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“Nothing Extenuate, Nor Set Down Aught in Malice”: Mediating Authorial Celebrity in Fanny Fern’s Periodicals and Ruth Hall

Kyle Thomas Brett
Lehigh University

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“Nothing Extenuate, Nor Set Down Aught in Malice”: Mediating Authorial Celebrity in

Fanny Fern’s Periodicals and *Ruth Hall*

by

Kyle Brett

A Thesis

Presented to the Graduate and Research Committee

of Lehigh University

in Candidacy for the Degree of

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in

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Lehigh University

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“Nothing Extenuate, Nor Set Down Aught in Malice”: Mediating Authorial Celebrity in Fanny Fern’s Periodicals and *Ruth Hall*

Kyle Brett

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Date Approved

Edward Whitley
Advisor

Scott Gordon
Department Chair Person

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ABSTRACT

As a study on Fanny Fern's influence on the nineteenth-century literary market, this paper ultimately argues for continued critical exploration into the developing understanding of the relationship between nineteenth-century American readers and their celebrated authors. Specifically, I argue Fanny Fern attempted to, yet again, radically change the literary market forming around her. Building on, primarily, Melissa Homestead and David Dowling's own critical work on Fern's alterations to the nineteenth-century publishing industry, this paper relies on close reading analysis through moments of interiority—active peeping into private spaces—and reader-author communications within *Ruth Hall* and the collection of columns within *Ginger-Snaps*. I argue that Fern, tired of her commodified existence as an American authorial celebrity, worked to reclaim her subjectivity through providing her readership with fictional and non-fictional didactic interactions between an authorial subject and consuming reader, teaching those readers to forsake authorial commodification and rather establish an emotional recognition of dual-subjectivity.

I. Introduction

When turning to matters of nineteenth-century American print culture we notice that no author continues to inform our studies like Sara Willis Parton.¹ Driven to satisfy our fascination with the burgeoning nineteenth-century literary market, we continually return to Fern's columns from the *New York Ledger*, *Olive Branch*, *True Flag*, and the *Musical World and Times* for access to the interior practices and ethics of the publishing industry. Focusing on Fern's ruthlessness and no-nonsense candor, scholars isolate her semi-autobiographical novel, *Ruth Hall* (1854) as a work that continues to allow a coveted peek behind the curtain surrounding nineteenth-century authorship, showcasing the lives of authors, publishers, and readers as they all attempted to negotiate their own roles within the ever-growing print industry. As a result of such interiority, our critical focus tends to highlight Fern's transformative prose and boisterous voice that worked to not only inform, but also radically change the market she worked within. For Fern, her position as a female writer and celebrity was to be determined by her own, very vocal, terms and conditions.

Captivated by Fern's ability to not merely remain silent in the male-dominated publishing industry, Melissa Homestead and David Dowling work to highlight Fern's talent to directly challenge the status quo. Arguing that Fern, using her celebrity and cultural status, published *Ruth Hall* to stake her own claim on her authorial identity that was consumed and shaped by ravenous male publishers and their culture of reprinting, Homestead rightly argues that "*Ruth Hall* was, in part, an attempt by Fern to establish a

¹ I will continue throughout this essay to address Sara Willis Parton by her penname, Fanny Fern. As a study on her usage of this pseudonym and the celebrity that surrounded it, this project will follow the critical trend of conflating her identity.

stable authorial persona that could secure future proprietary claims” and situates Fern’s text as one whose function was to present readers with “a new, more stable Fern who would author-ize future book and periodical manifestations” (153). Like Homestead, David Dowling also lauded the transformative power of Fern’s writing, namely in the power *Ruth Hall* had over the male-dominated literary market. Looking at how Fern presented the literary industry that surrounded her titular character, Dowling ultimately argues that “*Ruth Hall*’s seemingly conventional domestic scenes are liberally peppered with diction associated with the ethics of trade courtesy” (69). By portraying the conflict surrounding Ruth’s publication and the savior and husband-like depiction of her fictional publisher, Walter, Fern is “employing a method of characterization that would update older business ethics while still accommodating sentimentality and domestic care as its defining features” (72). Because of such methods, Fern is able to redefine “the code of the gentleman publisher in her novel to reflect the new prototype of publication practice” associated with Fern’s own Robert Bonner (72).

Both Dowling and Homestead give a specific type of agency to Fern and her usage of her cultural standing, arguing that this nineteenth-century writer worked with and employed her own sense of celebrity to negotiate the market that attempted to marginalize her. Homestead, concerned with the legalities of literary propriety, demonstrates how Fern used her own popularity to make a definitive claim to the literary work that she produced. Dowling, more concerned with how Fern shaped the actual practice of the market, illustrates how Fern was able to, yet again, take control of her own cultural weight and command over literary form to alter the publishing industry. However, the gap that both methods seem to leave open, namely how Fern also interacted

and shaped her reception and interaction with her readership, is where I want to focus my attention. By focusing on how Fern responded to and communicated with her respective readership in *Ruth Hall* and within her periodicals, I will illustrate that Fern is attempting to control exactly how her readership is speaking to and consuming her celebrated authorial persona. Doing so allows us to see how Fern, not only invested with shaping the ethical and legal atmosphere of the publishing market, also worked to extend her sphere of authorial influence out toward her reception and consumption by her readership. By instructing her voracious literary fans, guiding them through negative and positive models of author-reader interactions embedded within her prose, Fern grasps tightly to her sense of celebrity and, again, attempts to exert control over another realm of the literary market that worked tirelessly to take ownership over her and the works she produced.

Running immediately counter to Fern's efforts is the slanderous biography published by William Moulton,² *The Life and Beauties of Fanny Fern* (1855). Published only months after *Ruth Hall*, Moulton's text was used primarily as a counterattack for Fern's breakaway from the dominion of the *True Flag*; however, more than just a perfect example of slander, Moulton's text, like *Ruth Hall*, was highly invested in offering its readers access to the interior realm of Fern's life. The scandalous biography was important to nineteenth-century readers on two counts. First, the biography falsely revealed the identity of Fanny Fern as Sara Farrington,³ allowing the reading public access to the woman behind the penname. Second, it provided readers false insight into

² As Joyce Warren notes in *Fanny Fern: An Independent Woman*, Moulton, outraged by his own depiction as Mr. Tibbets and by his loss of profit from his inability to continue publishing Fern's work for the *True Flag*, stands as the likely author of the slanderous volume (Warren 123).

³ A name that would evoke for the readership Fern's second marriage to Samuel Farrington and, as a result, the controversy surrounding their divorce.

“the most prominent incidents in her eventful career, which is [sic]⁴ authenticated, not only by the testimony of her nearest relatives, but by the communications from her own lips” (*Life and Beauties* 3). By giving its readers “a bouquet of ‘Ferns,’ all freshly gathered” the text shows “Fanny at home, on the street, and in church” promising its readership that it held the “key which will unlock many of the mysteries of ‘Ruth Hall,’ and ‘Fern Leaves’” (4). Far from unlocking the mysteries of the celebrated columnist-turned-author, *Life and Beauties* was a text that intended to shatter the popularity and reputation of an author who commanded the attention of an expansive fan base. Though dismissed by contemporary critics as nothing more than an example of Moulton’s bitterness, *Life and Beauties* stands as a case of another competing narrative that is treating Fern as a commodity—a persona to be controlled and altered solely by the dominating publisher. As a text that promises to decipher *Ruth Hall* and Fern’s columns, the collection forces the reader to negotiate two distinct discourses that surrounded her popularity and texts: one sanctioned by Fern within *Ruth Hall* where the reader is able to see as authorial subject, Ruth, makes her way through the untenable lifestyle of a female writer, and the other presented by Moulton that strives to undermine Fern’s power and talent, and thus her own control over her persona, effectively re-objectifying her.

Existing between these two texts and the disputing claims that they maintain is a rift in Fern scholarship that demands exploration, a critical opening that concerns how Fern desired to interact with and shape her own reception as a celebrated writer. The central tension between these texts, and the goals that both Fern and Moulton intended to fulfill, is centered on how the celebrated columnist’s readers responded to and fed off of

⁴ All following quotations from period-specific sources will be transcribed with the original authorial errors.

Fern's literary celebrity; whether they chose to continue to only view Fern as consumable celebrated object, or as an authorial subject. As a result, I maintain that *Ruth Hall* and the columns that follow the domestic tale's success are examples of Fern's desire to not only sate an epistophilic readership, but also highlight her efforts to show, to teach, that readership exactly how to interact with a celebrated author in a manner that transcends authorial commodification. Instead of isolating her readership completely, Fern uses her own celebrity status to her advantage, calling for readers to strive to not view their celebrated author as only a consumable object, but rather know her as a celebrated subject capable of life beyond print. Building on the critical trend to isolate the notion of the authorial victim⁵ within the emerging print industry of the nineteenth century and the illusion of the ideal literary market and author toiling within that market, I examine how Fern, instead of bemoaning her own exploitation, actively tried to control and reinvent, through direct didactic engagement with her readership, the literary market that simultaneously attempted to claim ownership over her.

