

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Fanny Fern (1811-1872)

from *Fern Leaves from Fanny's Portfolio*

"Fanny Fern" was the pen name of Sara Payson Willis Eldredge Farrington Parton (to add the names of her first, second, and third husbands to her family and given names). Her father, Nathaniel Willis, was a Presbyterian deacon and the founder of *The Recorder*, the nation's first religious newspaper, and also of *The Youth's Companion*, the first children's paper. Her brother, N.P. Willis, became a very popular poet and journalist. But Sara did not start writing for money until left practically destitute by the death of her first husband, Charles Harrington Eldredge (in 1846) and her separation from her second, Samuel P. Farrington (in January, 1851). She could make no more than seventy-five cents a week as a seamstress and could obtain no post as a teacher. Her wealthy father had remarried, and he contributed very little to her. Nor did her first husband's parents help her much, despite their being grandparents to her children. But on June 18, 1851, she published her first sketch, anonymously, in a Boston paper called the *Olive Branch*, which paid her fifty cents. In September, she began using the pen name Fanny Fern, and her sketches were being pirated by other papers, including her brother N.P. Willis's *Home Journal*, which had turned them down when Sara had sent them to Willis under her own name! Moving to other papers, at increasingly better pay, she was soon one of the best-paid columnists in the country—and published, *Fern Leaves from Fanny's Portfolio*, and in the next year it earned her nearly ten thousand dollars.

As a columnist, she both wrote in the first person and told other stories that were often disguised autobiography. In the persona of Fanny Fern, she also developed the style of a woman who was vulnerable to sentiment and yet leery of it and, frequently, sharp-tongued and irreverent. At times she cried and brought tears to her readers; at other times she shocked. "A Widow's Trials" is tearful and obviously based on the cruel treatment she had received from her father. "Apollo Hyacinth," June 18, 1853, satirized her well-known brother N.P. Willis as a self-centered, dandified hypocrite. But while "Fanny Fern" acquired fame and notoriety, Sara's own identity was safely secret-until December, 1854, when one of the people satirized in *Ruth Hall*, the autobiographical novel she had just published, started a series of articles exposing her. Male journalists soon attacked her for being so vindictive towards the father, brother, and in-laws who had refused to support her when she was a poor widow, and though interest in *Ruth Hall* as a scandal grew and sales zoomed, the game was over...or the rules had changed. The hurt and sensitive Sara, who had once hidden behind the pseudonym, now used it as both shield and sword. She also was a personage in it, Fanny Fern come to life.

This change shows up in later sketches like "A Law More Nice than just" (1858) and "How I look" (1870). In the first, James Parton, whom she had married in 1856, appears as "Mr. Fern," assisting in her experiment in wearing men's clothes. In that piece, incidentally, the man to whom she bears such a close resemblance is her brother. In the second, she enjoys the mistake a man makes in identifying her as another woman, dressed in diamonds and lace. (In other sketches, too she alludes to "Fanny Fern" as being dark and sinister, while she, the real Fanny, is blonde.) Thus, even though she increasingly called herself "Fanny Fern" (and this is the name now used in most library catalogues), the mystery over who this autobiographer really was continued. Indeed, until the recent rediscovery of nineteenth-century women's writing, literary historians cast her as just "sentimental," the "grandmother of all sob sisters." They seem to have judged her only by the flowery name, without bothering to read her books. She and her writings are fascinating studies in the interactions of autobiography, fictions, and pseudonyms.

A further selection of sketches is in *Ruth Hall and Other Writings*, ed. Joyce W. Warren (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1986). For a biographical and critical study, see Nancy Walker, *Fanny Fern* (New York: Twayne, 1992).

Reading

Ruth Hall: A Domestic Tale of the Present Time

<http://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=nyp.33433076060734>