

BORDERLANDS TRAVEL WRITING: HELEN MARIA WILLIAMS, MARY SHELLEY, AND POLITICAL CONFLICT IN FRANCE

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Resumo

Em *Cartas escritas na França no verão 1790* a um amigo na Inglaterra (1790), Helen Maria Williams descreve as mulheres como “as molas secretas [no] mecanismo” das questões humanas, significando que as mulheres influenciam até mesmo os eventos mais importantes (1790, p. 79). Williams está se referindo às inúmeras maneiras como as mulheres influenciaram a Revolução Francesa, e ela fez a parte dela ao representar abertamente a agitação política na França para um público inglês. Vivendo na França em um momento tão arriscado e publicando um relato de suas experiências, Williams resistiu às expectativas sociais em relação às mulheres. O desafio de Williams à autoridade masculina e aos papéis tradicionais do gênero também pode ser visto nos escritos de vida e de viagem de Mary Shelley, tais como *História de uma viagem de seis semanas* (1817), um dos primeiros relatos da França após o reinado de Napoleão. Com a *História*, vemos mais uma escritora britânica usando o gênero de fronteiras da escrita de viagens para questionar limites de gênero e de classe. As semelhanças e conexões entre Williams e Shelley (ambas rechaçadas por suas ligações e viagens com homens casados) torna surpreendente o fato de as duas ainda não terem sido comparadas.

Palavras-chave

Classe; França; Gênero; Helen Maria Williams; Literatura de Viagem; Mary Shelley.

Abstract

In *Letters Written in France in the Summer 1790 to a Friend in England* (1790), Helen Maria Williams describes women as “those secret springs in [the] mechanism” of human affairs, meaning that women influence even the most important events (1790, p. 79). Williams is referring to the numerous ways women affected the French Revolution, and she played her own part by positively representing political upheaval in France to an English audience. Living in France at such a risky time and publishing an account of her experiences, Williams defied societal expectations of women. Williams’ challenge to male authority and traditional gender roles can also be seen in Mary Shelley’s life and travel writings, such as *History of a Six Weeks’ Tour* (1817), one of the earliest reports from France after Napoleon’s reign. With *History*, we see yet another British woman writer using the borderlands genre of travel writing to question gender and class boundaries. The similarities and connections between Williams and Shelley (both of whom were shunned for their liaisons and travels with married men) make it surprising that the two have not yet been compared.

Keywords

Class; France; Gender; Helen Maria Williams; Mary Shelley; Travel Writing.

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Travel writing is a “borderlands” genre—meaning it is situated between generic borders, so it is interstitial or liminal—because, typically, travel writing is simultaneously private thoughts and writings provided for public consumption. In fact, Helen Maria Williams (1767-1821) and Mary Shelley (1797-1851) are two of several women who “wrote in ways that redrew generic lines” (CRACUIN; LOKKE, 2001, p. 9).

Published descriptions of travels typically combined genres. For example, Williams published her travel writing in the form of letters; Shelley presented her European tours through letters and journals. Complicating this generic ambiguity, the content of travel writing does not fit neatly within separate categories either. As Esther Schor points out in her article “Mary Shelley in Transit”, travel writing itself combines reflection and reporting, so that it is “one part self-portrait, one part portrait of the Other.... an exploration of the self through an encounter with the Other” (1993, p. 235; 237). Due to these hybridities, I am suggesting that travel writing is a borderlands genre, meaning that it occupies a place between borders where a duality of form and purpose exists.

Yet another duality can be seen in readers of travel literature because the audiences for travel writing differ in their purposes for reading. Some readers of travel literature use travelogues and travel guides to inform their own travel while others live vicariously through the author’s adventures without ever leaving home. Many of Williams’ and Shelley’s readers were in this second category due to the contemporary political upheaval in France. In addition to inviting a binary opposition of readers who travel and those who do not, travel writing also allows readers to be both at once: “active tourist and contemplative philosopher” (SCHOR, 1993, p. 253). Perhaps the popularity of travel writing—even today—is due in part to its duality.

In early nineteenth-century Britain, travel writing truly was a popular genre. According to Benjamin Colbert’s *Bibliography of British Travel Writing, 1780-1840: The European Tour, 1814-1818* (excluding Britain and Ireland), 75% of the titles published were “personal witness” narratives (journals, letters, notes), and from 1814 to 1818, the number of travelogues published was almost double that of novels: an average of 58.4 new novels were published each year, compared to 98.8 travel titles (2004). Shelley and Williams, both professional writers, capitalized on the reading public’s preference for travel writing.

