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"A Good Mind, Well Stored": Medicine, Society, Literature, and Sensibility in the Journal of Abigail May, 1800

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**“A GOOD MIND, WELL STORED”:
MEDICINE, SOCIETY, LITERATURE,
AND SENSIBILITY IN THE JOURNAL OF
ABIGAIL MAY, 1800**

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of History
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by

Thomas A. Chambers

1994

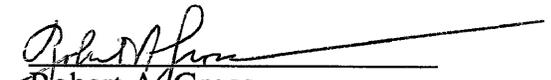
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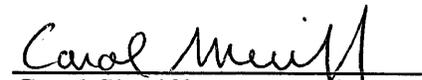
Master of Arts


Thomas A. Chambers

Approved, May 1994


Robert A. Gross


Chandos M. Brown


Carol Sheriff

DEDICATION

For my parents,
whose love and support have made all that I have achieved possible.

And for Roger Dechame,
may his spirit and love of history carry on.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Acknowledgments.....	v
Abstract.....	vi
Introduction.....	2
Chapter I: Illness and the Ballston Cure.....	5
Chapter II: Seduction and Sensibility.....	25
Chapter III: Literary Imitation and Self-Construction.....	54
Bibliographical Appendix: Abby's List.....	71
Bibliography.....	74
Vita.....	80

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My parents, James and Joanne Chambers, also merit special appreciation for their support, both financial and spiritual, of my undergraduate and graduate education. Without them, I would not be where I am today. Finally, fondest thanks to Anne Elizabeth Ward, whose keen eye found nearly every grammatical and typographical error in the text (any that remain are due to my own stubbornness). She also offered confidence and friendship in the moments when I doubted the completion of this thesis. It is to Anne that I offer my humblest thanks and love.

ABSTRACT

This essay studies the letters of Abigail May, a twenty-four year old woman who journeyed to the fashionable world of Ballston Spa, New York during the summer of 1800. It traces the illness that threatened her health, the society in which she found herself, and her reading and writing.

Abigail May found the contrived world of the spa to be a dangerous, exciting place. To preserve her virtue and refinement, she accumulated a “store” of readings and ideas that she hoped would serve her well. As she confronted her declining health, the numerous men who courted her, and the constrictions that society placed on a single woman, Abigail May discovered that her “store” did not suffice. The cultural assumptions and prescriptions of the American early national period failed to provide solutions. Ultimately, Abigail May was the only person who could determine or assuage her fate.

**“A GOOD MIND, WELL STORED”:
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INTRODUCTION

Abigail May, a twenty four year-old woman, set out in May of 1800 to take the waters at the popular and fashionable spa of Ballston in northern New York State. As the daughter of a wealthy family, she enjoyed the comforts and amusements of a resort for the rich and famous. Accompanied by her mother and younger brother, Abby hoped that the mineral waters that bubbled from the ground would cure the nerve disorder that was crippling her left hand. By the end of August she resigned herself to accepting that the water cure had failed, and so she returned home and died soon thereafter.

While at Ballston, Abby May wrote a detailed account of her experiences and emotions. She covered a broad range of topics, from the bitter taste of the spring water to the intentions of her many male suitors to ruminations on her writing style and the authors of the time. Each morning Abby sat down and diligently recorded the events and scenes she had experienced and seen. After two or three entries were completed, she would bundle the pages together and send them to her sister Lucretia in Boston, either by the mail or by a trusted friend bound for her hometown. Lucretia then assembled the letters and shared them with other family members. Her letters home at first chronicled her life at the fashionable spa, but quickly became Abby's outlet for addressing the awkward and unfamiliar situation in which she lived. A single woman among numerous males of the most refined (and unscrupulous) manners, Abby negotiated her way through the complicated maze of gender relations and courtship in the late eighteenth century. Her health was failing at the same time, and she was often in a gloomy and morbid mood; however, Abby overcame these hardships to cultivate and preserve her own persona and refinement. Abby believed that her own efforts to build a "good mind, well stored" would enable her to survive the challenges and dangers spa society posed.

This essay traces Abby's attempts to furnish and maintain her "store." Chapter 1, "Illness and the Ballston Cure," studies Abby's illness, her search for a remedy for her disease, and the religious ideology that explained and reconciled Abby to her fate. Chapter 2, "Seduction and Sensibility," discusses the social world at Ballston, the rakes and coquettes who threatened innocents like Abby, gender differences and conflicts, and Abby's attempts to preserve her virtue and refinement. Finally, Chapter 3, "Literary Imitation and Self-Construction," explores Abby's reading and writing, the source of her books, the models she imitated, the politics of women's reading in the early national period, and Abby's place in the scholarship of that time. In conclusion, I argue that Abigail May constructed and maintained her own virtue, refinement, and individuality while facing her illness and the dangers of spa society, all within the cultural constraints of her gender, class, and mentalité. Her summer at Ballston proved a triumph of her individual will, intelligence, and virtue. She may be only a single, obscure woman in a small New England town, but her experience speaks volumes about the culture of her time.

In quoting from Abby's journal, I have attempted to stay as near to the original as possible. I retained her sometimes inventive spelling and made grammatical changes only when punctuation made sentences or phrases unintelligible. I omitted brackets in these cases in order to simplify reading.

In the winter after Abby's journey her sister Lucretia copied the letters into two notebooks and added her own introduction. These two volumes were later donated to the New York State Historical Association in Cooperstown, New York by Margaret Roys, Abigail May's great-grand-niece. The original letters reside, as part of the May-Goddard Family Papers, in the Schlesinger Library at Radcliffe College in Cambridge, Massachusetts. One of Abby's descendents, Robert Morse May, donated them in 1963 and 1964. I have consulted the original manuscripts at the Schlesinger Library, but have

based pagination and citations on a typed transcript housed at the New York State Historical Association.

ILLNESS AND THE BALLSTON CURE

Upon arriving at Ballston Spa, New York in the summer of 1800, Abigail May was not impressed with what she saw. The waters of the spa attracted the sick of all kinds, all hoping for a miraculous recovery. Despite the spa's supposed curative powers, Abby remarked that "We all make wry faces at the waters, I confess tis strange to me, any one can like them. I should as soon fall in love with a dose of salts, and antimony." The spa was a long journey from her home in Boston. To reach it, Abby bounced along the rutted stage roads of Massachusetts, crossed the Connecticut River, traversed the Berkshire Mountains, ferried the Hudson River, and rode over the sandy flats north of Albany during her five-day journey of nearly two hundred miles. There seemed little reason to come to Ballston, yet she and hundreds of others like her made the trek. These people believed in the physical and spiritual curative powers of the spa.

Taking the waters was popular in colonial America as early as 1669, when Bostonians frequented the nearby Lynn Red Spring. Stafford Springs, Connecticut rose to prominence as a resort in 1766, just one year before Sir William Johnson, the British Indian Agent in New York's Mohawk River Valley, was carried to the springs at Ballston, seeking relief from an old wound. The popularity of taking the waters at various spas expanded as prominent doctors found them to be "safely and successfully drunk in many cases," particularly for those ailments due to "inactivity and a sedentary life... or from excessive and free living." Others journeyed to the spas for less salubrious reasons. The wealthy "sought that prized conjunction—restoration of health and relief from ennui." Thrown together in a rural hamlet where few of these strangers knew each other, the

visitors, who came from the elite of American society, combined to create a community based on a search for health and amusement.¹

In an era of rudimentary medical knowledge, each patient played an active role in his or her own treatment and cure. If the waters had a “disagreeable flavourality,” their effects were no worse than those of other therapies of the day.² Abby chose the Ballston cure because she hoped it would heal her crippled left hand. She exercised personal agency in seeking a cure for her illness, not only at the spa, but with other types of treatment as well. When her health faltered, she turned to the values that offered her comfort; these shaped Abby’s approach to her cure and her spiritual response to her failing health. Abby’s letters home reveal the mind of a young woman choosing from the many types of therapeutics of her day, supported by the religious and literary writings she knew.

People like Abby selected from among the various therapies available at the time. In her time the rituals of the water cure became a product marketed to the wealthy classes of the young republic. Choices among a variety of therapies and medicines had to be made, all in the belief that a rigorous, sound treatment would cure the patient. Many who sought a cure believed that physical regeneration sparked spiritual rebirth. Abigail May encountered this emerging commercial, secular world during her visit to Ballston in 1800.

Abigail May, accompanied by her mother-chaperone, arrived at Aldridge’s Hotel “before sun-set” on Sunday, May 25, 1800. Abby and her mother arose early the next morning and discovered that “in the room under us is a Woman from German-Flatts, with a child that is truly a pitiable object — tis four years old, but never walk’d a step, and is continually on the twitch... there is also a brother of the woman’s here who is troubled

¹ Carl Bridenbaugh, “Baths and Watering Places in Colonial America,” William and Mary Quarterly 3:2, 3d Ser., (April 1946), 152-153, 168; Edward Grose, Centennial History of the Village of Ballston Spa (Ballston Spa, New York: Ballston Journal, 1907), 65-66; Grace Swanner, Saratoga: Queen of Spas (Utica, New York: North Country Books, 1988), 103.

² Journal of Abigail May [JAM], May 26, 1800, p. 11; May 24, p. 2; June 3, p. 20. The original letters are in the May-Goddard Family Papers at the Schlesinger Library of Radcliffe College. I am working from a typed transcript from the New York State Historical Association in Cooperstown, New York.

with Epileptic fits.” In meeting her neighbors, Abby discovered an encyclopedia of illnesses: “Numbers daily drink the waters for Salt Rheum, Schropila, Rheumatism, and various other disorders — and seem to feel a reverential surety of relief.” Despite these hopes “disease and death continually stare them in the face.”³ The spa did not appear to be a pleasant place.

Like all of the spa visitors, Abby came to take the waters. She hoped to recover like “Major Kiezes at Saratoga Springs, who told me he came there about 4 weeks ago — with his crutches — and so weak he could not ride above ten miles a day. — he now skips about without help — and rides on horseback here and back again without fatigue.” If only she could submit to the rigors of the Ballston cure as the Major had.⁴

While at the spa, Abby complained of “the most distressing pains in my back &ccc [which] made me very sober — I also thought I perceived an unusual irritation in my nervous system---while trying to get to sleep at night, [as well as] such frequent and violent starts and twitches, as really alarm’d me.” To these symptoms were added “a disagreeable twitching in my left eye,” a face that looked “bloated and swell’d” and an eye that was “so weak I can scarce keep it open.” These complaints were not new to Abby. Her illness also affected her left hand, over which “for two long years my sad heart has brooded.” Yet she did not not know the cause of her illness.⁵

Dr. Alexander G. Reeves and Scott Krugman of Dartmouth Medical School— Department of Neurology offer a modern diagnosis. Abby’s symptoms were consistent with an “elementary focal seizure” in her hand that may have generalized to the rest of her body. The cause of the seizures and of her death may have been the same. If so, she most likely suffered from a “glioblastoma,” or brain tumor. Thirty to ninety percent of such tumors are accompanied by seizures. They also grow quickly and could help explain

³ *JAM*, May 26, p. 11.

⁴ *JAM*, June 3, p. 20.

⁵ *JAM*, May 28, p. 16; June 4, p. 22; June 22, p. 48.

Abby's sudden death. (Her letters indicate that she was leading a relatively healthy life until her final weeks.) She suffered fatigue and headaches in the mornings, which also support this diagnosis. Abby's tumor was probably in the right side of her brain, as evidenced by the "twitching in my left eye," and the consistency in the legibility of her writing, which appears to have been done with her right hand. Abby's was likely a sudden and catastrophic brain tumor that showed few recognizable symptoms until very near the end.⁶

The medical community of 1800 provided more general diagnoses and treatments than do these modern physicians. Few doctors received formal education during Abby's time; most served an apprenticeship under another practitioner. A few European-educated physicians lived and worked in the larger towns and cities. The skills of these academically trained physicians were, in any case, for the most part no better than those of midwives, apothecaries, or folkhealers. So many people possessed medical knowledge that physicians who sought to control entry to their profession were unable to get state legislatures to pass licensing requirements, and in this time when each household practiced its own form of herbal medicine, there was little need for a medical establishment. The individual patient was capable of making his or her own medical decisions.⁷

Those who called themselves doctors did not agree on how Abby's condition should be treated. A major division existed between formally educated physicians, the elite of the medical world, and ordinary practitioners like druggists, surgeons, midwives, bonesetters, and herbalists. Established doctors practiced "heroic" treatments like bloodletting and purges, and administered prodigious doses of drugs to produce "rapid and observable symptomatic changes in the patient." For these physicians, "the fundamental objective was

⁶ Correspondence and conversations, April and May, 1993. Symptoms of brain tumors appear on the opposite side of the body. Krugman, a medical student, expressed frustration at the paucity of evidence from Abby's diary and the impossibility of performing a biopsy. The only other possible illness was diabetes, but Krugman and Reeves felt the diary did not provide enough information about Abby's symptoms for a firm diagnosis.

⁷ William G. Rothstein, American Physicians in the Nineteenth Century: From Sects to Science (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 26, 38; Richard Shryock, Medicine and Society in America: 1660-1860 (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1962), 28.

to restore the natural balance, which was accomplished by depleting or lowering the overexcited patient and by stimulating or elevating the patient enfeebled by the disease.” These doctors had no knowledge of bacteria or viruses, and diagnosed diseases based upon “observable pathological symptoms like fever or skin eruptions.” They treated “fevers, fluxes, and dropsies rather than diseases.” When a patient appeared ill, “aggressive intervention was often called for to effect the therapeutic lowering.” Drugs, emetics, blisters, low diets, and drawing blood brought about the desired depletion. Late eighteenth-century doctors prescribed travel and rest to cure what they believed to be Abby’s nervous disorder.⁸

The alternative was not much better. Practitioners who advocated “irregular” medicine during Abby’s lifetime believed that the bleedings and purges of traditional medicine were ineffective and that alternative cures should be tried. New treatments flourished because of the limitations of traditional medicine. Regular doctors were criticized for “the physical damage that their heroic therapies often did to patients.” Alternative medicine was practiced by herbalists, midwives, bonesetters, and even some physicians, who had arrived at their own cures, which often did not work. Patients could choose between leeches and emetics, or other less painful treatments. Any of these remedies would have been palliative at best, but they conformed to the medical paradigms of the day.⁹

In seeking relief from her ailments, Abby evaluated her options before choosing a cure. She relied on her own knowledge and insight, eventually choosing cold water over leeches and emetics. Having been advised to “travel for [her] health or to go for treatment to the numerous spas and health resorts,” she journeyed to Ballston to take the waters. The distraction of the waters assuaged both her physical and mental complaints. Abby was not

⁸ Rothstein, *American Physicians in the Nineteenth Century*, 27, 41; Shryock, *Medicine and Society in America*, 50; John Harley Warner, *The Therapeutic Perspective: Medical Practice, Knowledge, and Identity in America, 1820-1885* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1986), 85-92.

⁹ James H. Cassedy, *Medicine in America: A Short History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 33, 35-8, and 47; Rothstein, *American Physicians in the Nineteenth Century*, 50; Shryock, *Medicine and Society in America*, 73.

alone in seeking this remedy, for “the water cure was the preferred therapy of a considerable segment of America’s middle and upper class, particularly women.”¹⁰

Women shaped the spa through their enthusiasm for the waters and their definition of style.¹¹ Abby May was wealthy enough to experience this world and appreciate the potential for recovery it offered.

She and her mother waited five days before they “try’d the taste of the springs.” The salty, astringent, bubbly waters, which smelled a bit like rotten eggs, “brac’d [her stomach] by every draught.” This was only the beginning of the regimen. “The old Lady to whom we go for advice” prescribed bathing in the waters, after drinking the waters for a week.

Abby followed this advice. A few days later,

before six Mama and myself were at the bathing house... Mama went in first, every drop of water that fell upon her, made me shrink: but at last, and at length — I muster’d courage. taking care to have Laudanum handy — and was happy to find no such effects from the shock as I had dreaded — I screamed merrily — so says Mama — for my own part I do not remember much about it.¹²

Abby’s initial reliance on “the old Lady” was quickly supplanted by an allegiance to a Dr. Anderson, who made the half-day journey from his home in nearby Schenectady to administer to his sick (and, not unimportantly, rich) patients at Ballston. He, like the wizened woman before him, prescribed drinking and bathing in the mineral waters.

Of the many people Abby met at Ballston, “one bath’d their head for the head ache, another wash’d their Face for St. Anthony’s fire, — some wash’d their hands for salt rheum — others their knee or ankle for Rheumatism, and Gout — eyes, ears, noses, in

¹⁰ Casedy, Medicine in America, 35, 37.

¹¹ Bridenbaugh, “Baths and Watering Places of Colonial America,” 151-181; Theodore Corbett, “Women at the Spas, 1790-1850,” Brookside Local History 1 (September 1991) [Published by the Saratoga County Historical Society, Ballston Spa, New York]. There is little scholarship that traces women’s roles in spa life and hydropathy before 1830, but an excellent example is Susan E. Cayleff, Wash and Be Healed: The Water-Cure Movement and Women’s Health (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987), which begins with 1840.

