Chapter 2

Sex and Marriage

i. ‘Principal Occupations’

‘This is the place in all England to enjoy good health, and to turn it to account’ the French traveller Abbe Prevost declared of Bath: ‘Beauties of all ages … come to show off their charms, young Girls and Widows in quest of Husbands’ and ‘married Women who seek Solace for the unpleasant Ones they possess’.¹ Many contemporaries concurred with Prevost’s depiction of Bath as a location which enticed visitors searching for romance, marriage and sexual dalliance.² ‘There is no place in the world so fit for the necessary and honourable business of making alliances’ as Bath, Pococke declared in the mid eighteenth century, adding that this was the sole reason for the ‘increase of Buildings’ at the resort; while in the nineteenth century, A. B. Granville scathingly remarked that ‘the laying of snares for young women, intriguing with such as had a husband, hunting after the fortune of widows, and entrapping the unwaving youth with more money than wit … formed the principal occupations of … those who assembled at Bath’ in the previous century.³

Tunbridge Wells was similarly reputed as a spa where romantic and sexual relationships could be pursued by male and female visitors alike. The resort was

particularly renowned for sexual misdemeanour; John Macky stated there was ‘no better place to start an intrigue,’ and John Britton informed his female readers not to make ‘their faces cheap’ by appearing too frequently at the spa. He discusses a Miss Banks, who could win nothing but ‘a faint languid attention’ at Tunbridge Wells, as a result of spending too many seasons there. However, Daniel Defoe believed that the resort was safe for respectable women: ‘a lady very seldom suffers that way [damage to her reputation] at Tunbridge, without some apparent folly of her own; for that they do not seem so apt to make havoc of one another's reputation here, by tattle and slander.’

This chapter investigates the themes of sex and marriage at eighteenth-century Bath and Tunbridge Wells, exploring the range of options that lay open to leisured women. In particular, it seeks to separate the fictional representation from the lived experience, two elements which have become tightly bound in spa historiography. In turn, it considers how far the resorts functioned as marriage markets; the ways in which spa schools taught young women lessons in the art of courtship; how opportunities for flirtation occurred on a daily basis during the fashionable seasons during rounds of balls, concerts and theatre-visiting, and finally, it investigates the benefits which the single life offered to widows and spinsters at the eighteenth-century resort.

Penelope Corfield argues that ‘Bath was a meeting place for the sexes’ and that ‘even more than most towns, it was an unofficial marriage market.’ Similarly, Roy Porter suggests: ‘A season of balls, family parties and visits to resorts such as Bath was invented, to give Miss more chance to meet eligible suitors.’ Peter Borsay highlights how the ‘facilities at Bath were carefully organised to promote the market’s smooth operation’, thus suggesting that both the supply and demand elements of spa society were geared towards the marriage market. However, the full

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6 Defoe, *A Tour Through the Whole Island of Great Britain*, i, p. 127
range of romantic and sexual opportunities on offer to polite female visitors is rarely explored. Instead, we are presented with a refined, neat and somewhat rose-tinted image of the Georgian spa as a well-oiled marriage machine.

The representation of the spa as a marriage market fits into a wider theory which argues that during the mid-eighteenth century, a series of country marriage markets emerged in England, centred on the newly developing facilities of county towns, such as assembly rooms, theatres and pleasure gardens and the series of balls, plays and musical concerts which they accommodated. As Macky noted, before the emergence of new urban entertainments such as assemblies, it was difficult for women to meet suitors: ‘for formerly the country Ladies were stewed up in their father’s old Mansion Houses, and seldom saw Company, but at an Assize, a Horse-Race, or a fair. But by the means of these Assemblies, Matches are struck up.’

London and Bath, Lawrence Stone suggests, emerged as unique ‘national marriage markets’ which attracted squirearchy from all over Britain. Despite its small size, Tunbridge Wells also attracted visitors from far and wide, competing during the later seventeenth and early eighteenth century with Bath. Within these spaces, ‘wealth could be exchanged for status’ as the sons of the landed aristocracy and gentry looked for matches with the daughters of wealthy merchants and middling professionals. Such matches were beneficial to both parties, the husband securing a substantial dowry to help finance his landed estates and the wife inheriting status, lineage and ‘the envied entrée to polite society.’

One of the particular benefits of the national market was that it allowed for a wide choice of suitors. It has been suggested that the eighteenth century witnessed a shift away from marriages of convenience to companionate marriages. Stone suggests that in medieval England, marriage was most frequently formed for convenience, with little regard for love and affection. This, according to Stone and Randolph

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Trumbach, altered from the late seventeenth century and throughout the eighteenth, whilst Edward Shorter locates this development in the nineteenth century. Historians give different reasons for this change. Shorter argues that there was a social shift, a ‘rise in sentiment’ after 1800. Stone makes a similar case, looking at case studies spanning the social hierarchy and famously arguing that a change started to occur after the mid seventeenth century, which led to a new emphasis on affection and individual personality. Ralph Houlbrooke argues that parents became more considerate of their children’s wishes regarding marriage in the seventeenth century whilst Jaqueline Sarsby and Alan Macfarlane suggest that it is difficult to draw such strict divides in emotional history and stress that couples were marrying for love before the eighteenth century. General consensus now agrees with the latter historians, who emphasise continuity, rather than change. Whether historians view the companionate marriage as a medieval, early modern or modern phenomenon, many agree that the eighteenth-century spa helped facilitate such matches by enabling men and women to meet with a greater variety of possible partners, and to ‘test’ out these suitors.

ii. Fictional Representations of Courtship, Marriage and Sex

Many examples of men and women utilising the spa as a marriage market can be found in novels of the long eighteenth century, particularly in the case of Bath. For example, though unsuccessful, Defoe’s Moll Flanders resorts to Bath in the hope of


finding a husband when she is widowed.17 Mr Elton of Austen’s *Emma* goes to Bath in search of a wife, where he meets and marries the wealthy Augusta Hawkins after a short courtship of a few weeks.18 In *Northanger Abbey*, Mr and Mrs Allan take Catherine Morland to Bath, with the evident intention of introducing her to eligible young men. It is in a Bath ball-room that Catherine meets Mr Tilney, and through partaking in a number of spa-recreations with him that they begin a relationship which soon leads to marriage.19 The Elliott sisters of *Persuasion* also find themselves entwined in Bath’s marriage market; Elizabeth pursues her cousin Mr Elliott, who in turn, seeks the hand of her sister Anne. Simultaneously, Miss Clay seeks to win the wealthy and widowed Sir Walter Elliott, whilst also plotting to become Mr Elliott’s mistress. The use of the spa as a marriage market is also visible in Amelia Opie’s *Adeline Mowbrey*, in which Editha, a widow of thirty-eight, wishes to ‘share in the delights of conquest and admiration with her youthful and attractive daughter’ at Bath. Whilst seeking to promote Adeline, she also looks for a husband for herself and accepts the hand of Patrick O’ Carrol, a handsome yet impoverished Irish bachelor.20

Women are depicted in a variety of romantic and sexual roles in spa-located fiction and a complex picture of marriage and sexuality emerges. The resorts are shown as spaces in which many types of intimacy could be found. One of the roles in which women are frequently shown in is that of victim, as they are pursued by rakes and fortune hunters who attempt to win their affections through flattery and gift giving. In *The New Bath Guide*, Anstey’s Captain Cormorant whispers ‘tender tales’ to Jenny Warder, purchasing soup and jellies for her at Mr Gill’s pastry shop and lavishing her with presents such as a diamond pin and a muff (also indicative of his sexual designs).21 Tobias Smollett’s Tabitha Bramble, a forty year old spinster with a deluded sense of her allurements, is similarly pursued by Sir Ulic McKilligut, who praises her with ‘high-flown compliments’, in an attempt to woo her and secure the

large dowry he believes she possesses. In *Persuasion*, Mr Elliott’s attempts to win the hand and fortune of his cousin Anne Elliott are carefully crafted; rather than showering her with the gifts and compliments that Austen’s modest heroine would shy away from, he flatters her by adopting his conversation to suit her. Once again, in *A Winter in Bath*, the heroine is sought for her dowry. Mr Dawson is encouraged by Adriana’s father who wishes her to make a lucrative marriage, irrespective of love, before his bankruptcy becomes known. This causes his daughter much anguish; ‘was she to become the wife of Dawson? or be held up on the public market, and be disposed of to the highest bidder?’ Dawson also tries to secure his potential bride with compliments and gifts, purchasing her a greasy cheesecake from Mollands and ungraciously forcing it into her hand in Milsom Street.

It is not only potential lovers who prey upon women in eighteenth-century spa fiction, but also the parents of vulnerable heroines. In Thomas Baker’s play, *The Tunbridge Walks*, the country gentleman Woodcock takes his daughter to the spa in order to find her a husband:

Reynard: Now, Pray, what has your Daughter? For if her venture don’t answer my Estate, I’le not have her….

