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Making the *Flâneuse* Visible?
Women and the City in the Novels of George Gissing

George Gissing, the Working Woman and Urban Culture. Emma Liggins. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006. 193 pp.

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<1>In the course of the past few years there has been a mini renaissance in research and publications on the works of the late-nineteenth century novelist, George Gissing. Three new collections of essays, *Gissing and the City: Cultural Crisis and the Making of Books in Late-Victorian England* (2005), *George Gissing: Voices of the Unclassed* (2005) and *A Garland for Gissing* (2001) have emerged from lively international conferences, whilst Simon James's book-length study, *Unsettled Accounts: Money and Narrative in the Novels of George Gissing* appeared in 2003. Scanning the assorted contents of the edited collections, one finds that to a large extent this renewed interest has been generated by feminist scholarship. From the late 1980s to the mid 1990s Janet Wolff, Elizabeth Wilson, and Judith Walkowitz (among others) provided illuminating interdisciplinary investigations into the question of women's place in the city, and thus in narratives of modernity, at the end of the nineteenth century. In the wake of such work arose a new interest in the body of so-called New Woman fiction of the 1880s and 1890s: interest which was not solely directed at these texts' contributions to the "woman question" of the period, but also at the manner in which the novelty of the protagonists was intertwined with their distinctive urban identity. Gissing, a pre-eminently urban novelist, ever-preoccupied by the stories of those on the margins, has left a rich body of work in which scholars can pursue the fleeting figure of the New Woman through the streets of the modern metropolis in order to develop work in this area.

<2>Emma Liggins's comprehensive study is a valuable contribution both to the growing body of work on Gissing, and, perhaps more significantly, to current debate on women, modernity, and the city at the turn of the last century. By examining the majority of Gissing's novels and several of his short stories in some detail, Liggins redresses the balance of previous research which has tended to focus on his depiction of middle-class women in *The Odd Women* (1893) and *New Grub Street* (1891). Liggins, by contrast, devotes two chapters to representations of working women never embraced by the necessarily middle-class category of the New Woman: the prostitutes and the working-class female labourers of London's East End who populate his earlier novels. Simply by giving such space to the shaping forces of class as well as gender, Liggins makes an important intervention in current scholarship on women and urban life in the

cultural history of the late nineteenth century. Liggins outlines the object of her study as a comparison of the 'representations of working women in Gissing's fiction and in investigatory discourse' in order to "argue the case for Gissing as a progressive writer"(x; xvii). But these stated aims, smacking of character study, belie the sophistication and range of the work as a whole.

<3>Liggins's introduction provides a meticulous account of critical debate on the existence and identity of the female *flâneur* (or *flâneuse*) in the nineteenth century; the urban stroller, tasting the diverse pleasures of the city as one of the crowd, but remaining always somehow distinct and alienated from it. The significance of this figure, as numerous studies building on Walter Benjamin's foundational reading of Baudelaire's Paris remind us, is that the *flâneur* is the archetype of modernity. If there is no female equivalent, no *flâneuse*, to be found wandering free in the nineteenth-century city streets then, it seems, women were necessarily estranged from modernity itself from the outset. Liggins work is a welcome attempt to "historicize the *flâneuse*" by reading Gissing's fiction (and a wealth of under-read fictional works by other writers) against contemporary journalism and periodical literature charting women's work and the "woman question" in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (xxx). Liggins's commitment to reading the beyond the fictional texts results in an impressive range of source material and she is careful to avoid reducing the novels to mere reflections of the "reality" revealed by social investigators like Gissing's good friend Clara Collet. One of the book's most striking conclusions–but one that is rather too modestly packed away amid other material–is that Gissing's representations of working women of all classes anticipate many of the sociological concerns apparent in studies published in the early twentieth century, after the author's death. There is a subtle sense here of the relative autonomy of literature and its ability to articulate developments, like same-sex relationships, celibacy, and married women's work, that could not be registered as general social phenomena in the late nineteenth century.

<4>As Liggins suggests, "if we are to unearth the experience of the woman of the crowd…surely the working-class woman, reliant on her mobility, would qualify as a prime contender," and her first chapter thus turns to the most anathematized of working women: the lower-class prostitute. Here, as in the next chapter on the East End work-girl, Liggins explores the similarities and differences between Gissing's early works and those of the French naturalist novelists, Emile Zola and Guy de Maupassant. Liggins argues that the depictions of prostitutes in *Workers in the Dawn* (1880) and *The Unclassed* (1884; 1895), unlike the works of Zola, defer to the conservative tastes of the British reading public at the time. Nevertheless, Liggins unpicks an ambivalent admiration for certain aspects of such women's freedom in these novels and provides a deft reading of Gissing's implied criticism of philanthropic attempts to "rescue" fallen women from the streets. The second chapter, "Industrious, Independent Women" explores Gissing's prescient "recognition of alternative models of working-class femininity" (31). Liggins argues that Gissing questions the stereotype of the brash factory-girl in *Thyrza* (1887), *Demos* (1886), and *The Nether World* (1889). Liggins suggests that unlike Arthur Morrison and Margaret Harkness, two contemporary naturalist novelists of East End life, Gissing subverts the pessimism associated with the genre to provide a sense of possible future community for working-class women.

<5>The final three chapters of Liggins's study move on to the rather more familiar territory of Gissing's depiction of middle-class working women, a subject that captured the author's attention from the early 1890s. Chapter Three takes female professionalism as its theme and brings together an exhaustive range of contemporary journalism and fiction: *The Odd Women* (1893), *New Grub Street* (1891), *Denzil Quarrier* (1892), and *Isabel Clarendon* (1886) are contrasted with five New Woman novels and other non-fiction sources. Liggins's potentially interesting argument that Gissing is less insistent on marriage as woman's ultimate fulfilment than contemporary women writers like George Paston [Emily Morse Symonds] is rather muted by the sheer array of material condensed into this section. Liggins discussion of the representation of white-collar women workers in the next chapter is, however, much more cogent and captures the pleasures, excitements and dangers of the city for the shop-girl, typewriter and woman office worker in *The Odd Women* and *Eve's Ransom* (1895). The assertion that Gissing uses these types of lower middle-class women workers to provide "alternative accounts of…modernity and liberation" is thoroughly convincing and wrought through some fine close reading (102).

<6>In her last chapter, "From Bachelor Girl to Working Mother," Liggins returns to the spatialization of the city and tracks the parallel movement of middle-class women from centre to suburb and from celibacy to motherhood in *In the Year of Jubilee* (1894) and *The Whirlpool* (1897). Charting the free movement of the female protagonists of these novels through the city crowds and in the heterosocial space of the railway carriage, Liggins returns to the critical debate that began the book. Marriage and a move to suburbia can no longer serve as satisfactory plot closure in these late novels, which engage with the heroine's need to be at the heart of modern city life, even after motherhood. Gissing's fiction, Liggins concludes, ambivalent as it may appear about female emancipation, '*insists* on middle-class women's place in the capital' (158). This revision of the truisms of Gissing's anti-feminism and a general cultural resistance to women's free movement in urban space in the late nineteenth century is much needed. Although Liggins's range of material is admirable, a more confident insistence on the significance of her contribution to critical debate, even at the cost of breadth, would have ensured wider recognition of the value of her work.