

NINETEENTH CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

ISSUE 15.3 (WINTER 2019)

Sarah Bilston. *The Promise of the Suburbs: A Victorian History in Literature and Culture*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2019. 282pp.

Reviewed by Anne Humpherys, The Graduate Center City, University of New York

<1>This important book has two main objectives: one, to challenge the conventional and persistent negative representations of the suburbs in the long nineteenth century, and two, to demonstrate in detail the role women played in making the suburbs and more importantly the role the suburbs played in making modern women of their female inhabitants. Bilston suggests that the negative views of the suburbs were constructed by popular novels and other contemporary written sources to critique the emerging middle class as well as to dismiss the value of women's work. She substitutes an argument "for suburbia's generative capacities[.] . . . for women in particular, the suburbs were not simply places of tedium, cultural aridity, and baffling anonymity—[but rather, the suburban] landscapes, ways of life, and problems produced new characters, new problems, and new possibilities, facilitating, even requiring, new plots." (181) These gave women who lived in the suburbs many opportunities for "created self-expression and enabled new communities formed around shared interests rather than birth networks." (3)

<2>In the course of establishing this new view of the suburbs, Bilston introduces many facts and observations that are enlightening, even surprising. For example, most of the semi-detached and row houses, built by a variety of builders whose main goal was to make as much money from their constructions as possible, were rented, many on short-term leases. As a result, a common narrative of the suburbs is one of "moving," in one trope, changing house and having to come to know a different neighborhood, and in another what happens when a stranger moves to the suburbs, frequently as a lodger, and both suburbanite and stranger must make what they can of each other, usually involving misunderstandings.

<3>Bilston makes her argument and marshals her extensive research in an introduction, followed by seven chapters tracing developments and themes in chronological order spanning the whole of the century followed by a brief conclusion. Included in this broad sweep of time and content are a wide range of historical, sociological, and literary texts, a number by women writers, many of which will likely be unfamiliar. The result is a wealth of new knowledge about the building of the suburbs, the nature of their inhabitants, and their opening up new opportunities for middle-class women, the last being the most important part of the argument.

<4>The first three chapters set the scene beginning with John Claudius Loudon, a writer optimistic about the suburbs in the 1830s and 1840s, particularly the opportunities for artistic gardening and the development of public parks, and he expected women to be part of these developments. But by the 1850s, his vision has changed to one more in tune with conventional thought. Now the suburban house is seen as a refuge for men away from the pressures of work and he drops his celebration of the opportunities for women in the suburbs.

<5>Chapter Two traces the development of the ultimately widely held negative stereotype of the suburbs from the 1820s to the 1850s. Bilson focuses on works by Edward Bulwer-Lytton, George Augustus Sala, and a few others. Through astute readings of these texts, she arrives at one of her main points: “the stereotyping of suburbia in the early to mid-Victorian years was one way of attempting to limit the increasing cultural force of the middle classes: the stultifying suburb was a stereotype employed in the service of an aristocratic ideology at a time of upper-class retreat” (51).

<6>The third chapter, “Plotting the Suburbs: Popular Fiction and Common Knowledge, 1850s-1870s” demonstrates how negative stereotypes of suburbia solidified. It includes substantial discussions of Wilkie Collins’s *Basil* (1852), Emily Eden’s *Semi-Detached House* (1860), and Bertha Buxton’s *Great Grenfell Gardens* (1879). There is a repetition of stereotypes in many of the fictional plots—in one a male protagonist cannot read the suburban inhabitants and is taken advantage of, and in another, a woman’s abilities to function in the suburban world is rewarded and seems in the end to balance both work and home.

<7>In the next two chapters, Bilston turns to specific positive aspects of a woman’s life in the suburbs, namely home decoration and gardening. She shows “how advice texts responded to, and reframed what suburbia could offer women—how the very problems of the suburbs gave women purpose” (138). Chapter Four, “Art at Home,” looks at women’s advice literature on home decorating (especially books by Jane Ellen Panton), which enabled women, through decorating the interiors of their frequently poorly built houses, to have fulfilling and even professional work lives. The chapter includes an interesting discussion of the Queen Anne Revival in architecture and its relation to the woman’s movement, and it concludes on the development of the profession of interior designer.

