The Venus of Margate: Fashion and Disease at the Seaside

Rachael Johnson

Thomas Rowlandson - in his late eighteenth-century 'Venus's Bathing (Margate)' - portrayed sea-bathing as a pleasant, enjoyable and, above all, sexually titillating experience. The companion prints, 'A Fashionable Dip' and 'Side Way or Any Way' show a buxom young woman swimming confidently in the sea after having dived into the water from a bathing machine.[1] Completely naked and exposed in the water, she is being observed by distant onlookers who gaze in admiration at her healthy and attractive body.

As representations of eighteenth-century sea-bathing, these prints are misleading. First, 'there is little to no evidence to suggest that female swimming existed in any significant form prior to the 1800s'.[2] Indeed, even when swimming in England emerged as a popular pastime from the 1830s, it remained a predominantly male preserve.[3] Furthermore, although men often bathed naked, women typically wore flannel gowns: whilst illustrations often showed them without clothes, 'if this was not simply artistic licence then it was an unusual practice.'[4] More significantly, whilst sea-bathing at the time was promoted primarily as a medical cure, the young lady shows no signs of illness. Instead, the Venus of Margate is a picture of health and displays a self-assured and attractive physicality.

1. Thomas Rowlandson, *Venus's Bathing (Margate): A Fashionable Dip*, s.l., 1790, ICV No 20451, Wellcome Library, London.

2. Thomas Rowlandson, *Venus's Bathing (Margate): Side Way or Any Way*, s.l., c. 1800, ICV No 20452, Wellcome Library, London.

This article will show how Rowlandson's satirical prints formed part of a complex narrative of fashion and disease at the Georgian seaside. The Venus of Margate

was part of a new trend in resort literature which criticised the display of young, healthy bodies. Largely overlooking sea-bathing's status as a medical treatment, these works represented the sea as a place of freedom, with the shoreline acting as a boundary between the civilised resort and unpredictable nature. As the Venus of Margate demonstrates, these works sexualised the seaside water cure, using the sea as a setting for romantic encounters.

This new literary response to sea-bathing, it will be argued, was a departure from the established trope of the fashionable sufferer to a new fashion for the healthy, sexualised body. As other articles in this volume have explored, eighteenth-century watering places were spaces in which visitors were encouraged to combine fashionable sociability with the display of illness. The contradiction between the fashionable sufferer and the genuine patient was an attractive topic for satirists and many of Margate's writers explored this in their publications. Unlike at the spas, however, this narrative was slowly being replaced: at the eighteenth-century seaside, visitors began to reject the idea of the fashionable sufferer, viewing a healthy body as a greater cultural asset than a sick one.

Despite growing scholarly interest, the manifestation of fashionable illnesses at the pre-railway seaside resort remains under-examined. Discussion has typically focused on the works of Jane Austen, with *Sanditon*, written in 1817, the most commonly cited example. John Wiltshire has argued that *Sanditon*, unfinished at the time of Austen's death, offers not only a setting within which the inhabitants share an 'obsession of health', but also reflects Austen's own battle with illness.[5] Sanditon, a fictional seaside town which Mr. Parker hopes to develop into a fashionable resort, is being visited by three hypochondriacs who each 'amplify and exaggerate' the 'enjoyments of invalidism.'[6] The Parker siblings, Susan, Diana and Arthur, Wiltshire argues, 'share a conviction of their own bodily infirmities' and 'continually re-inforce, and therefore make real, the bodily symptoms from which the others suffer.'[7] While Austen's work focuses on certain aspects of fashion and illness at the seaside, studying a wider range of literature reveals many other facets of this complex relationship.

Despite the healthy figure sported by Rowlandson's Venus, sea-bathing during the eighteenth century was first and foremost a medical treatment. Seawater was considered to have medicinal properties and taking a 'dip' was thought to cure a wide range of afflictions. But whilst sea-bathing was widely considered fashionable among

the Georgian elite, the majority of the ailments treated by Margate's physicians had few positive connotations. Through an analysis of the works of Dr Richard Russell, who brought seawater to the attention of the fashionable world, and Dr John Anderson, Margate's premier resort physician, this article will show that patients undertook the seaside water cure for a wide range of afflictions: though some, like nervous diseases, may have been considered fashionable, the medical profession did not present them as such. Instead, the focus was on seawater's power to cure what were often painful, debilitating, even life-threatening, ailments. Indeed, as Rose McCormack has argued was the case at eighteenth-century spas, many of the illnesses treated at the seaside were 'distinctly unfashionable'.[8]

Sea-Bathing: A Fashionable Treatment?

The rise of seaside resorts was rooted in a widespread belief in the curative properties of seawater. Whilst Rowlandson's 'Venus Bathing (Margate)' shows an attractively healthy body, in reality, many of those who undertook a course of sea-bathing at Margate would have been suffering from a genuine affliction. In contrast to cultural representations of sea-bathing, the lived experience for many patients would have been painful, uncomfortable and intimidating. This section will explore the practise of sea-bathing through an examination of Margate's medical literature. By analysing the cures promoted and treatments offered, it will show that the reality of the seaside water cure often stood in stark contrast to its portrayal in contemporary literature. Building on this discussion, this section will interrogate sea-bathing's status as a fashionable medical treatment.

