



Sunday in the Park with Elinor Dashwood: “So Public a Place”

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VOLUME THREE OF *Sense and Sensibility* opens with an exciting, fifteen-page chapter filled with gossip, overwrought posturing, and exuberant punctuation. First, Mrs. Jennings brings home to Berkeley Street the news of the Mrs. John Dashwood/Lucy Steele contretemps at Harley Street, exclaiming: “Lord! my dear Miss Dashwood! have you heard the news!” (291). Then, in an exchange punctuated with dashes on both sisters’ parts, Elinor emotionally “undeceives” Marianne with the truth about Edward’s situation. Finally, John Dashwood arrives to “talk over the dreadful affair” and to give details of the “very shocking discovery that took place under our roof” (300). This very theatrical chapter—rich in descriptions of Mrs. Jennings’s bustling, “hurrying importance” (291); with reports of Fanny’s suffering and “violent hysterics” (293), Lucy’s fainting fit, and Mrs. Ferrars’s bad behavior; and with accounts of Marianne’s excessive crying (296), her constant “moving from one chair to another” (300), her “ecstasy of indignation” (302) and “vehemence” (305)—is exhausting for the characters (and for the readers). With its three mini-dramas about suffering, real and exaggerated, this chapter is admired by fans of the novel for its mixture of dramatic tension and humorous reportage, and by critics and cinematographers because so much is revealed and so much happens—yet all the while the major characters are boxed up inside the house on Berkeley Street.

By comparison, Chapter 2 is short (ten pages) and boring. This chapter has received virtually no critical attention, perhaps because Elinor’s walk in a park lacks dramatic action; because conversation devolves into Nancy Steele’s

meandering, rude, and self-centered monologues; because “nothing” (a word repeated fifteen times) happens; and because, for most of the chapter, Elinor effaces herself from her company and her surroundings. While Miss Steele’s speech is punctuated repeatedly with exclamation marks, Elinor responds calmly and tersely, mainly through questions. Always polite, she resorts to an exclamation only once, when she chides Miss Steele for her deviousness in gathering information: “‘How!’ cried Elinor; ‘have you been repeating to me what you only learnt yourself by listening at the door?’” (311). Eavesdropping is revealed as the major crime of the social comedy in this chapter, yet neither Elinor nor the reader finds much enlightenment in Miss Steele’s ill-gotten revelations. While the text’s surface tranquillity, in conjunction with Elinor’s extreme reserve, seems to offer little more than a respite from the storms of the preceding chapter, the reader is left to wonder what new insights into Elinor’s feelings the chapter was intended to reveal. The content of the chapter is so slight—Miss Steele’s reiteration of the events is partially a fantasy—that it seems an anomaly in the context of Austen’s art of developing chapters and moving the plot along.

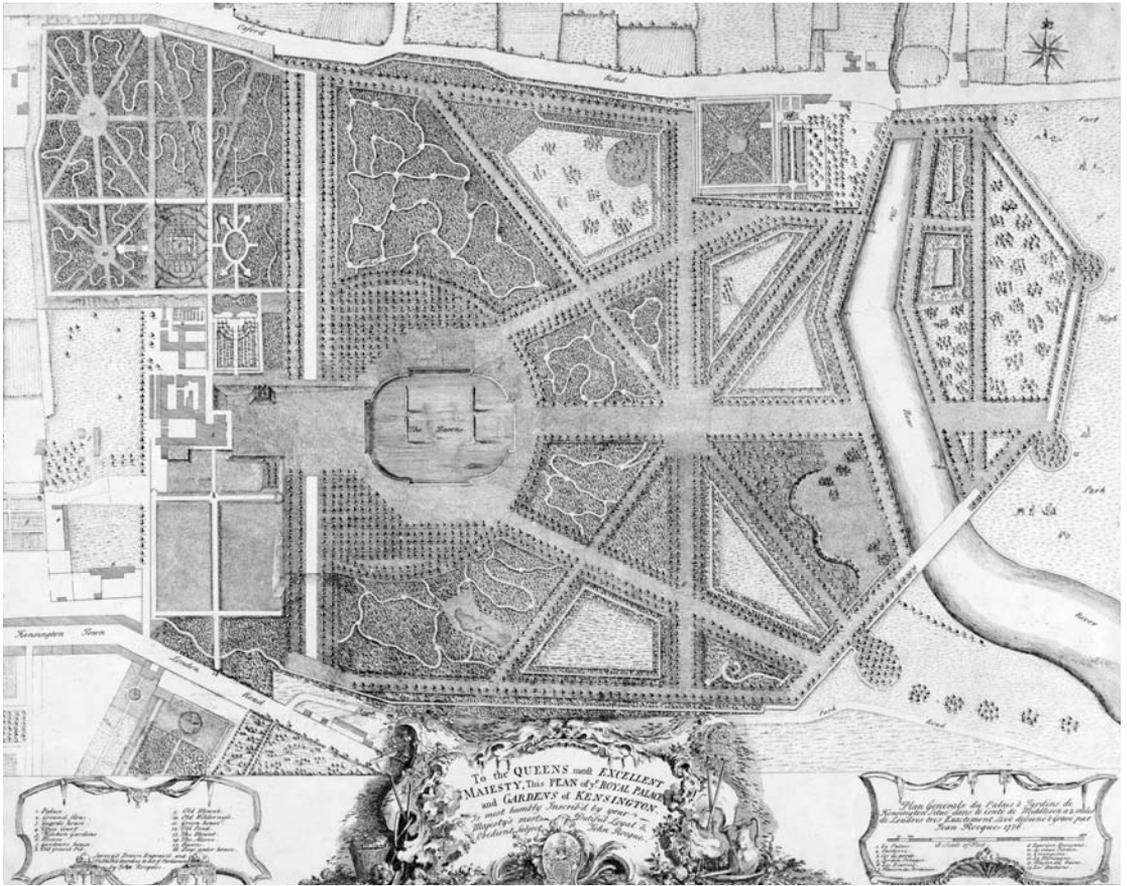
In terms of character development and social history, Chapter 2 serves an important function. While the excursion to Kensington Gardens, which ostensibly offers Elinor a time of “quiet reflection” (307), is interrupted by Miss Steele and apparently ruined by her long-winded prattle, the proposed walk draws Elinor out of the confines of the house on Berkeley Street, away from the network of family members’ houses in Mayfair, and into public space. Along with Elinor, the reader is introduced to the activities polite Georgian society could indulge in when the weather was nice enough to draw ladies outdoors on a Sunday afternoon. Since Jane Austen names Kensington Gardens as the specific setting for the action (or lack thereof), attentive readers will realize that this specific setting has wide implications in the novel. The whole of Chapter 2 functions as a literary trope, an homage to the recurring pleasure garden scenes in other eighteenth-century novels (most evident in Fanny Burney’s *Evelina*). The setting offers a backdrop to an ironic interlude that mixes private revelations and public space; as a bonus, Jane Austen may have plotted a political subtext into the scene.

