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American Slavery Through the Eyes of British Women Travelers in the First Half of the 19th Century

My paper investigates 19th-century travel writing by British women visiting America: texts by such authors as Frances Trollope, Isabella Bird, or Frances Kemble. I analyze to what extent these travelers' gender influences their view of race. On the one hand, as Tim Youngs stresses, there seems to be very little difference between male and female travel writing in the 19th century, as women, in order to be accepted by their audience, needed to mimic men's style (135). On the other hand, women writers occasionally mention their gender, as for example Trollope, who explains that she is not competent enough to speak on political matters, which is why she wishes to limit herself only to domestic issues. This provision, however, may be seen as a mere performance of a conventional obligation, since it does not prevent Trollope from expressing her opinions on American democracy. Moreover, Jenny Sharpe shows how Victorian Englishwomen are trapped between a social role of superiority and inferiority, possessing "a dominant position of race and a subordinate one of gender" (11). This makes the female authors believe that as women they owe to the oppressed people more sympathy than their male compatriots. My paper discusses female writing about the United States in order to see how these writers navigate their position of superiority/inferiority.

Key words: travel writing, women, slavery, race, antebellum America

1. British women travelers in America

Looking at British travel writing about America created in the first half of the 19th century, one can see that the texts reveal an uncanny degree of similarity. Partly because the travelers read one another's works, and partly because in Europe, the American travelogues were almost an established genre with its own ritualized tropes, one can find the same standard motifs in these texts. Conservative writers,

such as Frances Trollope, Basil Hall, or Thomas Colley Grattan, complained about the American lack of manners, the poor state of literature and arts, bad roads, unpicturesque landscapes, or the levelling influence of democracy. Radicals, such as Frances Wright, often praised the very same features, or at least found excuses for the young republic's imperfections. In light of these genre-driven similarities, women's travel writing from that period does not differ substantially from men's: as Tim Youngs states, in order to be accepted by their audience, women needed to mimic men's style (Youngs 135).

On the other hand, since the very expectations of readers and critics the female writers met with were strongly influenced by their gender, it does seem justified to look at their texts through a gendered lens. This essay focuses on four women travelers whose popularity rivalled that of their male counterparts: Frances Trollope, Frances Kemble, Harriet Martineau, and Isabela Bird. Their texts span the first half of the 19th century, or, to be more precise, the period from the early 1830s, when America became very popular as a subject of British travelogues (Trollope's book, being the earliest one discussed, was published in 1832), until the Civil War (Kemble's *Georgian Journal* was published as late as 1863, but written in the 1830s).

Being a nondomestic genre, travel writing was a "risky choice for the woman writer" (Frawley 24). Women had to fight for recognition in the male-dominated world of travelers, and suffer satirical depictions in the popular press, ridiculing them as ladies out of place in wild surroundings (Blanton 45–46). Susan Bassnett provides the example of Isabela Bird's anxiety about the approval of the Royal Geographical Society and about the public reception of her work (Bassnett 229). Bird was not wrong in anticipating the worst, since for instance Harriett Martineau was criticized by conservative reviewers for not sticking to the subject of domestic manners but actually daring to talk about society and political institutions (Deis, and Frye 147). Maria Frawley points to the fact that contemporaneous responses to Martineau's writing show how much of a "challenge to womanhood" her work was perceived to be (Frawley 161).

This is why Romantic and Victorian women travel writers were often very careful about how they fashioned themselves. Frances Trollope declared:

I am in no way competent to judge of the political institutions of America; and if I should occasionally make an observation on their effects, as they meet my superficial glance, they will be made in the spirit, and with the feeling of a woman, who is apt to tell what her first impressions may be, but unapt to reason back from effects to their causes. (Trollope 47)

The self-deprecating tone is striking: apparently, as a woman, Trollope is not "competent" to write about political matters, as her glance is "superficial," and emotional ("the feeling of a woman"), not allowing her to draw conclusions from her impressions (she is unable to "reason back from effects to ... causes"). Moreover, she adds that there are certain subjects on which women may safely pronounce their judgement, which are "all that constitutes the external of society" (Trollope 47) – it is in fact a reiteration of her point about the supposed "superficiality" of the female perception.

