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### **Charlotte Smith's Eighteenth-Century Sensory Suburbs**

In the late eighteenth century, London was rapidly expanding outwards. The aristocratic, gentry, and merchant classes alike built villas in London's *campagna*; once rural villages like Clapham and Islington expanded, and ribbon development sprung up on the roads leading out of the metropolis. The length of time spent in these homes varied as did the reasons for having them.<sup>1</sup> Charlotte Smith's *Emmeline* (1788) and *Celestina* (1791) showcase the multiplicity of the period's suburban spaces: for example, Mrs. Ashwood's house on Clapham Common showcases her wealth and self in a bid to catch a rich City husband, while the merchant's daughter, Sophy Elphinstone, finds solace in a little house near Richmond and later in the shabby genteel setting of a small house on the road to Islington. Then there are the aristocratic women I consider here – Lady Frances and Lady Adelina – one of whom has a villa near Richmond for dissipation and conspicuous consumption, while the other has lodgings in Highgate for rest and recuperation with close friends.

In order to define suburban space, I need to consider geographical position as well as how the occupant uses, conceives of, and feels about space. The spaces listed above are suburban in their geographical position at about ten miles or less from the city, allowing, if desired, for daily movement between the suburban home and the metropolis. In this discussion, references to London are always to the West End; at the time, as in these novels, London, or "town," was generally the West End for the affluent. In terms of experiential space, the narrative is particularly focused on how Lady Frances' and Lady Adelina's spatial experiences are mediated through their senses, specifically through their emotional

engagement with space. The acquisition of a London-adjacent home ideally reflects a retreat from the city, allowing for an opportunity to recapture or stake out an emotionally rehabilitating idyll and to cultivate strong emotional bonds with family and intimate friends; this is Lady Adelina's model which I call the "suburban retreat." Meanwhile, most characters, including Lady Frances, ostensibly import the corrupted feelings of urban fashion and dissipation into London's environs, creating what I label "urbanized suburbs." Both of these models describe suburban spaces in that they are emotionally constructed in relation to the city, whether this is a relationship of rejection or emulation. Smith portrays areas that are "too" rural or "too" urban as dangerous emotional spaces; they are characterized by out-of-control sensations bordering on Gothic terror and fear. It is between these urban-rural poles both geographically and emotionally that women can potentially create more balanced, empowering, and healthy suburban spaces. This discussion thereby highlights how Smith's fiction critiques women's social, physical, and emotional vulnerability across a range of spaces, looking specifically at the changing built environment and social spaces of London's fringes, one of the first pieces of literary criticism to consider such spaces in Romantic-period fiction.<sup>ii</sup>

I will start with Lady Frances who is enamoured of London, specifically the West End. West End culture at that time was one of fashion, public display, conspicuous consumption, and dissipation (which consisted of a variety of behaviours like keeping late hours, excessive drinking and gambling, having illicit affairs, etc.). Lady Frances, like her West End colleagues, lacks sensibility – the ability to feel for others – and is always seeking novel sensations through the acquisition and display of goods or through the thrill of gambling. Lady Frances imports this West End emotional space into the country near Richmond, an area renowned at the time for its many fashionable villas and located about ten

miles from Charing Cross, often considered the centre of London at the time. Her villa is described as follows: Lady Frances Crofts

after staying ten days or a fortnight in Burlington street, where she made an acquaintance with Bellozane, she went to pass the months that yet intervened before it was fashionable to appear in London, at a villa near Richmond; which she had taken in the summer, and fitted up with every ornament luxury could invent or money purchase. She retired not thither, however, to court the sylvan deities. A set of friends of both sexes attended her. Bellozane was very handsome, very lively, very much a man of fashion....Bellozane became the life of the party; and was soon so much at his ease in the family, and so great a favourite with her Ladyship, that only her high rank exempted her from those censures, which, in a less elevated condition, would have fallen on her. (433)

The narrative implies that Lady Frances is misguided in her use of this space; indeed, the emotional and social space she creates does not comfortably map onto the villa's geographical position or material characteristics. Her behaviour evinces a corruption of the pastoral ideal; after all, "[s]he retired not thither... to court the sylvan deities." Smith implicitly sets this space up as one that should be a space of retirement away from the city and of spiritual connection with nature, and Lady Frances' failure to use it in this way is an emotional misuse of this suburban space.

Instead Lady Frances distracts herself with ornaments and crowds. She pursues novelty in her acquisition of objects – she chooses ornaments that are on the cutting edge of luxurious invention – and she also pursues novelty in choosing her companions. She fills the villa with mixed-sex crowds, and her adulterous relationship with her newly acquired companion imported from London, the fashionable rake Bellozane, is almost explicit.

Furthermore, Bellozane is “very lively, very much a man of fashion,” pointing to the pursuit of fashion’s novel sensations, rather than the contemplation of nature.