¹² JAM, May 26, p. 11; June 3, p. 20; May 26, p. 12; May 28, p. 15. Laudanum was a less-powerful derivative of opium used as a painkiller at the time.

short each had an ail, and apply'd [water] accordingly."¹³ The application of a single treatment for many diseases was common. Rather than diagnosing a specific disease and prescribing a suitable remedy, as a modern doctor would, physicians at the turn of the nineteenth century believed that "the same therapies would be suitable for all diseases." So long as there was an immediate and drastic impact on the patient, the therapy was valid.¹⁴

Abby's case was no different. After other cures had failed, she went to the spa for treatment. She was advised to bathe in the waters early in the morning and drink large quantities of water throughout the day. Her problem was getting used to the salty, astringent drink and standing under the shower's icy stream. When Abby first tasted the waters she "could distinguish its 3 different impregnations viz -- steel, salt, and sulpher, very plain." The water she sampled would soon be called the "Old Iron Spring." After a few days at the spa, she began "to grow very fond of the water. it has lost its disagreeable flavourality in a great measure." Two weeks later she had acquired an affinity for the Ballston waters, preferring them over other nearby springs. When "we arrived at Saratoga... we all of us disliked the waters, and gave a decided preference to those at Ballstown — [the water at Saratoga is] flat, dead, and thick — we even conceited it did not smell well."* However, not all of the Saratoga waters tasted bad. "At Congress Spring I was really pleased beyond my expectations... I was so well satisfied with the flavour of the waters — I drank four large half pints." Within a few weeks, Abby had become a connoisseur.¹⁵

Indeed, she grew so attached to the taste that she was not sure if she could give up the waters. She asked her sister if she could

¹³ *JAM*, June 20, p. 44.

¹⁴ Rothstein, *American Physicians in the Nineteenth Century*, 42; see also Bridenbaugh, "Baths and Watering Places of Colonial America," 152-153.

* "Conceited" means "had the opinion that" in this context. See the *Oxford English Dictionary [OED]*, vol. VIII, 649.

¹⁵ *JAM*, June 3, pp. 19-20; June 21, pp. 43-44.

conceive for a moment how you would feel, to swig a quart of any Liquor by way of amusement, in the morning — when we leave here, I know not what we shall do for a substitute — and have not made up my mind whether toddy or gin sling — will do best — being used to water of so high a flavour — Adams Ale, is so insipid I can scarcely wash my mouth with it.¹⁶

The waters were an acquired taste. But once Abby had learned to savor their aroma and mineral bite, she was hooked. Though not a drug itself, the water's effect was similar. Psychologically, mineral water was as addictive and curative as any narcotic.¹⁷ It may not have improved Abby's ailments, but leading a hygienic lifestyle with plenty of exercise had more mental than physical benefits. While the waters may not have had any direct impact on Abby's health, drinking the mineral waters could not do as much harm as the copious doses of various patent medicines available at the time.¹⁸

So appealing were the mineral waters that budding entrepreneurs like Benjamin Silliman, the privileged son of a leading Connecticut family and a recent graduate of Yale University, seized the advances of science and sought to market the fashionable spa waters. Due to advances in analytical chemistry, Silliman developed a process for reproducing the Ballston waters in 1806. He and his competitors sought to “democratize the cure” and create a market for curative waters that otherwise could only be drunk at the expensive spa at Ballston. Fountain rooms were established in New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore, and Silliman experimented with bottled waters. The waters became more than a medical cure: they were now a product, just like any other, to be marketed and sold to a willing public. But Silliman miscalculated in this analysis of the market for mineral waters. Only a small group of people wanted to buy them.¹⁹

¹⁶ *JAM*, June 20, p. 44. “Adams Ale” is a humorous reference to water, as the “only drink of our first parents.” (*OED*, vol. I, p. 138.)

¹⁷ Many of the springs contained lithium, a psycho-active mineral (Swanner, *Saratoga: Queen of Spas*, 33).

¹⁸ Bridenbaugh, “Baths and Watering Places of Colonial America,” 179-180.

¹⁹ Chandos Michael Brown, *Benjamin Silliman: A Life in the Young Republic* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989), 207, 231, 251-258, 276.

For those rich enough to travel to the source, the Ballston cure demanded rigor and adherence to convention. Men and women shared the ordeal of bathing in the spa's waters. The routine was to "bath 3 Mornings and omit 3." The bathing houses that Abby used, as well as the water, were unheated, which made for an unpleasant early morning shock. Abby described bathing as "dreadful business. to make the best of it, and use does not w[ear] away its horrors, I agree with the author of an extempore couplet, which is written upon one of the baths, and says,

What freezing terrors chill the soul before you
pull the wire,
As o'er your head the waters roll — you're ready
to expire.²⁰

Abby was terrified by the cold shower. But, she was not nearly as frightened as Ellen, another visitor to the spa, who "every time the wire [to the shower] is pulled gives a shrill scream, nor will she go in herself till the last, and then tis sometimes half an hour before she will step into the bath — where she stands shivering and exclaiming — till at last a fit of desperation comes on — she cries 'Murder' and down comes the shower while she capers finely." Such a display must have made for hilarious early morning amusement. Even Abby had her embarrassing moments. She usually bathed with her face down, but found that it made her head ache. So one morning she "look'd up at the shower, which made me catch my breath — and of course filled my mouth with water — I have been spitting ever since for 'tis nauseous."²¹

If the cold did not shock Abby, the bad taste would. The water cure was not an easy or painless treatment. It was perhaps not as trying as the bleedings and purges characteristic of heroic medicine, but it still demanded courage and a conscious choice to undergo its unpleasant measures. Without rigor, there could be no cure. Abby made this choice and was willing to withstand the hardships.

²⁰ *JAM*, June 15, pp. 36-37.

²¹ *JAM*, July 8, p. 62; July 12, pp. 68-69.

Drinking two quarts of water each day did alter Abby's health. She reported that the waters "must have some effect on the constitution, taken in such large quantities — on drinking my head is frequently dizzy, but an agreeable warmth seems to diffuse itself all over me — and my stomach is brac'd by every draught." Whatever magical curative powers the waters may have had, they also affected her body in far more mundane ways. After a month and a half, Abby complained that "for several days past I have had pain, but now have reason to think I have a little of the Dysentary -- however it was a complaint I could not make known to my Doctr and I was determined to say nothing about it." Abby could not share the embarrassing symptoms of her violent diarrhea with her male physician, Dr. Anderson. Fortunately, Mrs. Bowen of Providence noticed Abby's illness and "made me up a number of powders of Rhubarb and Epecac — chid me for having so long kept it to myself and after mixing and giving me a dose, advised me to lay down, and every 4 hours repeat the dose till I was relieved, I soon experienced considerable ease."²² The well-known cures, or "simples," for diarrhea worked well for Abby.

When confronted with this malady, she turned to the shared world of women's medicine for a cure for this very private ailment. Abby and other women did not want to break social taboos and discuss their bodies' functions with men. But they could share some complaints with each other. The gender spheres that Nancy Cott and Linda Kerber have described were reflected in the ways in which male physicians and female patients interacted, especially in the charged social world of the spa.²³

But women could not cure all of Abby's ailments. The hardships of her treatment extended beyond bathing and drinking: "Dr. Anderson advised to more spirited measures with my hand, than I have yet used." These included pouring a pitcher of water "upon my hand four times in twenty four hours and keeping it wrapped in flannel." In addition, the

²² *JAM*, June 3, p 20; July 22, p. 81.

²³ Laurel Thatcher Ulrich finds that birthing was a medical procedure shared almost exclusively by women in 1790s rural Maine. Women offered "emotional as well as physical support" during the birthing process. (*A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785-1812* [New York: Vintage, 1990].) Note especially the chapter entitled "December 1793: 'Birth 50. Birth 51,'" 177-186.

doctor “work’d upon my hand to limber the joints, above an hour.” According to Abby, this “severe discipline, to be honest almost killed me.” The painful physical therapy continued through the summer, with little improvement in Abby’s condition. “Working” Abby’s arm did little more than increase the pain in her joints. “My hand it grows more and more painful. the joints are so sore, tis dreadful to have them undergo such severe discipline— but I can and will bear it.”²⁴ According to a modern medical opinion, Dr. Anderson’s remedies “didn’t do any good and the side effects made Abby feel worse.”²⁵ Yet she believed the cure would work.

Her mother, also named Abigail, was ill at the spa as well. “A large [boil] on her neck” appeared on June 26 after several weeks of “dullheavy pain in her head and neck.” Indeed, the illness had not manifested until Mrs. May had arrived in the vicinity of Ballston a month earlier. Abby wrote that “Mammar thinks the spring water does not agree with her — feels many of her old complaints.” Apparently the mineral waters aggravated her pain and perhaps even her condition. As her health worsened, Mrs. May could not “sleep without laudanum.” Dr. Anderson “advised poultices on the neck — to bath her feet, and gave a small quantity of laudanum.” Despite the doctor’s attention, Mrs. May’s condition did not improve. On July 9 “Doctr Anderson arrived — and lanced Mammars neck — which gave her great relief.”²⁶ She had decided to follow the water cure, even when it seemed to worsen her pain; when it did not work, Mrs. May was ready to try another remedy. Mineral water and drugs had not relieved her symptoms or cured her complaint. Only by relying on a basic medical practice, lancing a boil, did Dr. Anderson cure Mrs. May.

²⁴ *JAM*, June 7, p. 29; June 15, p. 37; July 5, p. 58; July 22, p. 81; July 28, p. 90.

²⁵ Conversation with Scott Krugman of Dartmouth Medical School, May 22, 1993.

²⁶ *JAM*, July 6, p. 60; June 26, pp. 53-54; June 24, p. 50; June 29, p. 55; June 26, p. 54; July 9, p. 63. Abby’s mother, who had eleven other children, recovered from the illness and lived until 1824 when she died at the age of 70. A detailed genealogy of the May family is located in the May-Goddard Family Papers at the Schlesinger Library of Radcliffe College (Box 1, Folder 1).

In addition to her mother, Abby looked to others at the spa to judge the water cure's effectiveness. She discussed her hand with one woman, who upon being told that it was due to a "nervous affection" responded that "it was melancholy, but I was happy compared with her daughter." Later, Abby wrote to her sister, saying:

judge of my feelings, Lucretia! when she exactly described my case, no one particular wanting — even the time of day [of the spasms]— her appearance while under their grasp: all! all perfectly agreed — I thought I never again should be so distress'd for others — but in pitying the poor girl I pityed also Myself — Yet her situation is preferable to mine: for tho' subject to spasms — yet never having any external application made to her hand, tis equally as well as the other: — and here is my firmest hope destroyed! But let me turn from a retrospect too, too, painful.

The similarity of the woman's condition to Abby's was cause not for hope, but despair. Abby had thought that her illness was "a local complaint of the thumb." Her "expectation that I might lose the disease, by parting with the limb — that no longer remains!" At this moment Abby realized that the mineral water might not be any help, but hesitated to confront the fact that her "firmest hope," the water cure, was useless; she turned to her own resources in a final effort to conquer her disease.²⁷

Dr. Anderson's early optimism that Abby would be "intirely restor'd to Health" faded with the summer. By August 4, Abby wrote that Dr. Anderson "watches my countenance so narrowly and seems so much grieved when he distresses me."²⁸ Apparently the doctor saw that his patient was not improving. He continued his treatments until August 22, when Abby realized that the water cure was not working and left Ballston to look for a cure elsewhere.

Though she had many choices, Abby was unwilling to try just any remedy: "Dr. Porter of Connecticut will relieve me, if I will go to Newhaven — and Dr. Kittridge of Pittsfield, is certain he could restore me, and my hand, to perfect health." In addition, "Mr. Dobson thinks Animal Magnetism will cure me." (This treatment featured wrapping live or

²⁷ *JAM*, May 24, pp. 5-6.

²⁸ *JAM*, June 15, p. 37; August 4, p. 98.

dead animals around the affected region of the body.) Even though Abby had “had enough of Quackery” each alternative added “a slender string to the bow of expectation, and I will not snap it off prematurely.”²⁹ Desperate for a cure, she turned not to the Ballston quacks, but to Dr. Stringer of Albany.³⁰

Stringer was famous for his use of the “Oxygen Gas — or vital air according to the latest and most approved method,” having made “several extraordinary cures.” In Abby’s case, however, he deviated from his standard treatment: “opium was the word with him.” Abby expressed her reservations, based largely on her experience with laudanum (a tincture of opium) “lessening its effects by frequent use.” She feared that the opium was only “capable of lulling for a time not radically curing any disorder.” Abby wanted more than relief from pain; she wanted a cure. She was suspicious, but Dr. Stringer’s “venerable and scientific appearance” reconciled Abby to the drug, “more than if it had been made by a quaking ragamuffin — such is the force of prejudice — Dr. Stringer engaged my respect and confidence at first sight.” More importantly, Abby sensed that the drug was “better than the poultices and Vitae” she had endured under Dr. Anderson.³¹

The opium Dr. Stringer prescribed was a fairly common drug in 1800. It was used mostly as a tonic or “stimulation” to improve appetite and digestion. Benjamin Rush, a leading American doctor, complained in 1810 that many suffered from ““intoxication from opium,”” but historians have found no evidence that drug addiction was common at the time. Its use was fairly restricted in the late eighteenth century because opium was seen as muting the pain that was nature’s voice. Since “cure, not pain relief, was the overriding

²⁹ *JAM*, June 17, p. 41; May 24, pp. 6-7.

³⁰ This may well be Dr. Samuel Stringer (1734-1817), who commanded American medical forces in the Northern Army during the early years of the Revolution. A protégé of Gen. Philip Schuyler, he was removed from his command around the same time as Schuyler (January 1777). After his service in the army he “settled in Albany and practiced medicine there.” See Louis C. Duncan, *Medical Men in the American Revolution, 1775-1783* (New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1970), 103-104; and Jack P. Greene and J.R. Pole, eds., *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1991), 598.

³¹ *JAM*, August 21, p. 117; August 24, p. 126.

medical duty,” opium was not yet the universal painkiller that it would become a century later.³²

Abby tried the drug for several days, with disturbing consequences. “Oh this Opium! my senses are sealed in forgetfulness my frame tottering.” The sedative and euphoric effects continued for three days, when Abby wrote:

when I had about half done breakfast I felt very oddly — and rose from table. I knew no more till past eleven -- but Mrs Lowell says I told all my secrets — and talked incessantly... and was very amusing — the Doctr called and said I had taken too large a dose — but ought not to be discouraged — and he divided all the pills into quarters — while I was insensible.³³

Abby feared the hallucinogenic aspects of opium, but desired the cure that Dr. Stringer promised.

She soon found, however, that the drug did not work. Abby’s condition seemed to have stabilized, so she boarded the stagecoach for Boston, eager to return home. But just three days out of Albany she “could not but be unhappy to find those twitches and tremors returning again — which I had flattered myself were removed by the spring waters.” Abby wondered “whether it was owing [sic] to my bathing in the warm bath (that it was too relaxing for me) or that Opium I took in Albany caused these distressing sensations I am unable to say.” Having “passed a wretched day” she returned to an old aid: “at seven o'clock [I] took 15 drops of Laudanum. I was all night in a profuse perspiration -- at 10 I took 15 more and got some tolerable sleep. I found myself very weak the next morning but considerably relieved.”³⁴ Though she had not become addicted to the opium, she at least craved its weaker form, laudanum, which she had taken for some time. Perhaps Abby had been right in questioning Dr. Stringer’s prescription. Like all the other medicines and cures

³² Rothstein, *American Physicians in the Nineteenth Century*, 52-53; Martin S. Pernick, *A Calculus of Suffering: Pain, Professionalism, and Anesthesia in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 53, 135, 105; Shryock, *Medicine and Society in America*, 90.

³³ *JAM*, August 27, p. 129.

³⁴ *JAM*, August 30, p. 134.

she had tried, opium did little but relieve the symptoms of her disease. Despite all of the remedies she experimented with, she was still ill.

Just as Abby sampled the cures available to her, so she chose from the literature of the period to find solace and an explanation for her fate. Abby's failure to find a cure, as well as the wretched condition of those around her, weighed on her mind during the summer of 1800. Abby was so struck with the variety of illnesses at Ballston that she exclaimed, "Bless Me! what a catalogue of human infirmities might be published from these Springs... there is the nervous, Rheumatic, Spasmodic, Crazatic, Itchatic, Hypiatic, Goutatic, Soreatic, and all the atics — beside scorbutic, scrophulous and headachs."³⁵ The situation at Ballston reminded her of a passage from Milton's Paradise Lost:

'A Lazar house it seems, wherein are laid, numbers of all diseased, all Maladies, Ghastly spasm, of racking torture, qualms of heart sick agony, all feverous kinds, Convulsions, Epilepsies, fierce Catarrhs, intestine Stone, and Ulcer, cholic pangs, demoniac frenzy, Dropsies, and Asthmas, and joint racking Rheums.'³⁶

The passage gives an accurate reflection of what Abby saw around her. Her own afflictions and those of the others at the spa mirrored the condition of humanity after its ejection from Eden. Abby's selection from Paradise Lost continued:

the review of [the Lazar house] caused our great forefather Adam to exclaim 'O miserable mankind to what wretched state reserved, why is Life given to be thus wrested from us? rather why obruded on us thus. who if we knew what we receive, would either not accept Life offered, or soon beg to lay it down, glad to be so dismissed in peace.'³⁷

Abby and those at the spa led a painful and difficult life, as did Adam and Eve after the Fall. The burden of existence was sometimes too much. Simply seeing the wretchedness of

³⁵ JAM, June 7, p. 27.