There are several ways in which the seaside water cure could be considered fashionable. First, seaside resorts, like spas, were high-status social arenas. Spending the season, or even a few days, at a resort required an expenditure of time and money that was beyond the reach of the majority of the population. For the gentry and aspirational middle classes, a visit to the seaside offered the opportunity to rub shoulders with the *beau monde* and engage in the conspicuous consumption of leisure and pleasure. As 'taking the waters' was the *raison d'être* of seaside resorts, with the daily routine structured around bathing and drinking, the water cure and the pursuit of health itself accrued significant fashionable status. Second, the medical and promotional

literature of eighteenth-century seaside resorts frequently promoted seawater as being a near-panacea. If the treatment and venue was in itself fashionable, then medical practitioners and guidebook writers made it possible for nearly everyone to find a reason to participate. Indeed, even if one was not suffering from any particular affliction, then the water cure could be employed as a preventative measure for the preservation of health. Third, resort literature incorporated many of the afflictions, such as nervous and hypochondriacal disorders, that contemporary society would have defined independently as 'fashionable'.

However, despite these factors, identifying sea-bathing as 'fashionable', is highly problematic. Most significantly, many of the afflictions treated at Margate had few, if any, positive connotations. This was particularly true for gynaecological complaints. As McCormack has explored elsewhere in this volume, whilst 'many authors, medics and philosophers of the eighteenth century glamourised fragile female health … gynaecological complaints were never considered fashionable'.[9] Despite this, barrenness, greensickness and irregular menstruation were thought particularly responsive to seawater bathing.

In contrast to Brighton, and notwithstanding Margate's early success, the resort did not attract a well-known medical authority until the arrival of Dr John Anderson in the 1790s. Up to this point, visitors to Margate would have relied on the work of Dr Richard Russell. Russell's treatise, *A Dissertation Concerning the Use of Seawater in Diseases of the Glands*, first published in Latin in 1750 and in an official English translation in 1753, brought seawater treatments to the attention of the fashionable world. As the first 'to have discovered in sea water the medicinal values traditionally associated with spa waters' and, by couching the benefits of sea-bathing within the familiar language of the water cure, Russell was instrumental in bringing seawater therapy into the mainstream of medical orthodoxy.[10]

Russell's basic hypothesis was that seawater treatment could prevent and cure diseases of the glands. Not only did seawater allow 'Glands … [to] be scour'd and cleans'd of their Obstructions', but it also 'strengthen'd, and render'd firm' 'the whole Habit of the Body'.[11] Though he denied that seawater was a panacea, the list of cures offered by Russell was extensive. The list of nine afflictions Russell believed particularly responsive contained the following:

All recent Obstructions of the Glands of the Intestines, and Mesentery …

1. All recent Obstructions of the pulmonary Glands, and those of the other *Viscera*, which frequently produce Consumptions. ...
2. All recent glandular Swellings of the Neck, or other Parts.
3. Recent Tumours of the Joints, if they are not suppurated, nor become *Scirrhi*, or Cancers; and have not carious Bones for their Cause.
4. Recent Fluxions upon the Glands of the Eye Lids . . .
6. All Defædations of the Skin, from an *Erysipelas* to the *Lepra*.
7. Diseases of the Glands of the Nose, with their usual Companion a Thickness of the upper Lip . . .
8. Obstructions of the Kidnies; when there is no Inflammations, and the Stone not large.
9. In recent Obstructions of the Liver, this Method will be proper; where it prevents Constipation of the Belly, and assists other Medicines directed in Icteric Cases.[12]

This list was not comprehensive: in his wider thesis Russell addressed an even greater variety of treatments; from shingles to jaundice to scorbutic eruptions. The sheer range of treatments offered by Russell makes any meaningful analysis difficult. What is evident, however, is that whilst Russell was addressing the fashionable elite, there was no attempt to limit his treatment to those afflictions that had positive cultural connotations, or were socially acceptable.

Dr John Anderson (c. 1730-1804) was the first 'big name' physician to practice at Margate. Anderson, after being awarded his MD at Edinburgh University, was initially based in Kingston, Surrey, before moving to Margate in the 1790s. As well as catering to the town's fashionable clientele, Anderson was appointed as physician and later director of Margate's General Sea-Bathing Infirmary.[13] Like many prominent physicians, Anderson published widely: his dissertation on scorbutic diseases (*De Scorbuto*, 1772), was followed by texts which directly addressed the topic of sea-bathing. These publications were by no means disinterested: by endorsing seawater as a medical cure and promoting Margate in particular, Anderson consolidated the resort's reputation and drew public attention to the cures achieved by himself and his colleagues.

Anderson published two influential treatises on seawater in 1795, *A Preliminary Introduction to the Act of Sea Bathing* and *A Practical Essay on the Good and Bad Effects of Sea-Water and Sea-Bathing*. These built on an earlier publication that addressed similar themes, *Medical Remarks on Natural, Spontaneous and Artificial Evacuation*, published in 1787. Drawing upon his own observations, the experience of Margate's sea-bathing guides and the knowledge of colleagues practising in the Isle of Thanet, Anderson offered advice on the treatment methods and cures achievable.

Echoing Russell, Anderson made grand claims for the curative powers of seawater, stating that 'There are but few distempers' for which the air and water of the Isle of Thanet 'are not equal to meet.'[14] Accordingly, an extensive number of afflictions were deemed responsive to the Margate water cure, including diabetes or 'flux of the urine,' diarrhoea, jaundice and 'other bilious complaints,' '*fridigity*, *venus landuidis*, *languor* or indolence, *depression of spirits* . . . maniac melancholia,' '*spasmodic complaints*, such as *hysteric*, *epileptic*, . . . St.Vitus's dance', '*Cynic Spasm* or wry mouth,' tetanus 'or locked jaw,' chronic rheumatism, leprosy, and 'humoral sore eyes and dimness.'[15] Scrofula, scurvy and serpigenous ulcers were likewise deemed curable by Margate's premier physician.

