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Vice in Vauxhall: Debauchery and the Pleasure Garden, 1730-1770

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On the 21st of April, 1749, George Frederic Handel rehearsed his ill-fated fireworks display at the Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens. It was a spectacle for all of London: "A thousand twenty five coaches passed the Turnpike that Morning, in their way thither," causing a roadblock that lasted for hours on the London Bridge.¹ Drawing thousands of visitors was nothing new for Lambeth's most popular attraction. Vauxhall appealed to a wide array of people in eighteenth-century London and the Pleasure Garden itself habitually drew people from all around the metropolis. As court life offered little entertainment, many

looked elsewhere for places to spend their leisure time. Luckily for the Gardens, the English gentry and aristocracy had a preference for entertainment in the open air, and soon after the Restoration, probably in 1661, the Vauxhall New Spring Gardens were opened. Initially, there was no fee to this meager collection of trees on the rural south bank of the River Thames, but it would mushroom into one of the pre-eminent attractions of London. As such, it is of much interest for those wishing to explore the social dynamics of London and ascertain who, precisely, dictated social mores around London.

Curiously, however, many authors skirt over an issue central to our knowledge of the operation of this Pleasure Gar-

¹ "London Intelligence", *Whitehall Evening Post or London Intelligencer*, April 25, 1749.

den: the way debauchery looked and operated there.² As a location where significant social intermingling occurred, Vauxhall reveals much about the negotiated nature of acceptable comportment. Unfortunately most have concentrated on the development of the Gardens and the personality of Jonathan Tyres in his roles as master of ceremonies and proprietor at the expense of this analysis. Warwick W. Wroth and Arthur E. Wroth's *The London Pleasure Gardens of the Eighteenth Century* is a quintessential example of early scholarship on the development of the Pleasure Garden from its inception to its closure.³ They further contextualize Vauxhall among all other pleasure gardens they discovered, sixty-five in total. Others have contributed a more focused view. Walter Scott's *Green Retreats* explores the history of the Gardens, but also addresses the problem of access and publicity to which Wroth and Wroth do not devote much attention.⁴ T. J. Edelstein's *Vauxhall Gardens* beings where Scott's account left off, detailing the pecuniary aspects of the Gardens, especially as they related to the regulation of space.⁵ Specifically, Edelstein argues, the proprietors of the Gardens had to carefully balance polite respectability and its reputation of overt sexuality in order to be successful. Indeed, that the Gardens stayed open for so long hints at its success. Miles Ogborn's *Spaces of Modernity* features a chapter on the Gardens as a cultural and social geography.⁶ Ogborn sees Vauxhall principally as a spectacle of consumption wherein a person could show off their politeness or become more polite by osmosis. Indeed, in an era where leisure time was a key indicator of high social standing, it is thoroughly unsurprising that many sought to consume leisure time in as public a manner as possible. More recently, David Coke and Alan Borg's incisive and authoritative *Vauxhall Gardens: A History* examines not only the owners and patrons of the Gardens, but also the geography, art, and music that so captivated thousands of visitors.⁷ P. J. Corfield's *Vauxhall: Sex and Entertainment* stresses the problems manage-

ment faced with maintaining public interest without giving in to debauchery.⁸

The proprietors certainly wanted to make money and thus relied on cultivating respectability at the same time as encouraging some less-than-polite behavior. Vauxhall relied first and foremost on very wealthy and famous gentry to encourage many of the middling sorts to attend. Tyres thus faced a very difficult conundrum: if they attempted to cultivate an image of polite respectability, as did their chief competitor Ranelagh, they would preclude the attendance of many of those who bought tickets and contributed to Vauxhall's monetary success. However, if the Gardens was a site of too much libertine debauchery, the gentry would take their business elsewhere and a chief incentive for many to come to Vauxhall would be no more. Part of Tyres's response was a price increase, which in many cases prevented poor and middling sorts from attending on nights when important people had planned to see the Gardens. Historians have detailed this problem extensively and further demonstrated how the proprietors of the Gardens responded – successfully or no – to them.⁹ There is, strangely, as of yet no reflection on precisely *whom* owners identified as the cause of these problems. Were these problems the conduct of drunken gentry after one too many of the notorious and heady Vauxhall rum punch or a more systematic penetration of middling individuals – or the owners themselves – into a space frequented by those with deep pockets and polite sensibilities?¹⁰ If the former is the case, then the policing of polite sensibilities by bourgeois individuals flips the typical police of comportment on its head.¹¹ If the latter, then the actions of proprietors betray a sort of social inertia on their part, but also indicate that middling Londoners were quite keen to access (and hence denature) the spaces of polite Londoners, if not to disrupt the

2 In this essay, “debauchery” refers to acts that would normally call into question a person's polite reputation. In Vauxhall, this was largely limited to loud and lewd suggestions – frequently sexual – that arose from Vauxhall's very potent punch. The “flashing” of erogenous zones was relatively common, as were flirtation and kissing, but we have no evidence that sexual intercourse ever took place in the gardens. All the above activities would have called into question the respectability of a Londoner to some extent.

3 Warwick William Wroth and Arthur Edgar Wroth, *The London Pleasure Gardens of the Eighteenth Century* (London: Macmillan, 1979).

4 Walter Sidney Scott, *Green Retreats: The Story of Vauxhall Gardens, 1661-1859* (London: Odhams Press, 1955).

5 T. J. Edelstein and Brian Allen, *Vauxhall Gardens* (New Haven: Yale Center for British Art, 1983).

6 Miles Ogborn, *Spaces of Modernity: London's Geographies, 1680-1780* (London: Guilford Press, 1998), 116-157.

7 David Coke and Alan Borg, *Vauxhall Gardens: A History* (London: Yale University Press for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 2011).

8 P. J. Corfield, *Vauxhall: Sex and Entertainment: London's Pioneering Urban Pleasure Garden* (London: History & Social Action Publication, 2012).