³⁶ JAM, June 7, p. 27. The passage is taken from Book 11, lines 479-485 and 487-489. Abby omits lines 485-487: "Demionac phrenzy, moaping melancholy,/ And moon-struck madness, pining atrophy,/ Marasmus, and wide-wasting pestilence." Perhaps these words were too depressing and close to her case.

³⁷ JAM, June 7, p. 27. Book 11, lines 500-507. Again, Abby has quoted selectively, leaving out part of line 502: "better end here unborn."

those at the spa depressed Abby. She continued to transcribe from Milton, hoping to find a solution, or at least solace. “Henceforth I fly not Death nor would prolong Life much, but rather, how I may be quit fairest and easiest of this cumbrous charge, which I must keep till my appointed Day of rendering up and patiently attend my Dissolution.” Abby’s resort to these texts was a form of prayer, a search for reassurance and hope in the moral works she knew well. In this instance, her thoughts led her to resignation and acceptance of God’s will.³⁸

There were many other moments when Abby sank into the depths of depression. She often felt that fate was working against her. In one particularly reflective passage Abby wrote: “surely I may say with the Psalmist, ‘have pity upon O ye my friends. for the hand of God hath touched me, my harp he hath turned into mourning, my joy into sorrow; and I water my couch with my tears.’” But she refused to close the entry on a somber note:

what ails my pen? I am sure it takes great liberties thus to encroach on forbidden subjects: but since it has wilfully made such a melancholy quotation from the best of all good books, take another, which God may grant may be verified – ‘thou hast turned for me my mourning into dancing, thou hast put off my sackcloth and girded me with gladness.’

Just as the Bible taught Abby to accept her fate, other passages gave her hope, if she could only recall them.³⁹

At one point, deep in despair that she would ever regain her health, Abby recalled a Biblical parable: “I would I had more faith, even as a grain of mustard seed, but I cannot yet flatter myself with hopes of recovery.” Jesus told the parable of a tiny mustard seed that withstood drought and poor soil to grow into a mighty tree, seemingly against all reason

³⁸ JAM, June 7, p. 27. Book 11, lines 547-552.

³⁹ JAM, May 26, p. 14. Abby quotes not from a single Psalm, but from several Old Testament books. The first passage is an amalgamation of Job 30:31, Tobit 7:16 and Psalm 6:6. The second reference is to a single verse, Psalm 30:11. Rather than referring to the Biblical passages specifically, people generally called them Psalms in Abby’s time. New England schoolchildren learned to read and write by copying edifying passages from The Bible and pious authors like Milton into their notebooks. It would have been easy for Abby to recall these eclectic verses, but not to give their exact citations. She probably did not have a concordance at her bedside as she wrote. See George Sensabaugh, Milton in Early America (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1964), 205.

and odds. He instructed his disciples that “if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible to you.”⁴⁰ Hope and faith were as much a part of Abby’s cure as mineral waters and physical therapy.

The message she chose to take from the Bible described not a tyrannical God, but a benevolent and merciful one. This God would help her bear the trials of her illness and depression. When confronted with a fatal illness and personal doubt, Abby turned to the familiar tenets of her faith. It assured her that God would be merciful in deciding her fate.⁴¹

In essence, Abby fit within the Arminian branch of New England Protestantism. Arminianism emphasized personal Biblical interpretation and the ability of each individual to lead a moral life and to determine, to some extent, his or her own salvation. Its basic tenets rejected the strict Calvinism of men like Jonathan Edwards in favor of a more liberal conception of man’s relation to God.⁴² Most Arminians came from the social and economic elite of eastern, urban New England of the late eighteenth century. Its adherents were mostly Federalist and anti-French in their politics. (Abby, as the daughter of a prominent Boston family, constantly voiced her dislike for the “Jacobins.”)⁴³ Just as she was active in determining her cure, Abby was seeking her own salvation by choosing the moral life she led. Her religious outlook was far more secular and rational than any other in New England at that time. It influenced Abby’s approach to her illness and her musings about the afterlife.

⁴⁰ JAM, May 26, p. 11. The mustard seed parable is found in the Gospels of Matthew (13:31 and 17:20), Mark (4:31), and Luke (13:19 and 17:6). I have referred to the version in Matthew 17:20.

⁴¹ Jay Fliegelman, Prodigals and Pilgrims: The American Revolution Against Patriarchal Authority, 1750-1800 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 155-157.

⁴² Sydney E. Ahlstrom, A Religious History of the American People (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 391-392, 400; and Conrad Wright, The Beginnings of Unitarianism in America (Boston: Star King Press, 1955), 235-250.

⁴³ Alan Heimert, Religion and the American Mind: From the Great Awakening to the Revolution (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1966), 535.

Like any good Arminian, she looked first to the Bible. She found the encouragement she desired in a familiar text she had read many times. She knew the Bible well, a common trait among the New England Puritans who learned to read and write by copying its pages. Her eclectic sampling, as well as her use of Milton, were founded in the rational, intellectual roots of the Arminian outlook.⁴⁴

In addition to the religious texts Abby quoted, Abby read certain secular works. She had studied Oliver Goldsmith's novel The Vicar of Wakefield (1766) several times and found "the company of the good Vicar was a real consolation — and I declare, to this day his precepts have strengthened my mind." The optimistic vicar lost his daughter to a scheming seducer, saw his house burned to the ground, and languished in debtor's prison, yet kept a positive outlook. At the end of the novel all of the vicar's problems were solved by a benevolent relative. Even this miraculous salvation did not change the protagonist's belief in simple needs and familial love. Abby concurred with the good vicar's sentiments:

I was often led to reflect how very few are the real wants of Man. since tis possible to be happy — or rather as happy: in a log hut as in a splendid palace. Goldsmith says, 'Man wants little here below.'... I think I could be very happy in these secluded shades — with this proviso — let me have those I love with me; the rest of the world I could abandon without a sigh!⁴⁵

Ironically, she wrote of her affinity for the simple life while at a resort for the rich, waited on by a personal maid who slept in her room and by slaves who attended her at the bathhouse.⁴⁶ But the ideal of simplicity served as an alternative to the pained existence she led. She could hope for something better. No matter how low she sank, her life would

⁴⁴ Sensabaugh, Milton in Early America, 205.

⁴⁵ JAM, May 24, pp. 7-8.

⁴⁶ Abby referred to "Old Frederick—who tends the baths" on May 26, p. 17. He also appeared on June 2, pp. 20-21 and July 8, p. 62. Other people at Ballston had servants, both black and white. When Abby dressed, she had "Roby to assist me." Abby wrote that "I have this good little girl to sleep in a Cotbed in my chamber" (July 14, p. 70). This servant is identified as Roby Westcott, the stepdaughter of hotel proprietor Joshua Aldridge (Abby May's Brookside Summer, 1800 [Ballston Spa, New York: Saratoga County Historical Society, 1988], 19).

improve, as had the vicar's. Abby found the comfort she sought in a popular novel. Her reading of both religious and secular works satisfied her emotional needs.⁴⁷

Three months and five hundred miles later, Abby found herself back in Boston just as sick as the day she left. Three doctors, two women practitioners, and at least as many remedies had effected no discernable improvement in her condition. She sat at her desk in her Boston home and reflected on her trip to Ballston:

I said when leaving home I did not expect relief, yet I find by my feelings now, I, unknown to myself cherished considerable hopes. but now I fear, and almost to a certainty think — that notwithstanding my health is greatly benefitted by this journey — I never more shall have the use of my hand.⁴⁸

The treatments had alleviated her symptoms (and may have worsened her condition in the process), but physicians were unable to diagnose her illness or remove the tumor that was growing inside her brain. Her best efforts and wisest choices had not been enough.

Abby had gone to Ballston in hope of being cured by the waters' incredible powers. But they, like so many other medical treatments she tried, had failed. Abby embraced the conventional wisdom that "illness was something that society and the medical profession, aided by the hygienic discipline of the individual, ought to be able to alleviate or prevent."⁴⁹ Her summer at Ballston was an effort to cure herself by using the latest medical treatment and living healthily. That her condition did not improve was less her fault than that of a medical community eager to prescribe a single treatment for a variety of ailments. Sadly, none of their remedies could cure a catastrophic illness like Abby's. The prevailing medical paradigm of visible symptoms and heroic treatments was not sufficient in Abby's

⁴⁷ *JAM*, June 3, pp. 20-22. Readers finding their own lives mirrored in books were not new phenomena. Robert Darnton writes that Rousseau's readers "knew his novel was true because they had read its message in their lives." ("Readers Respond to Rousseau," in *The Great Cat Massacre* [New York: Vintage, 1984], 246.) Abby experienced many of the same feelings of desperation as Goldsmith's characters, and hoped her life would turn out as well as theirs. Mary Kelley traces the later development of this phenomenon among women in *Private Women, Public Stage: Literary Domesticity in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Oxford, 1984).

⁴⁸ *JAM*, August 30, pp. 132-133.

⁴⁹ Cassedy, *Medicine in America*, 44-45.

case. She actively selected different remedies in attempting to cure herself; Abby's choices had as much of a chance of success as did those of any doctor of the day.

Yet she accepted the responsibility of selecting her treatment, and the hope of the salvation a benevolent God promised her. Abby's values emphasized the importance of the individual and personal agency in deciding one's fate. This young woman was not a weak, resigning figure. Abigail May took an active role in determining where she would go for medical treatment and what course it would take. She used her own reason and intellect, buttressed by religious and secular readings, to guide her decisions and reconcile herself to her fate. But in the end, she failed. Her brain tumor, despite all of the therapies she tried, killed her.

SEDUCTION AND SENSIBILITY

“No one who had ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy would have supposed her to be an heroine.” So begins Jane Austen’s 1798 novel Northanger Abbey, the tale of one young woman’s education in the ways of elite society of late eighteenth-century England. Catherine’s early years lacked excitement; she “had reached the age of seventeen without having seen one amiable youth who could call forth her sensibility: without having inspired one real passion, and without having excited even any admiration but what was very moderate and very transient.” Neighbors realized that “if adventures will not befall a young lady in her own village, she must seek them abroad, [and] invited her to go with them.” Catherine and her new friends journeyed to Bath, the most fashionable and dangerous of all English spas. Lords and baronets posed the greatest danger because they “delight in forcing young ladies away to some remote farm house” where they practiced their “mischievousness.” But Catherine’s mother was ignorant of these evils and advised her daughter only to “wrap yourself up very warm about the throat when you come from the Rooms at night; and I wish you would try to keep some account of the money you spend.” Catherine found herself in Bath “having no party to join, no acquaintance to claim, no gentleman to assist her,” and “not experienced enough in the finesse of love, or the duties of friendship, to know when delicate raillery was properly called for, or when a confidence should be forced.” Alone and inexperienced, she was at the mercy of rakes and coquettes who would take advantage of her innocence.¹

On the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, at a pale imitation of the spa at Bath, lived an American Catherine Morland, Abigail May. When she stepped out of her carriage in front of the columned porch of Aldridge’s Hotel just before sunset on the rainy Saturday evening of May 24, 1800, she entered into the fashionable and equally dangerous world of the spa

¹ Jane Austen, Northanger Abbey (London: Penguin, 1985), 37, 40, 41, 44, 57.

at Ballston Springs, New York.² Abby's mother and brother accompanied her, but both were sick and would leave her on July 10, just "before fashion sends her train; whose season does not Commence til August." Abby came to Ballston hoping the waters would cure her disease. Without her mother present to offer advice and guide her conduct, Abby needed to find friends and confidantes to steer her through the shoals and rapids of such a perilous place. Abby cautiously entered the contrived society of Ballston Springs with failing health and few certain friends, hoping to preserve her virtue while cultivating her sensibility.

The world she found there differed from the everyday life of most Americans. Wealthy travelers from Boston, New York, Philadelphia, New Haven, the nearby area around Albany, and even Charleston, South Carolina came to Ballston. Visitors to the spa included lawyers, doctors, wealthy merchants, well-dressed ladies, generals, and politicians. The elite of New York society (the Schuylers, Van Courtlands and Van Rennselaers) counted mayors, generals and governors among their number at the spa. A governor of a British Caribbean colony stayed at Ballston, as did eleven-year old Catharine Sedgwick, who later became a famous author.

Abby found Ballston to be a quaint, if rustic, resort. Some two thousand people lived in the town, the seat of rural Saratoga County, which boasted a population of more than twenty four thousand. Five hotels— McMaster's, White's, Tryon's, the Milton House, and Aldridge's (where Abby stayed)— were clustered within a quarter mile of the mineral spring and bordered the brook which ran through town. Aldridge's could "entertain a hundred people," but upon her arrival Abby found that "there are but few boarders at either house," for "'tis yet too early in the season for the fashionable world to resort here!"³

² *Journal of Abigail May*, [JAM], May 24, 1800, p. 9; June 7, p. 28.

³ Dolores J. Cerefin, "Growth and Decline of Ballston Spa Hotels," 1983 (paper on file at the Saratoga County Historical Society, Ballston Spa, New York); The United States Census for 1800 lists Ballston's population at 2,099 and Saratoga County's at 24,283 (as reported in Nathaniel Bartlett Sylvester, *History of Saratoga County, New York* [Philadelphia: Everts & Ensign, 1878], 131); *JAM*, May 26, p. 11.

Throughout the summer the number of visitors to the spa increased. By June 15 there was “a party of twenty and upwards.” A week later the number exceeded forty, and Abby was “daily expecting large additions from N[ew] York and Philadelphia.”⁴ Thrown together in a rural hamlet where few of these strangers knew each other, the visitors, who came from the upper-middle and elite ranks of American society, combined to create a community based on a search for health and amusement. The society they formed was a product of changes that were altering the localistic world of early America.

The spa marked this trend. In colonial American society “the local community provided within itself a focus for the economic, political, social, and religious lives of the townspeople.” Tightly-knit social networks, homogenous religion (within individual towns), family and kin, and limited mobility restricted social experimentation and expansion. But American society opened considerably after the social disruption of the Revolution, as “the traditional groups of family, church, and town” became “less prescriptive.” Personal identification no longer centered exclusively on the town. As localism diminished, places like the spa rose to replace the old allegiances. Revolutionary ideology provided the impetus for a national culture, but no social or cultural standards ranked individuals from the various towns. While people measured social status in their own communities with ease, they could not “describe relative social status across space.” Places like Ballston existed in this social vacuum. According to Carl Bridenbaugh, it was at the spas that a new national elite took shape. While the elite rejected aristocratic titles and mouthed the rhetoric of republican virtue they spent their summers at spas like Ballston, displaying their status and living a life that only those as wealthy as themselves could.⁵

American society had changed considerably by the end of the eighteenth century. As Linda Kerber has written, “The opening decade of the nineteenth century was not a placid

⁴ *JAM*, June 15, p. 38; June 23, p. 49.

⁵ Thomas Bender, *Community and Social Change in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 65, 80, 90; Carl Bridenbaugh, “Baths and Watering Places in Colonial America,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 3:2, 3d Ser., (April 1946), 151-181.

time; social changes in the post-revolutionary era created tremendous intellectual pressures from which few were insulated.” An emerging middle class challenged the social classes that had dominated American society and politics throughout the colonial period.

Gentlemen who had once based their claims to authority and power on economic position and land holding could not assume their old deferential status; a new standard founded on republican virtue emerged, created by the very gentlemen whose position was eroding as well as the rising middle class that threatened the elite’s position. “Known community leaders of talent and merit” replaced appointed imperial officials in the new government after the Revolution. These new leaders reconceived themselves through economic success, which would no longer be based solely upon land. The gentry emphasized republican virtue in an effort to avoid competition with the nouveau riche— wealth alone would not equal status; refinement was required as well. From this background a fledging aristocracy arose, “based on principles that could be learned and were superior to those of birth and family, and even great wealth.” Hierarchy still existed, but it derived its legitimacy from the virtue and character of rulers and citizens. The new aristocracy was merit-based.⁶

In the early years of the new nation a generation who had been too young to fight the Revolution or debate the Constitution asserted its independence and individuality. Women, who had previously received little attention, struggled to make their voices heard in this turbulent time, but were scarcely heeded by those in power. Americans of the early national period lived in a much more open society of blurred class lines and revolt against strict parental authority. In response, an aristocracy of virtue arose to maintain an ordered society. In this context a place like Ballston Springs was liberating; there young men and women tested the bounds of their new consciousness and independence.⁷

⁶ Linda Kerber, *Federalists in Dissent: Imagery and Ideology in Jeffersonian America* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1970), viii; James Kirby Martin, *Men in Rebellion: Higher Government Leaders and the Coming of the American Revolution* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1973), 183; Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Knopf, 1992), 195.

