

Inventing the Coffeehouse

It should be easy to identify what a coffeehouse was at the dawn of the eighteenth century: a place where people gathered together to drink coffee, learn about the news of the day, and perhaps to meet with other local residents and discuss matters of mutual concern. Yet beyond this simple rubric lay a wide variety of places. The coffeehouse was an innovative new institution that emerged in the mid-seventeenth century, but it was built on a number of familiar templates. The coffeehouse was a public house much like the alehouses, inns, and taverns that had long formed a part of the British urban landscape. The term "public house" captures nicely the paradoxical juxtaposition of the domestic and the public spheres found inside these places, and the term was increasingly being used to refer to homes open to customers for rest and refreshment in the post-Restoration era.¹

Coffeehouses did not look much different from taverns or alehouses on the outside, or even on the inside (Figures 8 and 9). They were all rather ephemeral structures. The surviving images of the coffeehouses suggest that the interiors at least were decorated almost entirely in wood, which would have made the places extremely vulnerable to fire as well as damage from heavy rains and the changing temperatures from season to season. Few of the original buildings seem to have survived past the late nineteenth century. Most coffeehouses were in fact hardly distinguishable from the rest of the building around them.

Coffeehouse proprietors tended to live on the premises with the rest of their family, and the "coffeehouse" proper was really little more than a room within the larger domicile. Some of the larger and more prosperous coffeehouses may have offered several rooms to their various customers, perhaps even private rooms, but the standard coffeehouse model seems to have been one large room with one or more tables laid out to accommodate customers. Anthony Sambach's coffeehouse had five tables; Samuel North's coffeehouse had nine tables in his "great coffee room." Some coffeehouses had benches; others had chairs for their customers (Figures 10 and 11). Like most early modern households, each coffeehouse had a number of servants, usually younger boys, who served coffee and attended to the needs of the customers. Other boys working as shoe-shiners or porters for hire also plied their trade on the premises.² Many eighteenth-century images of coffeehouses include household pets such as birds, but especially dogs (Figures 12 and 13). Coffeehouse-keepers were also heads of their households, and as such they were usually men, widows, or occasionally unmarried single women. One could usually find the keeper of a coffeehouse located behind a bar at the head of the room. This was where the drinks and other goods on offer were prepared for customers, although the coffee itself was usually prepared in a vat over a large fire. Here the ground coffee beans and the water would be boiled together to brew the freshest coffee. Extra coffee might be kept warm in metal pots by the hearth.³

The coffee served was much weaker than the coffee we normally drink today. There was no early modern "espresso." Seventeenth-century estimates of the ratio of coffee to water used by coffeehouse-keepers range from one ounce of grounds per quart of water to two ounces per pint and a half of water. The coffee was unfiltered, but it was often mixed with milk to make "milk coffee" or with sugar, a habit that was increasingly common by the last two decades of the seventeenth century. There was some debate as to whether spring water or "river water" from the Thames made for better coffee, but it seems that river water was used most commonly as it was much easier to obtain.⁴ Although coffeehouses were of course best known for serving coffee, they quickly became known as places where one might find a wide variety of exotic drinks. Tea and chocolate were commonly served alongside coffee. The chocolate drinks served in the coffeehouses were much thicker and richer than the coffee and tea: along with the chocolate grounds, a substantial number of eggs, some sugar, milk, and even "a thin slice of white bread" could be added to the mix. Other possible chocolate additives included flour for "breakfast" chocolate or wine for an alcoholic chocolate drink.⁵ More exotic concoctions served at some coffeehouses included: sage tea; a drink called "content" which consisted primarily of milk and eggs; and *ratesia*, a drink fortified with brandy.



Figure 8. Joseph Highmore, attributed (previously attributed to William Hogarth), "Figures in a Tavern or a Coffeehouse" (1720s), oil on panel (19.7 × 46.4 cm); BAC, Paul Mellon Collection, B2001.2.86. Courtesy of the British Art Center, Yale University. The interior of the public house depicted here would suit either a tavern or a coffeehouse and it is not clear whether coffee or alcoholic drinks are being served. Certainly the table, pipes, papers, and servant staff would be appropriate for either a tavern or a coffeehouse.



GARRAWAY'S COFFEE-HOUSE. (From a sketch taken shortly before its Demolition)

Figure 9. William Henry Prior, Garraway's Coffeehouse (from a sketch taken shortly before its demolition), (London, 1878 or later), hand-colored wood engraving from a sketch by William Henry Prior and originally produced for the part-work *Old and New London* (London, 1873–1878), (10.5 × 14.5 cm). Courtesy of the author. The outward appearance of the early modern coffeehouse was nondescript. They were commonly located on the ground floor of a larger building.

Sometimes other alcoholic liquors such as mum, mead, metheglin, cider, perry, usquebaugh, brandy, aqua vitae, strong-waters, beer, and ale were sold in the coffeehouses.⁶ While coffeehouses offered many drinks in addition to coffee, it seems that coffee was not sold in other drinking establishments, such as taverns, ordinaries, or alehouses.

Along with its drinks, the coffeehouses offered a place to smoke tobacco, another exotic drug whose consumption was becoming increasingly popular over the course of the seventeenth century. Judging by the presence of pipes in nearly every representation of the early coffeehouses, smoking was a natural complement to drinking coffee. By the turn of the century, snuff tobacco was also popular in the more fashionable coffeehouses. It was this combination of a variety of different exotic consumption options that made the coffeehouse distinctive among early modern public houses. Although one could smoke just

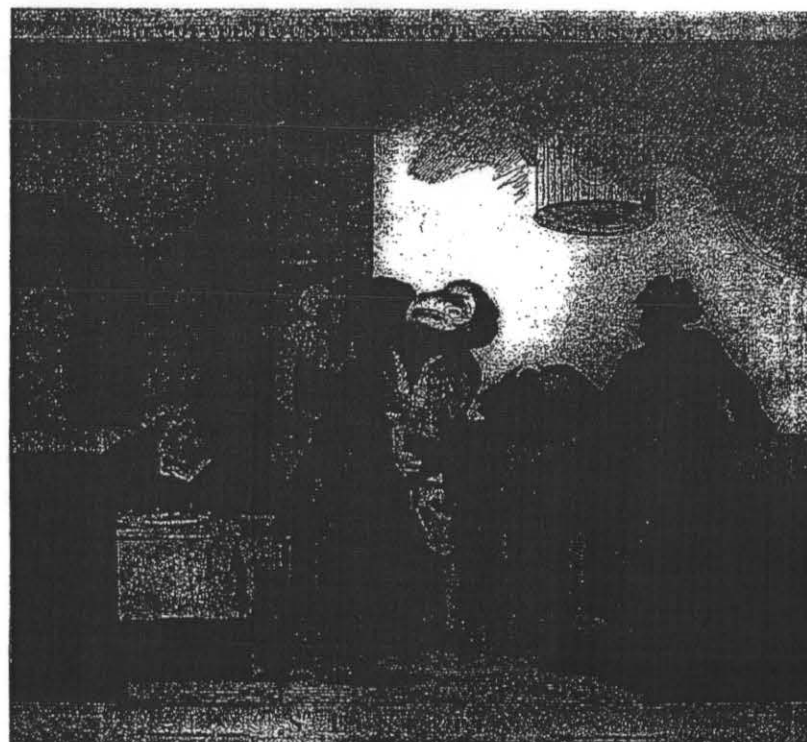


Figure 10. W. Dickinson, "The Coffeehouse Patriots; or news, from St Eustatia" (London, 15 October 1781), stipple; no. 12 of a series (11 3/4 × 14 in.). BM Sat., 5923; HL, Print 216/4. Courtesy of the Huntington Library, San Marino, California. The booths, animals, and food served at table are all characteristic of the later eighteenth-century coffeehouse. The public reading of the news, and the satiric denigration of the practice, were both commonplace in the early modern coffeehouse.

about anywhere, and one could find wine, ales, or beers on offer at most taverns or alehouses, a coffeehouse might offer any of this plus the newly fashionable hot drinks such as coffee, chocolate, or tea. In this way, the coffeehouse became an important new venue for the introduction of innovative consumption habits.