9 See for example Corfield, *Vauxhall*, 11; Edelstein, *Vauxhall Gardens*, 25; Coke and Borg, *Vauxhall Gardens*, 220; and Wroth and Wroth, *The London Pleasure Gardens of the Eighteenth Century*, 292.

10 Politeness was a court culture in this period, reserved principally for aristocracy and gentry who were in many cases *de facto* polite regardless of their conduct. It replaced sixteenth-century discourses of civility and showed significant imbrications with respectability, decorum, and decency. Near the end of the seventeenth century, many found politeness too affected and the concept of sensibility came into vogue. By the reign of Queen Victoria, the idea of respectability became the norm for the higher classes of London.

11 Police in this essay will refer to proprietors' attempts to control behavior in Vauxhall. Police in London during the 18th century was inherently decentralized. Many historians cast the aristocracy as the arbiters of polite comportment in our period, but the aristocracy, attempting to avoid charges of French absolutism, frequently allowed much lewd behavior for the sake of free will. Police then appears as a communal (though not entirely equitable) force in Vauxhall.

cultural hegemony of the landed aristocracy. This essay argues that Tyres's control of polite comportment in his gardens complicates the traditional narrative historians weave. By controlling the behavior of all in his gardens, he in some cases replaced the aristocracy as the exemplars of politeness.

This essay concerns itself most with Vauxhall during its rise and apogee. In 1728, Jonathan Tyres secured a lease for the New Spring Gardens at Vauxhall from Elizabeth Masters for £250 per annum, and in the coming decades would renovate and market the Gardens to make it a pioneering location that ranked among Westminster, the Tower of London, and St. Paul's as a visitor attraction.¹² Subsequent purchases by Tyres in 1752 and 1758 culminated in his becoming the sole proprietor of the Gardens. Shortly after securing the initial lease from Masters, Tyres organized a *Ridotto al Fresco* – an Italian-style carnival and ball – to celebrate the reopening of his Gardens. Over 400 of London's finest turned up to his *Ridotto*, which cost one pound, significantly more than the normal one-shilling admittance fee.¹³ This was a special event designed to cement the respectability of Vauxhall in the minds of aristocrats and was especially crucial to the success of the Gardens given its previous reputation. From 1661 until Tyres took over, Vauxhall was infamous for its debauchery. Some even went so far as to liken it to an outdoor brothel.¹⁴ Tyres had to work within the confines of this image; the sexual seductiveness of the site itself was one of the chief reasons many attended. Yet the *Ridotto* demonstrates Tyres's wish to make Vauxhall a polite space. From this Italian-style ball until his death in 1767, he worked tirelessly to balance the specter of libertine sexuality with the requisite respectability the nobility expected. In some sense this was a never-ending battle, but Tyres and his employees devised several ways to secure the politeness of the Gardens while concurrently hinting that they were places where one could get away with a moderate amount of debauchery. The very existence of the Dark Walk (or Druid's Walk) on the southernmost edge of the Garden evoked a sexuality prohibited from the light of London. After Tyres's death, Vauxhall began a slow descent into ignominy and financial hardship, closing finally in 1859. This study focuses on the high years of Vauxhall under Tyres, 1730-1770, in order to observe the Gardens when it had its largest impact on, and representation of, London society. But in order to understand the police of Vauxhall, one must first comprehend the space of the Pleasure Garden itself.

The main entrance to Vauxhall was on the west side of the complex. A gate revealed a 900 foot long Grand Walk

that terminated (for the period that concerns us) with a statue of Aurora, goddess of the dawn. Two walks ran parallel to the Grand Walk. One came to be known as the Italian Walk and was framed by three Triumphal Arches. On the very south side of the garden was the Druid's Walk or Dark Walk. While much of the Gardens would have been dark, by 1750 lights embellished the trees almost everywhere except the Dark Walk making it a choice location for those seeking less respectable entertainment. Other walks ran perpendicular to these three and were called cross-walks. Yet the architectural facets of the Garden were at least an equal draw for visitors. On the far west side of the Garden facing east and looking down the Italian Walk was the Prince's Pavilion, named after Frederick, Prince of Wales, a frequent visitor and landlord of Vauxhall. Just to its southwest was the Gothic Piazza, which included spaces for those wishing to dine in the Gardens. In the middle of the Gothic Piazza stood a statue of Handel, fashioned as Apollo playing a lyre, facing the orchestra building.

Erected in 1751, the Orchestra stood in the middle of a well-lit grove surrounded by trees. The grove was the locus of polite entertainment in the Garden and many of its most respectable visitors spent time there. Other visitors were more content to walk among the trees, admire the *trompe l'oeuil* paintings, and gossip as the music echoed along the boulevards. On the other side of the grove, facing south towards the Orchestra and considerably larger than the Gothic Piazza, was the Temple of Comus, renamed the Chinese Pavilions after renovation in 1751, evoking an Orientalist architecture that further complicated the intriguing mix of Classical, Gothic, and nascent Baroque styles. Attached to the west end of the Chinese Pavilions was the Great Room, Rotunda, or Music Room. It was here the orchestra would play during rainy weather, though many would also dine in the Great Room in these circumstances, as spaces in the Chinese Pavilion, Prince's Pavilion, and Gothic Piazza reserved for refreshments were leaky. Both dining boxes and the Music Room featured paintings to embellish their looks. While those in the Music Room were of a significantly grander scale, those in dining booths tended to show every-day activities that required very little interpretation by the contemporary visitor. While these paintings were clearly indicative of the climate Tyres tried to cultivate, they also provided social cues to those dining in or walking past the booths.