The chapter begins quietly with Mrs. Jennings’s, Elinor’s, and Marianne’s individual musings, not upon the general unrest at Harley Street, but rather upon “their knowledge of the particulars” of the situation (307) and upon the implications of Edward’s “conduct” rather than his feelings (306). The tone here is dull: boxed in at the house on Berkeley Street, the characters are

listless, and they have “[n]othing new” to discuss about the “public discovery” even though rounds of visitors have come and gone, thus complicating the ladies’ visiting opportunities (307). After three long paragraphs of exposition, Jane Austen sends Mrs. Jennings and Elinor out to the park—not to any London park, but to Kensington Gardens. In the Topographical Index to *Jane Austen’s Letters* Deirdre Le Faye notes that a guidebook dating from Austen’s time describes the nexus of Hyde Park and Kensington Gardens as “[o]ne of the most delightful scenes belonging to this great metropolis”; singled out for particular notice is the “noble walk, stretching from north to south, in Kensington Gardens, at the eastern boundary” (605–06). The straight lines of the noble walk and the radiating axial lanes provide the kind of intrinsic order that matches Elinor’s personality. For Elinor’s first foray into “so public a space” (SS 307), Kensington Gardens suggest elegance, order, and fashion—a place so fashionable that in June 1808 *Le Beau Monde* illustrated a “Kensington Gardens dress” (Watkins 135).

The totality of the action in this chapter is Elinor’s walk outdoors in a “public” place. Throughout *Sense and Sensibility*, the “3 or 4 families” transported from the country to London continually meet at each other’s houses, the friends and neighbors providing a network of relationships that constrain Elinor’s conduct and feelings. Until Chapter 2, Elinor has been situated in a series of private spaces: the “private balls at the park”; the private “parties on the water” at Barton (63); “unpremeditated” private balls at the Middletons’ house on Conduit Street (the spontaneity of which Lady Middleton does not approve) (194); private dinners at Norland, Barton Park, and the Dashwoods’ house on Harley Street; and a private party in London, to which they “attend” Lady Middleton (199). When Austen moves Elinor outside the private sphere and into Kensington Gardens—not Hyde Park, the public garden closer to Mrs. Jennings’s house at Berkeley Street, and not Vauxhall, the most popular venue in Georgian London—she matches the character to the public space. As Peter Graham points out, readers of Austen’s novels “must share [Austen’s] premise that moral truths underlie apparently trivial choices” (176). What, then, might be the moral or ethical motive behind Austen’s choice of Kensington Gardens? The wider historical, cultural, and literary meanings implicit in Austen’s choice of Kensington Gardens in lieu of another one of the great London gardens are apparent only from a comparative analysis.

The contemporary guidebook cited by Le Faye relates how in Kensington Gardens great “[n]umbers of people of fashion, mingled with a great multitude of well-dressed persons of various ranks, crowd the walk for many hours



Plan of y^e Royal Palace and Gardens of Kensington, by John Rocque (1735–1745).

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together” (605–06). The mixing of ranks fits into the social context of *Sense and Sensibility*, for in this book Austen eschews the fine demarcations of class hierarchies, ignores the distinctions of ranks and titles, and subtly blends classes. From Sir John Middleton to Mrs. Jennings and her friends in the City, from Elinor and Marianne to Nancy and Lucy Steele, Austen is more interested in kindness, generosity, elegance of mind and style, and personal virtues than in the entitlements of rank. Elegance, in fact, is the most evocative word for the social context of the chapter, for “elegance suggests not only the thing itself, but the response that it elicits” (Pimentel 219). The characters’ responses

to Kensington Gardens are subdued, meditative, and formal. Even Miss Steele is on her best behavior in Kensington Gardens. She arrives in a carriage with Mrs. Richardson as a chaperone, and she is dressed respectably, with accoutrements such as silk stockings (311), pink ribbons, and a hat with both a bow and a feather (308). Based on her outward appearance, Miss Steele has a place in Kensington Gardens.

Notwithstanding that she is dressed for a stroll in Kensington Gardens, Miss Steele negates the impression that she belongs, for her rambling monologue is the antithesis of the formal structure and architectural balance of these Gardens. Ignorant of, or perhaps defying, polite conventions, Nancy Steele accosts Elinor and proceeds to blurt out, “*without* being asked” (308), intimate details about Lucy’s rages and Edward’s alleged declarations, her verbal affectations distracting Elinor and her repeated exclamations of “La!” an obvious annoyance. Miss Steele deviates from the line of her narrative about Lucy and Edward to wander through the labyrinth of her thoughts about clothes, her (possibly non-existent) flirtation with the Doctor, people she knows, Mrs. Ferrars’s ill-natured behavior, and the John Dashwoods’ lack of kindness. She even implores Elinor to cadge for her and her sister an invitation to stay at Berkeley Street. She calls on a catalogue of invisible people—in Kensington Gardens only Mrs. Jennings, Elinor, and Miss Steele have speaking roles—but Miss Steele manages to incorporate a whole universe of offstage participants: the Richardsons, Miss Godby, Miss Sparks, Miss Morton, her cousin Richard, and Martha Sharpe. Like Miss Bates, who torments Emma with her digressions, Miss Steele is unstoppable. Obviously embroidered by the stretch of her overly active romantic imagination and delivered in ungrammatical constructions, her narrative ruins what would have been Elinor’s only time alone outside the house since the news about Edward and Lucy came to Berkeley Street.

Miss Steele’s incessant talking (without making much sense) as she and Elinor walk in Kensington Gardens is Austen’s ironic commentary on pastoral conventions. Although Austen has signalled to the reader that when Mrs. Jennings meets up with Mrs. Clarke, her “intimate acquaintance,” Elinor “was herself left to quiet reflection,” it is only two sentences later that she finds herself accosted by Miss Steele (307). The potential pastoral mood is so quickly shattered that Elinor responds to Miss Steele with epigrammatic brevity. Elinor’s first speech in the chapter is a response to Miss Steele’s query about whether Mrs. Jennings is angry. While the reader is left to wonder why Mrs. Jennings, who has little to do with the Lucy Steele/Edward Ferrars affair, is Miss Steele’s first thought, Elinor replies, “Not at all, I believe, with you”

(308). After that, as Miss Steele “wandered away” to other subjects, the digressions force Elinor’s attention to focus on Miss Steele rather than on the natural space of the park. Mary Jane Curry notes that in her novels Austen uses the pastoral interlude as a context for establishing the heroine’s identity; “[f]or her main characters,” Curry says, “nature is a source of comfort and freedom as well as beauty” (176). By invoking the pastoral, the author has set the reader up to expect that Elinor will respond to her environment, but in this case Miss Steele shatters the pastoral mood, bringing into her monologue the private particulars of Lucy’s and Edward’s situation, and deflecting Elinor’s attention from nature, reflection, and meditation. In this chapter of *Sense and Sensibility*, moreover, Austen flouts conventions: there are no descriptions of the beauty of the Gardens, for while Miss Steele chatters Elinor remains singularly immune to the joys of nature. Miss Steele’s words have erected boundaries between what Elinor hears and what she sees. With Miss Steele monopolizing her thoughts and intruding on her space, Elinor does not find comfort in the pastoral calm of the most beautiful park in London.

