

TROTting TO THE WATERS: SEVENTEENTH CENTURY SPAS AS CULTURAL LANDSCAPES

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The concept of cultural landscape – the symbolic interaction between environments and humans- has been used in cultural geography and anthropology as a repository of information about social behaviour. I will borrow this conceptual frame to approach a series of Restoration works focusing on life at the spas. Shadwell's *Epsom Wells* (1674), Rawlins' *Tunbridge Wells* (1678) and several pamphlets and poems depict visitors to the wells drawing on several stereotypes: the mixture of social groups, the scatological effects of the waters, and the sexual freedom encouraged by a place where women often stayed on their own. I would like to argue that beyond its naturalistic character this picture of the spas provides some insights into the mechanisms through which several forms of satirical literature challenged and/or maintained discriminatory social categories. The literary renderings of this cultural landscape fed back into Restoration society by privileging a fashionable environment suitable to enact larger social conflicts, especially those of class and gender, and to expose the vices of the age.

The concept of cultural landscape – the symbolic interaction between environments and humans – has been used in cultural geography and anthropology as a repository of information about social behaviour. I will borrow this conceptual frame to approach a series of Restoration works focusing on life at the spas in the late 17th century. Shadwell's *Epsom Wells* (1674), Rawlins' *Tunbridge Wells* (1678) and several pamphlets and poems depict visitors to the wells by drawing on several stereotypes: the mixture of social groups, the scatological effects of the waters, and the sexual freedom encouraged by an environment in which women often stayed on their own. I would like to argue that beyond its naturalistic character this picture of the spas provides some insights into the mechanisms through which several forms of satirical literature challenged and/or maintained discriminatory social categories. The literary renderings of this cultural landscape fed back into Restoration society by privileging a fashionable environment suitable for the enactment of larger social conflicts, especially those of class and gender, and for exposing the vices of the age. Eventually all these discourses contributed to the cultural construction of the spas as places of

mirth and fun in which everyday conflicts were to be left at bay, thus helping to redefine more accordingly to the interests of London citizens the boundaries between productive and leisure time.

I

While preparing our edition of Shadwell's *Epsom Wells* we confronted serious difficulties whenever we tried to add stage references to the location of characters and their ensuing actions.¹ The reason for this was the asymmetry between the number of places needed to give the different subplots verisimilitude and the lack of such a diversity of places in contemporary topographical descriptions of Epsom. In fact, a detailed drawing of the Wells produced by a Dutch visitor in 1662 shows little else than barren land – the Downs – with a hut in the middle and shrubs interspersed with people.² Another witness of the life at the spas during the closing years of the 17th century and the first decades of the 18th century, Celia Fiennes, presents the developments undertaken during her traveling life in those places she visited. For instance when she arrived at Epsom for the first time in 1690 she complained that the wells were dirty, with no basin or pavement, and the town remained unsophisticated in all possible senses, offering only basic facilities. Nevertheless during her second visit in 1712 she noticed the growth of the weekend habit among visitors as well as major rebuilding and a new series of amusements and enterprises which were making the town flourish (Osborne & Weaver 1996: 36, 43).

How can we account for this lack of agreement between the physical reality of the spas and their literary rendering? It seemed as if the social life portrayed in the plays and poems produced between the period 1663-1684 takes precedence over any significant urban development at Epsom or Tunbridge; consequently the possibility of their use by a large number of people – a necessary requirement for ensuring the anonymity of the participants in the vibrant social life portrayed in the texts – sounds rather improbable. Nevertheless Carolina asserts in her opening words in *Epsom Wells*: “London is so empty, 'tis a very wilderness this vacation”. (2000: 1.2.14-5)

It is my contention that the literary spas helped to naturalise certain social practices before urban development in modern leisure towns had really taken hold. In fact the significant lack of topographical details in these texts can be explained simply because the authors could not rely on the audiences' knowledge of these places. In the poem, *Tunbridge Wells* (ca. 1675), Rochester fills the spa with references drawn from literary texts; and so, the first fool to appear is compared to “Sir Nicholas Cully”, a character in Etherege's *Love in a Tub* (1664) and later Rochester mentions three characters from Shadwell's *Epsom Wells*:

Poor foolish Fribble, who by subtlety
Of midwife, truest friend to lechery,

1. For all references to Shadwell's *Epsom Wells* see Prieto-Pablos et al edition of the play.
2. A reproduction of Schellinks's sketch is included in the edition mentioned above; see xlvii.

Persuaded art to be at pains and charge
 To give thy wife occasion to enlarge
 Thy silly head! For here walk Cuff and Kick,
 With brawny back and legs and potent prick,
 Who more substantially will cure thy wife,
 And on her half-dead womb bestow new life.
 From these the waters got the reputation
 Of good assistants unto generation. (1968: 139-48)

It seems as if Rochester, when looking for his readers' shared knowledge about the wells, was more confident referring to literary figures than their human counterparts.

In fact, the set of works that use the spa as a literary frame resort to a common series of motifs, characters and situations in their portrayal of social activity at the wells. No major change takes place in spite of the generic diversity – pamphlets, poems, plays, burlesque, satire and even popular romance – and one has the impression that the best literary achievement of the entire set was the first to appear, Shadwell's *Epsom Wells*. These ever-present topics are scatology, the exhibition of male and female desire, and the consequences of social medley. Although none of these is exclusive to the literary spas, the special way in which they are handled seems to show an awareness of the fact that the spas enhanced certain social practices which were native only to London social life, specially those merging on the illicit, the marginal or the grotesque. In this sense the relation between the spas, as natural places, and their literary counterpart is obscure and puzzling. I will argue that only a conceptual model encompassing both real and signified place may help us to an understanding of its cultural significance.

II

The choice of special literary topographies has already been considered by Richard H. Perkinson in his article "Topographical comedy in the Seventeenth Century". Perkinson focused on comedy to assert that "the effect of locale, ... may be seen in the treatment of manners, in the plot and in the *Dramatis Personae* of a comedy" and argues its value as part of the strategies of realistic comedy: "Locale then performs a double and somewhat contradictory function: the particular place contributes to realism or credibility; its characteristic atmosphere or reputation, by extension and exaggeration, to improbability" (1936: 277).