It appears that food was in some respects the most expensive part of entertainment, but this was crucially a factor that did not exclude people from participating in the spectacle that was Vauxhall.¹⁵ While some middling sorts did purchase refreshments in the gardens, it was the admittance charge that likely constituted the largest expense. Yet this charge was remarkably little for many, staying at one shilling from 1730-70 and beyond. Certain events required a more discerning clientele and entrance fees rose accordingly, chiefly to preclude middling individuals, as occurred – somewhat unsuccessfully

12 P. J. Grosley, *A Tour to London: Or, New Observations of England and its Inhabitants* (Dublin: Exshaw et. al., 1772), 171.

13 "By Desire of Several Persons of Quality and Distinction", *Daily Journal*, June 17, 1732.

14 Thomas Brown, *The Third Volume of the Works of Mr. Thomas Brown, Containing, Amusements Serious & Comical, Calculated for the Meridian of London* (London: Bragg, 1708), 51.

15 John Trusler, *The London Adviser and Guide* (London: Trusler, 1786), 163.

– during Handel’s firework music rehearsal referred to at the opening of this essay. As Handel’s concert demonstrates, if the entertainment was enticing enough, middling individuals could and did scrape together enough money to attend. For exceedingly polite events, tickets had to be purchased in advance to ensure all those in attendance were of a sufficiently respectable sensibility to fit the occasion. While the vast majority of entertainments at Vauxhall were open to the wealthy, gentry, and middling sorts, the very poor were excluded in almost all cases. Lack of leisure time, the costs associated with travelling to Vauxhall, and entrance fees compounded to preclude the entry of ignominiously impolite individuals.

Vauxhall was not the easiest place in the metropolis to access, but nor was it the hardest. Located along the south bank of the Thames about two miles southwest of the City of London and south and a bit east of Westminster, early travelers like Pepys took boats across the Thames to visit the Gardens. This could take anywhere between 20 and 50 minutes, depending on traffic on the river and the speed and skill of the oarsmen. On special occasions, landing on the south bank were precarious as many boats jostled to land first.¹⁶ Boat rides were expensive, preventing the more middling sorts from attending, so to counteract the issue of access, Tyres occasionally rented out boats to carry visitors across the Thames at specified intervals to alleviate traffic and encourage visitors. With the opening of the Westminster Bridge in 1750, the most polite segments of society theoretically had significantly easier access, as it required only a coach – which many gentry and aristocracy possessed partially as status symbols – to reach the Gardens.¹⁷ But possession of coaches was not limited to aristocrats: it was the merchants and their guests coming from the City of London that caused so prodigious a traffic jam on London Bridge in 1749, as most gentry probably came by boat to Vauxhall for Handel’s rehearsal. Initially, Vauxhall was not particularly urban: its rural nature was a chief draw for many in its earlier years, as the gentry doubtless enjoyed the similarities to their country estates and merchants, traders, and even middling individuals could appreciate, if not articulate, the budding romanticist implications of the wide open spaces Vauxhall offered. Tyres was therefore cautious not to obstruct the view of the surrounding rural areas from Vauxhall and elected to secure the perimeter of the gardens with only a ha-ha, or small ditch that could easily be climbed over. Indeed, on May 12, 1769, a man was caught sneaking into the gardens over the ha-ha and was caged for the rest of the night by guards employed by Jonathan Tyres the younger, the proprietor of Vauxhall after his father’s death.¹⁸ Eventually, the view of the Gardens was compromised by London’s relentless urban expansion and iron bars were placed up

around the perimeter of the gardens, though this occurred after our period.

While a few tried to sneak in, most came in legally. By paying a shilling at the main entrance to the west of the Gardens, entrance was granted. In cases where large crowds were anticipated, Tyres opened up two more entrances manned by employees to ease traffic and visitors were instructed as to at which entrance they ought to present themselves. There were frequently restrictions on how one could dress and a violation of these sartorial mores would preclude entrance. During the opening *Ridotto* in 1732, for instance, no admittance could be offered for gentlemen wearing swords or masks.¹⁹ For this event, the attendees were doubtless incredibly polite, so swords as a status marker indicating high military rank would largely be superfluous and given the potency of Vauxhall’s punch, could prove dangerous. Masks, enjoyed by many in polite society during masquerades, prevented as open an interchange as between people without masks. Tyres seemed committed to showcase the newly respectable nature of his Gardens, but he did so here by policing the behavior of *polite* society. This is exceptionally interesting given that many of the attendees were the traditional arbiters of politeness. Tyres, by giving cues as to appropriate dress in order to cast his Gardens in the best light possible, became the judge of polite comportment in Vauxhall, an inversion of authority over politeness. Four years later, Tyres was still cultivating the veneer of politeness he kicked off at the *Ridotto*. In a 1736 advertisement, he states that he would not longer be offering admission to the gardens by ticket, as servants appeared to have been abusing their roles in purchasing entry and in so doing allowing many to access the Gardens who, in Tyres’s estimation, were “not fit to intermix with those persons of quality, ladies, gentlemen and others”.²⁰ While there is certainly a capitalist bent to this declaration, there is a cultural one as well. The Gardens relied on the patronage of polite London to induce many to come, and it was them who Tyres first tried to protect.

His strategy was a resounding success. Vauxhall in the late 1730s and 1740s counted the illustrious Frederick, Prince of Wales and his wife among their patrons. Newspapers commonly proclaimed the attendance of the Prince and Princess of Wales along with several of their polite entourage in Vauxhall and unfailingly claimed that the concerned parties had enjoyed themselves during their visit.²¹ Throughout this period, Tyres appeared relatively *laissez-faire* in his attitude toward the rich. Rather than policing their behavior or suggesting polite mores to them at his Gardens through newspapers, he chose to lionize the Prince of Wales and the company he kept as paragons of politeness. There was clearly a commercial impetus for this

16 Coke and Borg, *Vauxhall Gardens*, 8.

17 Peculiarly enough, many gentry even after the opening of Westminster Bridge chose to come by water instead of coach in order to enjoy the journey there and to conspicuously consume leisure time.

18 “London”, *Public Advertiser*, May 12, 1769.

19 See note 10.

20 “London”, *Daily Gazetteer*, June 7, 1736.

