knight's Edition" of RUTH HALL, 1s. cloth,
LIFE and BEAUTIES of FANNY FERN, containing the whole of her "Shadows and Sunbeams," the best of her other Sketches, and an authentic Narrative of her Life. — Order "Knight's Shilling Edition." Or bound in cloth, extra gilt edges, with Engravings, 1s. 6d.
 2. RUTH HALL: a Domestic Tale of the Present Time, by FANNY FERN. With Frontispiece by Gilbert. "Whoever reads one chapter will be sure to go on to the end." — Order "Knight's Shilling Edition" bound in cloth. Or cloth extra, gilt edges, 1s. 6d.
 Knight and Son, Clerkenwell Close. (397)

Figure 4: *The Publishers' Circular and General Record of British and Foreign Literature* (London: Sampson Low, Son & Co., 1855), XVIII, p. 174.

The differences in presenting *Life and Beauties* to American and British readers, one a scandal mongering exposé and the other an additional title by the famous American writer, can be partly attributed to the impact of statutory copyright laws on business practices in the transatlantic book industry. Copyright laws protected the editions of Moulton's book and Fern's books published in the United States because they were written by American citizens. Conversely, British copyright laws over American texts did not guarantee the same level of protection. The publishers of these editions were preoccupied primarily with attracting potential consumers and amplifying what they assumed to be of interest to their readers – that is, uncovering the mysteries surrounding the celebrity columnist for H. Long & Brother and strengthening a model marketable female authorship in the case of Knight & Son. However, due to the absence of American participation in international copyright agreements, British publishers were not only working to attract potential buyers but also competing against rival publishers that issued pirated American books in England. Securing intellectual property protection for books written by American authors in Britain was a rather complicated process. They may acquire a valid copyright by staying in Britain, or any country under the British domain, during the publication of their works in the British marketplace (Seville 2006: 45; Spoo 2013: 70). To meet this requirement, it was not uncommon for American authors, such as Mark Twain, to travel to Canada to ensure intellectual laws in England protect their works. Although Fern's first publisher, James C. Derby, had successfully secured copyrights for her early works there, the publisher of *Ruth Hall*, Mason Brothers, did not take the steps necessary to protect her novel against unauthorised reprints in England (Low 1853). Consequently, Fern's *Ruth Hall* was subject to pirating by several British publishers, including the publisher

of *Life and Beauties*, Knight & Son. Thus, Knight & Son was not only attempting to increase the appeal of these books to British readers but also contending with rival publishers that printed pirated British editions of Fern's and Moulton's books. Charles Knight's strategy was to build a reputation for his firm as an authoritative British publisher of American literature. To do this, he emphasised the literary aestheticism associated with Fern's literary brand instead of focusing on the details of her life. Furthermore, his choice to publicise *Ruth Hall* and *The Life and Beauties of Fanny Fern* in Sampson Low's paper *The Publishers' Circular* is telling. Low's paper was among several contemporary attempts to regulate the book trade of foreign literature under ambiguous international copyright laws. *The Publishers' Circular* acted as an "authorized medium" for literary advertisement, and by implication, it presented the publishers that first advertised there as the official publishers of certain books (Barnes and Barnes 2011: 70).

The strikingly different ways that *The Life and Beauties of Fanny Fern* appeared to American and British audiences had influenced its reception to some degree, which confirms that readers use both textual and paratextual elements in the process of interpreting a literary text. For instance, one review by *The United States Democratic Review* comments on the astonishing juxtaposition between the title and the cover of the American edition; it notes the irony of choosing "the embossed cover as a viper biting a file" when the "anonymous complier" professes to unveil "the 'Life and Beauties' of his authoress" ("Book Notice" 1855: 235). It is unclear whether the reviewer understood the significance of using the rod of Asclepius for a book cover. The reader quickly notices that the review of *Life and Beauties* is clearly an estimation of Fern's character, with no consideration of the reprinted articles' aesthetic value. This biographical approach towards a book that is not exclusively a biography was not uncommon among American reviews. Several British responses to *Life and Beauties* correspond with their American counterparts and express "surprise" ("Notices of New Publications" 1855) and even "outrag[e]" ("Fanny Fern" 1855b) over the discrepancy between what Fern's character appears to be in her writing and what this seemingly authoritative biography reveals. Yet, advertising *Life and Beauties* alongside Fern's sanctioned work *Ruth Hall* in England contributed to another reception that is uncritical of its scandalous aspects. The prolific *Lady's Newspaper and Pictorial Times* magazine, for instance, simply comments on the cover of *Life and Beauties* complimenting the "very pretty edition" ("Our Library Chair" 1855: 315) while remaining completely ignorant of its content. Because it is clear that the reviewer did not *actually* read the book, one is tempted to conclude their reason to review *Life and Beauties* was because of its association with Fern's name; this stresses my early argument about the currency that her pseudonym came to hold in transatlantic literary culture. This vague review also conveys that Fern's efforts at branding were somewhat successful. For *Lady's Newspaper and Pictorial Times* to include a book that appears to be written by Fern suggests her name was associated with a type of literature that was nonthreatening and thus was suitable for consumption by middle-class white women.

