



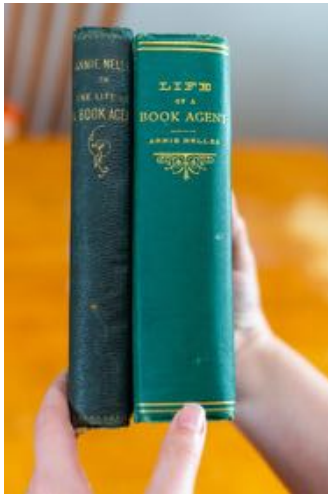
Though opportunities for women were rapidly expanding by the end of the nineteenth century, their presence in public spaces was still a lightning rod for conversations about respectability, making the profession of book agent an especially risky one for women. Canvassing required agents to go door-to-door collecting orders, meaning that female agents regularly interacted with strangers, often men (a circumstance that, if their narratives are to be believed, resulted in an impressive number of romantic propositions). But as book agents, women also had the opportunity to become free agents, independently earning a living and sometimes even representing their own literary works to prospective customers, a 19th century precursor to the self-published eBook.

According to Historian Natalie Marine-Street, women made up only about 2.8% of the total agency workforce in 1890. It is all the more interesting, then, that women are overrepresented in a sub-genre of narratives in which book agents chronicle their travels and exploits. Marine-Street also points out that, because of the public and mobile nature of the profession, it could be a particularly risky one for women - a fact reflected in some of their personal narratives.

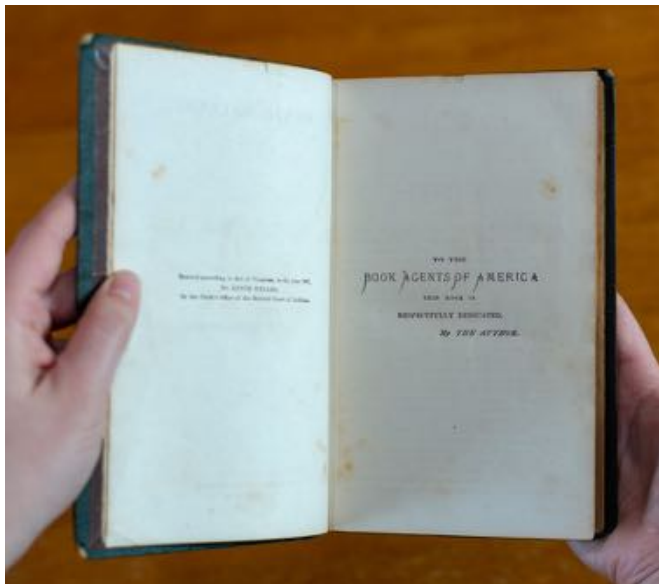


1. Hosmer, Charlotte and Sarah Mendell. *Notes of Travel and Life*. Published for the Authors, New York, 1854.

“What! we book pedlers write a book?” So begins this early agenting narrative, comprised of the letters of the two young ladies who entered the trade before the Civil War. Hosmer and Mendell were explicit in their wish to provide a path for other aspiring female book agents: “[A]s pioneers in a new sphere of labor for our sex, we would make known to them our success, and open to them the new avenue to Industry and Independence.”



2. Nelles, Annie. *Annie Nelles, or The Life of a Book Agent*. First edition. Published by the Author, Cincinnati, 1868.



Annie Nelles spent only a short time as a canvasser for other writers' books before deciding to compose her own account of her life and experiences as a bookseller. More far-ranging than some other narratives of this type, *The Life of a Book Agent* details not only Nelles' experiences selling books by subscription, but also her early life, romantic woes, and family troubles. Nelles dedicates her volume, “To the Book Agents of America.”