In what follows, I begin with a close analysis of Fern's most prominent text, *Ruth Hall*. I argue that Fern establishes reoccurring moments of narrative-sanctioned reader intrusion from the onset of the novel that, in turn, serve as examples of where she is directly presenting her readership with both negative and positive forms of invasion of private domestic spaces, an act committed by both Mrs. Hall and the narrative voice. Such intrusions seem to demonstrate the way in which Fern is attempting to map

⁵ For a more in depth analysis of the notion of the authorial victim, I turn your attention to Everton's *The Grand Chorus of Complaint: Authors and the Business Ethics of American Publishing*, specifically to "Melville in the Antebellum Publishing Maelstrom" and to William Charvat's *Literary Publishing in America 1790-1850*'s second chapter, "Author and Publisher," to see how nineteenth-century authors encountered the harsh division between producing literary work for art's sake and publishing art for economic gain and how they established themselves as the victims of this market exchange.

experiences of real-life reader-invasion into her own private life. Ultimately, I maintain that Fern presents her readership with a method of safe gazing into her life without materialistic judgment. From there I establish Mrs. Hall as a foil character for Ruth—both are concerned with their private and public lives, but respond to that division differently. As a result, Fern posits Ruth as a character who is able to balance both private and public identities—Floy the authorial persona cannot be separated from Ruth, while Mrs. Hall’s materialistic public image is completely separated (spatially and mentally) from her more corrupt private interior.

The second half of my analysis of *Ruth Hall* establishes Fern’s connection with her domestic heroine and attempts to tie Fern’s own struggles with her celebrity and intrusive fans with Ruth/Floy’s own negotiation of her readers and their often absurd requests. I focus here on moments in the text where Ruth must read the many letters from her fans and choose to either acknowledge them personally, or mock them viciously, arguing that the latter only occurs when the balance between Ruth’s private and public identity is not maintained by those fans who reach out to their literary idol. I argue that Fern, upset by the absurdity of those fans who are trying to consume only her public, and thus objectified, persona—reaching out for autographs, impersonating her on lecture circuits, and burglarizing her home—forces *Ruth Hall*’s narrative project to be highly concerned with a celebrated literary character fighting against the readers that attempt to control fully or exploit Ruth’s celebrity persona.

Finally, I turn to Fern’s works produced after *Ruth Hall*, namely her work published in the *Ledger* and within her volume, *Ginger-Snaps* (1870), to frame Fern’s non-fictional engagement with her readership. Not able to only guise her annoyance in

fiction, Fern's scathing remarks, like Ruth's when she reads over her fan mail, serve as an attempt to, albeit more maliciously, direct her readers to a more balanced notion of private and public literary identity. Doing so, will allow Fern's more didactic project concerning reader negotiation of celebrity in both fictional and journalistic texts to be connected, showing that Fern, when reaching out to her readership from the paragraphs in her columns and the pages of *Ruth Hall*, uses her growing celebrity to sway her readership to engage with her on her own terms.

To aid in my analysis of Fern's texts, I hope to build on critical work that is attempting to map how celebrated nineteenth-century authors engaged with their own sense of celebrity. David Haven Blake isolates the evolution of the image of the celebrity throughout the nineteenth century and links that celebrity's movement from national hero to a consumable product. Blake argues that celebrity was not always a marker for individual achievement, but rather a locus where "individuals could be sanctioned with public approval and sanctified in national pride" (23). The turn, for Blake, came with the commodification of the celebrity persona, a process influenced by the collection of autographs and daguerreotypes. Like Blake, Leo Braudy traces how nineteenth-century authors sought to distance themselves from simple authorial commodity. For Braudy, the reader who only consumed the trappings of literary celebrity was a byproduct of the authors' larger projects of reaching an ideal, or "spiritually kindred" literary public⁶ (474). Along with Braudy and Blake, Leon Jackson's study on Poe's view of his own fame and status is a key component for establishing the groundwork of my exploration

⁶ Focused on reader interaction, Braudy's analysis of Whitman's "Calamus 12" addresses this tension that the public poet felt when trying to ward off those sightseers, those that only wished to consume or collect fragments of the poet at large. Though he does not bring Fern into the mix between Whitman and Dickinson, I extend his formulation that these two writers sought their ideal reader to Fern's project. Predating Whitman and Dickinson, Fern, too, had to negotiate her own commodified existence.

into Fern's negotiation of celebrity. Responding to criticism that has sought "to understand Poe's opinions of fame, status, reputation, and canonicity," Jackson wants to examine exactly how Poe attempted to balance between both of these extremes—much like Fern does through her own writings (38). Where I am interested, however, is in Jackson's use of the notion of "True celebrity," a type of fame not only mediated by the exchange of celebratory knick-knacks, or ascribed celebrity, but also by the discourse that such celebrity causes (41-2). Like Jackson, my goal in what follows is to articulate exactly how Fern operated and, like Poe, supported and shunned such lauding status by focusing her attention on her own reception by her readership. I maintain that Fern, not content with accepting the label as only a commodity to be consumed, actively attempted to take advantage of the discourse caused by her commodification to reclaim her authorial subjectivity.

II. *Ruth Hall*: A Domestic Intrusion into Public and Private Realms

Published in November 1854, *Ruth Hall* served as Fern's own attempt at crafting a *kunstlerroman* of a female writer and, at the same time, a semi-autobiographical retelling of her life pre- and post-literary celebrity. Unlike *Life and Beauties*, *Ruth Hall* demonstrates not only Fern's control over her own authorial persona, but also highlights the intrusion dynamic of that persona, allowing the narrator's voice to oscillate between the private and public lives of Ruth and her contemporaries and, all the while, inviting the reader to help witness that shaping of a celebrity persona. Until the publication of *Ruth Hall*, such interiority into Fern's private life outside of her columns was merely speculative. As such, the power behind Fern's domestic novel begins with the invitation

it offers to an ever-growing nineteenth-century readership, one that teases those text-hungry masses with access to exactly what they craved the most: access to a more complete and stable, albeit embellished, persona developed and disseminated by Fern.

Ruth Hall is a text with an ample amount of critical commentary, though many of these critical efforts do not address the relationship between Fern and her own readership. Instead, many have argued for the transformative power of such a genre-defying text had in the market that delivered it to a reading-hungry public.⁷ For my purposes, I want to focus my analysis on the moments of interiority and control over Ruth's persona by other characters, focusing on the gossip and intrusion committed by Mrs. Hall, and then later turn my own gaze toward the moments where Ruth, using her penname, Floy, responds to her readership and fandom. Doing so, I will demonstrate that *Ruth Hall* is highly invested in developing not only a stable persona for Fern/Floy/Ruth, but also strives to highlight the give and take relationship between author and reader, a relationship that calls for a balance between viewing Fern as not solely as commodity to be consumed. Through Ruth's development of Floy, we are presented with a model of how Fern desires her own readership to engage with her private and public selves.

Fern, with this relationship to her growing readership in mind, opens her "first continuous story" with a personal address to the reader. It is here within this quick aside to the narrative that follows that Fern establishes the particulars of the reader-author

⁷ Another trend in Fern scholarship is to express her power as a female writer in a predominately male discourse community. For more exploration in this relationship, I yield to Lauren Berlant's work on how Fern influenced the evolution of nineteenth-century discourse, making room for the expansion of "cultural resources of industrial capitalism to make women into a 'new' consumer group: circulating around a subject addressed and newly empowered by a female culture industry" (432). See also, Lara Langer Cohen's, "Mediums of Exchange: Fanny Fern's Unoriginality" for an apt exploration into Fern's generation of a gendered notion of literary fraudulence.

dynamic. Indeed, instead of serving as a model for what follows, the reader address seems, rather, to be outlining what the text is not and will not be:

I Present you with my first continuous story. I do not dignify it by the name of “A novel.” I am aware that it is entirely at variance with all set rules for novel-writing. There is no intricate plot; there are not startling developments, no hair-breadth escapes. I have compressed into one volume what I might have expanded into two or three. I have avoided long introductions and descriptions, and *have entered unceremoniously and unannounced, into people’s houses, without stopping to ring the bell.* (*Ruth Hall*⁸; emphasis added)

Ruth Hall stands as a novel that is defying popular conventions, something textual that is “at variance” with the standard rules of form and plot structure. Here is a “Domestic Tale of the Present Time” that will not follow the standard tropes of its genre. Rather, Fern establishes a narrative that is counter to not only the conventions of an established market, but one that is rather unforgiving toward its own ability to enter unceremoniously and unannounced into the homes and minds of its readership. Like Robert Gunn, I agree that this reader address is Fern’s way of emphasizing “that the book is more important as a gesture of solidarity than it is as the history of a person” (28). My argument hinges on such a gesture of solidarity between Fern the authorial persona and the reader who is consuming her prose. What then strikes me is the way in which this solidarity is articulated, namely as an act of unceremonious and unannounced trespassing into a reader’s mind and home.