Within his 1795 treatises, however, Anderson gave more weight to some conditions than others. Women's health received particular emphasis: significant space was given in *A Practical Essay* to menstruation and barrenness, as well as other afflictions of the uterus, with an entire section dedicated to sea-bathing as an abortifacient. In so doing, Anderson was echoing the established practices of spa-doctors. Since the early seventeenth century, mineral waters like those at Tunbridge Wells and Bath had been successfully promoted as cures for gynaecological disorders. Infertility and menstrual problems were widespread in Georgian England and many women would have visited a spa hoping that the waters would aid in the conception and safe delivery of a child. Such problems were, however, rarely discussed by women: indeed, as McCormack has argued, admitting to infertility would have been damaging to a woman's reputation.[16] At the seaside, therefore, just as at the spa, a women would want to keep her suffering to herself.

Nonetheless, Anderson was keen to reassure women of the efficacy of seawater against gynaecological disorders. As proof of his claims, Anderson provided case studies

of patients treated at Margate. A 'Miss P----', for example, who suffered from 'bilious bowel-complaints', and 'irregularity of her monthly terms' was reported to have gone 'around the town of Margate to shew [sic] what a miracle the sea-bath had performed on her.'[17] To further verify his claims, Anderson drew on the testimony of Margate's bathing guides, instrumental figures who aided visitors in the physical practice of sea-bathing. Whilst an absence of records would make it difficult to prove conclusively, it is likely that women drew on the expertise of female bathing guides when undergoing treatment for gynaecological disorders, seeking advice they would not have been willing to solicit from their friends.

In contrast, whilst an analysis of Margate's literature will later show that nervous diseases were used by visitors to gain cultural capital, Anderson was ambivalent about the efficacy of seawater in such cases. Indeed, Anderson even warns that sea-bathing might prove dangerous to those suffering from hysterical, hypochondriacal and nervous disorders:

> The efficacy of the sea-bath is much prevented by a person's fear, especially the feeble, nervous, irritable habit, such as the hysterical or hypochondriacal … which, if they have, the intention of the bath will be frustrated.[18]

Nevertheless, later in the treatise, Anderson enthusiastically recommended sea-bathing to sufferers:

> In *nervous* or *hypochondriacal* disorders, in which the mind is feeble, irritable, and unstable, the sea-bath, amusements, exercise, and air of Thanet, have happy effects. I have observed that in every instance; wherefore I would advise all who would deliver themselves from the tyranny and fear to throw aside their long-tried unsuccessful plan, quit the smoky town, and fly hither to the *Isle of Thanet* (the Island of Health), and I will promise them health, strength, and good spirits.[19]

Far more than any other category of disease, Anderson linked the cure of nervous disorders with participation in the resort's social and cultural life. Sea-bathing by itself was not sufficient to effect a cure: taking part in Margate's amusements was deemed essential for the restoration of health. This was not, of course, unusual: doctors at both spas and seaside resorts adopted a holistic approach to treatment, considering diet, air and exercise as important elements of the water cure.[20] Instead, by understanding the treatment of nervous disorders in these terms, Anderson allowed both genuine and fashionable sufferers to find in his work support for their preferred method of treatment.

Margate as a Fashionable Resort

By the late eighteenth century, when Rowlandson's 'Venus's Bathing (Margate)' was published, Margate was a thriving seaside resort. Over the course of fifty years, it had grown from a small port to become one of the country's leading centres for fashionable leisure and pleasure, drawing its visitors from the aristocracy, gentry and middle classes. Replicating the model of the inland spas, by the turn of the century Margate offered all the social, cultural and medical facilities necessary for success, cultivating an image of polite respectability. Margate's early development gave it, however, a very different character to its main competitor, Brighton, as well as from the spas it emulated. Whilst Brighton attracted royal patronage, Margate's water communication links with London made it an attractive destination for the city's middling classes. These professional and mercantile families had different expectations of resort life to the *beau monde*, caused by their typically shorter visits and their greater numbers. Furthermore, the unique forms of seaside architecture and emphasis on the natural environment, meant that Margate's visitors were encouraged to spend much of their time outdoors, exploring the sea and shore. It was this context which inspired a reimagining of the seaside water cure.

A small port in the Isle of Thanet, Margate had quietly prospered through the exportation of corn to London and as the base of a fishing fleet until the decline of the latter industry in the early eighteenth century. Prompted by the town's falling fortunes

and inspired by innovations at Scarborough, Margate became one of the first providers of commercial sea-bathing facilities. In July 1736, local carpenter Thomas Barber advertised his newly constructed seawater baths in the *Kentish Post, or Canterbury News Letter.* Aiming to attract patrons from the surrounding area, the bath, at fifteen feet long with a 'private room adjoining it', operated on a small scale.[21] Modestly successful, Barber advertised the bath's expansion in 1737 to include lodging, dressing and dining rooms.[22] The bath, however, failed to thrive: no mention is made of it after this date and Margate's development as a resort stalled.

This early experiment with sea-bathing placed Margate in a good position thirteen years later, when Dr Richard Russell published his seminal treatise, *A Dissertation Concerning the Use of Seawater in Diseases of the Glands* (1750). Capitalising on the interest generated by this publication, Russell set up a practice in Brighton, a town that quickly established itself as England's premier seaside resort. Seeing Brighton's success, Margate's residents began once again to court fashionable visitors.