⁷ Robert Wiebe, *The Opening of American Society: From the Adoption of the Constitution to the Eve of Disunion* (New York: Knopf, 1984), 11-20; see also Jay Fliegelman, *Prodigals and Pilgrims: The American Revolution Against Patriarchal Authority, 1750-1800* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge

But little had changed. Intellectual shifts were not mirrored at Ballston, which attracted fashionable men and women from all parts of the country. “By the close of Jefferson’s second term, Saratoga [just to the north] and Ballston had become favorite resorts of the gentry from both North and South.” Spa-goers tried to recreate a sophisticated, elite world, basing their replication on the model of the Atlantic world’s pre-eminent spa at Bath, England. Republicanism seemed to have little place here. Ballston’s and Bath’s visitors followed similar regimens: early morning bathing (divided by gender) followed by rest, dinner, and an afternoon call at the springs for a communal drink. Visitors enjoyed amusements and diversions in mixed company in the late afternoon and evening. In addition to these activities, doctors on both sides of the Atlantic prescribed drinking the waters three times a day. Ballston and Bath served the elite of Anglo-American society; neither was challenged or altered by the new republican virtue.⁸

As the new national elite asserted itself and the old hierarchy faded, places like Bath were the last refuge for people who embraced the “order, decorum, and propriety” so fundamental to English society. In Bath, writers like Jane Austen found “the essence of the eighteenth century, the illusions of order and decorum which concealed actual unrest, hypocrisy, and the rising wave of personal freedom.” Status no longer derived solely from wealth; inequality was expressed in new forms based on virtue and refinement. These characteristics were “no less to be observed at Bath, the most fashionable of all such places, than among its humbler imitators.” Just as Abby would copy the literary styles of England, Ballston counted itself among those imitators of Britain’s leading spa.⁹

University Press, 1982), and Melvin Yazawa, From Colonies to Commonwealth: Familial Ideology and the Beginnings of the American Republic (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985).

⁸ Chandos Michael Brown, Benjamin Silliman: A Life in the Young Republic (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989), 207; George D. Kersley, Bath Water: The Effect of the Waters on the History of Bath and of Medicine (Bath, England: Victor Morgan, 1973), 8-12.

⁹ Paul Langford, A Polite and Commercial People: England, 1727-1783 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989), 105. For a comparison of another American spa and Bath during the late eighteenth century, see Donald Yacovone, “A New England Bath: The Nation’s First Resort at Stafford Springs,” Connecticut Historical Society Bulletin 41:1 (January 1976), 1-11.

Jane Austen's novels Persuasion, Sense and Sensibility, and especially Northanger Abbey detail the world of early-nineteenth-century elite British society. Courtship, romance, adventure, the ideal of sensibility, and men's unkept promises to marry fill their pages. Austen herself spent several summers in the early 1800s at Bath, while "a constant round of social calls, teas, and walks kept her amused." Catherine Morland, the protagonist of Northanger Abbey, also tasted and bathed in the waters, danced at balls, talked with men, attended plays, read novels, and promenaded the streets of Bath. The rituals of Bath and the exchanges among and between the sexes replicated themselves in Ballston.¹⁰

But the social world on either side of the Atlantic was in flux. The rising middle class, which included the fictional Catherine, whose family was "very plain," intruded into Bath, a place that had once been strictly an elite resort. In her novels Jane Austen criticizes the social decadence of the aristocracy and the negative aspects of the spa that diminished the elegance and pleasures people hoped to enjoy there. Austen attributes this deterioration to the infiltration of bourgeois social climbers into elite society. Social change transpired at the places where the old hierarchy celebrated itself even as it faded. In late eighteenth-century Britain, "Since order was tenuous, it became a much sought ideal." The problem was even worse in America, a place where no aristocratic titles existed to distinguish the refined from the common. Commercialism had altered society and created new, bourgeois classes that challenged the hegemony of the old order.¹¹

The elite of English and American society sought health and diversion at these spas. In England, many aspiring middle-class families sent their daughters to Bath in search of a suitable husband. They hoped to find a young man of higher social and economic status, thus increasing their own position. The problem was that "the very freedom which was necessary for the marriage market to operate satisfactorily created immense risks." Such risks included the duplicity of suitors and their professions of love and pending marriage,

¹⁰ Mary K. Hill, Bath and the Eighteenth Century Novel (Bath, England: Bath University Press, 1989), 23. Austen first visited Bath in 1797, and her family spent several summers there between 1800-1805, when she was in her mid-twenties, the same age as Abby May was during her sojourn to Ballston.

¹¹ Austen, Northanger Abby, 37; Hill, Bath and the Eighteenth Century Novel, 37, 56, 60-65.

which were quickly abandoned as soon as they had bedded the bride-to-be. The spas created competitive places where status was at issue. With well-to-do strangers gathered from around the country in an isolated enclave, spas differed from everyday life, where individuals knew each other and regulated their conduct by traditional norms. Without these guidelines, people at the spas had to measure the risks and evaluate the motives of those around them lest they lose not only their good name and honor, but perhaps also their fortunes.¹²

To guard their reputations and prevent ruin, many upper class spa-goers judged each other by new standards: true feeling, sincerity, emotion, and proper manners. Adherents to this new ideology of gentility reacted powerfully to experience and were often carried away with compassion or gratitude. People now measured character by sensibility, which could be defined as “the responsiveness of a delicate heart to the slightest emotional stimulus.” Virtue was to be found in benevolence and feeling, as influenced by “the tender passions and affections which prompt [philanthropic] actions and constitute their immediate reward.” In many cases, people engaged in “the pursuit of emotion for the sheer pleasure of feeling.” Emotional extravagance took sensibility to the next level, sentimentalism. Sincerity in conduct was the mainstay of a culture that believed that the heart gave natural, visible responses to stimuli. Some, like Abby May, were “very observing of countenances — and affirm they are (generally speaking) the index of the Heart.”¹³

The elite hoped that these new standards would perpetuate their position by legitimating it. Refinement was an “outward sign of inner grace.” It “held out the hope of elevation from ordinary existence into an exalted society of superior beings.” In an era

¹² Hill, Bath and the Eighteenth Century Novel, 21-23; Langford, A Polite and Commercial People, 113-115.

¹³ Karen Haltunnen, Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830-1870 (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1982), xvi; R.S. Crane, “Suggestions Toward a Genealogy of the ‘Man of Feeling,’” in The Idea of the Humanities and Other Essays, Critical and Historical I (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 197; Richard L. Bushman, The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities (New York: Knopf, 1992), 83; see also the chapter entitled “The Birth of Sensibility” in Langford, A Polite and Commercial People, 461-518; JAM, July 26, p. 89.

when the rising middle class was threatening the position of the wealthy, “gentility bestowed concrete social power on its practitioners” and “supported class authority.” Pretenders might copy the manners and dress of gentility, but they could never truly attain refinement, which “was inward and profound.” Gentility answered the challenge from the middle classes because it “deepened the division between rich and poor, adding a moral dimension to differences in wealth.”¹⁴

Even with class-based distinctions, some people imitated the standards of refinement. For disciples of sensibility the spa presented an opportunity to feel the emotions of true sentiment. But for other less scrupulous visitors the spa was an orchard of tender fruit ripe for the picking. Rakes and coquettes infiltrated the society ready to seduce, corrupt, and ruin the naive and innocent. The spa looked very much like the scene of a contemporary sentimental novel. The task for women like Abby May was to avoid the fate of The Coquette (1797) or Charlotte Temple (1791). To keep rakes at a safe distance, Abby May projected an image of herself as a refined, sentimental woman, as based on the models of other women she met at the spa. Abby searched for men with refined sensibilities to match her own, but found that most were more concerned with flattery. Her every action and word had an implied message; the trick was to discover the other person’s motives and feelings before revealing one’s own. The spa nurtured Abby’s virtue with gender-segregated activities, group socializing, and the support of the female community. But in many cases these protective devices failed, and Abby relied finally on her own sense and sensibility, as she had in finding a cure for her illness. Despite the many temptations and snares Abby encountered, she used her sense to maintain her independence and reputation.

While at Ballston, Abby spent much of her time alone or in the company of other women. Her typical day began at five in the morning, when she rose to take her bath with the other women at the spring. Abby returned to her room, located in a female-only wing of

¹⁴ Bushman, The Refinement of America, xix, 81, 182, 183, 404.

Aldridge's Hotel, and dressed. She then ate breakfast with the rest of the hotel's guests. Writing filled her mornings; a group dinner followed around one o'clock. Abby came down into the main rooms of the hotel in the afternoon to socialize with the other guests. During this time "we had a variety of amusements — Mr Kain spouted poetry and sung. Mr Cochran read aloud Mr Dupaster flattered. Mr Rogers played back gammon and talked sentiment. Dr Erving cut Miss Clarkes knotting. the ladies, knotted, netted, made tassels, fringe, cut watch papers — knit purses, wove watch chains, braided hair." Men could engage in public demonstrations like singing and oration, but women were confined to fancy work. While men were free to divert themselves as they pleased, women needed to appear busy at their needlepoint in order to watch the men play. These differences in diversions, however, did not prevent mingling. Dr. Erving took the opportunity to sit next to Miss Clarkes, perhaps even to touch her, under the pretext of cutting her knotting.¹⁵

There were other parlor activities that allowed men and women to interact on a very personal basis, albeit in the presence of others. Spa-goers could play backgammon, which Abby enjoyed "with my two Beaux." People might also gather "in the Parlour," where they "each took a Book... or play'd backgammon." Abby passed much of her time in discussion with the other visitors. One afternoon she found that "The conversation was exactly to my mind — Books, Men, Politics, Agriculture — the World, in short passed in review — what can be more pleasing than to hear such subjects discussed by men of sense and refinement." When they grew tired of these diversions, they might "walk to the spring." But a simple game like backgammon became dull very quickly. After a few torrid rounds of rolling dice and moving marble pieces across a felt board, General Philip Van Courtland showed Abby

a new game, called solitary — which required only one person to play it, it consists in filling the chequer board with men — and taking off all but one — I gave my

¹⁵ *JAM*, August 18, p. 112; For a detailed study of women's work, see Chapter 1, "Work" of Nancy Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1977), 19-62. She calls much of late-eighteenth century women's work "cooperative and renumerative social relationships" (19).

head a saucy toss, and said it was just fit for a dumb old Bach, who was doing penance for his folly in living alone — just as I spoke (this was the mischief of it) I recollected this was our General's state — I colour'd, hem'd, and looked like a fool... at last we all joined in a hearty laugh.¹⁶

The incident may have been embarrassing, but Abby had few other recreational choices besides playing solitary, a game designed for one, with the General. There were few people at the spa and even fewer things to do.

Later in the summer, in August, the society grew and the amusements diversified. The new visitors brought a variety of talents with them as well. On occasion music might be offered: "Mr Cooper play'd the Clarionet Doctr Mclean and Lieutenant Turner, the flute — Mr Scammerhorn the violin. we had quite a concert." "Rational conversation" often followed the "elegant music" to form "a charming society." Impromptu theater was also a possibility. "Our long room this evening was converted into a theater — or something of the kind. McGinnis danced upon the Wire and performed tumbling feats. the babes in the wood and a dance by Automatans compleated the entertainments." Babes in the Woods was a popular English ballad from the seventeenth century that recounted the trials of a brother and sister abandoned by bandits hired by their guardian to murder them to obtain the children's inheritance. In the end, the culprits are captured and put to justice. Its twenty highly emotional octets conclude with a moral that advises the listeners to take heed lest the same fate strike those who have mistreated their wards. Such a popular and well-known poem probably generated common reactions from the audience, all of whom responded appropriately to its message, thus displaying their sensibility.¹⁷

¹⁶ JAM, June 6, p. 26; July 25, p. 87; June 9, p. 30; June 21, pp. 45-46; Philip Van Courtland (1749-1831) was an American general in the Revolutionary War, a wealthy Hudson River estate owner, and an early Federalist, though he later became a staunch Jeffersonian (Dictionary of American Biography, X, 162-163). He was the Lieutenant Governor of New York State at the time (Field Horne, The First Respectable House: Brookside and the Growth of Ballston Spa [Ballston Spa, New York: Saratoga County Historical Society, 1984], 20).

¹⁷ JAM, July 29, p. 92; August 4, p. 97; August 17, p. 111. A text of Babes in the Woods is located in Early English Books: 1641-1700 (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University Microforms, 1984), microfilm reel 1560: item 63.

At other times Abby joined in the most popular of spa amusements, the dances and balls that brought men and women together. Dances allowed the sexes interaction on a one-to-one basis, often in close physical contact. One afternoon following tea, “unexpectedly our musician enter’d the room — and a party stood up for a country dance, I marvelled — but in rome, one had better do as the romans do — I danced 2 dances with Mr Tucker, 2 with a captain Turner (a Spruce little officer) and retired.” Her original shock at the event stemmed from a growing opinion among the young members of the upper classes that contra dancing “was emblematic of outmoded and rustic ways.” Abby followed the latest trends.¹⁸

Other events were more formal than the impromptu contra dance: “There came over the governor of Santa Cruz’s compliments to the Ladies.” Robert Dugan, British Governor of the Virgin Islands, “inform[ed] them the Hall was prepar’d by his orders and he asked it as a favour that they would walk over and do him the favour of dancing in it — my mammar Western saw no impropriety in it — but said she would go with us.” Abby was thrilled at the invitation, but needed to check with her de-facto guardian (Mrs. Western filled in for Abby’s mother when Mrs. May left Ballston in mid-July) on etiquette first. Once propriety was assured, the fun began. “In the evening we had a smart ball — all the Company from both houses [or hotels, segregated by gender] — Doctr Anderson — insisted upon my dancing — I refused for some time, but at last (like a fool) stood up... I danced the next dance with Mr Morgan — one with J Bowers — one with Mr Hunt — and two more with the Doctr — smart was I not? to dance every dance but one.”¹⁹

¹⁸ *JAM*, July 26, p. 89; Jack Larkin, *The Reshaping of Everyday Life, 1790-1840* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1988), 244. “Spruce” referred to a person of trim, neat, dapper appearance (*Oxford English Dictionary* 2d ed., XVI [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989], 365).

¹⁹ *JAM*, July 28, p. 91; Home identifies “Santa Cruz” as St. Croix (*The First Respectable House*, 20), as does Alan Burns (*The History of the British West Indies* [New York: Barnes & Noble, 1965], 748). The island came under the administrative control of the Virgin Islands. Dugan was the Governor there from 1796-1801. See Lillian Penson, *The Colonial Agents of the British West Indies* (London: Cass, 1971), 253; *JAM*, July 21, p. 80.

Occasionally the merriments became risqué, as when “the gay party round us proposed playing ‘jingle the keys’ — all... sprang forward — they form themselves into a ring, one in the middle jingles the keys, the renown’d Major Wallach, sung — when the keys are thrown, every one tries for a chair — it was laughable.” The antics involved in this early version of musical chairs were more to Abby’s liking. There was even the possibility that during the rush for the remaining chairs the players of opposite sexes might brush against each other, a type of physical contact that ordinary society would not have tolerated.²⁰

Abby could retreat into the safety of the women’s community at the spa when the daily activities overwhelmed or contact with men threatened her. Being in a strange environment and an unsure social position, Abby relied on other women to introduce her to society and their acquaintances. Abby felt that she owed a debt to her new friends, but was not quite sure how to repay it. She found the answer in “that passage of our divine Milton, [that] wonderfully relieves me ‘A grateful mind, in owing owes not, but still pays, at once indebted, and discharged’ — tis the only way I can square accounts with my numerous Creditors.”²¹

Women provided each other refuge and protection from the dangers of the spa. They were not only companions and confidants, but also models of propriety. In a time when women were identified with the heart and emotions, as Nancy Cott has written, women “would find truly reciprocal interpersonal relationships only with other women.” Mrs. Western, who became Abby’s guardian, mentor and confidant, stood out as a paragon of virtue and sensibility.

Greatly do I wish it were in my power to describe this Woman to you — I cannot find language adequate — She captivates everyone — and by an most undefineable charm seizes the heart — her manners are the most elegant, her air most graceful, her conversation the most clear and refined, her every look the most intelligent and prepossessing of any person I ever knew.

²⁰ JAM, July 23, p. 87; Horne identifies this game as musical chairs (The First Respectable House, 23).

²¹ JAM, August 4, p. 97. From Paradise Lost, Book 4, lines 55-57.

