Fanny Kemble’s “Vulgar” Journal

Long before young Miss Kemble’s daily record of her 1832-1834 tour of America actually appeared in print, rumors about its contents were circulating. Americans, their sensibilities already rubbed raw by the published castigations of Mrs. Frances Trollope and other representatives of the Mother Country, were grimly prepared for yet another attack upon their national character. The Southern Literary Messenger observed that “perhaps no book has, for many years, been looked for, long previous to its publication, with such intense curiosity, as this record of Miss Fanny Kemble’s observations and opinions of men and women, manners and customs, in the United States.”¹ Pages of unauthorized galley proofs began circulating around Philadelphia, with the authoress and her publisher blaming each other for the disclosure.² Some of these galleys appeared in the newspapers: the astonished London Times carried an excerpt and confessed that

We cannot bring ourselves to believe that the following writing, ascribed to Miss Fanny Kemble, can proceed from the pen of that accomplished lady. Extravagance without fancy, coarseness without humor, exaggerated phraseology without talent, are certainly not the qualities we should expect to see in one who showed herself competent to represent a Juliet or a Portia.³

The actress herself, still in her early twenties, certainly knew what kind of reaction might be expected by foreign visitors who dared to air their opinions of the New World: shortly after arriving in New York, she had written in her Journal, “Mercy on me! how sore all these people are about Mrs. Trollope’s book, and how glad

¹ “Journal—by Frances Anne Butler,” Southern Literary Messenger, I (May, 1835), 524.
² In answer to what had obviously been a complaint from her publisher regarding circulation of these proofs, Mrs. Butler replied with some asperity that she knew that at least some of them had been gotten “from one of the little boys in your printing office. . . .” Fanny Butler to H. C. Carey [n.d.], Edward Carey Gardiner Collection, 59, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.
³ The Times (London), Feb. 10, 1835.
I am I did not read it." After spending some time in this country, she observed:

Such an unhappily sensitive community surely never existed in this world; and the vengeance with which they visit people for saying they don't admire or like them, would be really terrible if the said people were but as mortally afraid of abuse as they seem to be. I would not advise Mrs. Trollope, Basil Hall, or Captain Hamilton ever to set their feet upon this ground again, unless they are ambitious of being stoned to death. I live myself in daily expectation of martyrdom. . . .

The private, highly personal day-to-day jottings of this proud, somewhat spoiled, highly opinionated and very articulate young actress were never intended for exposure to the public gaze. But when a Philadelphia publisher offered her £500 for the American rights to her diary, she saw an opportunity to provide financial security for a beloved maiden aunt, Adelaide (Dall) de Camp. Frances Anne, or "Fanny" as she was more usually called, accepted the offer.

By the time of publication, her original good intentions had come to naught: faithful Aunt Dall, who had followed Fanny throughout her stage career as combination duenna and maid-of-all-work, had died as the result of a New England carriage accident. Fanny had married Pierce Butler, a wealthy young Philadelphian, and had no need for additional funds. She was, however, under an obligation to her publisher; and the book, very likely, would further her career in belles lettres. After all, acting had been only a temporary occupation embarked upon to raise money; her lifelong ambition was to become a writer.

---

5 Ibid., II, 103-104.
6 Fanny's youthful generosity had been amply demonstrated before this unselfish act. While in her teens, she used funds received from publication of a play, Francis I, to purchase a commission for a younger brother. Her acting career, which she loathed, had been begun only to save her father from impending bankruptcy, and she had undertaken the American tour with her father so that her parents might have sufficient money for their retirement. Undoubtedly the memory of her uncle, the great actor John Philip Kemble, being hounded into a Swiss exile by his creditors, spurred her impulse to provide for members of her family.
7 At nineteen, she had written to a friend: "My head and heart are engrossed with the idea of exercising and developing the literary talent which I think I possess. This is meat, drink, and sleep to me; my world in which I live, and have happiness. . . ." Frances Anne Kemble, Records of a Girlhood (New York, 1879), 26.
By the time of publication, either Fanny or members of the Butler family apparently had second thoughts about the book. The author’s original editing had reduced many possibly offensive passages to line after line of asterisks; and all names were changed to “Colonel ———,” “D———,” and sometimes just “———.” Occasional footnotes were added which amplified a youthful judgment but very seldom modified an often intemperate opinion: usually these notes managed to rub salt into whatever wounds the text had opened. Just before publication, extensive changes were made in the text, probably at the urging of Fanny’s Philadelphia husband who wanted desperately to defuse this literary bombshell. These changes were made at the author’s expense, and exceeded ten per cent of the total royalty payment.