'From the 1760s onwards Margate witnessed a marked and prolonged physical and residential expansion' as the town strove to provide the built environment that would allow it to compete with the nation's leading watering places.[23] The construction of Cecil Square in particular signalled Margate's aspirations of becoming one of England's leading resorts. Completed in 1769, Cecil Square consisted of a combination of houses and social facilities, including assembly rooms and fashionable shops. Two years later the neighbouring Hawley Square was erected where, in 1787, a permanent Theatre Royal was opened. Built in the classical style, these developments existed at the heart of resort life and signalled Margate's ascent as a polite and aspirational leisure arena. Perhaps the most impressive structure was Hall's Circulating Library, which opened in new premises in 1786. Described as a 'magnificent room', boasting a 'screen of columns', a 'dome of eighteen feet diameter' and 'a most superb and beautiful chandelier of glass,' the library formed the heart of Margate's social life, acting as the resort's prime venue for fashionable sociability.[24]

The provision of bathing facilities was central to Margate's success. In addition to emulating the facilities of spas, seaside resorts developed their own unique forms of architecture. Bathing machines, piers, jetties, and bathing rooms, as well as the beach itself, provided important focal points for resort life and had a significant impact on the

way space was used by visitors. The bathing machine, one of the first pieces of seaside architecture to be introduced, was one over which Margate had a particularly strong influence. As an integral, if temporary, set piece of seaside resort architecture, the bathing machine provided a method for controlling the consumption of seawater and existed on the boundary between nature and urban polite society. The hooded bathing machine was invented by the Quaker Benjamin Beale, perhaps as early as the mid-1730s.[25] The umbrella attachment, which extended from the rear of the machine, provided privacy to bathers and proved a popular addition for those conscious of their respectability.

Fred Gray has argued that the bathing machines marked an important transition from the cultivated resort to untamed nature – the sea – existing on and providing a means to navigate the point where seaside resorts and the society they represented 'confronted nature directly at a sharp, precise edge or front.'[26] The bathing machine was also integral to polite society's consumption of nature and allowed a direct monetary gain to be derived from the practice of seawater bathing. Bathing machines thus 'became an essential instrument for regulating and controlling the use of the sea - when, where and how people bathed.'[27]

The practice of bathing in seawater led to the emergence of another piece of seaside resort architecture: the bathing rooms. A cousin to the pump rooms of the inland spas, bathing rooms provided a place for people to congregate and wait for a machine to become available and often also housed indoor bathing facilities. At Margate, the bathing rooms were one-storey buildings that lined the shorefront and provided direct access to the bathing machines. Looking at the shore from the sea they would have been a prominent feature of the town. In 1797 Zechariah Cozens offered the following description:

> Along the borders of the western strand,
> In High Street Bathing Houses stand:
> Though thus they're nam'd, they are not strictly so
> They're only places where the Bathers go
> To wait their turns, of plunging in the sea.[28]

Constructed during the 1760s, Margate boasted seven bathing rooms. Contrary to what Cozens suggests, they were more than just waiting rooms; rather: 'in a morning [they] form an agreeable lounge, even for those who do not take the fashionable plunge.'[29]

The beach itself occupied a unique position, becoming increasingly important as a leisure space in its own right during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Walking along the shore was used as a way to take the sea air and the recommended exercise after bathing, as well as for general diversion. A 1775 guide described how 'When the Tide is ebbed, many Persons go on the Sands to collect Pebbles, Sea-weed, Shells, &c. which, although of no great Value, are esteemed as Matters of Curiosity, by those to whom such Objects have not been familiar.'[30] As novelties, these collected items were made into souvenirs: seaweed, for example, 'when spread on Writing Paper, extended with a Needle, and pressed between Boards, form an infinite Variety of Landscapes, in beautiful Colours.'[31] Acting as a space to promenade, the beach encouraged visitors to spend their time outdoors. This was for many a refreshing contrast to the constrictions of city life: the Venus of Margate's home was not the Pump Room of the inland spa, but the wide expanse of the sea.

Fashionable Disease: A Declining Narrative?

The inherent contradictions between sea-bathing as a medical and a social practice made the seaside water cure an attractive subject for contemporary commentators. Representations of the fashionable sufferer directly addressed this dichotomy, ridiculing those who sought to gain cultural capital from a display of their afflictions. At Margate, however, the established trope of the fashionable sufferer would be challenged by a new emphasis on healthy, young bodies.

The contraction of an illness can lead to distinct meanings being placed on the sufferer's body in response to cultural attitudes. Clark Lawlor has argued that 'illness – an often painful phenomenon and negatively constructed experience – can paradoxically give pleasure to the beholder and even to the sufferer.'[32] Focusing on pulmonary tuberculosis (consumption), Lawlor has shown how the combination of medical, cultural and religious discourses combined to create the notion that this was a

disease that not only beautified the sufferer but also inspired creativity and spirituality.[33] Both Lawlor and Heather R. Beatty have emphasised that the cultural capital accrued by sufferers from nervous or Romantically-inspired diseases did not necessarily negate the reality of their symptoms: 'it would be unfair to dismiss all patients who revelled in the fashionable implications of their sensibility-induced disorders as mere actors'.[34] Furthermore, the presentation of nervous diseases in popular culture could differ significantly from the progress of afflictions as understood by the medical profession. In particular, the picture of the nervous sufferer presented within novels of sensibility was highly sanitised. Nervous symptoms were used by novelists to 'diagnose their character's temperament, not their disease' and heroines only suffered from 'attractive' symptoms: as Beatty notes, whilst swooning, lethargy, a pale complexion and weakness from emotional distress were common in sentimental literature, 'other nervous symptoms regularly listed in health manuals such as excessive flatulence, moodiness and belching remained conspicuously absent in fictional accounts.'[35] It was this contradiction between the fashionable sufferer and the genuine patient that made nervous illnesses such an attractive focus for satire.

