A delightful thought has struck me; it has positively illumined the blank of existence! Why should I not follow in the glowing footsteps of 'Eöthen' [a book of Middle Eastern travel]? Why should I not bask in the rays of Eastern suns, and steep my drooping spirits in the reviving influences of their magical mirages? The idea was an inspiration! I instantly rang for my faithful Minikin [the author’s best friend], and bade her prepare for Eastern travel at the shortest notice. I shall not dread the wrench from old associations; familiar faces can make any land a home. Dear little Bijou [her dog]! Neither shall you be left behind.¹

—Lady Dufferin, “An Unprotected Female in the East” (1863)

So at the end of our journey, we return to the Honorable Miss Impulsia Gushington, the heroine of Harper’s New Monthly Magazine’s parody of women’s solo travel, whom we met in the introduction on her runaway camel. Confiding her impulsive decision to travel to the pages of her journal (which well-meaning friends encourage her to publish on her return), the fictional Impulsia provides a stark contrast to the thoughtful, competent, ragged-edge travelers we have met in Traveling Economies. Ridiculous from the start, Impulsia imagines herself a romantic travel heroine, and indulges herself not just with the trip itself, but with bringing her dog along with her mountains of luggage. In Cairo, Bijou succumbs to the “ferocious nature of the indigenous dogs,” his “ears and tail alone remain[ing] to tell [the] terrible story” to his distraught mistress (439). Bijou’s death means that Impulsia is truly traveling alone, without “the only link between [her] and home,” because her friend and companion, Minikin, abandons her as soon as their steamer has landed at the first Eastern port, Alexandria, the prospect of riding a donkey having frightened Minikin straight back home (438). Minikin’s desertion and Bijou’s death are but the beginning of Impulsia’s travel misadventures—handsome but thieving guides; obnoxious, dishonest, and drunken traveling companions; locals who
literally steal the dress off her back; runaway camels; confidence men and women posing as relatives; and gold-digging suitors all get the better of the hopelessly romantic and unfailingly inexperienced Impulsia. Richly illustrated, Impulsia’s foibles are even more comic when events like her runaway camel ride are caricatured with flying dress and desperate grasping to keep hold of the saddle. The effect is a vivid portrait of women’s traveling incompetence; Impulsia’s repeated victimization emphasizes the myriad hazards that threatened traveling women and spotlights the “weaker” sex’s inability to successfully negotiate the obstacle course of travel. Readers are invited to laugh out loud at Impulsia’s pretensions to travel and independence. Expounding about the “freedom” and “charm” of travel, Impulsia follows her romantic notions to disastrous effect. What is being mocked here is tourist literature, with its “gushing,” sentimental, romantic language that tries to evoke for both the tourist and the reader the flood of emotions that foreign sites and experiences are supposed to produce. Following a standard route through a standard set of places and “adventures,” tourist authors have to make their account of the same places compelling for readers who have already read about them. Parodies like the one in Harper’s show how by 1863 there was already an avalanche of women’s tourist writing and how making fun of it convinced audiences that tourist accounts were all the women’s travel writing there was. That avalanche effectively buried the cultural criticism and political commentary found in the travel narratives of the women studied in Traveling Economies.

Also erased were the successful and competent travels of earlier women. The text and illustration of Impulsia’s wild camel ride emphasize the vulnerability and out-of-placeness of her traveling female body. Similar (although not ridiculous or parodic) scenes of physical danger found in the travel writing of Amy Morris Bradley, Nancy Prince, and Frances Wright highlight the risks of travel that they successfully survived—be they cliff-side mule rides, threatened beating and enslavement by Southern slaveholders, or a near tumble down a waterfall. A crucial missing element of Impulsia’s narrative is the inclusion of corresponding scenes of strength and competence designed to show readers that women are more than able to meet the challenges of travel. Travel-savvy Anne Royall would never have been so easily parted from her luggage (not to mention her dress!), and indomitable Mary Seacole would have handled the runaway camel ride as easily as she dodged bullets on the Crimean battlefront. Julia Archibald Holmes would have
found her bloomer much more suited to riding her camel astride, and Mary Ann Shadd Cary would have used a trip on the Nile to evaluate possible emigration to Africa and the column inches of Harper’s to bring her discussions of black nationalism to a wider audience.

So why, when there were such gripping stories of women’s travel to tell, did Harper’s spend twenty pages mocking the putative idiocy of women travelers in general and Impulsia Gushington in particular? The lampooning of suffragettes and women wearing bloomers (discussed in chapter 5) follows a similar pattern to the Harper’s parody of women travelers. Anxiety about women’s increasing participation in public life fueled these kinds of mocking parodies. It was not women’s silliness but women travelers’ independence and mobility that was the problem. The venom of the parody reveals the deep cultural fear about how to keep women at home. As we have seen again and again in Traveling Economies, when women traveled and wrote, they often challenged social power structures and worked to change the places they visited and the places from which they started. In fact, antebellum women travelers were not ridiculous Impulsias who traveled on a whim and were completely unprepared for their journeys. Neither were they Gushingtons who merely babbled effusively about pyramids, camels, and bargains to be had at local bazaars. The women travel authors featured in Traveling Economies carefully weighed the risks and rewards of travel and set forth not out of boredom, but for a range of reasons including work, racism, and reform efforts. They are deliberate authors who craft careful representations of themselves, their destinations, and the “homes” they leave behind. Telling their stories would have made much better copy for Harper’s and will make much better theories of women’s writing and experience for students and scholars today.