Such a movement into the private sphere of the reader paints *Ruth Hall* as a text that is highly concerned with crossing the line between public and private. Also, trying to wrestle with Fern’s treatment and reaction toward the “emerging culture of exposure and visual consumption” of the nineteenth-century marketplace, Dietrich Harer focuses on the

⁸ Hereafter referenced in the abbreviated form, *RH*.

intrusion and peeping of the author, arguing that what is at stake here is not the morality of intrusion into private spaces, but rather the morality of the intruder (5). Both Gunn and Harer, however equally obsessed with this authorial intrusion, fail to address the very type of relationship that it is cultivated between author and reader, one of mutual peeping. From the onset, Fern presents her not-novel as a project that grounds itself in a form of mental trespassing, a constant and simultaneous unceremonious exposure of both author and reader. With every page that follows the preface, Fern is suggesting that she, her words, and persona are walking through the reader's door. It is not only the reader who must deal with the intrusion, but the author as well. She invades and then opens her text, without guise of genre, to the scrupulous eyes of her readership. Because of this dual vulnerability, Fern does not demand that her readership love or enjoy her prose experiment, but rather gives them the choice. It is ultimately up to the readership, witnessing the laid bare authoress and her work, to see if they will be able to "fancy this primitive mode of calling, whether [they] will like the company to which it introduces...whether [they] will like the book at all" (*RH*).

Fern continues this peeping throughout the rest of *Ruth Hall* allowing us to watch omnisciently as characters inspect and gossip about the young writer's home and lifestyle. Readers are quickly presented with the gossiping and life-hindering in-laws, Mrs. and Dr. Hall. Immediately after Ruth's wedding to Harry, Mrs. Hall comments on her lack of understanding of who Ruth is as a woman and articulates her own resentment toward the match: "As to Ruth, I don't know anything about her. Of course she is perfect in *his* eyes. I remember the time when he used to think *me* perfect" (*RH* 10). What begins as jealousy seems to go far deeper. Mrs. Hall does not cease her lament and will not

passively accept her new role as mother-in-law, but rather begins to invade her new daughter-in-law's private space. Mrs. Hall nonchalantly confesses to herself and thus the reader that she's "been peeping into her [Ruth's] bureau drawers" judging the clothing placed inside: "What is the use of all those ruffles on her underclothes, I'd like to know? Who's going to wash and iron them? *Presents* to her! Well, why don't people make sensible presents—a dozen of dish towels, some crash rollers, a ball of wick-yarn, or the like of that?" (10). Admitting that the "bride is anything but a well-dressed doll," Mrs. Hall can only articulate her resentment of Ruth's excess and character in terms of her lack of domestic conformity (10). Seemingly anticipating the rhetoric of later critics of *Ruth Hall*, Fern is presenting Mrs. Hall as not only an intruding force into Ruth's private spaces, her home, bureaus, and later, role as mother, but also as someone who wants to exhibit control of Ruth and her private life.⁹ It is not enough for Mrs. Hall to merely comment, to gaze into, judge and examine Ruth's very existence, rather she must work to control Ruth and squeeze her into her own schema of housewife.

Such intrusion and character-making happens again when Mrs. Hall enters Ruth's new country home for the first time. Moving through the house with "stealthy cat-like steps," Mrs. Hall unceremoniously stalks through the property looking for anything that counters her own sensibility. While walking the grounds, Mrs. Hall discovers a volume of Ruth's own poetry housed in a tiny packet laying on the grass: "'What have we here? a book;'" (picking up a volume which lay half hidden in the moss at her feet;) 'poetry, I

⁹ Robert Gunn highlights the critical reaction toward *Ruth Hall*: "In the wake of the novel's revelations, the mainstream critical press excoriated Fern by judging her disclosures of private life to be transgressions against her gender" As a result these negative views, Gunn maintains, revealed "the degree to which challenges against the imaginary boundaries of privacy amount to challenges against orthodoxies of gender" (28). While I agree with Gunn, I wonder if such contemporary critical knee-jerk reactions were more a byproduct of the discomfort of such authorial and reader peeping and less a byproduct of a completely gendered reaction.

declare! The most frivolous of all reading; all pencil marked;--and here's something in Ruth's own hand-writing—that's poetry, too; worse and worse'" (29). There are two moments here where Mrs. Hall directs her wrath. Not only is Ruth, the alleged housewife, reading poetry, but also, more importantly, she is contributing to that "frivolous" work. More than just another moment of jealousy, Fern works to hinge this moment of tension on the discovery of the written word, and a private form of that expression, Ruth's own marginalia. What is "worse and worse" about this discovery is not just the poetry, but Ruth's own attempts at verse. Here Fern presents us with an intruding female character, who is actively judging not only the volume of poetry, but also the intimate penning of a fledgling writer. Fern, opening her own work to the reader's constant gaze, forces a form of identification with Mrs. Hall's own peeping. We continue to read as another character works to maliciously judge not only the reading habits of one she should be intimate with, but also the small and private verses living in the volume's margins. We are at once watching an invasion of private thought-space and, at the same time, are committing something similar by continuing to read the text. We discover the volume with Hall, judge as she judges (even if it rouses sympathies). We, unlike Mrs. Hall, are never implicated for this slight transgression, rather we are forced to, as Harer maintains, wrestle with the balance between moral and amoral notions of peeping. We, too, are intruding, peeping into the one who stealthily moves throughout Ruth's home. Through Fern's narrative voice we are implicated, if only briefly, for our peeping, our watching of the watchwoman.

Fern, however, quickly sways the reader to the position of a more knowing and benevolent peeper, one who is distanced completely from the gazing of Mrs. Hall.

Indeed, in the following chapter, immediately after Mrs. Hall begins her “exploring tour” of the summer home’s interior, Fern’s narrative voice moves to include its reader (31). Here the narrative voice guides Mrs. Hall’s movement and gaze throughout the house. “Not so fast, my dear madam” the voice interrupts, commanding Mrs. Hall to “Examine closely” the curtains and flowers, and to “see” how Ruth has aptly arranged the home (32). “We”, admits Fern, “beg pardon; we are keeping you too long from that china closet, which you are so anxious to inspect; hoping to find a flaw” (33). Here we, as readers, unite with Fern to guide Mrs. Hall through her inspection, providing subtle details, commanding Hall’s attention as she stalks through the house. Here reader and author unite under the royal usage of the plural pronoun to lay bare the intimate details of Ruth’s home. For example, we already know that the flowers on the table were picked and arranged by Ruth, not a byproduct of “A few dollars laid out” by Ruth and Harry as Mrs. Hall originally asserts (32). Here we unite with Fern to break the assumptions of the intruding Mrs. Hall. Through Fern we are also able to taunt the tyrannical mother, “You may draw those prying fingers across the shelves till you are tired, and not a particle of dust will adhere to them. Neither cups, saucers, tumbler, nor plates, stick to your hands; the sugar-bowl is covered [...] and the silver might serve for a looking-glass, in which you could read your own vexation” (33). We taunt, along with Fern, egging Mrs. Hall on to continue her spying in vain prodding the intruder, “mayhap you’ll find something wrong *up* stairs,” contributing to Hall’s vexation, we know too well that “nothing could be more faultless” (33). The only piece of evidence that Mrs. Hall is able to escape the home with is a small partly finished dress for Daisy and a “dicky of Harry’s, with the needle still sticking in it, which the little gypsey wife intends finishing when she comes

back from her wood ramble” (34). Upon this discovery Fern forces us back into the mindset of Mrs. Hall; we have moved from gazing above, taunting, and guiding, and back into the mind of Mrs. Hall who labels Ruth as “the little gypsy” wife. The tone here, naming Ruth as something derogatory, sticks out from the tone of the earlier peeping moments that were guided by the narrative voice. The chapter closes with Mrs. Hall’s “triumphant march home,” blaming Ruth for her “doings” and forgiving Harry of being duped (34).

Fern, in a chapter that has only spanned three pages, establishes the intrusion dynamic that was promised in her preface. As readers we have been gently guided into understanding the nature of peeping. We have passively followed Mrs. Hall as she first intruded into the home of the titular character and fledgling writer and have also been able to guide that peeping. We are both the biased observer like Hall who must enter the home of Ruth, see her domestic tale unfold, while at the same time we are in company with the narrative voice which allows us unparalleled access to not only Ruth’s interiority, but also the hidden details surrounding the few items that pique Mrs. Hall’s voyeurism. An odd relationship between mutual voyeurism, informed or otherwise, is well and good, but why would Fern include this in her domestic tale and how could it possibly relate to her own experience as a literary celebrity?

One popular theme throughout the first half of the novel is the maintaining of one’s own appearance and societal standing. Mrs. Hall is particularly concerned with such materiality. Upon relocation to the city, Harry becomes ill and is quickly fading. When hearing of her son’s illness, Dr. and Mrs. Hall rush into the hotel where Ruth is working tirelessly to nurse Harry back to health. While making their entrance into the

hotel, Mrs. Hall quickly establishes the importance of her own public image over her dying son:

I wonder if Harry *is* worse? Mercy me, I'm all of a quiver. I wonder if they will take us right into the drawing-room? I wonder if there's many ladies in it—my bonnet is awfully jammed: beside, I'm so powdered with dust, that I look as if I had had an ash barrel sifted over me. Doctor! Doctor! don't go on so far ahead. It looks awk'ard, as if I had no protector? (61)

Mrs. Hall seems to even question the severity of her son's sickness, the italics either working to place emphasis or to providing a questioning tone over her son's current state. Even if we give Mrs. Hall the benefit of sincerity, she quickly moves from maternal concern to quivering about her own appearance. Posing hypothetical questions, wondering, Mrs. Hall's primary concern in this passage focuses on her own reception amongst the potential group of "many ladies" waiting in the drawing room. We are presented her thoughts as they move from her bonnet, to her dusted clothes, and finally to the absence of her husband.¹⁰ Fern's presentation here does not allow Mrs. Hall a modicum of maternal feeling—the coveted role that Mrs. Hall laments losing in the early pages of the novel becomes ancillary to her main material pursuits. She, in the very moment where she could care about her son's wellbeing, is presented rather as a woman who is primarily concerned with her outward presentation.