Margate's fashionable sufferers were identified as the subjects of ridicule. George Keate's 1784 publication, *Sketches from Nature; Taken, and Coloured, in a Journey to Margate*, demonstrates how visitors' attempts to use their afflictions to gain cultural capital often failed to inspire the desired response. Keate, a writer and painter whose poems were praised by Voltaire, divided the visiting company at watering places into three groups: those who 'travel about from motives of curiosity'; 'Those who are driven about by want of health' and 'are seeking by foreign objects to divert their attention from some rooted sorrow'; and, the largest group, those who 'come with little other intention than to trifle away those hours in company which would at home be heavily borne.'[36] Keate offered up each group as the object of ridicule, but it is the second that will be the focus here. Addressing, in a grandiose manner, the sea itself, Keate asked, 'How many diseases, real, or imaginary, are now washing off under yonder range of canvas machines'?[37] Among the bathers, he highlighted 'The *fine lady*' who 'withdraws herself from the pleasurable toils of high life, to new brace those nerves which luxury hath relaxed', but next Keate states the myriad reasons for which people go to the sea:

> The *young* and the *healthy* court thee for pleasure – the *barren* to become fruitful – the *débauché* asks of thee a restorative – the *corpulent* a scouring – the *feeble,* strength – the *hypochondriac*, spirits – and the numerous family of the *rheumatic*, a set of muscles more pliant than those they possess.[38]

Venturing into the bathing rooms, Keate was 'agreeably surprized to find a face or two among the company which I had three years before often seen in the same place.'[39] These 'invalids' included: a 'bilious gentleman'; a 'poor crippled figure, with an eye of languor'; a lady 'whose face wore the colour of an INDIAN pickle'; and 'a nervous old gentlewoman.'[40] The group spend their time talking about their illnesses and commenting on the state of the sea, before eventually being called to bathe.

Keate presents the occupants of Margate's bathing rooms as a group who revel in their afflictions. His portrayal does not deny that these figures are actually ill: indeed, Keate is following a fairly typical pattern when he describes this group by their illnesses; as 'crippled', 'nervous' or 'bilious'. Nor does he deny the healing powers of seawater. Yet the implication was that these figures indulged in their afflictions, drew attention to themselves through a display of their symptoms and used their suffering as a means to confer status within the resort community.

This portrayal of invalids as figures of ridicule was echoed in other satiric literature of the late eighteenth century. The 1778 *Letters of Momus, from Margate, Describing the Most Distinguished Characters There* offers one rather peculiar account of an invalid drawing attention to his illness:

> In the anxious and corroding silence of the card-room an invalid coughed in a note like that of a pig; the astonishment it occasioned made the man ashamed to own his infirmity. Some referred it to evil spirits, and the clergy were desired to go home for their prayer-books, or to speak Latin, *which they declined*; and being reduced to difficulties, they started the supposition that the noise was made by a ventriloquist.

The cougher, presumably humiliated by his actions, disappeared into the crowd and 'was never heard of more'.[41]

This episode is revealing about how fashionable sufferers were viewed at Margate. Nervous sufferers were presented as subjects for ridicule: the bodies of the invalids are pictured as frail, their symptoms cause for embarrassment and sufferers made ridiculous by their ostentatious display of ill-health. So far, so familiar: by presenting fashionable sufferers in this manner, both texts can be placed firmly within a wider literary canon; these themes originated at Bath and were echoed across resort literature. What is interesting at Margate, however, is that this literary trope lost ground during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to a new portrayal of the water cure: one that gave healthy, rather than diseased bodies cultural priority.

New Interpretations of the Water Cure

The practice of sea-bathing allowed a new set of meanings to be placed on the water cure. Instead of being confined to the pump room or modest-sized baths, the water cure now took place in the open sea, away from the urban centre of a resort. The shoreline represented a boundary: bathing machines carried the bather out of the civilized space of the town and immersed them in the sea – a powerful, uncontrollable force of nature. The bathers themselves were clothed less formally than on mainland: men might bathe naked or wearing only loose drawers, whilst the linen smocks donned by women could both reveal and obscure the body.

Margate's literature enthusiastically addressed these aspects of the water cure. *Adam and Eve; A Margate Story*, published anonymously in 1824, offers an account of a visit to a resort which emphasized the possibilities sea-bathing offered for romance and romantic mishaps. As this publication was designed in part to act as an advertisement of Margate, the protagonists, a young married couple referred to as Adam and Eve, spend much of their time in the heart of the resort ('had wandered through / Each hole, and corner of that pleasant town'), but it is at the 'water's edge' that the main drama of the tale occurs.[42] Inspired by the 'thousand sweet sensations' which 'o'er them stole' as a result of looking at 'first each other, then the sea', the couple decide to go into the sea,

thinking 'how love – and – bathing would agree.'[43] Having found 'a sequestered, solitary spot / Where they might bathe secure from all intrusion,' the couple undress and leave their clothes in the gig. In the 'sunny hour / Of some sweet summer day' and safe from prying eyes, the couple find bathing in the sea exhilarating:

> … they cast
> Their eyes around; but there was nobody:
> Air, earth, and seas were all their own. They passed
> Unto the waters, which voluptuously
> Closed in, while the small, wanted waves embraced
> Each lovely charm, as 'twere in ecstasy.[44]

The language here is overtly sexual: the water moves 'voluptuously', the waves 'embraced' the couple in 'ecstasy'. The freedom found in this secluded part of the beach is also emphasised and it is this that allows the couple to immerse themselves in nature: Adam and Eve are placed in intimate contact with the powerful forces of the air, earth and sea.

The tale concludes, however, on a humorous note. Returning to the beach, Adam and Eve find their horse and belongings missing: 'oh! - ye goddesses of witches! / The horse is off with petticoats and breeches!'[45] Whilst previously the couple had delighted in their exposure, the author states that he 'can but laugh to think / How piteously they gazed upon each other.'[46] Indeed, the title of this tale derives from this moment, with the link being made between the couple on the shore and the biblical Adam and Eve, ashamed of their nakedness after their sin. Though the couple do manage to borrow some clothes and return to their hotel, 'the story had got there before 'em': they were the laughing stock of Margate.[47] This publication, therefore, combines the promotion of Margate's leisure facilities with a morality tale: the reader is informed both of what they could and what they should not do.

