“My lot is cast in with my sex and country”: Generic Conventions, Gender Anxieties and American Identity in Emma Hart Willard’s and Catherine Maria Sedgwick’s Travel Letters

Abstract

The article analyses generic conventions, gender constraints and authorial self-definition in two ante-bellum American travel accounts – Emma Hart Willard’s *Journal and Letters, from France and Great Britain* (1833) and Catharine Maria Sedgwick’s *Letters from Abroad to Kindred at Home* (1841). Emma Hart Willard, a pioneer in women’s higher education and Catharine Maria Sedgwick, an author of sentimental novels, were influential figures of the Early Republic, active in the literary public sphere. Narrative personas adopted in their travel letters have been shaped by the authors’ national identity on the one hand and by ideals of republican motherhood, which they propagated, on the other. Both travelogues are preceded with apologies filled with self-deprecating rhetoric, typical for women’s travel writing in the early 19th century and both are intended to instruct the American reader. Other conventional features of American antebellum travel writing include comparisons between British and American government and society with a view of extolling the latter as well as avid interest in social status and public activities of European women. Willard and Sedgwick deal with possible gender anxieties of their upper middle-class female readers by assuring them that following one’s literary or educational vocation in the public sphere does necessarily mean compromising ideals of true womanhood in private life.

Discussing social changes which had affected women’s status in the United States since the 1840’s, Henry Adams thus commented on the ubiquity of female travel-lers: “The woman has been set free. […] One had but to pass a week in Florida, or on any of a hundred huge ocean steamers, or to walk through the Place Vendome, or join a part of Cook’s tourists to Jerusalem, to see that the woman had been set free” (362). Once they were “set free,” many American middle-class women went mainly – though not exclusively – to Europe in order to see its cultural treasures, to study its customs and institutions or to shop in Paris and visit fashionable resorts. Some of these visitors wrote letters home or sent them to local papers,
presenting themselves as well-informed and competent travelers – an image which ran counter to cultural expectations regarding women at that time.

Though classifying women’s travel writing in opposition to men’s travel books is an oversimplification, it is true that “gender inevitably affects genre” (Siegel 5). For all their thematic and generic similarities to men’s travelogues, women’s travel narratives reveal certain inherent tensions since they were “constructed in the process of interaction of colonial textual constraints and constraints of gender” (Mills 40). While women travelers were rarely openly opposed to imperialism or colonization, they were often critical of the abuses engendered by the system and felt more sympathy for subjugated native people.

Constraints of gender are visible in the ways women travelers negotiated discourses of femininity in their books. Theirs was a precarious position. On the one hand, traveling middle-class women needed to act with decorum and maintain respectability if they wished to have their books published and read – thus, for example, so much emphasis was put on the proper dress code and feminine behaviour during the journey. On the other hand, the very act of leaving one’s home, of venturing, usually alone, to foreign, exotic, or even uncivilized lands certainly meant transgressing the boundaries of femininity: “in addition to presenting themselves as subjects, in traveling, women literally had to inhabit and negotiate the public sphere” (Siegel 5). It is interesting to note that white, middle class travelers were doubly constrained: by their gender roles and by their class. In contrast to them, black women who often had no means to travel nevertheless “experienced greater freedom and mobility because their skin color automatically excluded them from the rigid expectations of feminine behavior and limitations to solely domestic space that often afflicted white women” (Steadman 7).

Travel writing had become an important medium for 19th century American women authors, as the increasing number of published books manifests: 27 books of foreign travel by women were published before the Civil War and 168 after it (Schriber xxi). Some authors did not point to their gender in the title while others played on the concept of the “female gaze” for their benefit. For instance, in conclusion of her *Europe Through a Woman’s Eye* (1883) Lucy Yeend Culler wrote: “If any of my readers wonder why I have said so little concerning the agriculture, manufactures, commerce, customs and habits of the people and political affairs of the countries we visited, please remember that this is EUROPE THROUGH A WOMAN’S EYE” (225). The titles emphasizing a feminine point of view helped to promote books on a market already overflowing with numerous travel accounts by men (Schriber xxvi–xxvii).