Conclusion

The New York Weekly Dispatch's prediction that "the book by Long & Bro. will finish Fanny" ("Fanny Fern Again" 1855: n.p.) was incorrect. It is true that *Life and Beauties* harmed Fern's reputation and negatively affected her efforts at branding, at least temporarily. It was, nonetheless, financially rewarding. The sales of *Ruth Hall* multiplied as publisher Mason and Brothers issued new editions to keep up with public demand. Furthermore, Fern signed an exclusive contract with Robert Bonner's *New York Ledger* in 1855 amid the *Ruth Hall* controversy, making her allegedly the highest-paid female columnist in the

United States. Nonetheless, Fern attempted to mitigate the damage to her reputation caused by the publication of *Life and Beauties* by using two strategies: issuing an open letter rejecting the book's claim about her life and turning to fiction to explain the episode with her second husband. Both strategies, however, were unsuccessful. She sent a letter to the editor of the *New Bedford Mercury* on 31 January 1855 riposting the paper's declaration that readers could find the "real" account of Fern in *Life and Beauties*. Such a move represents her efforts to reclaim ownership over her life story. In the letter, she stresses that she had "never authorized it [*Life and Beauties*]," asserting that "my life having been a humble one, [is] in no way of any interest or concern to the public" ("Letter from Fanny Fern" 1855: n.p.). She then dismisses the book as "a catch-penny affair" (n.p.), denouncing its authority by emphasising its commercial motivation. It is true that *Life and Beauties* sold well because of Fern's literary brand, running into several American and British editions. It also succeeded in stigmatising Fern as a divorced woman. Following the book's publication, several periodicals, such as *Daily American Organ* and the British *Norfolk Chronicle*, used her former husband's name and addressed her as "Mrs. Farrington" implicitly undermining her authority as a domestic writer by referencing her divorce.

Like other female writers of the period who felt compelled to maintain expectations based on their socially ascribed gender role, Fern used the masquerade of fiction to explain the impact of these hegemonic assumptions on her personally. Although her first novel *Ruth Hall* did not contain details about her second marriage to Farrington, and Moulton tactically exploits this omission in *Life and Beauties* to defame her, Fern's last novel published in a book form, *Rose Clark* (1856), alludes to it through details about Gertrude's second marriage to the "hypocrite" and "gross sensualist" John Stahle (Fern 1856: 236). Stahle's abuse makes it impossible for Gertrude to live with him, and she leaves, which subjects her to slander. Unlike in *Ruth Hall*, Fern is less concerned with defining her position as a transatlantic female celebrity than in defending herself against the criticism initiated by the circulation of *Life and Beauties*. *Rose Clark* has not been reprinted since its original publication, suggesting that Fern's method in using fiction to reduce the damage of *Life and Beauties* on her reputation had failed. The implication is that the form of biography had more authority than that of fiction in laying claim to the personality of the female celebrity, something that Fern realised and would later try to exploit for her own gain.

As years passed, Fern would have another opportunity to align herself with an acceptable model of female authorship. The controversies surrounding *Life and Beauties* taught her that it was more effective to have others attest to her personal and intellectual qualities rather than do it herself in her writing, no matter how evasive her writing strategy. In 1868, another seemingly authoritative biography of Fern was published as part of a larger project of documenting *Eminent Women of the Age* (1868). By placing her alongside figures such as Queen Victoria, the editor of *Eminent Women* increased Fern's cultural importance and thus, even if implicitly, elevated her status beyond the ephemerality of celebrity culture. Such a move was intentional; after all, the editor was the well-known biographer James Parton, Fern's third husband. The essay on "Fanny Fern—Mrs. Parton" was written by Grace Greenwood. From its title, the reader is introduced to both the popular writer and the domestic woman. Greenwood continues this strategy by presenting Fern as a woman whose literary career did not interfere but was inspired by her motherhood. In one example, she attributes the source of Fern's literary talents to her daughters, whom the former describes as her "muses" (Greenwood 1868: 72). Greenwood does not make any reference to Fern's dispute with her family, her divorce or the debate over *Ruth Hall*, excepting a vague remark about the "unnatural indifference" that prevented Fern, as "a proud, independent woman," from "ask[ing] for help" (71). The fact that Greenwood occasionally quotes "from a private letter . . . [of] the subject of this biographical sketch" (67) reveals Fern's level of involvement in the process of writing

the essay and thus explains the omission of certain details that could have negatively affected her reputation. It is difficult to determine if *Eminent Women of the Age* had a greater impact than the earlier biography *Life and Beauties* on shaping Fern's literary brand. It is safe to assume, however, that by the end of the nineteenth century, Fern's literary reputation as a domestic writer had been firmly established even among conservative readerships, such as Mormons (Wilkinson 2018). The case of how Fern managed her literary celebrity by constructing a unique brand out of her pseudonymity demonstrates the strains imposed on female professional authors who had to navigate their identity as public writers in a society that considered them as private beings.

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