



ARTIFACTS

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Vauxhall Gardens in Frances Burney's *Evelina*

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Frances Burney's *Evelina* portrays a world where politeness, manners, and proper etiquette are very important. When *Evelina* first encounters Vauxhall Gardens, she has yet to believe that the place is anything but reputable, and she endeavors to express her satisfaction with some pleasure (Burney 218). This can lead modern readers to think that Vauxhall Gardens is a reputable place. Modern readers have, up to this point, experienced Vauxhall Gardens as a pretty place, but overly formal (216), that is open to visitors well into the evening. Perhaps modern readers are reminded of modern day botanical gardens, that are also often well-lit in the evenings. Though unlike Vauxhall Gardens, modern botanical gardens tend to only have orchestras during special occasions. This first impression may leave modern readers surprised when *Evelina* and the Miss Branghtons go to the dark walks and encounter the disagreeable people that they do, and with the promptness that the encounter occurs. In this instance, it would seem most important to not let the first impression be the final impression. It may be supposed that naive *Evelina* is unfamiliar with the full reputation of Vauxhall Gardens, and that the charm of the well-lit areas has left *Evelina* as unprepared for what the dark walks hold as modern readers. This would also raise the question of how well aware *Evelina*'s relations would have been to the varying attitudes toward Vauxhall Gardens, and what attitudes and understandings Burney's contemporaries had toward Vauxhall Gardens.



The River Thames was the most common way to travel to Vauxhall Gardens. For *Evelina*, seeing the Thames was one of the pleasures of visiting Vauxhall Gardens (216). As described by Archenholz, "Vauxhall Gardens are situated in a pleasant village of the same name on the banks of the Thames" (image number 182). Doody notes that "[t]he traditional way to go to Vauxhall was by water, but since the construction of Westminster Bridge in 1750 it was possible to go by land" (481). Though the bridge allowed people to travel by coach or by foot (Burney 216), and allowed people to avoid the water if they had a fear of water, there were disadvantages. It was "about two miles distant from Westminster-bridge" (Archenholz image number 182). Along with the time it would take to travel by horse drawn carriage, "those who attempted to travel by carriage could suffer the indignity of being caught in a traffic jam" (Conlin). Those traveling by water might be able to avoid the traffic jam, though the watermen at the barge would charge about nine-pence a head (*The Adventures of a Hackney Coach* image number 4). One would have to have the money to spare, not only for the travel cost, but also for the entrance fee. Admittance to Vauxhall Gardens was not free, though only one shilling was needed to pay for entrance (Archenholz image

number 182). This low admittance price meant that a person did not have to be greatly affluent to enter Vauxhall Gardens.

The orchestra of Vauxhall Gardens was one of the primary attractions that people went to visit. Combe describes the orchestra as offering a fine band of vocal and instrumental music (image number 147). Archenholz illustrates the orchestra as in the open air, “placed under an amphitheater, erected in form of a temple, surrounded with elegant porticoes, and brilliantly illuminated” (image number 182). It would seem that the orchestra was readily accessible to visitors. Boswell describes the “music, vocal and instrumental,” as “not too refined for the general ear” (image number 38). Labeling the songs as “not too refined” would seem to indicate that the songs were not about elevated themes, and instead would have themes common to the lives of the visitors. *The Vauxhall Concert* exhibits some of the themes that musicians would typically sing about at Vauxhall Gardens. “A New Song” sung at Vauxhall Gardens includes themes such as shepherds, nymphs, and swains (image number 7). “The Wanderer” portrays a woman waiting for the sound of her lover’s return (image number 8). Even though many songs were not of a too refined nature, occasions were taken to remove any of the songs that could be regarded as obscene, such as the “Collection of New Songs for the Year 1766”, in which great care was taken to omit all of the obscene songs from the book (Stevens image number 1). It would seem that the music helped to set the mood and atmosphere of Vauxhall Gardens for all the activities that the Gardens had to offer.

While guests would listen to the esteemed orchestra, “supper could be taken in the supper-boxes” (Doody 479). Carey writes that “[r]estaurants as we now know them did not exist in the mid-18th century, and the English middle classes found eating in public embarrassing at first. But ... they soon took to it.” In the instance that *Evelina* and her party had supper in one of the supper boxes, “[m]uch fault was found with everything ordered, though not a morsel of anything was left” (Burney 217). The fault that they found with the food could as easily be due to the disposition of the party to complain whether there was truly something worth complaining about or not, or the food quality could have been lacking in merits. The quality of the food at Vauxhall Gardens seems to have been rather a matter of opinion. Boswell depicts that there is “good eating and drinking for those that chose to purchase that regale” (image number 38). However, Leapman depicts the food as less than spectacular, and writes that “Samuel Pepys ... was the first of many to complain about the price of the food and drink.” Leapman also comments that “[l]ater critics of the catering maintained that the ham was sliced so thin you could read through it, and a single ham would cover the 12-acre site.” The thinness of the slices of ham became proverbial, and to the majority of visitors a shilling for a dish of ham was a high price to pay, downright exorbitant (Southworth 134). Southworth writes of one old gentleman, who with “every bite he put in his mouth, amused him-self with saying,—‘there goes two-pence,—there goes three-pence,—there goes a groat.—Zounds!’” (135) Along with supper, if the season was right, “[t]here were fruit trees, free for paying visitors to pick from, and punch, of course” (Long).

