

SEM2. Humanism in motion: Travel literature, salon culture, and cosmopolitan networks

11 September h. 16:00-18:30, S6 Moro

Convenors

David George Lyons (Alma Mater Studiorum Università di Bologna) david.lyons@unibo.it

Antonia Marcarelli (Alma Mater Studiorum Università di Bologna) antonia.marcarelli2@unibo.it

Giovanni Iamartino (Università degli Studi di Milano) giovanni.iamartino@unimi.it

Abstract

This seminar proposes an exploration of the importance of humanism within travel writing from the Anglosphere, focusing on salon culture and the social role of travel writing. The chronological focus of the seminar broadly encompasses works from the 17th-19th centuries. Recent historiography has investigated the complex relationship of salon culture to the public sphere (Habermas, 1989), and, more importantly, the role of women in shaping such a culture (Landes, 1988; Pekacz, 1999), while other scholars, such as Dena Goodman (1994), have highlighted the value of salons as spaces where ideas could circulate across national and cultural boundaries. Travel writers often operated within complex networks of patronage and sociability, positioning their works as mediators of cultural dialogue and as reflections of humanist ideals.

By situating travel writing within these broader frameworks, this seminar seeks to investigate its dual role as a representation of individual human experience and as an instrument for collective understanding. In order to promote a wide engagement on the topic, and invite a truly transdisciplinary style, we welcome methodological approaches varying from literary criticism, cultural studies, discourse analysis, historiographical approaches, and digital humanities.

We invite topics focused on, but not limited to:

- the influence of humanist principles and how they are articulated by travel writers
- travel writers as mediators of culture(s)
- the role of salon culture in the production and dissemination of travel writing
- salons as networks of cross-cultural dialogue and as sites for exchanging ideas
- the importance of the role of women in travel writing.

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SEM2. Papers

11 September h. 16:00-18:30, S6 Moro

- *Great news from Ireland at door! A corpus-based discourse analysis of coffee house dialogues and their discursive practices in late 17th and early 18th century England (1662-1712)* (Ersilia Incelli, Sapienza Università di Roma)
- *Travel writing and well-being: Anna Riggs Miller and Hester Lynch Piozzi as mediators of Italian culture in England* (Laura Pinnavaia, Università degli Studi di Milano)

- “*The cause of liberty still warms my bosom*”: Helen Maria Williams and the lesson of recent history of France (Tiziana Ingravallo, Università di Foggia)
- *Women, travel, and public discourse: Exploring the personal and public dimensions of Lady Sarah Lyttelton's and Lady Elizabeth Grosvenor's travel writings* (Marta Zonca, Università del Piemonte Orientale)
- *Mapping contact: Tracing salon culture in women's travel writing through digital humanities tools* (David George Lyons, Alma Mater Studiorum Università di Bologna)

SEM2. Abstracts

Great news from Ireland at door! A corpus-based discourse analysis of coffee house dialogues and their discursive practices in late 17th and early 18th century England (1662-1712)

Ersilia Incelli (Sapienza Università di Roma) ersilia.incelli@uniroma1.it

Abstract

This research presents a corpus-based study which examines various speech-related written genres from the period 1662-1712, comprising transcribed coffeehouse dialogues, plays, poems, trial proceedings, as well as the written genre of broadsheets and newspapers (The Spectator, The Tatler, The London Spy). The corpora of collected texts reflect the popularity of public coffeehouses in England, renowned as public social spaces where people gathered news and discussed politics, religion, travel, science, poetry, literature, and other matters. Although coffeehouses have been studied from the historical, social theorist point of view (Habermas, 1989), this research adds linguistic insight into the experience of these public spaces, revealing the peculiarity of changing relationships between self and society. Hence, the aim of the study is to explore the linguistic features relevant to the socio-historical and pragmatic aspects of the texts in their sociocultural, communicative contexts, focusing on speech acts, politeness strategies, conversation principles, hedging and assertive utterances. Data retrieved so far reveal a significant tension in the supposed discursive practices. The idea of the coffeehouse as a peaceful place of rational, genteel discourse, egalitarian dialogue and reasoned argumentation (Steele, 1711; Habermas, 1989), contrasts sharply with linguistic evidence from primary sources which reveals coffeehouse conversations as not always civil (*you Rogue*), and orderly (*On this a quarrel soon began*), with unrestrained turn taking and frequent impoliteness (*But parted each to shew his spight,... I'd kick him headlong to the Devil*). This study also looks at recurrent pragma-dialectical features such as: high frequency pronouns *I, thou*; referencing style and discourse markers, e.g. *Pray sir*.