Perkinson assumes the existence of fixed public images for the places he lists -walks, fairs, markets, wells- and makes no assertions about their different cultural significance during the second half of the 17th Century. For instance, the perception of traditional fairs and markets was very different to that of the spas. Fairs and markets had played a substantial role in economic life since ancient times and still did; spas, on the contrary, did not attract public attention for that reason but for their association with just the opposite of economic life – that is, leisure time. My aim then is to focus upon texts produced in a time-span of 40

years in order to analyse the cultural landscape they portray. I will argue that the use of the spa as locale – very roughly presented in most literary pieces – did not aim at evoking a specific topography but a set of social meanings at work. To articulate those questions concerning both the natural and the literary spas as part of one single reality created by its signifying practices, I am going to use a conceptual frame developed in the field of Cultural Geography by David Sack in two of his books: *Human Territoriality* (1986) and *Homo Geographicus* (1997).

For Sack, a certain natural space becomes a territory as the result of the intervention of human agency in three interconnected realms: meaning, social relations and nature.³ The construction of a cultural landscape demands the interaction between the natural realm of space and the cultural realms of meaning and social relations. This interaction is visualised as a loop-movement between the three realms. This loop-movement can be originated at any of them although when the three realms are at work, each movement along the loop determines a new stage in the cultural construction of that cultural landscape.

The principles that hold the model could be summarised as follows. Firstly, all our knowledge of physical reality comes in the form of language. Meaning then moulds or influences other realms because we do not have any other form to apprehend either social relations or nature, unless we vehicle our knowledge into a symbolic system of communication. Secondly, places affect each other because they are connected in physical space. Places, as nodes, draw upon and weave together elements that move from place to place. Thirdly, places are sites which favour a circuit of three completely interrelated loops which circulate and redistribute meaning, nature and social relations.

Social relations are contained within the in/out loop. This stipulates what place includes and excludes (territorial rules). These rules of place require social power to stipulate and enforce them. As it overlaps the other realms, it socialises parts of nature and meaning, making them adhere to social norms (90-1). The physical aspects of nature which condition the cultural construction of place are visualised in the spatial interaction loop. Territorial rules are constructed to control and reorient spatial relations but the information flow about that use – assisted by whichever technology available – may problematise and question those same rules and, consequently the power system which they support (92-4). Finally, the realm of meaning is framed within the surface/depth loop. Reading a landscape always involves the issue of appearance and reality. Cultural landscapes may help to reify a hegemonic set of beliefs and disguise gender inequality or social injustice. But this loop engages meaning by problematising it, and by doing so it engages the overlapping elements of the other realms by questioning their meanings. Questioning a surface or appearance, and replacing it with another that was hidden, activates the other two loops by altering spatial relation and rules of in/out place. It also makes this new layer into another surface, which

3. Sack's uses the concept of territory as a dynamic image to describe the cultural construction of a natural space. For the development of the model see especially chaps. 2, 3 and 4 in *Homo Geographicus*, 27-126.

in turn can be questioned – and so the circuit continues. (97)

From this model we may define the Restoration spa – especially Epsom – as a cultural landscape in so far as its own existence is determined by meaning – literary and medical discourses – which in turn accounts for a whole repository of information about social behaviour. For Sack the meaning of a certain cultural landscape is determined by its nodal position in a network of places. This network of places is established on both mechanical and symbolic perceptions of distance and accessibility. This criterion will help us to discriminate among the spas and other topographical literary locales and even among the spas themselves. For the sake of our discussion, the distance between Epsom or Tunbridge and London and the possibility of covering that distance by public transportation emerge as two of the essential attributes of these two spas.

A clue to the cultural value of distance is provided by the anonymous *An Exclamation From Tunbridge And Epsom Against The Newfound Wells At Islington*, printed in London in 1684. The two spa-towns, in the first person, argue against the new well found on the outskirts of London voicing their advantages as

... staying out a Month or two, without being troubled with the peivish Yoak-fellow, save only on Saturday and Sunday Nights (on which you are sure to be very Sick) and all the rest of the Week as blyth as Batchellors, and free and uncontroled as the most absolute Monarches of the East, having nothing to doe, but Cajole the beleiving Fopp at Home with a few kind Lines, for a Supply of Cash, dictated by the obliging Miss or Gallant, to make the Sport more divertive. ‘Consider well all these Advantages of a remoter distance, consult your Interest, and abandon this upstart Haeresy of Flocking to Islington’.(1684: 2)

The “advantages of a remoter distance” indicate the complex relationship between London and its surrounding areas. London by 1675 was not just the City any more as its most immediate liberties had already been engulfed in the London conurbation. In this context of city growth, traditional symbolic dichotomies as those exploited by Steven Mullaney in *The Place of the Stage* prove too schematic, as the inside-outside relations multiply with the “promiscuous” growth of the city.⁴ As King James had already prognosticated in 1616: “With time England will only be London and the whole countrey be left waste” (Manley 1988: 349).⁵

The literary spas’ dependence on the metropolis may be explained largely by the new symbolic spatial relations determined by the growth of London. In *Epsom Wells* when Clodpate, “an immoderate hater of London” (DRAMATIS PERSONAE), lists the vices of the city, he advances the actions and characters we are to discover at Epsom:

CLODPATE: There’s pride, popery, folly, lust, prodigality, cheating knaves, and jilting whores; ... Ay, and cards and false dice, and quarrels, hectors and reform’d officers to borrow a crown, and beat a man that refuses it, or asks for’t again;

4. See his discussion esp. 1-25.

5. James I, speech in Star Chamber, 20 June 1616 in *The Political Works of James* (1918), ed. C.H. McIlwain. Cambridge, Harvard UP., 343. Quoted in Manley, 349.

besides, I'll sum you up the beastly pleasures of the best of ye.

WOODLY: What are those?

CLODPATE: Why, to sit up drunk till three a clock in the morning, rise at twelve, follow damn'd French fashions, get dress'd to go to a damn'd play, choke yourselves afterwards with dust in Hyde-Park, or with sea-coal in the town, flatter and fawn in the drawing room, keep your wench, and turn away your wife, Gods-ooks. (2000: 1.1.213-30)

As Lawrence Manley has argued, the image of London changed drastically during the 17th century “as the cultural facts of urban life began to be conceptually opposed to nature”, and this idea of the unnatural landscape incorporated images of chaotic growth and spiritual and body diseases (1988: 350).