Abby's other friends had excellent qualities as well. "Miss [Catharine] Sedgwick has a highly cultivated mind and a feeling heart — she is much admired... she is not so lovely but her mind — her mind — in the words of Lord Littleton 'to more than merely sense she joins the softening influence of female tenderness.'"²²

Not all women provided the security and companionship that Mrs. Western and Catharine Sedgwick did. Other women were snobs and fashion-plates.

Mrs F[ell, of Charleston, SC] dresses very smart — and I expect has a stock of clothes that will enable them to wear different dresses every day — they brought no less than 7 trunks. two as large as yours [her sister Lucretia] — she has 5 or 6 different bonnets and hats — yesterday she was habited in a spotted muslin trim'd round with green velvet and Lace — a band of the same round her head, and a chip chapeau with a painted handkerchief and wreath of roses upon it — a pearl comb &cc — she is so handsome one cannot help gazing at her.

Women like Mrs. Fell, in the words of Washington Irving, who visited Ballston just a few years later, came to the spa "to exhibit their equipages and wardrobes" and win the "envy of their fashionable competitors." They came to the spa not for their health, but to display their style. Abby did not fit in with these women, especially in terms of her wardrobe. "We find ourselves not a little scrimpt for cloathing — what renders it provoking we might as well have brought more as not — some of our company dress a great deal and you know the old adage 'one fool makes many' however our wardrobe is of a kind to look new whenever tis clean." Abby was jealous of these women and annoyed with herself for not

²² See Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood*, 168; *JAM*, August 10, p. 103; August 14, pp. 107-108. Catharine Sedgwick (1789-1867) was the daughter of the wealthy New Englander Theodore Sedgwick of Stockbridge, Massachusetts. Years later she wrote domestic novels and books about the natural beauty of the Berkshire Mountains (*Dictionary of American Biography* VIII, 547-548); see also Mary Kelley, "A Woman Alone: Catharine Maria Sedgwick's Spinsterhood in Nineteenth-Century America," *New England Quarterly* 51:2 (June 1978), 209-225, and the introduction to her edited version of *Hope Leslie: Or, Early Times in Massachusetts* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1987). George, First Baron Lyttleton (1709-1771) wrote several novels and advice books in the eighteenth century, including *Dialogues of the Dead* (1760) and *Advice to a Lady* (1733).

bringing more clothes. She could not compete in the fashion show. Their style centered around clothes; hers valued sentiment.²³

The spa's prima donnas annoyed Abby. Boston's Mrs. Thomas Amory's "riding dress shew her shape to every possible advantage — nothing was quite good enough to go down her delicate throat at dinner... adding to all this, a supercilious and contemptuous dropping of the eye when any one passed, effectually disgusted our social party." Mrs. Amory's arrogance and vanity contradicted the virtues of modesty and sentiment that Abby admired in other women. Yet despite this, Abby had to admit that, "She is however a beautiful creature. one is almost tempted to say with Pope — If to her some female errors fall/ Look in her face and you'll forget them all."²⁴ Beauty might overcome other faults. Abby could condescend to forgive this woman's flaws, if only to demonstrate her own sincerity and magnanimity. In so doing Abby proved that she was above the petty intrigues and rivalries in which overdressed women engaged. Intelligence, virtue, modesty, and a feeling heart were the qualities that Abby admired. She imitated those at the spa who demonstrated them and begrudgingly acknowledged those who did not.

Solitary walks with a handsome man provided one of Abby's favorite activities. "This morning Mr. French and myself took a walk. he led the way to the Bridge and when there produced paper and pencil — urging my taking a view so beautiful — it was vain to refuse... we neither of us accomplished any thing; the scene had acquir'd so many beauties, we were obliged to look at them, rather than Copy them." Abby perceived French's intentions. Taking her to a scenic overlook and huddling close over a piece of paper, pencil gripped softly in her hands (did French intend the phallic symbolism?), did not make a platonic outing. Yet it was a perfectly acceptable one. Men and women of the time often observed a natural scene and commented on its wonders, with the expectation of

²³ *JAM*, July 12, p. 70; Washington Irving, "Style at Ballston," *Salmagundi No. XVI*, Thursday, October 15, 1807, p. 257. In *Salmagundi*, Bruce I. Granger and Martha Hartzog, eds. (Boston: Twayne, 1977), 256-60; *JAM*, July 23, pp. 49-50.

²⁴ *JAM*, July 2, p. 56.

an “intense emotional or religious response.”²⁵ But it could also have a romantic element. The picturesque, possibly even sublime, view could stir passionate emotions, which might be overwhelming. Abby could only gaze at the view and contemplate what was around her, including Mr. French. Sketching the scene served several purposes: it passed an otherwise dull afternoon, cultivated sensibility, and perhaps even led to romance.

Abby risked becoming the subject of vicious Ballston gossip by spending the afternoon with Mr. French. The spa was “a censorious place, and one cannot be too careful how [she] conduct[s] [herself], whatever we say goes to the [men’s] house. we frequently too are complimented with the credit of speeches we never made... if a Lady is reserved, she is no company... if chatty and social, why ‘how she loves the men.’”²⁶

Abby did not have to look far for what happened to those who violated the unwritten rules of this “censorious place.” Before they spoke, women at the spa had to be certain that the feelings they expressed would be reciprocated before they spoke.²⁷ Otherwise, they might end up like a young woman at the spa, Miss Kissam, who was enthralled with a villain [sic] — by the name of Gillian, [who] has been here about a fortnight — he has paid very particular attention to Miss Kissam — she imprudently walk’d, rode and conversed with him frequently — he (as she says) offerd himself to her — and was rejected — he told the gentlemen round, scandalous (I hope) falsehoods about her — and said he could have her whenever he chose, for she loved him to distraction.

This blossoming relationship was spoiled by the loose-lipped braggart Gillian, who was too eager to boast that Miss Kissam did indeed kiss him. This injustice was a challenge to a certain

Rensselaer Skuyler — who lives at Stillwater but was at the springs — [who] heard, and saw (set a rogue to catch a rogue may we not say the same of a rake?) he told Miss Kissam [that Gillian] was a needy adventurer that, induced by her little

²⁵ *JAM*, June 7, pp. 27-28; John F. Sears, *Sacred Places: American Tourist Attractions in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 13-14.

²⁶ *JAM*, August 4, pp. 98-99.

²⁷ Ellen K. Rothman, *Hands and Hearts: A History of Courtship in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 36. Rothman writes that women held the moral power of sexuality, as men were seen as incapable of controlling their passions (50-54).

paternal fortune, he might perhaps marry her, but that [Gillian] was a gamester, debauchee, and every thing that was bad — however Gillian still attended her.

How would the gallant officer solve the dilemma? “Skuyler, sent for an officer and put [Gillian] under arrest for a 1000£ he owed him.” Abby, however, saw through the scheme. “And now Miss Kissam heard some plain truths — tho! saved from one villainous plot — there yet remain’d enough plotters — she was urged to go to Newyork among her friends.”²⁸

Women found that the safeguards the spa had created to prevent men from seducing women failed to protect women from the advances of men and the censure of other women. Abby constructed her own defense based on the ethic of gentility. Her behavioral code, modeled on the aristocratic courts of Europe, had three basic themes: respect for rank, bodily restraint, and regard for feelings. Pleasure came from the enjoyment of “a society of harmonious and easy intercourse.” The objective was to “separate the false from the true, to purge hypocrisy and vanity... and so to create refined and worthy hearts and minds.” Gentility required proper behavior in an accepted setting with the trappings and symbols of the upper class; it altered all aspects of one’s life. “Everyday activities took on new meaning when carried out in refined environments and in polished forms to suit delicate and tasteful minds.” “Gentility transformed life into a performance in which one’s beauty and grace were constantly on display.” To merit Abby’s attention, men had to conform to the same rules.²⁹

Abby displayed her own refinement and insisted that others respect it. She managed to be simultaneously humble and avant-garde. When she first arrived at Ballston, Abby was the favorite of several men. “We have plenty of Beaus now, and some very good of the kind tho’ some are rather shy — there are but very few Ladies here at present.” Even so, she was not the most popular lady, perhaps because of her appearance.

²⁸ *JAM*, July 22, p. 85. Rensselaer Schuyler was a member of a wealthy and powerful clan, whose seat was the manor at Rensselaerwyck, just south of Albany. He was the mayor of that city at the time and the brother-in-law of Lieutenant Governor Van Courtland. See Horne, *The First Respectable House*, 20.

²⁹ Bushman, *The Refinement of America*, 38, 45, 60, 185, 446.

I think there is some miscalculation in my age, as I can only charm the aged, and so I intend to rectify the mistake, by putting on mob caps, and lawn aprons, round toe'd shoes and spectacles... 'tis therefore high time, I descended into the vale of years, to meet the ancients who feel willing to admit me into their Society — for I would I cannot descend the other side.

Just as she could forgive Catharine Sedgwick for less than perfect looks, so too could Abby see herself as something other than a candidate for marriage. She even did so with a sarcastic wit on more than one occasion.³⁰

Abby had thought one of her suitors, Mr. Morgan, was admirable until she discovered his one failing: “he is a Jacobin — ‘Oh Lucifer son of the morning how thou art fallen’ — but this is nothing to me — I never took any notice of his politics — except one evening — when he asked me to call for my favourite tune I requested ‘Adams & Liberty.’” Morgan must have squirmed upon hearing the boastful lyrics of Robert Treat [né Thomas] Paine’s nine verse campaign song, an unabashed defense of the administration of John Adams and the policies of Federalism.³¹ In Abby’s view, acceptable gentlemen could not support the anarchistic policies of Jefferson and his Francophile friends while being a true advocate of gentility and refinement.³²

To dance with several men, while demurely refusing their attentions at first, was a testimony to both Abby’s elevated manners and popularity. Her manners were tested more than once:

Mr J Bowers came over about five oclock and requested the honour of the Ladies Company at their house to dance in the evening — I refused for positively I was almost (nay quite) tir’d of it ‘Oh but Miss May you must come you are going to

³⁰ *JAM*, July 12, p. 70; June 2, p. 23.

³¹ *JAM*, July 2, p. 56; August 24, p. 128; Thomas Paine, Adams and Liberty: The Boston Patriotic Song 3d ed. (Boston: P.A. vonHagen, 1800), in Charles Evans, American Bibliography... 13 (New York: Smith, 1941), 197 [Microprint 38177]. Apparently this Thomas Paine, a staunch defender of Federalism and the established social order, changed his name lest he be confused with another Thomas Paine, the radical author of Common Sense and Rights of Man.

³² See Mary Beth Norton, Liberty’s Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800 (Boston: Little, Brown, 1980) on women’s roles in politics during and after the American Revolution. Chapter Four of Wiebe, The Opening of American Society, discusses the polarity of national politics along an English-French fault.

leave us on Monday — and tis to take leave of you we dance tonight’ there was no resisting such a plea you know.

Mr. Bowers had called upon her feelings of sympathy, to which she had to respond. After all, how could she refuse a dance in her honor? Her actions indicate that she was less than a reluctant participant in the evening’s entertainment:

The next [dance] I called (Hob Nob) with the Doctr which was very much admired never having been danced here — I foolishly told the Miss the little circumstance of its having been made at our house and by myself — they proclaimed it and it was buz’d round the room quickly — one couple stood up after another to dance ‘Miss Mays dance’ — till at last quite ashamed and tired I begged to sit down.

Ritual humility and honest exhaustion could not hide the performance. Calling a dance and starting a trend was a conspicuous display of Abby’s gentility and haut couture.³³

Her reputation grew as people began to notice the number of letters Abby received from her family. The very fact that she was receiving a large volume of correspondence was a sign of her position and wealth in a time of few post offices and high rates. But the letters meant more than fame and envy to Abby.

I feel very grateful and a degree of pride mixes with my gratitude, when I hear one and another say ‘Well Miss May, you receive more letters than all of us together’ — Rochefoucault says we are fond of exaggerating the love our friends bear us — ‘but it is more a principle of gratitude, than a desire of prejudicing people in our own merit’ — perhaps it is so but dearly do I enjoy a letter from my friends. independent of the consequences attached to it.³⁴

Letter writing was reciprocal; good writers received many letters. Abby was bolstered by the confirmation, in the form of letters, that her family and friends still loved her. She consulted, probably from memory, the French moralist LaRochefoucauld, whose basic precept held that self-love and self-interest controlled all human actions and feelings, for guidance. His writing confirmed that Abby could savor the affection her family bore for

³³ *JAM*, August 22, pp. 119 and 120.

³⁴ See Richard Brown, *Knowledge is Power: The Diffusion of Information in Early America, 1700-1865* (New York: Oxford, 1989), 13, 79; and Brown, “The Emergence of Urban Society in Rural Massachusetts, 1760-1820,” *Journal of American History* 61 (June 1974), 42-50; *JAM*, August 15, p. 108.

her. Abby expressed gratitude for the letters, happy that a bond of love existed between herself and her “friends” at home. True feeling was enough.

Matters worsened when she returned safely from a dangerous voyage across Lake George. “I alighted amid a croud of Beaus, who all flew to welcome me, and congratulate me on my escape from drowning — I felt very much confused and embarrassed, up stairs I made my escape as soon as possible.” The men expected Abby to be available for their perusal and interrogation whenever they felt the whim. What they saw as compliments, Abby took as an assault on her privacy. Yet Abby did not have to cater to these men’s tastes, for as the summer wore on, “our Beaux pretend to lament the arrival of [others] — as they expect to lose consequence by it.” As more people came to the springs, the number of social events, and opportunities to meet men, increased. So did Abby’s sophistication about the men around her and their motives. Abby found these new arrivals to be “of consequence to set my Cap square.” Their presence was not completely enjoyable, however. Abby felt uneasy sitting across the dinner table from a particularly flirtatious lawyer. “How like a fool one feels, in such a situation, while the high and mighty Lords of Creation, as they call themselves — will pick their teeth and stare confidently in your face, not heeding the confusion it occasions.” Despite their high opinion of themselves, such men lacked even the simplest table manners.³⁵

But the men’s transgressions did not stop at the table. “They are forever in our Piazza, for my part, I do not like this encroaching upon our precincts — this upper piazza ought to be sacred to the Ladies.” One lawyer even went so far as to “impertinently come into the Piazza which fronts my window, and throwing open the shutters insisted upon my playing or walking with him.” Abby did not welcome this advance and “felt offended, but as he took a seat before the window I was necessitated to comply and accordingly played two hits — when the arrival of Company gave me an opportunity of decamping.” The

³⁵ *JAM*, July 20, p. 79; June 10, p. 31; July 22, pp. 48-49; June 6, p. 24.

beaux's constant attentions and intrusive stares and arrivals destroyed what little privacy Abby had.³⁶

The cult of sensibility required that there be what Karen Haltunnen has called a "back space", a place where each performer could take off his or her mask of gentility. For Abby, this space was her room. Men constantly assaulted what little personal space she had, which diminished when on July 26 "a number arrived in the evening — from Hudson and Newyork, two of whom partake my Chamber, tis not pleasant." This intrusion into Abby's private space threatened her identity and heightened her insecurity. "I find it so uncomfortable having strangers or indeed any one, in the same room... give me a small chamber to myself, let me have it unmolested and I will not complain" Abby's protestations were heeded, and two days later she had moved to a new room, which she had all to herself. But by the time "eighty boarders including servants" had arrived in mid-August, privacy was virtually impossible. Abby had to interact with all of these people on a daily basis. Whether dining, bathing, reading, or walking, she was never alone.³⁷

Even worse than Abby's lack of privacy were men like Mr. Bowers, who ignored the ideals of sensibility and acted from ignoble motives. At first Mr. Bowers confused Abby. "The persecuting attention of Mr. Bowers quite vexed me — I thought myself secure from all, even civilities from him, as I had heard he 'detested ugly women' and thought a woman who pretended to sense and sentiment, the greatest bore in creation — as I make pretensions to all three — I placed my security there."³⁸

Mr. Bowers' flirtatious behavior angered Abby, especially when she discovered that he was married. Others detected this hostility; rumors soon circulated that Abby had called Mr. Bowers "a sot [and] a deceiver." Abby claimed that "whatever be my thought I had never said so." Abby told her friends how angry she was that Bowers was asserting she

³⁶ JAM, July 23, pp. 87-88; June 7, pp. 28-29.

³⁷ JAM, July 26, p. 89; June 27, p. 89; August 12, p. 104.; Haltunnen, Confidence Men and Painted Women, 102-112.