Poet William Robinson, in his 1805 *A Trip to Margate*, adopted a similar theme, though in his tale the couple in question are strangers. At the beginning of the episode 'A youth of two and twenty once came down, / Who ne'er had seen the sea coast, nor beheld / Bathing machines of course.'[48] It was after he had found a machine and was returning from his swim that he encountered difficulties:

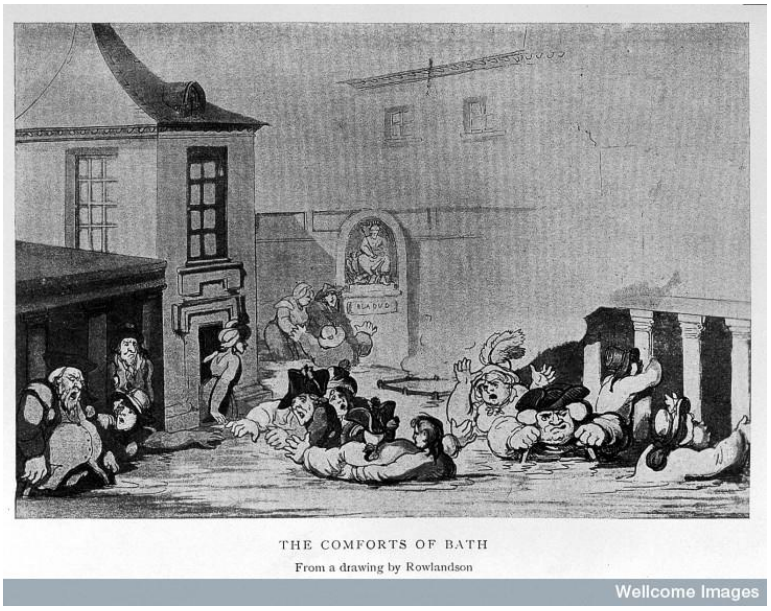
In his return he swam beside the throng
Of those machines, which then more num'rous stood
In all directions, thick as any wood;
He felt perplex'd to know which was his own;
He look'd at many, more bewilder'd grown
At ev'ry view; then swimming to the side
Of one he fondly hop'd to find the guide
Who brought him there, he ask'd, "Are you the man
"With whom I came." – "Nay, answer that who can,"
The rustic arch reply'd, "till you are dress'd;
"Put on your clothes, Sir, then I'll tell the rest."[49]

Believing he had found his bathing machine and chancing his luck, the youth swam under the water to enter the machine's cover (the distinguishing feature of Margate's hooded bathing machine) where he found 'The lady, fond of bathing as the youth, / And fond of taking it in naked truth.'[50]

There is more to Robinson's story than boy meets girl, however. In a dubious comic twist, there is more waiting for the young men under the umbrella than the young woman. The lady, perhaps as the result of the cold water, or else having 'been too bold/In exercise' had discharged her bowels, 'discharging thence / Some little faeces, which afloat did swim, Nor passage could obtain beyond the rim / Form'd by the canvas.'[51] The 'luckless' youth, after ducking under the umbrella and rising from the water, 'gaped as he rose / For respiration … Something his palate reach'd, and pressing thence / Into his throat, disorder'd ev'ry sense.'[52] After an awkward encounter with the lady and her maid, the youth, in a continuation of this repellent farce, vomits: '…his stomach, struggling to be free / From what convuls'd it, … obtain'd release'.[53] Despite such an inauspicious first meeting, the couple find themselves bound together: the lady's honour having been compromised, the story concludes with the youth being challenged to a duel by her brother and an eventual marriage. Whilst Robinson, therefore, began the encounter by playing with the sexual tensions created by the

exposure of young, healthy bodies, he ends it by making these same bodies the butt of the joke: the previously alluring female body is demystified by a display of vulgarity.[54]

Representations of sea-bathing at Margate stand in stark contrast with Rowlandson's depictions of mineral water bathing at Bath. Rowlandson's *The Comforts of Bath*, produced in 1798, offers an interesting comparison to *Venus Bathing (Margate)*, which was published around the same time. Influenced by the works of George Cheyne, Tobias Smollett and used to illustrate the 1858 edition of Christopher Anstey's *New Bath Guide*, *The Comforts of Baths* offers an altogether unappealing portrayal of the water cure. Plate VII shows mixed bathing in the King's Bath. None of the bathers appear to be enjoying their experience: two are shown clinging onto the stone columns; one apprehensive gentleman hovers on the edge of the bath, having to be persuaded by his companion to enter the water; several more are frantically trying to navigate their way out from the bath's centre. In comparison to the Venus of Margate, who appears to take delight in swimming, the King's Bath is an ordeal to be endured.



3. Thomas Rowlandson, *The Comforts of Bath*, Plate VII, 1798, L0002550, Wellcome Library, London.

At both spas and seaside resorts, it was typical for bathers to wear flannel gowns, but whilst Rowlandson's Venus of Margate is naked, bathers in the King's Bath are all

elaborately dressed. Fiona Haslam has argued that, by 'dressing his bathers in their usual attire', Rowlandson was criticising visitors' preoccupation with fashion.[55] Indeed, display was central to the experience of the King's Bath: not only could people be observed by their fellow bathers (both male and female), but they could also be viewed from the windows in the Pump Room. By entering the King's Bath, bathers were exposing their bodies to the gaze of the visiting company: Rowlandson portrays the water cure as spectacle, with bathers as objects of either pity or ridicule. The Venus of Margate, of course, is also overlooked. Distant figures can be seen standing on the cliff edge, peering at the swimming figure. Their gaze, however, is appreciative, inciting lust and desire rather than derision. Furthermore, whereas at Bath the ability to observe bathers is openly acknowledged - indeed it is part of the very fabric of the building - the onlookers at Margate, viewing the lady from afar, are experiencing an illicit thrill. The distant onlookers, therefore, are charged with a hint of seediness, a theme that would become more pronounced in seaside literature as the nineteenth century progressed.