Woodcock: [Aside] My Own Humour – He knows the Market… And I’d have a Man inspect a Wife as he does a Horse, see if she has all her Teeth, and her Quarters tight and sound.

Woodcock’s coarse phrasing, in which he compares his own daughter to a horse at market, may have evoked another type of market to the minds of contemporary audiences: the literal wife sale in which a husband sold his wife as a form of self-divorce. Contemporary depictions of this custom show women stood in market places, with halters around their necks. It was a practice only adopted amongst the working classes, as it offered a man the opportunity to separate from his spouse.

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Fig 9: The Successful Fortune Hunter. Or, Captain Shelalee leading Miss Marrowfull to the Temple of Hyman (Thomas Rowlandson).
without expensive legal fees. Woodcock’s words therefore may well have conjured such comparison for his contemporary audience, causing them to laugh at the absurdity of a polite woman being ‘sold’ in a familiar working-class custom. Similarly, in the manuscript poem Bath Lampoon, a mother attempts to ‘sell’ her daughter to a wealthy husband, however instead of evoking images of a literal market, as Barker does, this verse equates the situation to a bawd and prostitute:

Her Mother good lady
Wou’d serve her own baby,
For no body here can deny it,
That she thinks it no matter
To Bawd for her Daughter,
Something by it.27

The theme of older female relations parading their younger ones around the spa in the hope of attracting possible husbands continued to be popular in fiction for well over a century after this. Maria Edgeworth’s Belinda Portman is ‘hawked about every where’ at Bath by her Aunt who ‘puffs’ her ‘with might and main’, provoking one witty gentleman to remark: ‘Belinda Portman, and her accomplishments, I’ll swear, were as well advertised as Packwood’s razor strops.’28 Similarly, in A Winter in Bath, the widowed Mrs Pemberton is persuaded to help Lord Maybury secure Miss Oakley as his wife, in return for which she is given a sum of money which enables her to take her daughters to Bath to find them husbands.29 The depiction of women as victims of fortune-hunters and as fortune-hunters themselves arose from the same concern, the fear of women’s social freedom and inclusion in public life at the resorts.

27 NUSC PW V47/94 (FF 130V-132V) Bath Lampoon (1693/4).
28 Maria Edgeworth, Belinda (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 25
29 A Winter in Bath, i, p. 271.
Contemporary fiction often portrayed women as particularly susceptible to the allure of an attractive or well-dressed suitor, as illustrated in a manuscript lampoon written in 1694:

> With Tongs and a Brush a settlement he’el make,  
> And a whole Bale for Jointure she must take.  

In the print, *The Successful Fortune Hunter*, [Fig 9] Rowlandson also comments on how easily a woman at the spa could be won by a good looking man paying court to her. The print depicts an overweight and wealthy widow, grinning as she walks arm in arm with a tall red-coated solider to whom she is about to be wed; the couple walk along the Crescent at Bath, she gazing admiringly up at him, and he slyly smirking at the prize he has won so effortlessly.

However, women were not always shown as victims; they were also depicted in the conscious manipulation of men at the resorts. In the above instance there are examples of younger women being influenced by older ones. In the play, *A Day's Courtship at Tunbridge Wells*, almost all female characters are engaged in duplicitous relationships with men. Mrs Paywell engages in an adulterous affair with Owmuch, hoping to conceive and fulfil her sexual desire; Parret, the midwife, conceals their meetings, and Brag a ‘rich Buxom widow’ turns out to be a prostitute disguised as a woman of leisure, hoping to secure a wealthy husband at the spa. Similarly, women’s romantic and sexual deceptions play a central role in Thomas Barker’s *The Tunbridge Walks*, with female infidelity highlighted in the prologue:

> Where Beaus, and City Wives in Medly come,  
> The brisk Gallant supplies the Husband’s room,  
> Whilst he, dear harmless Cuckold, packs up Goods at home.  

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30 NUSC PW V 47/99 (FF 136R-137R) Bath Lampoon (1694). Here ‘bale’ might refer to a ‘bale’ of hey, indicating that he is possession of land, though he is financially poor.  

Fig 10: A Real Scene on the Parade at Bath (James Willson, 1772).
Not all women in print culture are married or engaged in courtship; single women also feature frequently, usually in comic form. Such depictions informed polite society that the single life was not an acceptable option for respectable women and reminded readers and viewers that whilst at the spa, single women should turn their minds to matrimony and approach it in a discreet and modest way. Often depicted as a rounded, comical figure, the spa-widow was shown ready to give herself to any man who paid court to her, suggesting they desired sexual or romantic intimacy, but were not themselves desirable. In *A Real-Scene on the Parade at Bath*, an aged widow smiles lecherously at a young macaroni [Fig.10]. The image suggests that gender roles have been reversed, as the widow boldly places her hand on the arm of the young man, whilst he raises a thin and delicate hand to his chest as if in a modest surprise at her attentions. Spinsters were regarded as even more peculiar characters to be ‘despised, pitied and avoided.’

Mrs O’Donolly, an Irish widow in *A Winter in Bath* is another example of a comical spa widow of eighteenth-century print. ‘Like most of the young widows who visit Bath during the season’ Mrs O’Donolly goes to Bath to ‘gain a second husband’. However, she is too proud of her own accomplishments to be easily wooed by an admirer. Reading ‘german theatre in the original’ and reciting plays like a celebrated actor form her principal enjoyments in life. Satirical representations also suggested that widows enjoyed a life of leisure. Widow Quicklackit of Anstey’s *New Bath Guide* cries for six days after the death of her husband, but does not allow his death to prevent her from attending a ball:

BUT STEPHEN, no Sorrow, no Tears can recall!-
So she hallows the Seventh, and comes to the ball.

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34 *A Winter in Bath*, iii, pp. 60-61
These negative representations illustrate how widows were regarded as ‘ungoverned’ women, who presented a threat to the social order by enjoying their single status and the freedom it afforded them.36

Spinsters were regarded as even more peculiar figures; the fact that they had never had husbands being seen as proof of failure to attract male admiration.37 Cindy McCreery suggests that single women’s ‘insatiable sexual desire’ was probably the most common theme of eighteenth-century caricatures of widows and spinsters.38 This can be seen in the previously mentioned caricatures of widows, and in the poem *On a Certain Ugly Old Maid, at Tunbridge Wells*, which addresses a spinster named ‘Balda’. The lampoon refers to the woman as ‘the oddest creature’ and suggests that her passions were incontrollable: ‘Rashly you love, as rashly you hate’. This lampoon implies that the lack of a husband to control her behaviour and satisfy her sexual desires has led Balda to ‘Perverseness and ill Nature’.39 By depicting widows and spinsters as desirous of male attention, satirists created a more acceptable image of the single woman; through showing widows lusting after younger men, and mocking the perverseness of old maids, caricaturists dismissed the threatening notion that wealthy widows might prefer to enjoy the comfort of the single life than to re-marry, or that spinsters might wish never to marry at all.

iii. The Reality of the Spa as a Marriage Market?

Through understanding how far visitors utilised the resorts as a marriage market, we can obtain a clearer picture of how far women looked for husbands and were sought as wives, before considering the range of other options which lay open to them. There are a number of instances of famous individuals meeting their spouses at the spa: Austen’s parents, George and Cassandra Austen, courted and married at Bath in

38 McCreery, ‘Lustful Widows and Old Maids’.
39 Tunbrigialia: or, Tunbridge Miscellanies, for the Year 1733 (Tunbridge Wells, 1733), p. 7
In 1778 the widowed Catherine Macaulay married William Graham after a courtship conducted at the spa. Richard Brinsley Sheridan met Elizabeth Linley at the resort and eloped with her from her family home in the Royal Crescent in March 1772, while William Wilberforce proposed to Barbara Ann Spooner (1771-1847) after only an eight day courtship at Bath, marrying her there in May 1797. Most of the eighteenth-century matches which were initiated at Bath and Tunbridge Wells will never be known to us; however, it is possible to find a few examples of lesser known individuals, whose marriages resulted from a spa visit or residence, using the ODNB. A brief look at some of these marriages helps to clarify the different ways in which couples met at the resort, and to move away from relying on fictional sources and historical tradition.

In 1754 the actress Ann Barry, nee Street (1733-1801), daughter of a Bath apothecary, returned to her native city where she met and married her first husband, actor William Dancer, who played alongside her in a production of King Lear. The Dancer example illustrates how men and women of the middling, artistic professions might meet as a result of their occupation. Whilst this thesis focuses on the leisured visitor, the middling sorts were a wide and varied social group which included women working in a variety of professions; professions which could introduce them to marriage partners. A gentleman’s profession offered proof he would be able to financially support his wife; therefore when the widowed Christiana Freame, nee Barclay (1739-1796), moved to Bath with her children and met the surgeon William Watson (1744-1824), she would have seen his profession as a sign of security, one which may well have prompted her to accept him as her third husband when they married in 1770.