Along with the punch, wine and other alcoholic drinks were readily available at Vauxhall Gardens. It would seem that it was common practice to order wine after supper, and one woman told her husband, “We must have some wine, my dear ... or we shall not be looked upon you know” (Southworth 136). A wide variety of alcoholic drinks were offered, one of the waiters is depicted as offering “a bottle of champagne, or burgundy, or claret” (Southworth 136). Some people would merely sit and talk while they drank (*Yorick’s Jests* image number 37). However, as in any situation where there is prominent drinking, some people became rather rowdy. This was not helped by the fact that “[t]he punch of Vauxhall was famous for its potency” (Southworth 132). One man is depicted as trying to fight everyone, after too much punch had aroused his fistic propensities (128). Southworth summarizes how Joseph Sedley from *Vanity Fair* “mixed the punch which he alone drank; became boisterous, noisy, attracted scores of listeners to his box, and caused a general commotion until Dobbin got the party out of the gardens” (132). Brawls are said to have been frequent (30-31).

There was regularly a large crowd at Vauxhall Gardens and this large crowd allowed the opportunity to be alone amongst the masses, or to be one with the crowd. It was “not at all uncommon to see six thousand persons there at once” (Archenholz image number 182). There was an “incessant motion of the multitude” and a general “hum of their discourse” (Berquin image number 159). *The Explanation* discusses a fragile, young woman and how the bustle of noise and long walk around the orchestra of Vauxhall Gardens tires her. It is portrayed as if walking in Vauxhall Gardens would not have been tiring to most people. It would seem as if the bustle would have been stimulating for most, but for someone fragile, it is overwhelming (Lady image number 131). Though a public space, one might feel invisible in such a crowd, such that people alone together in the crowd were afforded opportunities for romance, an example of such given in *Persiana*, where one man tried to bring a woman that he esteemed to an immediate decision in his favor (image number 169). Conlin proposes that people that went to Vauxhall Gardens want to be seen, and writes that “[t]hroughout its history, Vauxhall’s main appeal lay in its ‘autovoyeurism’: the practice of seeing others and being seen by them.” Conlin further depicts that other public realms in London afford the same opportunity to see and be seen by other people while “under the cover of shopping, artistic and musical exhibitions, or divine service,” but that it was a central activity at Vauxhall Gardens. “Autovoyeurism was ... indulged in consciously and deliberately by men and women of different generations and social classes. It was closely associated with role play and illusion” (Conlin). In this instance, it would seem that people were getting their entertainment from a public space, not only from the entertainment provided, but also the entertainment of seeing how other people were reacting to it. If people were viewing others for entertainment, then it would seem that they were aware that they would equally be a source of entertainment for others.

Conlin writes, “Pleasure gardens such as Vauxhall are regularly cited as typifying a nascent public sphere, one identified with the commodification of culture and the rise of the ‘middling rank.’” It would seem that people were getting used to associating the idea of things with status. Clothing and fashion were important aspects of the socializing at Vauxhall Gardens, and was frequently commented on. Being considered fashionable was associated with being a respectable person. “The company was numerous and respectable, comprising many persons of fashion; and upon the whole the fete passed off with considerable *éclat*” (*The European magazine* image number 569). The focus on fashion is seconded by Berquin, writing, “[t]he crowd of men and women ... were ... elegantly dressed” (image number 159). People that were considered to be of the lower class who would go to Vauxhall “always dress themselves in their best, and thus endeavor to copy the great” (Southworth 112). “Class distinctions were forgotten when there was no need for them to be remembered” (Southworth 119), especially when everyone was dressed fashionably. It would seem that people were getting used to the idea that there could be a loosening of some of the traditional social barriers and these looser standards became a norm for Vauxhall Gardens.

There were frequently people that did not feel inhibited about expressing themselves to people that they were attracted to. “Flirtations were an accepted part of the evening’s entertainment” (Southworth 119). As previously mentioned, alcoholic drinks were readily available, and this would help to lower inhibitions. Some of the men and women liked the feeling of being invisible in the large crowds that frequented Vauxhall Gardens. Not only could they get lost in the crowd, but those inclined young people would often take their flirtations to the close walks of the Gardens (14). “If a suitable inducement offered itself in the guise of a handsome young man” (37), a young woman would seek to escape her mother in the walks between walks. These areas were like an intricate maze, where the young men and women would meet and mutually guide one another with the aim of losing their way (14). “Much to the joy of the young people, the windings and turnings in the little wilderness were so intricate that the most experienced mothers often lost themselves in looking for their daughters” (14). Some flirtations were harmless, with the women treating men with pleased disdain, and then parting in mutual hopes of a second interview in the Garden (27). Other incidents were also harmless, such as a man intending to let a woman know his mind, but his courage failed him and “he could only muster up courage enough to say that it was a fine place for lovers to walk” (121). Other incidents depict that women in the Garden were not too safe (11), such as when “a

lady with her daughters [were] attacked ... rudely by a set of wild ruffians" (122).