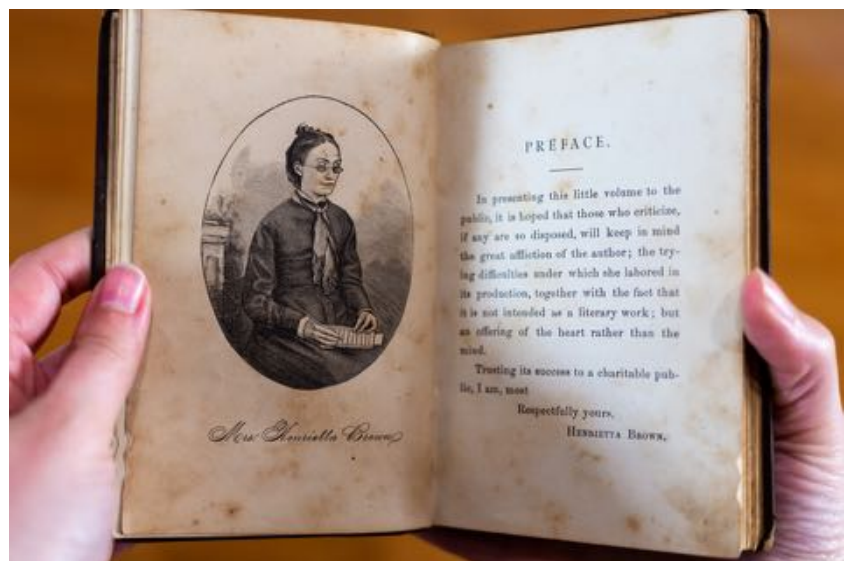
3. Nelles, Annie. *The Life of a Book Agent*, Fifth Edition. Published by the Author, St. Louis, 1892.

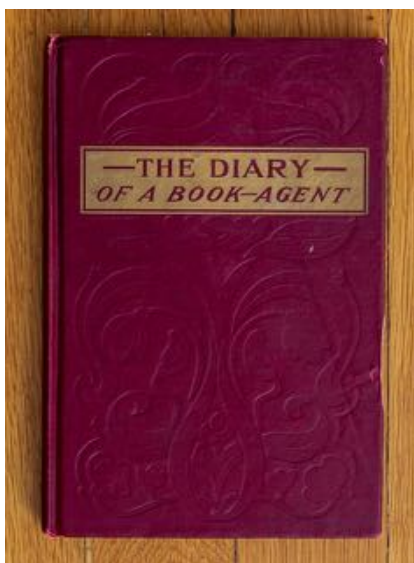
It seems that Nelles couldn't decide whether she wished to write a novel or her autobiography; in the two editions of *The Life of a Book Agent* I have been able to locate, she fluctuates between the two. By 1892, Nelles was no longer claiming to be relating her own story, but instead that of "Minnie Ford," and had fleshed out her narrative with several novelistic flourishes.



4. Brown, Henrietta. *A Blind Lady's Experience in Four Years' Canvassing*. S.n., 1882.

Veterans, widows, and people in similarly difficult social and economic circumstances were commonly recruited into the agenting business, which required little capital and offered a great deal of flexibility. In this small volume, Henrietta Brown shares how she began canvassing after the death of all her near relatives. Most of her sales are made through visits she makes to Methodist congregations and Sunday Schools.

