
Seafaring Wives and Widows: Crossings of Citizenship in American Women's Literature

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Abstract

While nineteenth-century readers devoured masculine seafaring adventure stories, this paper will consider the characters who most captured the literary imaginations of American womenwriters: maritime wives. The Oxford English Dictionary defines a wife "separated from or deserted by her husband" as "a widow bewitched." Focusing on literary representations of nineteenth-century sailors' wives who endured widowhood or prolonged separations from their spouses, the first half of this paper will consider the cultural border-crossings of the widow and the "widow-bewitched" in seafaring communities, particularly in Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs*. Widows (such as Mrs. Todd) and widows-bewitched (symbolized in the tragic Joanna) transgressed boundaries of citizenship available to women in the nineteenth century by autonomously managing households, conducting family businesses, and temporarily "filling in" to handle the civic responsibilities of their husbands at sea. This paper contends that, especially in maritime towns comprised of communities of women, it is widows and near-widows who can achieve, perhaps, the purest form of democratic agency prior to suffrage. When female bodies, however temporarily, replace those of men in the marketplace, the household, and other civic spaces, female citizenship is often imagined in utopic and uniquely democratic ways. The second part of this paper flips the coin to explore the real-life boundary-crossing of women who opted to travel with their husbands rather than face months of separation at home. By reading diaries and letters of wives who took to the sea, such as Mary Brewster, Hannah Rebecca Burgess, and Mary Lawrence, I examine how nineteenth-century American women's citizenship crossed literal and symbolic borders when the domestic moved to the sea. Rewriting what constitutes "home" and "wife," the literature of seafaring wives offers another lens through which we might deepen our understanding of married women's citizenship in the nineteenth century.

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