



Troubling Suburbia in Early/Modern London

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Abstract: Despite an apparent reversal in the representation of the suburb between the publication of John Stow's *Survey of London* (1598), Thomas Dekker's *Lantern and Candlelight* (1608), and Thomas Nashe's *Christ's Tears Over Jerusalem* (1593), and J. B. Priestley's 1933 play, *Laburnum Grove*, there are striking commonalities. While the early modern suburb appears as an unruly threat to the City and the modern suburb a semi-rural idyll, accounts by Dekker, Nashe, and Stow demonstrate a problem of appearance or signification addressed again by J. B. Priestley, whose comic account of suburban criminal activity subverts the ideology of privacy, health, and placidity projected by the promoters early twentieth-century railway suburbs. However, as troubling as the suburbs appear, in both periods City economic practices prove to be the source of the problem and notions of suburban crime and disorder appear determined as much by perception as by actual location.

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Several years ago, I developed an undergraduate seminar, entitled "Early/Modern Londons," whose premise was the exploration of conceptions of London from the perspective of a pair of temporal bookends: the rising urban centre of the late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth centuries and the decaying metropolis of high modernism. In its initial iteration, I decided to include a brief unit on the place of suburbs, in part because the vividness of the representations by Thomas Dekker and Thomas Nashe in contrast to John Stow, whose *Survey of London* formed the backbone of the course. One of the unexpected results, however, was the emergence of significant commonalities between the two periods, despite an apparent reversal

in the representation of the suburb over the intervening centuries. While represented in ostensibly opposing ways, with the early modern suburb an unruly threat to the City and the modern suburb a semi-rural idyll promising escape from the City, examination of accounts of the suburb by Dekker, Nashe, and, more subtly, Stow demonstrates perhaps more a problem of appearance or signification that is addressed again by J. B. Priestley in his 1933 play, *Laburnum Grove*. In Stow, Dekker, and Nashe, the suburbs are presented as protean and potentially criminal threats to the City and with an ambiguous status and boundaries that seem to render them curiously impervious to control and containment. Several centuries later, Priestley's comic account of suburban criminal activity both parodies and subverts the ideology of privacy, health, and placidity disseminated by the promoters of the extension of railway lines to areas of the home counties branded as "Metro-land," indeterminate areas that were neither fully rural nor fully urban, such that the social and epistemological challenge presented by suburbia in both periods appears remarkably similar (Ward: *Selling Places*, 116). However, also in both cases, the trouble in suburbia is ultimately located in the context of morally culpable City financial practices that in fact generate the appearance of a suburban problem.

Articulating the relationship between the City and its suburbs during the rapid expansion of London through the early modern period has presented a complex historical and critical challenge. Historians and critics have traced a number of understandings of the relationship between City and suburbs, from, as Valerie Pearl argues, a tendency to correlate rapid growth of the suburbs with necessary civic disorder which led to 'a picture of a city constantly close to riot, a place in which criminality was endemic and the underworld pervasive' (Pearl: 'Change and Stability', 5). Pearl counters this image by noting that down to the Great Fire more people lived under the jurisdiction of the Lord Mayor than outside it and that too-heavy a reliance on 'the colourful sources of pamphlets and plays' may be partly responsible for these accounts (Pearl: 'Change and Stability', 5-6). Steve Rappaport concurs, arguing that 'throughout the sixteenth century London lacked both a pattern of pervasive instability and a single rebellious disorder,' such that while social problems were undeniably present, 'chronic instability cannot be counted among them' (Rappaport: *Worlds Within Worlds*, 18). Ian Archer challenges Pearl's revision, pointing out that 'none of the advocates of stability have examined the admittedly difficult records of urban criminality to determine the dimensions of a problem which much exercised the rulers' (Archer: *Pursuit of Stability*, 16). Pearl's caveat, though, is supported by Peter Howell's analysis of patterns in literary-critical accounts of the liberties and suburbs, in which they are understood as 'a utopian space of equality and license' or 'liminal spaces of refuge, of festivity, of criminality and of cruelty' (Howell: "'Tis a Mad World', 2, 8). Howell subsequently argues that the pamphlet, 'Pymlico; or Runne Red Cap,' works through the tropes of nature and urban pastoral, madness, the theatre, and colonization to represent the northeastern suburbs as spaces of sexual freedom, but also as 'a hinge between the town an country' for inhabitants of London (Howell:

'Tis a Mad World', 6). Joseph P. Ward argues that City authorities of various kinds did reach beyond the City walls and that, relatively speaking, government and regulation in the suburbs may not have been much less effective than inside the City (Ward: *Metropolitan Communities*, 42-43). While Ian Archer challenges Ward's thesis to some extent, he usefully notes that 'it is clear that to some extent the city's rhetoric about the suburbs was self-serving. Highlighting the problems of the suburbs might well be a means of diverting attention from the failings of city authorities' (Archer: 'Government', 135). In a similar vein, Vanessa Harding points out that, while relations between City and central governments became increasingly polarized in the face of the rapid expansion of the suburbs, what may very well have been the key change was 'in the perception of health and order' (Harding: 'Changing Shape', 133-34).