Another fragment where Trollope refers to this assumed female inferiority is when she writes about the detrimental effects of American freedom. Stating that the excess of freedom in America results only in chaos, she adds:

were I a stout knight, either of the sword or of the pen, I would fearlessly throw down my gauntlet, and challenge the whole Republic to prove the contrary; but being, as I am, a feeble looker on, with a needle for my spear, and "I talk" for my device, I must be contented with the power of stating the fact, perfectly certain that I shall be contradicted by one loud shout from Maine to Georgia. (Trollope 90)

The "femininity" of the traveler's persona is once more highlighted to the extent of being overdrawn. Trollope uses interesting, medieval imagery: knights, duels, and spears, creating an opposition of female domesticity against the chivalry of men, and associating herself with the former. This allows her not to use any arguments in support of her claims, just to "state the fact" – which is not the fact at all but merely an opinion. Presenting herself as a "feeble" woman, she gives herself permission not to provide proof for her statements, which apparently would be necessary if she was a man.

Apart from allowing Trollope to present her unsupported views, the abovementioned remarks about her apparent incompetence may be seen as a mere fulfilment of a conventional obligation, since they do not prevent the writer from expressing her opinions on the American democracy. Self-deprecation seems to be a ritual for the benefit of her male readers that allows her to speak with impunity exactly about the issues she declared herself unfit to discuss. Thanks to this move, Trollope's entire book is precisely about what it is not supposed to address; the title focuses on the "domestic manners," yet the content is just as much about the public as it is about the private sphere of American life.

Carl Thompson identifies this technique as a popular feature of 19th-century travel texts written by women, stating that "the female writer puts a *cordon sanitaire* around her participation in ongoing cultural and intellectual debates, as expertise is simultaneously demonstrated and disclaimed," at the same time professing her ignorance of a given topic and showing the contrary in practice (Thompson 188). This is why a similar disclaimer appears in Frances Kemble's *Journal*, where she states: "Politics of all sorts, I confess, are far beyond my limited powers of comprehension" (Kemble, *Journal by Frances Anne Butler* I.140). However, unlike Trollope, Kemble does not write directly that this "limitation" stems from her gender. Such reason is implied, yet not openly expressed. Yet again though, this avowed "limitation" never prevents her from actually talking about American political life. Finally, not all women feel the need to justify themselves; an example of a female writer who does not trouble herself with explaining why she takes up such "unfeminine" subjects as politics, history, or wars, is Frances Wright, who does not feel compelled to create this ritualistic *cordon sanitaire*, probably because of her feminist and reformist views.

Being women themselves, many of those travelers comment on the situation of women in America. Dunlop believes that while male travelers appreciate the fact that American women do not work professionally, female travelers are critical of that fact, seeing it as discrimination (Dunlop 149). Martineau includes an entire section devoted to the "political non-existence of women" in America in *Society in America*. She is especially critical of the position of women in the South, comparing in to the one of slaves (Martineau II.71), and pointing to the fact that the very same system which makes Southern men more independent, results in a greater dependence

of women (Martineau II.87). The fact that Martineau points to these drawbacks of the American system is not exclusively dictated by her gender; there are also male travelers who make similar observations. For instance, Captain Frederick Marryat states that despite the immense civility shown by men to the "fair sex" in America, the latter are not treated seriously: "when men *respect* women they do not attempt to make fools of them, but treat them as rational and immortal beings, and this general adulation is cheating them with the shadow, while they withhold from them the substance" (Marryat, *Second Series of a Diary in America...* 101). It is a view shared by Martineau, who complains that American women are given indulgence instead of justice, which makes America far less civilized than many European (and not necessarily democratic) countries (Martineau II.156). At the same time, Marryat's progressive statement is accompanied by a remarkably chauvinistic criticism of Harriet Martineau's suggestion that women should also be elected for government offices. This is how Marryat comments on Martineau's idea: "we should have a 'teeming' prime minister, and the Lord Chancellor obliged to leave the wool-sack to nurse his baby; Miss M. forgets that her prayer has been half granted already, for we never yet had a ministry without a certain proportion of *old women* in it; and we can, therefore, dispense with her services" (Marryat, *Second Series of a Diary in America...* 107). The passage reveals a combination of a typical 19th-century belief that women cannot participate in political life because of their family duties, with using the phrase "old women" as a derogatory term to describe men. As can be seen from these two passages by Marryat, male travelers' perception of women is not purely dismissive, since one writer may present patriarchal views and at the same time call for a greater recognition of women's intellect.

