Introduction

In the middle of the nineteenth century, the highest paid and most famous newspaper writer in the United States was a woman known to the world as Fanny Fern, the nom de plume of Sara Payson Willis. Entertaining (and often provoking) readers with her engaging, conversational style that blended satire and sentiment, Fanny Fern wrote with an unbridled candor that was unexpected for a woman of her time. While she also authored two best-selling and controversial novels (*Ruth Hall* in 1853 and *Rose Clark* in 1855), it was Fern's newspaper columns that made her a household name in the 1850s and 1860s and were her most significant outlet for social commentary.[1] Fern's voice, despite being widely recognizable in her time, was virtually eliminated in the male-centered literature canon that took shape in the twentieth century. However, readers today will find in this celebrity columnist's writing a compelling glimpse into the past, as well as prescient cultural discourse that is still relevant today. Indeed, in nearly two decades of teaching college courses in American literature and women's literature, I have found that the writing of Fanny Fern consistently fascinates my students. They are intrigued by the variously snarky, subversive, quirky, sentimental, witty ideas of this author who defied the rules of her society for women to remain docile and demure.

The selected works in this volume represent Fern's perspective on a range of topics: from pushy department store salesmen to the hazards of secondhand smoke; from the joys and hassles of life in New York City to the inhumane conditions of schools, prisons, and asylums; from dealing with people's annoying habits and personalities to coping with trauma and grief. Above all else, Fanny Fern was known for her advocacy for women's rights and financial independence, and her writing on those issues was

shaped by her own fight for professional equity in the male-dominated newspaper world.

The story of Fanny Fern's meteoric rise to stardom is one of perseverance and triumph in the face of substantial obstacles. Before becoming "Fanny Fern," Sara Payson Willis's life was conventional for a white, elite-class woman of the 19th century. But a sudden change of fortune following the untimely death of her husband left her a destitute widow with two young children to support, during a time when there were few options for women to earn a living. With a talent for writing and familiarity with the newspaper business, Fern turned to writing for newspapers in an effort to provide for her family. She would have to advocate fiercely for fair compensation as a professional writer; in doing so, she confronted the substantial obstacles to a woman's voice and financial independence in a patriarchal society. The lessons Fern learned in the early struggles of her career stayed with her throughout her entire life, and she used her platform to advocate for women's independence and to call out patriarchal hypocrisy when she saw it.

The fifth of nine children, Sara Payson Willis was born in Portland, Maine, on July 9, 1811, to Nathaniel Willis and Hannah Parker Willis. The year after Sara was born, her family moved to Boston, where her father continued his work as a newspaper editor and served as a church deacon. Sara enjoyed a close relationship with her mother, judging from the loving recollections she would later share in such pieces as "Mother's Room" (included in chapter 6). In her biography of Fern, Joyce W. Warren points out that she especially appreciated her mother's affectionate cheerfulness, even in the face of her father's cold and stern personality: "Fern respected her mother for having the patience she felt that she herself never could have had under such [harsh] treatment. She recognized the cost to her mother of this effort and recognized also that it was only because of this effort that her mother was able to make their childhood home the warm and cheerful place that it was."[2]

Sara's father and her eldest brother, Nathaniel Parker Willis, were both editors of periodicals. Her father founded the Congregationalist newspaper the *Boston Recorder*, as well as the children's magazine the *Youth's Companion*, and Sara helped proofread and wrote copy for her father's periodicals. Her brother was a successful author and editor, eventually establishing the extremely popular magazine the *Home Journal* (which is still running today, with the title *Town & Country*). This early exposure to the world of authorship and publishing shaped Sara's own budding interest in reading

and writing, but when it mattered most, her brother and father failed to support her writing career. In 1828 Sara began attending Catherine Beecher's Hartford Female Seminary in Hartford, Connecticut, where she began to develop her voice, as well as a reputation for her sense of humor and a mischievous sparkle in her personality.