This question of perception is one that Paul Griffiths usefully takes up in *Lost Londons: Change, Crime and Control in the Capital City, 1550-1660* through the concept of the 'mental map'. He argues that, in lieu of street maps that were not readily available until the latter seventeenth century and works like Stow's *Survey*, 'people got to know the city by walking, looking, or asking for directions. They drew maps in their heads from memories that were theirs alone' (Griffiths: *Lost Londons*, 77). Crime was mapped in this way through circulation of pamphlets, trial reports, and word of mouth, such that location and crime together became part of name-calling, e.g., 'Hackney queane' (Griffiths: *Lost Londons*, 77). Griffiths points out that 'most mental maps singled out seedy places, like London's suburbs' and arrests do show that the major areas of prostitution were outside the walls (Griffiths: *Lost Londons*, 78-79). While coordination of strategies when authority was split among counties, boroughs, and parishes meant that regulation was uneven,

in citizens' minds London's suburbs fragmented the city's once secure and cohesive identity and created one crime-wave after another. Rather than create metropolitan-wide communities, magistrates and authors worked hard to disentangle London from its troublesome suburbs. (Griffiths: *Lost Londons*, 80)

Courtbooks allow another mapping of crime, which indicates that the City wards of Farringdon Without and Within, respectively, were the hotspots for a variety of criminal behaviour, from thievery to prostitution, but this may be influenced by the fact that high-traffic Fleet Street cut straight through these wards and right by Bridewell, which made it a convenient place to drop off suspects (Griffiths: *Lost Londons*, 84-87). Griffiths does not argue for an absence of crime and disorder, either inside the City or in the suburbs, but that the influence of mental maps may have generated a clearer sense of distinction between them and between citizens and criminals when indeed 'little was comfortably clear cut, despite an annual flood of polarizing policy and prose' (Griffiths: *Lost Londons*, 171).

Literary representations by Stow, Dekker, and Nashe form part of what Twynnyng describes as 'a vast literature of classification and categorization,' in which 'lanterns were shone into all the dark corners of the city to reveal what was there; it was mapped, unwholesome alleys were looked into, iniquities were laid bare, vices exposed, enormities made known, and immorality was scourged' (Twynnyng: *London Dispossessed*, 66). They write the suburbs in imagery characterized by liquidity, leakiness, and contagion, a pattern characteristic even of Stow, who is least interested in the specifics of vice and criminality and draws a comparatively clear distinction between a sense of an orderly City and disorderly suburbs. While Stow's anatomization of London streets and careful accounting of memorials and historical features has been read as nostalgia for a disappearing ordered past, it is also interpreted as a means of countering urban fragmentation by reconstructing custom and collective memory in order to promote civic identification (Collinson: 'John Stow', Archer: 'Arts', Gordon: *Writing*, 154). Both Stow's method and goals, though, are challenged in his comparatively brief account of the suburbs, which he does not seem to be able to render as easily into legibility and coherence.

As with many of his entries on the wards of the City, Stow opens with a quotation from Fitz-Stephen describing a rural idyll:

on all sides, with trees, both large, sightly, and adjoining together. On the north side are pastures and plain meadows, with brooks running through them...There are near London, on the north side, especial wells in the suburbs, sweet, wholesome, and clear. (Stow: *Survey*, 353)

Fitz-Stephen's version of the suburbs runs counter to the foul liquidity of Dekker and Nashe. However, when Stow departs from FitzStephen to engage in his own description, it becomes populated with stories of crime, all initially associated with water. He opens in the east with the stretch from St. Katherine to Wapping, 'the usual place of execution for hanging of pirates and sea-rovers, at the low-water mark, and there to remain till three tides overflowed them' and now, since the removal of the gallows, 'a continual street, or filthy straight passage, with alleys of small tenements, or cottages, built, inhabited by sailors' victuallers, along by the river of Thames' (Stow: *Survey*, 353-54). While Stow continues in his typically methodical manner, detailing parishes, churches and their memorials, noteworthy inhabitants, and micro-histories, the recurrent threads are of crime, crowding, and pestilence, particularly in the discussions of the northern and eastern suburbs. A repeated motif is of open space, typically common fields, having been infilled with crowded housing described in the language of dirt and disease. For example, after noting that the plain at Tower Hill 'is likewise greatly diminished by merchants for building of small tenements,' Stow complains that

Also without the bars both sides of the street be pestered with cottages and alleys, even up to Whitechapel Church, and almost half a mile beyond it, into the common field all which ought to be open and free for all men. But this common field, I say, being sometime the beauty of this city on that part, is so encroached upon by building of filthy cottages, and with other purpressors, enclosures, and laystalls (notwithstanding all proclamations and acts of parliament made to the contrary), that in some places it scarce remaineth a sufficient highway for the meeting of carriages and droves of cattle. Much less is there any fair, pleasant, or wholesome way for people to walk on foot. (Stow: Survey, 354-55).