21 See *Read’s Weekly Journal or British Gazetteer*, July 8, 1738; “London”, *London Daily Post and General Advertiser*, June 4, 1743; “London”, *Daily Post*, May 21, 1744; “London”, *Daily Post*, August 27, 1745.

— that one might see the Prince of Wales at Vauxhall was doubtless a significant draw to those outside of court culture. Yet a trend toward the lauding of politeness as opposed to the punishment of its opposite was present as well. To encourage his patronage and thank him for his attendance and good humor as a landlord, Mr. Arne, a musician at Vauxhall dedicated an ode to the Prince and Princess of Wales on August 24, 1745, causing the Gardens to be open past their regular hours.²² Arne and Tyres needed to thank Frederick for his business of course, but they also needed to celebrate his personality for less pecuniary reasons. Vauxhall relied on not only the presence of polite individuals, but their proper conduct within the Gardens and Frederick provided the perfect personality whose conduct visitors would follow. While the aristocracy were practically polite by virtue of being aristocracy, and little they ever did could preclude them from respectability, many still sought to penetrate into higher social circles and the Prince of Wales was for some the highest one could potentially reach. While the rich did not go to Vauxhall to seem more polite — this occurred much more at Ranelagh or in small social gatherings and, albeit later and almost exclusively for men, in clubs — Tyres employed the celebrity of the Prince as a way to dictate the norms he expected to see at his Gardens from all segments of society. When the Prince died in 1751, Tyres organized a dirge on his death and charged an inflated price of 2s 6d for entrance. At this price, fewer could gain access, further cementing the respectability of the Gardens at an event to mourn the death of so polite an individual.

Inflated prices were not abnormal at Vauxhall. Only a year before his death, a concert celebrated the Prince and Princess of Wales there and because of the respectable nature of the attendees to whom the concert was dedicated, there was a price increase to half a pound. This price put it firmly outside the realm of access to all but successful merchants and nobility, but Tyres took no precautions and only admitted people with tickets. Although tickets could be bought at several locations around London, buying a ticket took time, further limiting the number of those who could attend and *de facto* casting it as a space for polite entertainment.²³ Morning entertainments also grew increasingly common at Vauxhall, but Tyres could not tolerate any debauchery in the daytime, and usual morning concerts required a 2s 6d admittance fee.²⁴ The ideological reason should be obvious by now: Tyres wished to cultivate a respectable image by attracting the custom of polite Londoners and concerts helped accomplish this goal. It is here we begin to see Tyres's techniques for generating business at work. That concerts often occurred on Wednesday mornings also betrays an economic bent to his decision to increase the price. Those who did not have significant leisure time — the customers he

relied on most for evening entertainments — would be at work. This price change then was also a way for Tyres to increase the price while not deterring too many from attending. The morning entertainment eventually bled into the evening as well: on June 6, 1758, The Governors of the Lock Hospital dined at Vauxhall for a very successful charity night that raised £100 p. a. and Tyres and his staff that night served four hundred of London's most discerning and respectable individuals, including nobility, gentry, and "most of the foreign ministers."²⁵ A similar event occurred in 1764, when a great personage desired to see Vauxhall, and tickets were distributed at select locations around the metropolis for the purpose of attending.²⁶ On a typical night, the admittance price of one shilling was advertised in newspapers around London and when special events occurred they were as well, so those who planned on coming to Vauxhall any given night knew precisely what was expected of them and if they could get in.²⁷

A price increase in some cases excluded the middle classes, but it was also the selling of tickets throughout London and the consequent consumption of leisure time that prohibited many from even attempting to buy tickets to very respectable events. Only shops known for their polite or quasi-polite cultures served as hubs for the sale of tickets to special nights at Vauxhall, and typical locations included the Star and Garter Tavern in Pall Mall, Will's Coffee-house by the Admiralty, George's Coffee-house near Temple-Bar, Mr. Sheepey's Bookseller under the Royal-Exchange, and Vauxhall itself — reinforcing the polite nature of the Gardens.²⁸ This exclusionary practice was the case for another *Ridotto al Fresco* in 1769, this one after Jonathan Tyres the elder's death. Clearly evoking the initial *Ridotto* that placed Vauxhall firmly on the map of polite London, this *Ridotto* entailed an increase in ticket price, to the familiar figure of half a pound with the added insurance of mandatory tickets.²⁹ This *Ridotto*, like its predecessor, was styled as a ball and concert and promised an evening full of entertainment. Tyres the younger clearly learned something from his father's techniques, for to cultivate respectability and equalize the company of guests, an advertisement encouraged visitors to dress as was customary for assemblies and posited that no masks would be permitted. Again the mores of Vauxhall's polite entertainment provided an explicit cue to nobility and merchants as to what was and was not acceptable on their grounds. Politeness was as encouraged as usual in Vauxhall, even if the Gardens had lost their great proprietor.

This concern over polite culture can perhaps be most clearly discerned through a comparison between two seasons: that of 1759 and that of 1760, both under the direction of

25 "London", *Public Advertiser*, June 9, 1758.

26 "Articles of Intelligence from the Postscript of the Craftsman", *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser*, May 12, 1764.

27 See for example "Spring-Gardens, Vauxhall", *Public Advertiser*, August 2, 1765.

28 See note 23.

29 "Spring-Gardens, Vauxhall", *Public Advertiser*, May 6, 1769.

22 "Spring-Gardens, Vauxhall", *General Advertiser*, August 24, 1745.

23 "By Command of the Royal Highnesses the Prince and Princess of Wales", *General Advertiser*, April 23, 1750.

24 "Spring-Gardens, Vauxhall", *General Advertiser*, April 29 1751.