Some coffeehouses were quite modest, with just enough supplies to cater to a handful of customers, but others could be very large indeed. It was not unusual to find more than forty or fifty men together in a coffeehouse at the



Figure 11. James Gillray, "Un Diplomatie, settling affairs at Stevens's [Coffee-house]" (9 June 1797); etching with hand coloring (30.1 × 22.2 cm), BM Sat., no. 9067. LWL, 797.6.9.1. Courtesy of the Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University. The print probably refers to Stevens's Coffeehouse and Hotel on Bond Street, London, which flourished in the 1790s and the first decades of the nineteenth century.

same time. The coffeeman Samuel North's stock in trade included enough coffee dishes, mugs, and glasses to serve ninety customers, although it is unlikely that he ever had occasion to use all of them at once. Coffeehouses catered to their customers day and night: candles were always on hand to provide illumination when natural sunlight was not available through the

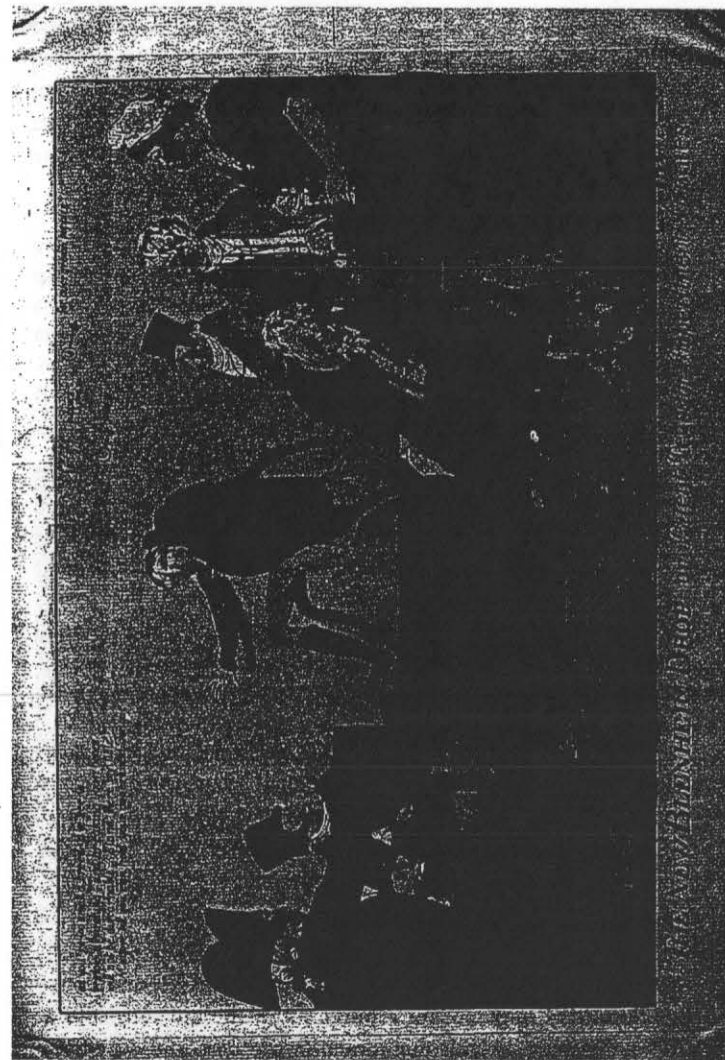


Figure 12. Charles Ansell, "The New Blenheim Drop," etching with hand coloring (21.2 × 33.2 cm), (London: S. W. Fores, 27 January 1800). BM Sat., no. 9374; LWL, 800.1.27.1. Courtesy of the Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University. The anxieties about impertinent coffeehouse talk and behavior documented for the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries in this study did not abate in the ensuing years, as this print attests.



THE SILENT MEETING.

Figure 13. Isaac Cruickshank, "The Silent Meeting," etching and engraving with hand coloring (16.5 × 23.1 cm), (London: Laurie & Whittle, 12 May 1794); LWL, 794.5.12.53. Courtesy of the Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University. By the later eighteenth century, quiet reading and relaxed sociability had become an important coffeehouse ideal and coffeehouses assumed a rather genteel aura. The Russian Karamzin recorded in 1790: "I have dropped into a number of coffeehouses only to find twenty or thirty men sitting around in deep silence, reading newspapers, and drinking port. You are lucky if, in the course of ten minutes, you hear three words. And what are they? 'Your health, gentlemen!'" See also Figure 32 below.

windows. The working day might begin around six in the morning and a continuing parade of different clientele might find their way in and out of the coffeehouse over the course of the day. Some might stop in briefly to catch the latest news or to look for a friend; others might spend hours at the coffeehouse "either to transact affairs or to enjoy conversation."⁷ Coffeehouses that stayed open too late, usually past nine or ten at night, were suspicious. Both royal and civic proclamations often enjoined that public houses close their doors at nine or ten in the evening, although these demands could never be fully enforced. These late-hour coffeehouses catered to a nighttime demimonde and their

attractions probably resided as much in the alcoholic drink and the free-spirited company on offer there. One paid the reckoning at the end of one's stay. The coffeehouses were famous as inexpensive "penny universities," and Joseph Addison's Mr. Spectator frequently remarks upon how he paid his "penny at the bar" of the coffeehouse before leaving the premises. Humphrey Kidney, the waiter at St. James's coffeehouse, kept a book of debts for the regular customers, noting carefully those patrons who left the premises without paying.⁸

While the coffeehouse is rightly associated primarily with print and scribal publications because it was an increasingly important venue for the reading and distribution of such materials, the coffeehouses were also important sites for the display of visual images as well. Many early eighteenth-century images of coffeehouses represent them with at least one, and often several, pictures hanging framed on the walls (see Figures 36 and 37). These artworks were not likely to be the products of imported grand masters such as Rembrandt, Titian, or Poussin, but they may well have been more representative of a native English taste for portraits and landscapes. Along with painted pictures, the walls of coffeehouses were often also filled with cheaper prints such as broadsides and woodcuts. In this, they were not much different from the walls of contemporary alehouses, which were also filled with cheap prints. Both high-brow connoisseurship and low-brow popular print culture flourished in the early coffeehouse milieu.⁹

The early coffeehouses were most notable as centers for news culture. The coffeehouses bundled news and coffee together as a means of attracting their customers. News could be consumed in a variety of different forms: in print, both licensed and unlicensed; in manuscript; and aloud, as gossip, hearsay, and word of mouth. Why did coffeehouses, of all places, become such important news centers in post-Restoration Britain? Any attempt to link sober coffee drinking with serious consideration of important matters would fail to explain the often playful and unserious nature of early coffeehouse sociability and newsmongering. There was no necessary functional association between the coffeehouse and news culture—the link had to be invented. The chapters in this section offer one important source for the construction of this link between news and the coffeehouse: the virtuoso culture of curiosity that had also nurtured the initial interest in coffee itself. Chapter 4 locates the origins of the coffeehouse as a novel social institution in the social world of the English virtuosi. Unsurprisingly, given their interest in the coffee drink itself, the virtuosi were among the first to patronize the earliest British coffeehouses, and their interests and their social codes and conventions set the template upon which the coffeehouse milieu developed. The virtuoso fascination with novelty

and the penchant of the virtuosi for wide-ranging discourse on multifarious topics set the tone for later expectations of what a coffeehouse would be. But the coffeehouse, being of course a "public" house, was soon exposed to influences well beyond the initial virtuoso culture out of which it emerged. This interaction between elite virtuosity and the popular and commercial cultures of the early modern city in the London coffeehouses is the subject of Chapter 5. Virtuoso culture gave birth to the coffeehouse phenomenon of post-Restoration Britain, but in doing so it was itself transformed into a much more diverse and open set of interests and individuals.

Penny Universities?

Because England's virtuosi were the most vocal proponents of coffee consumption as well as the earliest and most enthusiastic patrons of the coffeehouses, their interests, attitudes, and modes of sociability were bound to influence the culture of the coffeehouse. Indeed, the peculiarly "virtuosic" emphases on civility, curiosity, cosmopolitanism, and learned discourse made the coffeehouse such a distinctive space in the social world of early modern London. But virtuoso culture itself was transformed by its increasingly close relationship with the commercialized and urban elements of the coffeehouse milieu. We must pay close attention to this reciprocal relationship between the community of the curious and the commercial institutions they patronized if we are to understand how the coffeehouse etched out its place as a distinctive and novel social institution in later seventeenth-century Britain.

When "virtuosity" was made more accessible to the patrons of the coffeehouses after the Restoration, it became less and less the exclusive preserve of a tightly knit gentlemanly elite, as it had been during the first half of the seventeenth century. The English virtuoso thus came into direct contact with the preexisting forms of "bourgeois" sociability whose "social and cultural associations mainly revolved around the countless inns, taverns and alehouses of the towns."¹ This was a process of "bourgeoisification" also insofar as it brought virtuoso culture into direct contact with the commercial world of

metropolitan London. The precious icons of a virtuoso's erudition and prestige, such as rare works of art or natural curiosities, were now freely bought and sold in the public houses of London; even the less material markers of virtuosic status, such as knowledge of foreign lands and cultures or a familiarity with the codes of elite civility, could now be acquired for the price of a dish of coffee by any patron with a penchant to learn about such matters. Such a broadening of the accessibility of gentlemanly prestige was not an entirely welcome prospect to those virtuosi, such as John Evelyn, who had acquired their cultural capital through much more arduous and costly means, and did not wish to see the distinctiveness of their virtuosity diminished by its contact with the less discriminate, more commercialized, and vulgar public of metropolitan London.