The field is neither fashionably urban, like the new garden suburb of the Strand, nor functional, as with the open common land of FitzStephen. Instead, its filth, in the form of a disorderly arrangement of poor and crowded housing, enclosures, and laystalls, encroaches upon what was 'sometime the beauty of this city on that part.' The suburb here is consuming the city, which appears, as Stow's parenthetical remark about the inefficacy of legal measures, unable to stem the flow.

In the example of Moorfields in the north, Stow's account of the use of ditches to drain the moor when it 'stood full of noisome waters' emphasizes the image of liquidity:

in the year 1527, Sir Thomas Semor, mayor, caused divers sluices to be made to convey the said waters over the Town Ditch into the course of Walbrook, and so into the Thames. And by these degrees was this fen or moor at length made main and hard ground, which before being overgrown with flags, sedges, and rushes, served to no use; since the which time also the further grounds beyond Finsbury Court have been so overheightened with laystalls of dung, that now three windmills are thereon set, the ditches be filled up, and the bridges overwhelmed. (Stow: Survey, 358)

Water, filth, overwhelming, and passage from the suburbs through the City, sometimes invisibly, as in the case of Walbrook, which ran through the Wall and the City and was by Stow's day an underground river, characterize the contents of these suburban spaces, which also defy categorization on the basis of function. Further around to the west, near Smithfield, lies St. Giles church, which also is concerned with suburban water:

Some little distance from the east end of this church standeth a fair conduit, castellated, in Fore Street. Then have ye a boss of sweet water in the wall of the churchyard, lately made a pump, but already decayed. Then have ye a fair pool of sweet water near to the church of St. Giles, wherein Anne of Lothbury was drowned.... (Stow: Survey, 360)

In each case, sweet water rendered foul by decay and death is leaked through walls in a way that is potentially threatening.

To the east and north, the suburbs are characterized by decaying, crowded housing and foul water, culminating in the mass plague burial ground known as Pardon Churchyard, just beyond Smithfield (Stow: *Survey*, 363). There the dead are an undistinguished mass, rather than a series of identifiable citizens rendered distinct by their memorials. However, the further west and south Stow moves, he is able to catalogue increasing numbers of great houses, for example near Temple Bar and in Chancery Lane where they include those belonging to the widow of Richard Alington, the Earl of Southampton, and Sir Nicholas Bacon, along with other 'divers fair houses and large gardens' (Stow: *Survey*, 366–67). Stow's description of the Strand is a litany to the powerful that itemizes Paget House, Leicester House, Essex House, Arundel House, and Somerset House (Stow: *Survey*, 370–71). His attention to crime, decay, and fouled water diminishes as his trajectory turns toward Westminster and the centre of government, so that

the overall impression given by the mapping of the physical, economic and social morphology of Stow's London is of two prosperous centres: the City with its substantial housing and its busy commercial and industrial life, albeit slightly ragged around the walls, and the West End and Westminster with its landowners, government servants and lawyers. (Power: 'John Stow,' 13)

Stow's suburbs, with their lack of clear boundaries as they surround the City and their uncomfortable mingling of the poor with the powerful and of slums with stateliness, resist, to some degree, Stow's orderly taxonomy of the City wards with their stability of memorialization.

In *Lantern and Candlelight* (1608), Thomas Dekker picks up urban taxonomy 'from another perspective, presenting what looks like another of the cony-catching pamphlets that might serve as a guide for the newcomer to the various characters of the London underworld, complete with sketches of various types of criminals and swindlers and a lexicon of thieves' cant. The promise of those texts is to render legible for the young, well-to-do male visitor the criminal underworld lurking at the edges and in the dark corners of the City. Dekker's text, though, is framed somewhat more seriously. It succeeds *The Bel-man of London* (1608), taking up the image of night watchman with his lamp who goes out to guard against robbery and fire and announce the time (Dekker: 'Lantern', 305 n.1). In *Lantern and Candlelight*, the powers of Hell seek vengeance on the Bel-man for revealing the thieves and cheaters of the City and send an emissary whose goal it is to become familiar with the companies of criminals and win them to the side of Satan in order to overwhelm the Bel-man's efforts (Dekker: 'Lantern', 225). Seeking the counsel of Pride, he takes on the guise and garb of a fashionable young gallant and goes about making notes of

the various schemes for cheating and swindling gentlemen that he encounters, along with the locations at which these occur. All of the schemes that the infernal envoy uncovers in the City are financial, i.e., cheating at cards and dice, turning goods into cash and exacting a price at each step, adding multiple or false dedications to books for a fee, or in the guise of wealthy gentlemen stealing horses from innkeepers (Dekker: 'Lantern', 226-43). The problem, however, is that it is at times difficult to distinguish criminals from victims. The victims are for the most part vain young gentlemen coming to London to show off their lavish spending and consumption who are driven by vanity or greed when their financial resources and credit with London merchants are exhausted (Dekker: 230-31). In the instance of the "Rank-Riders" who cozen horses from innkeepers, one of the few City crimes that seems to target citizens, the scheme succeeds by means of the innkeepers' greed. Their acceptance of the appearance of rank as a form of currency, i.e., the promise that one who looks like a gentleman of means and claims that he is about to come into a large sum of money will grace the inn with a stay of a quarter or more, brings about the success of the scam (Dekker: 'Lantern', 240). The world of financial crime seems oddly victimless, but also contained within the world of the wealthy.