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40 Lane, A Charming Place.
Eighteen-year old Eliza Noel also met her future husband at Bath. One evening in February 1774, after attending a concert performed by the Linley family, Eliza and her companions ‘went to Tea, & about 16 gentlemen gave us a hop.’ Her own partner was a Mr Burgiss who she thought ‘a charming man tho’ very plain.’ Three years later, this ‘very plain’ man became her husband. Margaret Spinckes, a spinster of All Saints in Aldwinkle, also met her husband, Admiral Samuel Graves, at Bath. Margaret Graves was forty-two when the wedding took place, one year after their first meeting. Helena Beecher Hayes also met her future husband as a result of the spa leisure scene. In 1824 Hayes attended a private evening soiree at Bath, where she met the song writer and poet Nathaniel Bayly (1797-1839), whom she married the following year.

The above examples illustrate that Bath could and did function as a marriage market: however, the image it creates is more complex than the neat depiction of the wealthy young heiresses of a professional and mercantile middling sort, marrying the land-rich but cash-poor sons of gentlemen, whom they met in spa ball-rooms. The instance of Eliza Burgiss, an eighteen-year old girl meeting her future husband whilst dancing at Bath, might well be expected, but the other examples are less so. They illustrate how an actress, widow and spinster met their future husbands whilst moving around Bath in their day to day lives. This is not to say that the traditional and literary depiction of visitors consciously utilising the resorts as marriage markets did not have truth in it. In 1700 Mary Clarke made explicit reference to the spa being used in such a way: ‘Mrs Sandford and her two eldest daughters go for Bath one day this week I suppose the daughters for one of the common causes I mean to get husbands … for them heare is a great scarcity.’ To this Clarke added that she believed ‘if we should marry one of our two daughters well before they married theirs it would be a great vexsation to them.’

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48 Mary to Edward Clarke (24 June 1700) in Bridget Clarke (ed), The Life and Correspondence of
Fig 11: The Snug Party’s Exit or Farewell to Bath (1799)
Honour Gubbins and her sister Mary were similarly thrust upon the social scene of the spa by their ambitious mother, just as the daughters of Mrs Sandford appear to have been. Like Edgeworth’s Belinda Portman, or Adriana Hartley in *A Winter in Bath*, they were used to attract prosperous husbands. Mrs Gubbins risked the reputations of both of her daughters by encouraging Prince George (later George IV) and his brother to dine and play cards with them late into the evening, in the hope of securing his hand for one of them.\footnote{BL 42161 Powys Journals (4 May 1799).} The Prince’s attentions however brought them humiliation, as illustrated in a damning print of the sisters [Fig.11]. The image shows the Gubbins playing at cards with the Prince, he with his hand on Honour’s breast, while Mrs Gubbins smiles on the scene before her. All the figures are shown ensnared in the net of the Devil. Caroline Powys pitied the sisters; ‘tis not their but the mothers fault to be in such a constant round of dissipation; and playing very deep at cards from [the] same bad example.\footnote{BL 42161 Powys Journals (4 May 1799).} However, despite this scandal, Honour managed to make a respectable match, marrying the wealthy Ralph Dutton at Bath in 1803, following a spa courtship.\footnote{Collin’s Peerage of England (1812), pp. 53-54; The Athenaeum (1807), i, p. 327.} These instances illustrate that there was considerable variance in the way that matches were formed at the resorts. Some matches were made as the caricature suggests, by parents pushing their daughters onto the spa social scene, as Mrs Gubbins was and Mrs Sandford attempted, or amidst a season of pleasure seeking, as Margaret Graves and Helena Beecher Hayes found. Yet there were other, less well-known routes to the altar via the spa: the ball room was not the only arena for match-making.

However, there were draw-backs to meeting and attempting to form an alliance at the spa. Through considering examples of failed spa courtships, the following section explores the more complex and variable reality of women’s romantic lives at the resorts. George Lucy was a permanent bachelor, yet a letter he wrote from Bath in 1761 indicates that he had met a woman whom he was confident he would marry. He informed his housekeeper: ‘a certain negotiation is now pretty plain I believe, to most people here, we now appear together in public at certain concerts, and at the
rooms, and played on Fryday night last at cribbage publickly there’. What happened to prevent the marriage is not clear, but the case illustrates that the marriage market was complex, as intentions could change at any point prior to the actual wedding ceremony. Similarly, in August 1794 John Glynn Wynn, the eldest son of Glyn Wynn of Glynllivon, wrote from Tunbridge Wells in anticipation of his ‘approaching happiness and good fortune in being married to miss neale’ who he believed was ‘possessed of every amiable accomplishment’. In addition to her accomplishments, Grace Neale was the daughter ‘of the late Robert neale Esqre of Shaw House in Wiltshire’ who had ‘Estates in that county as well as in Dorsetshire and Glostiershire’ and was approved of by his family. Yet this was another marriage which never took place. Once again, it is not clear why the wedding never occurred.

Although this thesis is primarily concerned with leisured women, the courtship of Caroline Walkey, a governess working in Bath in 1832, with ‘a very amiable clergyman’, helps illuminate the difficulties of the spa marriage market. On moving to work at the resort, Walkey wrote of a clergyman paying her ‘great attention’ and embarrassing her ‘by wishing to be informed who I am, and the circumstances in which I am placed.’ Five months later, she told her guardian: ‘the idea I had formed of marrying is quite at an end’. In this instance we discover why the courtship finished: ‘indeed on my friends here having enquired the real character of the clergyman they really found an alliance with him would by no means add to my happiness, or respectability.’ It is possible Lucy, Glynn Wynn and Walkey’s courtships ended for similar reasons; perhaps all three fared well in their early days, in the public arenas of the resorts where gallantry and display mattered, but when more precise details became known by the prospective husbands or wives, they abruptly ended. The ability to deceive a suitor was non-gender specific; men and women might have wished and may have found opportunities to conceal certain aspects of their situation whilst at the spa. It is easy to see why such an environment caused contemporary authors such concern and why they portrayed the spas as places in which deceit was often used in courtship.

52 WRO L6/1459 George Lucy, Bath, to Mrs Philippa Hayes (22 February 1761).
53 NLW Glynllifon Estate 570 John Glynn Wynn, Tunbridge Wells (8 August 1794).
54 FRO D/IP/246 Caroline Walkey, Sion House, to Philip Godsall Esqr (6 July 1832); Caroline Walkey, Lambridge Villas, to Philip Godsall Esqr (21 November 1832).
Attending public events at Bath and Tunbridge Wells, with their parents and their friends, enabled young girls to watch how courtships were conducted in fashionable society, whilst day and boarding schools taught them the skills they would later require when entering the market themselves. Throughout the long eighteenth century and particularly in the early nineteenth century, the number of commercially run girls’ schools rose significantly throughout England: in the capital, the provinces and at the resorts. Provincial schools, such as those in Oxfordshire might charge between twelve and thirty guineas, whereas those in London and Bath could charge up onto one hundred guineas per boarder, due to their superior fashionable location. These institutions taught a range of subjects such as English, foreign languages, arithmetic, needlework, dancing and music. They also offered valuable skills, such as dancing, deportment and foreign languages, which would later enable their pupils to navigate the marriage market to the best of their ability. Richard Steele scorned the way in which a young girl would be: ‘delivered to the Hands of her Dancing-Master… forced into a particular Way of holding her Head, heaving her Breast, and moving with her whole Body; and all this under Pain of never having an Husband, if she steps, looks, or moves awry’, yet these skills spoke of a fashionable education and sophistication, and thus gave pupils practical accomplishments. However, these were powerful communication skills which transformed young women from mere commodities in a market, to active participants who could express their learning, interests and personality through language and movement.

Bath had a number of educational options for girls: day schools, boarding schools, and ‘Masters’ who visited pupils in their homes. The schools of Tunbridge Wells are

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57 *TBJ* (7 January 1754); *TBJ* (17 June 1754); *BB* (6 January 1766); *TBJ* (16 January 1775); *TBJ* (12 June 1775); *TBJ* (24 February 1783).
more difficult to trace, due to there being no local newspaper for the period under consideration. However, in the early nineteenth-century it had at least three female seminaries.\(^5\) Most fashionable girls’ schools taught foreign languages, particularly French. The young women who attended the French Boarding School for young Ladies in St James’s Street Bath in 1754 were ‘fully qualified’ in dancing, music, drawing, French and Italian.\(^6\) Such an education helped pupils to converse with international visitors in the public spaces of the spa, resulting in the expansion of their social networks. Girls with a fashionable spa education would also be able to politely express their attraction and interest in a suitor by utilising their knowledge of fashionable deportment.