From Oxford to London: The Invention of the British Coffeehouse

The first coffeehouse in Britain was established in Oxford in 1650 by a Jewish entrepreneur named Jacob who opened a coffeehouse at the Angel. Oxford remained an important early center for the creation of a distinctive coffeehouse culture throughout the 1650s. By late 1654, another Oxford coffeehouse had been established by one "Cirques Jobson, a Jew and Jacobite," who added chocolate to the drinks on offer.² By Jacobite, Wood was referring to the Monophysite Christians from Syria. Presumably, Wood's use of "Jew" in this context was to identify Jobson as an ethnic Semite, rather than a practicing Jew. The coffeehouse trade began like the coffee commodity itself, an exotic transplant into English society.

But this situation did not last for long. In 1656 Anthony Wood recalled that Arthur Tillyard, an "apothecary and great royalist," also joined the trade as he began to sell "coffey publickly in his house against All-Soul's College. He was encouraged so to do by some royalists, now living in Oxon, and by others who esteem'd themselves either *virtuosi* or *wits*." These early coffeehouse virtuosi included the young Christopher Wren, Peter Pett, Thomas Millington, Timothy Baldwin, Georg Castle, William Bull, John Lamphire, as well as Matthew and Thomas Wren, the sons of Dr. Matthew Wren, the bishop of Ely. According to Wood, "this coffey house continued till his majestie's returne and after; and then they became more frequent."³ We have already seen how the 1650s Oxford milieu was particularly conducive to the development of the new coffeehouses because that decade saw a peculiar conjunction of orientalist scholarship at the university and a vibrant new scientific community in the town. It was these same Interregnum virtuosi of Oxford, and later in London

as well, who established a distinctive style of coffeehouse sociability that became a sort of template upon which the later, and much more numerous, coffeehouses of the Restoration era modeled themselves.

Little is known about the coffeehouses of Oxford in the 1650s save what Anthony Wood and John Evelyn recorded in their memoirs. Yet it seems clear from Wood's occasional jottings that these coffeehouses catered more to a select clientele rather than to the general public. Indeed, they were much more like private clubs than public houses. The earliest coffeehouses were characterized by an air of exclusivity and aloofness that remained at odds with their supposed openness as commercial drinking places. "At Tilliard's," Wood recalled with a barely concealed twinge of bitterness, "a club was erected . . . where many pretended wits would meet and deride at others."⁴ In the early 1660s, Peter Staehl of Strasbourg the chemist, Rosicrucian, and "great hater of women," began to offer instruction in chemistry to a select group of Oxford virtuosi at Tilliard's coffeehouse. The chemistry club included a number of hangers-on from the original Tilliard's clique, including Christopher Wren and Thomas Millington; they were joined by Dr. John Wallis, Nathaniel Crew, Thomas Branker, Dr. Ralph Bathurst, Dr. Henry Yerbury, Dr. Thomas Janes, Richard Lower, Richard Griffith, and several others. John Locke was among the participants in an earlier chemistry club with Staehl. Wallis, Wren, Bathurst, Lower, and Locke would later become important Fellows of the Royal Society.⁵

Later in the 1660s, a group of young men from Christ Church donated books for a library to be set up in the study at Short's coffeehouse. Wood noted that the holdings consisted of works of "Rabelais, poems, plaies, etc."⁶ In these formative years in which a novel social space for the coffeehouse was constructed, we find the distinctive imprint of virtuosic social forms and preferences. The coffeehouse was a place for like-minded scholars to congregate, to read, as well as to learn from and to debate with each other, but it was emphatically *not* a university institution, and the discourse there was of a far different order than any university tutorial. The coffeehouse thus occupied a social space distinct from those older centers of learning which were constrained by their dependence on church or state patronage as well as their stubborn "scholastic" refusal to accept the methods and supplements offered by Bacon's "new learning," which were so dear to the virtuosi. By contrast, the coffeehouse offered an alternative space for the promotion of virtuosic interests.

The relationship between the new coffeehouse and the established university was not necessarily an antagonistic one. While some virtuoso projectors strongly lobbied for the creation of continental-style "academies" for the promotion of the new learning as well as the requisite gentlemanly social graces

such as “riding the great horse . . . dancing, fencing, singing, playing on musical instruments, mathematics and the like,” others saw no need for such institutions due to the emergence of coffeehouse learning as a useful supplement to the traditional university curriculum. The eminent Oxford professor of geometry, John Wallis (1616–1703)—who had been a member of Peter Staehl’s chemistry club at Tillyard’s coffeehouse—expressed this view forcefully in his animadversions on Lewis Maidwell’s proposal to erect a London academy in 1700.⁷ He praised those extra-university clubs that met “by voluntary agreement and consociation, for particular parts of usefull knowledge in our universities.” A prime example of these associations, he thought, was indeed the Tillyard coffeehouse clique:

It is now near fifty years ago, that Mr. Staal (a skillfull *Chymist*) came to *Oxford*, (being invited hither for that purpose) and made it his business here, to instruct such as desire it, in the practice of *chymistry* (a piece of knowledge not misbecoming a gentleman:) that is, when 6, 8, or more (of the better rank amongst us) agreed together for that purpose; he did, with them (in a convenient place for that affaire) go through a whole *course of chymistry*.

And the like practise hath been pursued ever since by Dr. Plott, Mr. White and others successively to this time.

Wallis also thought it entirely unnecessary to provide instruction in the more fashionable, but less scholarly, aspects of genteel culture. Where would it end, he asked: shall the young now need instruction “to drink wine, ale, coffee, tea, chocolat, &c.”?⁸ Wallis’s sharp wit focused on the uneasy cohabitation of intellectual achievement and social cachet, or between learning and fashionability, in virtuoso circles that was both a singular characteristic of the new coffeehouse social scene, and yet also a source of much anxiety for many of the more earnest citizens of the later Stuart republic of letters.

Anthony Wood was certainly one of them. Although he was an early aficionado of the Oxford coffeehouse scene, Wood gradually came to resent their impact on the state of learning in the town and the university. As early as 1674, Wood included among a series of general laments on the debased mores of his times the specific complaint that “the decay of study, and consequently of learning,” was due to “coffy houses, to which most scholars retire and spend much of the day in hearing and speaking of news, [and] in speaking vily of their superiors.” For Wood, coffeehouse discourse reflected a general decline in late seventeenth-century English intellectual life: “Since the king was restored it was looked upon as a piece of pedantry to produce a Latin sentence in discours . . . to dispute theologically at the table at meales, to be earnest or zealous in any one thing. But all, forsooth, must be gentle [i.e., genteel] and

neat — no paines taken.” This was to his mind little more than “bantring,” and it was to be lamented as much as was the popular taste for “playes, poems, and drollery” in books, rather than more serious works of practical divinity. Wood also complained about this bantering “in public places and coffey houses,” which he found to be “fluently romantick nonsense, unintelligible gibberish, flourishing lyes and nonsense.”⁹ Instead of providing a space for enhancing the intellectual life of the university, Wood found that the coffeehouses of Oxford were most often used to avoid study in frivolous chat, or perhaps even worse to the mind of an embittered scholar: self-interested lobbying for preferment. Furthermore, Wood found that the coffeehouses of post-Restoration Oxford were not like the cozy and cliquish clubs he had enjoyed in the 1650s: the later coffeehouses were much more open to all sorts of patrons he considered undesirable, such as papists, Members of Parliament, and local townsmen. Wood’s pessimistic view of the rise of the public coffeehouse as a sign of the decline of scholarly standards was shared by many of his contemporaries, such as Roger North and Thomas Tenison. These complaints reflect a growing division in academic taste between the prolix Latinate “erudites” and the witty, vernacular *mondains* whose tastes were to remain ascendant through most of the eighteenth century.¹⁰ Much to the lament of scholars like Wood, North, and Tenison, the character of the coffeehouse would adapt to the times, and it would become much more so a venue for fashionable wit than a center for serious scholarly study.