Jonathan Tyres the elder. A May 15, 1759 announcement proclaimed that the Gardens would open the next day and each person would be obliged to pay “two shillings for coming in; and in order to preserve the requisite Decorum, no disorderly Women can possibly be admitted.”³⁰ That these two thoughts are so closely linked they literally become articulated in the same sentence is remarkable. Women, the traditional arbiters of polite society, obviously could not be admitted if they were disorderly, lest they pollute the Gardens with their lack of propriety. The price increase further reflects a need for Tyres to foster an even more polite image of the Gardens than he had hitherto enjoyed. A principally economic reasoning for this price change is unconvincing for 1759. Large and expensive renovations had occurred eight years previously and no new overhauls were planned, so a large cash influx was not required, though it was certainly welcome. Tyres instead clearly strove to limit the number of baser people who might enter through this price increase as a way of protecting the Gardens’ reputation. But by increasing the exclusivity of the gardens, he also drove up demand, for the opening night of the next season, when admittance was lowered to one shilling where it would remain for the rest of our period, over 6,000 people attended. Peter Nettle’s account of the night deserves special attention. For Nettles, the falling price of admittance was the key reason so many flocked to Vauxhall. This was a matter of reclaiming a space middling sorts knew and loved, but it also reveals that Tyres was remarkably successful in restoring the image of Vauxhall to its former respectability – if his project failed, few would have attended. A chief reason many middling sorts came to Vauxhall was to experience polite culture and perhaps even rub elbows with celebrities, as noted above. The increased exclusivity of the 1759 season temporarily quieted concerns about Vauxhall’s debauchery and led many to attend when its prices had reduced sufficiently. Nettles tellingly posits that two types of people exist in Vauxhall, “People of Taste, and those who have no Taste at all.”³¹ Tyres always prohibited livery servants in the Gardens, as reiterated in an April 20, 1748 post that boasted Vauxhall’s new embellishments.³² This prohibition served a double purpose. First it excluded those who were considered among the least polite individuals in the metropolis and who might compromise Vauxhall’s reputation. Second and more importantly for this analysis, it reduced all in the Gardens to a similar plane. Wealthy individuals could not show off their status by bringing along a large cadre of servants to exclude them from other visitors and instead walked the Gardens by themselves. By denying this marker of status, Vauxhall was a more level social space than London as a whole, and this was a crucial aspect of the garden’s draw for less wealthy individuals. This great social leveling entailed a homogenization of polite society

that concurrently temporarily diminished the politeness of the most respectable members of society while raising that of more middling sorts. In this light, Tyres’s genius lay partially in the fact that he could allow some forms of vice while clinging to Vauxhall’s reputation as a polite space.

No small part of this was due to the cultivation of a polite clientele, but Tyres had one more critical innovation that helped secure the gentility of his Gardens: the season ticket. Introduced in 1737, season tickets were carved out of metal and could be purchased from Tyres. These pendants entitled one to free admission to the Gardens over the course of the season and granted the further privilege to jump the queue for coaches on busy evenings. Only one pass was ever granted for life, going to William Hogarth, a dear friend of Tyres and informal designer of the Gardens. In 1737, season tickets sold for £1, putting them largely out of the reach of all but the most polite and wealthy in London. The next year Tyres increased the price for season passes to £1, 3s, due to the price of silver on which the new pendants were etched, and in 1741 the price of season passes rose again to £2.³³ Tyres’s talent of manipulation is apparent here as well. What better way to maintain the image of the gardens as a polite space than to encourage the most polite to return again and again? While the gentry enjoyed a diverse array of leisure activities, they still disliked wasting money, so upon buying a ticket, Tyres would likely enjoy their custom. Season passes technically entitled a stage-coach to enter the gardens, so a single pass could also be used to introduce the Gardens to other polite individuals. While Ranelagh served a larger role than Vauxhall in the courtship rituals of polite London, Vauxhall played some role due to its long-standing reputation as a meeting-place for the two sexes. Some even came to Vauxhall for the express reason of meeting a pretty person with whom they could engage in light debauchery: a kiss, perhaps, but almost never full sexual intercourse, as this would invalidate both the politeness of the space and that of the individuals involved.

Decorum was a concern for Tyres both inside and outside Vauxhall. It became clear to him that some were abusing the season ticket privileges he afforded by purchasing a ticket and then renting them out to allow middling sorts to queue jump on especially busy nights. Tyres did not take kindly to this and stated he would confiscate any passes that were abused in such a manner. As an added deterrent, he increased season pass prices to limit the financial returns of such an activity. The people he tried to attract using these tickets clearly would not mind a price increase of 3s, especially if the passes were printed on a precious metal. The subsequent increase to £2 in 1741 further disincentivized would-be fraudulent season pass users from this sort of criminality. Tyres once more employed a clever monetary tactic to keep certain tokens of politeness within the reach of the gentry alone, for any compromising of this image was threatening not just to his Gardens’s reputation but also fundamentally antithetical to the class-entrenched po-

30 “Spring-Gardens, Vauxhall”, *Public Advertiser*, May 16, 1759.

31 “To the Printer”, *Read’s Weekly Journal or British Gazetteer*, May 17, 1760.

32 “Spring-Gardens, Vauxhall”, *General Advertiser*, April 28, 1748.

33 *Ibid.*

lite culture of eighteenth-century London. This was difficult, though. Tyres certainly tried to cast Vauxhall in as polite a light as possible, but this could not come at the expense of the brand of adult enjoyment that attracted many to its walks in the first place.