The present paper looks at two ante-bellum American travel accounts – Emma Hart Willard’s *Journal and Letters, from France and Great Britain* (1833) and Catharine Maria Sedgwick’s *Letters from Abroad to Kindred at Home* (1841) – with a view of analysing narrative personas shaped by the authors’ national identity on the one hand and by ideals of republican motherhood on the other. Both
accounts are epistolary in form and can be considered as by-products of European voyages, which is typical for American pre-Civil War travel texts (Schriber xxv). The letters are addressed to family members, friends and, in Willard’s case, also to her students. Looking back to the role such letters played in the 1830’s, Willard’s biographer underscores that “every letter from Europe was a treasure. It passed from hand to hand, from family to family” and the pleasure of reading about European sights and customs was much greater back then “since we had not heard or read so much about them” (Lord 128). This comment reveals that in the first part of the 19th century women’s travels to Europe were still quite rare, so their letters were welcomed as entertaining and reliable first-hand accounts of the Old World.

In his study devoted to European travel in 19th century American culture, William Stowe claims that “travel writing was neither a particularly masculine mode nor an exclusively feminine domain [...] but a genial form of narrative that served as a meeting place for various voices, literary styles, levels of speech and kinds of subject” (107). Such “heteroglossia” (to borrow Bakhtin’s term) or polyvocality seems to him a characteristic feature of many 19th century American travel accounts (Stowe 107–108). It has its origins in Washington Irving’s Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent. (1819), the book that has become a model for subsequent American travel writers (Stowe 59). Irving employs a variety of fictional and non-fictional genres in Sketch Book including short stories, essays, mini-biographies and vignettes of English life and landscapes. The role of Geoffrey Crayon – the persona assumed by the author – is not to dominate over other voices but to allow them to speak for themselves. As a result, the book becomes “a collection of voices assembled for the reader’s pleasure by a genial master of ceremonies” (Stowe 108). Similar generic variety is also to be found in H. W. Longfellow’s Outre Mer (1835) and in L. H. Sigourney’s sentimental Pleasant Memories of Pleasant Lands (1842). Stowe finds evidence for polyvocality in Emma Willard’s Journal and Letters (111–112) and in Margaret Fuller’s reports to the New York Tribune (1846–1850) (118–124). Needless to say, not all American travel authors in the early 19th century followed the Geoffrey Crayon model. James Fenimore Cooper’s Gleanings in Europe, published in several volumes between 1837–1838, are narrated in a homogenous voice as are Sedgwick’s Letters from Abroad and Sarah Haight’s Letters from the Old World (1838).

Emma Hart Willard and Catharine Maria Sedgwick were influential figures of the Early Republic, active in the literary public sphere. Willard was a pioneer in women’s education and founder of Troy Seminary, the first institution which offered higher education for women in the USA, established in 1821. As an author of popular history textbooks which were in print for almost fifty years, she must have shaped the way many Americans understood national and international history (Baym 4). What is noteworthy, her achievements “demonstrated that the properly educated woman could, at one and the same time, be a successful entrepreneur.
and serve her country in a way that transcended gender boundaries without over-turning sexual difference” (Baym 4). Catharine Maria Sedgwick was a writer of fiction, the author of bestselling *Hope Leslie* (1827) and other popular sentimental novels. As one of practitioners of “woman’s fiction,” she did not only adhere to the “cult of true womanhood” but also explored tensions and turbulences caused by women’s subordinate legal and social status in American society (Clements xvii). In her novels Sedgwick portrayed independent, morally strong heroines who, like her female readers, often faced a choice between married and single life, neither of these options being without some inherent perils.