³⁸ JAM, July 20, p. 77.

had said such things. Bowers only exacerbated the situation when he tried to apologize for the misunderstanding. Abby wrote that “He took a seat at my side, and open’d Langhorns ‘fables of Flora’ gave me the ‘sunglower [sic] and ivy’ to read, saying ‘tis applicable to you.” The poem, which tells of a nun who contemplates the joys of living outside the convent in language that shallowly hides the sexual undercurrents of the work, did not assuage Abby. “in short his conduct shortened my visit, for his every look seem’d to say ‘you have grieved your poor little heart about me, I must try to please you till you forget it’ oh! these men!”³⁹

It was not so much the content as the style of Bower’s apology that angered Abby. He did not try to make amends with a heartfelt and sincere apology, but rather with the flattery at which men of his type were so adept. Abby responded by saying: ““Mr. Bowers the next time you feel disposed to shew you within this way I hope you will be treated as you deserve — with silent contempt.”” Abby stormed out of the room and eventually “condescended to forgive him.” She could not resist a general comment on men like Bowers, however. “Tis necessary I find to call forth all the dignity one is possessed of, to command proper respect from such a character.” His transgression rested in not treating Abby as an intelligent woman, but rather as a potential target for seduction. Abby inverted the power relationship by assuming a superior position before forgiving the inferior, chauvinist Bowers.⁴⁰

Abby fumed over “these Libertines. those are best off who never see one.” There was danger in men like Bowers. She referred to Bowers once more in the journal, recalling a conversation where she said: ““I will tell you Mr Bowers, there are some gentlemen whom

³⁹ *JAM*, July 22, pp. 82 and 83; John Langhorne (1735-1779), *Fables of Flora*. Evans’ *American Bibliography...* lists a third edition printed in London, 1771. “The Sunglower [sic] and Ivy” was one of eleven poems based on various flowers like Evening Primrose, Wall-Flower, and Passion Flower. I examined an 1804 edition printed in Philadelphia by A.R. Poole (Swem Library Rare Books, College of William & Mary).

⁴⁰ *JAM*, July 22, p. 83.

the less we know of them the better. you happen to be one of that description.” Abby had little patience for Bowers, of whom she could only say, “I hate — I detest him.”⁴¹

Abby evaluated Bowers and most of the other men she encountered at Ballston in terms of contemporary literature. This was especially useful when she wanted to criticize people for not measuring up to the standards set in the literature she read. For instance, one of her beaux, “Townsend, has lately returned from China — is a sensible, shrewd observer, but no Chesterfieldian.”⁴² Lord Chesterfield was the recognized authority on the necessary social accomplishments of gentlemen. His Letters to His Son and Principles of Politeness, anthologies of missives to his illegitimate son instructing him on the best ways to become a respected gentleman (and seduce women), were published posthumously and recommend the steps any young man should take to gain respectability. In Chesterfield’s view, a man should not tell lies; he should avoid excessive drinking; eschew hunting, horse racing, and gambling; have affairs with only the most cultivated women; refuse bribes but not be above giving them; read the proper literature and receive a good education; be energetic and industrious in all affairs; and above all cultivate refined manners. The lessons the letters taught could be put to good or ill purposes. Chesterfield came to be seen as a “primer for opportunists,” and the term “Chesterfieldian” was used at that time to describe “one who is unscrupulously concerned with social position.” Contemporaries disliked the “apparent emphasis on appearance and manners to the exclusion of virtues and real substance.” Apparently Townsend did not measure up to these dubious standards.⁴³

However, Chesterfield’s advice could produce men who practiced sensibility and seduction, sometimes even at the same time. One of their favorite tools was flattery:

⁴¹ JAM, July 22, p. 83; August 15, p. 109.

⁴² JAM, June 6, p. 25.

⁴³ Fliegelman, Prodigals and Pilgrims, 242; Richard L. Bushman, “American High-Style and Vernacular Cultures,” in Colonial British America: Essays in the New History of the Early Modern Era, Jack P. Greene and J.R. Pole, eds., (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 352-355; F.L. Lucas, The Search for Good Sense (New York: Macmillan, 1961), 154; Haltunnen, Confidence Men and Painted Women, 94-96; Bushman, The Refinement of America, 36.

buz, buz, our ears are assailed on every side with compliments — addressed equally to old and young ugly or handsome — ‘tis the Ladies, must be flattered — ‘tis the part of the gentleman to administer the soothing essence — oh if I had not determined to be very cautious — almost to put a seal upon my lips I could — I feel that I could, make some of our Jessamys acknowledge all women are not so weak as to swallow the dose however applied — Chesterfield says, you may safely flatter a Woman from her understanding down to the exquisite taste of her fan, no flattery is either too high or too low for them.⁴⁴

She did not want the attention of these “Jessamys,” men modeled on the rake in Royall Tyler’s contemporary play The Contrast (1787), who would do anything to seduce a woman. At one point in the play Jessamy exclaims: “Vulgar, horrid brute! Married, and above a hundred miles from his wife, and thinks that an objection to his making love to every woman he meets! He never can have read, no, he never can have been in a room with a volume of the divine Chesterfield.”⁴⁵

More of Abby’s literature ratified people’s shortcomings. Abby wrote that Mr. Baldwin “is a pretty spruce young man — but owes all his smart to the army, and as Goldsmith observes he must hope for success, more from the powder on the outside of his head, than the sentiment within.”⁴⁶ If a man was to win Abby’s approval, he needed to have the character of a proper gentleman, and, more importantly, a kind and caring heart. Outward appearances did not deceive Abby. She wanted true sentiment from within.

Books served as more than guidebooks to gender relations. They conveyed romantic messages as well. When a Mr. K., who had “exhausted his stock of ideas upon the ladies,” began making advances on Abby, she knew how to react.

so taking hold of my arm he began quoting from Thompsons seasons with much theatric gesture and killing glances. we walked on and got to the centre of a bridge when he stop’d and began ‘but happy they the happiest of their kind’ he held me fast and went thro the passage with great correctness and emphatic display of

⁴⁴ JAM, August 20, p. 115.

⁴⁵ Royall Tyler, The Contrast (New York: American Manuscript Society, 1970), 58.

⁴⁶ JAM, June 16, p. 39.

feeling — I saw the girls laughing immoderately. and I could have join'd them nay for that matter did.

The selection comes from the “Spring” section of The Seasons, which concludes with “the love that has been evoked in the loveliness of nature.” Perhaps Mr. K. hoped that the idealized softness of love portrayed in the poem would overwhelm Abby and he would succeed in seducing her. But Abby understood his intentions and the poem’s meaning immediately and returned her own symbol, laughter, whose significance was equally blunt.⁴⁷

Abby measured other men by similar standards of gentility. Mr. Morgan was “a sensible rational man, and moreover a man of sentiment & taste” after an evening of conversation. She “passed [her] time very agreeably with Mr. Morgan — books, sentiment, music, taste, and Beauty — were some of our topics — he is an elegant minded man.” One afternoon, while walking beneath a summer sky filled with puffy white clouds, “he made some delightful observations upon the ‘Heavens above’ and the ‘Earth beneath’ — he spoke in so soft a voice, and look’d so much more than he said.”⁴⁸

As the conversation turned personal, Abby remembered that regard for the feelings of her partner was essential. Apparently Mr. Morgan had “lost a darling wife and Child.” This tragedy improved Morgan in Abby’s eyes, as she noted that “a pensive softness very interesting is his characteristic.” But Abby was not the only one to express her sympathy. She soon learned that Mr. Morgan “seems to sympathize very sincerely in my misfortune — I love to be pitied by the good.” Abby and Mr. Morgan showed the each other their pity; they displayed their goodness. In genteel circles discussion was a performance that reflected one’s character. It was an intricate dance “couched in a high diction and formal

⁴⁷ JAM, August 17, pp. 110-1. This passage is the opening line (1113) the final section of “Spring.” (James Thomson, The Seasons and the Castle of Indolence, James Sambrook, ed., [Oxford: Clarendon, 1984], 33.) For an excellent analysis of the poem, see Ralph Cohen, The Unfolding of The Seasons (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970), 85.

⁴⁸ JAM, July 7, p. 61; July 9, p. 63; July 11, pp. 65-66.

syntax that sustained the exchange on a lofty plane.” Abby and Morgan were able to perform it to perfection.⁴⁹

Another day Mr. Morgan created a perfect setting for sentiment when he invited Abby and others on a walk. Strolling through the woods, they suddenly found that in the midst of wild bushes and tall pines, was erected a delightful arbour, or bowry — 20 feet square — open at the sides, but the top covered with green boughs, and the hemlock hung over the sides like a fringe — with four posts which supported the roof were bound round with green — and red and white holly oak — pots of flowers were distributed — and benches placed round the sides — in the centre was a table handsomely covered with, syllabub, cream, raspberries, currants, cakes, rusk, &c. a cooler, contain’d liquor for the gentlemen — the effect was delightful — and we were quite at a loss to express our pleasure at the scene.

To complete the mood, “Morgan spouted poetry — prose, he said would not do there — as his selections were apropos, they were very pleasing.”⁵⁰

Mr. French displayed genuine feelings as well. Abby passed an evening “very pleasingly with Mr French,” who was “gentle and contrite — and really we had an interesting & rational Discourse, upon Men, Matters, and Modes.” He “attended to me, with the kindest solicitude — and were my situation different, I should suppose he was making Love, according to Sterne’s definition ‘A series of small quiet attentions, not so pointed as to alarm, nor so vague as to be misunderstood.’” French’s interests were not seductive, but rather honorable. She attributed French’s attraction to her “‘Sensibility! source inexhaustible, of all that’s precious in our joys or pleasing in our sorrow, ‘tis here I trace thee’ — tis to thy influence I ascribe the feeling and sympathetic interest, which a stranger envinces for my happiness.” She thought that Mr. French, “who seeing my forlorn situation, strove by every, the most delicate attention, to amuse, and instruct me — I never met with a more delicate mind.” He was a compassionate man who attended to

⁴⁹ JAM, July 9, p. 63; Bushman, *The Refinement of America*, 83, 91.

⁵⁰ JAM, July 12, pp. 67-68.

Abby in the proper way: he offered only condolence and amusement, not passion and licentiousness.⁵¹

Mr. French offered Abby a token of his friendship when he left Ballston on June 13. “Mr. French put Rochefoucaults Maxims into my Hand, saying ‘I wish I had anything here to offer worthy your acceptance, but it will gratify me to think you have a Trifle however small, to remind you of me.’ he urged for some of my drawings, but I positively refused — the Book, I could not avoid accepting.”⁵² The meaning of French’s present was mixed. LaRochefoucauld’s Maxims was not a book with great romantic content (it emphasizes the selfishness of man) but the fact that it was intended as a remembrance of Mr. French gave it extra importance. Lest French think that Abby had romantic feelings for him, she refused to give him her drawings, personal and emotion-laden objects, in return. As kind and considerate as Mr. French had been, she could not give him such a strong expression of her self.

All of these men expressed their feelings through literature, whether their intentions were seduction or friendship. The exception was Abby’s physician, Dr. Anderson. His frequent visits and ministrations put him in closer contact with Abby than any other gentleman she met. He also exhibited the qualities that were so appealing to Abby. “I had quite a pleasing conversation with him last evening in the Piazza before our windows — and find his blue eyes do not deceive — in promising at every glance, good sense, and a cultivated mind in the possessor — with great delicacy and softness of manners.” When the doctor poured mineral water over her hand and massaged it while gently looking her in the eye and speaking softly (in his best bedside manner), Abby felt her heart flutter. She mused, “twould it not be wonderful, if I was to feel a pang for Dr A — handsome, agreeable, tender, affectionate, assiduous.” Soon thereafter she confided, “I assure you I feel myself in danger — and greatly fear the remedy — will be as bad as the disease... his

⁵¹ JAM, July 25, p. 87; June 6, p. 26. The quote is from Laurence Sterne, A Sentimental Journey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 27; see Rothman, Hands and Hearts, 36-37.

⁵² JAM, June 13, pp. 34-35.

blue eyes look so divinely — and his voice is so sweet — I protest the mischief is done already (I fear it will not wait for my cure).” Abby was in love, whether she wanted to admit it or not. She despaired that “if while he mended the hand he should mar the heart — and for that (alas! what shall I do) there is not a cure — not even spring water, unless you lay under it long enough.” In ill health and poor spirits, Abby became infatuated, despite her own reservations, with the young doctor.⁵³

Word of the budding romance spread quickly. By early August Abby noted that “I am so continually pester’d about the young Physician, so much is said of him when he is away, that when he comes, I cant if I Die, help my Cheeks Glowing.” But Abby was hesitant to declare her affections, and resented the insinuations and rumor mongering of the people at the spa. She wrote: “my obligations to him are great whether he succeeds [at curing me] or no and I am ready to quarrel with the world, or rather some of its inhabitants, for making it necessary for us, to act a part foreign to our Hearts.” Abby wanted only her true feelings for Anderson to show, regardless of what others said. The relationship never matured as Abby hoped, and by the end of the summer she feared that she and the doctor had grown apart.

I hope! again I say hope the Doctor is only my friend from disinterested motives — yet he colours whenever I meet him — appears confused if I speak — and talks to everyone with more freedom than myself — however if he has heard these reports (to a modest man and he is one) it might occasion all these symptoms — and so I leave him.

The doctor did not have the same attraction that Abby did; his attentions were of the professional sort. Perhaps Abby had misread his blushing and talk as romance, when it was his way of expressing his reluctance to enter into a romantic liaison with a woman who was his patient. Still, Dr. Anderson fit Abby’s ideal.

I do like to see a man possess feeling. why should they be ashamed of having hearts capable of sensibility — ought it not rather to be wished for — I declare it enobles a man in my eyes — and tis that trait in his character I most admire — he

⁵³ *JAM*, July 6, p. 58; June 21, p. 46; June 23, p. 49; June 21, p. 46.

blushes, often sighs when he gives pain — and if any one relates a melancholy tale — will not be ashamed to feel moved by it.⁵⁴

But Dr. Anderson failed to express his feelings. When Abby's coach left the hotel for her return to Boston, he neglected to see her off. The one man she could love did not reciprocate.

Abby criticized the social circles at Ballston throughout her stay. She found life there dull and pointless. “Never (I believe) was a set of people so hurried, with having nothing to do.” A later commentator referred to “a delicious life of alternate lassitude and fatigue, of laborious dissipation, and listless idleness, of sleepless nights, and days spent in that dozing insensibility which ever succeeds them.” The aimless scurrying and lounging of the visitors troubled Abby. “We talk laugh drink eat walk read play sing every thing but work — in short we are almost hurried to death.” Here was a collection of people, some very near death, spending most of their time at pointless amusements. The hectic pace did little to improve their health, and may even have hastened their demise. She decreed: “lo! all ye weary mortals who feel time a burthen and exercise all your faculties to kill it as it goes. come to the springs — here without the trouble of thinking what shall be done with the hour — days weeks and months slip away imperceptably.” So much so that people did not recognize their declining health. Abby wondered how people “can dance and sing, while disease and death continually stare them in the face.” That was the irony of spa life: people thought the waters and countless amusements would cure them, when in reality the spa dissipated their health. People boasted of the curative powers of the spa's waters; few spoke of the corrupting influence of its contrived society.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ *JAM*, August 4, p. 98; August 21, p. 118; August 24, p. 123.

⁵⁵ *JAM*, July 5, p. 58; Irving, “Style at Ballston,” 259. Washington Irving stayed at the same hotel as Abby did and etched his name on a pane of glass in his room on August 13, 1802. [In the collections of the Brookside Museum, Saratoga County Historical Society; see Cerefin, “Growth and Decline of Ballston Spa Hotels,” 11.]; *JAM*, July 8, pp. 61-62; August 8, p. 101; May 26, p. 11.

Abby found spa life to be both distracting and dangerous. The restraints and bonds of community were diminished in this new setting. The hierarchy and established social order fell before the emerging society and its ideal of sensibility. Rakes and coquettes gambled reputation and virtue in an unconsolidated society with few rules. A young woman like Abby had to be aware of the conniving men who appeared safe, but might be after more than sentiment. Abby combated this situation by establishing a circle of female friends whom she could trust. Her Mother, Mrs. Western, and Catharine Sedgwick provided a model for propriety and a support group. With their help, she could refine her sentimental heart and project that image to those around her. The problem was that crafty men, schooled in the refinements of Lord Chesterfield, could manipulate that standard and use it to their advantage. Just because a man quoted the correct passage did not mean that he was genuine. Abby negotiated these shoals with wit and intelligence. She was able to detect the motives of those around and foil them when their intentions were not honorable.

Her summer at Ballston was in part an attempt to cultivate and display her refinement, cure her illness, and preserve her virtue in the unstable society of the early national period. In a world in which sensibility and true feeling were the lingua franca of social intercourse, Abby had to distinguish between those who manipulated the language and symbols of sentiment for base (often sexual) purposes and the few who adhered to its true tenets. It was only because Abby was stronger and smarter than the conniving men and had the support of some of her fellow women there that she managed to ward off unwanted advances and maintain her refinement. But in the end those very standards prevented Abby from realizing the strongest and most desired of her emotions: her love for Dr. Anderson. The cult of sensibility both defined true feeling and, because of its ritualized performance, prevented its actualization.