While crime within the city walls is clearly a problem, albeit largely for visitors who are in some way complicit, the suburbs draw special attention as sites of infection and threat to the City through prostitution (Twyning: *London Dispossessed*, 63, Archer: 'Government', 34):

How happy therefore were Cities if they had no Suburbs, sithence they serve but as caves where monsters are bred up to devour the Cities themselves! ...What a wretched womb hath a strumpet, which being, for the most part, barren of Children, is notwithstanding the only Bed that breeds up these serpents! upon that one stalk grow all these mischiefs. She is the Cockatrice that hatcheth all these eggs of evils. (Dekker: 'Lantern', 246)

This monstrous space is feminized as the topography of the cave shifts to become a paradoxically barren, yet uncontrollably fecund, womb. For Decker, the suburb is a key source of danger to the City, for not only is she the source of the infection, she is leaky:

When her villainies, like the moat about a castle, are rank, thick, and muddy, with standing long together, then, to purge herself, is she drained out of the Suburbs, as though her corruption were there left behind her, and, as a clear stream, is let into the City. (Dekker: 'Lantern', 246-7)

The perimeter of the City here is permeable and potentially vulnerable to the contagion of the surrounding suburb, imagined in a way that links the epistemologically opaque cave, with its monsters, to the equally fantastic strumpet's

womb. The purging of her 'villainies' before the streaming of her liquid into the City is only apparent, 'as though her corruption were left behind her.' The association of female bodies with the uncontrolled and disturbing production of fluids is made by Gail Kern Paster, who links their sexual danger to a liminal suburban space (Paster: 'Leaky Vessels', 44). The danger is made quite specific in *Bartholmew Fair* when two city wives are identified as prostitutes because of their need to use Ursula's chamberpot: 'Here, unlawful access to the otherwise inaccessible woman is made possible by the odd but crucial mediation of the chamberpot: it discloses their vulnerability, announces an occasion of physical and social permeability' (Paster: 'Leaky Vessels', 49). The leakiness of Dekker's suburbs thus draws on a cultural association between water and a sexually available female body.

In the next chapter, Dekker reverses the gendered trope of the virgin as castle or tower assailed by a male suitor to fit his urban context, entitling it, 'What armor a harlot wears coming out of the Suburbs to besiege the City within the walls' (Dekker: *Lantern*', 247). Here, the harlot from/as the suburb presents a somewhat different problem of legibility from other criminals, insofar as she, rather than donning a specific disguise for the purpose of defrauding a single type of visitor, steals the reputations of those around her 'as a cloak to cover her deformities' and

though the law threaten to hit her never so often, yet hath she subtle defences to ward off the blows. For, if Gallants haunt the house, then spreads she these colors; she is a captain's or a lieutenant's wife in the Low [C]ountries...If Merchants resort to her, then hoists she up these sails... (Dekker: 'Lantern', 247)

The extended nautical, or perhaps piratical, metaphor marks her as protean and oddly defiant of categorization on the basis of her appearance, as she draws her rank from those she encounters. As a cipher, the harlot seems to parody the virtuous married woman, the *feme covert* who derives her status from her husband. She is, though, is epistemologically troubling because of her resistance to taxonomy in the way that the financial criminals are not. Dekker concludes this chapter with an appeal to City authorities in the voice of the actual Bel-man of London, rather than in the guise of his infernal imposter:

You Guardians over so great a Princess as this eldest daughter of King *Brutus*, you twice twelve fathers and governors over the Noblest City, why are you so careful to plant Trees to beautify your outward walks, yet suffer the goodliest garden within to be overrun with stinking weeds? You are the pr[u]ning knives that should lop off such idle, such unprofitable and such destroying branches from the Vine. The beams of your Authority should purge the air of such infection. Your breath of Justice should scatter these foggy vapors and drive

them out of your gates as chaff tossed abroad by the winds. (Dekker: 'Lantern', 248)

Dekker's appeal to City authorities introduces another image, the garden with its insidious weeds, to the motif of assailed virginity, which underscores the troubling uncontrollability of the suburbs at the same time as he appeals for authoritative action. The garden metaphor, however, also points to a general problem with the governance of the City because authorities do not address what lies beneath appearance in either City or suburb. Instead, the task of revelation, if not regulation, is left to informal means in the person of the Bel-man, who through his own act of disguise, i.e., appearing without his identifying lamp, appeals to the envoy's vanity so that he eagerly displays his notes on London's crimes and abuses. The result of this virtuous cozening is the Bel-man's 'perfect Map' in the form of the text of the pamphlet (Dekker: 'Lantern', 260), a solution that requires the complicity of one who is a participant in the crimes he reveals.