A study of nineteenth-century women’s prefaces shows that a tendency to apologize for authority and to belittle one’s achievement was common to authors of both prose and poetry (Howells 131). In these apologies, women writers resorted to such strategies as “presenting the authors humbly, situating the project as communal, and characterizing the writer’s efforts as un-artful” (Howells 132). All these strategies aimed to legitimize their writing projects and to disarm possible critics by assuring them that the ideals of femininity had not been compromised. Apologetic prefaces have been included in both Sedgwick’s and Willard’s travel letters. The former author begins in the following manner: “An apology for a book implies that the public are obliged to read it; an obligation that would reverse the order of nature – transfer the power from the strong to the weak” (ix). Putting herself in the position of “the weak,” she begs her friends and countrymen for “indulgence for the following pages […] published rather with deference to the wishes of others than from any false estimate of their worth” (Sedgwick ix). A conventional reference to “the wishes of others” casts the project as communal rather than personal. Furthermore, the author apologizes for the book’s content. Since her itinerary was typical rather than original she hopes to interest her readers with “the fresh aspect of familiar things” and promises to avoid the staple of European travel books that is “churches, statues and pictures” (Sedgwick x).

Willard’s preface to *Journal and Letters* also casts her project as didactic and community-oriented because, as she insisted, her observations were specifically “for [her] country women; especially for those who were, and who had been my pupils” (4). Thus, her study of foreign customs and institutions is to contribute to the instruction of Americans: “the little knowledge I acquired abroad […] should be turned to good account in the service of one class or another of our citizens.” Her book is to serve the community of women in yet another way. Since Willard is convinced that her “special calling” is “female education,” she decides to donate the royalties from sales of her travel account to support the Troy Society for the Advancement of Education in Greece, a society she has founded to train teachers for independent Greece. Such detailed explanations behind the composition and publication process certainly aim at convincing the readers that Willard sought neither profits nor fame for herself. Being primarily concerned with “community betterment rather than self-aggrandizement” the woman writer could “argue for
her text fulfilling a feminine responsibility” (Howells 133). This is precisely what Sedgwick and Willard aimed to achieve through their prefaces – to re-direct their readers’ attention from themselves towards the obligations they have towards family, friends and students.

Another way gender affects travel texts is visible in the way women authors observe and comment on social status, privileges or limitations of European women contrasting them with American reality. The female social role in the Early Republic was first and foremost that of a wife and a mother – submissive and selflessness in her service to others: “Marriage was a central and defining aspect for the majority of women in 18th- and 19th-century American society” (Sherman 62). No wonder Sedgwick is surprised to meet so many unmarried women in England:

With us […] few women live far beyond their minority unmated, and those few sink into the obscurity of some friendly fireside. But here they have an independent existence, pursuits, and influence, and are much happier for it; mind, I do not say happier than fortunate wives and good mothers, but than those who, not having drawn a husband in the lottery of life, resign themselves to a merely passive existence. Englishwomen, married and single, have more leisure and far more opportunity for intellectual cultivation, than with us. (107)

Comparing the position of single women in England and in America, Sedgwick seems envious of the former’s active presence in social and intellectual life. However, female autonomy, presented in a favourable light, poses a challenge to the dominant gender discourse, which directed female intellectual and moral energies toward her family and community. Thus, to appease her readers’ anxieties, Sedgwick juxtaposes a happy, single Englishwoman with an ideal American mother:

On the whole, it seems to me there is not a more lovable or lovely woman than the American matron, steadfast in her conjugal duties, devoted to the progress of her children and the happiness of her household, nor a more powerful creature than the Englishwoman in the full strength and development of her character. (108)

The figure of American matron can be read as a reference to the ideal of “republican motherhood,” which defined women’s role in the Early Republic. Propagated by advice literature and religious writings, this ideology saw women primarily as mothers, instrumental in educating future generations of virtuous and loyal citizens. To be able to fulfil such a responsible role on a national scale, upper-middle-class women had to be properly educated, hence the importance of new educational institutions like Troy Seminary, founded by Willard.