In an ironic nod to Fanny Burney (1752–1840), Jane Austen evokes in the setting of this chapter a motif capitalized upon by the famous author. So many London parks and gardens feature in Burney’s *Evelina* that when Jane Austen devotes a whole chapter of *Sense and Sensibility* to Elinor’s walk in Kensington Gardens, a contemporary reader would have expected either a pastoral interlude, during which the ingénue communes with Nature, or an onslaught, during which the young lady is accosted by dandies, gallants, highwaymen, or ladies of the night. Being accosted in the parks or gardens was a reality—such notable members of society as Walpole, Boswell, Dr. Johnson, and even King George II were waylaid and robbed—and in fiction the possibility of violence would provide a frisson for every young female reader. Austen, however, overturns the contemporary reader’s expectations. As Jocelyn Harris points out, part of the subtext of an Austen novel is the way she “interrogates and rewrites the old, persistent stereotypes” (“Silent Women” 6). For Elinor’s outing, Austen rewrites the trouble-in-paradise motif by subverting the pleasure-garden molestation scene. In Kensington Gardens, Elinor is neither refreshed by the vistas nor accosted by men who will attempt to seduce her.

The stereotypical garden or park is a place of both awesome amusement and sexual threat. Elinor’s non-experience in Kensington Gardens is Austen’s satiric answer to that threat of sexual violence. Barbara Wenner makes the point that Burney’s novels offer “male-dominated landscapes” (8), certainly the case with the city landscapes that *Evelina* encounters. In *Sense and Sensibility*,

Austen turns the garden trope into a female-dominated comedic scene, with Mrs. Jennings as chaperone, Elinor as the young lady, and Nancy Steele as the ostensible villain—one of the “insidious forces” invading the pastoral landscape (Curry 176)—whose peremptory behavior with Elinor is equivalent to the gallants’ forcing themselves on women (like Evelina) in the parks. As villainous verbal aggressor, Miss Steele “accost[s]” Elinor and insinuates herself into her outing (307). She even takes Elinor “familiarily by the arm” (308), her action reflecting how Evelina is waylaid at Vauxhall by a band of men, one of whom attempts “in a most familiar manner” to engage her in a race (238). In a chapter offering few “stage directions,” Miss Steele’s action stands out. As Inger Brodey notes, “Austen places great weight on extra-lingual communication, especially on the significance of gesture and vision” (173). Miss Steele’s vulgar attempts at intimacy—physical and emotional—occur in “so public a place” (307) that Elinor is, in effect, held captive. Miss Steele has no awareness of where she is, of what is public and what is private.



A short review of London’s parks and gardens may provide more insight into Austen’s choice of the Kensington Gardens setting. “Georgian London,” notes Roy Porter in *London: A Social History*, “had a well-mapped topography of pleasure” (169), and Jane Austen would have been perfectly aware of this topography. Her letters reveal that she took great pleasure in being in London and in sampling its elegant diversions. In March 1811, Jane Austen was staying in Sloane Street with Henry and his wife Eliza, correcting the proofs of *Sense and Sensibility*. In April, she was particularly busy with social events: attending the Lyceum theatre (25 April), shopping at Grafton House on the corner of Grafton Street and New Bond Street (18–20 April), “Walking & Coaching” around London, and strolling through Kensington Gardens with Henry. On 25 April, Jane included in her letter to Cassandra at Godmersham a short description of springtime in London: “Your Lilacs are in leaf, *ours* are in bloom.—The Horse chesnuts are quite out, & the Elms almost.—I had a pleasant walk in Kensington G^s on Sunday with Henry, M^r Smith & M^r Tilson—everything was fresh & beautiful.” Five months later, on 31 October 1811, *Sense and Sensibility* was advertised in the *Morning Chronicle* (Tomalin 217–18).

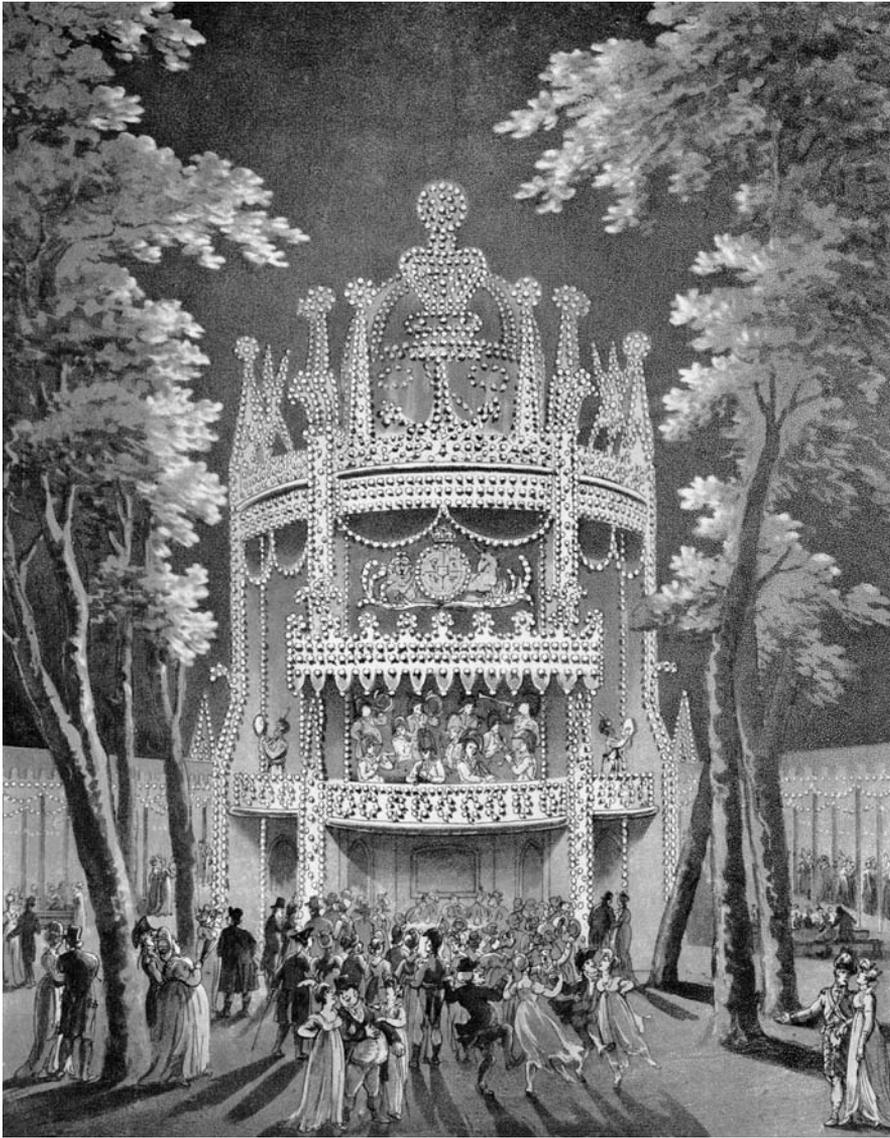
In addition to fresh air and flowers, London’s public gardens and green spaces offered—usually for a small fee—opportunities for amusing oneself outdoors, for taking “healthful ‘walks’ in a number of carefully planned and

