

Women and Urban Green Space — Gardens in *Evelina* and *Miss Brill*

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This essay tries to explore how public gardens present a new type of social space for women in different periods. By focusing on Frances Burney's *Evelina* (1778) and Katherine Mansfield's *Miss Brill* (1920), I shall demonstrate how women over centuries have interacted in changing ways with urban green space. In *Evelina* we see though accessible to women, pleasure gardens do not bestow the flaneuse with a safe haven, but rather, have limited women's opportunities for exploration in the eighteenth century. In *Miss Brill*, however, the public park provides a space for contemplation as well as for the transgression of societal boundaries.

Vauxhall and Marylebone in *Evelina*

In her epistolary novel *Evelina* (1778), Frances Burney depicts how a young girl, Evelina, tries to find her identity by sampling the city's attractions and concludes on a cautionary note. Her letters to her guardian detail events and mishaps that occur in various public spaces in London which offers the flaneuse an education in late eighteenth century society.

In Evelina's first few days in London, as a respectable young lady, she walks the Mall at St. James Park, goes shopping, visits the opera, and attends a private ball in the company of the Mirvans. According to Vivien Jones, Evelina's sketches in her first few letters to her guardian are similar to notes from a guidebook of what not to do for readers, especially young ladies, who are new to the city, seeking the same excitement: "Her frank assessments of the pleasures and shortcomings of the city's various attractions also add particularity and authenticity to the impersonal accounts offered by those contemporary tourist guides concerned mainly to celebrate the metropolis"

(xvii).

In *Evelina*, we can see that class is tied directly to space just as much it is to one's dress. Failing to fully understand the complex implicit restrictions, Evelina becomes the victim of mistaken identity, jeopardizing both her safety and reputation concurrently.

By the mid-eighteenth century, public gardens were popular as evening resorts, attracting visitors with fireworks, concerts, masquerades, and facilities for eating and drinking (Wroth 5). Among them, Vauxhall had a universal popularity due to its ability to appeal to people of all classes. As Mollie Sands well describes: "If you could pay the entrance money, were decently dressed and behaved with decorum, you would be admitted whatever your social status" (Sands 16). By the same token, James Southworth wrote about Vauxhall as follows:

Class distinctions were forgotten when there was no need for them to be remembered, and flirtations were an accepted part of the evening's entertainment. Young bloods strolled about scrutinizing and staring the ladies out of countenance. (119)

Evelina enters this public space accompanied by her relatives and the Mirvans. Her companions, people of both the middle class and the gentry, provide an interesting insight into how Vauxhall, representing the culture of pleasure gardens in general, made it almost impossible for women to engage in flanerie. Through Evelina's accidental wanderings into the less reputable areas of these places, Burney poses the question of how obvious class distinctions truly are.

Being laughed at as timid by the Branghton sisters who recommend a visit to the dark walks of Vauxhall, Evelina feels compelled to follow them. However, she at last loses herself and wanders alone in an unlit area where she is accosted by parties of men who mistake her for a prostitute. Sir Willoughby, though rescues her, boldly grasps her hands and subsequently leads her to an even darker alley to confess his love, assuming that Evelina comes there wanting to be solicited. When Evelina reproaches him, he expresses his confusion: "'By Heaven,' cried he with warmth, 'you distract me, —why, tell me, —why do I see you here?—Is this a place for Miss Anville?—these dark

walks!—no party!—no companion!—by all that’s good, I can scarce believe my senses!’ (Burney199).

Miles Ogborn argues that Vauxhall creates a culture of the spectator, with women as the object watched. “Vauxhall Gardens was made of spectacles ... Everyone was on stage ... It was the pleasure of looking at others that were stressed, particularly of men looking at women” (151). The eighteenth century may have seen the emergence of the modern ocular and sexual ideology of the male spectator and the female spectacle (149). Evelina enters a space that automatically imposes a class identity on her regardless of how she acts or dresses. She becomes mistakenly categorized by just being present in that space.

Evelina’s visit to Marylebone, another popular resort in the eighteenth century for city dwellers of all classes, is an instance where her identity is undermined since she is judged by whom she walks with. While Evelina was watching the performance of Orpheus and Eurydice, “there was such an explosion of fire, and so horrible a noise, that we all, as of one accord, jumped hastily from the form, and ran away some paces” (Burney 233). Separated from her company, Evelina loses herself in the chaos: “For a moment or two, I neither knew nor considered whither I had run, but my recollection was soon awakened by a stranger’s addressing me with, — Come along with me my dear, and I’ll take care of you” (Burney 234). “In vain, from side to side, I looked for some face I knew; I found myself in the midst of a crowd, yet without party, friend, or acquaintance” (Burney 234). For Evelina, the crowd’s anonymity and strength prove disastrous. She seeks help and is accosted by men who can see her distress: “Every other moment, I was spoken to, by some bold and unfeeling man, to whom my distress, which, I think, must be very apparent, only furnished a pretence for impertinent witticisms, or free gallantry” (Burney 234).