The overcrowded city was also a source of contagion and the experience of the plague had helped to publicise the healthy atmosphere of the country spas. Although figures are not quite conclusive, by the second half of the 16th century the city contained three quarters of the population of the metropolis and the suburbs a quarter; by 1680 the situation was reversed. Defoe in his

Tour through the whole island of Great Britain also emphasises this perception of the capital when he describes it, in its “modern acceptation”, as a “vast mass of buildings” without boundaries: “Whither will this monstrous city then extend? and where must a circumvallation or communication line be placed?” (288). This unnatural growth and the assimilation of larger parts of the surrounding areas to its economic and symbolic concerns may explain the interactive relation between city images and the spa fashion.⁶ There was nothing new in this leaving the city behind, only the fact that the number of those who could do it had changed drastically and by doing so another symbolic line of discrimination started to blur. The plays and poems fed back into London society by privileging a visit to the spas; and by doing so, they raised expectations about certain usages of private time – traditionally linked to aristocratic practices – and, in this way, symbolically linked a frivolous visit to larger cultural constellations.

III

Some of the wells had been known since Classical times and others came into use during the Middle Ages, but it was during the 17th Century that a large number of wells were rediscovered or newly found. The pamphlet *A True and Exact Account of Sadlers Well* (1684) provides us with a few clues about the history of some spas. As the author reveals, the well “was famed before the Reformation for several extraordinary cures” – hence its old name “Holywell”. At the time it

6. In James Howell's *Londinopolis* (1658), this unnatural growth and its symbolic meaning is exemplified in two opposed images: “a judicious Forreiner (...) said that she [London] bore no proportion with the land, but might serve a Kingdom thrice as big, and that England may be rather said, to be in London, then London in England, which made some compare her to the spleen, whose over-swelling, make the rest of the body languish; but it might be answered, that London is rather like the stomach, which digest the wealth of the land, and after a good concoction, siperseth it again in wholsom nutriment to all parts” (406-7).

was frequented by friars from the Priory of Clarkenwell who “made the people believe that the vertues of the Waters proceeded from the efficacy of their Prayers” (1684:1).

The well was closed following the Reformation as it was thought to be a place attended by the “superstitious”; and within a few generations it had “by degrees it grew out of remembrance” (1684: 1). Then, after an accident, the place was rescued from oblivion and the medicinal properties of the mineralised waters discovered. In this sense, scientific discourse was the first to re-signify the old religious beliefs. The special qualities of the water was not to be attested by episcopal bulls but by chemical testing, and the friars who aided the effect of the waters with their prayers were replaced by an army of doctors, quacks and chemists. This narrative makes clear the essential role played by medical discourse in the construction of the spas as a cultural landscape and how, in fact, literary texts exploit its gaps in meaning for their own purpose.

Rowzee’s *Treatise of the nature and vertues of Tunbridge Water* (London, 1632) is probably the best guide to the medical interpretation of the wells. In his opening section, Rowzee deals broadly with classical antecedents. The author explains that Pliny had already listed a whole set of wells whose waters had wondrous effects: the fountain Crathis, procured whiteness, Sibaris, blackness. He also talks of two Springs in Baeotia by the river Orchomenus, the first strengthened memory; the second, caused oblivion; and later “A fountaine in Arcadia called Linus preserveth conception and hindreth aborsement, and on the other side, the river called Amphrisus maketh women barren” (1632: 23-4). After these references, the general idea is that mineral waters show nature’s paradoxical workings, its contradictions and diversity: “... diverse springs draw sometimes contrary faculties, ... and from hence it happeneth that oftentimes one & the same medicinable spring cureth divers diseases, which are either contrary one to another, or at least have but small affinitie together” (1632: 29). This paradoxical effect – attributed to the fermentation of the mineral components – “maketh it excellent for most diseases, and as it were a generall Panpharmacon” (1632:30).

These scientific considerations about the diversity of symptoms the waters could be used for were honestly believed by some people, and secured the social diversity of those who gathered in the wells; but this diversity enabled those who did not believe in those effects to go there just to take advantage of the resulting social freedom. By conjuring the image of the panpharmacon which is not to be taken as a panpharmacon, the spas are evoked as a place to be avoided on moral grounds but also extremely inviting.

This paradoxical reaction may be linked to the perception of the capital as disease. Through this metaphor, the spa acquired a pastoral value, as a place free from the contagion of the city. The efficacy of the waters, sanctioned by empiric science, had also another advantage for most city dwellers, they were cheap: “For those obstructions being stubborne ... which in their owne nature are not incurable; but onely remaine uncured, either because the Patient is not able to willing undergoe such a course of Physicke, ... or because hee loveth his purse too well. But these Waters bring no charges, and after one hath bene used a

little while to them, the taking of them is not troublesome at all" (1632: 40-1).

In spite of Rowzee's final denial of the waters' panpharmacon effect, the list of diseases they are recommended for is impressive enough. It seems that the denial is just a way to ensure medical control of a remedy which could be administered by anyone and for nearly every purpose. So medical control was recommended even before getting to the wells and, as it happened with fasting and soul cleansing before undertaking a pilgrimage to a holy site, medical treatises insisted on the preparations of the body for drinking the waters. The explanations about diet at the spas provide another clue to their construction as privileged sites for displaying new attitudes towards health. Rowzee explains the special meaning of the term "diet" – "besides meate and drinke" – includes "ayre, motion, and quiet, things retained and voyded, sleeping and watching and the passions of the minde" (1632: 65). The fact that the air at the spas was "pure and wholesome" connected them to an ongoing discussion about the effects of air in human health and also to the visible effects of pollution in the city. As Raines, one of the wits in *Epsom Wells*, comments, "for conversation is to the mind, as the air we live in is to the body: in the good we by degrees suck in health; and in the ill, diseases" (2000: 1.1.128-30). London's bad air makes Clodpate roar:

CLODPATE: Ud's bud, I go to London! I am almost sick at Epsom, when the wind sits to bring any of the smoke this way, and by my good will would not talk with a man that comes from thence till he hath air'd himself a day or two. (2000: 1.1.208-11)

Another medical attribute of the spas is their role as a place for joy -in spite of the fact that most people there would be sick. In the section devoted to the "Preparation of the body," Rowzee asserts: "of the passions of the minde, when we wished all such as come to the Water, to compose and frame themselves to mirth, and to leave all cares and melancholy at home" (1632: 65-6) This advice connects the effects of the water to one of the traditional cures for melancholy and adds another imaginary quality to them: the wells must be a place of mirth and fun in which everyday conflicts must be left at bay.