Pierce Butler may have weakened the explosion, but he did not prevent it. Almost everyone who had crossed Fanny’s path found himself attacked in one way or another. Many well-meaning people who had gone to some trouble to entertain Fanny and her father during their tour discovered that their efforts were ridiculed within the pages of this book. Philip Hone found himself among the more prominently abused. A wealthy New York merchant, Hone had very much enjoyed the companionship of the Kembles at a lavish dinner party. But his opinions altered when he read Fanny’s assessment of the occasion: writing about Fanny’s book in his own Diary, Hone remarked:

There is all the light gossip, the childish prejudice, the hasty conclusions from erroneous first impressions, in which the diary of an imaginative

—A typical footnote reads: “Saw a woman riding to-day; but she has gotten a black velvet beret upon her head. —Only think of a beret on horseback! The horses are none of them properly broken: Their usual pace being a wrong-legged half-canter, or a species of shambling trot denominated with infinite justice a rack. They are all broken with snaffles instead of curbs, carry their noses out, and pull horribly; I have not yet seen a decent rider, either man or woman.” Journal, I, 61.

The Library of Congress possesses what is apparently the printer’s copy as it was prepared by Mrs. Butler, complete with asterisks for omitted passages and blank spaces for names. A bill for reprinting charges is included with the manuscript. LC Acc. #14,385. The original manuscript “Journal” has never come to light and it is possible that the author herself may have destroyed it, since she was not inclined to dwell on past unpleasantnesses. When editing her correspondence for the three volumes of Records, Mrs. Kemble went through her letters to Harriet St. Leger and those “which could have revived any distressing associations were all destroyed when first I received the box . . . .” Frances Anne Kemble, Further Records (New York, 1891), 11.
youthful traveller in a country in which all things are new and untried may be supposed to abound; and the style is sometimes bad; and the remarks she makes on the private habits of persons who received her and her father kindly, and treated them hospitably, are all in bad taste. . . . [Her comments were] evidently written on the evening of the very day, and with all the flippancy and want of reflection that one might expect to find in the commonplace-book of a giddy girl who had just returned from a dinner party in which herself was the principal object of notice and attention, and from which, I can tell her, she went away leaving no favourable impression behind her.\(^\text{10}\)

Even though names were omitted from the book, Hone and others were able to supply them with little difficulty. A game of “fill in the blanks” developed up and down the East Coast, and in a short time, very few spaces were left unfilled.\(^\text{11}\)

Hone’s reflections were not published until many years later, but detailed commentary on the Kemble Journal began to appear in the quarterly magazines as soon as the book appeared. Lengthy quotes were usually included, so that each review became, in effect, a condensation of the book itself. The Edinburgh Review’s critique ran to more than thirteen thousand words and that of the North American Review to more than sixteen thousand. On some points the critics seemed to be agreed. They felt that her writing had, in the words of one writer, “all the freshness, confidence, and indiscretions of an intercepted correspondence.”\(^\text{12}\) They also agreed that her writing was shockingly unladylike and well beyond the bounds of decorum. Taking note of her “masculine intellect,” the Southern Literary Messenger called “the style and language . . . often coarse, we might say vulgar; and her more impassioned exclamations are often characterized by a vehemence which is very like profanity.”\(^\text{13}\) In an era when the basic vocabulary of male and female seemed to be drawn from different sources, such verbs as “potter,” “dawdle,” “gulp,” and “twaddle,” were not ladylike discourse. One letter writer from Liverpool went so far as to state that “The authoress has unsexed herself.”\(^\text{14}\)

\(^{10}\) Bayard Tuckerman, ed., The Diary of Philip Hone (New York, 1889), I, 126.

\(^{11}\) Columbia University Library has a copy of the Journal in which an elderly Mrs. Kemble filled in many of the blanks and added occasional comments. Unfortunately, fading ink and an infirm hand have left many of these names indecipherable.

\(^{12}\) “Mrs. Butler’s American Journal,” Edinburgh Review, LXI (July, 1835), 379.

\(^{13}\) Southern Literary Messenger, I (May, 1835), 525.