For this reason, the university authorities also viewed the rise of the coffeehouse in their towns with great suspicion. By the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, both Oxford and Cambridge universities had devised statutes and regulations to control the coffeehouse attendance of their students. In 1663, the vice chancellor of Cambridge University licensed coffeehouses only if they agreed that the keepers “suffer no scholars of this University, under the degree of Masters of Arts, to drinke coffee, chocolate, sherbett, or tea . . . except their tutors be with them.”¹¹

But not all virtuosi were as melancholic about the role of coffeehouses in the republic of letters as Anthony Wood. John Aubrey wrote to Wood in praise of the great boon the coffeehouses had been to his own biographical scholarship. He noted that he had gathered up enough material for another sixteen “lives” based on anecdotes and stories he had picked up in coffeehouse chat. “Before coffee-houses,” Aubrey gushed, “men could not be so well acquainted with one another. They were afraid and stared at all those that were not of their own sodalities.” In January 1681, Aubrey also expressed his concern with “what the academiques say at the coffee-houses about [his biography of] Mr. Hobbes’s life,” and he seemed to regret that its reception there might be

overshadowed by the growing political crisis over the succession to the crown. Aubrey was one of the earliest English virtuosi to take advantage of the novel coffeehouses in ways which aided his own scholarship and advanced his personal reputation among his peers, although Aubrey's "coffeehousing" with his fellow virtuosi could just as well present more opportunities for personal embarrassment, and indeed some found the eccentric antiquarian to be "as mad as anyone in the University of Bedlam."¹²

The Oxford milieu of the 1650s was crucial to shaping English expectations of what sort of place the new institution called a coffeehouse was supposed to be. Although they were clearly understood to be public houses for the retailing of beverages, from the very beginning they were invested with a distinctive brand of learned, but not at all pedantic, sociability that was far from the well-established association of alehouses and taverns with a wide variety of vices, such as drunkenness, criminality, and public disorder. The coffeehouse was a place for "virtuosi" and "wits," rather than for the plebes or *roués* who were commonly portrayed as typical patrons of the alcoholic drinking houses. A social stereotype for coffeehouse society was established in its Oxford origins, but it was in metropolitan London where this model was most fully developed.

The first coffeehouse in London was established by one Pasqua Rosée, a Greek servant to a Levant Company merchant named Daniel Edwards, in 1652 (Figure 14).¹³ There is no reason to suspect that the opening of this first coffeehouse was related to the lapse of the licensing acts of September 1651, for the early coffeehouses had not yet developed the close association with news culture that would develop after the Restoration. The summer of 1652 did see a "period of relative independence in the press," but it is not clear that this was a direct result of the lapse in licensing. Rosée's establishment was succeeded by a handful of other coffeehouses, but there is very little evidence from the 1650s that the coffeehouses initially attracted a very large clientele. John Houghton recalled that the early coffeehouse keepers faced opposition from the "ale-sellers" who complained to the Lord Mayor that the new coffee-men were not freemen of the City, and thus ineligible to retail drinks there. In 1657, the coffeehouse-keeper and barber James Farr was presented before the wardmote of St. Dunstan's in the West "for making and selling a drinke called coffee, whereby in making the same he annoyeth his neighbors." They claimed that his constant fires had presented a great fire hazard, which brought "great danger and affrightment" to his neighbors. It was not until November 1659 that Thomas Rugge noted "att this time a Turkishe drink to bee sould, almost in every street, called coffee and another kind of drink called tee, and also a drink called chacolate, which was a very harty drink."¹⁴ Apparently it took many years before the new coffeehouses became an accepted part of the Lon-



Figure 14. Pasqua Rosée's handbill advertisement for his coffee drink (1652). BL shelfmark C.20.f.2 (372). Courtesy of the British Library, London.

don social landscape. As late as the mid-1660s, coffee sellers were still trying to carve out a niche in the London retail market. The proprietor of the Turk's Head coffeehouse in Exchange Alley offered free coffee on New Year's Day 1663 to all "gentlemen" willing to give the new drink a try, and promised to continue doing so until "the worlds end," and the proprietor of the Grecian coffeehouse offered to teach his patrons how to prepare coffee for themselves "gratis."¹⁵

Perhaps it was a coincidence that Rugge began to pay attention to the

growing popularity of coffee in London at the very time that James Harrington established what was to become one of the most famous coffeehouse clubs of the century: the Rota club, which met at Miles's Coffeehouse in the New Palace Yard. James Harrington, along with his friend and fellow traveler in republican politics, Henry Neville, were both early aficionados of the new coffeehouses and they quickly saw the new institution as a suitable venue for the propagation and discussion of their ideas and their politics. John Aubrey recalled that after the publication of the *Oceana* in 1656, they would speak "daily at coffee-houses," and their "smart discourses and inculcations . . . made many proselytes." In the summer of 1659, Harrington and his friends had instituted a "Commonwealth club" which met at a tavern owned by John Wildman on Bow Street in Covent Garden, the purpose of which was apparently to draw up petitions for constitutional reform which they presented to the restored Rump Parliament.¹⁶ Whether these proposals were "quite seriously intended," or were rather "essaying a politics of absurdity or being merely facetious," the actions of these outspoken "well-wishers to a republic" were taken seriously enough by the informants to Henry Hyde's royalist intelligence network. The proposals would be brought up again as proof of Harrington's disloyalty to the crown in formal accusations at his interrogation after his arrest in December 1661. The Rota club quickly succeeded the short-lived Bow Street group: it began meeting at Miles's Coffeehouse in October 1659 and continued until the end of February or early March 1660, by which time the restoration of Charles II had been well assured. On 20 February 1660, Pepys wrote, "the [Rota] club broke off very poorly, and I do not think they will meet any more."¹⁷

The Rota club was established for the primary purpose of allowing Harrington's "disciples and the virtuosi" to debate matters of politics and philosophy, and it gathered quite some notoriety despite its brief existence. John Aubrey had been present at the meetings, and he recalled that "the discourses . . . [there] were the most ingeniously, and smart, that ever I heard, or expect to heare, and bandyed with great eagernesne. . . . The roome was every evening [as] full as it could be crammed." The Rota was clearly something more than a Harringtonian clique, as the earlier Bow Street club had been, for it attracted many interested observers who were not necessarily committed to maintaining or reestablishing a republic, but it was not entirely the "free and open academy unto all comers" that the club's own rhetoric proclaimed it to be. There was an admission fee: Samuel Pepys paid the not inconsiderable sum of 18 d. to become a member of the club; and just as important were the informal means of exclusion which obtained—the Rota was not an open public house, but a club for self-styled "virtuosi," who were by their nature a very rarified and

self-selected breed. Michael Hunter points out that "few can have afforded as much time for endless talk" as the virtuosi.¹⁸

The proceedings at the Rota were by all accounts well organized, and they proceeded according to Harrington's notions of how to govern an ideal commonwealth. The organizing principles were that all decisions should be resolved by casting votes by ballot, and that all offices should rotate among the members. Whether or not the Rota was merely "a coffee-house academy, and not a political pressure group," like the Bow Street club, has been a matter of some historical debate, but the point was made moot by the restoration of the monarchy.¹⁹ During his 1661 interrogation, Harrington disavowed any practical political purpose to his Rota activities in 1659, claiming that they were only abstract exercises in philosophy, and he chided his accusers thus: "Did Alexander hang up Aristotle; did he molest him?" But this is of course the only response one would expect from him under such forbidding circumstances. The newly restored monarchy took the Rota-men seriously, so much so that Derek Hirst has concluded that royalist polemic of 1659–60 took great care to counter what they perceived to be "the brainsickness on which the Rota fed."²⁰

What is clear is that for its brief lifespan, the Rota was *the* place in London for the English virtuosi to assemble for discourse. The aspiring young virtuoso Samuel Pepys attended the Rota meetings primarily to hear the "admirable discourse," and "exceeding good argument," on matters of political philosophy, and to rub shoulders with the Earl of Dorset and another nobleman. While William Petty, who had already earned his stripes as a respected virtuoso in Samuel Hartlib's circle, showed up to trouble "Harrington with his arithmetically proportions, reducing politie to numbers." Debate—contentious but still civil, and learned but not didactic—was the Rota's real *raison d'être*. The club's published "model of a free state" suggested that such an ideal government should provide accommodations for an open academy of virtuosi, and "that this academy be governed according to the rules of good breeding or civil conversation"—a concept that had been promulgated for over a century in English-language gentlemanly courtesy literature, and for even longer among the Italian virtuosi, who in many ways provided a model for their English cousins.²¹ This discursive ideal provided a model for coffeehouse conversation for the rest of the Stuart era.

Other members of the Rota included the ubiquitous John Aubrey; Cyriac Skinner, a friend and assistant to John Milton; gentlemen such as Sir John Penruddock, the earl of Tyrconnel; Sir William Poulteny; and a number of future Fellows of the Royal Society, including Sir John Hoskins and Sir Philip Carteret. This significant correspondence between the erstwhile Rota-men and the future Royal Society has led some scholars to conclude that

Harrington's club offered a political and organizational model for the new scientific academy. Michael Hunter has estimated that eleven out of twenty-seven, or nearly 40 percent, of the identifiable Rota-men went on to become Royal Society Fellows.²² Certainly there were some formal and informal correspondences between the organization of the Rota and that of the Royal Society, particularly in the use of balloting and in the emphasis of both on allowing for free and open debate which was nevertheless constrained by a formalized means of procedure.²³ But contemporaries such as the Rev. John Ward, who heard that Charles II had founded the Royal Society in opposition to the Rota club, "not thinking fitt to putt down the [Rota] by open contradiction," were able to clearly distinguish between Harrington's republicanism and the overt monarchical loyalism of the Royal Society.²⁴ What made this rumor so plausible to men like Ward was the way in which both the Rota and the Royal Society were fishing for the same punters, as it were. The curiosity of those virtuosi who attended Harrington's late-night sessions in order to partake in the debates there might well have had their attention diverted by the emergence of a rival society.