In *A Short Treatise of Metal and Mineral Waters (...)*, edited in London in 1684, that is 50 years after Rowzee, the same passage above is rewritten with some significant changes. To start with, the passage is not included in the preparations but in the directions after drinking the waters: "Having drank your daily quantity of Water, you will do well to walk, or stir up and down, and compose your self to Mirth with some of the Company; for all cares and contrary passions of the Mind and Melancholly must be left behind" (1684: 44). The restrictive effect of "some" presents the possibility of choosing among the company and there is also a new emphasis on the need to be in the wells with a special state of mind in order to obtain the benefits of the waters. The text constructs a fantasy of a place in which cares, contrary passions and melancholy can – for sure – be left behind.

This fantasy seems to come true in Defoe's description of Epsom in his *Tour through the whole island of Great Britain*. He notices that "we see nothing of business in the whole conversation of Epsome. Even the men of business, who are really so when in London ... yet here they look a if they had left all their London thoughts

behind them, and had separated themselves to mirth and good company; as if they came hither to unbend the bow of the mind, and to give themselves a loose to their innocent pleasures; I say, innocent, for such they may enjoy here, and such any man may make his being here, if he pleases" (1971: 169). By publicising the spas, medical texts – very much as the plays and poem – worked as an invitation to a visit but this also naturalised into the modern concept of leisure the idea that holiday resorts should provide help to cure melancholy by breaking the rhythms of everyday life in the city.

But medical discourse – as the wits satirise it – could also take a completely different stand and criticise the democratic use of the wells: "all must be moderate, and thus much for dyet which if minded, there would not be any need of taking such uncertain remedies as Mineral Waters which have certainly been the utter ruin of many thousands" (Prat 1684: 64). It seems that the sudden spread of this habit was regarded by some physicians as a threat, in the same way that the presence of the citizens was regarded as a shame by the gentlemen of the town. Nevertheless, these discourses did not manage to exercise the control they aimed at and the wells prospered as a place to go to.

IV

Re-signifying a place also requires a temporal frame to provide a certain time of the year with a special cultural value. The seasonal quality of the visit to the spa was explained in medical discourse rather ambiguously: "Concerning the season of the yeare, Sommer is the fittest ... and the chiefest moneths Iune, Iuly, August, and September)" (50-1), says Rowzee 1632. But the relationship between "summer time" and "fittest time" is not particularly clear, since he adds that "whensoever the weather is cleare and dry, the water is then best, as well in Winter as in Summer, yea in hard frostie whether the Water is commonly strongest ..." (51). In another treatise, the advice adds a note of common sense to the explanation: "for the season of the year, Summer is the best, when the weather is commonly settled, warm and dry ..." (Prat 1684: 41).

The literary texts offer some clearer hints to explain the specific cultural notions on work and rest time attached to this summer vacation. In *An Exclamation against Islington Wells*, Epsom and Tunbridge remember the good old days when they were always crowded saying:

Loretto was scarce haunted with such swarms of Pilgrims as our Health-restoring Plains, nor Rome more crowded in a Jubilee, than we were, from merry May till after the Dog-starr had done Barking, and the more important Negotiations of Bartoldom-Fair, called home our customers. (1684: 1)

Bartoldom Fair took place at the end of August – in traditional calendars the autumn started around this time. If we compare this reference to those quoted in the medical treatises we notice that the temporal frame here is modelled on business time, that is leisure time is made dependent on the working schedule of city traders. Unlike the annual work and rest cycle of rural societies – controlled by natural rhythms – life in the spas is regulated by the rhythms of trade and

commerce. Epsom – or Tunbridge – time was conditioned by an utilitarian conception of time -time as a physical entity that needs to be efficiently used.⁷ By regulating personal duties to a fixed temporal schedule, the mercantile calendar also opened to the idea of leisure time; that is, a time fit to encompass those activities which were not essential for economic welfare. These activities – in spite of their flimsy nature – contributed to the public image of those individuals and ended up affecting their welfare. When Edward Ward opens his poem *A Walk to Islington: with a Description of New Tunbridge – Wells and Sadler’s Music – House* (1699) saying: “In Holiday Time, when the Ladies of London/ Walk out with their Spouses (...)” (3), he is naturalising the idea that “Holiday time” is not one single day appointed by the liturgical calendar but a larger span of private time in summer that could be used for personal purposes. This was especially the case with women, who seemed to enjoy in the spas an unusual control in their own accessibility.

From the attendance at a place for the sick – a none-too-distant image from the pilgrims’ visit to holy places – to annual attendance at the spas as described by Defoe, we can attest the consolidation of an emerging fashion: “this place seems adapted wholly to pleasure, so the town is suited to it; ... that the people who come out of their confined dwellings in London, may have air and liberty, suited to the design of country lodgings” (1971: 169). Probably the plays and poems written during the period prior to Defoe’s account played an essential role in popularising the connections between the body healing effects of the waters and the enjoyment of leisure time.

V

Once we have determined the spatial and temporal parameters signified by the wells, we can start looking more closely into the activities performed there. The link I would suggest between medical discourse and the plays and poems is the purging effects of the waters, an aspect that can be read in connection with the social medley of the wells and the display of female and male desire.

