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The Digital Encyclopedia of British Sociability in the Long Eighteenth Century

Women's travel writing

PAGE-JONES Kimberley

Mots-clés

Education
French Revolution
Travel
Women

Résumé

This entry deals with female travel narratives to the Continent, with a focus on those written during the revolutionary decade (1789-1800). It aims to show how sociability – sociable practices, culture, values – was a key topic for understanding the Continental other (its character, manners and mores) but also a rhetorical mode of writing one's self in relation to the other. Furthermore, sociability enabled female authors to tackle political issues, a field considered to be inappropriate in the education of eighteenth-century women. The revolutionary decade intensified the politicisation of sociability in travel narratives as the formation of the self through culture, amusements and public events was increasingly seen as inextricably tied up with the nature and form of the government.

In her preface to Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's *Letters Written, during her Travels in Europe, Asia and Africa* (1762), Mary Astell praises a feminine epistolary style devoid of English prejudices that could offer 'a more true and accurate account of the customs and manners of the several nations, with whom this lady conversed'.1 Sociability is thus

perceived not simply as a topic of interest (‘customs and manners’) but also as a means (‘conversation’) of acquiring a more unbiased knowledge of the countries women visited. Lady Montagu, for instance, describes her own encounter with Turkish sociable practices to debunk the prejudiced myths and stereotypes against Oriental women. In one of her most famous letters, she recounts her visiting a bathing house and meeting some ‘two hundred women’, ‘all being in the state of nature’.2 Using a common trope in travel-writing, that of cultural comparison, she cleverly relocates British sociable values – virtue, politeness, modesty and civility – from British sociable places (‘the assemblies’) to the Turkish hot bath.

Sociable values (‘the politeness of a court’, ‘the gentleness of a lady’) are also invoked by Mary Astell to tone down prejudices and soften the narrated encounter with and reception of foreignness. In a skilful inversion of values, Astell ascribes what were perceived as feminine vices (‘envy’, ‘malice’, ‘cruel back-biting’, ‘spiteful detraction’) to the masculine sphere – the coffeehouse – and masculine talk while lauding the virtue, ‘better sense’ and ‘better natur[e]’ of a female audience who will no doubt acknowledge the genius of Montagu (Montagu 1776, vii). In a sense, Astell suggests that female travel writing can produce an ‘imagined community’ in which reading women can exercise their Christian sociable skills, on the model of tea-table assemblies, an idealised form of communal sociability later to be echoed in Adam Smith’s concept of ‘harmony and correspondence’ of minds and sentiments through free communication and openness.3

A similar approach to cultural and social discovery is advocated by Mary Wollstonecraft in her *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (1796), although her deep-seated belief in enlightened progress would make her more than often quite dogmatic:

> ‘The most essential service, I presume, that authors could render to society, would be to promote inquiry and discussion, instead of making those dogmatical assertions which only appear to gird the human mind round with imaginary circles […]. This spirit of inquiry is the characteristic of the present century, from which the succeeding will, I am persuaded, receive a great accumulation of knowledge; and doubtless its diffusion will in a great measure destroy the factitious national characters which have been supposed permanent, though only rendered so by the permanency of ignorance.’4

Since the 1990s, scholarship on women’s travel writing has clearly established the connections between the literary form and intersectional factors such as genre, class, education, ideology, and financial situation to understand the issues they addressed in their travel narratives and the stylistic devices and strategies used. As underlined by Carl Thomson, ‘cultural constraints exercised a powerful shaping influence on women’s accounts generating a degree of de facto difference from male-authored narratives’.5 If women’s travelogues never outnumbered those of men during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (out of the 1,400 travelogues published between 1690 and 1800, only 40 were written by

women), they nonetheless made an apt use of this 'frontier discourse'[6] to reach out in the public sphere. Travel literature indeed enjoyed a reputation and a popularity as a 'descriptive knowledge genre' (Ferris 452) that required aesthetic and intellectual curiosity, acuteness of observation and a large range of knowledge and interest. By making use of this medium, women gained a certain degree of public fame and indirect political agency; indeed, if politics was deemed inappropriate for female travellers, they could nonetheless broach the issue in their narratives, either relying on the words and opinions of their husbands (see Ann Radcliffe's *A Journey Made in the Summer of 1794 through Holland and the Western Frontier of Germany* (1795), Louise Elisa Beaumont's *A Sketch of Modern France* (1798)) or using the lens of sociability (described by Elizabeth A. Bohls as 'surface display and sensuous pleasure'[7]): descriptions of local customs and manners, houses and buildings, fashion, street sociability, food, amusements and entertainments. While in Nuremberg, Lady Montagu thus argued that, by looking at how 'the streets [were] well built and full of people, neatly and plainly dressed, the shops loaded with merchandise and the commonality clean and cheerful', it was 'impossible not to observe the difference between the free towns and those under the government of absolute Princes' (Montagu 1994, 8). Germany and Scandinavia were indeed thought-provoking terrains for political, commercial and economic observations. We find them in Dorothy Wordsworth's "Journal of a visit to Hamburgh" (1798), although indirectly addressed, and in Wollstonecraft's *Letters Written during a Short Residence*: '[…] the more I saw of the manners of Hamburg, the more was I confirmed in my opinion relative to the baleful effect of extensive speculations on the moral character' (Wollstonecraft 190).