The Rota also resembled the Royal Society in its remarkable capacity to provoke the ridicule of the cheap-print wits.²⁵ Indeed, some authors focused their satire on both targets. Samuel Butler derided the "Rota-men" as too "full of . . . politicks" for their own good, and he similarly sneered at the experimental virtuosi as "those wholesale criticks, that in coffee-house, cry down all philosophy." In Henry Stubbe's squib *The Rota or, news from the commonwealthsmens club*, a Rota-man is called "a learned asse," and the discourse derided as both impudent and frivolous: "A question here, although nere so rude, / Is so belaboured, and so tewd, / And into sundry pieces hewd."²⁶ Stubbe would later vent his wrath upon the Royal Society in a series of polemic tracts, an act which would ironically cause him to be labeled a "Rota-man" by John Evelyn. Years later, Thomas St. Serfe would also scoff at the erstwhile "politick speculists of the round-table" by calling them "ballating projectors" who foolishly debated "whether the hen or the egge was first . . . and heav'n knows . . . what havock they made of Bodin, Machiavel, & Plato." The ridicule heaped upon the Rota seemed to have as much to do with the "dilettante air" which surrounded their proceedings as it did with Harrington's republicanism. In this respect, the Rota was just the first butt of a long-running series of jokes aimed at the virtuosi throughout the Augustan era.²⁷

Despite its short lifespan, the memory of the Rota died hard for the chattering classes of late seventeenth-century England. While the specter of a resurgent republicanism gave the Rota the same fearful currency that animated the persistent tales (most often perpetuated by fervent royalists and tories) of the meetings of "Calves-Head Clubs" who celebrated the execution of Charles

I every January 30, the image of the Rota was also maintained by its association with the coffeehouse culture that began to flourish after the Restoration. When John Dryden's enemies wished to deride his play *The Conquest of Granada* (1673), they did so by invoking the memory of the Rota, which by then was remembered not so much as a cabal of subversive republicans but rather as a group of "Athenian virtuosi in the Coffe-Academy instituted by Apollo for the advancement of Gazett Philosophy, Mercury's, Diurnalls, &c." Invoking the memory of the Rota in this context probably had more to do with satirizing Dryden's role as a "coffeehouse wit" than to tar his work with the taint of republicanism.²⁸ The example set by the Rota remained fresh in the mental world of the Restoration wits not only because it provided a telling example of the ludicrous failure of arm-chair republicanism but also because it had created a workable and enduringly successful model for coffeehouse sociability.

The coffeehouse retained its reputation as a center for informal learning and debate among the virtuosi well after the Restoration. According to Randall Caudill, "the coffee-houses catered for the entire range of 'gentlemanly arts' prescribed by contemporary courtesy literature and projected in the curricula of the gentlemen's training academies." One could take lessons in the French, Italian, or Latin languages; it was possible to sign up for instruction in dancing, fencing, or equestrian skills, or take in lectures in poetry, mathematics, or astronomy—all in the coffeehouses of late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century London.²⁹ At the turn of the century, John Houghton published his effusive assessments of the contributions that the coffeehouses had made to the advancement of learning since their introduction both in the Royal Society's *Philosophical Transactions* as well as in his own financial weekly, *A Collection for the Improvement of Husbandry and Trade*. He thought that:

Coffee-houses make all sorts of people sociable, the rich and the poor meet together, as also do the learned and unlearned. It improves arts, merchandize, and all other knowledge; for here an inquisitive man, that aims at good learning, may get more in an evening than he shall by books in a month: he may find out such coffee-houses, where men frequent, who are studious in such matters as his enquiry tends to, and he may in short space gain the pith and marrow of the others reading and studies. I have heard a worthy friend of mine . . . who was of good learning . . . say, that he did think, that coffee-houses had improved useful knowledge, as much as [the universities] have, and spake in no way of slight to them neither.³⁰

By the eighteenth century, the coffeehouse had become a widely accepted part of urban social life, and its character as a serious center for practical

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learning had been well established. The virtuoso ideal was now, in principle, available to everyone, regardless of their wealth, status, or education.

The relative openness of coffeehouse learning to all comers, however, made the new institution vulnerable to charges that a site so indiscriminate could hardly promote the advancement of learning, but it was instead quite likely to debase learning through its association with the vulgar, dilettantism, and the plain inept. Although critical and satirical works recognized the distinctiveness of the *claims* to erudition by the patrons of coffeehouses, these critics were quick to burst the pretensions and shortcomings of coffeehouse discourse. A 1661 tract complained that since coffeehouse conversation proceeded with "neither moderators, nor rules" it was like "a school . . . without a master." "Education is . . . [in the coffeehouse] taught without discipline. Learning (if it be possible) is here insinuated without method." Another scoffed at the coffeehouse as "a new erected Grecian Academy" that harbored only drunken gallants who refused to pay their reckonings, while Richard Leigh derided the coffeehouses as "tattling universities." These criticisms were echoed by a pamphlet published in 1662, which claimed to be "printed and . . . sold at the Latine coffee house near the stocks [market]" in Cornhill, and offered its readers an account in doggerel verse of a coffeehouse duel of wit and scholarly acumen. The coffeehouse here is portrayed as a place "where doctors and schollars assemble / [and] where the folk do speak, nought but Latin and Greek," although the author advises: "But did you but hear, their Latin I fear / You'd laugh till you'd burst your breeches."³¹ The pamphlet proceeds to scoff at the indiscriminacy and dilettantism of coffeehouse discourse, which ranged from debates on the relative merits of Calvinist and Arminian theologies to problems in mathematics or much more mundane matters: "the one talks of news, the other of stews / and a third of pick-pockets and bears, / A fourth doth always curse masques, balls and plays." Another broadside published several years later continued to ridicule the supposed erudition of coffeehouse patrons. How could the coffeehouse compare to a university, it suggested, if at a coffeehouse "you may a scholar be / for spending of a penny." Similarly, Thomas St. Serfe's play *Tarugo's Wiles* scoffed at the coffeehouse scientists who awed at spectacles such as the early Royal Society trials at blood transfusion, or those "journey-man" virtuosi who pompously discussed the aesthetic merits of paintings but could not distinguish a crude Dutch genre piece from the work of an Italian master.³²

These criticisms did not go unanswered, but they were a part of a consistent refrain in the ongoing debates about the role of the coffeehouse in English society for the rest of the seventeenth century.³³ What is most remarkable about such satires is the way in which they mirrored the anxieties that the

virtuosi themselves harbored about their relationship to the coffeehouse and the metropolitan milieu with which they were associated. Did the coffeehouse offer an exciting new venue for the sharing of useful new knowledge? Or was it rather the lamentable site for the replacement of real learning with superficial, merely fashionable, social display? While the majority of the virtuosi welcomed the coming of the coffeehouse, a vocal minority persisted in voicing their worries that the new institution presented a hindrance to the advancement of learning.

From Great House to Coffeehouse: Virtuoso Sociability After the Restoration

Recent studies of the role of the coffeehouse in Restoration society have noticed that its emergence was the subject of a great deal of contentious polemic, and that it is indeed "hard to find kind words for the coffeehouse during the Restoration period." Steve Pincus has argued that much of the animus toward the coffeehouses came specifically from the camp of the "Anglican Royalists"—and even more particularly, the "new High-Church movement" of the 1670s—who were most insistent in their desire to turn back the clock on the dramatic Civil War and Interregnum transformations in the English church and state. For Lawrence Klein, the Restoration-era anxieties about the proprieties observed in coffeehouse society were part of a more generalized ethos which sought to "reassert authority over discourse and culture." I will return to these important arguments on the politics of coffeehouse society in Chapter 7, but we should note at this stage that one important reason for the resilience of coffeehouse sociability, even when it came under the most serious criticism from both high Anglican royalists and Grub Street wits, was its initial and persistent claim to "civility"—a term I invoke to suggest a peculiarly *urban* brand of social interaction which valued sober and reasoned debate on matters of great import, be they scientific, aesthetic, or political. This was not the courtly civility made famous by Norbert Elias; it was rather a sense of propriety which guided the actions of those who laid claim to the identity of a "gentleman."³⁴

This was precisely the ideal promulgated by the virtuosi of Harrington's *Rota*, and it was only further elaborated in the decades after 1660. Although the civil ideal was by no means an exclusive preserve of the virtuosi, such manners were crucial in maintaining the bonds which held the community of the curious together, and it was primarily by means of its initial virtuoso patrons that the coffeehouse came to be associated with polite society. Although the genealogy of this "civility" may be traced back to the manners and

social forms prescribed by courtly courtesy literature, in late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Britain, it took a distinctively urban, and indeed *metropolitan* form.³⁵ Coffeehouse “civility” did not have to await the Glorious Revolution and the appearance of the *Tatler* and *Spectator* papers in order to receive vindication; it had been present from the very first gatherings of virtuosi in the coffeehouses of Interregnum Oxford.