Activity at the wells started early in the morning: “when the Sunne is an houre more or lesse, high, is the fittest time to drinke the water”. According to Rowzee 1632, the reason was that “when the Sunne beginneth to be of force, it doth attract some of the minerall spirits, and the water looseth some of its strength” (53-4). In the literary texts the reasons are normally quite different: both for women and men this was a rare opportunity to see each other in public “Drest Dishabillee”, and this liberal outfit could always lead to some outrageous scenes: for instance, in Richard Ames’ “The Three-penny Academy”,

(...) Then a Young Sempstress of th’Exchange
 In an Undress so loose and Strange,
 that she was thought by every Man,
 to come from China or Japan. (1691: 6)

7. On the concept of utilitarian philosophy of time see Zerubavel, 54-64.

For the gallants – the male poetic “I” of most poems and characters such as Tom Fairlove in Rawlins’ *Tunbridge-Wells*, or Bevil and Raines in Shadwell’s *Epsom Wells* – a bad night was normally the cause for taking the waters, thus transforming medical arguments into a sort of afterhours practice. “Fev’rish and Hot by Drinking Claret /...I left my Bed by Six i’t’h’ Morning” (1691: 1), says Ames; and Rochester: “At five this morn, when Phoebus raised his head/ From Thetis’ lap, I raised my self from bed,/ And mounting steed, I trotted to the waters ...” (1968: 1-3).

Another important aspect of drinking the waters was their ingestion, which should take place within a short time, and demanded that “their naturall heate should be something awaked and excited, because then the water will be the better attracted, and have the more speedie passage” (Rowzee 1632: 54). Hence while drinking, after every glass, or every two or three glasses, Rowzee recommends the taking of caraway confits, coriander seed, and other herbs to help the digestion and passage of the water and also a pipe or two of Tobacco. He also recommends exercise but – he says – “I utterly dislike it if it be too violent, as running, leaping, jumping, as some in wantonness use to doe” (1632: 55). Once more, medical directions did not prevent people from doing just the opposite: in fact, *Epsom Wells* opens with a scene in which one of the characters asserts: “CUFF: How the white aprons scuttle, and leap, and dance yonder; some of ‘em are dancing the hey” (2000: 1.1.20-1).

This opening would evoke in the audience an ideal situation of freedom and joy but also of “wantonness”. An association which would be even more obvious when reporting or portraying the passing effect of the waters. At this point we must consider what Gail Kern Paster has called “a semiology of excretion”, that is a way to implicate “an ostensibly natural behavior [like bodily functions of evacuation] ... in a complex structure of class and gender differences” (1993: 34-5).

The purging effect of the waters and their use as a panpharmacon introduced several images of democratic levelling in the spas. The first I will consider is the public performance of evacuation. The desired effect of the water was –and I quote Rowzee again – that “the greater part of those that drinke of it, are purged by stoole, and some by vomit, as well as by urine” (1632: 35-6). This gave to the wells a rather peculiar aspect. Schellinks, the Dutch visitor at Epsom in 1663, reported that the waters “work extraordinary well, with various funny results *-probatum est*. Gentlemen and ladies have here separate meeting places, putting down sentinels in the shrub in every direction” (Exwood and Lehman 1993: 88).

Schellinks’s account seems to agree with several other seventeenth-century reports that confirm the method employed at Epsom and other similar spas: people drank as many glasses – rather, pints – of mineral water as possible, after which they had to walk, jump, dance or even ride on a horse, so that the water might «pass well», leading to vomiting – especially if the person had been drunk the previous night – or simply «evacuating». Epsom wells were over half a mile away from the town, which meant that the company had to walk for 15-20 minutes in order to reach their lodgings. This would have been somewhat difficult

for those with urgent bodily needs, so the purgative effect of the waters was usually achieved among the bushes near the wells; hence the separate areas for men and women, and the convenience of those «sentinels in the shrub.» Pepys, who visited Epsom in 1663, wrote in his diary that «we drunk each of us two pots and walked away – it being very pleasant to see how everybody turns up his tail, here one and there another, in a bush, and the women in their Quarters the like» (26 July 1663).

The literary texts naturalize this sight by stressing the lack of prudery in talking about the purge, as happens in this fragment from *A poem on the New Wells at Islington* (1684):

Here you may see Spewing by your side,
 A City Coxcomb by his Country Bride.
 How does your Waters pass to Day? says Jenny,
 I've drank six Pints that are well worth a Guiney;
 They come so freely from me, and so Cool,
 I vow to you this is the seventh Stool.
 With this Discourse they pass'd away the time,
 And wash away their nasty Filth and Slime. (1684: 2)

The “changing threshold of embarrassment and shame” -in Gail Paster’s words- varies from text to text. For instance in the pamphlet *Flos Ingenii vel Evacuatio Discriptionis. Being an Exact Description of Epsam, and Epsam Wells*, published in 1674, scatology is used as a rhetorical device for burlesque and as an instrument for social levelling. While London is a place for “closing” secrets, the spas are the place to make them open: “The Heath or Common on which the Well stands, is a place contra di stinkt to Hide-Park, for here many secrets are disclosed”(1674: 165).

This gaze upon the voiding body re-inscribes old concepts of the grotesque on a new environment, and by doing so they assimilate retrospective carnivalesque images of class confusion into modern concepts of leisure time.

And this they doe with the more confidence because there is none there that can tell tails they are so many. When the water drinker are in a Body on the Common as sometimes they are postur'd you would take them to be the Representatives of the Rump Parliament. How different soever they are in their judgements they meet there with one Consent. There are none idle there, but all at their Business. The Souldier he is presenting, and giving fire. The Phisician casting of his Water, the Apothecary at his Clister, the Lawyer waiting for his motion, the Archer nocking of his Arrows; the Gramarian at his *Ars in presenti*, the Musitian at his strain, but none of the sweetest, the Mathematician erecting his Telescope, the Seaman cleansing his Scupper hole, so that you would take it for a kind of Cacademy ... And as the silly Bustard ... thinks if his head be hid in a bush or brake, his whole body is invisible too, thus these water drinkers, so their Tayles be hid they care not if their heads, and all the rest of their bodies be seen. (1674: 165)

This description in *Flos Ingenii* stresses the levelling aspect of the grotesque as the purging effects make all equal in their imposture. If we agree with Stanley Cavell that shame is “the specific discomfort produced by the sense of being

looked at” and the response to shame “as the desire to cover up not your deed but yourself,”⁸ then we have also to agree that the evacuating practices at Epsom were to be regarded as perfectly shameless, contradicting the new rules of conduct that was beginning to influence the behaviour of upper-class men and women. In many ways, this shows the liminality of the period as regards the construction of new male and female models of behaviour.