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“The cause of liberty still warms my bosom”: Helen Maria Williams and the lesson of recent history of France

Tiziana Ingravallo (Università di Foggia) tiziana.ingravallo@unifg.it

Abstract

Helen Maria Williams travels to France in 1790 and witnesses the Revolution first hand. She becomes the main correspondent of Revolutionary events for the English audience through her *Letters from France*. She shapes her letters as a travelogue. Her eight volumes take her readers on a tour of important Revolutionary sites and events. Public and private places and the stories they contain organize her reporting. As a woman, a foreigner, and a letter writer she places herself to occupy the role of historical spectator by eyewitness reportage and embedded memoirs. Soon after her arrival in France, she becomes a leading figure in the community of British and French radicals. The main protagonists of the historical

events of the moment liven up conversation in her Paris salon. She considers her experience and her adherence to the revolutionary ideals thoroughly cosmopolitan. She argues: “This was not a time in which the distinctions of country were remembered. It was the triumph of humankind. [...] It required but the common feelings of humanity to become in that moment a citizen of the world.” Her letter-writing mingles radicalism with sentimental accounts in order to make the British readership sympathize with “the sublimer delights of the French Revolution”. For Williams, revolutionary ideas were the result of the cultivation of empathy towards others.

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Mapping contact: Tracing salon culture in women’s travel writing through digital humanities tools

David George Lyons (Alma Mater Studiorum Università di Bologna) david.lyons@unibo.it

Abstract

This paper explores how various digital humanities methods can be utilised to identify, map, and interpret points of cultural contact in women’s travel writing from the mid-eighteenth to mid-nineteenth century. By collecting an ample corpus of female-authored travel texts, the project aims to trace the itineraries and intellectual geographies of women travellers, re-evaluating their contributions to cosmopolitan exchange, cultural mediation, and the performative spaces of Enlightenment sociability.

At the methodological core is a combination of Natural Language Processing (NLP) techniques and geospatial visualisations achieved using Python programming language. Named Entity Recognition (NER), implemented using a comprehensive, large-scale English language processing model developed by spaCy, enables the extraction and quantification of proper nouns—people, places, institutions—which function as proxies for cultural nodes. Supplementary rule-based filtering allows for the identification of key terms related to salon culture, through common nouns such as salon, *conversazione*, tea, drawing room, or again via proper nouns such as names of individual hosts and intellectuals. By cross-referencing entity frequency with contextual usage, the project reveals how salons are not only social spaces but also textual markers of intellectual and affective networks.

In parallel, itineraries are extracted and plotted using Geographic Information System (GIS) tools, allowing the spatial reconstruction of travel routes. This geographical dimension illuminates similarities and divergences in women’s movements across Europe, highlighting how physical travel intersects with imagined geographies (Chard 1999: 9) of nationhood, class, and gender. Further experiments with topic modelling offer a way to visualise thematic issues—such as nationalism, exoticism, or gender performance—as they alter across regions and texts.

