

“What is this Vassar?”: Elizabeth Champney’s Use of the College-Educated Woman as a Role Model for American Girls of the 1880s and 90s

Elizabeth Champney graduated from Vassar in 1869, a member of the college’s second class. At the time, higher education for women was considered a bold “experiment,” and Vassar was the first American college to offer women an education equal in rigor to a man’s. After traveling extensively, Champney began to write a series for girls about the foreign adventures of college women, beginning with *Three Vassar Girls Abroad* in 1883. Though the point of the books was to introduce the historical sites, architecture, and culture of specific countries, they take as their protagonists independent, artistic, and intelligent young women who often decline the assistance of gentlemen, insist that marriage is not the apex of a woman’s life, and seek philanthropic work. As Barbara quips, “There are two kinds of girls, girls who flirt and girls who go to Vassar College” (*Abroad* 40). Champney pokes fun at Madeleine’s aunt who laments she will be an old maid, “as though this were the crowning misfortune which could ever befall a woman” (*Home* 19). The girls are often stubbornly set against the gender stereotypes of their elders and tend to be resourceful in escaping them; when a chaperone seems necessary, Elsie dresses in a “rusty crepe veil” (*Tyrol* 35). Though the girls do marry, it is because Champney also must break the stereotype that the college-educated woman is unsuited for matrimony. While the feminism of the books is somewhat limited, the series helped inspire the next generation of American girls to travel, to seek activist agendas, and to pursue a college education.