Sara married Bostonian banker Charles Harrington Eldredge in 1837, and the couple had three children between 1838 and 1844: Mary, Grace, and Ellen. After several years of a relatively conventional life as a nineteenth-century wife and mother, the trajectory of Sara's life was derailed by a series of tragic deaths: her youngest sister, Ellen, died in 1844 from complications in childbirth, and her beloved mother died six weeks later; her firstborn, Mary, succumbed to meningitis in 1845; and her husband died from typhoid fever in 1846. Compounding the trauma of these personal tragedies, Charles Eldredge died in serious debt and left his widow and children in poverty. Sara took in sewing work, but it was not enough to support herself and her children, and she received little financial support from her family and in-laws. Eager to rid himself of financial responsibility for his daughter and her children, Sara's father pressured her into a poorly matched marriage to Samuel Farrington in 1849. Sara's second marriage brought more hardship and heartache, as Farrington proved to be an emotionally abusive and jealous husband. Two years into their marriage, Sara took her two daughters and left Farrington—a bold and risky choice for a woman in the nineteenth century, when marriage laws favored men and divorce scandalized women. Farrington spread malicious rumors meant to tarnish Sara's reputation, and he eventually filed for divorce on the grounds of desertion. Sara was left financially destitute yet again, and her family refused to offer her and her children support, essentially punishing her for the scandal caused by her divorce.

Faced with the need to earn a living for herself and her daughters, Sara turned to writing essays and columns for Boston-based newspapers under the pseudonymous persona that would make her famous. As a woman working in the male-dominated newspaper business, Fanny Fern's compensation in the early days of her career was paltry. Warren notes that Fern's first contribution to the *Olive Branch* earned her fifty cents, and when she was later writing for both the *Olive Branch* and *True Flag*, both papers paid her two dollars per column.[3] On top of the usual obstacles facing women writers of the era, Fern's difficulties breaking into the business were exacerbated by the hostility of her own brother, the prominent editor and author Nathaniel Parker Willis. Rather than lending support to his sister's

budding career as a newspaper contributor, Willis harshly rejected his sister's writing. He went so far as to forbid James Parton, who was editing Willis's magazine the *Home Journal* at that time, from publishing anything written by Fanny Fern or even positive reviews of her publications. Parton resigned from the *Home Journal* in protest. Undeterred by her brother's rejection and the discrimination she faced as a woman writer, Fern continued to publish in various newspapers and gained a devoted fan base. She later exposed her brother's betrayal, as well as the exploitative practices of the newspapers that grossly underpaid her for her writing, in her 1854 autobiographical novel *Ruth Hall*.

In 1852 Fern was hired as a regular columnist by the New York-based paper *Musical World and Times*. The following year, in a turning point in her professional career, she published her first collection of columns, *Fern Leaves from Fanny's Port-Folio*, with the Auburn, NY, publisher Derby and Miller. In a savvy move, she negotiated to receive royalties at ten cents per book rather than a flat fee of one thousand dollars; her decision paid off when the book became a bestseller, with seventy thousand copies sold in the US and twenty-nine thousand in England in 1853.[4] With her financial success and increasing fame from *Fern Leaves*, Fern relocated permanently to New York City, which she found to be a better fit than Boston both professionally and personally. Derby and Miller published two more successful books by Fern, a second collection of columns, *Fern Leaves from Fanny's Port-Folio, Second Series,* and a collection for children, *Little Ferns for Fanny's Little Friends*. Reviewers praised Fern's collections for her original style and bold perspective. A review of *Fern Leaves from Fanny's Port-Folio, Second Series* that appeared in *Godey's Lady's Book* points out the value of Fern's collected columns in preserving and curating the author's newspaper writings: ". . . unlike meteors, which fade away after a brief flash, Fanny's flashes are designed for preservation, and are carefully collected together and made to form a brilliant galaxy for permanent usefulness and lasting admiration. Her originality, industry, and proficiency in all departments of life and human knowledge are wonderful, indeed, and therefore wonderfully widespread is her popularity."[5]

Following the success of Fern's collections of columns, Fern's next book sold even more impressively, while provoking an onslaught of negative criticism. A roman à clef, *Ruth Hall: A Domestic Tale of the Present Time* revealed the significant obstacles of a nineteenth-century woman writer who sought to lift herself out of poverty and support her family. Closely based on Fern's life experiences, the novel tells the tragedies and triumphs

of the title character as she overcomes the circumstances of grief, poverty, and patriarchal oppression to achieve financial independence, professional success, and fame, as well as builds a supportive personal network. In her account of Ruth's trials and triumphs, Fern based her fictional characters on the people in her life who mistreated her and withheld support when she needed it most. She exposed her family and in-laws for failing to provide compassionate care and assistance in the aftermath of her husband's death. She also satirized her famous but vain brother Nathaniel Parker Willis, named Hyacinth Ellet in the book, who, like Willis, refused to support his destitute sister's budding writing career despite his powerful position in the literary world. The novel also included fictional counterparts to the editors who exploited Fern's popularity and discriminated against her. One of the editors who felt attacked by the novel, *True Flag*'s William U. Moulton, retaliated by outing Fern's well-protected identity and publishing an unauthorized "biography" of the author.[6]