There were many schools dedicated specifically to dance at Bath, and nearly every boarding school hired a dancing instructor. By employing professional dance teachers the schools enabled their pupils to learn the latest fashionable formations; increasing their ability to partake in dancing at public events and minimising the possibility that they would have to turn down partners due to ignorance of a dance. Pupils were taught ‘etiquette in deportment, and in the cultivation of that air of relaxed assurance’, for example, how to sit and stand elegantly, how to correctly accept or decline a dance partner and a variety of other skills, such as how to hold and display a fan.\(^6\) Even though social custom forbade women to ask a man to dance, fluency in fashionable deportment allowed women to request and decline through bodily and facial expressions.

Some of the pupils who attended the spa girls’ schools were far from home, sent by parents who believed a spa education offered a superior experience and would make their daughter more eligible. In 1766 the Reverend Penrose and his wife considered the ‘Bath Boarding School’ for their Daughter ‘Dolly’, even though the family resided in Cornwall. They deferred their decision and the following year settled on

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\(^5\) Three female seminaries are listed for 1817: Mrs Halley’s at the top of the Parade, Miss Sydall’s at Camden House on Mount Sion and Mrs’s Way’s at Merivale, Mount Sion. J. Clifford, *The Tunbridge Wells Guide, or an Account of the Ancient and Present State of that Place With a Particular Description of all the Towns, Villages, Antiquities, Natural Curiosities, Ancient and Modern Seats, Foundries &c Within the Circumference of Sixteenth Miles, With Accurate Views of Principal Objects* (1817), p. 186.

\(^6\) *TBJ* (17 June 1754).

\(^6\) Fawcett, *Bath Entertain’d*, p. 27.
sending her to Mrs Aldworth’s school in St John’s Court, Bath. In 1820, Jane and Eliza Johns of Dolaucothi in Wales were also sent to school at the spa, even though they preferred ‘the wholesome welch air’ to ‘smoky Bath’.  

Maria Longet, who resided in Bath with her parents, was fortunate that the closest school to their family home was the well regarded Belvedere, where they sent Maria in the 1790s.  

It was not only the daughters of gentlemen, but also those of middling families who attended fashionable schools. Many feared that this blurred the boundaries of the social hierarchy and flooded the marriage market with middling women.  

Whilst residing at an inn on her way to Bath, Frances Cradock was surprised to discover that the daughter of her landlady had been given a spa education; she ‘had had a genteel education at Bath … indeed some of the quality said she played at the top of the music very well.’ Though impressed by her playing, Cradock tellingly ‘found Miss was too fine to attend to any domestic employ in the house.’  

This instance illustrates how girls from middling homes could be taught to behave and act like the daughters of gentlemen, enabling them to compete in a fashionable marriage market, but rendering them of less practical use to their families.

In addition to preparing pupils for the marriage market, spa schools sometimes gave direct access to it. At Belvedere, pupils were allowed to make social visits on Sundays, if accompanied by a footman. These visits offered pupils the opportunity to integrate themselves into the wider community. Mrs Sewell, a friend of Reverend Penrose, encouraged him to send his daughter to the Bath Boarding School and offered to ‘introduce her into polite Company’, by having her to dine with them on Sundays and taking her in at Christmas. Visits could also provide opportunities for girls to be introduced to prospective suitors in a respectable domestic setting. Public activities such as attending church, chapel or the abbey, visiting the circulating

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62 NLW Dolaucothi L2849 Jane Johns, Bath (8 June 1820)  
63 BLA X464/198/1 Hand-made cards for Maria Longuet of Bath, in praise for excellence in English grammar, spelling, geography, and ‘sisterly affection’; BCL Marshall’s Circulating Library Subscriber’s List which names ‘Mr and Mrs Longet’ of Belvedere.  
65 DUSC 1433 Anna Francesca Cradock Typescript of ‘Journal of a Tour in England’ (10 April 1787), p. 4.  
libraries or promenading provided further opportunities for the pupils of spa boarding schools to catch the eye of a suitor. For example, if Dolly Penrose had attended the Bath boarding school, she would have mingled with other members of polite society in the school’s attendance at the Octagon chapel, and at the annual school ball.\textsuperscript{68} Once every three years, the pupils of Belvedere would dance before the master of ceremonies and an audience of friends and relations in the upper assembly rooms at Bath.\textsuperscript{69} This was an occasion of great import for the pupils and their families as it provided an entrée into fashionable society.

v. \textbf{Flirtation}

Many women at the resorts were not in a position to consider marriage. There were those who were already married when they visited the spas such as the Duchess of Richmond, Elizabeth Montagu (after 1742), Lady Bristol, Mary and Elizabeth Isham and Caroline Powys. There were others who were too young, such as the younger pupils of the girls’ schools, too old, such as Margaret Graves who was in her sixties when she resided in Lansdowne Crescent after the death of her husband and those who were too ill, such as Bridget Ottley, to consider themselves suitable for the marriage market. However, flirtation was an activity open to all. Philip Thicknesse suggested that one of the greatest benefits of Bath was that it offered young women a chance to enjoy the company of young men in a safe environment. To illustrate this point, he tells an anecdote of a young country girl locked away by her father, whose ruin appeared in the form of a reckless young man who persuaded her from her room at night, to meet him in the garden. The heroine takes her own life, rather than face humiliation the following day, when it would be known that she had met him in secret. Thicknesse suggests that a girl who had been allowed to socialise at Bath would not have been persuaded into such behaviour, her ability to converse with proper gentlemen satisfying her desire for attention and male company and her

\textsuperscript{68} Reverend Penrose, Bath, to Peggy Penrose (27 May 1766) in Mitchell and Penrose (eds.), \textit{Letters from Bath 1766-1767}, p. 146.
\textsuperscript{69} Sibbald, \textit{Memoirs}, p. 58.
judgement of gentlemen better formed. Thicknesse therefore suggests that the spa provided a safe space in which flirtation could be practised, and observed, without risk of danger.

Through flirtation relationships could be kept in a state of play. As Adam Phillips argues, the perpetrator could then assess a situation, cultivate their wishes and make room for the type of interaction they desired. Therefore, by creating space for reflection whilst maintaining the possibility of a romantic or sexual relationship, flirtation offered the leisured woman a form of influence and widened her options at the eighteenth-century spa. Female flirtation and coquetry are depicted as a common feature of resort life in contemporary fiction, suggesting that the resorts were perceived as spaces highly conducive to the activity. The coquette, Tamara Wagner argues, has been largely forgotten by historians in comparison to her sexually enlightened companions such as the fop, libertine and rake, yet she held an important place in eighteenth-century literature. The term ‘coquetry’ was applicable to both men and women, and according to Diderot could be defined as ‘a lie, which consists in stimulating a passion one does not feel and in promising a preference one will not grant.’ In failing to gratify the desires they provoked, the coquette was also duplicitous. Haywood’s Lady Leer, who is ‘exquisite in the Art of Jilting’ enjoys attracting the attentions of male admirers at Bath even though she has no intention of consenting to a romantic relationship. Similarly, in Barker’s The Tunbridge Walks, ‘the Beaus flutter about’ Hillaira who argues that a woman gained more through remaining single than in marrying, and thus explains her reluctance to ‘lose the Serenades, the Treats, and Addresses a single State affords me.’ In A Journey to Bath, Lady Filmot boasts of her proficiency in flirtation, declaring that ‘a woman never plays the coquet well with a man she really loves’ and states her relief that she had never been ‘incommoded’ by ‘tender feelings’. These works echo the concerns reflected in contemporary periodicals that women had too great a ‘Passion for Praise’

73 Eliza Haywood, Bath-Intrigues: in Four Letters to a Friend in London (1725), p. 39
75 BL 25,975 Frances Sheridan. A Journey To Bath: A Comedy.
and enjoyed attending ‘all public Places and Assemblies’ simply to ‘Seduce Men to their Worship.’  

In 1712, a series of letters printed in *The Spectator* highlighted concern over female flirtation at Tunbridge Wells. Written by a ‘Matilda Mohair’, the first letter informs the reader that a group of young women at Tunbridge Wells had invented a game in which they would climb on ropes in order to be ‘swung’ by their ‘male visitants’: ‘The jest is that Mr Such-a-one can name the colour of Mrs Such-a-one’s stockings’. As part of the game, the letter stated, each woman’s lover would ‘tie her clothes very close with his Hatband before she admits to throw up her heels’. Two further letters, composed by a Rachel Shoestring and an Alice Bluegarter, written as a response, suggest that Mohair’s complaints resulted from the fact that she had participated in the game, only to be mocked for having crooked legs. Conduct authors warned that public displays of merriment, or of becoming lost in the moment, were highly dangerous for women, suggesting to their audience that they were equally relaxed and carefree in all aspects of their lives. Whether or not the game actually took place, the series of letters imply that the emphasis on public leisure at Tunbridge Wells, and the inclusion of women within it, caused concern amongst the more cautious and reserved members of the company. Whilst they engaged in literal and metaphorical play, favouring men with their romantic interest and attention, but not showing serious intentions towards matrimony, women upset social stability by highlighting that they had choices; they could successfully win romantic attention but might ultimately reject it, and perhaps most disturbingly, they might prefer the thrill and uncertainty of coquetry to the security of marriage.