Though the ideology of republican motherhood emphasized women’s intellectual equality, it simultaneously contributed to the consolidation of the notion of a separate, female sphere. At the beginning of the 19th century the republican
motherhood “had morphed into the closely defined ideology of true womanhood […] which also embraced women as daughters, sisters and wives. This ideal deemed piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity as key attributes of a true woman” (Sherman 60). The American matron in Sedgwick’s description finds happiness in being a good wife and good mother, who is “loveable” and “lovely” because of her nurturing qualities. In contrast, an Englishwoman, who lives for herself rather than for others, is characterized as “powerful,” an adjective which was usually reserved for accomplished men at that time. Although the author renders both figures as admirable and worthy of respect, the roles they play in a society seem incompatible. In the literature of the Early Republic “educated women who channeled their intellectual energies toward their domestic duties earned approbation,” while those who acted selfishly and neglected their domestic duties became subjects of cautionary tales (McMahon 144–145). That is why, in her travel letters Sedgwick writes approvingly about the women who have managed to successfully combine public, usually literary careers, with private, domestic virtues.

Common practice of nineteenth-century American travellers to England was to arrange meetings with literary figures and other notable people. For women travellers it was especially important to meet recognized women authors. During her stay in England Sedgwick meets Miss Joanna Baillie, Scottish dramatist, poet, and close friend of Walter Scott. Dining at her house, she presents Baillie as graceful, delicate, elegant, “free from pedantry and […] affectation.” She fits perfectly, in Sedgwick’s opinion, “the beau ideal of an old lady.” In domestic surroundings, one easily forgets that her name “is best established among the female writers of her country” (82). She also visits another popular writer – Miss Mitford and devotes a full page to describe her collection of geraniums. She also comments approvingly on the writer’s devotion to her father (Sedgwick 47). Anna Jameson, the author of Characteristics of Women (1832), is a brilliant hostess but while praising her interlocutor’s wit and talents Sedgwick nevertheless makes a telling reservation: “with all these a woman may be, after all, but a kind of monster; how far they are transcended by the virtues and attractions of her domestic life, it was our happiness to know from seeing her daily in her English home” (Sedgwick 98). Baillie, Mitford and Jameson are set up as examples because they have successfully managed to balance their intellectual and literary ambitions with domestic duties. Without home as a locus of her femininity, a woman may eventually turn into “a kind of monster,” Sedgwick warns. That is why she is so anxious to emphasize femininity, modesty and loving nature of her interlocutors, and invariably present their households as intellectually stimulating and filled with domestic harmony at the same time.

Home is “the best point of view for all best women,” Sedgwick asserts (82), and this conviction is certainly shared by Willard. When she comes to London, she wishes to get to know Maria Edgeworth, author of popular novels and co-author
of *Practical Education* (1798). As she waits for the meeting, Willard describes Miss Edgeworth’s house as “tasteful and convenient” but not “gaudy.” The hostess wears a “lady-like dress” of “delicate colored satin with a turban” and even though her attire resembles that of Madame de Staël there is “not one single blue-stocking oddity about her [...] noting that marks the slightest consciousness of her superior powers. Attentive to please, she seems liberal of her fine conversation, and observant of little attentions to her guests” (303). Similarly to Sedgwick, Willard presents a famous author while entertaining guests, and thus playing a role typical for any middle-class lady of that time. She emphasizes her pleasant manners, conversation skills, lack of affectation and – last but not least – lack of pride at her achievements. She is also moved by motherly feelings of Miss Edgeworth towards her younger sister, whom she had educated herself (304). For all her accomplishments, Miss Edgeworth has never questioned her family obligations. As an unmarried older sister, she devoted her educational talents to raising younger siblings, and as a favourite daughter she helped her father in research and writing.