LITERARY IMITATION AND SELF-CONSTRUCTION

Thomas Selby, a character in Hannah Webster's 1797 novel, The Coquette, believed that "Every woman is, at heart, a rake.' How else can we account for the pleasure which they evidently receive from the society, the flattery, the caresses of men of that character?" He answered his own question by stating, "It cannot be the result of her education. Such a one as she has received, is calculated to give her a very different turn of mind."¹ Women of the late-eighteenth century were encouraged to read works of religion, philosophy, natural science, and poetry to cultivate refined sensibilities and elevate morals. For women like the fictional Eliza Wharton, who is seduced and ruined as a result of her coquettish practices, education proved inadequate. Abigail May faced a similar problem of achieving sensibility while maintaining independence and morality in a hostile world.

Abby believed that "a good mind, well stored was equal to every calamity."² She accumulated her "store" of readings to enable her to converse, express her sentiments, and negotiate the dangerous social world of the spa. Like Eliza Wharton, Abby read the leading authors of her day. But while Eliza succumbed to the advances of a rake, Abby successfully remained independent and virtuous. Abby's reading and writing reveal her as a woman working within the bounds of social acceptability to establish her own sensibility and seek solace from adversity. She, like so many other authors of her time, read widely and wrote imitatively. The self-consciousness she achieved, and the writing and reading she did to cultivate it, was heavily laden with the burden of gender. Abby inhabited a world of privilege and comfort, yet was able to take the texts it recommended to her and convert

¹ Hannah Webster Foster, The Coquette; Or, The History of Eliza Wharton: A Novel (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939), 78.

² Journal of Abigail May [JAM], August 10, 1800, p. 103.

them, often imitatively, into an expression of self and female autonomy. Abby's journal was as much a lesson in womanhood as it was a literary exercise.

Abby chose the books she read in an effort to develop the sense and sensibility that were so important to women of the early republic. She wrote: "let me see why I cannot go to work and manufacture some vanity, some of the essence of good opinion. — I have surely materials enough for the groundwork." Abby cited her looks, intelligence, manners, and ability to dance and converse as assets. As important as these qualities were, she needed to expand her intellectual store to become a sentimental woman. By reading widely in the literature of her age, Abby could find the correct quotes to describe her emotions. While Abby demonstrated keen and witty insights when describing the concrete social world around her, she relied on the words of others when expressing sentiment or talking about herself. Women like Abby May and Catherine Morland, the protagonist Jane Austen's Northanger Abbey, "must read to supply their memories with those quotations which are so serviceable and soothing in the vicissitudes of their eventual lives." Writing her journal and quoting the proper authors were part of her education of "polite accomplishments" appropriate for the new woman charged with the duty of preserving the moral order of the nation. Indeed, journal writing was so much a part of the spa that Austen could describe a conversant's response when Catherine Morland suggested that she might not keep a journal in this way: "'Not keep a journal! How are your absent cousins to understand the tenour of your life in Bath without one? How are the civilities and compliments of every day to be related as they ought to be, unless noted down every evening in a journal?'" For Abby, her journal served as the mirror into which she gazed to assess herself each day.³

³ JAM, August 12, p. 105; Jane Austen, Northanger Abbey, (London: Penguin, 1985), 39, 48-49; see especially Mary Kelley, Private Women. Public Stage: Literary Domesticity in Nineteenth Century America (New York: Oxford, 1984), chaps. 3 and 5; Linda Kerber, Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), chaps. 7 and 9; and Nancy Cott, The Bonds of Womanhood: "Women's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), chap. 3.

Abby relied on a local printer and bookseller in Boston, Isaiah Thomas, for her supply of readings. Twelve of the twenty titles she mentions had been printed in America by 1800. Of these, seven bear the imprint of Isaiah Thomas in the most recent eighteenth-century edition. Presumably, Abby would have bought and read the most recent and locally-available imprint of any work. The May family, living in Boston, most likely purchased its books from Thomas, who printed his books in Worcester, Massachusetts and sold them in his Boston store. Thomas may have been the most convenient bookseller, or the one with the most imprints or the most fashionable in Boston; whatever the case, he published the books Abby May read.

Abby did not identify the origin of all of the books she mentions, and in most cases refers to them only in passing. Of the three titles she took with her from Boston to Ballston Spa, one was issued in four Philadelphia editions between 1777 and 1791 (Milton's Paradise Lost), one (The Bible) can be assumed to have been printed in Boston at the time, and the last had but two American printings, both in 1795, one of which was by Thomas (Charlotte Smith's Elegiac Sonnets). The remainder of the references do not list a source or are too vague to allow identification of their origin. However, the fact that the most recent editions in America were printed by Thomas in nearby Worcester and that Abby had at least some books from that shop indicate a trend toward purchasing recently printed editions from local printers and sellers when possible, and particularly from Thomas.⁴

One particular case spells out this practice. In her journal, Abby referred several times to the writings of Chesterfield and LaRochefoucauld, both of whose works were printed by Thomas in 1794 and 1798, respectively (the latest American edition in both cases). However, the writings of both men appear together in several anthologies published in the 1790s. The most prominent of these was The New Complete Letter Writer; or, the Art of Correspondence, a collection of letters and writings designed to help elevate the reader to refined manners by urging him to model his own letters on the text. Significantly, Thomas

⁴ Data gathered from Charles Evans, American Bibliography... (New York: Peter Smith, 1941).

issued the anthology twice, in 1794 and 1798. To a young woman like Abby May, trying to enter into polite society by learning and following its conventions, a comprehensive book that prescribed the path to success and advised the reader of the evils and dangers of society, was invaluable. It was by reading through a book like The New Complete Letter Writer, rather than individual copies of authors' works, that Abby was exposed to Chesterfield and LaRochefoucauld. (In fact, she misspells "Rochefoucauld" the same way that the guidebook does.) Again, Isaiah Thomas provided the most recent and readily available edition of the text.

Abby relied on Thomas for her selections while she stayed in Ballston as well. She mentions the book trade in her journal in reference to Thomas' business associates in Albany, the city nearest to the spa: "Tis said that Mr. Andrews was assisted by her Father [Theodore Sedgwick] in getting into business as a printer. he is now the Editor of a paper in Albany." Loring Andrews began his publishing career in the Massachusetts capital in 1788 but lasted only a year in his partnership at the Herald newspaper, moving to Stockbridge, Massachusetts to found his own Western Star in 1789. His business comprised publishing the paper and printing religious materials, with an occasional digression into patriotic orations or the laws of nearby Williams College.⁵

After several apparently successful years (the number of his imprints increasing steadily) Loring Andrews moved to Albany, New York in 1797 and joined the Albany Centinel, in a joint partnership with an Albany bookseller, Obadiah Penniman, and two Boston printers, one of whom was Abby's own Isaiah Thomas. After fifteen months Loring Andrews became sole proprietor of the paper in October, 1798, and obtained additional work as the official printer for the State of New York. The breakup of the partnership must have been amicable, for Loring Andrews continued to print books for Penniman's store (partly owned by Thomas and another Boston printer, E.T. Andrews)

⁵ JAM, August 5, 1800, p. 100. Loring Andrews was related (son) to E.T. Andrews, Isaiah Thomas' partner in Boston, with whom he got his start in publishing. Richard D. Birdsall supports Abby's claim that Sedgwick helped Andrews get into the printing business in Berkshire County: A Cultural History (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1959), 187.

after leaving. Abigail May's contact with Andrews might seem casual and of little consequence, but it indicates a direct connection to the Boston printers. Knowing Andrews, a man who was a partner in a major Albany bookstore and part of the expanding publishing empire of Isaiah Thomas and E.T. Andrews, offered her access to a large number of books. At Ballston Abby was more comfortable doing business with a familiar name and company— perhaps Thomas referred Abby to Andrews. That Andrews held traditional religious and Federalist political beliefs similar to Abby's did not hurt.⁶

When Abby read the books that Thomas and L. Andrews provided her, it was often not alone, but rather in the presence of other women. On more than one occasion she reported that "our afternoon was spent in reading, or rather I read aloud to the Ladies." The subject of the readings varied, but was appropriate for a group of women to share together.⁷ She wrote her journal for a similarly defined group, her sisters and female friends. She told them that, "as you say my journal will give you pleasure, I shall without any preambles write the events of each day as they present, and by private conveyance transmit them to you."⁸ Abby presented her letters to her mother for approval before mailing them. In one passage she wrote of a family friend's illness, Abby's mother disapproved and ordered Abby to "intirely suppress" the mention. Abby sent it on to her sister, however, saying that

this half sheet may be suppressed without injuring the journal — and when you have read it you had better destroy it — perhaps I had better do it myself — but I am not willing you should lose a scrap however insignificant — and too well do I

⁶ All of this data is collected from Charles Evans, American Bibliography... by referencing R.P. Bristol, Index of Printers, Publishers, and Booksellers Indicated by Charles Evans in his American Bibliography (Charlottesville, Virginia: Bibliographical Society of the University of Virginia, 1961). There is no direct evidence that Abby bought or received any books from L. Andrews, but the connection to Thomas only strengthens the relationship that existed between her readings and the printings of Thomas' company. For an explanation of Andrews, see Birdsall, Berkshire County, 33-34, 51, 79, 186-192.

⁷ JAM, August 2, p. 96. Cathy Davidson has proposed these reading groups as typical of women's reading in Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 114.

⁸ JAM, June 24, p. 3.

know your steadiness and equanimity to think you would rather be kept in ignorance than know the truth.⁹

Abby kept nothing from her sister, no matter how inappropriate it might be. Abby wrote for a select audience she knew well and could confide in (her sisters and friends), which allowed her to discuss such sensitive issues.

Her purpose was similar to that of the only female writer she mentioned, Charlotte Smith. In the introduction to her poems, Smith suggested that she first gave her work to her friends, who then put the poems “into the prints of the day in a mutilated state.” Charlotte Smith, like Abby May, wrote for circumscribed groups of women they knew well and trusted. Their letters sustained face-to-face networks that distance rendered incomplete. Their writing to a select audience affected the style, content, and method of their writing. Women in the 1790s were not supposed to lead public lives.¹⁰

Abby may have chosen her readings based on contemporary advice books like The New Complete Letter Writer, which contained excerpts from authors she referred to in her journal, like Chesterfield and LaRochefoucauld. The text also contained form letters for different social occasions written by “Writers Eminent for Perspicuity and Elegance of Expression” on such topics as “Business, Friendship, Love and Marriage, Courtship, Politeness, Economy, Affection, Amusement, Duty, Advice, Religion, &c.” These letters gave the type of advice and information that Abby could have used in cultivating her sensibility, that Abby followed stylistically, if not always thematically.¹¹

⁹ JAM, July 23, p. 52.

¹⁰ Charlotte Smith, Elegaic Sonnets (London: Printed for J. Dodsley, H. Gardner, and J. Bew, 1771), iv. This third edition is contained in a collection of other poetry and prose assembled from different printings and then bound together. Swem Library Rare Books, College of William & Mary; Margo Culley, ed., A Day at a Time: The Diary Literature of American Women from 1764 to the Present (New York: Feminist Press, 1985), 2-8; and Estelle C. Jelinek, The Tradition of Women's Autobiography: From Antiquity to the Present (Boston: Hall, 1986), 67; see especially chap. 5, “Daughters, Wives, Mothers: Domestic Roles and the Mastery of Affective Information, 1765-1865,” of Richard D. Brown’s Knowledge is Power: The Diffusion of Information in Early America, 1700-1865 (New York: Oxford, 1989); and chaps. 8 and 9 of Kerber, Women of the Republic.

¹¹ The New Complete Letter Writer; or, the Art of Correspondence (Boston: I. Thomas and E.T. Andrews, 1794), 1. Earlier in this paper I established Thomas as the source of most of Abby’s books. This leads me to believe that if Abby had read any advice books, it would have been the one printed by Thomas.

Letter XXXV, “To A Young Lady, on the Amusements of the Female Sex,” offers basic advice on the activities that were acceptable for a young woman of Abby’s time. It recommends “Such books as improve your understanding, enlarge your knowledge, and cultivate your taste.” The writer, a male, advised outdoor exercise as a key to good health. He also promoted needlework and knitting to “enable you to fill up in a tolerably agreeable way, some of the many solitary hours you must necessarily pass at home.” Young women, all of whom were prospective wives, needed such a domestic education. Drama also served as an acceptable amusement, so long as the play remained not “particularly offensive to delicacy.” Instead, the author preferred tragedy, for “its sorrows will soften and ennoble your heart.” The book would produce sensitive, sentimental women. Having offered these prescriptions, the author qualified his advice on books by saying that “reading and late hours — [are] equally enemies to health and beauty.” Superficial refinement, not intellectual development, was the goal. With these general recommendations, a young lady might mold her character and preserve her virtue by following its prescriptions and prohibitions.¹²

Letter CXI, “On Female Accomplishments, By a Lady,” suggested the types of reading and education that a woman should pursue. “The principal study I would recommend, is history. I know of nothing equally proper to improve and strengthen at the same time.” Abby followed this advice by reading Heath’s Memoirs, the journal of an American Revolutionary War general. The author went on to say that “Nothing you can read will contribute to [the imagination] as poetry.” Abby’s reading of Charlotte Smith’s Elegiac Sonnets, Milton’s Paradise Lost and Il Penseroso, bits of Shakespeare, James Thomson’s The Seasons, and John Langhorne’s Fables of Flora all fulfilled this recommendation. Natural philosophy was classified as “too large a field for you to undertake,” and Abby avoided such works, but agreed with the author that “in the study of nature you will find a most sublime pleasure.” She read two nature poems, Thomson’s The

¹² The New Complete Letter Writer, 39-42.

Seasons and Langhorne's Fables of Flora. The author further advised that "Moral philosophy, as it relates to human action, is of still higher importance... many of the moral essays that have appeared in periodical papers... are particularly useful to young people." Abby read The Connoisseur, a periodical concerning taste, manners, and morals, Edmund Burke's A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful, and LaRochefoucauld's Moral Maxims. These selections were meant to cultivate sensible, caring women. They challenged the female reader, but not too strenuously. Women so schooled in writing would be good mothers and ensure public virtue.¹³

Beyond simply reading the appropriate texts, mothers had to be able to teach their children proper writing styles. By following the advice in The New Complete Letter Writer, Abby hoped to become an elegant writer, though writing was a laborious activity for Abby. She punctuated several passages in her letters with tentative rambling about her failings as an author, once even calling her efforts "the incoherent mess I wrote last evening, to fill up the page." She attempted to duplicate a literary standard that required her to write evocatively, with elaborate descriptions. Abby recognized this, and felt that her writing did not quite equal the literary models she espoused. Abby was, like so many in the eighteenth century, an imitative writer. Charlotte Smith wrote lines like "Ah!— for their future fate how many tears/ Oppress my heart— and fill mine eyes with tears!" Abby countered with "Sensibility! source inexhaustible, of all that's precious in joys or pleasing in our sorrow, 'tis here I trace thee." Emotional, exclamation-ridden phrases characterize both women's writing. To equal the form of another author, as Abby tried, marked one as virtuous and refined. She read the recommended works and applied them to her daily experiences.¹⁴

¹³ The New Complete Letter Writer, 178-180. See Kerber, Women of the Republic, 247 for a description of the usefulness of history in female education. Her general emphasis on moral learning applies to other works as well.

¹⁴ JAM, June 21, p. 45; Smith, Elegaic Sonnets, 28; JAM, June 6, p. 26; Abby wrote a epistolary journal of her residence in Portland, Maine during 1796. It is also located in the May-Goddard Papers at the Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College.

Early in the summer she wrote, “My journal is quite a different affair from what I expected — habituated to the fire side, and very unused to traveling — I concluded it requir’d only the means to commence Traveller, and elegant writing would follow.” In an age of travel narratives and the Grand Tour, she had many models to follow. By Abby’s own estimation, however, she did not write elegantly, despite the many evocative scenes she witnessed. On the stagecoach ride from Boston to Ballston, there were plenty of sites suitable for Abby’s journal, but “when any object particularly pleased me... I would think: how entertaining this will be to the girls — and supposing it would be in my power to remember every particular; but alas! they have entirely evaporated.”¹⁵ Her daily experiences provided the material, but Abby humbly disparaged her ability to transmit them to the page. Abby felt that “My head is not equal to forming into any order, a description of its feelings — Scarce a day passes that I am not conscious of being completely Sternified — but it never reaches my pen.” Laurence Sterne had traveled to France and Italy and written an account (A Sentimental Journey) that both chronicled his experiences and offered insight into the character of the people he met and the finer points of sensibility. Abby was unable to express her own observations and equal Sterne’s accomplishment, which so many women of her time admired; his relaxed patter was too difficult to imitate. Abby had the refined feelings of sensibility that were advanced by Sterne, but was incapable of putting them down on paper. Despite the many places she visited and the various people she met, none proved as interesting or insightful as the experiences Sterne described. Abby struggled with her own emotions, but did not trust her literary ability enough to express them.¹⁶

When Abby felt her writing was ineffective, she was not afraid to criticize it. “Away my pen, till I feel better — oh fye, what a paragraph I have written, I wish I could obliterate it.” She seems to be conforming to a convention of literary modesty here. But her

¹⁵ JAM, June 11, pp. 31-32; May 26, p. 10.