plotted public areas,” and for “Coaching” (Ackroyd 178). After the Restoration, acres of royal hunting grounds had been transformed into semi-private and public parks filled with flowers, hedges, ponds, and paths. Fashionable Georgians flocked to the gardens to exhibit their expensive costumes and carriages. Some of the pleasure gardens offered young men and women what seemed to be idyllic pathways where they flirted, wooed, and cavorted; other gardens had dark lanes where highwaymen or ladies of the night accosted their victims. Assignations and duels, flirting and feasting—London parks offered something for everyone.

In the eighteenth century the most popular and “luxuriant” public garden in London was Vauxhall² (known as the New Spring Garden until 1785). Vauxhall offered guests special supper boxes, fancy-dress balls, bowling greens, fireworks, and dancing, with the added bonus (for some) of being shoulder-to-shoulder with the Prince of Wales (later the Prince Regent) and his large retinue, who were regularly in attendance. While on the one hand Vauxhall achieved a kind of faux elegance replete with statues, arches, a cascade, and a Chinese pavilion, and with paths lit by hundreds of lamps, on the other hand ladies of ill repute “sauntered among the trees with gold watches dangling from their necks as a token of their trade” (Ackroyd 179). Nonetheless, Vauxhall drew immense crowds and offered spectacular entertainments. In 1749 a rehearsal of Handel’s *Music for the Royal Fireworks* at Vauxhall attracted an audience of over 12,000 people. In 1763 the seven-year-old Mozart played the harpsichord in its “great room” (Ackroyd 180). In 1802, in what was quite a Vauxhall spectacle, a Frenchman ascended in a “fire balloon”—not once, but twice—the second time with his wife. Over the course of the century, Samuel Pepys, John Evelyn, William Hogarth, James Boswell, and Dr. Johnson were all frequent visitors. In what might be considered its literary apotheosis, Vauxhall appears in novels by Henry Fielding, Tobias Smollett, and Fanny Burney.³

Eighteenth-century novelists dissected the ambiance and clientele of the pleasure gardens—Vauxhall, in particular—and depicted the landscape and people as artificial, frivolous, and dangerous. In Smollett’s *Humphry Clinker* (1771), for example, dyspeptic Matthew Bramble observes that

Vauxhall is a composition of baubles, overcharged with paltry ornaments, ill conceived, and poorly executed; without any unity of design, or propriety of disposition. It is an unnatural assembly of objects, fantastically illuminated in broken masses; seeming contrived to dazzle the eyes and divert the attention of the vulgar. . . .



The Orchestra Stand at Vauxhall Garden, after Thomas Rowlandson and Augustus Charles Pugin, from Ackermann's Microcosm of London (1809). © Trustees of the British Museum.

The walks, which nature seems to have intended for solitude, shade, and silence, are filled with crowds of noisy people, sucking up the nocturnal rheums of an aguish climate. (120)

In *Evelina*, her first novel (1778), Fanny Burney sets a variety of scenes in public gardens, Vauxhall being only one of them. In a “conversation turning upon public places,” *Evelina* is informed that “Vauxhall is the first pleasure in life!” (229), an opinion that seems to reflect contemporary society’s taste for popular entertainments. A few days later, visiting Vauxhall, *Evelina* finds that “[t]he Garden is very pretty, but too formal; I should have been better pleased, had it consisted less of strait walks” (235). Walking with her companions, she enjoys the lights, the fashionable company, and the concert, but she is disconcerted when “Mr. Smith endeavoured to attach himself to me, with such officious assiduity, and impertinent freedom, that he quite sickened me.” But worse is yet to come. Not one but two sets of riotous gentlemen attempt to “catch hold” of *Evelina*, and then her “protector” Sir Clement Willoughby (note the name) insolently tries to grab her hand and lead her into one of the dark lanes.

It seems apparent that this wildly popular pleasure garden would not appeal to Mrs. Jennings’s or Elinor’s—or Austen’s—sensibilities or sense of propriety. Elinor’s walk in the public park is an ironic twist on “a Young Lady’s Entrance into the World”—part of the subtitle of *Evelina*—and Vauxhall is not the place for Austen’s heroine. Not only does Vauxhall offer a whiff of sexual threat, but the Prince of Wales, known widely for his womanizing, is an habitual attendee. Austen’s verdict—“I hate [him]” (16 February 1813)—would have been enough for her to choose another venue for Elinor’s foray into London’s public pleasures.