The importance of flirtation at the resorts can also be seen in the writing of ‘water poetry’. Writing verses on the beauty, modesty and other virtues of certain women at the resorts was a popular pastime amongst male visitors at both Bath and Tunbridge Wells from the first decade of the eighteenth century. The tradition appears to have started at Tunbridge, where poems were left at booksellers and then published in

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76 Addison, ‘The Spectator’ (24 May 1711), Bond (ed.), *The Spectator*, i, pp. 312-313.
78 Phillips, *On Flirtation*, p. xix
volumes entitled *The Tunbridge Miscellanies*.\(^7^9\) The writing of poetry was a form of male rather than female flirtation, as the verses composed by women were predominantly on religious topics or written in tribute to other poets, rather than based on romantic love. Compliments are widely recognised as a common form of flirtation, used both in romantic and sexual relationships, and according to numerous psychologists, also adopted in platonic cross-sex relationships as a form of ‘quasi flirtation’ in which those involved can enjoy novelty, arousal and practice such behaviour in a safe context.\(^8^0\)

Within water poetry women were praised for a wide variety of qualities: beauty, youth, health, intelligence, wit, generosity and charitable natures. *Tunbridgialla: or The Tunbridge Miscellanies for the year 1730*, offers examples of romantic water poetry illustrating the feminine characteristics which were idolised. In *Upon seeing Lady Betty Germain*... the poet writes:

> When Ruin threatened me of late,  
> Some power, in pity to my fate,  
> Sent me generous Germain.

A Miss Delme is also the subject of several poems:

> Good sense, good humour’d, affable and free,  
> Guided by Prudence, and by Modesty;  
> Gentell, well-shap’d, her Eyes lambent Fire,  
> That kindle and perpetuate Desire.\(^8^1\)

Many verses emphasised the winning combination of beauty of person, modesty of character and a generous nature which made a woman desirable. This particular genre of water poetry illustrates that the public admiration of women, and public flattery were a part of resort culture.

\(^7^9\) Burr, *The History of Tunbridge Wells*, p. 117.  
\(^8^1\) *Tunbridgialla: or Tunbridge Miscellanies for the year 1730* (Tunbridge Wells: 1730).
Lady Frances Vane, a frequenter of both Bath and Tunbridge Wells, was well known for infidelity. In 1735, soon after her marriage to her second husband Lord Vane, Thomas Hervey reported from Bath that she had ‘a number of suitors’ and reflected that she was as ‘indifferently provided for in her illicit attachments, as she is in her lawful one’ slyly adding ‘But if Eve is Eve, what signifys that?’ Later in her life Vane is known to have been openly adulterous, yet Hervey’s letter indicates she may have enjoyed earlier flirtations and possibly intimacies. Elizabeth Montagu openly admitted her enjoyment of spa flirtations. In 1784 on a visit to Bath she informed Lady Polwarth that ‘her Design in coming to bath’ was ‘professedly to flirt with Gentlemen’. Melesina Trench was equally as open in her discussion of flirtations: ‘You say Bath must be unpleasant without a Lover’ she wrote from Bath: ‘I have several here whom I could make such, but not one among those that I think worth making’. Trench’s letter was written during a period of her life when she was a widow, after the death of her first husband but before meeting her second. She indicates a considerable degree of choice regarding her courtships at the resort, proudly boasting of having ‘crushed’ several aspiring lovers ‘in the bud’ and stating that at her age she would only choose ‘a man of either great sense, or the best fashion’ for an amour. In a later letter, Trench responds to another of Tuite’s enquires saying: ‘You ask just in time after flirts – I have got one, without any fault of mine… He is well looking – three and twenty – in the army – good humoured – not bright.’ Again she adopts a dismissive tone, though simultaneously she boasts of her ability to secure an admirer.

One social event which presented particular opportunity for the initiation and development of romance and flirtation was the public ball. Balls were held on a twice weekly basis at Bath and Tunbridge Wells throughout the long eighteenth century. These public occasions offered visitors the chance to enjoy dancing, discussion, card games and tea drinking. Dancing gave men and women alike the chance to display their skills in deportment and allowed them to experience physical

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82 StrRO D6584/C/15/41 Thomas Hervey, Bath, to Elizabeth Hamner (10 November 1735).
83 BLA L30/13/12/98 Lady Polwarth, Bath, to Mary Robinson (29 November 1784).
84 HRO 23M93/42/33/24 Melesina Trench, Bath, to Sarah Tuite (1798).
85 HRO 23M93/42/33/9 Melesina Trench, Bath, to Sarah Tuite (1797).
and conversational intimacy with the opposite sex in a public, yet respectable capacity. While middling and elite men could enjoy sexual relationships outside of marriage and still remain respectable, women could not; dancing was perhaps the closest form of physical contact women could experience with the opposite sex outside of marriage.

Despite the fear of trying to secure a partner and of having one’s steps closely observed, many women enjoyed spa balls, and the opportunities they provided for dancing. Betsey Sheridan declared she would rather resign such ‘youthful pursuits’ than stand up and risk being labelled an old maid. However after attending a ball at Tunbridge Wells in 1785 she wrote ‘Sir Richard Rycroft introduced his son to me as a Partner so I forgot my former resolution and danced away ‘till I got well warm’d… I was glad to find I could conquer the blue devils.’

In May 1786, after a ball at Bath she admitted; ‘I danced the whole evening and was better pleased with it than I expected.’ It was common for women to suggest that they did not wish to dance, to protect themselves from the embarrassment of not being asked. For Sheridan, this fear was intensified by pressure from her father who forced her to subscribe to the cotillion balls at Bath in 1786, in the hope that she would make a prosperous match. Fanny Burney also attended a ball at Bath where she chose not to dance; her companion Augusta proclaimed she would do the same, only to accept the first man to offer his hand, ‘She coloured, looked excessively silly, and walked off with him to join the dancers’.

Dancing was intimately tied up with courtship and flirtation; to be asked to dance was public proof of one’s desirability, but to remain unasked was humiliating.

Those women more sure of their success in finding a partner might have found it easier to declare their love of dancing, such as Elizabeth Montagu who wrote in 1736 ‘I danced twice a week all the while I was at Tunbridge’. She pronounced that she was happy when the balls at Bath were over as her physician had advised her not to

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86 Betsy Sheridan, Tunbridge Wells to Alicia LeFanu (1-6 October 1785) in LeFanu (ed.), Betsy Sheridan’s Journal, p. 73.
87 Betsy Sheridan, Bath, to Alicia LeFanu (8-10 May 1786) in LeFanu (ed.), Betsy Sheridan’s Journal, p. 82.
dance ‘but I intend to be so well by springing as to defy the doctor and all his works, and I will foot it in spite of his wisdom’. Montagu’s correspondence also reveals that she unashamedly enjoyed watching male dancers: ‘We have the most diverting set of dancers, especially amongst the men; some hop and some halt in a very agreeable gaiety’ She was even reprimanded for watching a particular dancer too closely, ‘Ever since my Lord Duke reprimanded me for too tender a regard for lord C’s nimble legs, I have resolved to prefer the merit of the head to the agility of the heels.’ Montagu’s letter, written when she was a young, unmarried woman, highlights the existence of a sexually charged female gaze, illustrating how female partners and onlookers could be more than a passive audience. Her letter also demonstrates that the ability of a man to dance well was not regarded as a symptom of effeminacy but as the mark of a gentleman.

vi. Sexuality

Neale and Davies argue that eighteenth-century Bath had a darker, less polite character, often neglected by modern historians. The following section explores how familiar elite and middling women would have been with this aspect of the spa and raises the question of whether or not polite women were more sexually promiscuous when at the resorts. Female vulnerability to sexual temptation forms a common theme of eighteenth-century spa fiction. For example, in *Moll Flanders*, the eponymous heroine becomes the mistress of a fellow lodging house boarder whom she meets at Bath. Moll assures the reader she had gone to the spa with honest intentions: ‘but I was at the Bath where Men find a Mistress sometimes, but very
Fig 12: (Top) The Comforts of Bath, The artist’s studio (Thomas Rowlandson, 1796)

Fig 13: (Bottom) The Comforts of Bath, The assembly (Thomas Rowlandson, 1796).
rarely look for a Wife’. Lodging houses grew significantly in number throughout the eighteenth century and many of these, Tony Henderson suggests, relied on the custom of prostitutes. Defoe implies that within Bath’s lodging houses, the boundaries of propriety might easily breakdown and that women could find themselves consenting to sexual relationships, outside of marriage. Unprotected by friends or a chaperone, Moll is encouraged by her landlady to pursue an intimacy with the gentleman, in order that she will have a ready income to pay for her keep.