Vauxhall Gardens had many things that attracted people, and perhaps "most notorious were the dark walks in the outer reaches of the gardens away from the concerts and fireworks" (Long). In Keats' "To a Lady Seen for a Few Moments at Vauxhall", the speaker experiences infatuation with a beautiful woman, "but many experiences of these dark walks were more sinister than his ode describes, and the behaviour of certain young men began to win the gardens the wrong kind of reputation" (Long). Sometimes the prostitutes at Vauxhall Gardens would proposition the men, such as described by Addison, "a Masque ... gave him a gentle Tap upon the Shoulder, and asked him if he would drink a Bottle of Mead with her? But the Knight, being startled at so unexpected a Familiarity ... bid her go about her Business." Other men would seek out those women, one example given by Spencer, who writes, "Pepys ... reveals that he went to the Gardens to meet the prostitutes who plied their trade there." It would seem that the dark walks at Vauxhall Gardens were so well established as a place for prostitution that any women found in the dark walks would readily be assumed to be prostitutes, and any men found in the dark walks could reasonably be assumed to be looking to associate with those women.

Taylor portrays the way that at least one person condemned the activities and social behavior at Vauxhall Gardens. He comments on people at Vauxhall as "instead of being employed in lawful recreations, being useful to ... your fellow-creatures... you lavish away your time going to the Park" (image number 13). If critics wanted to condemn Vauxhall Gardens, they would have their pick of things to condemn. It would seem that critics would also gladly bring up that "[b]efore the 1730s, pleasure gardens were regarded as dangerous, disreputable, and therefore unfashionable" (Brewer 60), and further, the people that would frequent such places were regarded similarly, "neither polite nor respectable" (Brewer 60). Though this generally changes over the decades, with Vauxhall Gardens gaining "prominence as a tourist attraction" (Brewer 186), the critics would likely condemn the things that made Vauxhall Gardens attractive as a tourist destination: the dark walks, the flirtations, the drunken behaviors, to name a few.

The Branghtons, Mr. Smith, and others in *Evelina*'s party are enthused about visiting Vauxhall Gardens, and Miss Branghton says that she likes the place because "it is not vulgar" (Burney 218), and Mr. Branghton thinks that it will be a treat for *Evelina* to visit (218). However, *Evelina* would not find this to be much of a recommendation, as she finds her taste to differ from theirs. In the instances at Vauxhall Gardens, she found herself in situations that confirmed those differing opinions, starting with the manner that Mr. Smith interacts with her. Burney's contemporaries would likely see that Mr. Smith could have had hopes that the atmosphere of Vauxhall Gardens would have an influence on *Evelina*, and that the atmosphere and power of the situation might prime her to treat him more favorably. It would seem that he may have hoped that the other flirtations happening around them, and those flirtations being perceived as entertaining, would soften her disposition to his endeavors to attach himself to her. He may have also hoped that the wine after dinner would help to soften her disposition to him as well, though his hopes were in vain.

Burney's contemporaries would have understood that it is a bad idea for the Miss Branghtons and *Evelina* to go to the dark walks. It would seem that the Miss Branghtons think the idea of the dark walks to be exciting, whereas *Evelina* was naive and didn't really know what she was getting into. The Miss Branghtons' reasons to go to the dark walks seems rather childish, as if they intend on a sort of hide and seek game, "we'll hide ourselves, and then Mr. Brown will think we are lost" (218). The Miss Branghtons seem to be familiar with Vauxhall Gardens, and they should have had a good idea about the type of company they would wind up mingling with, and the dangers that could be present there. It would seem that this merely added to the excitement of it.

Sir Clement Willoughby seems to be rather familiar with Vauxhall Gardens, including the dark walks. He

addresses the men that harass Evelina with familiarity, and seems to have an established authority with them in the situation. It would seem that in leading Evelina off to where they would be least observed (221), he assumes that Evelina is at the dark walks for the same reason as he is. In this instance, it would seem that he thinks Evelina is one of the young women that hide from their protectors in the dark walks in search of romance. As a man familiar with the dark walks, he would have been intending on either engaging the attentions of a young woman seeking romance, or spending time with one of the prostitutes of the dark walks. He would have been pleased to think that his intentions and Evelina's had finely aligned. When Evelina persuades him that she is merely lost, it is to his credit that he behaves as he does, and does not take advantage of the situation and their seclusion.

By the end of Burney's scene at Vauxhall Gardens, modern readers would be well aware that Vauxhall is not like modern day botanical gardens. At Vauxhall Gardens, people sought the company of other people. Whether it was enjoying supper with one's own party; meeting and flirting with a lovely person of the opposite sex; enjoying the performers in the orchestra; viewing the fashions of others; or having others to watch one make a spectacle of oneself, Vauxhall Gardens was a public sphere for people to interact. Vauxhall Gardens was a place for people to be with other people.

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