Rivalling Vauxhall as a place of public amusement and pleasure, Ranelagh (opened 1742) had an enormous Rotunda, an orchestra stand where Mozart played, and the usual feasting, fireworks, fancy-dress balls, as well as booths where everyone drank tea and wine and where men indulged their habit of smoking. Horace Walpole championed Ranelagh over Vauxhall for the regal company, which included princes and dukes. In Smollett’s *Humphry Clinker*, while Matthew Bramble grumbles about the vulgarity of both Vauxhall and Ranelagh, his niece Lydia Melford falls under the spell of Ranelagh, which seems to her to be “the enchanted palace of a genie, . . . enlightened with a thousand golden lamps, that emulate the noon-day sun,” a garden “crowded with the great, the rich, the gay, the happy, and the fair” (123). Echoing Smollett’s heroine’s youthful paeans to Ranelagh, Burney’s *Evelina* perceives that Ranelagh “is a charming place,” an “enchanted castle, or fairy palace, for all looked like

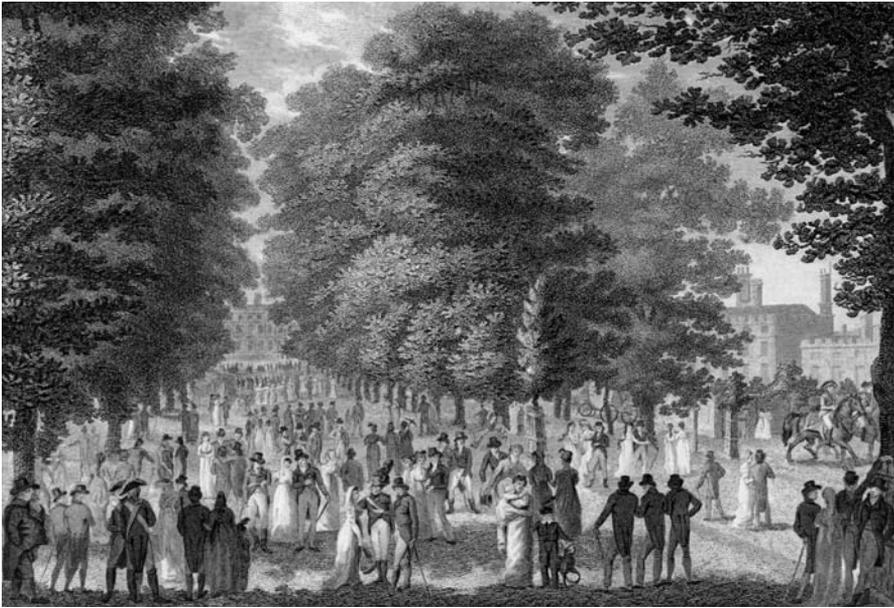
magic" (82–83). Ultimately, however, Vauxhall holds only disappointment for both fictional ingénues.

Enchantment is transitory, of course, and a combination of encroaching urbanization and neighbors' complaints resulted in Ranelagh's closing down in the first years of the nineteenth century. By the time Jane Austen was converting *Elinor and Marianne* (1795) into *Sense and Sensibility* and revising the manuscript into the final text, a period stretching from 1797 to 1809–10 (Copeland xxiii), Ranelagh had become in reality the infernal place that Smollett's choleric Matthew Bramble had described thirty years earlier, an odious public venue where "[o]ne half of the company are following at the other's tails, in an eternal circle; like so many blind asses in an olive-mill, where they can neither discourse, distinguish, nor be distinguished" (120). When Ranelagh closed, the princes and dukes dispersed elsewhere.

Other gardens drew different crowds. Marylebone Gardens, or "Marybone-gardens," was renowned at the end of the seventeenth century for such cruel sports as dog-fights, bear-baiting, and boxing matches (featuring male and female pugilists). In the eighteenth century, the whole area became more exclusive (neither servants in livery nor persons of ill repute were admitted). Even though they were situated on the edge of town, these gardens were not safe: "[a]t one stage, the proprietor of the gardens was obliged to hire a guard of soldiers to protect his customers on their way to and from London" (Thorold 136). In an extended example of the terrors offered on a hot July evening in a park, Evelina attends a fireworks display in the "Marybone Gardens" and in the chaos of the noise and sparks finds herself (as usual) separated from her friends. She is accosted every way she turns "by some bold and unfeeling man," by a young officer, and by "two ladies," who laugh at everything she says (273–76, my emphasis).⁴ These gardens closed in 1778, the year *Evelina* was published—when Jane Austen was a child.

Green Park, easily accessible from the Pall Mall, was (and is) very green: during the eighteenth century there were trees and verdant swards but no flowers, a phenomenon ascribed to the fact that the space had previously been used as the burial ground for lepers from the hospital of St. James. Renowned for fireworks displays and balloon ascents, Green Park had an even more acclaimed reputation for being a favorite destination of duellists and highwaymen. Given the context of the duels (illegal) in *Sense and Sensibility*, Elinor Dashwood would have avoided this Park, but both Willoughby and (surprisingly, perhaps) Colonel Brandon might have tried to settle old scores here.

Just across Pall Mall from Green Park, St. James's Park, the oldest of



The Promenade in St. James's Park, by *Edward Edwards, after Edward Pugh, from Modern London (1804)*. © Trustees of the British Museum.

the royal parks, was known for two distinctly different features—the vicious behavior of predators and the pastoral element the presence of cows added to the landscape. During the reigns of the Stuarts, St. James's Park was acclaimed as *the* fashionable place to ride and to be seen, particularly in the summer when the lanes were crowded with exquisitely dressed people “coaching” in modish equipages. The King's Old Road to Kensington, or Rotten Row (*route du roi*), “was the *bon ton*'s rendezvous” (Porter 173). In the reign of Queen Anne this park had become “notorious for prostitutes [Boswell later frequented this park] and for the depredations of those ruffianly aristocrats known as Mohocks” (Weinreb and Hibbert 716). The Mohocks were a gang of “young bloods” who roamed the park accosting men and women. They did not steal money, but they disfigured their male victims and sexually assaulted their female victims. St. James's Park was safe neither by day nor by night.

The feature that drew visitors to the park was the herd of cows residing there. In a radical return to country values, St. James's Park offered fresh milk served twice a day. With cows meandering over the grass and across the

lanes, the landscape of St. James's Park was a challenge for women's dresses. In Burney's novel *Evelina* is dismayed by her Sunday walk in St. James's Park: she complains that the Mall "is a long straight walk, of dirty gravel, very uneasy to the feet" (71–72). Notorious for its dirty lanes and sexual violence, St. James's Park would have been too unpleasant and threatening a location for Mrs. Jennings, in her position as chaperone, to suggest to Elinor as an appropriate place for a Sunday afternoon excursion. Nor would this park have appealed to Jane Austen herself, whose own experience walking in a public garden in March was so pleasant, her observations regarding the early blooming lilacs and horse chestnuts so particular. The potential disruption caused by marauders and cows would have made the tête-à-tête between Miss Steele and Elinor virtually impossible. In addition, the reverberating calls of "A Can of Milk, Ladies; A can of Red Cow's Milk, Sir" (Ackroyd 179) would have been a comic interruption into Miss Steele's monologues.