Spa fiction often portrayed women as sexually promiscuous during their time at Bath and Tunbridge Wells. For instance, in his satirical poem Tunbridge Wells, Lord Rochester refers to Cuff and Kick, characters from the play Epsom Wells, who help ‘barren’ women to conceive:

Some here Walk, Cuff and Kick
With brawny Back and legs and potent –
Who more substantially will cure thy Wife,
And to her half Dead-Womb restore new Life.

A ballad sung in A Day’s Courtship at Tunbridge Wells, also makes a similar reference to this popular spa-joke:

They [the waters] powerfully break the stone,
And heal consumptive Lungs;
They’ll quicken your conception,
If you can hold your tongues.

Tunbridge Wells had a more notorious reputation for female promiscuity than Bath. This may have been due to its isolated and rural character. The fact that visitors

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could speak to one another without introduction on the Walks of Tunbridge Wells added to a sense of freedom, as Macky hints: ‘every Gentleman is equally received by the Fair Sex upon the Walks.’ This is also implied in an anonymous lampoon:

O happy F-r whos husband roams abroad  
And leaves her eas’d of that ungrateful load  
Leaves her to love & al-ny free  
Leaves her to Tunbridge walks of Liberty.

Whilst female promiscuity and adultery are more prominent in fiction set at Tunbridge Wells, they can also be found in works located at Bath. Eliza Haywood’s Bath Intrigues for instance, also suggests women were easily tempted into adultery when at the resort. The narrator comments on the promiscuity of ‘polite’ women at Bath, such as Miss Forward, who is suspected of becoming the mistress of Lord Bellair, while his wife, Lady Bellair, is seduced by ‘a gentleman of the long Robe’. Haywood’s Berecillia conducts an affair with Basset the gamester ‘in a manner so publick’ that all the resort know of it, while the ironically named Belinda Worthy’s only interest in her husband is to use him ‘to conceal her loose Desires, which she makes no scruple of Indulging’.

Thomas Rowlandson’s print series, The Comforts of Bath, also features an adulterous wife as one of its principal characters. At the resort with her gout-ridden, hobbling husband, the young wife is depicted conducting a romantic relationship with an attractive young officer. The couple smile knowingly at each other in the assembly rooms, she holding her fan suggestively open in front of her hips, they embrace behind a pillar as her husband has his portrait painted and ride side by side as the unhappy husband trails behind [Fig 12, 13].

Despite this fictional representation, there is little evidence suggesting that leisured women behaved more promiscuously at the spa than elsewhere. Lack of effective contraceptive methods, the dangers of pregnancy and child birth and the possibility of contracting venereal diseases were all highly deterring factors which would have

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97 Macky, A Journey Through England, i, p. 58.  
98 NUSC NEC3043 ‘Tunbridge Wells’ (1751).  
99 ‘Gentleman of the long robe’: A man of the legal profession.  
100 Haywood, Bath Intrigues, pp. 21, 38.
troubled women considering sexual relationships out of wedlock.\textsuperscript{101} It is likely that the fictional portrayal of the spa as a place of female promiscuity was in fact influenced by the medical connection between the spa and fertility. The relaxed nature of female morning dress may also have contributed to this image of the spa. Both resorts allowed women to appear in ‘dishabille’ before breakfast, in the Pump Room at Bath and upon the walks at Tunbridge Wells, where Defoe noted ‘the ladies are all undress’d’.\textsuperscript{102} This added to the sexual frisson of the spa, as loose clothing was often equated with sexual immorality.\textsuperscript{103}

When at the spa, elite and middling women are likely to have been aware of the sexual behaviour of some of the male company. Gossip and scandal were rife at both resorts. Richard Steele complained of Bath that: ‘It was ordinary for a Man who had been drunk in good Company, or passed a Night with a Wench, to speak of it next Day before Women for whom he has the greatest Respect.’\textsuperscript{104} Therefore, even if they did not actively participate in licentious pleasures of their own, their vicarious enjoyment, discussion and even awareness of the spa’s sexual underworld allowed them access to a world of knowledge conventionally denied to them and perceived as a threat to their natural feminine innocence.

The boundary between polite and impolite society was permeable; not only could prostitutes enter polite areas of the resort, but some of the most respectable leaders of fashionable society dabbled in the more forbidden pleasures of eighteenth-century society. Richard ‘Beau’ Nash, for example, kept two mistresses during his time as Master of Ceremonies, whilst his successor Samuel Derrick, was the secret author of

\textsuperscript{101} Henderson, ‘Disorderly Women’, pp. 41-42: Henderson evidences that condoms were available in London from the late seventeenth century onwards. However it is unlikely that they were bought by women other than prostitutes and courtesans; for whom they were mainly used to prevent the spread of sexually transmitted infections rather than as a form of contraception. Vaginal douches and Hooper’s Female pills were also used by women who feared they might be pregnant, though the most likely recourse was to go visit an abortionist. It is unclear how many of these methods would have been known or available to women of the elite and middling sort. Hallie Rubenhold, \textit{The Covent Garden Ladies: Pimp General Jack and the Extraordinary Story of Harris’ List} (Stroud: Tempus, 2005), p. 241. Rubenhold points out that a variety of powders and herbs were available from apothecaries which could be used to cause a miscarriage.

\textsuperscript{102} Defoe, \textit{A Tour Through the Whole Island of Great Britain}, i, p. 126

\textsuperscript{103} Macky, \textit{A Journey Through England} , i, p. 57; Smollett, \textit{The Expeditions of Humphry Clinker}, p. 68. ‘Undress’ or ‘dishabille’ referred to loose and informal attire.

*Harris’s List of Covent Garden Ladies*, a practical guide giving the addresses, prices and skills of the prostitutes of Covent Garden.\(^{105}\) Bath’s Avon Street was well known for its brothels, and contemporaries commented on their surprise at the number of prostitutes they saw at the spa, as a Rector from Somerset noted: ‘I was not a little astonished, as I walked through Bath, to observe the streets so crowded with prostitutes, some of them apparently not above 14 or 15 years of age’.\(^{106}\) Henderson argues that many of the public arenas of eighteenth-century London were frequented by prostitutes searching for wealthy clients.\(^{107}\) It is likely that the theatres, walks and pleasure gardens of Bath and Tunbridge Wells had their own share of street-walkers, as illustrated by Defoe’s suggestion that prostitutes were free to walk on the parades at Tunbridge Wells.\(^{108}\) Whilst elite and middling women were unlikely to have participated in this aspect of resort life, they lived in close proximity with it.

Amongst the higher echelons of eighteenth-century society, there was a demi-monde of women who secured their place in fashionable circles through their sexual relationships. There are few known examples of such women at the eighteenth-century spa, yet instances can be found. Sarah Pridden, the courtesan whose life was recorded and partly fictionalised in *The Athentick Memoirs of the Life and Adventures of The Celebrated Sally Salisbury*, is supposed to have visited Bath on two occasions. According to her memoir, Pridden or ‘Sally’ won a dancing contest on her first visit to the resort but failed to find a man interested in keeping her. However, on her second visit she successfully used her ‘Whoreish politicks’, to secure a wealthy Peer.\(^{109}\) Fanny Murray, a courtesan who became the toast of fashionable London society in the late 1740s, was born in Bath in 1729 and lived there until 1743, when she was fourteen. After the death of her father, when she was twelve, Murray worked as a flower seller in the assembly rooms, but was soon seduced by Jack Spencer, the grandson of the Duchess of Marlborough. When still only twelve, she became the mistress of Beau Nash, who briefly had her educated in

\(^{108}\) Defoe, *A Tour Through the Whole Island of Great Britain*, i, pp. 126-127.
polite manners, before she left the spa aged fourteen. Although she was poor on leaving Bath, as the mistress of Nash, Murray is likely to have lived a comfortable existence. Pridden and Murray illustrate that even in the carefully regulated polite society of Bath there were women who ignored the rules of respectability and were still welcomed amongst polite company.

Mrs McCartney, known to her contemporaries as ‘Mother Mac’ is one of the most elusive figures of eighteenth-century Bath; yet what evidence remains of her suggests she gained significance in fashionable spa society through a sexual relationship with a high ranking individual. McCartney resided at No.30 on the Royal Crescent, during the last two decades of the eighteenth century. Though ‘Without birth or fashion’, Mother Mac was ‘courted’ by all. In January 1787 the Public Advertiser stated that she held gatherings at the Crescent from which ‘all the antiquated virginity of the place’ were excluded. The paper further suggested that to be ‘neither maid, widow or wife, is the only ticket of admission to the midnight orgies of the crescent!’ In 1791 The Morning Advertiser slyly asked, ‘Is Mr. WH__Y smitten with the charms of Mother MAC, or does he only visit her so often to plot routs?’ Satirical poems commented on Mother Mac’s sexual behaviour. One such poem was written as a conversation between the Anna Miller, a literary hostess who lived at Bath Easton, and Mother Mac, in which the former accused the latter, stating:

Your health and your vigor is so much decay’d
Your youth between Bacchus and Venus imploy’d
You passions still craving your senses destroyed.