The first volume of Williams’ *Letters from France* (1790-1796) constitutes travel writing because Williams recounts in it her 1790 trip to France before she relocated there in 1792. In this first volume, *Letters Written in France in the Summer 1790 to a Friend in England* (1790), Williams describes women as “those secret springs in [the] mechanism” of human affairs (WILLIAMS, 2001, p. 79). Williams is referring to the numerous ways women influenced the French Revolution; in fact, she played her own part by positively representing political upheaval in France to an English audience. Living in France at such a risky time and publishing an eyewitness account of the French Revolution, Williams defied societal expectations of women. In addition to her descriptions of post-Revolutionary events and the French monarchy’s restoration, Williams includes explicit commentary on politics, a subject normally reserved for men. At a time when women were gaining more of a political presence in France, Williams hoped to capitalize on their newfound liberty and expand her own role as a writer (KENNEDY, 2002). With *Letters Written in France*, Williams challenged male authority and traditional gender roles by explicitly providing statements about

female citizens, commenting on politics, and questioning gender and class boundaries.

Similar challenges can also be seen in Mary Shelley's life and travel writings. Before the publication of her famous novel *Frankenstein* (1818), Shelley published one of the earliest reports about France after Napoleon's reign in *History of a Six Weeks' Tour* (1817). The revised journal entries and letters comprising the volume recount Shelley's 1814 elopement with Percy Bysshe Shelley through France, Switzerland, Germany, and Holland and their 1816 return trip that repeated the 1814 itinerary. In 1814, the Shelleys observed war-torn France while touring primarily by foot; this mode of travel interrogates class borders by violating conveyance norms for the traditional aristocratic Grand Tour. With *History*, we see yet another British woman writer using the genre of travel writing to present experiences that call into question generic, class, and gendered divisions.

The similarities and connections between Williams and Shelley (both of whom were shunned for their liaisons and travels with married men) make it surprising that the two have not yet been compared. Both women crossed gender boundaries by traveling to France at a dangerous time and publishing political commentary within their travel writing. Just as travel writing occupies a special borderlands space due to its cross-generic characteristics, Williams' and Shelley's lives and works crossed ideological borders, thereby enacting erasure and/or revision of certain expectations, particularly ones regarding gender and class. Williams and Shelley took advantage of this borderlands genre to call into question numerous "borders" such as gender boundaries, class divisions, and the separation between the public and private spheres.

Williams and *Letters Written in France*

While capitalizing on the popularity of travel writing, Williams was also responding to British curiosity about and fascination with the French Revolution. As Neil Fraistat and Susan S. Lanser point out:

Unique among English women writers for her long participation in French Revolutionary politics, Williams became in effect a foreign correspondent, interpreting French history to readers in England and around the continent for thirty years. Her politics made her a controversial figure in England and sometimes even in France but gained her international recognition as an eye-witness historian of world-shaking events. (FRAISTAT; LANSER *apud* WILLIAMS, 2001, p. 16).

Williams' obituary in *The Gentleman's Magazine* in 1828 was not nearly as kind; there she was labeled "pre-eminent among the violent female devotees of the French Revolution" ("Obit." 1828, p. 373). Prior to assuming this role, Williams had already established her literary reputation as a "poet of sensibility", also publishing one novel before her journey to France in July 1790 (KENNEDY, 2001, p. 317; FRAISTAT; LANSER, 2001, p. 20). At the end of that trip, Williams published the first in what would become an eight-volume work entitled *Letters from France* (1790-1796), which covers the French Revolution from the Festival of Federation in July 1790 (opening the first volume) through the Reign of Terror and its aftermath. Williams began living in France permanently in 1792, so this article on travel writing focuses on the first volume,

Letters Written in France, composed when Williams was a tourist, not an expatriot.

During the two months that Williams toured France, she composed twenty-six letters addressed to an unnamed recipient. The letters recount Williams' experiences in Paris as she toured Revolutionary sites such as the Bastille and Versailles, as well as her trip to and stay in Rouen, where she visited her former French teacher, Monique Coquerel du Fossé. In six long letters in the middle section of her book, Williams presents a "memoir" detailing the imprisonment, poverty, and exile suffered by du Fossé and her aristocratic husband, whose "tyrannical father serves as a powerful allegory of the old regime's capricious control of its subjects" (FRAISTAT; LANSER, 2001, p. 15). The younger du Fossés' chances for happiness depended on the overthrow of the government. Williams uses this tale—which occupies what Mark B. Ledden terms "generically liminal space" (WILLIAMS, 2011, p. 07) — to support her claim that her own political opinions are grounded in the personal.