What both male and female travelers agree upon, when it comes to the situation of American women, is that it is unsatisfactory. Women in the New World are said to have more freedom and a better education than in Europe before they marry, but travelers complain that they lose their independence completely once they become wives. Trollope complains that their influence in society is quite insignificant when compared to the one exerted by European married women (Trollope 223). On the other hand, American women do enjoy certain privileges, which make them more independent: what the writers univocally praise is the fact that in America respect shown to women is so great that they can safely travel around the country unchaperoned. When reading this praise in Isabela Bird's book (Bird 77, 94), one may be tempted to see this remark as a way of justifying her own mode of traveling and refuting possible charges of its impropriety. However, the same statement is made by many male travelers, for example by Marryat (Marryat, *Second Series of a Diary in America...* 8), which suggests that this is not a valid explanation. Still, this greater degree of personal freedom does not seem to compensate for the social insignificance of women, in comparison to Europe (which is Trollope's point of reference) or to American ideals of equality and freedom (referred to by Martineau).

Male travelers writing about American women often reveal their expectations about "true" femininity – expectations that female travelers must have had at the back of their minds as well. For instance Thomas Colley Grattan comments on the women's rights movement in America, explaining that most women are modest and "feminine," and that the activists are simply an aberration one should not believe to represent the whole population (Grattan 79). Marryat is equally conservative,

criticizing American women for their “unfeminine” indifference to the suffering of other people and their interest in politics (Marryat, *Second Series of a Diary in America...* 105), or explaining that American children are prone to misbehaving because they spend too much time with their mothers, who are “naturally” more indulgent (Marryat, *A Diary in America...* 255–256). Little wonder that women travelers try to navigate their writing in such a way as not to be charged with “unfemininity” and yet voice their opinions.

2. Slavery in the eyes of women travelers

As Carl Thompson notices, gender does not always put women writers at a disadvantage: it gives them access to the domestic sphere, unavailable for men (Thompson 186) – thus for example Harriet Martineau can criticize de Tocqueville’s vision of America as incomplete, since it lacks precisely this domestic focus (Logan 204). Another problem where gender seems to give to female writers a different outlook than to their male counterparts is their view of slavery. As Jenny Sharpe states, Victorian Englishwomen are trapped between a social role of superiority and inferiority, possessing “a dominant position of race and a subordinate one of gender” (Sharpe 11). The awareness of one’s vulnerability and dependence on men, as well as the Victorian beliefs about what constitutes appropriately “feminine” virtues, often makes the female authors think that as women, they owe to the oppressed people more sympathy than their male compatriots¹.

For one thing, female writers may allow themselves a greater degree of emotionality. This is not restricted to the depictions of slavery, but is often typical of the entire travelogues; for instance, in her 1835 *Journal*, Kemble “cries like a wretch” at every occasion and repeatedly reports about her headaches. Here, this affectation is supposed to help her create the persona of a Romantic gentlewoman experiencing homesickness. However, her unmitigated emotionality plays an equally significant role in her portrayal of slavery. Thus, when she reports on hearing from an acquaintance of hers about the flogging of slaves in the South, she says it “forced colour into my face, the tears into my eyes, and strained every muscle in my body with positive

¹ Ever since the 1820s, one can see the growing participation of American women in a number of social causes, including abolitionism. This tendency was due to the Second Great Awakening, with different denominations stressing the sinfulness of slavery, as well as to the innovations of the Industrial Revolution, giving women more time to sacrifice to humanitarian issues. Popular activists included the Grimke sisters, originating from Southern aristocracy and giving first-hand testimony of the horrors of slavery, the writer Lydia Maria Child, whose 1833 *An Appeal in Favor of that Class of Americans Called Africans* was the first anti-slavery book published in America, or black abolitionists such as Sojourner Truth or Sarah Parker Remond. In Great Britain, since the founding of the Anti-Slavery Society in 1823, women such as Elizabeth Heyrick, Mary Lloyd, or Lucy Townsend were involved first in the movement to end slavery in the British colonies, and then, after the Act of 1833, they fought for worldwide abolition. Harriet Martineau herself became well-known for her tale “Demerara”, criticizing British slavery in the West Indies (Logan 208). In both Britain and America, women participating in the abolitionist movement met with mixed reactions of the male members, many of whom did not like the idea of women’s addressing mixed audiences and influencing the movement’s policies.