While the nexus of the Hyde Park and Kensington Gardens formed a perfectly delightful pastoral spot, Hyde Park itself developed a reputation as the haunt of highwaymen and the favorite destination of duellists. In the early Georgian period, Hyde Park, once famous for coach races, became less a place for perambulating Londoners than an exercise ground for "the Horse and Foot Guards, and other troops, and for occasional grand reviews. These military exercises destroy[ed] the verdure of the park, converting a large portion of it into a beaten and dusty parade" (Le Faye 609). The dust in the air and on observers' clothes was intensely unpleasant, but Londoners still flocked to the Park "in tens of thousands" to see the military reviews. Neither Elinor nor Mrs. Jennings would have been part of these crowds. Both the chaperone and the ingénue would have rejected a Sunday in a park where there was no escape from the masses of people or from the excitement of military exercises. In Chapter 2 of the novel, the setting for Elinor's walk needed to resonate with calm, quiet, and elegance, rather than with the shouts and hurrahs of people observing military reviews.

In contrast to all these popular parks, Kensington Gardens features as the perfect destination (minus Miss Steele) for Elinor's introduction to the public space of London. In the context of the Georgian penchant for pleasure, this setting reinforces the sense/sensibility dichotomy and underscores the collision of private and public values. A walk in Kensington Gardens has the potential to offer one of the "brief interludes of leisure" that Peter Graham identifies as "memorable set pieces in which characters reveal things about

themselves—things that allow both their fictive partners in leisure and Austen’s readers to judge them” (175). In the Kensington Gardens set piece, it is Miss Steele who reveals most about herself, and the reader is able to form a negative judgment of her style and substance. About Elinor we learn less directly, for her answers to Miss Steele are terse yet politely noncommittal; about the Gardens she voices no opinion. The lack of description seems to suggest that the author relies on the contemporary readers’ knowledge of Kensington Gardens—ubiquitous in pictures in newspapers and in prints—to provide the subtext.

The history of Kensington Gardens offers a glimpse into evolving ideas about design and taste. In 1689, William III, who suffered from asthma, purchased a parcel of Hyde Park for its “salubrious” air, tranquil location, and abundance of trees. The King commissioned Christopher Wren to create the redbrick Kensington Palace, which became an important royal residence from the 1690s to the 1730s (Desmond 76). The Gardens surrounding the palace provided a modicum of privacy for the royal family, but Queen Mary further enhanced the space, planting a “Dutch style” garden with formal flower beds with box and yew hedges. Later, Queen Anne obtained an extra notch of Hyde Park and expanded the Gardens. She removed most of the formal planting and authorized Henry Wise and George Loudon, her landscape designers, to develop an “English-style” garden and plantation.

A third Queen, Queen Caroline (Caroline of Brandenburg-Ansbach), wife of George II, had perhaps the greatest influence in turning Kensington Gardens into vistas that Jane Austen would have known. She acquired another tract of Hyde Park land, and, with the help of her landscape gardener Charles Bridgeman, whom she employed from 1728 to 1738, Queen Caroline redeveloped the landscape. She enhanced the Round Pond at the front of the Palace, created radiating avenues stretching out from the pond, and dammed the Westbourne Stream to configure the Serpentine and the Long Water. Instead of designing an artificial, rectilinear, and highly unnatural water feature, Queen Caroline and Bridgeman formed the Serpentine to look as though it were part of the landscape—a totally new concept subsequently adopted by landowners across the country. In addition, Queen Caroline and Bridgeman used an innovative ditch rather than a fence to separate Kensington Gardens from Hyde Park. This ditch was, of course, that iconic landscape device that soon became the rage on country estates, the *ha-ha*.

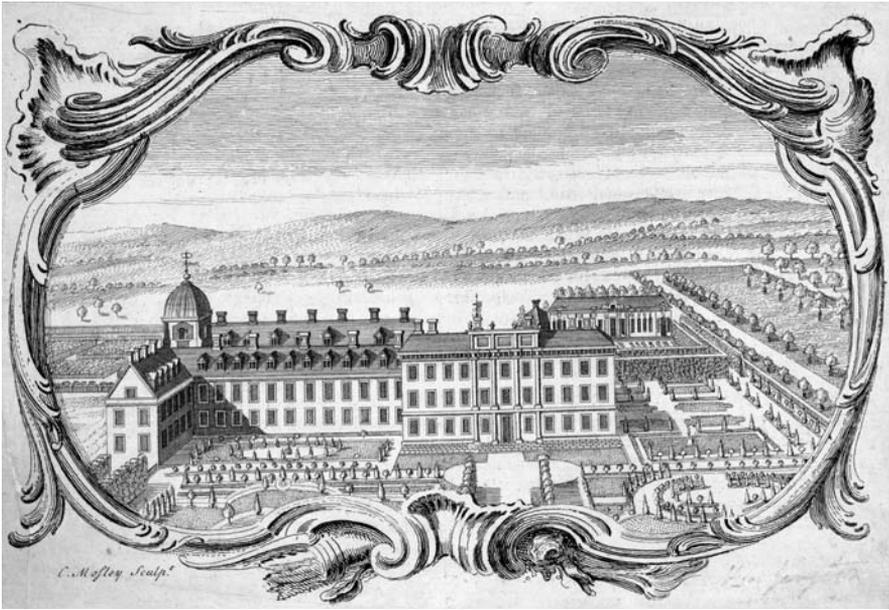
When Queen Caroline had the Gardens fenced, enclosure ensured that the Gardens would become the most “exclusive green” in London—a rival

to all the other pleasure gardens (Porter 173). George II opened Kensington Gardens to the public, but only on Saturdays, only to the respectably dressed, and only when the court was at Richmond (Weinreb and Hibbert 424).⁵ Servants stood at the entrances, ready to block anyone “meanly clad from going into the garden.” The Broad Walk became as fashionable as the Mall in St. James’s Park had been during the reign of King Charles II. Pity poor Evelina: although she is “much pleased with Kensington-gardens,” she hides herself from Lord Orville, for she fears he will see her “in a public walk, with a party of which [she] is ashamed” (283). Furthermore, she feels pursued by young Branghton, who is “extremely troublesome; he insisted upon walking by my side, and talked with me almost by compulsion.” When, like Branghton, Nancy Steele latches onto Elinor, she, too, is troublesome, clutching Elinor’s arm, talking nonstop, and pausing long enough to allow Elinor only a phrase or two for her replies.

In 1760, when George II died and his grandson George III chose Buckingham House as his primary residence, Kensington Palace was abandoned for almost forty years. The Palace and the Gardens fell into total disrepair. Then, the Duke of Kent decided to take up residence there, and renovations began on both the building and the Gardens. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, as the Palace’s refurbishment was nearing completion, the elegant Gardens were opened to the public on Sunday. By the time Mrs. Jennings and Elinor take the air on a Sunday in the second week of March, debts had forced the Duke of Kent abroad, and other Royals—including Caroline of Brunswick, the Princess of Wales—moved in (Weinreb and Hibbert 426). From 1808 to 1813 the Princess of Wales had apartments in Kensington Palace.