However, in spite of the proclaimed universal effect of the waters, it is generally female purging that comes under the scrutiny of the male poetic “I” in the literary texts. The speaker -a literary persona who likens himself to a peripatetick philosopher- ends up in all the poems in the ladies’ private areas:

But walking on with gentle pace,
And musing thoughts that oft do clog us,
I stepped into the women’s boghouse:
Where four or five together sat
Like Hunted Hares upon the squat. (*A Mornings Ramble* 1684:1)

In all cases the women react violently. However this reaction from the incontinent females, far from deterring the gallants, seems to incite their rhetorical incontinence, and eventually, in a rather peculiar example of mock heroic, they may adorn with mythological attributes a ladies’ miscalculations in her hasty run to the wells:

With that she Curs’t the fatal Hour,
And trudg’d away to Secret Bower.
...
And e’re she reach’t the place design’d,
As Cotton of his Dido feigned,
A Yellow Aromatick Matter,
Dropt down her Heels comix’t with Water. (*A Mornings Ramble* 1684: 1)

This type of scene is frequent in spa literature and mirrors common beliefs about women’s incontinence: on the one hand, it connected to the humoural theory of the female body which argued that women, being of colder temperament, were supposed to have urine lighter in color and greater in quantity than that of healthy male adults. This excess of fluid was even more obvious in the cultural landscape of the spa and its depiction another form of enhancing curiosity and desire in the audience. The development of sexuality is not exclusively linked in any of its stages to one single erogenous area; on the contrary these areas are continuously re-signified to provide substance for new fantasies: the orifice -the anus, the mouth, the vagina- is self-referential and any of the stages may be evoked by one of them. The purging effects of the wells allow scopic pleasure to enter this fantasy-place by locating the male gaze on the narrow realm of privacy allowed in the wells. If we consider that in the literary texts female characters prevail on their male counterparts, this male infantile pleasure in the evocation of the female anus seems to be a useless male revenge on women or if you like

8. Quoted in Paster 123.

the necessary scenario to project those fantasies.

This infantile voyeurism accounts in many cases for the lack of success in the sexual adventures undertaken by the male characters, as it can be seen in this section of *A Walk to Islington*:

By this time it happen'd, without Pill or Potion,
Or help of the Waters, my Breech had a motion;
Left Doxie alone, and the Place chanc'd to chuse,
Assign'd for the Laxative Ladies to use;
Not knowing my Error, I shut to the Door,
In order to do what I hinted before;
And who should come running immediately after,
But a pretty young Damsel to scatter her water;
Who being in haste, had the scurvie mishap
To thrust open the door, and clap Arse in my Lap:
Ads-wounds, said I, Lady Fair, as I am a Christian,
I never deserv'd from your Sex to be pissed on. (Ward 1699:10)

The Lady runs out and then, when he recalls the situation, the scatological-erotic connection comes into focus:

A curse on the Hovel, if lighter't had been,
Bless my Eyes! What a delicate sight had I seen?
Her person denoted her on such a Genus,
I dare to engage she'd a Bum like a Venus:
So soft, that I thought, I for ever cou'd feed-on
Such forbidden fruit, like an Adam in Eden. (Ward 1699:10)

As I have already suggested, in the literary texts the natural place of the spa is a feminized landscape open to male scrutiny. The Epsom Downs appear in *Flos Ingenii* “like a bare Buttock to be lasht by the Describer of it” (1674: 164). And a topographical description of Tunbridge Wells – “Two small springs contiguous together, about some four miles Southwards from the Towne of Tunbridge in Kent, from which they have their name” (Rowzee 1632: 34-5) –, can be transformed in a bawdy song into a description of the wells as female genitalia:

Joans was the first hole was found out,
my Ladies hole next after,
yet when you taste, you are in doubt
which is the better water:
But so it is, my Ladies hole
doth stand so near to Joan,
that if the people be too rude,
they may break both holes into one. (*On the New-found Wells* 1676:16)

But women are something other than the objects of gendered gaze in the wells. Scientific discourse on medicinal waters substantiated the idea that paradox stands at the heart of nature but this paradoxical nature was particularly clear in the female body. “Yet must I not forget in the behalfe of women, to tell them that there is nothing better against barrennesse and to make them fruitfull ...” (Rowzee 1632: 47-8).

But, if it was “the property of all equivocal agents to varie their operations according to the varietie of their objects” (Rowzee 1632: 41), then the waters could also aid contraception. Hence this was the place where unwanted pregnancies could be more easily sorted out due, among other reasons, to the presence of midwives in the wells. In both cases female control of their reproductive lives figures out as a threat – rather more imaginary than real. This threat may be also linked to two other popular images: child bearing as disease and the belief that instant urination after copulation could help both as a contraceptive and against venereal diseases.

The literary texts also scrutinized this paradox about the procreative and abortive effects of the waters. The emphasis on their panpharmacon effect on the female body ends up by portraying the wells as a place for female regulation-disregulation:

Some drink the Waters to promote Child-bearing,
Others to keep the Body in good wearing:
Green-sickness Girls, they in whole Troops do come,
To wash away the Dirt they’ve eat at Home:
Others to Purge away unlawful Issues,
Come in their Silks, their Sattins, and their Tissues.

(*A Poem on the New Wells* 1684:)

This paradoxical effect is also noted by Kick and Cuff in the opening scene of *Epsom Wells*:

KICK: Many a London strumpet comes to jump and wash down her unlawful issue, to prevent shame; but more especially charges.
CUFF: Others come hither to procure conception.
KICK: Ay pox, that’s not from the waters, but something else that shall be nameless.
(2000: 1.1.22-7)

As Kick points out, male and female lust provides a rather more credible interpretation of the medical paradox. The dramatic performance of this “nameless” thing involves, in many cases, male prostitution. This practice was related to the myth of sexual potency attributed to low-class male bodies (and this included rural and exotic foreigners):

I entred in, and viewed the Place,
With every squeamish Breeding Face,
Of City Wives, who thither come,
Whilst their poor Cuckolds wait at Home.
...
When they alas have no Design,
Only to tittle off their Wine:
And treat those Brawny Lads they Hire,
To do the Drudgery they require. (*A Mornings Ramble* 1684: 1)

In *Tunbridge Wells* (1678), Owmuch, “a Gamster”, makes his money procuring help for childless women. In the following exchange, Owmuch talks to Parret, Mrs Paywell’s confidante, an alderman’s wife who, according to the *Dramatis*

personae, “implores more of her husband estate in lewdness than in charity”:

OWMUCH: Now you speak reason. Ladies come down here for the common cause; and can you imagine that desires can be satisfied without their common remedy? Waters are but waters, Mrs. Parret, there goes more to the composition of an Heir than minerals.