In *Christ's Tears Over Jerusalem* (1593), Thomas Nashe addresses the problem of the suburb in a text that devotes the bulk of its attention to the forms of moral corruption similar to those identified by Dekker. The largest part of Nashe's pamphlet addresses the vices of the City as spiritual crimes, narrated in the voice of Christ, who at first addresses Jerusalem, but then shifts his focus to London, since 'whatsoever of Ierusalem I haue written, was but to lend to her a looking-glasse. Now enter I into my true Teares, my Teares for London...' (Nashe: 'Christ's Tears', 80). The crimes of the City are the spawn of Pride and include Ambition, Vaine-glory, Atheisme, Discontent, Contention, Disdain, Gorgeous-attyre, and Delicacie (Nashe: 'Christ's Tears', 81). Pride expresses itself in the City through displays of conspicuous consumption, for example, through the 'Gorgeous Ladies of the Court,' whose

heads, with theyr top and top gallant Lawne baby-caps, and Snow-resembled siluer curlings, they make a playne Puppet stage of. Theyr breasts they embuske vp on hie, and theyr round Roseate buds immodestly lay foorth, to shew at theyr handes there is fruite to be hoped. In theyr curious Antick-wouen garments, they imitate and mocke the Wormes and Adders that must eate them. They shew the swellings of their mind, in the swellingsand plumpings out of theyr apparrayle. (Nashe: 'Christ's Tears', 137-38)

Not only do their garments and hairstyles advertise their wealth, but they also signify that the Ladies are themselves for sale, for 'in Italy, when they sette any Beast to sale, they crowne his heade with Garlands, and be-deck it with gaudy blossoms' (Nashe: 'Christ's Tears', 137). While the Court Ladies appear then as high-end prostitutes, that they are located at Court circumscribes the effect of their behaviour while at the same time locating corruption at the heart of society. These displays depend themselves on a cluster of financial crimes, like the usury that both supports

the habits and appearance of young gentlemen and masquerades as mercantile activity, de facto extortion of parents to manage their children's debts, or extension of mercantile credit such that courtiers may never be free of it (Nashe: 'Christ's Tears', 93-98).

Like Dekker, Nashe identifies the suburbs with prostitution, asking, 'London, what are thy Suburbes but licensed Stewes?' (Nashe: 'Christ's Tears,' 148). He also links corruption of the order of the City to the suburb, asking

Can it be so man brothel-houses of salary sensuality & sixe-penny whoredome (the next doore to the Magistrates) should be sette vp and maintained, if brybes dyd not besirre them? I accuse none, but certainly iustice somewhere is corrupted. Whole Hospitals of tenne times a day dishonested strumpets haue we cloysterd together. Night and day the entrance vnto them is as free as to a Tauerne. Not one of them but hath a hundred retayners. Prentises and poore Seruauents they encourage to robbe theyr Maisters. Gentlemens purses and pockets they will diue into and pick, euen whiles they are dallying with them. (Nashe: 'Christ's Tears', 148)

While the strumpets are the ones accessible to City men of various classes, they, as proxies for the suburbs, penetrate the city through their effects, since they encourage theft by apprentices and servants, and function as Dekker's weeds in the garden of the City. Where Nashe differs from Dekker is in representing their penetration very precisely by identifying points of entry, specifically through corrupt City officers, for example the Magistrates who live next door and receive bribes or those who cooperate as the prostitutes engage in a 'fine closing in with the next Iustice, or Alderman's deputy of the ward' (Nashe: 'Christ's Tears', 152). Dekker's 'Authorities' are fully implicated here and, at the same time, the 'strumpets' resist discovery or legal action because they win the love of their neighbours in order

round about to repell violence if haply their houses should be enuirond, or any in them proue unrulie (being pilled and pould too vnconscionably). They forecast for backdoores, to come in and out by vndiscoverd. Slyding windowes also, and trappe-bordes in floars to hyde whores behind and vnder, with false counterfet panes in walls, to be opened and shut like a wicket. (Nashe: 'Christ's Tears', 152)

The houses here are facades or stage sets that present one way, but conceal a different reality. The windows, trapdoors, and 'counterfeit panes' in the walls reverse Dekker's image of the City as a castle besieged by the 'rank, thick, and muddy' moat about it or the armoured harlot to imagine the suburban house as impregnable through its constant mutation (Dekker: 'Lantern', 247-48). Nashe's suburbia is insidious, impermeable, and ungovernable, while, like Dekker's, penetrating the area

around it. However, it also mirrors the actions of the City, insofar as the prostitution that stands as a synecdoche for the suburb depends on the transactions of those who trade in women, 'Merchants of maiden-head' as opposed to the 'Merchant in ritches' (Nashe: 'Christ's Tears', 151). What distinguishes the suburb from the City seems to be whether sexual or financial crime is undertaken inside or outside of licit social structures and whether or not the contagion of these crimes is visible. The difference thus lies primarily in signification.