Austen keeps Elinor away from pleasure gardens where the Prince of Wales held sway, sending her instead into the domain of the Princess of Wales. During the time Austen was revising *Elinor and Marianne*, the Prince and Princess of Wales were living apart; having married in 1795, they separated the year following the birth of their daughter Princess Charlotte. By 1806 rumors of amorous affairs, adultery, and an illegitimate child circulated widely, with the result that the Princess of Wales was banished from Court and restricted in her visits to her daughter. During the time Austen was readying *Sense and Sensibility* for publication, the reputation of the Princess of Wales was in tatters, but the press still championed the wronged wife over the grotesquely extravagant Prince. An investigation into the Princess’s “amours” found no direct proof of anything more than flirtations.

Given Caroline of Brunswick’s public persona, it sometimes seems that



Kensington Palace and Gardens, by Charles Mosley (c. 1740). © Trustees of the British Museum.

Austen's fervor for defending her is misplaced. This fervor may have developed early on, perhaps in part from her brother Frank. Having been recalled from China by the Lords of the Admiralty to war duties closer to home, Frank was out of pocket for the expenses he incurred in his return to England. After intervention from Mr. Austen, who appealed to Warren Hastings on behalf of his son, Frank was subsequently recalled "in the bitter winter" of 1794–95 to the HMS *Lark* to serve "as part of a fleet sent to evacuate British troops from Ostend and Nieuwpoort" (Nokes 149–50). Lieutenant Frank Austen's next term of service on the *Lark* was perhaps calmer for the sailor, but the end result was a catastrophe for the principal domestic combatants—namely, the Prince of Wales and Princess Caroline of Brunswick. A few months after the successful evacuation of the Fleet, in 1795 the *Lark* was part of the squadron sent to escort Princess Caroline, affianced to the Prince, to England. As David Nokes relates, Caroline "came as a considerable disappointment to her future husband ('swears like an ostler and smells like a farmyard' was one unkind courtier's remark)" (150). Brian Southam suggests that the duty of escorting Princess Caroline "no doubt provided the young Lieutenant with a fund of royal anecdotes to entertain the family" (211). Alas, there is no record to show that Frank

actually entertained his family with anecdotes. While the Princess's behavior as a spurned wife was not faultless, to say the least, Jane Austen, along with a broad swathe of the British public, staunchly supported the Princess against the Prince. In a letter dated Tuesday, 16 February 1813, Jane Austen pens her opinion of the Prince and his abhorrent treatment of his wife: "Poor Woman, I shall support her as long as I can, because she *is* a Woman, & because I hate her Husband."

It is said that Caroline, the Princess of Wales, still haunts Kensington Palace.



The arc of this chapter has moved from Berkeley Street, where Mrs. Jennings and the Dashwood sisters meditate privately about Edward and Lucy, to "so public a place" as Kensington Gardens, where Nancy Steele reveals private details, and then back to Berkeley Street, where the private is confirmed as public. In a chapter that should belong to Elinor, Miss Steele dominates by speaking in long paragraphs cluttered with inconsequential details about herself, while Elinor rarely enters into the "conversation" (or "unconversation," as Juliet McMaster suggests [185]), and she directly replies to Lucy's ramblings only five times. The texture of Elinor's answers reveals her growing sense of authority, for each of her replies is formulated with a heavy emphasis on "I": "I believe," "I cannot suppose," "I never heard anything," and "I do not understand." The strength of Elinor's final three-sentence speech reveals her frustration with herself for listening to Miss Steele's indiscretions and with the method Miss Steele has employed to get her evidence: "How!" cried Elinor; 'have you been repeating to me what you only learnt yourself by listening at the door? I am sorry I did not know it before; for I certainly would not have suffered you to give me particulars of a conversation which you ought not to have known yourself. How could you behave so unfairly by your sister?' (311). Elinor's "How!" is not a question, for even as Miss Steele is chastising her for not knowing that it is impossible for "people to make love when any body else is by," Elinor has grasped immediately Miss Steele's treachery. "How!" functions here as an interjection associated with pain and grief. Elinor's cry comes from her heart, expressing her distress at the fact that she had "suffered"—that is, allowed—Miss Steele to impose on her about private matters. Elinor "tried to talk of something else," but Miss Steele stays fixated on the twists and turns of her own tangled narrative. But with her exclamation "How!" Elinor has distanced herself emotionally and ethically from Miss Steele.

If Miss Steele has the fashionable accoutrements to suggest that she is on an equal footing with Elinor, through her constant babbling she has exposed how lacking she is in the virtues that would elevate her in society. Devoid of principles, Miss Steele says that she cannot see what is wrong with her method: “Oh, la! . . . I only stood at the door, and heard what I could” (311). But she did more than stand at the door and hear what she could: Miss Steele has passed on to Elinor private details. When Elinor says that she “would not have suffered” hearing the “particulars” gathered in such a way, she is asserting her repugnance as well as her moral superiority.

In the public space of Kensington Gardens, Miss Steele has accosted Elinor and forced upon her private information gained by devious means—through eavesdropping. McMaster calls Miss Steele “the bean-spiller” (184), and in this chapter she cannot be stopped from divulging how Lucy and Edward “make love,” that is, indulge in an intimate conversation meant only for each person involved to hear (311). As Mrs. Jennings takes Elinor home in the carriage, Elinor shares with Mrs. Jennings only “the brief repetition of such simple particulars, as she felt assured that Lucy, for the sake of her own consequence, would chuse to have known. The continuance of their engagement, and the means that were to be taken for promoting its end, was all her communication” (313). The following morning a letter from Lucy to Elinor confirms the particulars. When Elinor passes Lucy’s letter to Mrs. Jennings—just as Lucy intended her to do—the whole true-and-false story is public.



For Austen, Kensington Gardens provides the setting for comedy rather than tragedy, for nothing in the chapter conforms to the reader’s expectations, and Elinor trumps the Steele sisters by the knowledge that Edward does indeed love her and would, if he could, break the engagement that has entangled him. From the very beginning of her excursion to Kensington Gardens Elinor’s walk seems fated to fail. She will have to endure politely the disorganized musings of one of Austen’s dullest female characters; she will encounter no one new. Whereas Evelina is constantly accosted by anonymous rogues and jostled by men on the razzle, Elinor is accosted by a devious female whose smug satisfaction shapes the form and content of her verbosity. Elinor’s walk in the park is notable for the fact that at no point does she comment on her environs. It is as though she is too startled to look around, but it may also be that a description of Elinor’s reactions to the lanes and plantings of the park

would have been redundant to Austen's readers, who, upon seeing that the designated destination is Kensington Gardens, could formulate in their own minds Elinor's experience. Instructed by Mrs. Jennings to "Get it all out of her," Elinor finds that her own curiosity is piqued (308), but her integrity is not threatened by her desire to know more about the engagement. Meanwhile, Elinor's reserve is eloquent.