PARRET: Now you come to me; and I've an Aldermans wife in chase to answer your full wishes, who wanting the conveniences her Sex requires, is kindly willing to spare the decrepit years of her Husband and to mannage his Cash to his ease, and her own satisfaction. (Rawlins 1678: 5)

VI

The question of appearances and social status is obviously at stake in the spas and we must be careful when reading this evidence. The main target of satire in these texts is social medley, normally described in the same terms as the purging effect of the waters; this medley introduces -to the dislike of the gallants in the plays and the poetic “I” of the poems- a reciprocity that could endanger social hierarchy. As Richard Ames puts it:

Of either Sex whole Droves together,
To see and to be seen flock thither,
To Drink, and not to Drink the Water,
And here promiscuously they Chatter. (1691: 3)

The comic potential of social and sexual promiscuity is particularly obvious when we get to the lodgings of the visitors. Pepys, Schellink and also the plays and poems make a point about the lack of convenient lodgings and the fact that people had to share rooms in a house. In *An Exclamation* we find an amusing picture of these lodgings:

Happy were they that could get shelter in our Illustrious Pallaces, covered with immortal thatch and delicately hung with the spinstry of Arachne, Vulgarly called Cloath of Cob-web. Three Families not seldom dwelt in one Chamber scarce so big as a Taffity Tart; and without any superstitious witness about difference of Sex, lovingly pigg'd in together (1684: 1).

This physical closeness stands as a visual signpost of social and sexual accessibility, one of the main features of this cultural landscape. The social medley viewed from the perspective of the gallant is a transformed version of the grotesque company of the carnivalesque performances of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. For Rochester, the wells are: “The rendezvous of fools, buffoons, and praters, / Cuckolds, whores, citizens, their wives and daughters” (1968: 4-5). But in spite of their difference, the social types that flocked to take the waters are in fact mixed, showing in this way another paradoxical aspect of the well:

But ne'er could conventicle, play, or fair
For a true medley, with this herd compare.
Here lords, knights, squires, ladies and countesses,

Chandlers, mum-bacon women, sempstresses
 Were mixed together, nor did they agree
 More in their humors than their quality. (1968: 80-5)

In this case the object of Rochester's satire is revealed only at the end. The spa becomes a distorted mirror which shows the true essence of humankind. The diversity of fools and ridiculous characters, "the social medley", shows, according to Rochester, the squalid nature of humankind:

Bless me! thought I, what thing is man, that thus
 In all his shapes, he is ridiculous?
 Ourselves with noise of reason we do please
 In vain: Humanity's our worst disease. (1968: 166-9)

In other texts, the image of the social medley emphasizes the levelling effect of the visit to the wells by explicitly commenting on the sexual, social and ideological differences among the visitors:

We have been frequented by the Noble and the Gay, the fine and the fair, the roaring Fopps and the still, sly formall Coxcombs; the Swaggerers in Buff, the venerables in Satin; the Flaming Lasses and the simpering Dames, those that help others; and those that help themselves, the wits and the jilts, the fond Husbands and the more foolish maintainers, the miserly Fathers and the generous Sons, and the free sporting Daughters, and the procuring Cozens, the Hectoring Bullies, and the snuffling Precisians; the long Hair and the overgrown Ears; Whigg and Tory, Trimmer and all, were every Mothers son, our constant Customers. (*An Exclamation* 1684: 1)

The wells accept everybody as a customer as far as they are ready to engage in the strategies of negotiation which make possible coexistence. In this sense, courtship proves the most efficient tool for social intercourse and consequently the potential dangers of its control by women's will is also foregrounded. The hegemonic position of women in the literary spa is somehow naturalised in so far as the wells are viewed as a place devoted to mitigating the concerns of everyday life – among other aspects, married life. But the danger may also come not simply from their irresponsible appeal to pleasure but even from a more dangerous inclination to think and to act.

In this sense, radical female control of courtship at the spa can transform it into a threatening landscape for male integrity. In *The Revengeful Lady* (1679), the story opens at the wells with the introduction of a Gentleman who "wanted the government of the Tongue" (Poor-Robin 1679: 1). There he meets a "young Lady, beautiful in her Person, and pleasant in her Conversation" (1679: 1). After a first meeting – and a failed try at her virtue- he accepts the rules of courtship fixed by the lady. Once he has gained her trust he invites her to play a game in which he ties her hands with ribbons and then – "the Story says she cryed out Murder, but withal, that she Died only in the phrase of modern Poets" (1679: 3). After copulation he runs to tell a friend his adventure; but this friend, being secretly in love with the lady, reveals the whole story to her. Then the lady starts planning her revenge: "after pretending a greater fondness to her Gallant for the

sake of what had past" (1679: 5). One day she proposes a game: she will tie him this time but instead of ribbons she uses garters to fast him soundly and she also ties his feet to a bush: "The Fellow all this while pleased with the Conceptions he had of the amorous Stratagem, lay stock still" (1679: 5). Once she has placed him in this position she talks to him "in a more unpleasant dialect than perhaps became either her Sex or quality" (1679: 5). Then she becomes the revenger for all her sex and after withdrawing "a very sharp Pen-knife", she suggests: "I should make a Capon of you" (1679: 6). Once she has emasculated the gent, she sends for the doctor as a final act of humiliation. This "Ironical Baggage", as she is called in the text, manages to get her revenge and neither law nor man seems to be able to stop her. This popular romance presents an extreme picture of the potential dangers for male desire when confronted by female will and it certainly exemplifies some of the male fabrications about gender levelling.