Williams declares that she is a proponent of the revolution because she is so moved by the plight of French citizens as well as their enthusiastic celebration of newfound liberty. To begin the volume, Williams fervently describes the Festival of Federation and peripheral events marking the first anniversary of the Bastille's fall. She captures the infectious gaiety in detailed descriptions and, most telling, in recounting her own reaction:

You will not suspect that I was an indifferent witness of such a scene. Oh no! this was not a time in which the distinctions of country were remembered. It was the triumph of human kind; it was man asserting the noblest privileges of his nature; and it required but the common feelings of humanity to become in that moment a citizen of the world! (WILLIAMS, 2001, p. 69).

This instance is not the only one in *Letters Written in France* in which Williams blurs national boundaries. For example, she predicts a time when all European nations will follow "the liberal system which France has adopted" (WILLIAMS, 2001, p. 82). She also joins "the universal voice" by shouting "Long live the Nation" (WILLIAMS, 2001, p. 73). Having such a cosmopolitan attitude invited censure in England, so Williams balanced it with statements such as "you are not one of those who will suspect that I am not all the while a good Englishwoman" and offering supposedly natural feminine emotion as the cause of her actions (WILLIAMS, 2001, 1790, p. 90).

To defend her pro-revolutionary stance, Williams states:

it is very difficult, with common sensibility, to avoid sympathizing in general happiness. My love of the French revolution is the natural result of this sympathy, and therefore my political creed is entirely an affair of the heart; for I have not been so absurd as to consult my head upon matters on which it is so incapable of judging (WILLIAMS, 2001, p. 91).

As Chris Jones points out, this "feminine discourse of pure sympathy belied [Williams'] own more dissident, intellectually based political principles" (JONES, 2000, p. 94). Still, Williams used this trope to placate readers.

Throughout *Letters Written in France*, Williams insists on her naturally feminine reactions, even conflating the personal and political explicitly: "I must acknowledge, that, in my admiration of the revolution in France, I blend the feelings of private friendship with my sympathy in public blessings" (WILLIAMS, 2001, p. 93). She even asks her correspondent, "Did you expect that I should ever dip my pen in politics, who used to take so small an interest in public

affairs...” (WILLIAMS, 2001, p. 109). Repeatedly, she insists that the suffering of the du Fossés under the old regime has motivated her political involvement: I am glad you think that a friend’s having been persecuted, imprisoned, maimed, and almost murdered under the antient (sic) government of France, is a good excuse for loving the revolution. What, indeed, but friendship, could have led my attention from the annals of imagination to the records of politics. (WILLIAMS, 2001, p. 140).

This narrative’s blurring of the personal and political transgresses the separation of the public and private spheres and is an example of a “border-crossing” that helps redefine gender boundaries. Williams’ rhetorical strategy turns the public/private dichotomy on its head because she argues that it is the characteristics associated with the feminine — emotion, passion, sympathy — that authorize participation in the masculine, public sphere. Williams adhered to this idea throughout her multi-volume work. Writing about *Williams’ Sketch of the Politics of France*, published in 1795, Richard C. Sha notes, by repeatedly suggesting how women’s capacity to feel makes them more capable of understanding liberty than men are, Williams lends women the authority to speak on such matters. Rather than seeing women’s capacity to feel as being at odds with intelligence and courage, Williams argues that they are mutually reinforcing (SHA, 1995, p. 197).

Williams’ opinion carves out new space for women and women writers; just as women experienced more freedom in France – such as easily gaining admittance to the National Assembly, which Williams observed (KENNEDY, 2002) – Williams attempts to take advantage of the new political participation by making explicit political statements and defending her right to do so.

Still, Williams realized that she could not simply offer such opinions in a philosophical treatise, for example. She took advantage of presenting her travels and politics through letters, a more acceptable form than a history or a treatise for women at the time. As Anne Mellor points out, “the public letter had become the major genre for political debate in England, enabling the writer to consider opposing points of view while at the same time foregrounding the role of personal experience and feeling in the determination of political ideology” (MELLOR, 2000, p. 107).

