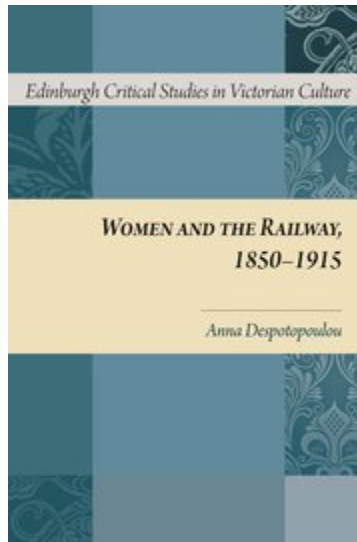


ISSUE 12.1 (SPRING 2016)



**Gender in (Loco)Motion**

[Women and the Railway, 1850-1915](#). Anna Despotopoulou. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015. 202 pp.

Reviewed by [Lois Burke](#), Edinburgh Napier University

<1>'She had a compartment to herself in the train from London to Morningside Park, and she sat with both her feet on the seat in an attitude that would certainly have distressed her mother to see, and horrified her grandmother beyond measure; she sat with her knees up to her chin and her hands clasped before them, and she was so lost in thought that she discovered with a start, from a lettered lamp, that she was at Morningside Park, and thought she was moving out of the station, whereas she was only moving in.'[\(1\)](#)

<2>This brief description encapsulates a micro history of women's social conduct on the railway; in various ways H. G. Wells's eponymous heroine Ann Veronica epitomises the feminist *fin-de-siècle* railway fantasy. Yet as Anna Despotopoulou highlights, railway travel for women was not always such a liberating experience.

<3>Despotopoulou's book presents a multi-faceted view of women's experience on railways. Building on seminal studies on the Victorian public's relationship with the

railway such as Wolfgang Schivelbusch's *The Railway Journey* (1977) and Michael Freeman's *Railways and the Victorian Imagination* (1999), and more recent studies such as Wendy Parkins's *Mobility and Modernity in Women's Novels, 1850s – 1930s* (2009), Despotopoulou's book provides a much-needed focus on the gender relations inherent in the experience of working and being a passenger on the railway. As a newly invented mode of transport (mechanised rail transport systems first appeared in England in the 1820s) men, women, and their relation to the industrial system were being continually redefined. Although there are arguments to define the train carriage as a kind of non-space (Marc Augé has suggested that the hotel or the supermarket for instance fit into this category), in the nineteenth century existing gender relations had to be defined in an entirely new space in a context which evoked the public and the private; two categories whose contradistinction was upheld by Victorian society.<sup>(2)</sup> The author suggests that the railway was a space to consolidate gender roles as well as challenge the separate spheres and expose the fallibility of such distinctions.

<4>The male skilled workforce involved in rail transportation in the burgeoning industrial era meant that women were largely excluded from the employment opportunities brought by the railway. Despotopoulou writes in chapter one, 'Geographies of Fear in the Age of Sensation', that women were 'rendered vulnerable by a presumed ineptitude' (18). Victorian women's lack of engineering knowledge, combined with their obligation to uphold societal morality on-board, limited their scope for power in the railway context, confirming it as a male realm. Moreover, the railway was an environment for incidents of sexual violence. Despotopoulou highlights the charges of rape which took place in the latter part of the century, which were fetishized in the anonymously published pornographic text *Rape on The Railway* (1984).<sup>(3)</sup> Before the innovation of corridors between carriages, the train compartment was a site of threat which lasted for the duration of the journey.

<5>Further alienating women from the exciting promises of the railway – chiefly the licence to travel widely and quickly – the author criticises the discourse which still sentimentally associated women with a pre-industrialised idyll. Despotopoulou exposes the argument that women were incompatible with the increasing modernising era because of their biology.

<6>These troublesome and complex representations are of course manifested in the literature of the period. Despotopoulou's analysis is largely literary – she cites George Gissing's *The Odd Women* (1893) as a fictional example of a sexual liaison on a railway which is consensual but morally dubious on both sides. Despotopoulou's examination of understudied mid-century female writers is particularly enlightening. She takes a long-awaited critical reading of Flora Annie Steel in chapter three, 'Breaching National Borders: Rail Travel in Europe and Empire,' comparing her to Rudyard Kipling in terms

of writing style. Prefaced with a geographical account of colonial India and Canada, the author goes on to study masculinities and out-of-place Britishness in these places which have growing railway networks.

<7>Despotopoulou also casts a critical eye over Rhoda Broughton, Dora Russell and Margaret Oliphant's female protagonists. Oliphant, presented as a largely conservative writer, wrote an uncharacteristic short story entitled 'The Story of a Wedding Tour' (1898). About to embark on her wedding tour in France via train, the protagonist takes another train in order to escape her new husband. Ten years later, the separated two pass each other on different trains, leading the abandoned husband to suffer a stroke and die from the shock encounter. The woman's life is described as being like a 'locomotive' or 'the railway' in terms of its changefulness, its pace.<sup>(4)</sup> The discursive meaning of the railway alternates between freedom and mobility for protagonist Janey but also her ultimate guilt at avoiding marital submission. The depiction of women varies between the trio of women writers that the author focuses on. Yet a commonality is their focus on female subjectivity, on the way in which the railway is a crux of the narrative. The railway changes and challenges these women in a nuanced way.