While *Ruth Hall* was a spectacular commercial success, reviewers criticized the novel and its author, primarily for transgressing deeply entrenched gender codes in nineteenth-century society. Simply put, Fern's decision to expose her family for their heartlessness and her former editors for their exploitation was considered unwomanly. Perhaps critics reacted so vehemently against *Ruth Hall* not solely because of the private family business aired in the novel, but also because of the inconvenient reality that the injustices and hypocrisy it revealed were all too common. *Ruth Hall*, and Fanny Fern, represented the threat of a woman writer lifting the veil on the power structures that hinder women from achieving success and independence in a patriarchal society. Never one to be deterred by critics and scandal, Fanny Fern continued to speak out on these issues for the remainder of her writing career. A notable exception to the trend of disparaging reviews was one that was written by the prominent women's rights activist Elizabeth Cady Stanton for the feminist magazine *The Una*. Stanton praised Fern's candid depiction of the obstacles that prevented a woman from being self-supporting and financially independent.[7] In response to the largely hostile criticism of *Ruth Hall* as unwomanly, Fern offered a more docile female protagonist in her second novel, *Rose Clark* (1856), but she included a secondary protagonist whose marriage closely paralleled Fern's own experience with her emotionally abusive second husband. "In *Rose Clark*, she cannily constructs the title character as a conventional female protagonist (that is, one based on the conventions of fiction) and then plays off against her a protagonist derived from Fern's own life."[8] While the autobiographical parallels are less

elaborate in *Rose Clark* than in *Ruth Hall*, both novels incorporate events from the author's own life that call into question cultural gender codes in the nineteenth century.

Despite the controversies surrounding her best-selling first novel, Fern's fame and fan base continued to grow. In 1855, Fern accepted an offer from *New York Ledger* owner Robert Bonner that would make her the highest paid newspaper contributor in the US: one hundred dollars for each installment of her serialized story, "Fanny Ford." She began a weekly column for the *Ledger* in January 1856, and her column appeared in its pages every week until her death in 1872. The arrangement between Fern and Bonner proved to be mutually beneficial. Fern was already famous by the time she began writing exclusively for the *Ledger*, and her popularity led to a surge of subscriptions for the fledgling newspaper. In turn, Bonner showed his support for Fern, not only by paying the unprecedented sum for her weekly column, but also in the free range he granted her voice. Even when they disagreed, Bonner did not restrict or censor his star columnist. In "A Break-fast Reverie on Ledger Day," which is included in chapter 9, Fern playfully comments upon the reciprocal benefits of her arrangement with Bonner and the *Ledger*. She acknowledges the freedom she enjoyed with an employer who "gives me a wide pasture to prance in, because he is sure that I will not jump the fence, though the conservatives sometimes needlessly hold their breath for fear I will." In turn, Fern comments that she was inclined to give "three cheers for Robert Bonner, whose heart is as big as his subscription list, and that's saying considerable, and who deserves, a hundred times told, every mill that his industry and energy have earned; and now, when he reads this, he may blush if he likes—I shan't." Following the success of his experiment in drawing Fern's dedicated fan base to his paper, Bonner recruited other prominent authors to write for him, and the *Ledger* became one of the most popular and influential papers of the era.

Fern's writing style was recognizable for its combinations of satirical irreverence and sentiment; seriousness and levity; and subversive ideas and conventional values. Her readers knew to expect layers of meaning in her columns, as she often wove her more radical messaging into more playful and lighthearted commentary. It is from an early column of Fern's, "Hungry Husbands" (chapter 2), that we get the adage "the way to a man's heart is through his stomach," a conventional enough sentiment that seems to be in-line with women's traditional domestic roles. But the statement sets up a bold discussion about a husband's potential for brutality when his carnal demands are not satisfied, as well as sardonic advice for wives to help them avoid the repercussions of their husband's hunger: "Yes, feed him well, and

he will stay contentedly in his cage, like a gorged anaconda." Ironically, Fern's powerful satirical commentary in that article was reduced to a lighthearted axiom about men's appetites, reflecting a broader erasure of this fascinating author's voice.