Williams’ stated reliance on emotional reaction to inform her political opinions seems to have effectively “insulated[d] her feminine persona” because the critical reception of *Letters Written in France* was primarily positive, with a couple of reviews explicitly mentioning Williams’ femininity (SHA, 1995, p. 197; p. 213-15). However, The Critical Review prophetically warned Williams that “for women to be crazy about liberty — My goodness, Mademoiselle, you will never be married!” (1791, p. 217). As Williams continued to publish her volumes about the French Revolution, the reviews became harsher; for example, a 1798 review referred to her as a strumpet and a bloody Poissarde (low-class market or fish woman) (KENNEDY, 2001, p. 324). Far from deterred by such attacks, Williams stated in 1801 that she would continue to write despite “the censure which has been thrown on writers of the female sex who have sometimes employed their pens on political subjects” (KENNEDY, 2001, p. 335). Williams’ commitment to publishing her political ideas paved the way for subsequent women writers, who benefited from Williams’ use of a borderlands genre to push against conventional expectations of women. By traveling at such a dangerous time, living in a risky political climate, and writing about subjects normally off-limits for women,

Williams created new opportunities for women writers. One such writer was Mary Shelley.

Mary Shelley and *History of a Six Weeks' Tour*

Like Williams, Shelley presents travel writing through personal genres of letters as well as journal entries (which were revised for *History*). *History* contains a travelogue of an 1814 European tour (based on journal entries by Shelley and Percy Bysshe Shelley), letters from an 1816 European tour, and Percy Bysshe Shelley's poem "Mont Blanc". Interestingly, Williams provided a history of the French Revolution, calling it letters/travel writing, while Shelley dares to entitle her travelogue a "history", which was a serious genre written primarily by men. The review in the *New Monthly Magazine* notes surprise that such a rapid European tour would be termed a "history" (1817, p. 55). Thus, even the title of Shelley's work defies generic boundaries and challenges the conventional types of writing deemed appropriate for women writers.

Unlike Williams' travel writing, in Shelley's *History*, we do not see much of the forthright political commentary offered by Williams. In fact, although Shelley recorded what would have been controversial opinions in her private journals, she chose not to include them in *History*. Perhaps one reason for the exclusion is, as Mary Poovey has suggested, Shelley's self-effacement (1984). One example of material excised before publication regards Williams. On Shelley's first evening in Paris, she attempted to visit Williams, who had been a friend of Shelley's parents, Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin (*Journals* p. 10). Shelley could not locate Williams, who was away from the city (SEYMOUR, 2000, p. 105). In *History*, Shelley makes no mention of Williams even though she does include a list of the sites visited that night (1817, p. 18). Perhaps Shelley excluded references to Williams because Shelley did not want to invite a comparison of herself with Williams, which probably would have called attention to Shelley's own affair with a married man. Just as Williams lived in Paris in a common law marriage, Shelley lived with Percy Bysshe Shelley from 1814 until 1816, when they were finally able to marry because Percy Bysshe Shelley's wife Harriet had committed suicide (SUNSTEIN, 1989, p. 41; SEYMOUR, 2000, p. 177). The preface to *History* introduces the volume as travels of "the author, with her husband and sister" although the Shelleys were not married at the time of this trip (1817, p. 13).

Although Shelley's political commentary is seldom explicit in *History*, descriptions of the war-torn countryside imply Shelley's judgment: she was impressed by the historical significance of events in France, but seems to have held pacifist beliefs. Traveling from Provins to Nogent-sur-Seine in 1814 reminded Shelley "that France had lately been the country in which great and extraordinary events had taken place" (1817, p. 21; MORRISON; STONE, 2003, p. 306). Shelley visited towns "entirely desolated by the Cossacs" with roofless, burned cottages and a few "squalid", hungry inhabitants whose livestock had been seized (1817, p. 21, 22). With a hint of political commentary, Shelley calls the country "pillaged and wasted by this plague, which, in his pride, man inflicts upon his fellow" (1817, p. 21). In these ruined villages, the "people did not know that Napoleon was deposed"; Napoleon, at the time, was in Elba before his brief return to power (1817, p. 22). According to Angela D. Jones, Shelley includes this tidbit about the villagers' ignorance to reinforce her own "status as a

knowledgeable, sophisticated tourist" from England, as an "outsider capable of rendering impartial judgment on the observed Other" (JONES, 1997, p. 27).

Shelley may, indeed, have needed to offer such evidence of her own authority because, unlike the upper-class gentlemen who traveled in style on the Grand Tour, the Shelley party had chosen to travel inexpensively by foot and boat. The Grand Tour, traditionally undertaken by a rich, young man and his tutor, was intended as the two- to three-year "capstone of a classical education" (MOSKAL, 2001, p. 177).