Through an approach based on distant reading (Moretti 2005; 2013), this proposal demonstrates how digital tools, rather than flattening historical nuance (Marche 2012), can offer a compelling way to uncover patterns and devices otherwise hindered by the scale or stylistic variability of the corpus. Ultimately, this paper argues that digital methods not only permit us to revisit women’s travel writing with revived analytical rigour, but also reanimate texts long dismissed as anecdotal or eccentric (Mills 1991: 27). Salons, mapped and named, become coordinates in a transnational system of intellectual circulation. What emerges is a dynamic cartography of cultural contact—one that reclaims the epistemic importance of women’s mobility, sociability, and textual self-fashioning.

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Travel writing and well-being: Anna Riggs Miller and Hester Lynch Piozzi as mediators of Italian culture in England

Laura Pinnavaia (Università degli Studi di Milano) laura.pinnavaia@unimi.it

From the 17th century travelling around Europe became a consolidated practice for many, representing an important educational experience, by which young people, and principally men, of the higher ranks of society could acquire the skills of observation and analysis necessary for them to build up the intrepidity and initiative essential for a successful future career. In offering the uninterrupted learning of lessons needed to build the “honnête homme” (Monga 1996:19), it provided cultural well-being.

For this reason, this practice was not limited to the journey but also and above all involved the reporting of it. As travellers began to recount their journeys, these travel books came to constitute a brand-new literary genre in the 17th century, which was to continue right through the 18th century and beyond (see among others Hulme and Youngs 2002, Schaff 2020, Thompson 2015, Youngs 2013).

Italy was knowingly a mandatory point of arrival in these travels. Travellers setting off from England would cross the Channel and visit Flanders, Holland, and France. Arriving in Genoa, Leghorn or Civitavecchia, they would then travel to Florence, Rome, and Naples (and some even to Sicily). On their way back, they would stop at Venice before their homeward journey through Switzerland and Germany (De Seta 1999: 16).

The aim of this research is to examine the role of two female figures within the male-dominated tradition of travel writing. More precisely, by analysing Miller's *Letters from Italy* (1776) and Hester Lynch Piozzi's *Observations and reflections* (1789), we would like to show how both women were important mediators of Italian culture in England. Based on Fairclough's (2003) theory on genre, discourse, and style, we will show how they offer an unexpected sensitivity towards Italian cities and their inhabitants, thus contributing in a new way to travel writing, reinforcing the concept of well-being upon their readers back at home.

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Women, travel, and public discourse: Exploring the personal and public Dimensions of Lady Sarah Lyttelton's and Lady Elizabeth Grosvenor's travel writings

Marta Zonca (Università del Piemonte Orientale) marta.zonca@uniupo.it

Abstract

In 1813-1814 and 1827, respectively, Lady Sarah Lyttelton and Lady Elizabeth Mary Grosvenor (née Leveson-Gower) travelled to northern European countries, documenting their experiences in personal journals and in letters sent to family members. The journeys of these two prominent noblewomen reveal many similarities in their itineraries, the people they met, and the social groups they engaged with. As demonstrated by Lady Lyttelton's intention to share her writings mainly with "that dear circle" of her family – and by the fact that they reached a wider readership through the efforts of her daughter and granddaughter – it is evident that the dissemination of Lyttelton's work was largely a personal endeavour. In contrast, Lady Grosvenor edited her own journal and letters and had them published in 1879, fifty-two years after her journey, an action that proves her willingness to enter the public sphere.

This contribution delves into the ways in which the two women engaged with travel writing, and how their writings reflect broader trends in cultural exchange and the social networks of the period. Indeed, the apparently private and domestic discourse of Lyttelton's and Leveson Gower's writings flows into public discourse revealing interesting networks of patronage and sociability and validating Homi Bhabha's suggestion that domestic spaces "become sites for history's most intricate invasions. In that displacement, the borders between home and world become confused; and uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorientating". This exploration thus aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the multifaceted role of women in the intellectual and cultural exchanges of the nineteenth century, offering insights into the ways travel writing served as both a personal narrative and a public instrument for cross-cultural dialogue.

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