By the turn of the twentieth century, London as metropolis was firmly established, and indeed was seen through the eyes of high modernism as a decaying and soul-less centre. From the 1840s, overcrowding in the City because of expanded business occupation and congestion in the areas that now form parts of central London led to a migration out to surrounding areas of Middlesex and Surrey in search of space and the ideal of privacy (Wagenaar: 'Conquest of the Center', 72, Dyos: 'A Castle for Everyman', 120, Dyos: *Exploring*, 29, French: 'Good Life', 106–8). Cheaper properties could be found to the east, north-east, and south-east, while south- and north-western areas were more favoured (Jackson: *Semi-Detached*, 167). The ideal of the middle-class home-as-castle is of course epitomized in the figure of Wemmick in *Great Expectations*, whose tiny home in Walworth literalizes this fantasy with drawbridge, moat, and miniature cannon (Cunningham: 'London Commuting', 14–16). By 1907, there was active marketing of the northern and northwestern suburbs by railway lines seeking to expand business and parlay surplus railway lands into profits (Ward: *Selling Places*, 115). One of the major players in this venture was the Metropolitan Railway, which began by marketing stops on its rural route as leisure destinations around 1905 and issued its first 'Metro-land' booklet in 1915 (Ward: *Selling Places*, 115). Between those dates, a 1910 silent film entitled 'A Trip on the Metropolitan Railway' advertised the largely rural route from Baker Street to Harrow, Uxbridge, Ruislip, and Aylesbury. This footage was later intercut into John Betjeman's 1973 exploration of London's suburbs, entitled 'Metro-Land.' Both pre- and post-war advertising posters for emphasised the healthfulness of homes in the outer suburbs with visual perspectives that show the city as a distant vista below (see figure 1), developed the metaphor of home-as-castle (see figure 2) along with its corollary potential for privacy (see figure 3), and promised easy access to both City and country (figure 4) (Jackson: *Semi-Detached*, 171–72). Developing the rural element, a common image pattern in this visual material is the garden and its accoutrements, like tools, sheds, and greenhouses (Cunningham: 'London Commuting,' 23). These images frequently juxtapose men in partial City garb with rakes, shovels, and scythes (see figure 5). With the introduction of seasons' tickets at different rates and trains timed for the needs of workers, clerks, and City gentlemen, suburban living was framed as orderly, healthy, and accessible in comparison to the crowding, poverty, crime, and expense of central London (Cunningham: 'London Commuting,' 11). While there were periodic outbreaks of burglary, partly ascribed to the space between houses in some areas and to the privacy that, paradoxically, allowed burglars to work

with relative leisure, crime was as a rule the work of non-residents (Jackson: *Semi-Detached London*, 185). In these ways, compared to the world of Stow, Dekker, and Nashe, the valence of the suburb's signification is apparently reversed.

By the early 1930s, however, marketing of the suburbs began to slacken, in part because of the consolidation of railway and underground lines in the London Passenger Transportation Board, which ended advertisement by individual lines, as well as 'growing circumspection of what had now become a major publicly owned body' and the rise of arguments against uncontrolled suburban sprawl (Ward: *Selling Places*, 124). By 1933, advertisement of suburbs had largely ceased (Ward: *Selling Places*, 124). This is the context for J. B. Priestley's 1933 play, *Laburnum Grove*. Critical accounts of Priestley have considered him a writer who both celebrates and critiques middle-class England, demonstrating a particular concern for the problems of consumerism and dislocation between individuals and society (DeVitis and Kalson: *J. B. Priestley*, 117, Lowe: *Journeys*, 274, Goulding: 'Sound'). *Laburnum Grove* has been regarded as narrower exploration of the family circle, prior to Priestley's more expansive, post-war national vision (DeVitis and Kalson: *J. B. Priestley*, 125, Gale: *J. B. Priestley*, 164). However, I would argue that *Laburnum Grove* is both rooted in and attacks the ideology of secure middle-class suburbia disseminated through the materials associated with the railway suburbs.

From its outset, the play considers, and satirizes, the ideology of suburbia, ultimately undermining the ubiquitous message of safety and stability propounded by the developers. The play is set in the Radfern house, Ferndale, in Laburnum Grove, Shooters Green, a North London suburb. The echo of the popular Golders Green in the location frames it as one of the newer railway suburbs, while the names of family, house, and street convey an overdetermined sense of idealized rurality. Even at this point, however, Priestley begins to undermine the image he creates. While the dominant sense of 'shooters' is of a sports person who shoots game, another meaning is 'a plant that shoots (vigorously, etc),' so that the carries a range of connotations, from country hunts to horticulture, such that the referent lies uneasily between violence and vegetation in country life ('Shooter': *OED Online*). 'Laburnum' contains similar tensions, which are profoundly significant for the play. The laburnum tree, also known as the 'golden chain tree,' produces beautiful chains of bell-shaped yellow flowers in May and June, but all parts of the plant are highly poisonous, containing the toxin, cystine (Quattrochi: *Plants*, 2195). A beautiful appearance disguises its toxicity, and this indeed proves to be the case with the Radfern household.