In another verse, the poet writes in the voice of Mother Mac, boasting:

I have handled that sceptre that governs the nation
The true council board in the board that I keep

110 Fergus Linnane, Madams, Bawds and Brothel Keepers of London (Stroud: Sutton, 2005).
111 NLI Untitled Newspaper Cutting From John Sandford’s Commonplace Book, .ii, p. 80.
112 Public Advertiser Wednesday (10 January 1787).
113 Morning Post and Daily Advertiser (6 January 1791).
And the sole bed of justice is that where I sleep.¹¹⁴

Though the poem does not name the specific individual, it implies that Mac had been sexually involved with a high ranking politician, legal professional or perhaps even a member of the Royal family. Her sexual behaviour was also mocked in the print *Mac in Her Teens*, which depicts her being carried by two disgusted footman, as she holds a pile of erotic works of literature [Fig.14]. Though an anomaly, Mac’s presence is important as it illustrates the complexity and hypocrisy of fashionable spa life; a damaged sexual reputation was likely to result in expulsion from polite society, yet in certain instances, a liaison with a powerful influential figure could actually have the reverse affect and secure her position.¹¹⁵

vi. Widows and a ‘Race of Old Maids’

The sixth and final section of this chapter explores the experiences of single women specifically at Bath. One difference between the two resorts is that considerable evidence highlights the prominence of widows and spinsters at the former spa, whilst there is not such proof for the latter. Bath appears to have been particularly suited to single women for multiple reasons. Its streets were reputed to be particularly quiet and safe. *The New Bath Guide* of 1792 noted that: ‘the act of parliament for paving, cleansing and lighting the city and its liberties, is strictly adhered to; and a regular night-watch patrols the different streets every half hour to preserve the publick peace.’¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ NLI Newspaper Cutting ‘Mrs Macartney’s Letter to Mrs M.C. Rudd’ from Sandford’s Commonplace Book, pp. 92-96.
¹¹⁶ The New Bath Guide; or, Useful Pocket Companion The New Bath Guide; or, Useful Pocket Companion for All Persons Residing at or Resorting to This Antient City. Giving an Account of the First Discovery of its Medicinal Waters by King Bladud; Nature and Efficacy of the Warm Baths and Sudatories, With Rules and Prices For Bathing and Pumping (Bath, 1792), p. 45
Fig 14: *The Maid of Bath or Mac in her Teens* (Isaac Cruickshank, 1792).
**Fig 12:** (top) Women’s shoes and matching pattens (c.1710-1730, Bata Shoe Museum).

**Fig 13:** (Bottom) Women’s shoes and pattens (c.1730-1740, V&A).
The ease with which women could move about the streets of Bath was also important to its appeal for single women. Partly this was a result of the provision of sedan chairs, but it was also due to the wearing of pattens. Traditionally, pattens (a type of over shoe), were worn by women of the working class, to help them navigate city streets by lifting them a level above dirt and debris. During the eighteenth century, more fashionable pattens or ‘clogs’ were designed and worn by women of the upper echelons of society [Fig 16 and 17]. According to Betsy Sheridan ‘genteel’ women were allowed to wear pattens over their shoes about Bath: ‘Our Weather is damp and dirty but does not confine us as you know we Ladies here trot about in Pattens, a privilege granted no where else to genteel Women.’¹¹⁷ The custom of patten-wearing is highlighted in numerous contemporary accounts of Bath, beside Sheridan’s. On her visit to Bath in 1774, the Eliza Noel looked forward to receiving the ‘stick and pattens’ she had been promised; ‘and then I shall be properly equip’d to sally forth’ and in Persuasion Austen describes the ‘ceaseless cink of pattens’, as one of the sounds of ‘winter pleasures’ at Bath.¹¹⁸ Bath was also well provisioned with shops selling every necessity and luxury at a range of prices to suit varying incomes.¹¹⁹

The first set of census records, collected in 1851, illustrate that there were large numbers of single women in Bath by the mid nineteenth century. In this year, 10,767 spinsters and 3,980 widows were recorded as living in the city, in contrast to 4,057 bachelors and 1,086 widowers. Neale suggests that one of the reasons for this was that as the spa declined as a pleasure resort in the late eighteenth century, it became a place of permanent residence and retirement for upper-middle class women.¹²⁰ Though there are no census records for Bath in the eighteenth century, there are countless references to the high visibility of single women in letters and journals. They are sometimes described as comic figures vying for the attentions of single men. Adam Ottley knew of ‘two agreeable Widows at bath’ who were ‘ready to pull coifs’ over a Mr Baldwin; George Lucy declared that ‘excepting a few gay widows’ he believed the female company at the resort to be ‘the most disagreeable women,

¹¹⁷ Betsy Sheridan, Bath (1-2 December 1789) in LeFanu (ed), Betsy Sheridan’s Journal, p. 188.
¹¹⁸ Eliza Noel, Bath (27 January 1774) in Elwin (ed.), The Noels and the Milbankes, p. 35; Austen, Persuasion, p. 110.
that ever were huddled together in one place’ and observers also commented on the custom of single women moving to the resort, such as Katherine Plymley who noted ‘Bath is the great retreat of widows and unmarried ladies.’

Widows provided competition for those women resorting to the spa in the hope of finding their first husband. Unlike well-off women still living in their parental home, widows were usually financially independent and becoming increasingly so throughout the eighteenth century as marriage settlements, outlining income and possessions on a husband’s death, became more common. Most well-off widows had an annuity resulting from their marriage and in some instances also inherited the fortune of their former husband. Financial independence also freed widows from the necessity of winning parental approval for a match, providing more freedom of choice in selecting a partner. Additionally, they had valuable experience of caring for a husband, managing a household and possibly child bearing and rearing, making them even more desirable partners.

Contemporary society enjoyed speculating on the motives of spa widows as indicated in a letter written by Priscilla Digby from Bath. Digby notes that a widow, named Mrs Saville, was ‘on ye brink of matrimony with a capt Shadewell’, a man ‘not worth a shilling’. Saville was to sell her jointure in order to aid her marriage, an action which illustrated her passionate nature. In 1760, when Catherine Macaulay married her second husband, whom she had met at Bath, fashionable society was scandalised by the match. Already a figure of controversy due to the fact that she lived alone with her male friend, Dr Wilson, Macaulay further shocked society by marrying William Graham, who was twenty six years her junior. These instances illustrate how widows could find considerable independence in the spa marriage market. Of all the women at Bath and Tunbridge Wells during the eighteenth century, well-off widows perhaps had the most freedom of choice in their personal

121 NLW Ottley Pitchford Hall Correspondence (3)3672 Adam Ottley,Kinver, to Bridget Ottley, The Bevan’s, Bath (24 December 1741); WRO. L6/1432 George Lucy to Mrs Philippa Hayes (6 January c. 1754); SRO. 567/5/5/1/5 Katherine Plymley ‘Journey to Bath 1794 2nd’ (27 October 1974).
122 NUSC MOL 81 Priscilla Digby, Orchard Street, Bath, to Mrs Anne Molyneux at Winkburn, Nottinghamshire (8 February 1743).
Examining the personal circumstance of several of Bath’s single women highlights the degree of comfort in which they could live. After the death of her husband, Margaret Graves moved to 15 Lansdowne Crescent, Bath; not in the hope of finding a partner, but in order to create a new life for herself. There she subscribed to the circulating library, bought new publications, spent evenings abroad in company and frequently invited guests to visit her. Mrs Horneck, a widow who was briefly married a second time to a Mr Thomas Whalley, was forced to separate from her second husband on his discovery of her significant debts. However, on their separation Horneck was given a house Catherine Place, Bath, where she lived alone and threw lavish parties for her friends. The presence of widows and spinsters at Bath could therefore be seen as evidence of the spa offering elite and middling women the opportunity to create a comfortable and lively independent existence for themselves.

In 1828 the three single sisters, Frances, Caroline and Emma Mitford moved from a village outside of Bath, into the city. While they had originally moved to the village expecting a peaceful existence, they found the reality of rural life more difficult. Frances wrote that she had ‘become so timid’ and felt ‘so very unprotected in our female establishment; that I think a City may give greater confidence’. The sisters moved to a house in the upper part of Bath, probably Somerset Place, where Frances busily cared for her invalid sisters and fitted up the house ‘in a Quaker style… calculated for every desired comfort, but for none of the elegancies of the day.’ Once they had moved to the spa, the sisters spent much time indoors, ‘Caroline and

125 CRO J/3/2/690 Frances Mitford, at a village near to Bath (the specific name is illegible), Probably to Mr Hawkins (29 December 1828).
Emma … rallying occasionally, & then relapsing, passing more than half their day on Sofas, and under strict regimen.'