Rowlandson placed the physical body at the centre of both sets of images but, crucially, whereas the Venus of Margate is naked and displays a healthy, attractive physicality, bathers in the King's Bath are all clothed and several show signs of ill-health. Several of the figures are overweight, with one particularly bulbous gentlemen appearing to be suffering from gout. Instead of swimming confidently, bathers hesitate on the edge or cling on to the pillars for dear life. Accordingly, the humour in this scene derives in part from the decrepit, physically-unappealing appearance of bathers who are dressed up in their finest to be viewed by the company: there is nothing aspirational or sexually suggestive about the group.

The depictions of bathing at Margate - Robinson's *A Trip to Margate*, *Adam and Eve* and Rowlandson's Venus of Margate - revolve around similar themes. First, all involve the exposure of young, healthy bodies in sexually suggestive situations. Second, this exposure is made permissible, even if still risqué, by their occurring on the shoreline or in the sea itself, a place away from the restrictive social rules of the resort. Third, all involve being immersed in the sea and, thus, in nature. Fourth, all use sea-bathing as an opportunity for lewd humour that centred on the body. We can see in Margate's promotional material of the late eighteenth/early nineteenth centuries, therefore, precursors of the crude, salacious postcard humour that would become a

dominant feature of the seaside holiday in the twentieth century. We can also see reflected the opportunities engendered by the seaside as a space in which the normal rules governing society were relaxed. Even though most visitors would not find love beneath the waves, these images were aspirational: romance, sexual encounters and freedom from restraint might all be found by the sea.

Conclusion

'Resorts depended hugely on their image', John K. Walton and Peter Borsay have argued: 'They were a commercial product or brand and would have to convince potential customers of the meaning and value of what they sold.'[56] Margate, as a thriving eighteenth-century resort, was clearly successful in its promotion, yet the portrayal of the seaside water cure – the primary product – was far from consistent. Instead, a number of contradictory themes vied for prominence.

Sea-bathing during the eighteenth century was primarily a medical treatment. As an analysis of the work of Russell and Anderson has shown, seawater was considered an effective treatment for a wide range of diseases. Many of Margate's visitors would have come to the resort in the hope that a 'dip' in the sea would have relieved their symptoms and cured their afflictions. Many of these ailments, and gynaecological disorders in particular, would not have engendered any positive cultural connotations. Instead of displaying their suffering, patients would have been more likely to have hidden or downplayed their symptoms.

The gap between the genuine patient and the fashionable sufferer made sea-bathing an attractive topic for satirists. At Margate, as at the inland spas, the fashionable sufferer was presented as an object of ridicule. However, whilst these portrayals of nervous disorders emphasised the appeal of frail, sick bodies and delicate constitutions, resort literature at Margate increasingly focused on the display of young, healthy bodies. Overlooking sea-bathing's primary role as a medical treatment, these images of sea-bathing emphasised the possibilities for sexual encounters through a display of the body. Yet, as an analysis of Margate's satiric literature has shown, even healthy bodies were subject to derision. Whilst stories and images of the sexualised sea-bather were

intended to titillate, these promiscuous encounters were not presented uncritically: sea-bathing could be both pleasurable and dangerous.

This was a new twist on an old theme but it held a distinct and enduring appeal. As the visitor numbers grew and length of stay shortened, Margate's increasingly middle-class company began to see the healthy body as a greater cultural asset than a sick one. Even those patients suffering from painful, debilitating afflictions may have drawn comfort from the positive portrayal of the sea-bathing body, even if the image of Rowlandson's Venus seemed far removed from their lived experience. A dominant theme in Margate's literature represented the sea as a place of freedom, with the shoreline figuring the boundary between the civilised resort and the unpredictable forces of nature. This freedom extended to the body: sea-bathing exposed the body and placed it on display to a far greater extent than either the pump room or indoor baths of the spas. The meanings placed on the sea-bathing body at Margate during this period were important for the resort's future: the crude, sexually-explicit humour of the postcard would eventually come to dominate the public's image of the seaside, with the shore being seen as a place for romantic encounters, a place of frivolity that existed just outside of the real world. The fashionable sufferer at the seaside, meanwhile, would eventually fade from view.

NOTES

[1] Thomas Rowlandson, 'Venus's Bathing (Margate)' (London, s.n., c. 1790-1800).
[2] Christopher Love, 'Splashing in the Serpentine: A Social History of Swimming in England, 1800-1918', *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 24:5 (April 2007), p.569.
[3] Love, 'Splashing in the Serpentine', p.569.
[4] Allan Brodie, 'Towns of 'Health and Mirth': The First Seaside Resorts, 1730-1769', in Peter Borsay and John K. Walton (eds), *Resorts and Ports: European Seaside Towns since 1700* (Bristol: Channel View, 2011), p.13.
[5] John Wiltshire, 'Sickness and Silliness in *Sanditon*', *Persuasions - Journal of the Jane Austen Society of North America* 19 (1997), p.94-5.
[6] Wiltshire, 'Sickness and Silliness', p.98.
[7] Wiltshire, 'Sickness and Silliness', p.98. See also Anita O'Connell's article, 'Fashionable Discourse of Disease at the Watering Places of Literature 1770-1820', in this volume.

