

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Aneta Lipska, *The Travel Writings of Marguerite Blessington: The Most Gorgeous Lady on the Tour* (Anthem Press, 2017)

The genre of travel writing is one that has historically been difficult to pin down or define. Its diversity makes it resistant to simple categorisation and it has frequently been overlooked as an inferior and unreliable form of writing. Travel writing displays inconsistencies and incongruities which have caused critics to consider it ‘only in most cases to move beyond it’, as Patrick Holland and Graeme Huggan point out.¹ Despite this mixed and often ambivalent reception, travel writing is now recognised as a significant corpus of work belonging ‘to a wider structure of representation within which cultural affiliations and links – culture itself – can be analyzed, questioned, and reassessed’.² If travel writing as a genre has a history of being disparaged, then this is exacerbated when it applies to nineteenth-century women travellers; early studies dismissed women’s travel writing as largely autobiographical and unreliable.³ So it is gratifying to read a book such as Aneta Lipska’s *The Travel Writings of Marguerite Blessington: the Most Gorgeous Lady on the Tour* (2017), which scrutinises hitherto overlooked travel texts written by a woman who was influential at the time she was publishing, but whose travel writing has been neglected by critics.

Lady Marguerite Blessington was a significant social figure and writer of her time and her life has been the subject of some critical examination. Lipska offers a survey of the literature about Blessington in order to explain the point of difference of *The Travel Writings of Marguerite Blessington*: a comprehensive study of Blessington’s travel texts has not been undertaken until now, even though Blessington has been mentioned in studies of women’s travel writing and her work in this area is claimed to have done ‘much to popularize the Grand Tour amongst “women of quality”’ (Jane Robinson, quoted in Preface xviii). As Lipska points out, the nineteenth century saw a burgeoning of British travellers to the Continent as travel became more accessible. Blessington could participate in a mode and style of travel many of her readers could only access through reading accounts such as hers. Lipska compares and contrasts four of Blessington’s travel texts, published almost twenty years apart: *A Tour in the Isle of Wight, in the Autumn of 1820*; *Journal of a Tour through the Netherlands to Paris, in 1821*; *The Idler in Italy* (1839-40); and *The Idler in France* (1841). Lipska points out that the subtitle of her study – *The Most Gorgeous Lady on the Tour* – is indicative of Blessington’s reputation amongst her contemporaries. Blessington’s texts serve to produce an image of the author that acts as ‘an index to her socio-cultural status’ (xiv). The nature of travel discussed in this book is a privileged one, as the titles of Blessington’s texts suggest. Her social position allows her to be an

¹ Patrick Holland and Graeme Huggan, *Tourists with Typewriters: Critical Reflections on Contemporary Travel Writing* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998) viii.

² Holland and Huggan viii-ix.

³ Sara Mills, *Discourses of Difference: An Analysis of Women’s Travel Writing and Colonialism* (London: Routledge, 1991) 12-13.

Book reviews: *The Travel Writings of Marguerite Blessington: The Most Gorgeous Lady on the Tour* by Aneta Lipska. Robyn Greaves.

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‘idler’ and ‘tourist’, spending long periods of time in European cities, exploring their aesthetic pleasures such as art galleries and museums. She sets up elaborate households in these cities where she entertains various guests in the role of salonniere.

Lipska’s book is divided into three parts, each dealing with certain aspects of Blessington’s texts. It begins with a discussion of the books as artefacts, including the ways they were promoted and marketed, and Blessington’s fictional strategies. Parts Two and Three are organised into chapters examining aspects of focus across Blessington’s narratives: natural scenery, ruins and edifices, sacred art and religious practices, and city spaces. The subjective experience of travelling is emphasised through this examination as we see how social, national and gender positions influence the travel experience and the narration of it. This extends to the form of the narratives: the journal was an acceptable form for women of this period to co-opt in order to make public comment. Blessington’s travels did not take her off the beaten track and her wanderings were largely confined to city-scapes, focusing on art galleries and museums and matters of society such as food, conversation and fashion. As such, Lipska’s book offers an examination of another manifestation of the genre of travel writing that is not about the experience of travelling as constant movement toward something new and exotic, but rather the experience of spending extended periods of time in civilised spaces and idling through them, appreciating the aesthetics of mostly material objects rather than the natural features of a foreign land. Even the engagement with foreigners is limited and peripheral; these texts offer instruction on the aesthetics and social mores of places rather than being tales of adventure in exotic locales.

Blessington traded on her position and celebrity status to sell books. She was a friend of Lord Byron, publishing *Conversations with Lord Byron* in 1834. She foregrounds herself in her travel narratives through self-promotion and ‘exploitation of the fictional formula of the fashionable novel’, for example by making Byron a protagonist in her account to add extra appeal for her audience. Lipska recognises the multi-faceted narrative persona Blessington adopts to suit her purpose, describing this as ‘self-fashioning’ (xiv). This self-fashioning is largely in response to social conventions, and what was considered acceptable for women in this period. Lipska compares Blessington’s narrative persona across the texts, noting the development of the author in the intervening years, such that Blessington allows her social status to speak more strongly through the later Tours: ‘an author emerges who has become much more self-assured in terms of her manner of writing, and who only selectively abides by the received conventions of travel writing’ (129), whereas in the early texts Blessington presents herself as a ‘modest novice’ and adopts a voice that combines ‘apology with assertion’ (47). While these positions are sometimes contradictory, they were common devices used by women (and men) to provide their readers with pleasure, or entertainment and instruction.

Occasionally I found myself wondering how sections of the book related to travel writing, such as the section on Byron at the end of Part One, but this illustrates the nature of the genre and its various manifestations. Blessington’s personal relationship with Byron seems to have

been one she stressed in her narratives as having a significant influence on her travelling and on how she saw the places she visited.

Lipska's eminently readable book is a welcome addition to the corpus of work on travel writing, particularly nineteenth-century women's travel texts. While she does not take an overtly feminist stance in regard to her subject or argue for a distinctive feminine tradition of travel writing, Lipska notes the ways in which women tended to construct their narrative personas to comply with social conventions, thus making their texts acceptable to a wide audience. Lipska fulfils her purpose to conduct 'a critical reading of ... Blessington's four travel narratives, and to broadly contextualize them within social, cultural and literary phenomena of the first half of the nineteenth century' (xiii), thus extending and adding to our knowledge of the cultural work performed by travel writing across time.

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