While they did not live a life of public leisure and excitement, their home provided safety and the family had ready access to the doctors and medicines that Caroline and Emma needed. Similarly, Priscilla Hannah Gurney moved to Bath in 1804, specifically to establish a quiet, Quaker life as a single woman. Gurney remained at the spa until her death in 1828. Like the Mitfords, it was not Bath’s reputation for leisure which drew her to Bath, but the freedom she had to create her own independent life style, exactly suited to her wishes.

Life as a widow or spinster could be isolated, yet living a single existence at Bath provided many opportunities for sociability. Katherine Plymley’s journal records how Mrs Isted & her daughters ‘retreated’ to Bath after the death of Mr Isted, giving the women ‘opportunity to enjoy not only the society of the place, but to see their old friends, who as they have lived much in the fashionable world are often coming there.’

The quality of their domestic social lives may have played a defining role in their attitude towards the resort. While the Isted women had many acquaintances, often making and receiving visits, Powys writes of a widow named Mrs Macartney who had moved to Bath for her health but had been forced to leave the resort declaring she would ‘rather live in H-ll than on ye Queens Parade where ye families were so shockingly unpolite as not to visit her.’

The fact that a lack of visitors provoked Mrs Macartney to leave the resort, suggests that she had anticipated visiting playing an important part in her residence at Bath, and highlights the appeal it had for single women.

Although fashionable society laughed at the ‘race of old maids’ who lived at Bath, there is much to suggest that for some women, the single state was particularly

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127 CRO. J/3/2/683 Frances Mitford , at a village near to Bath (the specific name is illegible), to John Hawkins Esq (14 August 1828).
129 SRO 567/5/5/1/4 Katherine Plymley ‘Journey to Bath 1794’ (15 October 1794).
130 BL 42161Powys Journals (11 July 1799).
appealing. Priscilla Digby, for example, turned down an offer of marriage whilst at Bath as she ‘cou’d not marry ye Riches when I did not like the man.’ Although Digby was residing at Bath as her mother’s carer at the time, she stated that ‘I’ve fewer cares now, & perhaps almost as many comforts as I shou’d meet in what is term’d ye happy state’ and asked ‘why shou’d I change?’ adding that she would never marry unless it was a situation where ‘my hand and Heart can go together’.

In 1800 the thirty year old spinster Magdalen Price visited the resort where she met her recently married friend, Mrs Oliver; the new bride fell ill soon after marriage and appeared ‘so indifferent’ that Price commented ‘I think old Ladies have no encouragement to matrimony so believe I shall return single.’

Several of Bath’s most famous literary residents were widows and spinsters. For example, the novelist Sarah Fielding frequently stayed at the resort before she moved there permanently in 1754. The literary sisters Henrietta and Sophia Lee who lived together at Bath also never married. Instead, they set up the popular Belvedere girls’ school and established a lively social life amongst the fashionable company of the spa. Despite the fact she disapproved of the frivolity of Bath, spinner, author and moralist Hannah More also resided for a period of her life at Bath, where she owned a house on Great Pulteney Street. When widowed by the death of her husband first husband, Henry Thrale, author Hester Piozzi moved to Bath to live with her daughters. Although she disliked depending on her grown up children, she must have valued the benefits of living at the resort as she moved there again after the death of her second husband, Piozzi. Similarly, Catherine Macaulay resided at Bath between husbands, moving there after the death of her first husband, Dr Graham Macaulay, and departing when she married her second husband, William Graham. None of these women appear to have been in Bath specifically looking for a husband; instead

131 HRO 9M55/F5/10 Anne Sturges Bourne, South Audley Street, London to Marianne Dyson, St James Square, Bath (4 April 1827).
132 NUSC MOL 78 Priscilla Digby, Bath, to Anne Molyneux at Oxton, Nottinghamshire (21 March 1742).
133 NLW D.T.M Jones (2) 9878 Magdalen Price, Bath, to Esq Edward James, Landovery (18 March 1800).
it was the relative affordability of life at the spa, as well as the sociability and cultural life of the resort which appear to have offered the main attractions.

Lady Isabella King, a philanthropist and founder of the Monmouth-Street Society, a poor-relief society in Bath, opened a home for genteel single women just outside of Bath; the ‘Ladies Association’ at Bailbrooke House was created specifically for parentless gentlewomen who could not afford to live a comfortable, independent existence. In return for a fee, all residents of the home held the property and its land in common. King’s idea for the scheme originated from reading Sarah Scott’s *Millennium Hall*, a feminist Utopian novel in which a female seminary provides shelter for single women. Bridget Hill suggests that the novel arose from Scott’s own consideration of ‘establishing some small community along the lines of her novel.’ King had many friends and supporters at the spa, and when it was located at Bailbrooke House, the Association prospered. However, when forced to move to Clifton near Bristol, King struggled without her friends and the benefits of being located near Bath. In 1837 she sold the property and returned alone to Bath. The fact that the Association ran successfully at Bailbrooke House between 1816 and 1821 offers further evidence that Bath was a supportive and comfortable environment for single women to live in.

The fictional representation of women’s romantic lives at the eighteenth-century resort and the lived romantic experiences of leisured women who went to the resorts, are both considerably more varied than historians have traditionally suggested. As this chapter illustrates, contemporary novels, plays, poems and prints convey a paradoxical image of women’s resort romances. On one hand, many heroines are the victims of rakes, fortune-hunters and scheming relations at the resort, while on the other, these virtuous and endangered women are outnumbered by those who are manipulative, scheming and promiscuous in their romantic and sexual relationships. Throughout the long eighteenth century, female participation in an increasingly leisured world caused moralists and conduct authors great concern; they argued that

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appearing too frequently in public would feed female vanity, destroy feminine modesty, encourage women to give in their ungoverned desires while simultaneously putting them at risk from male predators. It is precisely these fears which we see reflected in contemporary spa fiction. The subjects of marriage, sexuality and reproduction were ‘highly public’ matters, and therefore it is no surprising that a perceived threat to the stability of the marriage state, in this case, the public nature of resort life, caught the attention of contemporary authors.

Some women may have resorted to the spas specifically in search of husbands, but it is too crude too assume that most women’s motives were this overt. It was socially acceptable for elite and middling women to engage in flirtations whilst at Bath and Tunbridge Wells. Accepting the public attentions of an admirer and encouraging him within the bounds of propriety was regarded as part of the leisured routine of resort life. Public life at the spas was highly stylised and the public admiration of feminine virtues and the female sex was one of its most prominent features, as is illustrated in the fashion for water poetry, written in praise of the female sex as a whole, or on one specific woman. Flirtations that went no further than courteous behaviour in the public arenas of the resorts were considered harmless, as suggested by the openness with which Elizabeth Montagu and Melesina Trench discuss their flirtations and Sarah Tuite's assumption that a woman requires a ‘lover’ to make Bath entertaining. However, the hint of anything more intimate was considerably more dangerous to a woman’s reputation and place in polite society.

We will never know whether or not women were especially promiscuous at Bath and Tunbridge Wells, as contemporary fiction suggests; it seems highly unlikely that elite or middling class women would have committed adultery in order to conceive, as popular satire suggested. Reasons of health and reputation, as well as genuine affection for their lawful partners and the desire to produce legitimate children are likely to have prevented adultery being commonplace. However, elite and middling women could enjoy spending their time in the company of male companions, and experience physical intimacy with their admirers when they danced in the assembly rooms and pleasure gardens. A small number of women; Fanny Murray, Sarah Pridden and possibly Mother Mac, actually secured their place in the fashionable circles of spa society, through sexual relationships. How many courtesans and
mistresses visited or resided at the resorts is also unclear. However, the presence of even a few illustrates the diversity of eighteenth-century polite society. The close proximity of elite and middling women, to the darker, sexual underworld of the resorts, is further illustrated by the fact that in the public arenas the genteel woman brushed shoulders with those of the lowest strata, the streetwalker.

Bath and Tunbridge Wells offered elite and middling women with a range of romantic and sexual opportunities. Spa schools gave girls early lessons in courtship, providing them with skills which later translated into influence, power and sway in the marriage market. The emphasis placed on leisure and sociability also presented women of all ages with the chance to publicly enjoy flirtations without fear of scandal. It is possible that the genteel woman’s understanding of male sexual behaviour was expanded at the resorts, through observation of interactions with prostitutes in various public arenas and through hearing the open conversations of male visitors, as *The Spectator* suggested. Finally, Bath in particular appears to have offered widows and spinsters comfort, safety and sociability, attracting single women for a multitude of reasons and not solely with the prospect of finding a marriage partner.