What made the coffeehouse such an attractive locale for the social life of England’s virtuosi? First and foremost was the convenience of visiting a coffeehouse, an advantage which became only more pronounced as London became the unchallenged focal point for virtuoso culture after the Restoration. Whereas the virtuosi of the early seventeenth century had centered their activities and social interactions in aristocratic “great houses” such as Thomas Howard’s Arundel House, those of the latter half of the century increasingly migrated to London and found common ground in the public houses of the metropolis.³⁶ In their migration from country to the town, the virtuosi were merely following a much larger, slower, and more profound transformation in the modes of gentry sociability which saw the rise of the London “season” and its national marriage market, the residential development of London’s West End, and the privatization of the social ideal of good hospitality.³⁷

Unlike the formal social interactions prescribed by a visit to the great house, coffeehouse visits were more spontaneous and less rigidly ritualized. The protocols of recognizing rank and precedence were abandoned within the coffeehouse, a convenient social fiction which was celebrated in a broadside which proclaimed the “Rules and Orders of the Coffee-House”: “First Gentry, tradesmen, all are welcome hither, / And may without affront sit down together: / Pre-eminence of place, none here should mind, / But take the next fit seat that he can find: / Nor need any, if finer persons come, rise up to assigne to them his room” (Figure 15). This convention was not meant to promote social “leveling,” as many of the early detractors and modern historians of the coffeehouses have assumed, but it was rather a means by which the genteel manners of the new metropolitan “Town” were to be distinguished from what were perceived to be the excessive and stifling formalities of the past.³⁸

Similar moves to promote a social fiction of equality may be found in late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century scholarly academies that refused to make social distinctions between their members, as well as in the extracourtly world of the French salons, in which it was thought that “the pleasure of talk derives precisely from a collective effort to create the illusion of a world where hierarchy does not exist.” By the early eighteenth century, this sort of polite complaisance would be celebrated by the *Spectator* as one of the superiorities of

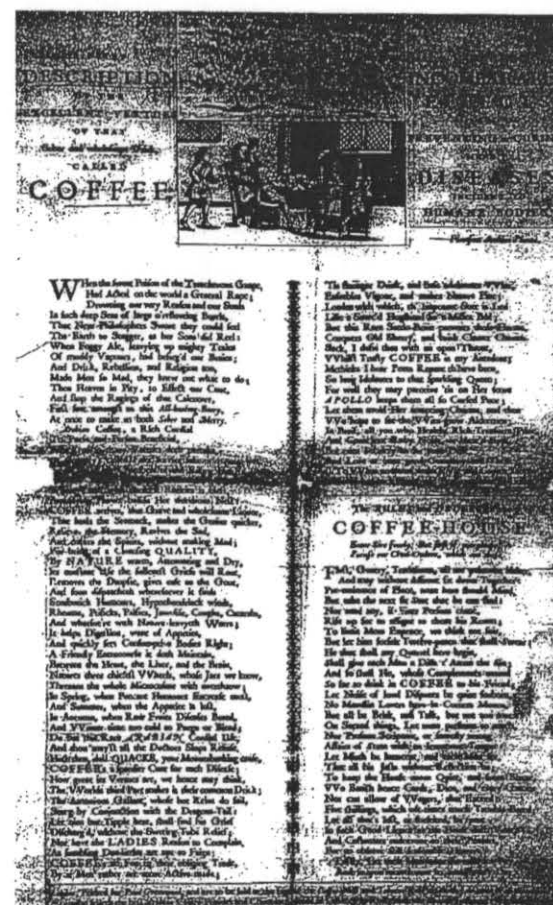


Figure 15. “The Rules and Orders of the Coffee-House.” *Brief Description of the Excellent Vertues of that sober and wholesome drink, called coffee*; BL shelfmark C.20.f.2. (377). Courtesy of the British Library, London.

urban gentility to that of the country. Previously, Addison thought, “conversation, like the Romish religion, was so encumbered with show and ceremony, that it stood in need of a Reformation to retrench its superfluities, and restore it to its natural good sense and beauty. At present therefore an unconstrained carriage, and a certain openness of behaviour are the height of good breeding. The fashionable world is grown free and easie; our mannerers, sit more loose upon us: Nothing is so modish as an agreeable negligence.”³⁹

This transformation in the manners of England's social elite was mirrored in the changing modes of virtuoso sociability after the Restoration. While they were not entirely abandoned by 1700, social visits to the private cabinets of virtuoso gentlemen were no longer the primary means by which a gentleman's status among the community of the curious was affirmed and maintained. This function was now supplemented by the emergence after the Restoration of two important new institutions, the first being the formal honor-bestowing places, patronage, and publications of the Royal Society, while the second was the informal collegiality which prevailed in the London coffeehouses. The informality of English intellectual sociability stood in stark contrast to the more formalized French manner for the Huguenot refugee Abel Boyer: "The English have no settled *Academies de Beaux-Esprits*, as we have in Paris, but instead of such assemblies, the most ingenious persons of their nation, meet either in places of promiscuous company, as coffee-houses, or in private clubs, in taverns."⁴⁰

A major advantage to coffeehouse sociability was its relative ease, cheapness, and frequency. One could visit a coffeehouse, or several of them, either daily as part of a regularized routine or spontaneously without much forethought or effort. In contrast, a formal visit required a proper introduction, a prior appointment on the part of the visitor, and the responsibilities of hospitality on the part of the host.⁴¹ The visit was a personalized ritual which was conducted on the private property of the host. The visit was also part and parcel of the traditional social economy of patronage and clientage; it was therefore also a powerful means of reinforcing the status differentials between the visitor and the host. Coffeehousing, by contrast, was conducted on neutral ground. Taking place in public space, the social intercourse of the coffeehouse allowed for, and indeed encouraged, the social fiction of equal status between patrons. While some gentlemen virtuosi such as John Evelyn clearly continued to prefer the visit as a means to display their virtuosity, others — especially the less well-off among the community of the curious — found coffeehouse society the perfect means to learn from, and show off in front of, one's peers. Although the private hospitality of the visit remained a vital social institution throughout the seventeenth century and beyond, it could now be complemented by the equally civil, but less formal and more egalitarian, sociability found in the coffeehouse.

It had to be the distinctive and novel institution known as the coffeehouse which opened up this new opportunity for virtuosic socializing. The other alternatives offered by London's rapidly expanding commercial hospitality industry — the traditional taverns, inns, and alehouses — were all burdened by their various associations with harboring drunkards, prostitutes, common

tradesmen, or plebeians. Although such places were not considered off-limits to a gentleman or an aspiring virtuoso, they were nevertheless tainted by an unmistakable patina of low status. This is not to say, as Peter Clark once claimed, that the alehouse milieu constituted an "alternative society," or a haven for a popular culture that existed in stark opposition to the social world of the more genteel elites or even the respectable middling sort, for it is now clear that the alehouse "constituted a rival pole to the respectable, establishment meeting place of the church" only in the minds of the overzealous godly.⁴² Although they were hardly cordoned off from the social world of the "better sort," public drinking houses were commonly thought to be places conducive to misbehavior. And if many found this to be part of their allure, few people wished to be known as one who made a regular practice out of frequenting taverns or alehouses.

Coffeehouses, by contrast, were a virtual tabula rasa whose social character was open to being cast with a more genteel and polite tone, and thus they came to be generally understood as places "too civil for a debauched humour." An early defense of the coffeehouse explicitly invoked its civility: "In brief 'tis undeniable that as you have here [in the coffeehouses] the most civil . . . [and] the most intelligent society, the frequenting whose converse, and observing their discourses and deportment cannot but civilize our manner, enlarge our understandings, refine our language, teach us a generous confidence and handsome mode of address, and brush off that *Pudor Subrusticus* (as I remember Tully somewhere calls it) that clownish kind of modesty, frequently incident to the best natures, which renders them sheepish and ridiculous in company." Of course, coffeehouses were not necessarily in practice more civil and sober locales than taverns or alehouses, but by and large they were perceived to be so by contemporaries.⁴³ And that made all the difference.