Although adapted as a film in 1936, reception of the play indicates that its sophistication may not have been fully appreciated by its initial audiences. The first two acts were considered boring by an early *Times* critic, who described the beginning as 'a slight yawn' and the characters as 'the creatures of a farce built upon an arbitrary and unpersuasive device,' superficially 'neat entertainment but no more' ('Duchess Theatre', 12, Brome: *J. B. Priestley*, 143). While the critic argues that in

the third act 'the tone of it is changed: it becomes true and entrancing; all that has gone before, though connected in plot, seems irrelevant', I would argue that the play exploits and parodies contemporary representations of suburbia from its opening in order to reveal the dangers beneath its homogenized and innocuous surface. Recalling the horticultural images on the Metroland posters, the stage directions for Act 1 note that 'on the back wall from right to left are a small window, then a door that can lead directly into a greenhouse, then a larger window looking out on to a back garden' (Priestley: *Laburnum Grove*, 29). The greenhouse figures prominently in the play, as George Radfern, the father who travels into the City and, indeed, to cities all over England on business, spends much of his time there, often in the company of his dubious friend, Joe Fletten. Described as 'a rather loud, jovial, middle-aged man, somewhat lower on the social scale than anybody we have met here so far' (Priestley: *Laburnum Grove*, 44), by Lucy Baxley as 'common', and by Harold as 'like a bookie's clerk' (Priestley: *Laburnum Grove*, 45), Fletten appears as neither a typical commuting workingman nor a City clerk, yet seems to require an enormous amount of advice, at odd hours, about greenhouses and the growing of tomatoes. On the other hand, George 'is very much the suburban householder at ease, wearing slippers and an old coat, and smoking a pipe. He is carrying two small tomatoes in one hand, and he displays these with an air of humorous triumph' (Priestley: *Laburnum Grove*, 33). His appearance recalls details of a number of the suburban railway posters (see figure 5), as does the location itself. As George describes it:

Here's Shooters Green, one of North London's newest suburbs. Very clean, very respectable, bright as a new pin. Nice little shops in the High Street....And here's Laburnum Grove, one of its best roads, very quiet, very select, best type of semi-detached villas...Nice little houses. Nice people. Quiet, respectable. No scandals. No brokers' men. No screams in the night. Morris Oxfords, little greenhouses, wireless sets. (Priestley: *Laburnum Grove*, 41)

Laburnum Grove is identified as free from the markers of urban disorder. Much of the action takes place in the dining room, where a sideboard is laid with an utterly suburban, middle-class cold supper of tongue, ham, cold potatoes, stewed rhubarb and custard, as George appears bearing first two tomatoes and later a third, declaring that 'they absolutely light up the table' (Priestley: *Laburnum Grove*, 47). The *mise en scene* is the very picture of suburban rectitude, as daughter Elsie indicates: 'Everybody's so smug and settled down and dull here, and so pleased with themselves', in lives replete with peaceful homes, 'and greenhouses and wireless sets' (Priestley: *Laburnum Grove*, 40). Later, Mrs Radfern's description of George's preferred activities reinforces these preoccupations:

Oh—my husband's always been quite a home bird, you know. His business takes him out, of course, and sometimes away too, but the minute he's back,

all he wants are his slippers and his pipe, and a book or his greenhouse or the wireless. (Priestley: *Laburnum Grove*, 73)

The repeated synecdochic representations of suburbia—slippers, book, greenhouse, and wireless—create a false front for the serio-comic action of the play. It is this commonplace, yet slick, surface of middle-class respectability that ultimately proves impenetrable.

While the setting is highly ordered, the plot reveals a suburbia that is at least as leaky and problematic as the suburbs of Stow, Dekker, and Nashe. Family politics are certainly complex, with Dorothy Radfern's sister, Lucy, and her husband, Bernard, 'a rather glossy, shifty fellow in his forties, always either over-confident or uneasy', in residence after their return from India and Singapore, and attempting to borrow a large sum of money from George, ironically as it turns out, in order to set Bernard up in the sale of business supplies (Priestley: *Laburnum Grove*, 33). It is not his first 'loan' as he has struggled with the economic exigencies of the Depression. Elsie's ne'er-do-well boyfriend also hopes to weedle money from George in order to buy into a clearly dodgy used-car business. It is at this point that George reveals that the greenhouse activity that so engages his time, as well as Joe Fletten's, is actually counterfeiting, rather than either tomato production or wholesale trade in fine paper. He is, in his own words, 'a crook. A criminal. An enemy of society' (Priestley: *Laburnum Grove*, 50). George reveals the suburbs as something of a hotbed of criminality, noting to Elsie that

people who break the law have got to live somewhere, and why not in Shooters Green and Laburnum Grove? They took away that solicitor who used to live at Stella Maris and gave him a couple of years. That was a start. Probably there are one or two more of us in Laburnum Grove who'll have to go yet. (Priestley: *Laburnum Grove*, 55)

