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Catherine Clinton. *Fanny Kemble's Civil Wars: The Story of America's Most Unlikely Abolitionist.* New York and London: Simon & Schuster, 2000. 302 pp. $26.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-514815-2.

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Fanny Kemble's Marital Combat

Several themes run through Fanny Kemble's life: her independence, her devotion to her family, her love of writing, and her concern for the unfortunate. In her marriage to Pierce Butler, these themes would come into conflict, bringing her bitter unhappiness.

Although born into one of the leading families of the British theater, Kemble did not intend to pursue an acting career; she was more comfortable on the literary stage. Family reverses, however, forced a teenage Fanny Kemble to become the economic mainstay of her family, leading to her celebrated debut on the London stage in 1829. As her family looked to stave off creditors, Kemble and her father Charles toured the United States in 1832, bringing about Kemble's introduction to Butler.

Butler's thoughtful devotion charmed Kemble, but after their marriage in 1834 the relationship quickly soured. Anticipating a companionate marriage, Kemble bitterly resented Butler's patriarchal view of conjugal life. Displaying her independence, Kemble refused to renege on a contract she had signed before marriage to publish a journal of her travels in America. After weeks of wrangling, Kemble packed her belongings and left her husband just four months into their marriage; unsure of what to do next, however, she returned to their Philadelphia home that evening. Kemble's first flight from her husband's home would not be her last. Shortly after the birth of her first child, Kemble wrote Butler a letter explaining she was "weary of my useless existence" and offering to surrender claims on their daughter in return for her release from marriage (p. 82). Kemble's letter reflected her frustration with a life in which she did not pursue her acting career, could no longer publish, could not choose her friends, and had few responsibilities for her household or child. Yet, when Kemble found a vocation in antislavery writing, her choice only exacerbated tensions with her husband.

Upon inheriting their uncle's estate in 1836, Pierce Butler and his brother became the second largest slaveholders in Georgia. Kemble, whose antislavery sentiments were long held and openly expressed, nevertheless shared her husband's

racial attitudes and was willing "to believe that her husband's family were 'good' slaveholders, indulgent and paternalistic" (p. 111). Her journey to her husband's plantation in the fall of 1838, however, disabused her of the possibility of benevolent slaveholding. Recognizing that her own financial well-being rested on slavery, Kemble issued her husband an ultimatum: she would not stay with him if he continued to earn his money from slavery, and she used against him the strongest weapon she could, the denial of sex.

Kemble finally sought a legal separation from Butler in 1843, after finding letters proving his marital infidelities. Butler retaliated by denying her almost all access to their two daughters; Kemble did not fully regain visitation rights until each girl reached her majority. The Butler-Kemble marriage clearly reveals the legal obstacles faced by nineteenth-century wives: prior to their divorce, a cash-strapped Pierce Butler was entitled to any money Kemble earned to support herself, and, even more galling, despite his adultery Butler gained a judgment against Kemble for desertion and won custody of their daughters.

Catherine Clinton's biography reveals a more complex portrait of the Kemble-Butler union than that of a defenseless victim and a domineering spouse. Kemble's independence and outspokenness could make her difficult for others to tolerate. Both of her daughters had closer relationships with their father than with their mother. As a teenager, Kemble herself had confided her doubts about her suitability for marriage, questioning whether she could be "an obedient wife or affectionate mother" (p. 73). Moreover, while no abolitionist, Butler himself was not entirely comfortable with slavery. When forced to sell half his slaves to repay his debts, Butler met personally with each of the five hundred slaves and gave each four quarters as a farewell token. Butler argued that Kemble was herself a hypocrite, for upon marrying him she had accepted her status as a slaveowner.

Clinton offers a detailed narrative of Kemble's life, yet her story also undercuts Kemble's significance as an abolitionist. While an opponent of slavery and a resident of Philadelphia, where women founded a Female Anti-Slavery Society in 1837, Kemble never associated herself with an antislavery group. More critically, Kemble refrained from publishing her antislavery journal in the antebellum period because she feared angering her estranged husband and losing all access to her daughters; instead, Kemble circulated her work privately among abolitionist friends. Not until 1863, after President Lincoln had issued the Emancipation Proclamation, did Kemble publish her ***Journal of a Residence on a Georgia Plantation***. In Great Britain, which had a strong abolitionist tradition, citizens read her journal avidly, but, as Clinton acknowledges, "it would be safe to say that the book has more greatly influenced twentieth-century historians than Civil War-era politicians" (p. 179).

Catherine Clinton writes that she has been intrigued by Fanny Kemble's life since her undergraduate years, and she has done meticulous research for this biography, especially in Kemble's prolific writings. Kemble's best-known ***Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation*** is only a small portion of her eleven volumes of autobiographical work. In addition to her journals, Kemble also published plays, poems, and essays that further illuminate her life and ideas. Moreover, since Kemble frequently criss-crossed the Atlantic, visiting family and friends in both Great Britain and the United States, her correspondence is large, and well-mined by Clinton.

Despite her extensive use of sources and quotations from Kemble's writings, however, Clinton dispenses with footnotes or endnotes, and her bibliography includes few monographs. Writing to a lay audience, Clinton does not engage the historiography nor does she attempt to place Kemble's life and work in the context of other antislavery advocates, such as Abby Kelley Foster or the

Grimke sisters.[1] Instead, this biography focuses narrowly on Kemble and her family. Had Clinton broadened her scope, of course, she would have revealed the limited impact of Kemble on her contemporaries. Her marital battle was a private one, marked by her resignation to contemporary laws and customs that favored husbands in conjugal disputes. The work for which she is best known, her writing against slavery, had little real influence because it was published during the Civil War when slavery's death knell had already sounded.

Despite these limitations, Clinton's biography reveals Fanny Kemble as a woman who stood on the cusp between wifely duty and independence, between private distaste for slavery and abolition, between acceptance of a patriarchal society and a preference for one marked by a more egalitarian spirit. Her clashes with her husband illuminate the difficulties that free spirited women faced in the restrictive society of nineteenth-century America.

[1]. See, e.g., Dorothy Sterling, *Ahead of Her Time: Abby Kelley and the Politics of Antislavery* (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1991) and Gerda Lerner, *The Grimke Sisters from South Carolina: Pioneers for Woman's Rights and Abolition* (New York: Schocken, 1966).