Though in the 20th century feminist writings Willard is often “erroneously described as a proto-liberal and a feminist foremother” (Baym 18), a careful study of her writings, including travel letters, reveals that her views on women’s role in the society were far from radical and firmly grounded in the principles of the republican motherhood. When she is introduced to a woman identified only as Mrs. R. in the letters, she is shocked by her opinion of men as “a race of brutal, selfish, unfeeling tyrants,” by her condemnation of marriage as an institution of “domestic slavery” but, most of all, by her rejection of God and Providence (307):

> What can be more horrible than for a woman of an intelligent and sensitive mind, loving justice herself, and desiring good, really to believe that there is no benevolence in the government of the universe; and that men who have the power to govern us, and whom our nature obliges us to love, are our tyrants and enemies. (307)

Though Willard feels sympathy for the lady who seems to suffer, both physically and psychologically, she nevertheless firmly distances herself from such radical views. In her opinion, Mrs. R.’s tirades against men and God are futile: “If instead of railing at the dispensations of God’s Providence, or idle declamation about the rights of our sex, she had set herself to the work of elevating their standards of morals and intellect, she might have been a blessing to future generations” (311). As an educator, Willard believes in the power of education, as an American, she believes in the power of self-improvement and in opportunities already offered to women, especially in her homeland, rather than in any further revolutionary changes.

Perceived in the London circles as a liberal woman, Willard explains that her usage of the term “liberal” differs from the English one and does not comprise rejection of religious and moral principles (315). She is thus careful to make
a distinction between progressive feminist notions and her own views of women’s place and role in the society, inspired by republican nationalism and based firmly on Christian principles. According to Baym, Willard “elaborated (and exemplified) a program for women on the basis of their structural placement in society rather than on any supposed essential elements of women’s moral or psychological makeup – which means that in the deepest sense she did not believe in sexual difference” (18). She took no interest in typical women’s issues of her times such as abolition, temperance and suffrage movements. Thus, “she simultaneously submerged and advanced the cause of women by placing it within the framework of national and even universal destiny” (Baym 19).

American travellers wavered between admiration and disapproval for England and the English in the 19th century. The former stemmed from a special affinity for the home of their forefathers and identification with the achievements of the English as a race, the latter from a condescension shown by the English towards most things American (Mulvey 4). Needless to say, admiration and praise is well received by the English hosts but is not reciprocated. When Willard notes that her emotional response to the monuments of early English poets at Westminster Abbey cannot have differed much from the feelings of the English, her interlocutor agrees: “Why should they be, it was your common fathers who were their contemporaries, and you have an equal share in their genius, and their fame” (317). However, American travellers expecting any “special treatment” because of shared past are greatly disappointed. Sedgwick is “a good deal shocked to find how very little interest was felt about America in the circles I chanced to be in” (12). Contrary to her expectations, nobody mentions America in answer to the question what foreign country they like best (Sedgwick 13).

For the English, the United States is at best a distant and provincial former colony inhabited by uncultivated people lacking proper table manners, talking incessantly about politics, and, last but not least, fond of tobacco chewing and spitting. All these images come from the most authoritative source on the Early Republic, namely Frances Trollope’s bestselling travelogue Domestic Manners of the Americans (1832). The book enjoyed phenomenal success and definitely influenced English negative perceptions of America in the first part of the 19th century, leading even to appearance of a new verb “to trollopise,” which meant to criticize the Americans (Rubin & Rubin 37). During their stay in England, both Sedgwick and Willard face ignorant or critical remarks about their country. They ignore some of these accusations, making only an ironic comment to the reader, but they try to refute others. In general, it seems that the response (or its lack) depends on the gravity of the charges.