In a novel that employs many sentimental tropes, Fern presents her readership with a maternal character that completely forsakes her child's wellbeing in lieu of her own maintenance of her social graces and appearance. Creating a foil for her more maternal and emotionally driven Ruth, Fern also establishes Mrs. Hall (and many minor

¹⁰ Throughout the text Mrs. Hall rarely seems intimate with either her son or husband. Here she continually addresses the latter as doctor, seeming only to reiterate his and thus her own status in the community.

characters like her within the novel¹¹) as motivated solely by their outward and public persona. This public façade, however, cannot be maintained within Fern's text. Indeed, Fern falls back to the motif of peeping and intrusion to subvert her most material characters, the good Dr. and Mrs. Hall.

In chapter sixty-three we are guided again by Fern to enter a private space, directing our gaze toward the interior of her in-laws' home. As before, our peeping is omniscient and allows us access to information that is unknown or hidden from other characters. Fern's narrator guides us to trespass into the very private home: "Let us peep into the doctor's sitting room; the air of this room is close and stifled, for the windows must be tightly closed, lest some audacious fly should make his mark on the old lady's immaculate walls" (164). From the onset, we know that the place we enter is off limits. The air is stale and the windows are barred from even allowing those "audacious" flies to bother Mrs. Hall or disturb the purity of her "immaculate walls." The Halls' home is one isolated from the gaze, closed off from the very public sphere that both of the Halls strive to function and perform in. Fern continues to describe the home's interior and then the specifics of Dr. and Mrs. Hall as they sit enforcing their strict code of conduct applied to Ruth's own daughter, Katy. In such an intrusion into a home that even Fern admits is hermetically sealed, we have begun to trespass, to enter a space not designed nor intended for public viewing. Because of this, we are able to witness the private selves of both Dr. and Mrs. Hall. Here the "old doctor, with his spectacles awry and his hands drooping listlessly at his side, snore[s] from the depths of his arm-chair" while Mrs. Hall resumed

¹¹ A similar argument can be made about Ruth's brother, Hyacinth. He, like Mrs. Hall is consumed by his own material gain and appearance, barring Ruth from entering his own field. More of the minor, one-shot, characters of the city also seem to echo these moments. I think of the two women gossiping over Ruth, Mary and Gertrude, who both empathize with Ruth's condition and poverty, while at the same time only caring for their own sense of public image and display of wealth (*RH 100*).

her work of continuous watching, “peering out from behind a very stiffly-starched cap border” (165). Differing from the austere public image of the know-it-all physician, Dr. Hall is shown to be in normal disarray; with his glasses awry and mouth agape, we are able to see him in a state that we never are privy to when he is administering his care (or lack thereof) to his patients. We, too, get to see Mrs. Hall, the “old lady” who is locked in her sealed habitat, knitting, while continuing her peeping, this time looking at her husband and observing Katy for any minor infraction of the established puritanical rules. Fern forces our gaze here, mirroring Mrs. Hall’s first intrusion into Ruth’s country home. We are, like Mrs. Hall, inspecting the interiority of both the intimate home and the characters that occupy it. By presenting a home that seeks to eliminate the presence of the public gaze and characters who seek desperately to hinder that public access to maintain their own public image, Fern presents the Halls as foils for Ruth’s own negotiation of those spaces. The peeping presented in this chapter serves to disrupt the ideal relationship between public and private personae. Unlike what we see later with Ruth’s negotiation of her own budding literary fame under her pseudonym, Floy, the Halls are shown here as fragile characters grasping to maintain their public image while simultaneously shutting out the very public that they wish to please. I contrast these intrusive moments of peeping with the moments where we are able to observe Ruth’s own writing process.

In a way that melds the public and private images of Ruth, Fern does not allow the reader to see Ruth’s public image as a budding writer isolated from her more private domestic toils. Before our intrusion into the Halls’ home, we are presented with a space that conflates the public act of writing with that of the private domestic life. We are encouraged to listen to the scratching of Ruth’s pen while she writes by “the dim lamp

flickering in the night breeze” to the sounds of the “deep breathing of the little sleepers” that slumbered nearby (160). Ruth’s “throbbing brow and weary fingers” continue to work through the night until the “lamp burns low in the socket” (161). Here Ruth “lays down her pen, and pushing back the hair from her forehead, leans faint and exhausted against the window-sill, that the cool night-air may fan her heated temples” (161). The young writer, in this moment of pure exhaustion, is blessed by “a sweet peace” that “steals into her troubled heart, and the overtaxed lids droop heavily over the weary eyes” (161). Ruth, exhausted by her own literary production, cannot be removed from her own pain and suffering in the domestic space. The dim lamp and the deep breathing of her daughters are ever present as she scratches the paper with a pen held by weary hands. Not only does Fern present her readers with a description of artistic production that completely counters the luxurious images of the ideal writer’s effortless penning away at their desk, but she also presents her readership with a figure who is simultaneously mother and writer. Not only does Fern connect Ruth’s two roles, but she also makes it a point to establish that the writing that Ruth is completing in this moment is very much connected to Ruth’s own bodily aches and pains. The more abstract and disembodied ideal writer is linked through physicality to Ruth’s private identity as a struggling and poverty-stricken mother. Unlike the Halls who only build the artifice of their public image and, privately, hide their own more bodily characteristics, Fern presents Ruth as exemplum of balance between the two extremes. Just like the typesetters (other producers in that ideal literary field) who must battle their own “sorrows, thinking, long into the still night as they scattered the types, more of their dependent wives and children, than of the orthography of a word, or the rhetoric of a sentence,” Ruth’s own private and public

identities cannot and will not be separated, allowing the reader to witness the complex and interwoven relationship of private and public personae (160). Here Fern begins to establish the notion of Ruth serving as the ideal representation, the balance incarnate, of both the private and public selves.

III. Real and Imagined Responses to Celebrity Images

If Ruth serves as a model of the ideal balance between material public and private images and notions of self, then it will be advantageous to see how such a character negotiates the moments where her private and public personae converge. However, it is necessary first, to briefly establish Fern's own connection to the Ruth/Floy character that she presents to her readers. Such a connection will help establish not only Fern's own investment in her novel, but also help link Ruth's negotiation of the private and public spheres of her celebrity to Fern's own negotiation of her own readership.

While gaining her own rather large readership, Fern contended with the more negative trappings of literary celebrity. Joyce Warren describes Fern's rise to fame and the constant battle that the young writer faced while encountering her fans. Such a relationship, Warren contends, was toxic, causing Fern "much pain and annoyance in her personal life" (179). Fern constantly had to wrestle with the public intruding into her life, or as Warren describes it, the "constant probing of the public: celebrity hunters followed her on the streets, pointing her out and rudely staring [...] men pretended familiarity with her; souvenir hunters tried to get into her house; and autograph hunters harassed her with constant requests" (179). Wherever the quick-witted writer went, her celebrity persona

weighed her down. In one of her published collections of columns, *Ginger-Snaps*,¹² Fern describes her encounter with a autograph hunter and the extent she went to highlight not only her annoyance with similar requests, but also the absurdity she believed that these patrons displayed. Fern writes,

I can conceive that invalids, or very young school-boys or girls, might amuse themselves in this manner; but how a sane adult, in the rush and hurry and turmoil of the maelstrom life of 1868, can find a moment for such nonsense, or can expect *you* to find a moment for it, is beyond my comprehension. Now a lock of hair has some significance--at least, I hope that man thought so, who received from me a curl clipped from a poodle-dog, which at the moment may be labeled with my name. It will be all the same a hundred years hence, as I remarked when I forwarded it to him. (*GS* "Autograph Hunters")

The joke is ultimately on the patron demanding the autograph, a member of that group of "sane adults" not caught up in the "turmoil of the maelstrom" of 1868 everyday life that is slighted for their quest for petty amusement contained in a signature. Here is a fan, demanding access, a literal piece of the celebrity's physical body, to sate his desire for consumption. Fern's response is telling, she sent the fake curl of hair, but also tried to seriously inform the collector "it will be all the same a hundred years hence." Here Fern is highlighting the triviality of such expressions of devotion and consumption. To her, the difference between the poodle's curl and her own is negligible. By tricking the collector, she is demonstrating her own control of and more hostile relationship with her celebrity.

Though *Ginger-Snaps* was published after *Ruth Hall*, Fern's views on her own literary celebrity remain unchanged and may have helped frame the narrative project of the semi-autobiographical text. By the time *Ruth Hall* was published, Fern was already a household name, a fact that made the advertisement of her unconventional novel much easier for her publishers, the Mason Brothers (Warren 123). The savvy publishers knew

¹² Hereafter parenthetically referenced as *GS*.

the power of the literary celebrity and as a result employed the spectacle of such celebrity to help *Ruth Hall* explode in the literary market.¹³ Indeed, the Mason Brothers played on the desire and “demand for anything that Fanny Fern could write” and, as part of their contract, barred Fern from publishing any other work, columns or otherwise while she worked on her text (Warren 120). Surrounded by her own celebrity, Fern created in *Ruth Hall* a response to her own vastly growing and Fern-hungry readership. Published amidst her established celebrity, it is hard to remove the semi-autobiographical *Ruth Hall* from Fern’s own negotiation of her literary status.