Robert Hooke (1635–1703) probably offers the most enthusiastic example of a virtuoso habitué of the London coffeehouses. He mentions visiting at least sixty-four London coffeehouses between 1672 and 1680 in his first diary, and rarely a day went by when he did not stop into at least one, and sometimes as many as three, even when he was ill and the weather was bad. Both Robert Iliffe and Adrian Johns have recently shown how Hooke used such opportunities to draw on the knowledge of a wide variety of individuals, from servants and skilled laborers to aristocrats, as well as to share and display novel scientific instruments. Hooke also used the coffeehouse as a venue to discuss and adjudicate philosophical and personal conflicts, and even to form his own cliques or "clubs" of like-minded virtuosi.⁴⁴ Hooke viewed the coffeehouse as a place for serious work, and he complained when there was "little

philosophical" work accomplished there; it was indeed the premier locale in which Hooke could "fulfill his own view of himself as a virtuoso, as a man of business, [and] as a man at the center of intellectual life in the city." Although there is little evidence that scientific experiments were actually conducted at a coffeehouse, it is clear that they were an important complement to the laboratory as a public space where experimental facts could be discussed and debated. Hooke himself used Garraway's coffeehouse as the venue in which he accused John Flamsteed of not knowing how to use his own telescopes properly. Coffeehouse conversation and debate offered an important face-to-face complement to the often unruly world of print publication and the formal meetings of the Royal Society in the social world of the virtuosi. The coffeehouse offered a space in which arguments could be conducted in an immediate and relatively unconstrained manner; for this reason, it was also an important place for the construction, or the diminution, of intellectual reputations among the virtuosi.⁴⁵

Hooke's virtuoso interests extended beyond the well-documented world of the new science, and again it was in the coffeehouses that he found the most convenient means to explore those interests. He could cultivate his connoisseurship of art by viewing prints, pictures, as well as other sorts of "rarities" or by purchasing them at auction, as well as discoursing with painters in a coffeehouse. He sometimes engaged in long discourses about foreign lands, such as the East Indies, and the exotic creatures in these places at Garraway's Coffeehouse. It was also at Garraway's that Hooke could inspect newly published books, presumably in the company of his learned peers. Even Hooke's coffeehouse newspaper reading could serve to reinforce his immersion in virtuoso culture: he read one "high Dutch gazet" in which "mention is made of certaine men walkin[g] the water."⁴⁶ Nuggets of curious information such as this were the common currency of virtuoso conversation.

Only slightly less ardent in his devotion to coffeehouse society was Samuel Pepys (1633–1703), whose diary from the 1660s includes around eighty visits to coffeehouses, mostly to those located near the Navy Office in Cornhill (where he worked) and the Royal Exchange, although he was an occasional patron of several coffeehouses in Covent Garden as well. For Pepys, the coffeehouse was less a venue to display his own virtuosity, which was in the 1660s only in its formative stages, than it was a place where he might learn from others. After attending the Rota meetings, Pepys continued to converse with other former members of the club such as William Petty, of whom Pepys thought was "in discourse . . . one of the most rational men that ever I heard speak with a tongue, having all his notions the most distinct and clear." Petty and Pepys chatted at various times on topics as various as contemporary

literature, music, "the Universall Character" (an attempt to produce a system of characters or symbols which could represent the words from any language), the art of memory, the notorious forger Abraham Gowrie Granger's method of counterfeiting signatures, the Cartesian dream argument, "and other most excellent discourses."⁴⁷

Before he became a fellow himself, Pepys eagerly listened to coffeehouse tales of the experiments that were being performed by the virtuosi of the Royal Society at Gresham College as well as their general proceedings. He also found an occasion to meet with fellows of the society, including Henry Oldenburg, "the Secretary of the Virtuosi of Gresham College" (i.e., the Royal Society), in a coffeehouse by the Royal Exchange. In November 1663, Pepys dropped by a coffeehouse near the Navy Office and there he listened to "a long and most passionate discourse between two Doctors of Physique . . . and a couple of Apothecarys" in which the relative merits of Galenic physic and Paracelsian iatrochemistry were debated. Pepys's reflections on the exchange are telling: "The truth is," he thought "one of the Apothecaries, whom they charged most, did speak very prettily; that is, his language and sense good, though perhaps he might not be so knowing a physician as to offer a contest with them. At last they came to some cooler term and broke up."⁴⁸ This sort of coffeehouse discourse must not have been uncommon, and it seems to have been conducted according to a mutually recognized, if not explicitly expressed, code of civil conduct. Persuasion was to be achieved through mellifluous ("pretty") rhetoric which combined a show of learning with good reason. In this respect, it might resemble the formal disputations of the universities, but coffeehouse debates were different in their spontaneity, their more casual tone, and their open-ended nature: when the conversation "cooled," it could end just as quickly as it had begun. Although the topics of conversation could be quite serious, the milieu in which they were set encouraged a rather relaxed tone to the proceedings—the purpose of coffeehouse chat was entertainment and relaxation as much as edification, hence the common expression by Pepys and other coffeehouse habitués of their delight at the "excellent discourse" that they enjoyed at a coffeehouse.

Pepys also engaged in his own speculative discourse on matters as wide-ranging as biology and natural history (such as whether insects were produced by spontaneous generation), new mechanical inventions, and strange natural phenomena, as well as medicine and chemistry.⁴⁹ His interest in virtuoso culture was, like Robert Hooke's, hardly limited to scientific matters, and he used his coffeehouse socializing to acquaint himself with painters or composers, or to discuss theories of political economy or the history of the Roman Empire.⁵⁰ In February 1664, Pepys popped into Will Urwin's coffeehouse on Bow Street

in Covent Garden, where he found the poet John Dryden and “all the wits of the town” engaged in their “very witty and pleasant discourse.” His interest in the “history of trades”—a favorite virtuoso project that was high on the agenda of the early Royal Society—could be cultivated in discourse with merchants or artisans. Another favorite topic of coffeehouse conversation was tales of foreign countries and cultures. In a Cornhill coffeehouse, Pepys listened to “Lieutenant Collonell Baron tell very good stories of his travels over the high hills in Asia above the cloudes.” While on another occasion Pepys chanced to meet with Sir Henry Blount, one of the first Englishmen to drink coffee during his travels in the Levant, who regaled him with stories of “Ægypt and other things.”⁵¹ The coffeehouse thus provided a new venue for the retailing of the traveler’s tales that were central to virtuoso culture.

Pepys’s coffeehouse conversations were of course not always devoted to virtuosic inquiries into the arts and sciences, although the preponderance of such instances is quite remarkable. He certainly engaged in much idle chatter or “common discourse,” conversation about his professional concerns with the business of the Navy Office, as well as a great deal of rumor mongering and spreading social or political gossip. Coffeehouse socializing might also present opportunities for embarrassment as well as edification or entertainment: on one occasion, Pepys found himself “shamed” in front of the “whole house” at a Covent Garden coffeehouse, when one of the patrons ridiculed his recent speech before Parliament.⁵²

Aside from the conversations and social interactions, Pepys also used the coffeehouse as a means of accessing the world of print. Some coffeehouses were closely associated with booksellers and offered their stock for sale on the premises. In this manner, Pepys was able to purchase a book on architecture at a coffeehouse in Exchange Alley, although he regretted having done so after reading it, judging it to be “not worth a turd.” Although he was a frequent consumer of the newly licensed newsbooks of the early Restoration, in his diary Pepys never specifically mentions reading a coffeehouse newspaper; perhaps he preferred to read in private, and to listen and discuss the news in the more public setting of a coffeehouse.⁵³

The centrality of the coffeehouse to virtuoso sociability did not wane after its initial introduction. By the 1690s, the coffeehouses of London were well established and they offered a quite diverse variety of venues for urban social life. James Brydges (1674–1744), FRS (elected 30 November 1694), and the future first duke of Chandos (1719), was perhaps the last great virtuoso of the long seventeenth century, and his conjoint searches for preferment and further erudition as a young man led him straight to the coffeehouses of London.⁵⁴ He kept a journal of his London activities in the later 1690s which documents

some 280 visits to various coffeehouses between 8 February 1697 and 12 December 1702. This count does not include visits to more than one coffeehouse in a single day, and on some days Brydges might visit three or more. Brydges visited about 65 coffeehouses, chocolate-houses, and taverns during his stay in London.⁵⁵

Brydges’s use of the coffeehouse as a social institution was quite straightforward: he knew which houses were likely to attract interesting company and potential patrons, so he made it a point to become a regular customer at those institutions. Brydges was a regular at such fashionable chocolate houses as Ozinda’s and White’s as well as the more businesslike coffeehouses such as Garraway’s, Man’s, or the Grecian. Most often he was successful in finding some worthy company at these places, but if he found “no gentleman coming there,” then he felt free to leave and move on in search of a more congenial locale.⁵⁶