As George describes his enterprise, he frames it as part of an alternative economy, 'a private policy of inflation' that functions as a counter to the failures of City banks and those officially responsible for the regulation of the economy to keep enough cash in circulation during the Depression (Priestley: *Laburnum Grove*, 52-53). George has moved from supplying fine paper to being 'on the staff' with a job that is now in 'distribution'. Through this alternative business, George travels to Birmingham, Newcastle, Liverpool, and Glasgow, as well as London, Amsterdam, and Brussels, such that from its suburban source counterfeit currency penetrates and circulates in multiple urban centres. In terms of London itself, the City, identified in the play with its banking, is marked as both authority and enemy, since 'what the banks don't like must be a serious crime nowadays, like blasphemy in the middle ages' (Priestley: *Laburnum Grove*, 53). What is interesting is that even George's formerly legitimate business is positioned as marginal, since his office and warehouse were located just

off Cloth Fair, slightly east of Smithfield Market and thus on the edge of the City's traditional jurisdiction in the ward of Farringdon Without. Mrs Radfern underscores their marginality by adding that 'the only time I went there, it was a very warm day and you could smell the meat in Smithfield Market—horrid it was' (Priestley: *Laburnum Grove*, 74).

While, as with Stow, Dekker, Nashe, the suburbs seem to teem with various forms of criminality, crime in Laburnum Grove is curiously impervious to discovery and regulation. George points out that

we've given Scotland Yard its biggest and most worrying case for years. After us! They're after us. Detectives, police, bank officials, magistrates, judges, the Treasury, the Army, the Navy, the Air Force. We haven't even the League of Nations on our side. (Priestley: *Laburnum Grove*, 54)

Two attempts at exposing George's criminal activity, once when the Baxleys try to reveal George's crime to his wife, Dorothy, and the other when Inspector Stack of Scotland Yard attempts at investigation, fail. The Baxleys relate the story quite directly, only to have it dismissed by Dorothy as a game or fiction contained in a detective novel, *The Great Bank Mystery*, that has been lying on a table throughout the play (Priestley: *Laburnum Grove*, 79). This gambit is one that Priestley also used in an earlier play, *Dangerous Corner* (Gale: *J. B. Priestley*, 66–69). Inspector Stack's interview penetrates little further, in part because of the correspondence between the crime he is investigating and the details of the novel, to which George makes frequent reference, commenting that the scope of the scheme and props, for example a torn playing card, look 'like a big of leg-pulling. Too much in the story-book style' (Priestley: *Laburnum Grove*, 102). George shields himself figuratively with his unremarkable suburban identity, 'a decent respectable citizen and a householder', and his crime ring quite literally with that symbol of suburban domesticity, the green house, behind which he has had his confederate, the felon Joe Fletten, hiding and listening throughout the scene (Priestley: *Laburnum Grove*, 103, 96). Stack gives up, unable to trap George and indeed having given away more information about the investigation than he has been able to acquire, including names of confederates, details of dates and locations, and half of a playing card used for identification. As a result, George is able to pass this information to Joe Fletten, launch procedures ('Plan B') for shutting down the counterfeiting ring, and arrange his escape via a sea voyage, on a Dutch ship because Inspector Stack revealed that 'an English ship, you know, is as safe to us as an English police court' (Priestley: *Laburnum Grove*, 104). When George reveals this element of the plan to his wife and daughter, it is with an ironic echo of Stack's statement: 'all the best boats that go out East are Dutch. They're much more comfortable. English boats are like police courts!' (Priestley: *Laburnum Grove*, 107). As Dekker noted, the authorities here also, albeit unwittingly, enable criminality. The ineffectuality of authority is underscored by the appearance

of a police sergeant at the door, who turns out to be innocuously collecting donations for the Shooters Green Football Club.

In the end, the suburb here proves as protean, and indeed, liquid, both literally and figuratively, as it was represented at the turn of the seventeenth century. However, what is also clear is that, as troubling as the suburb proves to be for the authority of the City in Priestley's play, the City is itself the source of the problem. Indeed, the economic interests of the City produce, through their legitimized financial crime, i.e., the failure to keep enough money in circulation to support its people, the very chaos that the forces of law and order must try to contain. Ultimately, while what appears as instability, criminality, and threat of disease in the figure of the suburb in early-modern texts seems reversed in its modern representations as a site of health and financial stability, examination of Priestley's play indicates that the suburb remains both troubling and troubled beneath the appearance and ideology of middle-class, semi-detached life. In the case of both time periods, the locations of criminal and non-criminal and disorder and order are determined as much by the 'mental maps' that determine perception as by physical location.

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Figures

Figure 1: <https://images.ltmuseum.co.uk/images/max/21/0237-21.jpg>

Figure 2: <https://images.ltmuseum.co.uk/images/max/33/0213-33.jpg>

Figure 3: <https://images.ltmuseum.co.uk/images/max/46/1735-46.jpg>

Figure 4: <https://images.ltmuseum.co.uk/images/max/26/0218-26.jpg>

Figure 5: <https://images.ltmuseum.co.uk/images/max/48/1735-48.jpg>,
<https://images.ltmuseum.co.uk/images/max/78/0245-78.jpg>, and
<https://images.ltmuseum.co.uk/images/max/13/2261-13.jpg>

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