¹⁶ JAM, June 11, p. 32; Herbert Ross Brown, The Sentimental Novel in America, 1789-1860 (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1940), 91; Kelley, Private Women, Public Stage, xi.

humility hides what upon closer analysis is a witty, descriptive, and affective writing style. Abby's most insightful moments come when she describes the society around her; her efforts falter and she relies on other author's words when writing about her own emotions. By her own estimation Abby wrote poorly, but compared to the models she espoused, her efforts shone.¹⁷

Abby offered her illness as an excuse for her inability to write well. As her condition worsened, so too did the quality of her journal entries. "I find I am less able to bear affliction with fortitude: at a time when I expected to show the most. it has till now been my opinion that a good mind, well stored was equal to every calamity — either my theory, or mind is deficient — and greatly I fear the latter." Rather than overcoming her illness, she crumbled under it. Edmund Burke instructed that "bodily pain, in all modes and degrees of labour, pain, anguish, torment, is productive of the sublime." Her belief that adversity bred excellence was shattered by her own performance. Apparently sentiment, the quality Abby tried so hard to cultivate, succumbed to her illness. Abby knew that people had written well under duress, yet felt that she could not.

we read examples, of the soul's apparently new vigour and powers hitherto unknown from affliction; and under its grasp the brightest efforts of genius have been made, and perfected — Milton wrote his divine poem of Paradise Lost, when totally deprived of sight — and some of the most perfect works, both ancient, and modern, were executed under peculiarly distressing circumstances.

Abby found inspiration in Milton, who was admired more than any other author in early America, and his example demanded that Abby's writing improve because she was ill.¹⁸

¹⁷ *JAM*, June 4, p. 22.

¹⁸ *JAM*, June 2, p. 19; Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (South Bend, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1958), 86; *JAM*, June 2, p. 19; George Sensabaugh, *Milton in Early America* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1964), 184-185, 243-245, 270. Sensabaugh states that Milton dominated the American literary scene at the close of the eighteenth century. Milton's writings were imitated by virtually all Americans, especially in sentimental poetry, which became rigidly patterned on Milton. His concepts of religious experience dominated American thought. Milton was even felt in politics, where the Federalist/Republican rivalry was seen as a struggle between good and evil. To attempt to imitate Milton was more important than actually reaching his excellence.

The pain of sickness would teach her about her own soul and its true character. But she was not able to rise to the occasion.

while I , shame on me; suffer my mind to prey upon itself — my daubing affords me no amusement, my writing does not please me... my imagination torpid, and dull; fancys only melancholy ideas — I really believe if I were to attempt writing a play, it would prove to be a Methodist sermon.

Abby considered her own efforts below those of popular authors like Methodist circuit riders. She tried to manipulate her accumulation of quotations and authors she knew to assuage her emotions, but, in her estimation, failed. More often than not, Abby reflected her depressed mood in her writing. Again, this was unsatisfactory: “If I cannot write chearful, I will not write at all.”¹⁹

Even as she criticized her own writings, Abby was able to offer lighthearted references to other equally ineffective writers. By the middle of the summer, Abby’s health had improved enough, or perhaps she had been so enlivened by the spa’s amusements, that she could mock herself. Struggling with writer’s block late one night, she included a disclaimer and suggestion for her readers:

the incoherent mess I wrote last evening, to fill up the page, is really too bad — but I felt tired and stupid — however such Paragraphs make those which are less stupid appear the better — all my journal needs is something to make it go down. if you have not Heaths Memoirs, do purchase them — and always when you are inclined to jog along with me — read a page or two of that — I know of no other work, equally flat and insipid.²⁰

Abby’s writing could occasionally be readable, but only when compared to something worse. Or so she thought.

Major General William Heath’s chronicles of his service in the American army during the Revolutionary War were even duller than the “incoherent mess” in Abby’s journal. She recounted her emotions as she walked the ruins of Fort Ticonderoga, a Seven Years’ and Revolutionary War site, in this way:

¹⁹ JAM, June 2, p. 19; July 5, p. 53.

²⁰ JAM, June 21, p. 45.

a cold chill ran through my veins, Ah! thought I, how often has a proud step and a gay heart passed thee, that now beats no more... a vast sight of blood has been spilt on this spot, all agree— for several miles around, every object confirms it— the heaps of stone on which the soldiers used to cook— the ditches, now grass grown, and forsaken graves!! all, every thing makes this spot teem with melancholy reflections.

Heath's description of the Battle of Saratoga was far drier: "On Tuesday, 7th instant a smart action took place between the right of Gen. Burgoyne's army and the American left, when the enemy were repulsed, drove back to their works, and then forced from them... One hundred of the enemy lay dead on the ground. The American loss, although not exactly known, was said not to be more than 30 killed and 100 wounded."²¹ Heath's style was exactly what Abby hoped to avoid if she was to succeed in writing a feeling, evocative journal. Rather than reporting facts and inspiring patriotic pride, Abby called forth melancholy sentiments of mourning, sacrifice, and the obscurity of the dead. In Abby's evaluation, her writing read more smoothly than the turgid prose of that model of sobriety, General Heath. While society encouraged women to read history, Abby did not imitate what she saw as General Heath's dry and passionless style. She wanted emotion, not facts.

Abby could also employ a metaphorical pun to deflect the attentions of the many men at the spa. In response to the constant attention she received from them, Abby quoted Lord Chesterfield:

'tis the Ladies, must be flattered — 'tis the part of the gentleman to administer the soothing essence' — oh if I had not determined to be very cautious — almost to put a seal upon my lips I could — I feel that I could, make some of our Jessamys acknowledge all women are not so weak as to swallow the dose however applyed.

Here Abby demonstrates her familiarity with two leading authors of the day, Lord Chesterfield and Royall Tyler, as well as her knowledge of current medical therapeutics. By portraying the gentlemen as doctors aggressively applying the "soothing essence,"

²¹ JAM, July 20, p. 76; William Heath, Memoirs of Major General William Heath (New York: New York Times & Arno Press, 1968), 119-120.

Abby can deflect their flattery by refusing to “swallow the dose.” Humor was her best defense.²²

When not turning men away, Abby looked to nature descriptions provided for an estimable model. Whenever Abby passed a mountain view or crossed a stream, she wanted to record its natural beauty and the emotions it aroused in her journal. On her stagecoach journey across Massachusetts to Ballston Abby had plenty of time to muse on the scenery that passed her window. When the carriage paused for the evening, she could reminisce.

I was delighted with this afternoon’s ride — never did [I see] so majestic a prospect as the view of mountains from Hadley [Massachusetts] — continually varying and improving — in appearance, in one place they appear’d particularly beautiful, forming a perfect Ampitheatre — and rising progressively as far as the eye could extend: such views are calculated to excite the most sublime sensations — and could I have written at that moment, I am convinced my pen would instinctively written a sublime description.

Abby was trying to reach established conventions of natural description with the expectation that such writing would evoke an emotional response. The model had been constructed by Edmund Burke, whose Essay on the Sublime and the Beautiful recommended people’s emotional responses to nature in 1790s. The variation and vastness of the scene at Hadley qualified it as both beautiful and sublime. According to Burke, “Greatness of dimension, is a powerful cause of the sublime.”²³ But Abby had moments that were far more impressive and terrifying. Overcome with fear while stranded on an island in Lake George during a thunderstorm, with the water “now tempestuously dashing against the rocks at our feet— the pattering of rain upon the trees over us— the thunder echoing among the mountains,” Abby could only describe the scene as “terribly, awfully, grand and sublime.” As Burke writes, “Whatever therefore is terrible, with regard to sight, is sublime too.” The goal for a writer was to capture these emotions and evoke the same sublime sensations as the actual object or scene, thereby coming closer to nature and its

²² JAM, August 10, p. 115.

²³ JAM, May 24, p. 4; Burke, A Philosophical Enquiry, 72, 155.

awesome power. Abby tried to reveal the great truths of nature in her writing, but once again claimed to be unable to record its beauty with her pen. The scenes were, for her, “beyond description grand and sublime.”²⁴

Yet these moments of bliss came only at the beginning and in the middle of Abby’s summer at Ballston. Near the end of her stay her mood, and her writing, worsened. Abby could only substitute the words of other authors in place of her own to capture the sublimity of natural beauty. One evening, while sitting on the porch admiring the sunset and reading a book, Abby remarked, “The setting sun reminded me of that passage in Shakespeare ‘The weary sun has made a golden set and the bright beams of his fiery bar, gives promise of a goodly day tomorrow’ — it was a glorious evening.”²⁵ Abby found it easier to quote the Bard when she attempted to describe her natural surroundings than to use her own words. She recited a passage from King Richard III that describes Richard’s army encamping in preparation for battle the next day, confident of victory. The hope she saw in the sunset was affirmed by Shakespeare. (Unfortunately, the king was killed in battle the next morning.) Rather than using her own words to paint the sunset, Abby relied on Shakespeare to do the task. Faced with her own illness, she was reluctant to discuss her own demise or her hopes of recovery. Instead she used a passage from literature to express her thoughts, thinking that it represented her feelings far better than her own words ever could.

Abby’s ability to employ the books she read to her advantage contrasted with the evaluation of her fictional contemporary, Eliza Wharton, who noted “When I have recourse to books, if I read those of serious description, they remind me of an awful futurity, for which I am unprepared; if history, it discloses facts in which I have no interest; if novels, they exhibit senses of pleasure which I have no prospect of realizing!”²⁶ Despite the claims

²⁴ JAM, July 20, p. 71; Burke, A Philosophical Enquiry, 57; JAM, July 20, p. 74.

²⁵ JAM, August 10, p. 103. The passage comes from Richard III, Act 5, Scene 3, Lines 19-21.

²⁶ Foster, The Coquette, 204.

of cultural connoisseurs, the moral lessons of the prescribed reading deteriorated in confronting the problems that young women faced in a dangerous, hostile world. Fortunately, Abby recognized this and avoided Eliza's fate.

Abby's reading conformed with society's prescriptions; it was not radical. She remained within the defined role of womanhood and did not test its bounds. Conspicuously absent from her readings were the sentimental novels like The Coquette and Charlotte Temple that historians like Linda Kerber and Cathy Davidson have claimed were so popular with women in the late-eighteenth century.²⁷ Perhaps Abby did not need to read these novels because she experienced their world daily in spa society. Instead, her reading focused on the moral and historical works that the advice books and cultural assumptions recommended. Abby was not an emerging feminist exploring the new world of fiction and its possibilities of gender empowerment. She held traditional religious and political beliefs; Abby did not challenge society's gender spheres. Instead, she followed the arbiters of propriety. Yet within the religious, moral, and poetic works of the elite Federalist culture that she read Abby was able to use these books to express her feelings and cultivate sensibility. But she deviated from the model; her goals were different: rather than aiming to become a dutiful wife and mother to virtuous citizens of the new republic, Abby sought to maintain her own virtue and refinement. Abby eschewed sentimental novels and the dangers inherent in them, but still found the options and solutions that her culture offered her insufficient. Abby's "good mind, well stored," as provisioned by the norms of the time, proved inadequate.²⁸

Abby turned to the authors and books she knew as she confronted her social position and illness. Their example would inspire her to literary feats, if only she could match their

²⁷ Kerber, Women of the Republic, 235-243; Davidson, Revolution and the Word, 97, 110-114. Davidson claims that the sentimental novel, in its very structure and content, contained many of the themes of women's status that so concerned young female readers. Textually this may be true, but Abby, despite her attention to her place in society as a woman, did not read these novels (146-147).

²⁸ See especially chaps. 3, "Ideology and Genre" and 6, "Privileging the *Feme Covert*: The Sociology of Sentimental Fiction," in Davidson, Revolution and the Word.

prose. She quoted them extensively, and in so doing revealed many of the literary and cultural sensibilities of her time and social class. She read books of religion, moral philosophy, and nature poetry that would not tempt her to violate the unwritten codes of respectability and gender separation that the tragic heroines of sentimental novels transgressed. Abby tried to conform to standards of sentiment and politeness that her time, culture, and social standing assigned her. Within these bounds she was able to reconcile herself to her position as a woman and the illness that was crippling her right hand.

She used literature as both a model for her writing and a source of meaning for the people and situations she faced. While trying to adhere to a social convention of sensibility and emotional writing, as recommended by the advice books of the time, Abby recorded her own feelings and shortcomings. She was not simply copying the styles of stodgy English male writers. Abby inserted her own interpretation of people and events. Her writing was as much an expression of her own fears and hopes as it was an exercise in literary sensibility. She tried to equal the standards of the day, but she also retained her own beliefs. In this case, imitation could breed independence.

Abigail May was an extremely well-read and intelligent woman who wrote a compelling and detailed account of her summer in residence at Ballston. What began as a simple attempt to become polite and articulate in the great works of the day turned into a personal introspection that helped Abby realize what she felt and wanted. She had learned the ways and forms of her era by the time she finished her journal, but used them for her own purposes. Abby eschewed the models of coquetry and mindless fashion in favor of a refined, sentimental womanhood. She succeeded in avoiding the fate of so many women of her time, like the characters in The Coquette and Charlotte Temple, who fell to the seductive designs of rakes. Abby preserved her virtue and cultivated the sensibility that meant so much to her. At the same time, she discovered her own intelligence and sense of self. In one of her final entries she triumphantly declared: “no power on earth can

effectually subdue or even repress the feelings of a heart like mine.”²⁹ Nothing, that is, but her death ten days later.

²⁹ JAM, August 29, p. 132.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL APPENDIX: ABBY'S LIST

A bibliography of Abby's reading provides interesting answers to the questions of what she read, when it was published, and where she obtained the books. The references in her journal are mostly indirect, in the form of an author's name or the title of a work. I have listed the clearly defined titles below with the first date of publication. In the case of authors without specific titles, I have given their dates of birth and death for context:¹

Babes in the Woods. 1695.

The Bible. References from Psalms and the New Testament.

Burke, Edmund. A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful. 1757.

The Connoisseur. Edited by George Colman and Bonnell Thornton. 1754-1756.

Chesterfield, Philip Dormer Stanhope, 4th Earl of. No specific title. 1694-1773.

Goldsmith, Oliver. The Vicar of Wakefield: A Tale Supposed to be Written by Himself. 1766.

Heath, William. Memoirs of Major General Heath. Containing anecdotes, details of skirmishes, battles, and other military events, during the American war. Written by himself. 1798.

Langhorne, John. Fables of Flora. 1771.

LaRochefoucauld, François, Duc de. Maxims and Moral Reflections. 1665.

Lyttleton, George, 1st Baron. No specific writings given. 1709-1773.

Milton, John. Il Penseroso. 1631.

_____. Paradise Lost. 1667.

Paine, Thomas. Adams and Liberty. 1798.

Pope, Alexander. No specific writings given. 1688-1744.

¹ Data on authors, titles, and publication dates are taken from The National Union Catalog: Pre-1956 Imprints (London: Mansell, 1975); and Charles Evans, American Bibliography... (New York: Peter Smith, 1941).

Schiller, Johann Christoph Freidrich von. The Minister. 1797 (English edition).

Shakespeare, William. King Richard III. 1564-1616.

Smith, Charlotte. Elegiac Sonnets. 1784 (2d ed.).

Smollet, Tobias. Peregrine Pickle. 1751.

Sterne, Laurence. A Sentimental Journey. 1768.

_____. The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman. 9 volumes, 1760-7.

Thomson, James. The Seasons. Four sections printed separately, 1726-30.

Tyler, Royall. The Contrast. 1787.

Of the 19 authors, all but one, Charlotte Smith, is male.² In addition, Abby read only five living authors: Smith, William Heath, Thomas Paine, Royall Tyler, and Joseph Schiller. She read works from an earlier period. Yet only three of the authors published their work before 1730 (Shakespeare, Milton, LaRochefoucauld, and the author of Babes in the Woods). In fact, only two others published their work before 1750 (Pope and Thomson). Fourteen of the 19 authors, or 74%, were published after 1750. Abby read mostly eighteenth-century literature. It would appear that the printing industry, just beginning to expand in England and America in the second half of the eighteenth century, was publishing more and more books from new authors. But they also concentrated on traditional works from the old country. Fourteen of the authors were from the British Isles, one each hailed from France (LaRochefoucauld) and Germany (Schiller), but only three lived in America (Heath, Tyler, and Paine). European, and specifically British, literature made up the bulk of Abby's reading. American printers, freed from the copyright restrictions of the British industry, reissued many older works originally published in Britain or Europe, flooding the market with inexpensive editions of previously published

² I am excluding The Bible from this analysis because of its wide availability and the difficulty in establishing which translation, edition, and printing Abby used.

books and anthologies. The typical book that Abby May read was written by a dead English male and was published after 1750.³

³ Robert A. Gross has found similar patterns in his work on the public libraries of Concord, Massachusetts in the nineteenth century. See "Reconstructing Early American Libraries: Concord, Massachusetts, 1795-1850," Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society 97 (1988): 335-336; and "Much Instruction from Little Reading: Books and Libraries in Thoreau's Concord," Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society 97 (1987): 141-144, passim.

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