By the 1690s, the chocolate house had taken a complementary place alongside the coffeehouse in the social round of the London elite, and indeed the chocolate houses tended to cultivate an air of even greater distinction than did the much more “democratic” coffeehouses. Although the chocolate houses were established primarily to cater to the social rounds of the leisured class to which Brydges belonged, the discourse which took place there was not entirely devoted to the light-hearted matters of “gallantry and pleasure” that Richard Steele thought were most characteristic of places such as White’s and that William Congreve epitomized in the first act of *The Way of the World* (1700). It was at White’s Chocolate House where Brydges disputed with one Mr. Barber “concerning the right of the people originally in government,” and he also discussed more topical matters, such as the prospects for a peace and the question of the Spanish succession. He also polished his virtuoso credentials there, by discussing the contents of the earl of Sunderland’s library with the Lord Derwentwater and the son of John Lake, the non-juring bishop of Chichester. At Tom’s Coffeehouse, Brydges was able to meet with the owner of some ancient manuscripts, and thus arranged a more formal visit to see them before moving on to discuss the art of painting with another interested virtuoso.⁵⁷

As Pepys had done decades earlier, Brydges maintained his valuable contacts with the fellows of the Royal Society through his coffeehouse socializing. He often met with Dr. Hans Sloane at the Temple Coffeehouse, where they discussed matters of curiosity such as the ways to navigate the bogs of Ireland; on other occasions, Brydges took the opportunity to get some free medical consultation from Dr. Sloane about his back pain, or his “rheumatick pains.” At Pontack’s tavern, Brydges was a frequent dining companion with the Royal

Society men before heading off to Gresham College, and these occasions were often punctuated by a visit to Garraway's for a dish of coffee. It was at one of these dinners that Brydges made the acquaintance of the diplomat and art connoisseur William Aglionby, FRS.⁵⁸

Although the coffeehouse was key to furthering his social aspirations in his early life, Brydges seems to have had less time for such activities after he was appointed paymaster of the armies abroad in 1705.⁵⁹ By 1710, he had become weary of the often very heated debates and discourses of the coffeehouses, and he confided privately to his friend John Drummond his hope that "some method can be found to quiet people[s] tempers and passions, which rage beyond expression at present (for your Gazettes can never treat some people half so ill, as they are in some coffee houses here all day long by word of mouth)."⁶⁰ When he began to accumulate his vast collection of rare books and art, Brydges chose to use purchasing agents and dealers resident abroad rather than to attend the auctions held in the London coffeehouses.⁶¹ In this respect, Brydges's increasingly distant relationship to the world of coffeehouse sociability reflected his newly secure status as a prominent virtuoso patron of the arts and sciences. He no longer needed to curry favor with potential patrons at White's, nor was it necessary for him to work hard to establish his reputation among the virtuosi of Gresham College. By the early eighteenth century, Brydges was a powerful patron in his own right, and his standing as a virtuoso was now to be secured through the advantages of his position as a landed magnate, in particular the prestige of his collection at his country estate, Cannons, and as the host of visits to that collection.⁶²

In this respect, James Brydges the landed peer had moved from a youthful social world akin to that of Samuel Pepys to one more like that preferred by John Evelyn. Even Pepys dramatically reduced the extent of his public house socializing as he grew older. Although the virtuosi played a central role in shaping the development of the coffeehouse milieu, especially in its early stages, the coffeehouse was never entirely accepted by the whole community of the virtuosi. Evelyn, in particular, remained wary of the institution, and indeed never mentions setting foot in a coffeehouse at any point in his diaries. When he did speak of coffeehouses, he was apt to be dismissive at best, or derisive at worst. Although he occasionally referred to the men of the Royal Society in jest as "the learned Coffee-Club," in a more serious vein he approved of Thomas Tenison's complaints that the young clerics of his parish spent little time with their books and far too much time "frequenting taverns or coffe-houses." Evelyn revealed his true opinion of the new coffeehouses in his marginal annotations to his copies of the Royal Society's *Philosophical Transactions*. Upon reading Thomas Smith's article on his travels to Con-

stantinople, where the authorities had considered suppressing the coffeehouses because of their tendency to promote seditious assemblies, Evelyn averred that "Coffe-hou[ses are] impolite, permissive, even among us, for the same reason, as I have always thought."⁶³

For Evelyn, the coffeehouse was an inappropriate venue for the learned discourse that was the common currency of virtuosity. It was too modish, too open to all comers, and too informal to maintain the elitist character that Evelyn thought socially appropriate for polite conversation. In this respect, Evelyn struggled valiantly against the dominant discourse of politeness in his day, which rendered the boundaries of class more permeable. Unlike Robert Hooke, Evelyn could never be comfortable in the company of lowly artisans and other such "mechanical and capricious persons," even when he thought there might be something to be gained from their practical knowledge. This genteel aversion to the manners of commoners was a major reason for his failure to make progress on the much vaunted "history of trades" for the Royal Society, and it kept Evelyn on the margins of the burgeoning coffeehouse milieu of metropolitan London. Evelyn's attitude to London itself was of course a vexed one for the author of *Fumifugium* (1661), a work which was at once a panegyric for the capital city and a strident complaint against the smoke and filth found there. As early as the 1650s, Evelyn was publicly deriding the metropolis as "a very ugly town" that was indeed "a resemblance of hell upon earth," and he inveighed privately "against the iniquities of [the] Mad City" to his cousin.⁶⁴ The fashionability of coffeehouse society made it seem all the more repugnant to the culturally abstemious Evelyn. For a disciple of the earl of Arundel, the advancement of learning could hardly be achieved in a place which was devoted to worldly leisure and the conspicuous consumption of luxurious novelties.

Robert Boyle, another gentleman virtuoso with a well-established social status, also seems to have maintained a certain aloofness from the London coffeehouses, although he was less vehement in his dislike for the institutions than Evelyn was, and he certainly retained an interest in the medical properties of coffee itself. William Nicolson (1655–1727), the Bishop of Carlisle during the reign of Queen Anne, seems to have preferred to make personal visits to the homes of his fellow virtuosi rather than to meet them in the coffeehouses. Although Nicolson apparently did not frequent the coffeehouses, he did occasionally stop in at a tavern and he could not resist examining some of the natural curiosities on display in the public houses. The Irish intellectual William Molyneux, FRS, told his friend John Locke that he thought "coffee-houses and publick tables are not proper places for serious discourses relating to the most important truths." This comment was made in the course of

chastising their mutual acquaintance, John Toland, for his indiscreet religious discourse in public houses, a practice which drew the shock of many of his contemporaries.⁶⁵ Toland himself later disavowed the practice of "railing in coffeehouses" and told the third earl of Shaftesbury that he was no longer prone to "sauntering . . . in coffeehouses, nor keeping so much tattling company" as he had formerly. The same reserved distaste for coffeehouse society was expressed by Shaftesbury himself, who associated the coffeehouse with "the world"—the English equivalent of the French *le monde*—and saw it as harboring little more than frivolity, gossip, sycophancy, and imposture. Shaftesbury recommended instead that his fellow virtuosi take advantage of "the liberty of the club, and of that sort of freedom which is taken amongst gentlemen and friends who know one another perfectly well," rather than to mingle "in mixed company, and places where men are met promiscuously on account of diversion or affairs"—precisely the locales in which Robert Hooke and the young Samuel Pepys moved so effortlessly.⁶⁶

It is perhaps ironic that some of Britain's greatest virtuosi of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries remained aloof from the social and commercial transformations that their fellow travelers so eagerly embraced, but these anxieties were not entirely idiosyncratic. Indeed, they reveal some of the major strains within British virtuoso culture itself. The coffeehouse became the primary site for the newer, more public, more commercialized, and urbanized modes of virtuoso sociability in the later seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, but these changes were not entirely welcomed by those virtuosi who still held on to the more circumscribed, private, and personal social forms that were the preserve of the landed gentleman and his great house. It should not be thought that the older ideal grew stagnant and was gradually replaced by the vibrant new world of the metropolitan coffeehouses. Some virtuosos, like James Brydges, found it possible to operate comfortably in both worlds at various times. The Virginian gentleman and fellow traveler amongst the virtuosi William Byrd, FRS (1674–1744), spent most of his London social life in the coffeehouses, and was also privileged enough to visit the collection of Lord Islay.⁶⁷

The coffeehouse did not supplant the great house as the central focus of virtuoso social life, but it did supplement it in a way that was not entirely comfortable for those who had invested a great deal of their cultural and financial capital in mastering the more venerable means of establishing one's learned reputation. For those aspiring virtuosi of lesser means, however, who could not afford to go on grand tours or amass great collections in their country houses, the coffeehouses opened up a hitherto restricted or severely regulated world of information and social access.