\(^{14}\) Niles Register, XLVII (Aug. 8, 1835), 395.
“Vulgar” was the most commonly applied epithet. Our present age would probably have used adjectives like “vigorous,” “expressive,” “vivid,” or “apt,” in describing this writing, but what appears as freedom or inventiveness today was impropriety in the nineteenth century. The Southern Literary Messenger reviewer, for one, objected to such usage as “lay on the floor in absolute meltiness away . . .”; “Away walloped the four horses”; “He was most exceedingly old and dauldrumish”; “Yesterday began like May, with flowers and sun-shine, it ended like December with the sulks, and a fit of crying.”

Critics beamed their approval, however, when Miss Kemble wrote as a lady should. They applauded such highly conventional poetic flights as one entitled “Autumn”:

Thou comest not in sober guise,  
In mellow cloak of russet clad,—  
Thine are no melancholy skies,  
Nor hueless flowers, pale and sad;  
With, like an Emperor, triumphine  
With gorgeous robes of Tyrian dyes,  
Full flush of fragrant blossoming  
And glowing purple canopies. . . .

They were totally unprepared, however, to say anything at all about a perceptive and original prose passage on the same subject, one which likened the changing season to a tubercular invalid:

In spite of its beauty, or rather on that very account, an American autumn is to me particularly sad. It presents an union of beauty and decay, for that ever reminds me of that loveliest disguise death puts on, when the cheek is covered with roses, and the eyes are like stars, and the life is perishing away; even so appear the gorgeous colours of the withering American woods. ’Tis a whole forest dying of consumption.

Miss Kemble was not unaware of the immodesty of her language; she was simply not willing to play the role of proper young lady. After visiting Hell Gate, on the East River, she remarked, some-

15 Southern Literary Messenger, I (May, 1835), 526. This excellent review is often attributed to Edgar Allan Poe, but it is not listed by any of Poe’s bibliographers.
16 Quoted in North American Review, XLI (July, 1835), 118-119.
17 Journal, I, 133.
what tongue-in-cheek, that “The ladies of New York, and all lady-like people there, have agreed to call this eddy, *Hurl-gate*. The superior propriety of this name is not to be questioned; for hell is a shocking bad word, no doubt, but being infinitely more appropriate to the place and its qualities, I have ventured to use it.”

Surprisingly, a great deal of print was expended in refuting the casual and often contradictory opinions of this impetuous young girl. Her pronouncements on dress, the servant problem, theatre audiences, society, customs, and the training of horses were all treated with a remarkable seriousness—almost as though the authoress were another de Tocqueville engaged in a weighty socio-logical study.

Two ladies, one English and the other Virginian, became so incensed by Fanny’s pronouncements that they offered lengthy and often libelous refutations of their own. An unknown “English lady, four years resident in the United States,” was offended that her countrywoman would use such words as “humbug” (“not to be found in a chambermaid’s vocabulary”), and was outraged that Fanny would dare express admiration for “*Childe Harold*—a work which in my happy country is not overly prudishly considered as unfit for a lady’s reading.” In a forty-eight page attack, Fanny was called, with heavy sarcasm, “This highly gifted lady, no less distinguished as a poet, a painter, a musician, a philosopher, a phrenologist,—and no less in metaphysics, theology, and in practical and experimental chemistry, than in the useful arts,—in farriery, pharmacy, and gymnastics.”

The other lady, Lucy Kenney, of Fredericksburg, was an established pamphleteer who was prepared to air her own opinions on a wide range of subjects. *Description of a Visit to Washington* contains, among other subjects, “a stricture on Miss Fanny Kemble’s *Journal*, at the request of a large circle of friends of distinction, in Fredericksburg, Washington, and Baltimore. . . .” Ms. Kenney did not mince words:

---

19 *An English Lady, Fanny Kemble in America* (Boston, 1835), 23.
22 Lucy Kenney, *Description of a Visit to Washington* [Washington, 1835], 1.
The only distinguishing trait in Miss Fanny is ingratitude of the blackest die. Coming to this country without a dollar in her pocket; made a handsomely independence; patronized by those who condescended to notice her; married a fool of fortune; repaid our kindness by ingratitude of the blackest hue;—but the just retribution of Heaven will overtake the vile ingrate, and make her quake.23

The attack is filled with rumor, containing reports from “two different Catholic priests, of high order in their church, as well as others, whose truth cannot be controverted. . . .”24

Two satires on the Journal also made their appearances. One of these was a booklet of poorly drawn and tasteless caricatures illustrating scenes from the original. A typical drawing pictures Fanny and her father attempting to swallow raw oysters about the size of dinner plates.25