With Fern’s own celebrity surrounding not only the marketing, but also the production of the text, the connection to Ruth/Floy’s own literary celebrity is stabilized. Like Fern, Ruth must engage with a reading public that cannot negotiate the division between private and public personae. Included in *Ruth Hall* are transcriptions of Floy’s fan letters. These moments, similar to Fern’s own diatribe against the autograph hunter, work to establish not only the discomfort of such celebrity, but also serve to express a more stable relationship between public consumer and private author.

After establishing herself, Ruth encounters an intrusive reading public that is consumed by the desire to know and understand the spectacle of Floy. After only months after deciding to write under the pseudonym, Floy’s “fame as a writer increase[ed] much faster than her remuneration. There was rent-room to pay, little shoes and stockings to buy, oil, paper, pens, and ink to find” (*RH* 170). Again, as before, Fern does not separate Ruth’s literary production, or her Floy identity, totally from the trials of domestic survival. Even when experiencing a growing literary fame, Ruth must worry herself about

¹³ The Mason Brothers were rather devious in their marketing methods, forcing a need for the text by puffing the public’s consumption of the text and by publishing, in rapid succession, three editions of the novel (Warren 120-3).

the rent, the stockings, and the oil. After those items are paid for, then she may find the paper, pens, and ink to complete her writing. All the while when “Ruth scribbled away in her garret, the public were busying themselves in conjecturing who ‘Floy’ might be. Letters poured in upon Mr. Lescom [the publisher], with inquiries, even bribing him with the offer to procure a certain number of subscribers, if he would divulge her real name” (170). Juxtaposed with the image of a famous Ruth, the consumers of her literary works are trying to understand the Floy identity, going so far as to bribe Ruth’s own publisher to release her identity (the trade-off being more subscribers and thus more readers who would obsess over Ruth’s writings). Fern, however, guides her readers to see Ruth and Floy as not separate identities to be discovered, or found out, but rather as a balanced image—both mother and writer personae converge and meld together, while an ignorant readership generate “all sorts of rumors” about the mysterious writer:

some [readers] maintaining her to be a man, because she had the courage to call things by their right names, and the independence to express herself boldly on subjects to the timid and clique-serving, were tabooed. *Some said she was a disappointed old maid; some said she was a designing widow; some said she was a moonstruck girl; and all said she was a nondescript. Some tried to imitate her, and failing in this, abused and maligned her;* the outwardly strait-laced and inwardly corrupt, puckered up their mouths and ‘blushed for her;’ the hypocritical denounced the sacrilegious fingers which had dared to touch the Ark; the fashionista voted her a vulgar, plebeian thing; and the earnest and sorrowing, to whose burdened hearts she had given voice, cried God speed her. (170; emphasis added)

One can see the comparison to Fern’s own reception by her readership in this passage.

While *Ruth Hall*’s readership is presented with a literary celebrity who cannot be separated from her private identity as a mother, they are also presented with the flurry of conjecturing readers who only view the Floy persona as an enigma to be solved or informed by their own ideas. Fern presents Ruth’s readership as celebrating or hating the

young writer. Those that read Floy's columns must work to fill in the gaps left by the mystery of her own identity—she is a man, a widow, a maligned writer daring to touch and expound on taboo subjects, a vulgarity, a subject only fit for plebian eyes and mind, or a heroine to the oppressed, giving them a voice when no one else will. Floy, then, is a moldable nondescript identity, containing multitudes and reflecting whatever her readership projects onto her. She is a blank page to be colored in by those that consume her public identity.

However, even while Fern highlights Ruth's readership as informing the particulars about her Floy identity, she signals to her own readership the truth behind such consumption. After listing how Ruth's readership tried to understand or negotiate the mystery behind their celebrated writer, Fern tells us that "'Floy' scribbled on, thinking only of bread for her children, laughing and crying behind her mask,—laughing all the more when her heart was heaviest; *but of this her readers knew little and would have cared less* (171; emphasis added). While the flurry of the readership's inquires swirl around Ruth, she is only concerned about her private identity, providing for her family and relieving her own poverty. Here Fern is the most overt about the tension between public and private personae. Ruth is depicted as a masked figure, who, while behind the Floy mask, is seen laughing and crying. While her readers can only see the presentation, the mask of Floy, they could not and would not care about Ruth's sufferings, indeed they know very little about this more complex authorial persona. The readers of *Ruth Hall* are presented with an authorial figure who is simultaneously the publically informed Floy and the interior and emotional Ruth. By presenting Ruth in such a dynamic way, Fern seems to be showing her readership the face behind the mask that they consume. The

problem here, for Fern, is that the readership “knows little, and would have cared less” about the struggles that Ruth faces as a writer. By allowing her readers to see both of these public and private moments as connected, Fern seems to encourage her own readership to view, not just the writerly persona scribbling behind her desk—a persona that can be altered by her readership’s desire to know—but rather the more complex relationship between Ruth the writer and Floy the persona.

Concerning herself with the proper negotiation of public and private celebrity, Fern relies on Ruth’s on negotiation of her fan letters to help illustrate her vision of an ideal connection between reader and authorial identity. In chapter sixty-five, Ruth receives her first packet of fan mail, two letters from readers that address their missives to Floy. Here Fern presents two opposing requests that stand as exemplum for such an ideal connection between reader and author. The first letter is from John Stokes, a reader who describes himself as a “rough old man” who is “not used to writing or talking to ladies” (173). He confesses that he does not “know who you [Floy/Ruth] are” and he does not wish to ask, but rather wishes to tell the mysterious columnist that her writings bring his family together: “I have a family of bouncing girls and boys; and when we’ve all done work, we get round the fire of an evening, while one of us read your pieces aloud” (173). As a professed reader, one whose family is brought together around a fire to share and bound over Ruth’s words, he suggests that Ruth collect her columns into a volume “so that you readers may keep them” (173). Though John’s request is not as demanding as others that come across Ruth’s desk, he is still only addressing Floy, the persona that he reads and not the young writer behind the mask. For him, literary production, the amassing of columns to be bond together in a volume is a quick and effortless endeavor.

He, a sentence after his proposition, quickly tells Floy that “You can put me down for three copies, to begin with; and if every subscriber to ‘The Standard’ feels as I do, you might make a plum by the operation” (173). Here Fern presents us with a reader that wishes to inform Ruth’s writing process—he is a reader who wishes Floy to publish, contrary to her own methods.

Ruth’s response is telling: “‘Well, well,’ said Ruth, laughing, ‘that’s a thought that never entered this busy head of mine, John Stokes. *I* publish a book?’” (174). What seems at first as a consideration of John’s request actually counters it with a more informed sense of the authorial practice. Ruth admits that John does not know the process in which he intrudes upon: “Why, John, are you aware that those articles were written for bread and butter, not fame; and tossed to the printer before the ink was dry, or I had time for a second reading?” (174). As before, Ruth conflates her two identities. The fame, the celebrity that she enjoys as Floy is ancillary to providing for her family. The articles that bring John’s family together and that, if published in a volume, could make Ruth a delicious plum of profit, were written for Ruth’s own sustenance, the bread and butter that continued to feed her family. Far from being the most negative meditation concerning her readership, this internal response to John’s request does seem to gently point to a disconnection between what John, the literary fan, assumes and the reality he does not see surrounding the literary profession. Fern, by allowing her own readership to witness this letter, is suggesting that they, unlike, John can indeed see both aspects of the author, the persona that builds fame and the reason for that literary effort, the making of money for bread and butter. Ruth confesses that readers like John are “such readers as whom I like to secure” (174). They are desiring a connection, gently informing her

practice as a writer (even if there are blind to the entire picture), but also respect her enough to admit their own ignorance of the craft; John admits to being rough and not concerned with knowing who Floy actually is and later apologizes for any possible offense given by his presumptions (174).

The next letter in this packet seems, unlike John's, to truly connect with Ruth. Penned by Mary R, the letter establishes a direct connection between the writer and reader. Addressed to Floy, the letter begins with a declaration of intimacy. "Dear Floy," Mary writes, "For you *are* dear to me, dear as a sister on whose loving breast I have leaned, though I never saw your face" (174). From the onset, Mary is concerned not with understanding who exactly Floy is, admitting that she "knows not whether you are young and fair, or old and wrinkled," but is rather concerned more by the affect Ruth's words have on her: "every week you printed words come to me, in my sick chamber, like the ministrations of some gentle friend. Sometimes stirring to its very depths the fountain of tears, sometimes by odd and quaint conceits, provoking the mirthful smile" (174). Reaching out to Ruth, Mary is attempting to demonstrate how Ruth, like a sister, eases the suffering of her ailments. For Mary, Ruth's "soul-strengthening words" that Ruth has "unconsciously sent to my sick chamber, to wing the weary, waiting, hours" provide more than just entertainment and curiosity (175). Even though Mary confesses that, because of her failing health, she "shall never see" or know Floy in real life, she, through the print medium, establishes a familial connection with Ruth, calling the writer her "unknown sister" (175). In this relationship there is no focus on celebrity, rather on personal connection through print. Here Ruth and Floy are presented as the same person;

it matters nothing to Mary whether Floy is old or young, rather her letter maintains that it is just because Floy's words have helped her in her time of loneliness and need.