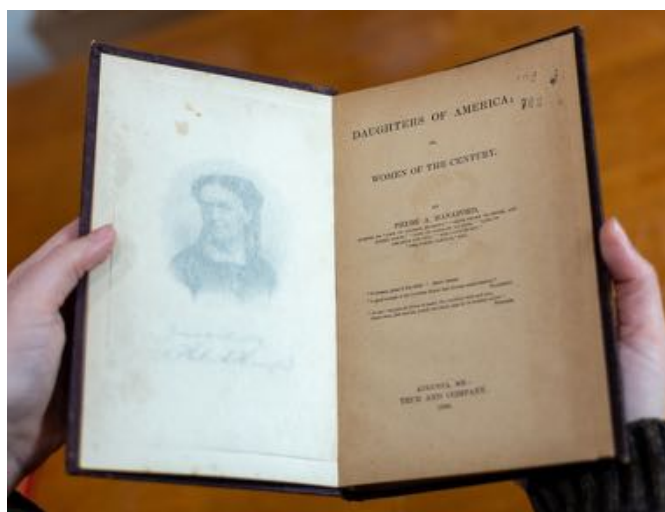




5. Lindley, Elizabeth. *The Diary of a Book-Agent*. Broadway Publishing Co., New York, 1911.

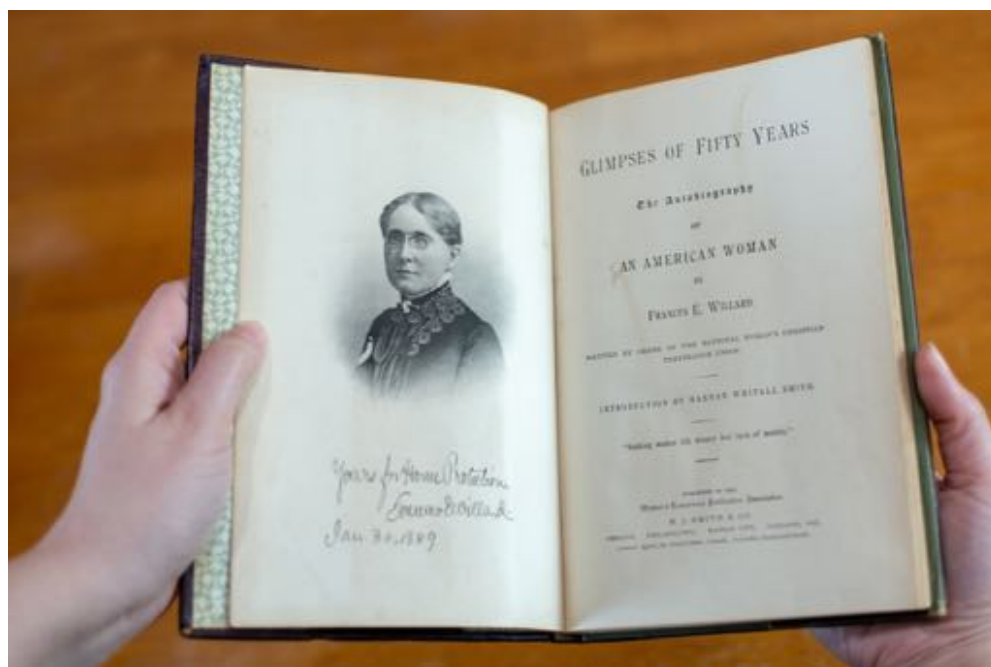
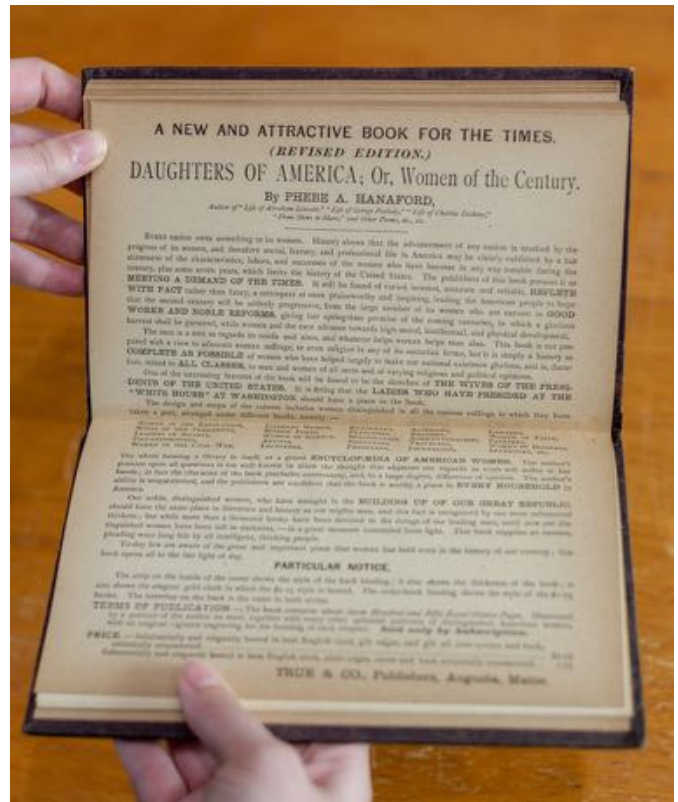
Lindley's account is a short one, and mostly a narrative about her failure to find success as a book agent. Notable for the many inappropriate romantic propositions she receives and her anecdote about being sent to try and sell a set of Mark Twain's works to Samuel Clemens himself. (Conveniently, *Diary* was published a year after his death, ensuring that Twain – a titan of the Gilded Age subscription book business – wasn't around to refute it).