Beginning around 1750, more middle-class British travellers, including women, started taking a shortened version of the Grand Tour (MOSKAL, 2003, p. 141). Unlike those tourists, the Shelley party planned a walking tour; short on money, they purchased an ass, which they exchanged for a mule "to carry our portmanteau and one of us by turns" (1817, p. 19). A French innkeeper warned about the danger of this plan due to the large, recently disbanded army (1817, p. 19). Although the traveling party was unmolested by soldiers, their mode of travel failed when Percy Bysshe Shelley's ankle "sprain rendered [their] pedestrianism impossible", and they proceeded to travel by open carriage with a hired driver who repeatedly proceeded to the next town without his passengers; they subsequently chased him town to town, mostly by foot (1817, p. 23). I include these details to suggest that the content of *History*, in addition to being humorous in places, transgresses both gender and class lines. In it, Shelley recounts experiences that could call into question Percy Bysshe Shelley's masculinity (He was the one constantly in need of assistance.) and the entire traveling party's class standing. With their mode of travel, the Shelley party made the Grand Tour even more inclusive—further erasing some class limitations as well as altering the traditional route "to strike across the country" (1817, p. 21). The review in *Blackwoods* took note of this walking and boating tour, stating "something original [was] in the plan of traveling" (1818, p. 412). However, *The Monthly Review* finds fault with those who "expatriate themselves for the sake of economy" (1819, p. 97).

Another "border" — in addition to class — questioned by Shelley is nationality. Shelley seems to have agreed with Williams, who thought that all global citizens should support the cause of liberty. In her first letter from Geneva, Shelley states that the French citizens' discontent with "a detested dynasty" forced upon them after Napoleon's rule is understandable: This feeling is honourable to the French, and encouraging to all those of every nation in Europe who have a fellow feeling with the oppressed, and who cherish an unconquerable hope that the cause of liberty must at length prevail" (1817, p. 42).

Thus, the cause of liberty transgresses national boundaries. Such cosmopolitanism, meaning a "conviction of the oneness of humanity", was the foundation of the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man in France, and Shelley and Williams shared this philosophical stance (APPIAH, 2006, p. XIV).

Although Shelley's *History* fared well in the three reviews that have been located, it had disappointing sales: the volume did not even make enough profit to pay the printer (MOSKAL, 1996, p. 04).

Perhaps *History* did not sell well because, as a result of the reading public's clamor for travel writing, the market had become flooded. In 1817, the year *History* was published, 31 books about the Continental Tour came out, with nineteen books about France (COLBERT, 2004). Rather than an indication of the quality of Shelley's work, the lack of sales was likely due to a saturated market.

Although many writers were publishing travel writing, most of those writers were male. According to Colbert, no more than three books by women travel writers appeared in a single year before 1817; in 1817, History was one of seven travel books by women, which means that only “5,5% of published travel writers were female” (COLBERT, 2004). This paucity of female travel writers makes Shelley’s and Williams’ choices to publish in this hybrid, or borderlands, genre a real challenge to gender boundaries, at least concerning gender-identified literary genres. Of course, several other British women — such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Lady Morgan, and Mary Wortley Montagu, to name only a few — had already published books about their travels, but the volume of travel books by women in no way compares to the vast number of such books by men. The content of History and of *Letters Written in France* is typical of women’s travel writing in the way that the works conflate genres and challenge notions of nationality, gender, and class.

The writing of Williams and Shelley provides a vantage point for exploring the ways in which transgression of ideological and cultural boundaries helps create new space, a place where supposedly binary oppositions can coexist and interweave. Such space can be categorized or labeled as “representational space”, as defined by Henri Le Febvre. Another alternative is to understand it as what Michel Foucault calls a heterotopia, which is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible.

However, that such transgressions occur in books about authors literally crossing national borders encouraged me to apply geographic or cartographic nomenclature and paradigms to literature. Therefore, I have labeled Williams’ and Shelley’s books as “borderlands” writing, by which I am motioning towards a place between borders where a fluctuation in genre, class, gender, and nationality exists. Such a *locus* recalls the historical situation in Mainz at the time the Shelley party passed through by boat. Shelley describes the city as “Mayence is one of the best fortified towns in Germany... the cathedral and towers of the town still bear marks of the bombardment which took place in the revolutionary war” (1817, p. 35). Shelley’s step-sister, Claire Clairmont, noted in her journal that “The Inhabitants of Mayntz do not know to whom they belong” (CLAIRMONT, 1968, p. 35). Though the liminality of Mainz was fleeting and violent, the not knowing, the resisting definition, the being located in a borderlands provides opportunity for transformation of ideology. At least, Williams’ and Shelley’s travel writings seem to suggest so.

STONE, S. Literatura de viagem na fronteira: Helen Maria Williams, Mary Shelley, e conflito político na França. **Olho d’água**, São José do Rio Preto, v. 4, n. 2, p. 86-95, 2012.

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