



# Love, Gossip and Diversion: John Wilkes in Bath

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if you prefer young Women & Whores to old Women & Wives, if you prefer the toying away Hours with little Sattin Back to the Evening Conferences of your Mother in Law.... if Life & Spirit & Wit & Humour & Gaiety but above all if the heavenly inspired Passion called LUST have not not {sic} deserted you & left you a prey to Dullness & Imbecility hasten to town that you may take a Place in my Post Chaise for Bath next Thursday morning....<sup>1</sup>

So wrote Thomas Potter (1718-59), the handsome but dissolute son of a former Archbishop of Canterbury, to his friend John Wilkes (1725-97) in October 1752.<sup>2</sup> Two months later, Potter tried again to tempt Wilkes to Bath by describing the city as having 'such a Parcel of dancing Bitches as shall shame all your Haymarket ones if ever they attempt to compare their postures with ours'.<sup>3</sup> Wilkes was a country squire in Aylesbury at the time of the proposed jaunts to Bath but he would soon make his name as a political agitator who fought for parliamentary reform and the freedom of the press. Elected an Alderman of London (1769-97), Lord Mayor of the city (1774-5) and City Chamberlain (1779-97), Wilkes would become MP for Middlesex (1774-90) following the famously contested elections of 1768-9. The author of *The North Briton*, a radical weekly publication in which he attacked both King George III and the Prime Minister Lord Bute, Wilkes was acclaimed throughout his life as a formidable champion of liberty.

Aside from his political career, Wilkes is best remembered as one of the most notorious libertines of his day. His friend, the publisher and journalist John Almon (1737-1805), claimed that it was Wilkes's 'early vicious acquaintance' with Potter that 'poisoned his morals'.<sup>4</sup> Potter scandalised Bath society in the mid-1750s after reports circulated of his affair with Gertrude Tucker (c.1726-96), the niece of the philanthropist Ralph Allen (1693-1764). She had married William Warburton, Bishop of Gloucester (1698-1779) and thirty years her senior, in 1745/6 but it was rumoured that Potter had fathered her only son Ralph (b. 1756). In actual fact, Potter's rakish influence over Wilkes might not have been as far-reaching as Almon liked to believe. Wilkes had already revealed his own libertine inclinations as a nineteen-year-old student at the University of Leyden where he was 'always among women... Three or four whores; drunk every night'.<sup>5</sup>

Beginning perhaps with his 1752 sallies with Potter, Wilkes made frequent visits to Bath over a forty-year period, during which time he indulged in numerous flirtatious encounters and mellowed from a lustful young buck into an older, altogether more measured admirer of female beauty. Wilkes's liaisons were not, of course, restricted to Bath but the fashionable resort was significant as the unique setting for his deepest emotional experiences. It was there that he met two of his most meaningful amours, Amelia Arnold (1753-1802) and Mrs Alethea Maria Stafford (d.c.1810), and where Stafford 'inspired [him] with a passion [he] never felt before'.<sup>6</sup> His infatuation with Stafford, whom he met at a dinner party 'that fatal saturday' in January 1778, resulted in a remarkable collection of letters in which Wilkes startlingly revealed both his innermost desires and his skills as a

fig 1: Portrait of John Wilkes by Richard Houston, 1769

would-be seducer.<sup>7</sup> It was in Bath too that Wilkes felt the bitterest of disappointments when Stafford returned to her husband, but also the great joy of parenthood. Wilkes fathered an illegitimate daughter named Harriet (1778-1820) at the same time he was pursuing Stafford and installed her mother, Amelia Arnold, as his life-long mistress.

Bath, however, was more than just an elegant setting for Wilkes's love affairs and flirtations. The city enabled him to unburden himself from the responsibilities of office and to present himself, if only for two or three weeks at a time, at his most relaxed, playful and unbuttoned. Even in pleasure-seeking mode, however, Wilkes was indefatigable in his vigorous cultivation of Bath society and in immersing himself in the city's many scandals, gossips and entertainments. As a consequence,

Wilkes's sojourns in Bath repay detailed scrutiny. They not only permit an intimate portrait of Wilkes as lover but also invite an examination of the ways in which Wilkes managed his leisure hours to cultivate a large social network and to fashion a central place for himself within Bath society.

Wilkes's diaries, which cover the years from 1770 to his death in 1797, and surviving letters to his adored daughter Mary (1750-1802), by his wife Mary Mead of Aylesbury, which date from 1774, show that Wilkes made at least fifteen visits to Bath during this period and that he regularly spent three weeks at Christmas and part of March and April in the city.<sup>8</sup> The first of any number of earlier excursions to Bath might well have been with Potter in 1752, assuming he accepted his friend's invitations to visit the city's fleshpots. Newspapers made note of another visit in April 1768.<sup>9</sup> Although some of these earlier trips were to seek relief from bouts of feverish ill health, Wilkes's enjoyment of Bath's many diversions, as a hiatus from his busy London life, is clearly evident from his correspondence with his daughter.<sup>10</sup> By the mid-1780s, however, the city's charms had begun to pall and in a letter to Mary, affectionately known as Polly, dated 18th May 1785, Wilkes complained that 'Bath is not alive, even to scandal and only two cotillon balls remain to be danced'.<sup>11</sup> As a consequence, one of his last visits to the city was probably in March 1790.<sup>12</sup> After 1788, when Wilkes secured a lease on Sandham (or Sandown) Cottage near Sandown Bay, the Isle of Wight became his preferred holiday destination. Wilkes made at least sixteen visits to his much-loved home on the island, the last being five months before his death in December 1797.