A contemporary reader might have expected that an excursion to Kensington Gardens would offer Elinor the opportunity to commune with Nature, to secure a period of contemplation for her troubled soul, to find an oasis in the busy routine of daily life in London. After all, the ostensible function of city gardens was personal and social rejuvenation. But Miss Steele negates the function, and her circumlocutions clash with the linear form of this most elegant garden. By overturning the pastoral trope inherent in the garden visit, Jane Austen shows that expectations regarding the visit to a garden were complex, that public pleasure might threaten personal well-being. In *Sense and Sensibility*, the threat is neither sexual nor physical; rather, Miss Steele poses a threat to Elinor's peace of mind. The dense, convoluted texture of Miss Steele's boring monologues contrasts greatly with the straight lanes and open spaces that were the well-known features of Kensington Gardens. With her words, which Elinor cannot divert, Miss Steele boxes Elinor in as though she is in a small room and cannot escape. On a deeper level, this chapter juxtaposes Elinor's inherent elegance and gentleness with Miss Steele's faux manners and lack of moral compass. Pairing Elinor with Nancy Steele, Austen satirizes the noisy, fake, and selfish interloper. Notwithstanding her silk stockings and hat with pink ribbons, it is as though Miss Steele and her egocentric conversation belong in another garden—Vauxhall, for example.

Elinor leaves Kensington Gardens stronger than when she left the house on Berkeley Street to walk in the park. Although she is deprived of any sort of quiet reflection, Elinor discovers not only that Miss Steele has no compunctions about her methods of gathering information, but also that the information she has been relaying so confidently is confabulated and in the main unreliable. Elinor can trust only the solid facts: Lucy trimmed Nancy's hat; after three days of silence Edward visited at Bartlett's Buildings and spoke with Lucy; he spent those three days in the country; he does not have enough money to marry Lucy and entreats her to break the engagement. Refusing (or unable) to hear the desperation in his plea, Miss Steele misinterprets Edward's begging Lucy "to put an end to the matter directly, and leave him to shift for himself" (310). She claims that Lucy said that "she could live with [Edward]

upon a trifle, and how little so ever he might have, she should be very glad to have it all, you know, *or something of the kind*” (310; emphasis added). Yes, Lucy would certainly be glad to “have it all.” Elinor hears Miss Steele’s mistake here, as well as Miss Steele’s addition of her own suppositions about what is said and felt by her sister and Edward: “then he was monstrous happy,” she tells Elinor, as though she can see through the door. Having heard her praise the good behavior of the Middleton children, Elinor already knows how elastic the truth can be for both Steele sisters.

The most important particular Elinor gleans from Miss Steele is the fact that “Edward have [sic] got some business at Oxford, he says; so he must go there for a time” (312). Without commenting on Elinor’s reaction to this important particular, Austen lets the reader intuit Elinor’s assimilation of the fact that Edward will be spending time away from Lucy. Even though she knows that the engagement continues, knowledge of Edward’s absence gives Elinor a moral and ethical victory. Walking through the gardens with Miss Steele, she has said hardly a word, yet in her insistence on honesty and delicacy she has triumphed over the Steeles and their manipulation of the truth. “Pastorals,” Mary Jane Curry says, “eject or neutralize antagonistic forces” (184), and in *Sense and Sensibility* the walk in Kensington Gardens has served to neutralize the Steeles. Elinor’s disrupted Sunday afternoon stroll has clarified for her the superiority of refinement, plain facts, and careful attention to details. When she gets into the carriage to go back to Berkeley Street with Mrs. Jennings, Elinor reports only the facts of the “continuance of their engagement, and the means that were to be taken for promoting its end” (313). Lucy’s follow-up letter, delivered to Elinor the next day, presents a different version of the facts—Edward “would not hear of our parting,” she writes, “though earnestly did I, as I thought my duty required, urge him to it for prudence sake” (314)—and suggests that the sisters should get their public stories straight. What Lucy does not include in the letter—the fact that Edward will voluntarily remove himself from London, and from her—is the information that Elinor carries away from Kensington Gardens. Imagine, then, her “astonishment and confusion” in Chapter 4 when he turns up at Berkeley Street to leave his farewell card (326). How cleverly Austen keeps the comedy going.

The heyday of the pleasure gardens was over by the time the Prince Regent finally became George IV. Over the centuries, Kensington Gardens has fared better than such riotously popular venues as Vauxhall and Ranelagh, but certain “design interludes” created by nineteenth- and twentieth-century

landscapers marred the integrity of the site with plantings of trees and shrub-beries, and with intrusive railings and benches (Desmond 76). The recent sympathetic renovations of Kensington Gardens should therefore prove to be of interest to readers of Jane Austen's novels, for the refurbishment includes a return to the kind of axial vistas and straight borders that the author would have been able to observe during her walk in the Gardens with her brother. The project focuses on "reinstat[ing] the dignity of the site through a considered scheme, based on historical precedent" (Desmond 78). Today, the Gardens exhibit a modern take on the verdure, flora, and herbage that Jane Austen herself would have known. Dignified and elegant, Kensington Gardens remains the perfect venue for Elinor Dashwood's Sunday walk.

NOTES

1. William IV recounted how his great-grandfather George II was accosted and robbed in Kensington Gardens: "one day a man jumped over the wall, approached the King, but with great respect, and told him he was in distress, and was compelled to ask him for his money, his watch, and the buckles in his shoes. . . . [T]he King told him that there was a seal on the watch-chain of little or no value, but which he wished to have back. . . . The man said he would do so provided the King did not mention the robbery to anyone. The bargain was made and the man returned the seal at the same hour on the same spot the next day" (Weinreb and Hibbert 424).
2. The name derived variously from "Fawkeshall," "Fauxhall," and "Foxhall."
3. See Porter 172–76; Weinreb and Hibbert 910–12; Coke and Borg.
4. See Porter's Chapter 7, "Culture City: Life Under the Georges." Information about the pleasure gardens and parks is taken from the Royal Parks web sources: www.royalparks.org.uk
5. Copeland quotes from *The Original Picture of London* (26th ed., 1827): "This delightful place is always open to the public from six o'clock in the morning in summer, and seven in winter, till sunset" (489). According to Weinreb and Hibbert, the Gardens were open on Saturdays during the reign of George II; then, in the early nineteenth century, when only a few Royals lived at Kensington Palace, the Gardens opened on Sundays as well. The Gardens were opened all year round to the public by William IV.

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