
‘[G]rim London welcomed me back’: Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s Second Foray into Europe

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Abstract

There were two periods in Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s life when she traveled extensively in Europe: as an aspiring reformer and newlywed in 1840-41 and, much later, in the 1880s as an international leader of the woman’s movement and mother of adult children living in England and France. When scholars discuss Stanton’s second period of transatlantic travel, they most often discuss her influence on Europe, as opposed to the other way around. In this paper, I return to the question how Europe shaped Stanton’s career, and specifically, how this second wave of international travel was a catalyst for yet another evolution in her complex intellectual and activist development. Stanton’s memoirs, diary entries, and autobiography from 1882 to 1888 reveal, on one hand, a preoccupation with solitude (especially that of American women), which disturbs Stanton and for which she finds an antidote in a convent in Bordeaux. She describes her extended visit in this all-female community in almost idyllic terms, with engaged, rigorous conversation and mirthful gatherings, an unexpectedly happy description from someone who was such a virulent critic of organized religion. Stanton’s preoccupation with aloneness and community in this episode and others comes to fruition in her late existential masterpiece, “A Solitude of Self,” delivered in 1892. On the other, much more troubling hand, one can see a growing elitism in Stanton’s mindset, fueled in part by her encounters with Europeans of the working classes, that seems to crystallize in her championing of “educated suffrage” once she is back on American soil. Stanton’s advocacy of the idea that it is most important that literate people – male and female – are enfranchised contributed to the rise of literacy tests and other tactics that disenfranchised millions of African Americans during the Jim Crow era. For Stanton, this late exposure to England and France simultaneously spurs her to craft profound philosophical arguments for her support of woman’s rights while it paradoxically (and hypocritically) cements her sense of entitlement as an educated, white American.

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