‘Citizens of London?’ Working Women, Leisure and Urban Space in Gissing’s 1880s Fiction

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In a letter to his sister Ellen in 1885, during a period of intensive teaching and writing, Gissing complained, ‘I no longer feel like a citizen of London. Libraries, book-shops, museums, theatres, all are strange to me – even the very streets’ (Letters, 2, 1991, p. 285). Lacking both the time and the money to participate fully in urban culture, his position mirrors that of a dominant figure from 1880s fiction, the East-End work-girl frustrated by her limited and controlled access to public space. In her feminist account of women’s historical exclusion from citizenship, Ruth Lister has argued that ‘women enter public space as embodied individuals...if women cannot move or act freely in the public sphere...then their ability to act as citizens is curtailed’ (Lister, 1997, pp. 71, 113). Gissing’s portrayal of female alcoholism and women’s occupation of public houses demonstrates that the threat of female sexuality tends to disqualify women from citizenship, though he also protests against their ‘restricted access to the public life of the city’ (Parsons, 2000, p. 5). In this chapter, I will explore his participation in current debates about working-class leisure, the constraints on women’s behaviour in public houses and on Bank Holiday excursions. Whilst ostensibly denouncing working-class amusement as vulgar and excessive, the 1880s novels also reveal his sympathies with the work-girl’s right to leisure.

Debates about working-class leisure

In an article on ‘The Amusements of the People’ in the Contemporary Review in 1884, the novelist Walter Besant’s list of amusements included ‘the theatre, the music-hall, the public house, the Sunday excursion’ plus parks and tea-gardens, with the public house functioning as the workman’s equivalent of the gentleman’s club because ‘his employers have found him no better place and no better amusement’ (1884, pp. 345, 344). Despite confessing his ignorance of women’s amusements, Besant recognises that
their participation in leisure is generally limited, observing of married mothers, 'one does not see how they can get any holiday or recreation at all'. His fictional manifesto for a People's Palace, *All Sorts and Conditions of Men* (1882) is typical of the plots of the new East-End fiction addressing both the difficulties of and the necessity for enticing the workers into such alternative spaces as clubs, lecture rooms and libraries. The middle-class proviso that 'the only condition of admission [to the Palace] will be good behaviour, with exclusion as a penalty' (p. 71) can only be achieved by downplaying the question of whether alcohol would be served, an issue which divided reformers before the opening of the actual Palace in the Mile End Road in 1887 (Small, 1997, p. xxii). As Besant noted in his 1897 Preface, the novel satisfied popular demands in 'catch[ing] and represent[ing] the ideas of the day', the need for 'recreation time' and the improvement of public spaces to enjoy it. It is interesting to note that Gissing objected to being bracketed with Besant as a 'philanthropic novelist' in an 1888 review by Edith Sichel (*Letters*, 4, p. 75). Sichel knowingly perceived Gissing's pessimistic narratives of the failures of philanthropy as a more authentic vision of the East End, an important modification to Besant's 'bowdlerised Whitechapel' (Coustillas and Partridge, 1973, pp. 114, 126).

Feminist social investigators expressed their concern that women's occupation of the streets led to their frequenting 'the music hall, the cheap theatres, the gin-palaces, the dancing saloons and the wine shop', spaces associated primarily with drinking and casual sexuality (Stanley, 1889, p. 76). In Gissing's fiction men's awareness of the dangers of urban culture for women are shown in the recurring scenes in which fathers, brothers and husbands join policemen in patrolling the streets, subjecting women to various forms of street harassment. In his first novel *Workers in the Dawn* (1880) Arthur Golding waits for hours outside Carrie Mitchell's lodgings for her return from a music hall because 'it was agony to him to think of her walking about the streets without his company and protection' (Gissing, 1880, Vol. 2, p. 340). In her 1885 discussion of how to prevent prostitution, Mary Jeune stressed that girls needed to be 'controlled and supervised' on public holidays and after work, claiming that 'very much is being done in England to guard young women... from the perils of our streets at night' (Jeune, 1885, p. 348). Concerns about the drunken revelry of the working classes on Bank Holiday excursions surfaced in a number of accounts. An article on the need to provide forms of 'legitimate and desirable pleasure' for young working women confirmed the 'well-known' fact that 'public holidays are a terrible danger to girls...In 1882, in one London police-court there were 240 convictions of women against 301 of men' (Greville, 1884, p. 22). It also reinforced the point that more respectable spaces tended to be 'inaccessible to women and children', encouraging 'the fatal habit of frequenting public-houses' (Greville, 1884, p. 23).