<8>In the next chapter, “Women and the Suburban Garden,” Bilston analyzes a number of books and articles, some by women, on gardening. Suburban gardening enabled women to use plants and planned gardens in aesthetic experiments and gardening further provided women chances not only to do actual labor in the garden, but also to conceive artistic projects, and, in shopping for plants and other gardening products, to achieve a kind of personal freedom and connections with others. The garden became more than an extension of earlier ideas of the garden as myth but now as “an occupation that benefits from access to the offerings of the market—tools and design books . . . scientific treatises, forced bulbs and imported annuals” (122). The chapter ends with an extensive analysis of the conflict of wild and formal gardening at the *fin de siècle* and its connection to the New Woman movement.

<9>Then, in Chapter Six, Bilston turns back to the role of suburban fiction. She does so through a specific case study, devoting most of the chapter to Mary Elizabeth Braddon, who not only lived in the suburbs, but set her novels in them, and whose life and works “negotiate . . . between stereotypes of suburbia and what different suburban areas offered contemporary women” (17). This concentration on Braddon, who was critical of the suburbs but also discriminated between those that were Dulham and those—especially Camberwell and Richmond—that provided a counter narrative of opportunity. Bilston discusses Braddon’s life in the suburbs and a good number of her novels and short stories. But many readers will be interested in her reading of Braddon’s best-known work canonized *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862) as a suburban novel, one not only set in the suburbs but also in some sense about the suburbs. If one looks at the locations of the action of the novel, we see the way the suburbs allow Helen Talboys to climb the social ladder and how her fall, but also the fall of Audley Court into ruin, solidifies the triumph of the suburban class as represented by Flora and Clara. The ending of the novel is conservative, however, as all Braddon’s novels are. Her heroines stay in suburbia and their reward is a good suburban home and not a rewarding profession.

<10>Chapter Seven, focusing on the last decades of the century, constructs the continuing dialogue about the suburbs through analysis of two suburban women novelists and journalists, Jane Ellen Panton (also discussed in Chapter 4) and Julia Frankau and the communities they moved among. Both were at their height in 1889. Though mainly opposed in their evaluation of suburbia (Panton positive and Frankau negative), both “found literary inspiration and practical aid” in them (17). Moreover, they both used “multiple writerly identities” (195) which allowed both to comment on the contradictions of suburbia.

<11>The “Conclusions: Stepping Off the Threshold” moves from the specifics of the previous Chapters out into larger generalizations mainly about the writing about suburbia late in the nineteenth century and into the next one. She mentions the development of the garden suburb, and the way the male cosmopolitan writers consistently expressed horror of suburbia (T.W.H Crosland, George Gissing, Conan Doyle, Arnold Bennett, Jerome K. Jerome, and Keble Howard). Then she juxtaposes that with “another way of speaking of suburbia” (211) which has not been heard very well until now. “Time and again, we find women writers deeply committed to the topic of what constituted ‘the best’ and emphatic that the suburban home is in fact the space in which ‘the best’ can be most actively pursued” (212). She suggests that other large cities in the U.K. would have similar stories to tell about their suburbias and that the loosening of class differences enabled women all over to work on *self*-culture. She closes the chapter in a discussion of the “first-ever exhibition of women’s professional achievements, held in the spring of 1885 . . . in the affluent Bristol suburb of Clifton, the Loan Exhibition of Women’s Industries” (216).

<12>*The Promise of the Suburbs* is a book every Victorianist should know. It is well-written, thoroughly researched, and full of new insights both into the history of the nineteenth century suburbs and the lives of the women who lived and worked there. Most

important, it can change the way we think of the agency of women in the second half of the nineteenth century.