Some of the most elusive and most compelling evidence of women's participation in the subscription market, however, comes not from the books sold there or even first-person accounts, but from the sample books they used to peddle their wares and collect orders. Among the those in my collection are prospectuses I can definitively say were either used by a female agent or are for books specifically focused on, targeted to, or written by women. There remains a great deal of work to be done with such objects, which could give us information about the different clienteles of male and female agents, if female agents were more likely to represent certain kinds of books, and more.

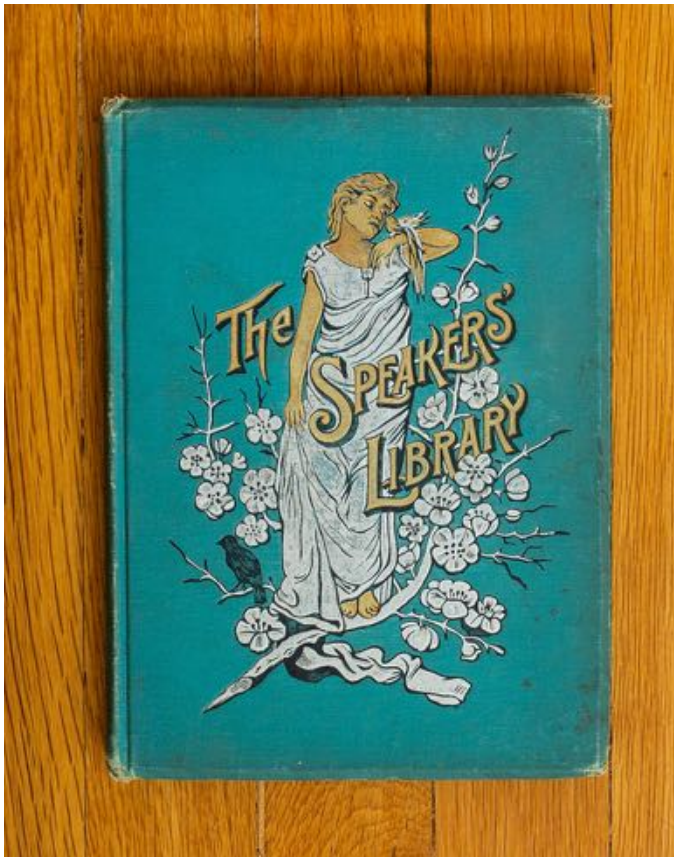


6. Hanaford, Phebe A. *Daughters of America; or, Women of the Century*. Publisher prospectus. True and Company, Augusta, ME, 1883.

Phebe A. Hanaford was a minister, abolitionist, and women's rights advocate who also penned biographies of figures like Charles Dickens and Abraham Lincoln. She was one of the first women ordained in the Universalist Church and officiated at the funerals of both Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony. In this subscription book, Hanaford offers a survey of some of nation's important female figures, including Lydia Maria Child, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Clara Barton, and dozens of others. "To-day few are aware of the great and important place that woman has held even in the history of our country; this book opens all to the fair light of day."



8. Dale, Daphne, ed. *The Speaker's Library: The Latest and Most Popular Literary Gems for Public and Parlour Entertainment*. Publisher prospectus. Elliott & Beezley, Chicago, 1891.



This prospectus is notable primarily for two character testimonies written in support of the agent, Mrs. Rachel Styles. Book agents in the late 19th century could be figures of public distrust, and popular stereotypes often depicted them as swindlers to be avoided. Testimonies from respected community members bolstered faith in an agent's honesty and could help them convince potential customers to buy.