Tyres still did much to discourage vice and debauchery in his gardens. Initially he faced a daunting task: to transform the reputation of the Gardens from that of a functional brothel into a place for polite comportment. He planned the 1732 *Ridotto al Fresco* to cater to the most polite of London, but with so much riding on this, Tyres took no chances, and he hired no fewer than 100 soldiers to guard the walk from the bank of the Thames to the Gardens themselves. Wroth and Wroth see this as an unnecessary precaution, but more recent research has tended towards the analysis that it was absolutely vital for the *Ridotto* to go off without a hitch and therefore the soldiers were warranted.³⁴ If one of the guests had been robbed on the short journey from the river to the Gardens, it would severely compromise its image. Once his initial ball was finished, Tyres maintained a sort of police on the grounds. A letter published in the *Grub Street Journal's* August 18, 1732 edition under the pseudonym Anticonstabularius is worth quoting at length for its discussion of police at Vauxhall:

... two or three ill-looking fellows with painted mopsticks, who burslequed constables, and, with terrific looks and magisterial behaviour, seemed to insult the company, and threaten something I was wholly ignorant of. Desiring from my friend some account of these preternatural Phenomena, he told me, *They were guards stationed there to prevent indecencies, and secure the Ladies from the attacks of rude fellows* [sic].³⁵

Anticonstabularius, as the name indicates, disliked this police and asks if “the politest gentlemen of the politest part of England, restrained from obscenities by no more generous a motive than fear?” Anticonstabularius later ponders: why, if guards are necessary to secure the good behavior of society, ought they not also be present in parks? For him, pleasure was enjoyed through freedom unmediated by fear, but Tyres clearly had more practical motives. To answer Anticonstabularius’s rhetorical question, it seems that in some cases, the politest in England indeed restrained from obscenity “by no more generous a motive than fear.” This was a fear of social exclusion as well as a fear of authority. That Tyres felt the need to police the activities of all his clients frames him as a paternal figure looking over the well-being of his garden-going guests, but it also displays an upsetting of the arbitration of politeness. While the purpose of the guards being to “secure the Ladies from the at-

tacks of rude fellows” no doubt demonstrates the patriarchal attitudes of the time, it is also crucial to note that as arbiters of politeness, ladies’ opinions of the Gardens were especially vital to its good reputation.³⁶ In this clause, Anticonstabularius saw the guards as mainly protecting the polite members of society from the more base levels and ponders why Tyres would allow the latter sort in the first place, but constables were present to police the rich as much as the middling classes even if the latter were more likely to be targeted than the former. Tyres kept all of his guests on a relatively equal plane, rarely differentiating between his finer and more plebian guests on regular nights. Anticonstabularius was surprisingly correct in his assessment of the Gardens, even though his assessment was negative. In his letter he reacts against Tyres’s police of polite society, something he found ludicrous; he doubtless preferred that a commoner not delimitate mores of politeness for the most discerning facets of London society, even if that meant the Gardens suffered financially. Contemporaries even recognized how Tyres’s suggestions of polite mores problematized the aristocracy’s hold on respectable behavior.

As Edelstein notes, striking the right balance between respectability by using an exclusive social cachet and adult entertainment through the marketing of an ambiance of accessibility was incredibly difficult and Vauxhall’s success is a monument to Tyres’s ingenuity.³⁷ Yet Tyres did not simply allow debauchery in his Gardens, he enabled and even encouraged it. While constables were present throughout the Gardens to protect the sensibilities of ladies, many images suggested inter-class social intermingling, debauchery, and sexual tension that many found hard to resist.³⁸ Grand *trompe l’œil* images were too public to be the loci of any significant reference to debauchery, but the images in dining booths around the gardens were at once public enough to be seen by many strolling along the walks and private enough to suggest sexuality in a more muted tone. As Coke and Borg demonstrate, these paintings were of daily events that allowed easy comprehension.³⁹ It is in this light a specific image on the inside of Vauxhall’s dining booths must be analyzed. Around 1745, Robert Sayer published an engraving by an anonymous engraver titled ‘The Stealing of a Kiss’. In it a woman leans over to kiss a man who snoozes as his wig falls off. Another lady in the foreground looks on with intrigue while a servant boy fans the man with a blanket. In the background, a woman at an open doorway appears appalled by the debauchery she witnesses (see Image 1).⁴⁰ While this was a reproduction of an original painting at Vauxhall, it is still worthy of detailed analysis. The lady in the background is perhaps the easiest to analyze. Dressed in respectable clothes,

36 See note 35 (“Gentlemen”).

37 Edelstein, *Vauxhall Gardens*, 11.

38 *Ibid.*, 32.

39 Coke and Borg, *Vauxhall Gardens*, 98.

40 Robert Sayer, ‘The Stealing of a Kiss’, *London Metropolitan Archives*, pressmark SC/GL/PR/L1/VAU/gar, collage 17347, (1745).

34 Wroth and wroth, *The London Pleasure Gardens of the Eighteenth Century*, 290.

35 “Gentlemen”, *Grub Street Journal*, August 5, 1736. Emphasis in original.

she demonstrates the socially unacceptable nature of this action in a way that bolsters the image of politeness cultivated at Vauxhall. The reaction from the lady on the left is another matter. She and the lady in the doorway are dressed remarkably similarly: both wear a dress that tapers into a point at the end of the torso and give the waist a naturally slimming silhouette and in both cases, voluminous dresses are worn. The lady in the foreground, however, wears a fashionable floral pattern, unlike her relatively drab counterpart. For both ladies the silhouette of the dress evokes a respectable air of sexuality. Floral patterns manufactured both overseas and in London itself (primarily around Spitalfields) were much the fashion and the lady's fan and shoes further attest to her high social stature.⁴¹ The offending party wears a fashionable floral pattern on her sleeves, hinting at her otherwise polite sensibilities. That a servant boy is present further suggests that these are wealthy merchants or aristocrats. The man's dress also betrays him as erotic. The wig, jacket, and shirt he wears were typical for gentlemen at the time, but his legs are of particular note. In a style standard for the early eighteenth century, he wears knee-breaches that are skin tight past the knee, showing off his large calves, an erogenous zone. This man snoozing in bliss appears so titillating that a woman dressed in the highest fashion of the day cannot help herself but stoop to sexual debauchery. That another wealthy woman appears to condone this activity illuminates the sexual tension of the image. It was a tension that served as a metaphor for every night at Vauxhall.