rage and indignation; he made me perfectly sick with it" (Kemble, *Journal by Frances Anne Butler* I.106). What is interesting is that she focuses on the minute and dramatic description of her own feelings, rather than on the slaves' suffering. In another passage, she writes about the possibility of a slave uprising:

Oh! what a breaking asunder of old manacles there will be, come of these fine days; what a fearful rising of the black flood; what a sweeping away, as by a torrent, of oppressions and tyrannies; what a fierce and horrible retaliation and revenge for wrong so long endured – so wickedly inflicted. (Kemble, *Journal by Frances Anne Butler* II.24)

It is noticeable that Kemble uses much more poetic language here than in other passages of her journal: a diction which is strongly metaphorical (the "black flood"), and characterized by a lofty, almost theatrical style ("Oh! what a..."). She apparently thinks it proper to be more emotional when she writes about the problem of slavery, and this is how she renders her emotional engagement.

One might be tempted to attribute this theatrical style to the fact that in 1835, slavery is still a somewhat abstract question for Kemble. This changes by the time of her *Georgian Journal*, written four years later and published in 1864, which documents her experiences on her American husband's plantation. Yet, even though Kemble's style in the second journal is definitely more mature and down-to-earth, the first-hand experience of slavery and deep sympathy for blacks which she develops does not mean a radical change of diction. In order to express the horrors of slavery, Kemble still relies upon descriptions of her own feelings alongside those of the blacks' misery. There is far less melodrama in the *Georgian Journal* than in her first *Journal*, yet there are still passages in which she gets carried away with her own emotionality, as when she says: "I stood in the midst of them, perfectly unable to speak, the tears pouring from my eyes at this sad spectacle of their misery, myself and my emotion alike strange and incomprehensible to them" (Kemble, *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation in 1838–1839* 33).

In another instance, when she hears of a possible separation of a slave named Joe and his family, she comments: "I retreated immediately from the horrid scene, breathless with surprise and dismay, and stood for some time in my own room, with my heart and temples throbbing to such a degree that I could hardly support myself" (Kemble, *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation in 1838–1839* 102). It must be added, to her credit, that she does not limit herself to this emotional reaction, but she successfully intervenes with her husband. Yet, when she talks about this intervention, she states: "Poor Joe's agony while remonstrating with his master was hardly greater than mine while arguing with him upon this bitter piece of inhumanity" (102). The likening of her suffering and the suffering of a slave is rather inappropriate – subjugated as her position was, it was still privileged when compared to the one of the slave – and shows that at times Kemble gets seduced by her own style, equating her emotions with those of the slaves. Such a comparison is not limited to this single occurrence; when her husband refuses to hear more of her pleas on behalf of the slaves, Kemble expresses a wish to return North, "for my condition would be almost worse than theirs [the slaves'] – condemned to hear and see so much wretchedness, not only without the means of alleviating it, but without permission even to represent it for alleviation" (Kemble, *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation in 1838–1839* 171). Her distress is understandable, as she hates the

feeling of helplessness at the sight of human suffering; yet the passage is remarkably self-centered, as is her belief, expressed elsewhere in the book, that if her friends in England knew the sights she must witness they would be sorry for her – for her, and not for her husband’s slaves (183).

The emotional form of Kemble’s *Georgian Journal* is partly dictated by the fact that it was composed as a series of letters to her friend, Elizabeth Dwight Sedgwick (Vacaro 257). A similar approach to the epistolary form is shown by Isabella Bird, who starts her journal with a conventional apology, stating that she decided to publish the content of her letters at the request of her friends, and drawing attention to the personal nature of her remarks (Bird 1). Yet the emotional way of looking at slavery is not always embraced by the female writers. Frances Trollope writes about her initially sympathetic reaction at seeing black slaves, but she also criticizes this impulse, suggesting that after having spent some time in America, she sees such sympathy as overreacting: “my fancy wove some little romance of misery, as belonging to each of them [slaves]” (Trollope 20). She presents herself as looking almost contemptuously, or at least pityingly, at this emotional and immature reaction. In this way, she first of all suggests that slavery is not as bad (or not always as bad) as she thought it to be, and, secondly, she criticizes her old self as sentimental, irrational, and childish (speaking of her fancy, and of a “little romance”).