When Sedgwick expresses admiration for English oaks, an English lady assures her that once they cut down their forests the remaining trees will have room for their limbs to spread. The traveller chooses not to respond to this unlikely prediction but shares with her readers a memory of “graceful, drooping”
American elms, far superior to their “stiff, upright” English trees. The aesthetic quality of trees is not a grave matter so the comment is directed to the reader, rather than directly to the English lady. When, however, during the same dinner, a male “hypercitic” attacks the American historian William Prescott claiming that he should use “purer English,” Sedgwick enters into a polemic with him, arguing that “new words sprung out of new combinations of circumstances” and therefore Americans have every right to expand English vocabulary (104). Clearly, the charge of America’s provinciality manifested in its allegedly corrupted language is too grave not to express any reaction. Moreover, by defending Prescott and his works Sedgwick asserts the authority of the American scholar. She also notes that his *History of Ferdinand and Isabella* was universally praised in England and this one critical voice was quite exceptional.

Emma Willard admits in her letters from London that she feels vexed whenever either as a woman or as an American she is perceived as an exception from the rule: “My lot is cast in with my sex and country; and where contempt is thrown upon either, I am ever provoked to be made an individual exception” (316). When an English gentleman challenges her at a dinner with words “Why, Madam! You acknowledge, do you not, that we are in a state of superior civilization to you?” she replies that the term “civilization” is hard to define but she considers American form of government better than the English one and American society as more conducive to the virtue and happiness of its citizens:

> I was tempted to tell him that the state of women had been considered the main test of civilization, and that in our country, the lower classes of women did not call their husbands “master,” as is the case here; and that we had public schools for the education of the higher classes of females […] far superior in their literary and scientific character, to any which existed in England. (Willard 317)

Civilizational “inferiority” was a familiar argument put forward by the European critics from the very beginning of the Republic’s independent political existence. In the 18th century, European anti-Americanism was fuelled by the degeneracy theory, according to which American soil and climate were not conducive to either human or animal growth and development. In the 19th century, it entered a new stage based on the claim that “the American efforts to create a civilization had failed” (Rubin & Rubin 21). Interestingly enough, one of the proofs of its failure was “excessively elevated status” enjoyed by American women who usurped themselves the right to be equal with men thus threatening the hallowed order of things (Rubin & Rubin 38–39). The fact that Willard eventually does not boast about the privileges of American women – though she is tempted to – may mean that she is aware it may be treated as a two-sided argument.

Unsurprisingly, the republican system of government is the most frequently criticized feature of the new state across the Atlantic. Occasionally, the critique comes from a compatriot rather than a foreigner. In a boarding house in Havre,
Willard meets a young American gentleman, a declared Anglophile, who deplores “the mere government of the mob” in his country and hopes that it will eventually be replaced with “the light and blessings of royalty,” as Willard ironically puts it. “All this was too much for me,” Willard asserts, and this phrase reveals some tension between the discourse of femininity, which tells her to dismiss such absurd views with a smile, and her “representative American” travelling persona which tells her to react (22). “Vexed and grieved” by the young man’s words she first ensures her surprised French interlocutors that such views are indeed rare among Americans and then recommends the young man to settle in England if he admires it so much: “such opinions in America will render you uncomfortable – will make you a bad citizen – and either drive you to mean duplicity, or debar you from political preferment” (22). Willard acts as a republican mother should, reproaching an errant “son” to make him realize his mistakes and return to the right path. In a footnote on the same page she adds, satisfied, that after a few days the young man has left her a message saying “I am already twenty per cent, more of an American then when I landed in France” (22).

While in Europe, Sedgwick and Willard present themselves as responding emotionally whenever their American identity comes into foreground. Adopting a conventional feminine voice, Willard “can scarcely describe” her own feelings when she is invited to accompany General La Fayette, the Revolutionary War hero, to the Opéra Français, and walks at his side:

I saw that he was regarded as he is, the father of France – aye, and of America, too. America! My own land! It was for her sake I was thus honored, and it was for me to feel her share in the common emotion. My spirit seemed to dilate, and for a moment, self-personified as the genius of my country, I enjoyed to the full his triumph, who is at once her father, and her adopted son. (89)

For Willard this is a moment of triumphant identification with her homeland. As La Fayette is cheered, she feels happy and grateful to the French because appreciation of his achievements can be read as a homage to her country’s independence. Aware of the fact that by putting herself in the center of attention she oversteps traditional female modesty, she assures her sister – addressee of the travel letter – that even though “it may look like vanity for me to tell you of these things,” she has accepted La Fayette’s invitation out of “deeply filial affection […] [and] reverential love” (89) to the legendary hero of her childhood years. Thus, in accordance with the ideals of true womanhood she presents herself as model (American) daughter grateful to her (French) father, directing the readers’ attention to the celebrated paternal figure rather than to herself.