This was due to its hinting at sexuality and debauchery. While diners and passers-by would see the image and perhaps dislike the sexual deviancy portrayed, that such activity was shown at all, and depicts so polite a lady accepting it, was an implicit critique of the ostensibly polite segments of society, as well as a covert suggestion that the Gardens were still a place for reveling in light debauchery. While this was clearly a satire of polite society, it is likely that most members of the aristocracy who saw the image viewed it less as critiquing them than some of their distant acquaintances, so it was not too offensive. The suggestion of sexuality in a sexually charged environment such as Vauxhall is also demonstrative of a covert suggestion to embrace some sexual debauchery in the gardens. The satire of the image then comes in less as a critique of the libertine, but rather a critique of a libertine that is too open or visible in one's sexuality. This image in fact encourages covert sexual debauchery as the pleasure of the two ladies in the foreground – and perhaps even the man himself – indicates, especially given its location was renown as a place where erotic conduct frequently, though covertly, occurred.

On a more discreet level, Tyres employed his Gardens as a space that celebrated erotic activity. This was nothing new to Vauxhall; the Dark Walk was a continuation of Vauxhall's

previous reputation for debauchery and was significantly less policed than more lighted areas and that Tyres allowed these walks to remain dark for so long was conducive to this covert vice. So long as the Gardens did not too openly encourage sexual indulgence, Tyres was content to allow some light debauchery for the sake of his brand of adult entertainment. Prints of Vauxhall in this period often exhibit a man and woman staring lustfully into each other's eyes, both encouraging and exhibiting a libertine sexuality that was culturally and institutionally animated.⁴² While images of the Gardens itself often show characters in daylight or along well-lit areas, the Dark Walk was a hotbed of sexual titillation. Vauxhall was therefore much less restrained than Ranelagh, as Tyres both allowed and encouraged a certain amount of adult pleasure. A May 18, 1764 newspaper advertisement for Vauxhall explains that while Tyres regretted the lighting of the back walks because of the resulting public displeasure he felt it necessary to preserve the requisite decorum at the Gardens.⁴³ Tyres clearly had to find a way of manipulating the debauchery of Vauxhall and by shining more light on the (in)famous Dark Walk, he discouraged the kind of vice many supposedly practiced. That Tyres's lighting of the Dark Walk instigated a wave of complaints demonstrates the powerful nature of the specter of erotic desire in the Gardens.

Large – and hence middling – crowds further encouraged debauchery. Vauxhall was intentionally open to a variety of people, and drew great numbers on several occasions. On May 18, 1751, Vauxhall opened for the season and “was so crowded that the People could hardly pass each other.”⁴⁴ It appears that the opening and closing nights of the Gardens were particularly well attended, as Peter Nettle's letter asserts that “near Six Thousand Persons” were present at the 1760 opening.⁴⁵ Philo-Vauxhall noted to the *Public Advertiser* that on the closing night of 1764 upwards of four thousand people were present.⁴⁶ The opening night of 1765 also occasioned the attendance of over four thousand individuals.⁴⁷ The season closing in 1765, according to *Lloyd's Evening Post*, drew near five thousand people.⁴⁸ Some nights that involved no special entertainment also drew crowds. Pouring through newspaper archives, the date of May 26 1767, only a month before Tyres's death, stands out as attracting over three thousand visitors.⁴⁹ Few of these people were polite, and the sheer number of people present was a key factor that contributed to Vauxhall's success while limiting its

42 M. Romano, “Scene at Spring Gardens, Vauxhall”, *London Metropolitan Archives*, collage 18057 (1741).

43 “Spring-Gardens, Vauxhall”, *Public Advertiser*, May 18, 1764.

44 “Supplement”, *General Evening Post*, May 18-21, 1751.

45 See note 31.

46 “To the Printer of the Public Advertiser”, *Public Advertiser*, August 25, 1764.

47 “Postscript”, *Lloyd's Evening Post*, May 8-10, 1765.

48 “London”, *Lloyd's Evening Post*, August 28-30, 1765.

49 “London”, *St. James's Chronicle or the British Evening Post*, May 26-28, 1767.

41 See Natalie Rothstein, *Silk Designs of the Eighteenth Century: From the Collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, with a Complete Catalogue* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1990).

reach as a polite space, so sometimes more extreme measures were necessary to deter crime. *Lloyd's Evening Post* detailed an incident in early July 1769 – under the stewardship of Tyres the younger – where “... a fellow was detected in picking a Gentleman's pocket, as he was going into Vauxhall-gardens; he was given up to the Coachmen, &c. who ducked him till he could scarce crawl.”⁵⁰ The reactions of coachmen and other passersby to whom the thief was given illuminates attitudes towards criminality in London as a whole and the severity of the punishment was for them equivalent to its threat to the social, spiritual, and economic health of the metropolis and the empire. While Ranelagh prided itself primarily on its social exclusivity, Vauxhall was open about its appeal to a broad range of people, from the royal family to common laborers, and this sometimes led to conflagrations. It was precisely this socially intermixed milieu that reinforced a tension between politeness, purity, vice, and debauchery that also made Vauxhall so compelling a location.