Still, this consent to being emotional allows many women travelers to express their sympathy towards slaves in a more direct manner. As Bassnett states, while 19th-century male writers tend to be more scientific in their interests, women are often more philanthropically inclined (Bassnett 228). At the same time, as Thompson notices, white women are also exploiting the Other, as it gives them a way of escaping their own social inferiority (Thompson 193). The text showing how these writers navigate their position of superiority/inferiority most interestingly is Kemble’s *Georgian Journal*. Her gender comes across as a central category in her writing because it is a central category of her experience at the plantation: these are mostly slave women who come and beg her to speak on their behalf to her husband. She serves as a bridge or a go-between for the slaves and their master because of her abolitionist views, but also because of her femininity. The “middle space” she occupies between masters and slaves quite well reflects her state of suspension between inferiority and superiority as a white woman. Listening to the slaves’ pleas is especially hard for her when women come to ask her for lighter work during the month after labor, appealing to her own experience as a mother, as she can easily identify with them being a mother herself, through this very natural and biological similarity (Kemble, *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation in 1838–1839* 183). Male slaves at the plantation never expect solidarity from white men just because of their gender; however, this “sisterhood” in a way transcends race, allowing for a common ground between women. Thus the slaves, according to Kemble’s account always very careful to put themselves in an inferior position not to offend the masters, in this case can draw a parallel between them and their mistress openly.

This feminine solidarity is something Kemble expects from herself as well as from other women. When she learns about the role many mistresses play in the plantation system, being often cruel to slave women due to jealousy of their unfaithful husbands, she is devastated and thinks this is even worse than male slaveholders’ cruelty. Interestingly, she also reveals her wider assumptions about femininity

in this passage, stating that jealousy is a common female trait – as if betrayed men did not experience the same passions (Kemble, *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation in 1838–1839* 228). Her assumptions about gender are also visible in her interactions with the slaves: she describes offering them “instruction in womanly habits of decency and cleanliness,” showing that, according to her, hygiene and “decency” belong to the feminine sphere of life (182).

Her position as a woman severely limits her options of improving the slaves’ situation. Basically, all she can do is to appeal to her husband and beg him for a number of small favors. When the slave Aleck asks her to teach him to read, she agrees reluctantly, knowing this to be illegal according to Southern laws. She comments: “Unrighteous laws are made to be broken – *perhaps* – but then, you see, I am a woman, and Mr. [Butler] stands between me and the penalty” (Kemble, *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation in 1838–1839* 230). She knows that she has no legal identity, and therefore if she breaks the law it will be her husband who is going to be financially punished for her offence. This in a way places also her in the position of her husband’s property, and makes it impossible for her to take legal responsibility for her decision to disobey the law she deems unjust. What is more, her helplessness or vulnerability is not limited to her interactions with the slaves. There is an interesting passage where she speaks of a young slave, a son of the head-man, who has such a light complexion that she finds it hard to believe that his parents are both black. However, this is what her husband tells her – and she seems satisfied with this explanation, never questioning it (Kemble, *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation in 1838–1839* 55). The reader of course immediately realizes why the boy is light-skinned, knowing the habits of plantation overseers and slaveholders. It seems that Kemble (or at least her narrator in the book) chooses not to question her husband’s explanation, as otherwise she would have to ask herself the uncomfortable question of who the boy’s real father is – a question that could have implications for her own sense of marital security as well. One could argue that, as a woman, she would not dare to address the subject of white men’s infidelity – yet she does speak about it in the beginning of the very same book, which shows that this is not entirely her subjugated position that prevents her from touching upon the issue of whites taking advantage of female slaves (Kemble, *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation in 1838–1839* 15).

3. Conclusion

While travel writing by male and female authors from the first half of the 19th century does not at first glance exhibit many differences, as women mostly imitate the dominant discourse created by male writers, certain areas of their experience are necessarily defined by gender. The female authors realize the danger of being ridiculed by male critics and readers; they also know the social expectations and rules defining what is “feminine” and what is not – and often share these beliefs with men. As according to these social norms, women are expected to be more compassionate and philanthropically-oriented, gender influences in particular their representation of slavery. They are typically allowed a greater degree of emotionality in their writing, which is clearly visible in the passages dealing with slavery. But, as

Kemble's *Georgian Journal* shows, British women's interest in the situation of blacks is often dictated not only by compassion, but also by a certain degree of solidarity with female slaves, as well as an awareness of their own subjugated position.

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