According to Stowe, who reads Willard’s account as an example of polyvocality in 19th century American travel writing, she brings various voices – serious and frivolous – to life in her letters “allowing them a certain independence while maintaining their clear relationship to a central thematic concern and authoritative
discourse” (111). Having the benefit of her students in mind, she comments with expertise on the rules in French and English educational institutions, provides detailed descriptions of Parisian sights that sound like copied from a guidebook and points to some domestic solutions that should be imitated in her homeland. However, knowing that her female readers would be also interested in less practical matters, she describes various members of Lafayette’s family she has met, depicts elegant dresses seen in the Italian Opera in Paris and comments on an impressive head-gear of an aristocratic lady: “Her coiffure was a berry of peach blossom crape, surmounted with a superb plume, (I know not of what bird) in which all the colors of the rainbow might be traced” (Willard 201). Serious and trivial matters coexist in her text and the reader’s task is to synthesize these voices and construct a complex yet consistent persona for the narrative (Stowe 112).

“The American in Europe,” wrote Margaret Fuller who went to Europe in 1846, “if a thinking mind, can only become more American” (qtd. in Schriber 100). In general, those Americans who went to Europe wished “to promote the superiority and the manifest destiny of American political and spiritual values judging American life and institutions superior to any other” (Schriber xxii). For Sedgwick, class divisions in England resemble the Oriental system of castes and even though the American “good society” may not be as refined in cultivation, manners, art of conversation and cultural accomplishments as its English counterpart, she rests assured that millions in America “occupy a level they can never reach in England” (118). Willard asserts: “neither as a woman nor an American, could I be happy in the English society,” though she adds that for a rich man, tyrannical in nature and unconcerned with others, London would be a perfect place to live (316). Both travellers act as “representative Americans” among the Europeans, always ready to defend their country and its republican principles. They observe “the luxuries and magnificence of their high civilization” (Sedgwick 118) with curiosity, rather than envy, aware that it serves the needs of an elite.

When Willard and Sedgwick look at foreign women, usually those occupying a social position comparable to their own, they are mainly interested in how these educators, reformers, and authors manage to reconcile the private and the public in their lives. Though most of them have remained unmarried, they continue to play central roles in the families as devoted daughters or loving sisters. Concern for the well-being of their families is as commendable as their intellectual and literary accomplishments, not to mention the fact that many of these writers actually support their families with their royalties. In this way, Willard and Sedgwick deal with possible gender anxieties of their upper-class female readers – following one’s vocation in the public sphere does necessarily mean compromising ideals of true womanhood in private life.

The same rationale can be applied to travelling. The authors travel to Europe for a variety of reasons – to improve health, to visit famous places and to meet the celebrities – but when they decide to publish travel letters in a book form
they point to their informative and educational potential for the American readers. Willard’s biographer remarks approvingly that she returned “with books, and pictures, and works of art, to enrich the institution of which she was the founder. Few people ever derived more profit from a tour to Europe than she” (Lord 134). In a way, what both travellers bring to others – actually and metaphorically – is more important than what they bring for themselves. Such a perception of travel as serving the needs of a community is unique to the 19th-century authors, aware of responsibilities defined by gender roles. In contrast, in the 20th century travel accounts by women the needs of community tend to be absent, the focus being on an inner rather than outer journey and the “profit” (or loss) is solely one’s own.

References