Ruth's response to this letter demonstrates the power of such emotional communication. We are told that after reading the letter from Mary, Ruth's "head bowed low upon the table, and her lips moved; but He to whom the secrets of all hearts are known, alone heard that grateful prayer" (175). Mary's words do not inspire laughter as they did with John's attempts to connect; rather they inspire a supplication and the mouthing of a silent and grateful prayer. What is striking here is Ruth's gratefulness. With Mary's dying words (or so we are made to believe; her fate is, ultimately, unknown) Ruth is moved to feel grateful not for the letter that sits on her desk, but rather the familial connection, the sisterhood with an unknown woman, who takes comfort in Ruth's words. The connection that Mary establishes with her "unknown sister" is the very "token of [her] love" that she promises to send to Ruth, promising that they will one day meet "where tears are wiped away" (175). Fern presents us with a model of reader and author connection. This is not to argue that each fan must be dying for Fern to accept them, or connect with them, but rather they should be more interested, like Mary, in the affect that the writer can and will produce. Here is a letter from a fan that transcends the material relationship of celebrated persona and consumer, displaying a personal connection—a literary Namaste. This is the connection that Fern seems to privileged throughout *Ruth Hall*, a connection between writer and reader that does not carry the weight of renown, but rather human emotion.¹⁴

¹⁴ A similar scene happens again when another female writer pens to Ruth. Mary Andrews later writes to Ruth requesting the latter to become a mother to her soon-to-be orphaned child. She admits that she cannot "tell you why I put this trust in one whom I have only known through her writers, but something assures me it will be safe with you" (213). Ruth responds that Mary's letter "must be answered" (213). Here again, I argue this connection and emotional

With two positive frames of a reader-to-author connection established, I turn now to the more negative letters that Ruth responds to throughout the text. Here in her either mocking laughs, or taunts, is where Fern seems to be arguing for exactly how not to address a literary celebrity. In each one of these cases, Ruth's negative response is due, in part, to the presumptions of the readers. Every one of the following letters engages with not Ruth the person, but rather Floy the persona, demanding her magical literary talent for their own financial gain.

Amidst the many requests addressed to Floy for autographs, marriage, and book offers, Ruth also is presented with readers who write to her about their misfortune. In such requests, disguised by sympathy, lies exploitation. The first reader to contact Ruth in this way is Reginald Danby. Reginald, addressing the "Distinguished and Popular Writer, 'Floy'" is "a young man with aspirations far above [his] station in life" (198). Continuing in length regaling Ruth with his familial history (which is linked to some semblance of gentry in England), Reginald informs her that the prominent Danby lineage has come on harsh times: "It is this: I am poor. My family, though once wealthy, is now impoverished. The way this state of things came about, was substantially as follows: My grandfather, who was a strong-minded, thrifty gentleman, married into a poetical family" as a result of the publishers "in those days" not being "as enterprising as they are now" these forgotten, yet remarkable manuscripts, went unpublished (199). As a result of this failed entrance into the literary field, Reginald's father's business sense did not develop as was intended due to his mother's more poetical feelings and obsessions (199). As such the letter

investment with another reader, regardless of gender, is what fuels Ruth's response. Fern does not only privilege women as the only members who can find this proper balance between public and private. M.D.J, a male reader, writes to Ruth telling her that he is a better son, husband and brother because of her writing. Ruth responds in a similar manner to this male reader as she did with the two female readers (235).

requests that Ruth receive the unpublished manuscripts (as long as she pays postage both ways), and write Reginald's own family history, one that he assures Ruth is "the subject for a splendid and thrilling story" (200). The trade is that Ruth must first send Reginald through college, in turn she is able to bolster her already vast literary fame and the profits from the volume would, possibly, "leave a large surplus" after, of course, meeting the minor cost of Reginald's schooling (200).

Reginald's letter meets with no response, tellingly; however, such silence demonstrates a reader's common mistake when reaching out to a celebrated author. Reginald's concern is not in establishing a connection with Ruth, seeing her as a human behind her authorial mask, but rather for his own and, arguably, his family's gain. His salutation is directed to the "distinguished and popular writer," privileging Ruth's success and not her character. In the body of the letter he assumes that, because she is so celebrated, Ruth is wealthy: "You are probably rich; I hope you are with all my heart" (200). Reginald's hopes are focused on Ruth's own status, but, as we know, for his own personal reasons. Juxtaposed with the rest of the letter, Reginald's hope is self-serving. He hopes that Ruth is rich not so that she is able to provide for herself, but so that she can provide for him. After all, according to Reginald, Ruth "must be able to command a high salary, and a great deal of influence" and thus must be able to help one who, like her, wishes to raise above his own station in life (200). Cloaked behind the mask of a sentimental tale, Reginald's plight is nothing more than an attempted exploitation of Ruth's literary influence and fame. Unfortunately for Reginald, despite his plea for Ruth to "believe [him] truly your friend and admirer," his request falls on deaf ears and blind eyes (200). Compared to John and Mary's letter, Reginald's request demonstrates the

skewed relationship between reader and author. Here there is only an emphasis on Ruth's talent, fame, and salary, which is only highlighted in hopes that Ruth complies with the request of literary production, writing Reginald's family story. There is no emotional connection, nor the forsaking of literary fame.

A similar dynamic occurs in another letter addressed to Floy. Sarah Jarmesin writes Ruth to explain her current misfortunes in life and in order to offset her own ruin, she requests that Ruth "furnish all the facts, and the story" of her life with Ruth's "magic pen" (212). The story reads similar to the misfortune that Ruth experiences in the beginning of the novel, but this does not sway the now famous columnist. Ruth's responds with a laugh: "'Well,' said Ruth laughing 'my bump of invention will be entirely useless, if my friends keep on furnishing me with subjects at this rate'" (212). Playing more on the fact that she is inundated with such requests, so much that her own personal life, her bump of invention, will not be needed if such readers continue to write in, Ruth seems to reject Sarah's plea because it demands the usage of her "magic pen." Unlike the earlier letters with Mary and John, Sarah, like Reginald, is asking not for Ruth's sympathy, but rather her literary talent. She logically deduces that since Ruth has achieved success that she will be able "to assist [her] by writing out my story and giving me the book" (212). Unlike Reginald, there is no tradeoff for Ruth—she does not even get the promise of profit. Rather, the only reward that Sarah promises is a justice that will favor her, promising Ruth that upon the success of the novel, she "could then triumph over the villain who so basely deceived [her]" (212). Ruth does not answer these letters, but rather hints to the amount of readers like Sarah who desire her "magic pen," her tool for establishing literary talent and merit. The disconnection is more obvious here than in

other letters. Here there is no stable trade for Ruth's involvement, rather Sarah is relying on Floy's fame and success to be able to sate her desire for revenge. Ruth becomes, in Sarah's formulation, nothing but a tool to fulfill her own needs.

Thomas Pearce, like Reginald and Sarah, is another writer who wishes to have Ruth work toward providing for his own benefit. Thomas, who has "the honor" of being the guardian to "a young Southern lady (an orphan) of a large fortune," has been giving the task by his ward of procuring celebrated busts of "distinguished female writers" for the young girl's suite (234). The young girl lists Floy as one of these lucky female writers who is to sit for a bust. Again this is a reader, mediated through Pearce's words, who wishes to consume only the public image of their celebrated writer. The letter is one of the shortest included in *Ruth Hall* and one in which no attempt at emotional connection is made; unlike Reginald, there is no mock sympathy here, only a bare request for the bust—an image of a perpetual static celebrity persona.

Ruth's response, as before, attempts to sway the reader to see that such a request is unfavorable because of the disconnection between Ruth's private and public identities. After reading the letter, Ruth glances "around her little dark room and smiled. 'I would rather, instead, that an artist would take a sketch of my room, now,' [...] 'that little black stove, where I have so often tried in vain to thaw my frozen fingers—that rickety old bed—the old deal table, with its yellow bowl of milk—that home-made carpet—those time-worn chairs—and then you, my little bright fairy [Netty], in the foreground;'" (234). Again, like when we are made to see Ruth's writing connected with her domestic space, Ruth forsakes the bust of Floy for a small sketching that instead shows the reality of her life behind Floy's persona. For Ruth, the presentation of the pain of writing—the thawing

of her fingers by the stove—or her private economic struggles cannot be forgotten by her readers. Though celebrated, she is still very much connected to that private domestic sphere, reading the letters while Netty sits at her feet. Far from distinguished, she lives a simpler life. Indeed, Ruth states that it would be “better [to] reserve the niche destined for ‘Floy’ for some writer to whom ambition is not the hollow thing it is to me” (234). For Ruth, writing is not about fame and celebrity; she sees it as a means to an end, providing food and safety for herself and her daughters. For her, to be modeled for a bust would be a job for someone one is writing not for personal reasons, but for solely ambition and pride.