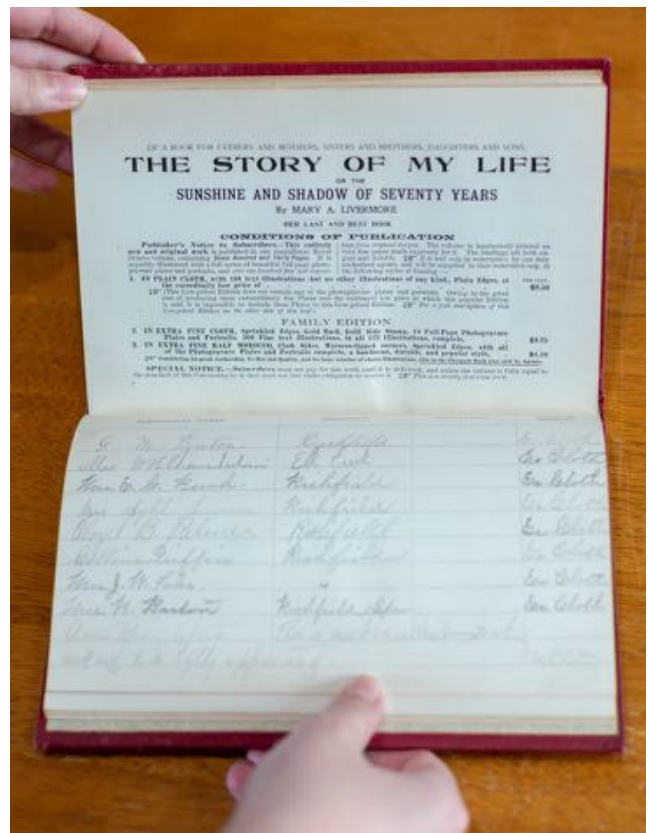
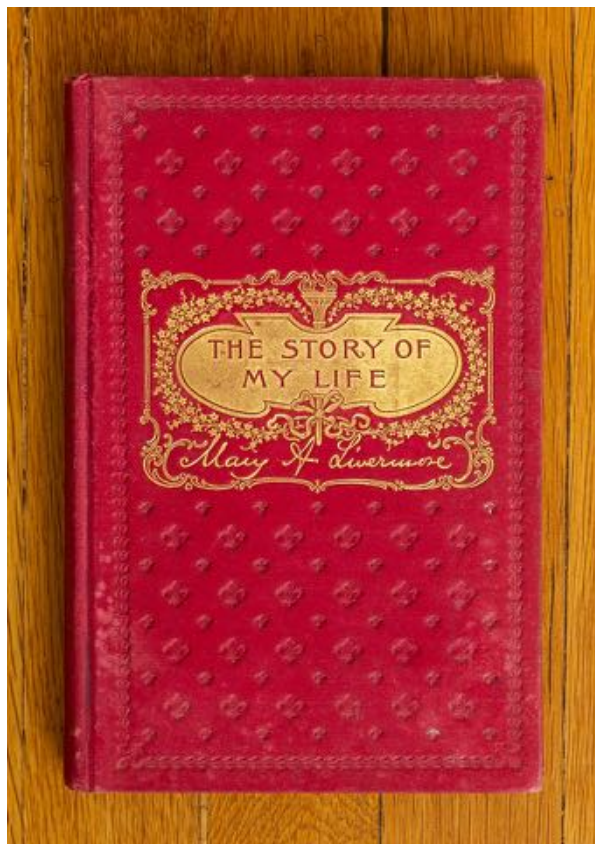
"I hereby commend Mrs. Rachel Styles to the confidence of the people as a reliable person to solicit subscriptions for her book. 'The Speaker's Library' contains many excellent selections both for parlor and public reading. It cannot fail to give much pleasure to the reader. – D.H. Hanaburgh, Pastor of Clinton Ave. M.E. Church."

"I hereby recommend to [?] [?] Mrs. Styles as reliable person to solicit subscription for this book which contains excellent selections for public and parlor entertainment and will give much pleasure to the reader. – H. Humphrey."