As underlined by Katrina O'Loughlin, the understanding and narration of individual and collective identities were embedded in an intricate pattern of topics related to geography, climate, customs, fashion, taste and relation. In the eighteenth century, subjectivity was 'conceived primarily as a social idiom, a powerful fusion of shared cultural vernacular and individual tastes'.[8] Female subjectivity was thus prone to be influenced by travelling experiences and social encounters: 'Travel writing is visibly engaged in the ongoing definition and shaping of these subjectivising concepts of sociality, through its evaluation of cultural practices and manners in other societies' (O'Loughlin 24).

Until the revolutionary decade, women's travelogues were peppered with narratives of benevolent encounters with various social groups that usually gave rise to reflections on the benefits of commerce and cosmopolitan culture. In her *Observations and Reflections Made in the course of a journey through France, Italy, and Germany* (1789), Hesther Thrale Piozzi is often tempted by picturesque descriptions, yet her narrative constantly harks back to social and sociable life: 'it is better to waste no more words on places however, where the people have done so much to engage and to deserve our attention'.[9]

Nowhere is this process of self-definition in relation to social encounters and sociability more conspicuous (yet ambiguous) than in Mary Wollstonecraft's *Letters*. Her narrative hovers between empirical observations of people and groups, lyrical descriptions of nature and intimate introspection, creating a literary *coup de force* that will leave a lasting impression on Romantics Robert Southey and S.T. Coleridge. While in Sweden, she takes a particular interest in the peasantry, amused and touched by the simplicity of their manners and the

‘frankness of heart […] produc[ing] a simple gracefulness’ (35). Yet, as an enlightened woman, she feels that her mind ‘would languish for more companionable society’ if she was to live there although her heart sympathizes with these ‘honest affections’ (35). Intertwining the voices of the enlightened mind, the sympathetic heart and the lyrical self, Wollstonecraft’s travelogue departs from the traditional eighteenth-century travel narrative and epitomizes, to a certain extent, this shift from the cosmopolitan to the bohemian, to use the expression of Margaret Jacob: ‘By 1800 the politics found amid the sociability of republicans and radicals had become intensely personal, and they had given birth to a new, bohemian persona’.10

What indeed problematized the construction of the female travelling self through social and sociable encounters in the late eighteenth century were the raging debates over freedom and the nature of the government following the Fall of the Bastille and the publication of Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). With the breakdown of the corporate structures and the collapse of *ancien-régime* identity, what could hold the self together? The issue took a psychiatric turn in France and Britain, with, for instance, the writings of Philippe Pinel and the interest for Brunonian medicine in Great Britain. In an article published in the *Journal de Paris* in January 1790, Pinel underscored the positive psychological effect of the revolution on the imagination – ‘L’imagination s’agrandit en voyant s’élever l’édifice majestueux d’une nouvelle organisation sociale digne d’un siècle de lumières’ – yet warned against possible counter-effects due to an excess of affects and imagination: ‘ces mêmes mouvements tumultueux, excités par des alarmes réelles ou imaginaires, ont produit à leur tour d’autres effets nuisibles sur des cœurs pusillanimes & souvent ingénieux à se tourmenter’.11

Helen Maria Williams’s *Letters Written in France*, published the same year as Burke’s anti-revolutionary pamphlet, offers a literary account of this dream of social happiness, of man’s regeneration and inherent sociable nature, lost and found again, and reactivated through a set of new social and cultural practices. Her travelogue opens on the *Fête de la Fédération* held on 14 July 1790, a spectacular representation of revolutionary sociability designed to celebrate the French people’s social regeneration. Her narrative is an attempt to describe the creation of new natural sociable bonds through her own emotional involvement in the *fête*. Writing retrospectively on revolutionary festivals prior to the Terror, she describes as such this new-born and natural yet urban and cosmopolitan sociability, and its effects on man’s heart and imagination: ‘What was become of those moments when no emotions were preordained, no feelings measured out, no acclamations decreed, but when every bosom beat high with admiration, when every heart throbbed with enthusiastic transport, when every eye melted into tears.’12 Polluted by perverted power (the ‘vulgar despots’, the ‘revolutionary commissaries’, the ‘spies of the police’), the utopian scheme of universal social happiness was to become a haunting image in the post-1793 romantic travelogues: ‘How I envied the peasant his lonely hut! For I had now almost lost the idea of social happiness. My disturbed imagination divided the communities of men but into two classes, the oppressor and the oppressed; and peace seemed only to exist with solitude’ (140).