Fern was known as an advocate of women's rights and economic independence, and, unlike many feminist voices of the day, even her more radical messages were tolerated by her readers. Fern's candor, relatability, and humor enabled her to reach a broad spectrum of readers, even when her critique of gender roles and double standards would have otherwise lacked mainstream appeal.[9] In a *Ledger* column that appeared in 1856, "Moral Molasses; or, Too Sweet by Half" (chapter 2), she points out the absurdity of guidelines for wives in domestic advice manuals: " 'Always meet your husband with a smile.' That is one of them. Suppose we put the boot on the other foot, and require the men to come grinning home? no matter how many of their notes may have been protested; no matter how like Beelzebub, their business partner may have tormented them; no matter how badly elections go;—when they do it, may I be there to see!" When she wrote on the same topic a year later in her article "A Word on the Other Side" (chapter 3), she dropped the humor and leveled a more direct critique of the misogynistic domestic advice manuals policing women's lives: "I have no patience for those who would reduce women to a mere machine, to be twitched this way and twitched that, and jarred, and unharmonized at the dogged will of a stupid brute . . . I have no patience with those who preach one code of morality for the wife, and another for the husband."

At the same time that Fern was embarking on her new partnership with the *Ledger*, she also began a new chapter in her personal life with her marriage to James Parton, the editor who resigned in protest when her brother forbade him from publishing or promoting Fern's writing. A successful author himself, well respected as a biographer, Parton was supportive of Fern's career and the pair were equal partners in their marriage. While she maintained a strict sense of privacy when it came to her family, she often wove references to her playful and mutually respectful dynamic with "Mr. Fern" into her columns, modeling for her readers an ideal egalitarian marriage. Sadly, Fern experienced the tragic loss of a child for a second time, when her daughter Grace died shortly after childbirth. She and Parton raised Grace's daughter "Effie" from infancy, and her later columns frequently referred to the challenges and joys of grandmotherhood.

Fern continued to write her weekly column for the *New York Ledger* until just before her death from cancer in 1872. Over the course of her career, she also published two novels (*Ruth Hall* and *Rose Clark*); three

books for children; and a total of six collections of her newspaper columns. The collections of columns are especially important for providing a sense of permanency to an otherwise ephemeral form of commentary, and for many years they served as the main source for readers to access Fern's newspaper writing.[10] Several articles and compilations of articles that appeared in Fern's collections are included in *A Fanny Fern Reader*, along with uncollected articles from the *New York Ledger*. While the thematic categories of this volume are not exhaustive, they indicate the range of topical areas Fern addressed in her career as a newspaper columnist. Fern's writing varies as much in the seriousness of its content as it does in its style and tone: she addressed universal realities of the human condition that ranged in intensity from the complex processes of grief and trauma to the petty annoyances of busybodies and whistlers. She often called on her readers to sympathize with the downtrodden, and she advocated for a more compassionate approach to prisons, schools, mental health care, and newspaper reporting. She also laid the groundwork for later methods of investigative journalism in pieces like her exposés of the asylum and prison located on Blackwell's Island (featured in chapter 6). But the most frequently recurring theme in Fern's writing is gender in society: the roles of men and women in domestic, civic, and professional spaces. Given her experience confronting gender-based discrimination in the newspaper world, she was a passionate advocate for women's economic independence. In addition to addressing the subject frequently in her column, in 1868 she cofounded a New York-based professional women's club, Sorosis, the first club of its kind in the US.

While her newspaper writing regularly delighted, inspired, and provoked her nineteenth-century readers, perhaps equally remarkable is its capacity to do the same for readers today. Teaching Fanny Fern's writing to college students has allowed me to appreciate the complex ways in which this famous author from the nineteenth century still speaks to modern-day readers. In nearly two decades of teaching, my students consistently value Fern's voice for its engaging style, and for the conversations and debates it stimulates. Indeed, we even learn from paying attention to the limitations and biases that are revealed regarding Fern's progressive concerns as a white, elite-class woman writing to an audience of mostly white, middle-class readers in the nineteenth century. Whether grappling with the entrenched cultural attitudes *resisted* in Fern's writing, or those that are *revealed* in it, my students marvel that a celebrity author from the past is unknown today outside of the world of women's literature classrooms. This volume is

dedicated to the many students over the years who have appreciated Fern's boldness and humor, and her prescient discussions about gender and power.

Note on the Text

The works included here are selected for their representation of the author's voice and opinions, as well as their potential relevance to modern-day readers, with the hope of inspiring further interest in Fern beyond academic settings. In most cases, the essays are based on the versions published in the *New York Ledger*, accessed mainly through America's Historical Newspapers (by Readex) and the Digital Library @ Villanova University. Unless otherwise noted, the dates indicate when the column appeared in the *New York Ledger*. Several essays are based on the versions published in Fanny Fern's collections of columns (including some thematic compilations of articles that were included in those books), as noted throughout the text. While archaic spellings and grammar have mostly been retained, silent emendations have been made in cases of obvious typographical errors. Minor changes to punctuation have been made for the sake of consistency.