<8>Contrast this with Henry James's often disparaging portrayal of people's relationship to the railway, describing commuters as 'thrust mannekin[s]' in his essay 'Criticism' (1891). In her study of the London underground in James's fiction, Despotopoulou highlights his portrayal of the tube as a 'libidinal space' (85) which creates opportunities for romantic encounters due to the close proximity of men and women. One of James's male characters moves closer to the object of his attraction, something made possible by the newly implemented mode of transport. But with the underground comes the associated imagery of the depths of hell and the morality to complement its denizens. Like a dual gendered utopia/dystopia, Despotopoulou shows that ideology prevails in these ill-defined spaces.

<9>However the author does not fully elaborate on what these often-prefaced 'non' or 'transitory' spaces mean in Victorian society's increasingly modernised everyday life. Despotopoulou's critique invites inquiry into what these non-spaces mean in terms of their demarcation as either public or private. As the railway occupies both categories, it blurs the lines between the two in other social contexts. But the author does highlight how in James's characters, particularly Maisie, liberation and cosmopolitanism is experienced as a result of the railway's industrialisation, twinned with an unavoidable sense of uprootedness.<sup>(5)</sup> In a later chapter, Henry's brother William James's theories of psychology in relation to the train are touched upon, alongside Freud's train analogy of free association.<sup>(6)</sup>

<10>The book then examines Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* (1895), a novel punctuated by a sense of journeying and gendered interactions. Despotopoulou

highlights Sue Bridehead's oxymoronic remark that the train station, the hub of outward passage, replaces the cathedral as the new centre of urban life. So the train affects religious norms as well as sexual morals in changing British society. But she associates women with 'organic' time, as opposed to mechanised time, which is something industrial and inherently masculinised.

<11>Following her texts chronologically, Despotopoulou concludes that as the century ended, women writers increasingly depicted the inevitable patriarchal regime of railway time and travel. After various examples of women rebelling against the structures of the railway, it is rather surprising that the author has a pessimistic view of the railway in this period. Perhaps it is actually rather progressive for female authors to write so openly and critically about these institutions and ideologies that seek to contain them. Despotopoulou argues that many of these narratives do not depict the 'fearless mobility' described by others. However, the author makes an excellent case in point with her example of a George Egerton story entitled 'Virgin Soil' (1894), about a woman who is sexually abused by her new husband on the train, and later blames her mother for her ignorance regarding marital relations. In a metaphorical gesture, the woman goes back to the station, the site of her abuse, and takes a train in the 'opposite direction' (175). It seems strange that these stories regress to themes of sexual abuse on trains, which, as Despotopoulou highlights, was covered in the media in earlier decades.

<12>In *Women and the Railway's* coda, 'resistance' emerges as a key word. Despotopoulou suggests that women in the nineteenth century resisted the structures of mechanical time and any strictures on imagination that the logical industry of the railway perpetuated. In summary, it provided as many opportunities for women as it did limitations, but the creative afterlife of the former superseded the latter, as is evidenced in the narratives of many writers.

<13>For all of its focus on women's experience, one might argue that the book employs a limited interpretation of the group. Critical works which feature 'women' as the first word of the title invite critical investigation into the vastness and plurality of that group. Although she does acknowledge the differing treatments of poorer women and upper class women on the railway, Despotopoulou's use of the word is ostensibly limited to white, heterosexual women, mostly in their twenties. There are no examples of trans-women's experience of the railway, nor lesbian, nor non-white women; and with the exception of James's fictional girl Maisie, the text lacks an insight into the juvenile female experience of industrialisation and the railway. Of course this kind of study is dependent on the availability of the primary sources, but these inclusions would make for a fascinating and original insight. Although Despotopoulou presents excellent understanding and analysis of the literary narratives, she includes few citations of gender scholarship. The author's argument might usefully have drawn on recent assertions on queer identity and the history of LGBT rights. Nevertheless

Despotopoulou's study brings to light a fascinating and until-now forgotten fragment of gender history.

### Endnotes

(1)H. G. Wells, *Ann Veronica* (London: Penguin, 2005).[\(↑\)](#)

(2)Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. John Howe (London: Verso, 1995), 86.[\(↑\)](#)

(3)See Robin Barrow Nichols, 'Rape on the Railway: Women, Safety, and Moral Panic in Victorian Newspapers,' *Journal of Victorian Culture* vol 20 iss 3 (06/07/2015): 341-356.[\(↑\)](#)

(4)Margaret Oliphant, 'A Story of a Wedding Tour' *Nineteenth-Century Short Stories by Women*. Harriet Devine Jump (London: Routledge, 1998), 425-440.[\(↑\)](#)

(5)Henry James, *What Maisie Knew* (London: Penguin, 2010).[\(↑\)](#)

(6)For a history of Victorian Psychology, see Rick Rylance *Victorian Psychology and British Culture 1850-1880* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).[\(↑\)](#)