In the immediate aftermaths of the Terror, travellers would cross the Channel, eager to witness the social and psychological effects of the political revolutions and convulsions. Yet, the pamphlet war had created an ideological rift in British politics between loyalists and republicans, creating new inflexions in travel writing standards. Katherine Turner has shown how empirical evidence, a more 'moderate, representative narrator' and insistence on vice and virtue became the new norms for travel writing so as 'to claim a nationally representative function',13 hence discarding the traditional codes of sentiment, singularity and eccentricity. Loyalist travelogues such as those of Rachel Charlotte Biggs (*A Residence in France During the Years 1792, 1793, 1794 and 1795 in 2 volumes*, 1796) or Louise E. Beaumont (1798) promised their readers a loose narrative, a 'slight sketch taken e*n passant'* (Beaumont v) to guarantee an impartial and accurate account. Although their social position and literary intention were quite different, both ladies relied on similar narrative patterns, rejuvenating the *ancien-régime* identity while fading or corrupting that of the revolutionary collective body and its ideal of liberty:

> 'The statue of Lewis the Fifteenth, which originally stood in the centre, has been removed, and is now replaced by a *gigantic s*tatue of Liberty, which *time*, or rather the c*rimes* by which *this* spot has been polluted, have already blackened; for it is a fact that this divinity is so tinged, and its original colour so altered, that, par son *teint* boueux et apparence *noirâtre*, *e*lle ressemble plus à la Liberté d'Afrique qu'à celle de l'*Europe*' (Beaumont 200).

Sociable practices as invented or cultivated during the French revolution are portrayed as vulgar and artificial, degrading the sentiments and manners of the French people, women being particularly targeted by British loyalist female travellers: 'The extreme change that is so conspicuous, and has since the death of Robespierre taken place in the character and dress of the major part of the Parisians, appears to have equally influenced their political ideas, and even affected their principles of religion' (Beaumont 270).

Using a similar strategy, Rachel Charlotte Biggs, a middle-class woman originally from Lambeth, travelled to France with her husband in May 1792, keeping a diary that she filled with letters to an imaginary brother. Her narrative is a constant reminder of the perversion of sociability and, by extension, of character and sentiment by the republican ideal of liberty. Focusing on sociable practices tainted by revolutionary principles (festivals, theatrical performances, ballets …), she laments the collusion of politics, sociability and popular amusements: 'I have more than once had to remark the singularity of popular festivities solemnized on the part of the people with no other intention but that of exact obedience to the edicts of government' (Biggs 127). To a certain extent, Beaumont's and Biggs's travelogues offer a negative version of Helen Maria Williams's revolutionary sociability. Traditional French gaiety and revolutionary enthusiasm have disappeared, replaced by faked hilarity, silent terror or savage mirth: 'I have seen […] a cotillion performed as gravely and as mechanically as the ceremonies of a Chinese court.' (Biggs, II, 26).

The increasing politicization of sociability during the revolutionary decade led to a recalibration not simply of the genre, but also of the narration of national character and

sociable culture. If the conversational mode was still harnessed by travellers during the revolutionary decade (and more specifically in the 1796-1798 travelogues), it was rather through the insertion of monologues of lonely figures – emigrants, widows, children, priests and nuns – to show the disintegration of the social fabric: 'this chimera of liberty and equality has created widows, orphans, and weeping damsels' (Beaumont 444). Descriptive vignettes of the horrors perpetrated during the reign of Robespierre became commonplace in the revolutionary travelogues and, for the British audience, an expected textual component that would echo the numerous visual caricatures of French atrocities in circulation at that time.

1. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, Letters of the Right Honourable Lady M_y W_y M_e: Written, during her Travels in Europe, Asia, and Africa, vol. 1 (London: B. Dodd, 1776), p. vii.

2. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, The Turkish Embassy Letters (London: Virago Press, 1994), p. 58.

3. Adam Smith, The Theory of Moral Sentiments (Basil: Tourneisen, 1793), p. 67.

4. Mary Wollstonecraft, Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark (Lincoln, London: University of Nebraska Press, 1976), p. 49.

5. Carl Thompson, "Journeys to Authority: Reassessing Women's Early Travel Writing, 1763-1862", Women's Writing (vol. 24, no. 2), p. 132.

6. Ina Ferris, "Mobile Words: Romantic Travel Writing and Print Anxiety", Modern Language Quarterly (vol. 60, no. 4, 1999), p. 453.

7. Elizabeth A. Bohls, Women Travel Writers and the Language of Aesthetics, 1716-1818 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 25.

8. Katrina O'Loughlin, Women, Writing, and Travel in the Eighteenth Century (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 5.

9. Hester Lynch Piozzi, Observations and Reflections Made in the course of a journey through France, Italy, and Germany (London: A. Strahan, 1789), p. 32.

10. Margaret C. Jacob, Strangers Nowhere in the World (Philadephia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), p. 142.

11. Journal de Paris, 18 janvier 1790.

12. Helen Maria Williams, An Eye-witness Account of the French Revolution by Helen Maria Williams, ed. Jack Fruchtman (Bern: Peter Lang, 1997), p. 168.

13. Katherine Turner, British Travel Writers in Europe 1750-1800 (Routledge 2018), p. 205.

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