These are but a selected few of the many letters that are presented in *Ruth Hall* that seem to be linked to Fern’s narrative project of demonstrating the need for a proper connection, a melding between consumable public celebrity personae and an author’s more interior and private self. These moments where Ruth’s readership reach out and request her aid stand as examples, for good or ill, of how Fern wishes her public to engage with her and her Fern persona. For Ruth and Fern, the two pseudonyms cannot be separated, but rather must be addressed together. A reader, if following the examples in *Ruth Hall*, must be able to see past the publically celebrated image, to see the writer as she is outside of her medium, a living and breathing human being.

IV. Controlling Real Literary Celebrity and Moderating Reader Intrusion

Fanny Fern’s columns are another location where I argue such a didactic project is undertaken. Much of the scholarship surrounding Fanny Fern covers either her effect on the literary market, or on her larger works, like *Ruth Hall*. Thankfully, however,

critics have since turned back to Fern's periodical writings attempting to see Fern in a more complete authorial picture.¹⁵ For my analysis of Fern's later periodical works, I rely on two main scholarly works to lay the foundation for my own exploration into Fern's didactic project. In her published dissertation, Karah Rempe works to understand the notion of how the reading public responded to the fame of nineteenth-century authors. Devoting a whole chapter to Fern, Rempe argues that Fern's columns, worked to "collap[se] the boundary between her public work and private life" by choosing "to write about the intimate details of her domestic life, her opinions on politics and social conventions" (146). Fern's columns, Rempe maintains, were places "of colliding public and private identities" where Fern had to work to manage her own public presence (147). To manage her stance in the "glaring, public spotlight" Fern crafted a "public image that traded in authenticity, while working to shield 'the woman' from the probing public eye" (148). Despite this effort, Fern was unable to "separate completely the woman from the author" (151). The tension for Rempe lies in Fern's alleged project of controlling both her private and public identities. While I agree that Fern desired such a control, I believe where Rempe misses the mark is in exactly how this balance was enforced or illustrated in Fern's writing. As such, I want to close the gap that Rempe left slightly ajar and argue that in both Fern's columns and volumes, Fern attempted to teach her readership—to show those masses who issued "demands for intimacy, friendship, and sympathy"—the proper balance between private and public lives of an author.

¹⁵ See Bonnie O'Neill's article, "Does Such a Being Exist?": Olive Branch Readers Respond to Fanny Fern," in *Letters and Cultural Transformations in the United States, 1760-1860* and Laffrado's "I Thought from the Way You Writ, That You Were a Great Six-Footer of a Woman" in *In Her Own Voice: Nineteenth-Century American Women Essayists*.

Also concerned with Fern's identities presented in her periodical work, Laura Laffrado argues that the medium of periodical writing allowed Fern to promote "redefinitions and reconfigurations of the (female) self," allowing female writers like Fern "to profess various (self-)representations" to best suit their respective rhetorical endeavors (55). As a result of such vast and mutable representations, marginalized female writers were able to better negotiate the more patriarchal system of the nineteenth-century print industry. While I support Laffrado's reading of Fern's multiple representations of an authorial self, I cannot help to wonder where and how Fern's own readership, those that consumed and circulated her mutable selves, fits within her argument. I view Fern's project as not only outlining the creation and control of a personal and private set of identities, but also one that is attempting to present the readership these mutable identities in order to cultivate a more balanced form of interaction. As Laffrado points us toward, Fern was hounded by her own fan's requests to consume or cross the boundary into the columnist's private life, but instead of side-stepping these readers completely, it seems Fern is more invested, as Rempe maintains, in controlling not only her own interaction within the market, but her readers' as well. Fanny Fern's columns both published in the *New York Ledger* and republished in her collection, *Ginger-Snaps* demonstrate Fern's own attempts to control her readership and their interaction with her own private and public forms of selfhood.

Published in 1870, *Ginger-Snaps* is a collection of new and republished articles from various periodical work. Though published two years before Fern's own death in 1872, *Ginger-Snaps* is still highly concerned with the negotiation of private and public realms, demonstrating how the columnist, even up to her death, was still attempting to

control the consumption of her fame. In one longer article entitled, “Some Gossip About Myself” Fern retells an often cited encounter with her readership. Towards the end of the article Fern turns her focus onto her “brethren[‘s]” inquiries into Fern’s physical description: “how [do] I look? Am I tall? have I dark, or light complexion? and what color are my eyes?” (GS “Some Gossip”). Confessing that she “should be very happy to answer these questions” Fern paradoxically admits to a personal confusion as to who she actually may be: “I proceed to explain why I cannot tell whether ‘I be I’” (GS “Some Gossip”). Fern then begins to tell her readership about overhearing a presumptuous encounter with an admirer at an opera house. Seated behind the gentleman fan and his companion, Fern overhears that “strange gentleman” informed his friend that he did indeed know Fanny Fern “intimately” and, pointing up to the box above Fern, singled out a patron that he mistook as the popular columnist. Fern, intrigued and “naturally desiring to know how [she] did look” used her opera glasses to spy on the Fern stand-in:

The lady was tall, handsome, graceful, and beautifully dressed. The gentleman who accompanied me began to grow red in the face, at the statement of my ‘intimate’ acquaintance, and insisted on a word with him; but the fun was too good to be spoiled, and the game too insignificant to hunt; so, in hope of farther revelations, I laughingly observed my ‘double....’ (GS “Some Gossip”)

As entertaining as this mistaken identity is for the casual reader, and even, it seems, for Fern, the underlying message seems clear. One looks toward the “gentleman who accompanied” Fern to the opera (some have identified this as Bonner) to understand the tension behind such a display of ignorance. For Fern, however, this misidentification is exactly why she cannot tell “whether ‘I be I.’” Presented with another form of herself, formed from the intimate knowledge and presumptions of a reader, Fern admits “how impossible it is, for such a chameleon female to describe herself” (GS, “Some Gossip”).

As in *Ruth Hall*, Fern is using the space of this article to convey the impossibility of her own regulation of her authorial persona, answering a request from one reader desiring to know Fern physically, Fern responds with another moment where one reader has taken the liberty of defining Fern as he would wish to see her, the ideal woman, tall and handsome, sitting in an opera box. More overt than some of her addresses in *Ruth Hall*, Fern presents her readership with such reader inventions of her Fern persona as responsible for her inability to even define herself. Because of such reader assumptions, the columnist is left, akin to a chameleon, changing her colors to fit a given readers expectations.

An earlier article appearing in the *Ledger* presents another reader with a lesson to learn not to base their perceptions of Fern on only the highly gossiped about celebrity persona. In her article, “Answers to My Own Correspondents,” published March 2nd 1861, Fern pens a response to Lucia, concerning a misconstrued image of the columnist’s authorial image. Responding to Lucia’s faith in a description painted by “a New York Correspondent,” Fern works to “pull down any of the fine air-castles [the correspondent] is in the habit of building” (“From the Periodical Archives”). Such “fine air-castles” are built by the rumors of those New York “gentry” who “with the greatest minuteness” describe “authors and authoresses whom they have never seen, manufacturing, at the same time, little personal histories concerning these celebrities” (“From the Periodical Archives”). Fern writes that “it matters little to the writers whether nature has furnished the authoress about whom they romance with black eyes or blue, brown hair or flaxen, whether nature made her a six-foot grenadier, or a symmetrical pocket edition of womanhood,” but that it is to the profit of the “Ananias and Sapphira gentry [to] find that

a spicy lie pays as well as truth—at least until they are found out” (“From the Periodical Archives”). By alluding to *Acts* 5:1-11, Fern accuses these men and women of knowingly distorting the truth concerning her own image as a writer, and then disseminating that obscured image to others for profit. Sapphira and Ananias’s story does not end well, as they are struck dead when confronted by Peter. To Fern, who is here playing Peter, those that create such spicy lies about her must face her retribution. For the rest of the short article, Fern dispels the rumors that these malcontents crafted. What is striking is that these rumors are more concerned more with her private and personal life than her authorial identity. Fern assures Lucia that she indeed does not ““smoke cigarettes or chew opium,”” and that she “is not ‘married to Mr. Bonner [her editor and boss]’” (“From the Periodical Archives”). Even though her readership is only encountering her Fern identity, they strive to invade Fern’s personal life, creating rumors about very personal details about children, marriage, and personal habits. Here, her readership is actively informing and creating narratives around the Fern persona. Tellingly, Fern ends the article answering the question concerning her religious creed with ““Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor”” (“From the Periodical Archives”). Though Fern’s penname was intended to craft an authorial scapegoat—a distance from the literary market—her readership fills the gap between the private and public personae, crafting rumors to link the two. By reaching out to Lucia, Fern is attempting to reconcile the gossip, the intrusion into her personal life. Here she guides Lucia to witness the woman behind the authorial mask, not the persona that is changed at the whim of her own readers.