While Bellozane is at “ease in the family,” Lady Frances’ husband, Crofts, works as a lawyer in London, commuting to the villa only for the weekends. Lady Frances and Croft’s relationship not only lacks mutual positive feeling, but verges on the Gothic: “like a wise and cautious husband, he forebore to complain [of the happenings at the villa]. Besides the fear of his wife, which was no inconsiderable motive to silence, he had the additional fear of the martial and fierce-looking French soldier before his eyes.” (433) Lady Frances’ increasingly frenzied and unfeeling behaviour alienates many others including her family, ultimately resulting in a Gothic nightmare: her brother Delamere is killed defending her honour in a duel with Bellozane. Lady Frances never finds an emotionally balanced space; as a result of her behaviour, she becomes a quasi-Gothic victim herself locked away in a French prison.

By contrast, Lady Adelina finds a “suburban retreat” that rejects such West End behaviour. Lady Adelina has had a difficult life, including an early marriage to a dissipated and abusive young man, an affair with a man with whom she’s in love, and a pregnancy resulting from this affair which causes her to run away from family and friends. When she runs away, she goes through many spaces of physical and emotional retreat. These rural spaces are dangerous for Adelina, the most extreme instance is when she is left alone on the Isle of Wight where she embodies a rural Gothic to Lady Frances’ urban one. Mrs. Barret, Lady Adelina’s servant, states that she “seems to take pleasure in nothing but sorrow and melancholy” (424). She walks alone to the farthest reaches of the estate and exposes herself to extreme weather. Her depressed emotions are so marked on her body that she looks like she is about to “sink into the grave” (422). Adelina’s isolation is tied to her exclusion from London. She lacks intimacy, her closest friends – her brother and Emmeline – are in the metropolis, and Adelina cannot go to London because of the potential consequences of her

illicit affair and illegitimate baby becoming known. Her complete retirement in a rural space and her exclusion from intimacy and regulated sociability in London – this distinction between country and city – are dangerous. It is when she can bridge the country and city that she can begin to recover from this near-death state on the island. She does eventually go to London, staying with her brother in a rented West End townhouse, but, as she herself describes, the city alone cannot counteract her depression:

‘The air of London,’ said [Lady Adelina], ‘is not good for my child. I cannot help fancying he droops already. And the noise of a house where there are unavoidably so many visitors, and such a multitude of servants, is too much for my spirits. As Lord Westhaven is desirous of my staying in London till my sister Clancarryl arrives, that we meet all together after being so many years divided, I will not press my return to East Cliff; but I wish he would allow me to go to some village near London, where I may occasionally enjoy solitude and silence; for I have that upon my heart, Emmeline, that demands both.’ ... the next day Lady Adelina and her little boy removed to Highgate, where her brother procured her a handsome lodging; and quitting those he usually occupied in town, he went to reside with her. (458)

Through this passage Adelina connects space to her own emotions: the noise and crowds of the West End townhouse are “too much” for her ‘spirits.’ Moreover, she believes that only in the “solitude and silence” of a retreat outside London – either at East Cliff, the house on the Isle Wight, or in a village close to London – will her oppressed heart find relief.

The retreat her brother arranges has a suburban location, it is a house in Highgate, then a village near London about five miles from Charing Cross. This suburban location – this nearness to London – is what allows her recovery. Rather than the debilitating isolation of East Cliff, Highgate provides only the “occasional” solitude and silence that Adelina asks for above. The Highgate lodgings are also a space of intimacy with a sibling and a close

friend. Godolphin moves in with Adelina, travelling back and forth to the city as required for business, so he is able to conduct his London business from Highgate, which he was not able to do from East Cliff. A spot close to London was also desirable so that Adelina can see her sister and family when they arrive. With their arrival, Adelina's life is structured by retirement and fresh air in Highgate and familial (rather than large-scale, mixed) sociability in the West End. This intercourse, between city and retreat, further marks Adelina's Highgate house as a suburban rather than a rural retreat. This arrangement is rehabilitating, as she "seemed to be in better health, and sometimes in better spirits" (465).

In conclusion, the number and variety of Charlotte Smith's suburban homes points to a suburbanization of London decades before the omnibus and railway. Most of Smith's suburban spaces are extensions of West End social and emotional spaces, pointing to an underlying fear that the worst of the city would colonize the countryside with the area immediately around London being most vulnerable. However, in the example of Lady Adelina, Smith shows how the suburban can serve a brief space of reprieve where women can relax and recuperate from time spent in unsatisfactory and often emotionally dangerous spaces.

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<sup>i</sup> For discussion of suburban growth, including its variety, in the eighteenth century, see, for example, Barrell 16-74; Fishman 3-72; Miele 31-59; Summerson 254-71.

<sup>ii</sup> Jane Austen's *Emma* is the only novel of the period that I know of that has been looked at in terms of the suburban; for these discussions, see Hothem 49-62; Wallace 67-78; Pinch xiii-xv. Romantic literary criticism on the suburban is predominately on non-fiction and poetry with an emphasis on John Keats' and Leigh Hunt's *Hampstead*. For discussion of Keats and Hunt, see Henderson 221-244; Jones 23-43; Wood 527-52. Other Romantic suburban literary criticism includes Gilroy 45-56; Morton, 317-27. Given this preference for prose and poetry, an interrogation of fictional suburbans of the period is required.

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