While trying to find her way back to her party, a young officer marches up to her and forcibly grasps her hand. She seeks help from two ladies who turn out, to her surprise, to be prostitutes: “I will not dwell upon a conversation, which soon, to my inexpressible horror, convinced me I had sought protection from insult, of those who were themselves most likely to offer it” (Burney 234). Lord Orville misinterprets her presence with these women. The power of the crowd in identity construction is fully illustrated here. A lady’s company

determines her public image. Identity creation, as shown in the novel, can be easily undermined in public spaces through the power of the crowd.

As exemplified through *Evelina*, the basic freedom to walk became limited. In public spaces that appeal to the growing commercialization of society, *Evelina* encountered the blurring of lines between being an observer and being the ones observed. The growing restriction placed on women to walk reflects the increasing prominence of the ideology of the separate spheres.

The flaneuse's role is to offer us a reading of the city, yet whenever her gender is apparent, she herself becomes the object of the gaze. Those around her begin to read or misread her presence in public. An access to the public realm does not offer her complete freedom. By the time we get to the publication of *Evelina*, the list of public spaces for women to explore was limited, and when there were any, they were, in some way, always fabricated. In the eighteenth century, a woman in public was subject to the male's gaze, and therefore often fails to conduct her own observation. This forms a contrast with twentieth-century flaneuses, such as Katherine Mansfield's Miss Brill who views the public park as a stage and everyone, including men mostly, is actors on this stage for her to observe.

The Public Park in *Miss Brill*

In her short story *Miss Brill* Katherine Mansfield paints a complex psychological picture of a woman negotiating her identity in the modern city. As Griselda Pollock explains, "seeing" equaled "knowing" (78), and women moving through urban space were at all times subject to the male gaze: "Women did not enjoy the freedom of incognito in the crowd. There were never positioned as the normal occupants of the public realm. They did not have the right to look, to stare, scrutinize or watch" (71). Mansfield reverses this dynamic by placing her female protagonist in the position of observer. By having Miss Brill adopt this role, Mansfield creates what Pollock calls "the very possibility that texts made by women can produce different positions within this sexual politics of looking" (85).

By going to the public park every Sunday to observe people around her, imagining they are on the stage, Miss Brill tries to establish her identity based

upon her ability to take the role of an observer, a position that was usually the prerogative of men in the modern city. Mansfield utilizes this space to reveal the intricate social forces that shaped women's experiences of modernity: "Oh, how fascinating it was! How she enjoyed it! It was like a play. It was exactly like a play. [...] They were all on the stage" (Mansfield 227). She is able to observe the events from an external position, a process that is facilitated by the setting of the garden, as she realizes her position as an individual entity as well as part of a play where "everyone is on the stage"(227).

In the first few decades of the twentieth century, the perception of the public garden as a civilized and nurturing space comes under scrutiny by women authors. Mansfield's work reflects the ambivalent nature of the space—in *Miss Brill* it confirms Miss Brill's comprehension of her position as a single woman who freely moves through the modern metropolis though located outside of traditional marital ties. However, Mansfield is also cognizant of the fact that this does not always constitute a pleasant experience for her protagonist. Though it should be a place where Miss Brill can feel naturally at home and at ease, she is still rejected by a young couple who remark on her as a "stupid old thing" rudely. At the end of the short story, Miss Brill suffers this ridiculous incident, but she herself realizes that this is not a suitable place for young couples to conduct intimate behavior. It is the young couple who are ultimately the subject of ridicule and not Miss Brill. The presence of the band signals a departure from a traditional, private garden as site of courtship that would have provided an intimate arena. In modernist fiction, women are no longer fixed in any one location and hence they can remove themselves from the gaze of the observer.

Frances Burney depicts pleasure gardens in the eighteenth century as a place where the protagonist failed to exert her power to be an observer and is prey to men's observation. When the revolution for women to possess rights in politics, economics, and society occurred in the twentieth century, the figure of the flâneuse re-emerges in literature. Katherine Mansfield rewrites and redefines the public park as a site where women can take control and reposition themselves outside of the sexual politics of looking.

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