Though Fern seemed to vehemently rise against the gossip about her own persona, the celebrated author had yet another major infraction for which readers would commit; readers who objectified the columnist were quickly addressed. As examined above, Fern colors the intrusion of autograph hunters as the basest form of reader requests. In “Autograph Hunters” Fern also seems to use this model of presenting negative examples to help convey the point that only consuming a public authorial persona is violating the intended relationship between reader and author. Fern admits that she expects such requests for autographs from family and “personal friends,” while denying the requests from “those who torment you from the mercenary motives or from mere curiosity, as they would bottle up an odd insect for their shelf, to amuse an idle hour” (*GS* “Autograph-Hunters”). The language here is telling and reveals Fern’s project. By drawing the distinct line between those mild requests from family and personal friends, Fern allows the reader to see the non-intrusive way in which to ask for her name scrawled on paper—namely through knowing or attempting to know the author that one desires to ask for an autograph. She does not disclose the possibility of friendship here, but rather rails against the more intrusive and mercenary like collector driven by curiosity or personal motives. She likens herself to an insect in a jar, set upon the shelf of her collector’s mantle. For Fern, this relationship between reader and author is a toxic one, a relationship that forces the author to accept her objectified role and for the collector/reader to enjoy another commodity to place on his shelf. Here again, through a negative example, Fern is attempting to demonstrate her own frustration with her own public and objectified status as a writer. Akin to those that scribbled to Ruth, Fern is

again attempting to privilege a more intimate connection, the recognition of being a subject and not an object of literary production or talent.

Published in 1856 and appearing in the *Ledger*, the next article also engages with Fern's attempt at teaching her readership how to negotiate her public persona. Fern's column, "Answers to Fern Correspondents," is a list of reader requests all of which are responded to in the negative. In a similar vein to the readers who write to Ruth, these reader requests are financially motivated, asking for anywhere from twenty dollars to five-hundred dollars for various purposes from buying a favored cigar or to start as "a market gardener" ("Answers"). Other more authorial requests are written asking for a personal story to be told. Bridget Jones writes asking for her "remarkable history to be published" and written by Fern ("Answers"). Joseph, another fan, writes that he is willing to pay "a reasonable sum for composing a moving love-letter for him to a cruel coquette" ("Answers"). These requests declined only with the repetitive "Ditto" from Fern ("Answers"). These readers assure Fern that they have the remarkable histories, and the passion to succeed in the literary market, but believe they are lacking to Fern's authorial mastery.

Fern's responses seem curt, but they are working to highlight not only the absurdity of such requests, but also the readers' consumption of only her authorial identity. She sees her fans writing to her persona—her ability to be an adequate wordsmith—and not to her. The only fan letter than Fern responds to in this string is one that is not looking for literary or monetary gain, but is rather seeking "frank expressions of opinion" concerning her impending marriage to an "old bachelor" ("Answers"). Fern responds at length to this young woman maintaining that "a man who for so long a period

has had nobody but himself to think of...make[s] a most miserable *help-meat*" ("Answers"). Why reply to this request and not the others? It is not merely a matter of gender as other female fans received the curt response, "Ditto." Fern is offering advice to this reader because the fan is not writing to Fern the writer for financial usage of her celebrated literary talents, but rather is seeking more personal advice—this implies a connection with Fern rather than a glorification of the Fern-persona. As a result, Fern seems to textually single out this reader, offering an answer beyond the repeating "ditto" and responds as a friend would, open and honestly. Here amidst a collection of negative examples of authorial address, is one reader who is looking to not Fern the writer, but rather Fern the woman and person. Using Fern's persona as a method of connection, writing to a celebrated author, Jones is looking past the literary spectacle and objectified status and is reaching toward something more personal.

Another theme in her periodical work is the presentation of the realities of her own literary labor. These articles address the common request of Fern's readership to, like her, profit from a literary lifestyle. Such an article, "To Literary Aspirants" published December sixth, 1856, functions as a warning and lament about those that have written Fern desiring to enter the literary field as authors. Fern writes, "My heart aches at the letters I am daily receiving from persons who wish to support themselves by their pens" ("To Literary"). This is not because she is worried about exploitation of these poor letter writers, but rather because of their lack of technical skill: "many of these letters, mis-spelt and ungrammatical, show their writers to be totally unfit for the vocation they have chosen" ("To Literary"). Here Fern is setting a boundary between the readership and the literary market, a boundary determined by education and skill. Fern then shifts to a long

diatribe about the actual labor of the literary market. She believes those that desire to enter the market see it as an easy labor process, but she is quick to remark otherwise: “They [the letter writers] see a short article in print, by some writer; it reads easy—they doubt not it was written easily; this may or may not be the case” (“To Literary”). She insists that true writers have “gone through (as you must do) the purgatorial furnace” that functions to separate “the literary dross from the pure ore” (“To Literary”). Though harsh, Fern’s rhetoric in this article should seem familiar when compared to a similar project outlined in *Ruth Hall*.

As when she would depict Ruth’s suffering at home while writing, Fern is attempting to create an accurate description of the market that she is toiling within. Akin to showing Ruth wishing that her readers could see the reality of her method of literary production, the harsh language in this article is working to remove the skewed view of the literary profession. This is not to say that Fern is employing tact, but she is attempting to convey the harsh reality, the grim production surrounding what her readership seems to identify as a profession of ease and enjoyment. The ideal vision of Fern causally writing, she maintains, is nothing compared to the reality of walking through the purgatorial flames of authorship. By correcting her readership’s skewed vision, Fern presents the reality of her own celebrity, focusing the hard labor, the trials of blood and spirit that are required as trade for her success. By doing so, Fern is also helping isolate that she is not unlike her own readership (minus the skills that they lack). Writing, for Fern, is a labor akin to what her readers experience in their own lives. Isolating the harsher realities of the literary market Fern presents her readership with a moment where she guides her readership to view her own work as actual labor. Here, in this market, there is not glamor

and instant-fame, rather only an author's hard work and suffering. By providing readers with a more realistic, albeit embellished, notion of the labor in the market, Fern simultaneously shatters any notions of an ideal literary market in which she toils. Her goal still falls within the boundaries of her didactic project. Her demystification of the labor of writing forces the readers to redefine their own conceived extravagance of literary celebrity and production.

V. "Speak of Me as I am; Nothing Extenuate, nor Set Down Aught in Malice"¹⁶

Bending her celebrity status and her readership's intrusive desires to her own will, Fern exerts control over another key component of the literary market that evolved around her. Instead of bemoaning her commodification by those readers and publishers that surrounded her, or plainly accepting her objectified status as a female writer, Fern worked endlessly to change the public and private politics of the market that she worked within. Not content with merely resigning herself to exploitation, Fern sought to teach, to guide, the publishers and readers that worked to objectify her. Working within the confines of both *Ruth Hall* and her periodical works in the *Ledger* and *Ginger-Snaps*, Fern presents her readership with moments of author-reader interaction, outlining how one must engage with their favored writer. Directing her readers through positive and negative examples of author-reader interaction, Fern begins to pave the way for an ideal relationship and emotional connection between an author and their voracious readers, a relationship that sees past the celebrity and the materiality and rather allows the reader to see the author as she lives, breathes, and works in the literary market. Far from being

¹⁶ From *Othello* Act 5, scene 2, lines 343-44.

perfect, Fern's didactic project still attempts to address what Fern believed to be a problem within the literary market, a problem that Whitman, Dickinson, and Poe (to only name three) also attempted to wrestle with during their literary careers. However, unlike those authors attempting to find and cultivate a spiritually kindred readership passively, Fern, as her readership would expect, takes a more direct approach. For her there cannot be a mere shrugging off of the readers that buy into the author-celebrity trappings and paraphernalia—she is not waiting for the ideal readership to acknowledge her as subject, she forces that distinction, creates it. Seemingly responding to the epigraph opening *Life and Beauties*, Fern claims that indeed, her message to her readers is neither extenuating nor set down in malice. She instead completes the quote from *Othello*, begging her readership to only speak of her as she is, a living subject who writes to a readership who consumes.

By exploring how Fern used her own celebrity status to influence not only the market surrounding her, but also the readers that aided in fueling that market, I hope to begin to open critical inquiry to account for the relationships that existed between celebrated authors and their readers; not only within the nineteenth-century as such commodified celebrity exists beyond the scope of the 1800s. We, like Fern, should not be content to merely look at the antebellum print-industry with only our focus on author and publisher. If we are to fully understand the role authors played within that market, then it only stands as reason to account for those masses, the reading public, that consumed those literary works. My analysis of Fern's didactic engagement is only one of many rich areas where our critical attention begs to be directed. Much of what I have briefly devoted attention to in *Ruth Hall* and Fern's other various periodical works, is a virtually

untouched, but steadily growing area of interest. As the field of nineteenth-century print culture evolves, I encourage that more sustained studies of our favored celebrity writers continue. By focusing on moments where authors are responding to their own burgeoning literary fame and status allows us to not only engage with and examine an oftentimes exploitative literary market, the seedy publishers and the business ethics (or lack thereof) of major publishing houses, but also how those writers saw themselves operating within that market. Ultimately, I want to make breathing room in this study for those who are most like the literary critics who pour over texts. Like us, they are readers who are attempting to connect with the same authors that we devote so many of our pages, our books, and our lives toward understanding. They are effectively speaking to and with those very same authors that we celebrate. Like Fern, we should actively address the unheard, often underrepresented, masses that helped generate the literary works that we praise. Only then can we begin to see how far our favored authors extended their influence over the market that produced and shaped them.

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Vita:

Originally from Shillington, Pennsylvania, Kyle graduated summa cum laude with his B.A. in English from Lock Haven University in 2013. Graduating with his M.A. in English in May 2015, Kyle is continuing at Lehigh in the Fall semester of 2015 to begin his Ph.D. He intends to focus his studies on American nineteenth-century celebrity and print culture. He currently lives in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.