VII

The texts I have been commenting on present a wide range of images in which gender and social conflict are reinterpreted in relation to the special conditions of accessibility created in the wells. I have tried to disclose some of the discursive frames in which these images become legible. The loop movement proposed by David Sack has allowed me to draw the discontinuous line of interpretations that the visit to the spas might have provoked in Restoration theatre audiences and the reading public. From the semiotically safe grounds of medical discourse, the spas emerged during the Restoration as a particular site in which concepts of healing and leisure time could be re-signified in terms of wider social concerns. If we accept that culture is an ongoing production of social meanings, it is clear that the wells occupied a very special position in the social re-enactment of hierarchy and control in Restoration England. They were places especially suited to showing cultural and social institutions under the disturbing eye of parody and satire.

The emergent consumerism promoted new rituals directly connected to bourgeois practices of time and space. The visit to the wells was one of these new rituals and the conditions of "being there", as they are shown in the plays and poems, were an uneasy truce in which each social or sexual party respected, in so far as possible, the position of the other. This seems a necessary requirement for the existence of both commodity exchange and a culturally mediated version of the war of the sexes, such as we find in the literary texts. According to Charles H. Hinnant, "this form of socialising is antithetical in every respect to the moral basis of courtships and marriages that are dictated by an aristocratic, courtly code of values" (1995: 82).

The spatial and temporal co-presence of subjects previously separated by geographical and historical disjunctures, and whose trajectories now intersect, foreground the interactive, improvisational dimensions of these encounters so easily ignored or suppressed by diffusionist accounts of conquest and domination. This "contact" perspective emphasises how the subjects in the spas are constituted

in and by their relations to each other in spite of their asymmetrical relations to power. The emergence of the spa as a “contact zone” can also be connected to the new symbolic and economic relation between the metropolis and its surrounding areas. I have argued that the cultural landscape of the spa privileged the scrutiny of city life practices characterised by its liminality, either in terms of gender or social position. This symbolic dependence can be observed in the connection made in *An Exclamation* between the prosperity of the spa-towns and social stability in London. The wells complain that their crisis started “First Oates plot for two or three years frightened away our Roman Communicants ... And then the Whiggs must go Plott and so wee lose that party too” (1684: 2). As this reference to the period 1678-1682 makes clear, the spas could operate as a levelling ground for social difference only when ideological confrontation in the City was not too violent or engulfing.

This may help us to link the spas to the emergence of contemporary ideas about the individual’s property of free time and how to spend it. The concept of vacation time observed in the wells differed from the perception of continued leisure of the powerful and the Sunday rest of both the bourgeoisie and the manufacturing classes. Although it retained some of the cyclical characteristics of other festive periods of the year, the people visiting the spas travelled there on individual reasons and consequently for their own interests. This interest was originally related to health care but soon some particular aspects of the scientific discourse on the waters, caught the people’s imagination: namely, the sex-purge homology. The waters enhanced men’s sexual appetite; for women, it helped barrenness, chlorosis, and other related diseases; for both, it might be a practical treatment for venereal diseases.

Although the literary works presented to their audience a fantasy situation rather than one necessarily experienced, it helped to refocus satire. Affectation and social travestism and the whole casuistry of marriage targeted conflicts which included both the upper classes and the emerging citizenship. According to John S. Pipkin, during the Restoration period “the vanguard of an emerging non-aristocratic urban elite had to develop mores to deal with their betters at Court, in theaters, and in the places of public displays in which they were increasingly tolerated” (1990: 155). This awareness of the new central position of the citizens’ agency in the cultural landscape of the spas can be perceived in Sedley’s prologue to *Epsom Wells*, when following the conventional request for a positive reaction of the audience, he sketches the ambiguous position of the elite towards the city’s symbolic appropriation of the wells – or the theatre pit:

’Tis not fair play, that one for his half crown

Shou’d judge, and rail, and damn for half the town.
 But do your worst; if once the pit grows thin,
 Your dear lov’d masks will hardly venture in.
 Then w’are reveng’d on you, who needs must come
 Hither, to shun your own dull selves at home.
 But you kind burghers who had never yet,
 Either your heads or bellies full of wit,

Our poet hopes to please; but not too well;
 Nor wou'd he have the angry critics swell.
 A moderate fate best fits his humble mind,
 Be neither they too sharp, nor you too kind. (2000: 19-30)

The relevance of the poetic “I” perspective in this construction should not be overlooked. As Charles Hinnant has pointed out: “The town gallant should be recognized as a signal precursor of the emergent consumerism ... what unites gallant and tradesman in a hierarchy of getting and spending is an acquisitiveness which is associated not with property ownership but with the pleasurable consumption of objects, persons and experiences”(1995: 79). The gallant’s role as a detached consumer is nevertheless challenged when the literary generic convention demands a change in the persona of the poetic “I”. In those cases, in spite of their privileged position, they have to acknowledge and come to terms with two traditional affected patients of their gaze: women and social inferiors.

In these texts the nature of the spa as contact zone materialises in negotiating consumption at leisure time.⁹ If comedy works to uncover the metaphoric and symbolic undertones of this consumption, we can understand better the relevance of the purging effect of the waters and the presentation of sexual and social promiscuity as part of the new concept of leisure time displayed at the wells. The popularisation of the spa and its interpretation as a place for renewal, an imaginary site to escape from everyday conflicts – two favourite topics in the dialectics of vacation – installed them progressively in the citizens’ imagination as a privileged site for social and gender levelling. As this idea took hold, a new stage in its spatial configuration emerged.

The loop movement that we have tried to draw leads us into the urban development of the wells and the spa-towns during the 18th century. In this remodelled spa, architectural design tried to fulfil the different requirements of leisure and health care providing a suitable urban frame for enjoying the advantages of personal accessibility, without the conflictive ambiguities that the poor conditions of the spa favoured during the Restoration. But that is an altogether different cultural landscape and the loop movement that this new site might engender, the topic for a different article.

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9. The concept of “contact zone” is an attempt to invoke the spatial and temporal co-presence of subjects previously separated by geographical and historical disjunctures, and whose trajectories intersect. A “contact” perspective emphasises how subjects are constituted in and by their relations

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to each other. It stresses copresence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices, often within radical asymmetrical relations of power. For a full development of the concept in the context of postcolonial studies see M. L. Pratt 1992: *Imperial eyes. Travel writing and transculturation*.