Of better quality was a thirty-six page travesty entitled My Conscience: Fanny Thimble Cutler’s Journal of a Residence in America whilst performing a profitable theatrical engagement beating the nonsensical Fanny Kemble Journal all hollow!!” Aside from such personal slurs as implying that Fanny was overly fond of the grape and that her father liked to chase young girls, the author devoted himself to a tolerably good takeoff of the Journal style. The following passage is characteristic:

Quarrelled with my maid—paid her, and told her I had no further use for her. She called me a lazy slut, and said if the people knew as much about me as she did, I would be hissed off the stage on my first appearance. What could she know about me during three days’ engagement?—my blood boiled within me, and I threw my shoe at her; when—oh, impudence most vile—she flew at me and boxed my ears till they fairly rang with pain, telling me I had got the wrong sow by the ear; hired girls were free and independent and she would have her rights though she died for it; then with a sarcastic grin, she made a low curtsey, bid me good morning, and hoped that the ears of the sweet, dear, delightful Fanny would be cooled by Monday night, as the medicine she had administered was a sovereign remedy for upstart impudence in an employer. I was about to faint with rage, when the punctual blackwaiter entered with my 11 o’clock julip.26

23 Ibid., 4.
24 Ibid., 5.
25 [David Claypoole Johnston], Outlines Illustrative of the Journal of F—— A—— K——— (Boston, 1835), plate 3.
26 Fanny Thimble Cutler’s Journal (Philadelphia, 1835), 8. Although no author is given, a copyright is entered in the name of Alexander Turnbull.
At the height of the furor over the book, a stage burlesque appeared which proved quite popular. According to an article in the New York *Mercantile Advertiser*,

Mr. Johnson, of the Tremont theatre, Boston, is in this city, and will make his first appearance on Friday next for Mrs. Flynn's benefit. A new piece will be produced, called "Bugs, Big and Little," in which Mr. Johnson will personate the celebrated Fanny—his imitation is excellent, and report speaks highly of it. We are really glad the piece is to be done at last, and we are convinced the house will be crowded. No doubt, some of our big bugs will figure conspicuously; one scene in particular was much applauded in the above city, it is where Fanny appears on horseback—Johnson in this scene was irresistible.27

Gradually, the controversy over the *Journal* subsided, but after-shocks persisted for some years. As late as 1840, an epistolary novel called *The Letter-Bag of the Great Western* contained the shipboard diary of a British actress written in the Kemble style. A typical passage shows that Fanny’s liberated exuberance and unfeminine vigor were still well remembered: "How this glorious steamer wallops, and gallops, and flounders along! she goes it like mad. Its motion is unlike that of any living thing I know; puffing like a porpoise, breasting the waves like a sea-horse, and at times skimming the surface like a bird."28

Aside from a preface to the British edition of the *Journal* in which Fanny defended the book as "my immediate impressions of what I saw and heard; of course, liable to all the errors attendant upon first perceptions, and want of time and occasion for maturer investigation,"29 there is little evidence that the author ever recanted her hasty judgments. Indeed, her life was to be so riddled with controversy that it is difficult to tell where the problems with the *Journal* ended and later ones, such as the notoriety of her divorce or her uncompromising stand on slavery, began. But at least one American was prepared to forgive the offenses she offered in her book: Philip

27 Quoted in *Niles Register*, XLVII (July 4, 1835), 311. The play title was taken from a much-quoted passage in the *Journal* (I, 98) in which Fanny adapts Hamlet's lines to fit the mosquito-laden air of the New World.

“——To bed—to sleep—
To sleep!—perchance to be bitten! aye—that’s the scratch:
And in that sleep of ours what bugs may come,
Must give us pause.”


Hone renewed his acquaintance with the young Philadelphia matron in 1838, and went out of his way to make himself agreeable to her. Writing in his diary after this meeting, he remarked "I thought it a pity that a woman so brilliant, who was capable of better things, should have compromised her literary reputation by giving to the world her inconsiderate, girlish remarks upon the daily events which amused her lively and excitable imagination."\(^{30}\) Years later, an aging Mrs. Kemble would probably have agreed with Hone's assessment. "My suddenness," she sighed, "is the curse of my nature."\(^{31}\)

\footnotesize

\(^{30}\) The Diary of Philip Hone, I, 319.
\(^{31}\) Henry Lee, "Frances Anne Kemble," Atlantic Monthly, LXXI (May, 1893), 674.