[8] Rose Alexandra McCormack, "An assembly of disorders': exploring illness as a motive for female spa visiting at Bath and Tunbridge Wells throughout the long eighteenth century', in this volume.
[9] McCormack, in this volume.
[10] James Walvin, *Beside the Seaside: A Social History of the Popular Seaside Holiday* (London: Allen Lane, 1978), p.16.
[11] Richard Russell, *A Dissertation Concerning the Use of Sea Water in Diseases of the Glands, &c.* … (, London, 1753), pp. 14-15.
[12] Russell, *A Dissertation,* pp. 35-37.
[13] G.V. Benson, *rev*. Claire L. Nutt, 'Anderson, John (c.1730-1804)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* 2 (2004), p.46.
[14] John Anderson, *A Preliminary Introduction to the Act of Sea-Bathing: Wherein is Shewn its Nature, Power, and Importance; With some Necessary Hints for the Attention of Visitors at the Watering Places, Previous to, and During a Course of Bathing*. … (Margate, 1795), p.15-6.
[15] John Anderson, *A Practical Essay on the Good and Bad Effects of Sea-Water and Sea-Bathing. …* (London, 1795), p.41-8.
[16] McCormack, this volume.
[17] Anderson, *A Practical Essay,* p.4-5.
[18] Anderson, *A Practical Essay*, p.2-3.
[19] Anderson, *A Practical Essay*, p.41.
[20] See Anita O'Connell, 'Fashionable Discourse of Disease at the Watering Places of Literature 1770-1820', in this volume.
[21] *The Kentish Post, or Canterbury News Letter* (17 July 1736), in John Whyman, *The Early Kentish Seaside (1736-1840): Selected Documents* (Gloucester: A. Sutton for Kent Archives Office, 1985), p.160.
[22] *The Kentish Post, or Canterbury News Letter* (27 April 1737), in Whyman, *The Early Kentish Seaside*, p.161.
[23] John Whyman, 'Aspects of Holidaymaking and Resort Development within the Isle of Thanet, with particular reference to Margate, circa 1736 to circa 1840' (PhD diss., University of Kent at Canterbury, 1980), p.192.
[24] Joseph Hall, *Hall's New Margate and Ramsgate Guide* (Ramsgate, 1792), pp. 9-10.
[25] Whyman, 'Aspects of Holidaymaking', p.153-54.
[26] Fred Gray, *Designing the Seaside: Architecture, Society and Nature* (London: Reaktion, 2006), p.115.
[27] Gray, *Designing the Seaside*, p.148.
[28] Zechariah Cozens, *The Margate Guide, A Descriptive Poem, With Elucidatory Notes. Also a General Account of Ramsgate, Broadstairs, &c. By an inhabitant* (Margate, 1797), p.60.
[29] Cozens, *The Margate Guide*, p.61.
[30] *The Margate Guide. Containing Particular Account of Margate, With Respect to its New Buildings, Assemblies, Accommodations, Manner of Bathing and Remarkable Places in its Neighbourhood. …* (London, 1775), p.19.
[31] *The Margate Guide*, p.19.
[32] Clark Lawlor, "It is a path I have prayed to follow': The Paradoxical Pleasures of Romantic Disease', in Thomas H. Schmid and Michelle Faubert (eds), *Romanticism and Pleasure* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p.109.
[33] Lawlor, 'It is a path I have prayed to follow', p.113-14.

[34] Heather R. Beatty, *Nervous Disease in Late Eighteenth-Century Britain: The Reality of a Fashionable Disorder* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2011), p.77.
[35] Beatty, *Nervous Disease,* p.23.
[36] George Keate, *Sketches from Nature; Taken and Coloured, in a Journey to Margate. Published from the Original Designs,* vol. 1 (Dublin, 1779), p.61-2.
[37] Keate, *Sketches from Nature*, p.73-4.
[38] Keate, *Sketches from Nature*, p.74.
[39] Keate, *Sketches from Nature*, p.77.
[40] Keate, *Sketches from Nature*, p.77-8.
[41] Momus, *Letters of Momus, from Margate; Describing the Most Distinguished Characters There; and the Virtues, Vices and Follies to Which they Gave Occasion, in What was Called the Season of the Year 1777* (London, 1778), p.3.
[42] *Adam and Eve; A Margate Story* (London, 1824), p.36-7.
[43] *Adam and Eve*, p.52.
[44] *Adam and Eve,* p.54.
[45] *Adam and Eve,* p.53-4.
[46] *Adam and Eve,* p.55.
[47] *Adam and Eve*, p.59.
[48] William Robinson, *A Trip to Margate: With a Description of its Environs, Written in the Year 1805* (London, 1805), p.11.
[49] Robinson, *A Trip to Margate,* p.11-2.
[50] Robinson, *A Trip to Margate*, p.12.
[51] Robinson, *A Trip to Margate*, p.13.
[52] Robinson, *A Trip to Margate,* p.13.
[53] Robinson, *A Trip to Margate*, p.14.
[54] Rowlandson is here offering a clear echo of Jonathan Swift's 'scatological' poems and the long tradition of demystifying women's fashionable 'classical' bodies. See Katherine Aske's "Such gaudy tulips raised from dung': Cosmetics, Disease and Morality in Jonathan Swift's Dressing-Room Poetry', in this volume.
[55] Fiona Haslam, *From Hogarth to Rowlandson: Medicine in Art in Eighteenth Century Britain* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1996), p.186.
[56] Peter Borsay and John K. Walton (eds), *Resorts and Ports: European Seaside Towns since 1700* (Bristol: Channel View, 2011), p.8.