Vauxhall, because of its wealthier clientele and reputation for covert debauchery, was also a popular spot for those for whom vice was profession – the criminal. Crime was obviously a problem for Vauxhall as it compromised the polite image Tyres tried so hard to maintain. Frequently items of special value to visitors were lost in the gardens, and there is a significant paper trail in the form of newspaper advertisements for missing items. On September 23, 1752, a lady reported losing a mother-of-pearl knife and offered a 5s reward for it.⁵¹ Eleven years later, somebody dropped a £50 bank note (approximately £3,740 in 2005 currency), prompting its owner to cancel its payment at the Bank and offer a £10 reward for its safe return.⁵² That this person owned a £50 bank note reveals great wealth and going to Vauxhall clearly risked a non-trivial amount of assets for some. Yet vice was frequently visible at Vauxhall and apparently even involved a major crime ring. The story of William Meredith, alias Bushey is of particular note. In June 1753, he was caught picking pockets at Vauxhall and once detected by Tyres's crew, threw a knife designed to slash pockets away from him. He was quickly apprehended and was found in the possession of a silk green purse. Following his capture, police around London leveraged his expertise to detect a ring of “a most dangerous and numerous Gang of Rogues” around the metropolis, consisting of a dozen individuals, some of whom were women.⁵³ William Meredith was not the only one who stole from people in Vauxhall. In June 1758, “a Man, very well dressed, was detected picking of Pockets at Vauxhall Gardens.”⁵⁴ The masquerade of fashionable dress was likely a charade to distract from his illicit activities, albeit an unsuccessful one. That this strategy was employed suggests that con-

stables at Vauxhall less heavily regulated those who appeared of higher social stature; but that it was unsuccessful speaks once more to the great social leveling at the Gardens and indicates that constables regulated the behavior of all visitors, both by their mere presence, and more authoritatively by intervening in situations. Not all of these crimes involved property. In early June 1759, the *London Chronicle* reported that a lady was viciously attacked in Vauxhall and states no apparent reason for the assault.⁵⁵ Spiritual and occasionally even physical danger seemed an omnipresent facet of the Gardens, and this at once drew people to, and deterred people from going to, the Gardens. This incident demonstrates the limits of the safety Tyres tried to instill around Vauxhall. That anyone, much less a lady, could be attacked at the Gardens was a significant breach of its quasi-polite reputation. This vice was tightly policed and incursions like this were quickly stopped. A *London Chronicle* article of mid June 1760 suggests the rapidity with which Tyres and his constables acted when it detailed “there was a rencounter at Vauxhall-Gardens, occasioned by a dispute between some ladies. It is said that the gentlemen were brothers; but the aggressor being presently disarmed, there was no damage done.”⁵⁶ The social and institutional policing of behavior was frequently swift in its action and worked primarily as a preventative force for more serious vices such as pick pocketing and assault. The motivation for this crime is worthy on note too. These brothers had a conflagration over a dispute involving ladies, betraying the significant imbrications between the Vauxhall's sexual debauchery and the more serious spiritual vices that Tyres, polite London, and Tyres's employees consistently attempted to discourage. Vice of this sort was never appropriate for polite individuals, and those noted in these accounts were likely not of a high social stature, indicating a surprising similarity between the control of the Gardens and the decentralized nature of metropolitan police more generally. Later in the eighteenth century and into the early nineteenth century, it appears that debauchery and vice rode more roughshod over the polite sensibilities cultivated by Tyres until his death, but in the period that interests us, this police seemed geared toward the less polite segments of society and did not so openly target rakish elites. Crucially, the constables impacted both polite and impolite individuals in similar ways, even though the surveillance of polite individuals rested more on an interdiction of overt debauchery.

Who did Tyres target in order to preserve this dialectic of debauchery and respectability in his Gardens, and what do its impacts tell us about Vauxhall's operations? As noted in virtually all the studies about Vauxhall to date, Tyres was challenged to make the gardens both as pleasurable and as respectable as possible – that he largely succeeded evidences his brilliance. Tyres kept a surprising amount of control over both politeness and debauchery in the Gardens. By employing constables, he was able to swiftly interdict activities he felt

50 “London”, *Lloyd's Evening Post*, July 5-7, 1769.

51 “Lost”, *General Advertiser*, August 3, 1752.

52 “Lost”, *Gazetteer and London Daily Advertiser*, May 27, 1763.

53 *London Evening Post*, June 30-July 3, 1753.

54 “Fresh Advices from our Correspondents”, *Whitehall Evening Post or London Intelligencer*, June 6-8, 1758.

55 *London Chronicle*, June 7-9, 1759.

56 *London Chronicle*, June 14-17, 1760.

inappropriate but as a master media manipulator was able to both enable and encourage covert debauchery in the Gardens as well. Ever wary that this vice might preclude the custom of polite individuals, he frequently used the Gardens for private parties and subsequently increased prices to contribute to the socially exclusive nature of the varied festivities. On regular nights, however, the sheer number of visitors, sometimes greater than 4,000 people, demonstrates that the vast majority of garden-goers were not quintessentially polite. By charging only one shilling, rarely deviating from that price, and precluding the admittance of livery servants, he allowed many to access and enjoy his Gardens *on relatively equal terms*. Tyres also employed season tickets to attract the return custom of respectable individuals, at once securing a stable financial base from a single large cash influx at the beginning of every season and casting the Gardens in a more respectable light. By refusing to allow rude women's attendance, prohibiting certain clothing choices (he deemed them a great threat to decorum), broadcasting sartorial expectations, and including seductive paintings such as 'The Stealing of a Kiss', he manipulated garden-goers into his dialectic of debauchery and politeness. That even the most respectable individuals can and did descend into the realm of salacious vice was no secret and Tyres covertly hinted at this media trope in his Garden advertisements and paintings around Vauxhall. Even more surprising than his manipulation of polite images was his police of polite mores more visibly by the use of constables. That these were at least theoretically applied to rich and poor alike, as demonstrated by Tyres's commitment to relative equality of treatment upon entrance to Vauxhall, Anticonstabularius's tirade, and occasional apprehension of fashionably dressed individuals inverted class markers, as he, a self-described "yeoman" from a leather-working family was the ultimate judge of acceptable behavior in his Gardens. That through his efforts Vauxhall became so incredibly popular and internationally regarded hints that the hegemony over politeness by gentry and aristocrats, and especially females in these classes, may not have been as total as scholars have so far assumed. Whatever Vauxhall's implications for class in seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century London, it is virtually inarguable that those who walked its boulevards and listened to the music emanating from the Orchestra in the grove were drawn as much by its reputation for vice and debauchery – even if it was sometimes dangerous – as they were by the specter of politeness Tyres so brilliantly cultivated.

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