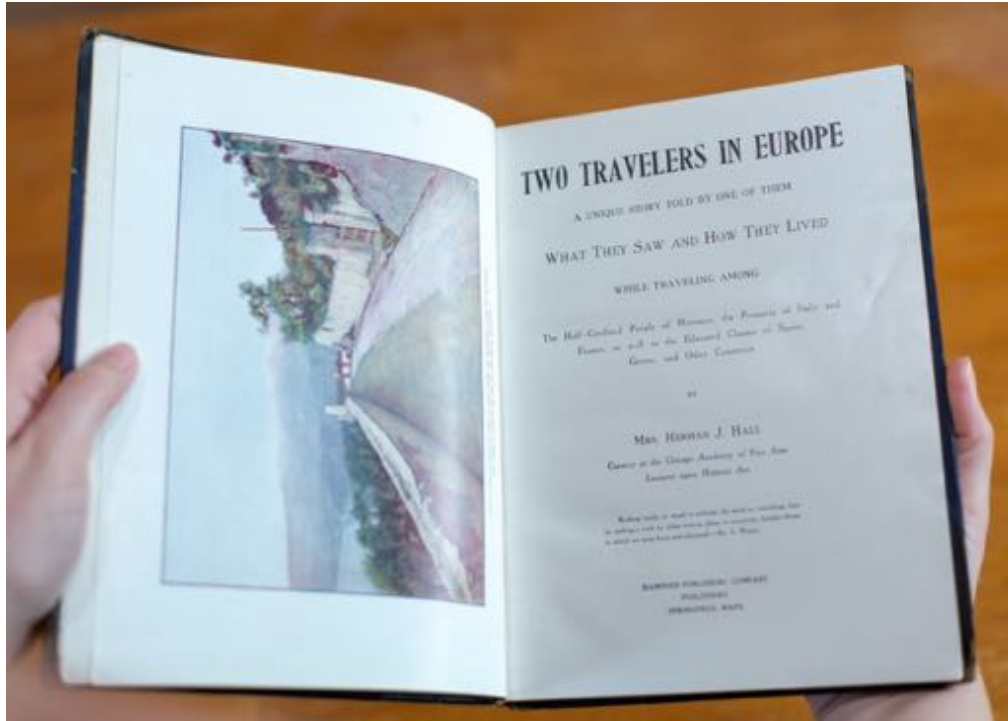
9. Rayne, Martha Louise. *What Can a Woman Do; or, Her Position in the Business and Literary World*. Publisher prospectus. The Eagle Publishing Co., Petersburg, N.Y., 1893.

In this volume, prolific journalist M.L. Raynes surveys the rapidly expanding world of professional opportunities for women, including in the fields of journalism, law, medicine, stenography, bee keeping, dressmaking, and more. Of special interest are printed testimonies attesting to the work's value. Sylvester Scovil, President of University of Wooster, records this dubious high praise: "There need no more be any superfluous women, even in Massachusetts." Interestingly, canvassing is one of the professions Raynes surveys, advising women who buy this book on how to become booksellers themselves.

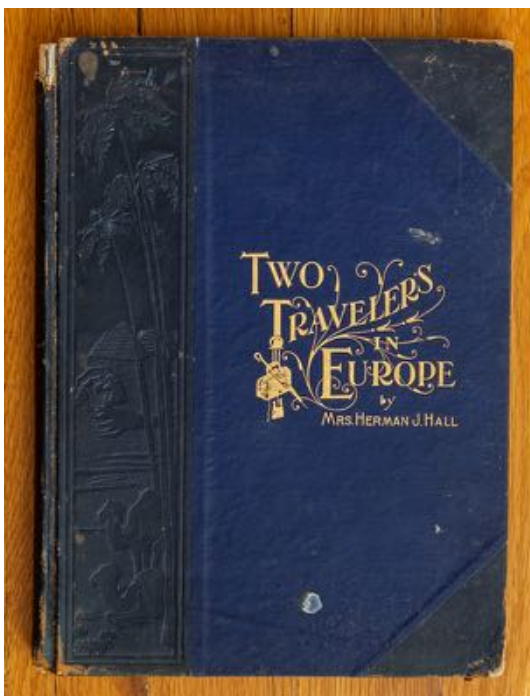


10. Livermore, Mary A. *The Story of My Life, or The Sunshine and Shadow of Seventy Years*. Publisher prospectus. A.D. Worthington & Co., Hartford, 1897.

Suffragettes seemed to have found an ally in the subscription book business – Mary A. Livermore was yet another women’s rights activists who found success selling the story of her life there. Livermore was a journalist, Civil War nurse, and president of the American Woman Suffrage Association. A printed endorsement from subscriber Annie Marie Styes notes, “This is most excellent work and [sure] to be highly appreciated.” This copy contains 9 orders, 6 from women.



11. Hall, Mrs. Herman J. *Two Travelers in Europe; A Unique Story Told by One of Them; What They Saw and How They Lived While Traveling Among the Half-Civilized People of Morocco, the Peasants of Italy and France, as well as the Educated Classes of Spain, Greece, and Other Countries.* Publisher Prospectus. Hampden Publishing Company, Springfield, MA, 1898.



Promotional material assures male customers that this travelogue is “NOT FOR WOMEN ALONE BUT FOR MEN!” The itinerant nature of the subscription business makes the popularity of travel narratives on this market all the more striking. The title of this work also suggests the racist and colonial tendencies intrinsic to late 19th century white American femininity.