fig 2: Harriet Wilkes (from private family collection)

During the mid-eighteenth-century, however, when Bath was at its most fashionable, there was no doubting the city's attractions for a man of Wilkes's celebrated sociability and flirtatiousness. Not least among these was the fact that, from the early days of his marriage, he could enjoy Bath free from the encumbrance of his neurotic wife Mary, whom Wilkes described as 'a woman half as old again as myself of a very large fortune' and whom he had married in 1747 'to please an indulgent father'.<sup>13</sup> Wilkes separated permanently from his heiress wife ten years later in 1757. According to the gossipy *Town and Country Magazine*,

some time after Mr. Wilkes married, he proposed going to Bath, and his lady was very willing to accompany him; but her relations interfered, and being of a very rigid way of thinking, they represented it as a licentious place, where the pretext of drinking the waters was pleaded to countenance every kind of vice and immorality, and they positively insisted upon her not accompanying her husband in this journey.<sup>14</sup>

Bath suited Wilkes in other ways too: his gregariousness, witty humour and gentlemanly charm found a ready audience within the pleasure-seeking resort and made him a much sought-after companion and preferred dinner guest in Bath society.<sup>15</sup> In addition, his parliamentary fame made him a firm favourite with those in Bath of his own political persuasion. As a follower of William Pitt the Elder, MP for Bath (1757-66) and leading Whig statesman, Wilkes would have been particularly popular with Pitt's loyal constituents after his appearance in the satirical print, *A Sequel to the Knights of Baythe, or the One Headed Corporation* (1763). The print was aimed at Bath Corporation and especially Ralph Allen, its foremost member. Allen had been influential in drafting the Corporation's loyal address of congratulation to King George III following the signing of the Peace of Paris (1763) at the conclusion of the Seven Years War (1754-63). In this satire, prominent politicians opposed to the peace, including Bath's two MPs, Pitt and Sir John Sebright, square up behind Wilkes who draws back a curtain to reveal members of Bath's Corporation, most of whom are depicted with animal heads.

Given his popularity, it is not surprising that Wilkes's diaries should record the same relentless roundelay of social engagements for Bath as they did for London and such fashionable resorts as Tunbridge Wells and Bournemouth (Brighton). For example, during a ten-day residence in Bath between 26th December 1771 and 4th January 1772, Wilkes only dined alone once. On three occasions, he dined at his favourite lodgings on South Parade with his landlady Mrs Harford, the wife of a local watchmaker, and invited guests.<sup>16</sup> For the remainder of his stay, he was hosted at various addresses in the city as well as further afield at Corsham, Bradford-on-Avon, Trowbridge, Bristol and Lucknam House near Colerne. A diary entry for 3rd January 1772 gives a flavour of Wilkes's intense socialising.

Breakfasted with a great deal of company at Mr Peach's, went to see Mr Southwell's at King's Weston, returned at noon to Bath with Mr Bull, Mr Lewes, and Mr Mullet of Bristol, dined on the South Parade at Mrs Harford's with them, Mr Dusin, Captain Watson and Captain Rice.<sup>17</sup>

With Wilkes's energetic sociability ensuring he was on friendly terms with most of Bath's famous residents, his diaries read like a who's who of the city. As Robin Eagles

has observed, however, in later years, these friendships reflected Wilkes's pursuit of respectability and his desire to distance himself from the radical groups of his younger, London days.<sup>18</sup> As a consequence, Wilkes was especially keen to cultivate Bath's literati: he dined with the Irish-born playwright Richard Brinsley Sheridan, the travel-writer Philip Thicknesse, Sir John Miller of Batheaston, husband to the poet and salon hostess, Lady Anna, and with Elizabeth and Mary Linley, the talented daughters of the celebrated musician Thomas Linley. He was also a regular guest of the Brereton family and especially Major William Brereton (c.1723-1813), Master of Ceremonies at the Lower Assembly Rooms on Terrace Walk. Bath acquaintances were not forgotten on Wilkes's return to London and 'Mr Palmer of Bath', William Brereton, Sheridan and 'Mr Richard Peirce of Bath' were among those invited to dine with Wilkes at his home in Prince's Court.<sup>19</sup> As well as the city's permanent residents, Wilkes was equally in demand among those elite visitors who came to Bath for the season. For example, the *Town and Country Magazine* noted that on one occasion, when Wilkes visited Bath sometime after his marriage in 1747

[he] made acquaintance with lord Sandwich, lord Temple, and many others of the first nobility, who courted his company, and seemed to vie with each other who should shew him the most politeness. His uncommon share of wit; founded upon a fine taste and a clear judgment, supported with all the advantages of education, distinguished him amongst the greatest genius's of the present aera.<sup>20</sup>

In contrast to the brief and appointment-based entries of his diaries, Wilkes's Bath letters to Polly are expansive and gossipy. A collection of over eighty of these warm, affectionate letters, written whenever Polly was unable to accompany her father to Bath, reinforces the view of Wilkes as indefatigably genial and very much at the centre of the resort's social life. They also show Wilkes's mischievous enjoyment of, and engagement in, the latest tittle-tattle and various Bath scandals to which he was privy and provide intriguing insights into the social rhythms, busy nothings, scandal-mongering and petty, malicious gossiping of Wilkes's everyday life in Bath. For example, in a sequence of letters to Polly, Wilkes recounted, in rascally detail, the gossip and speculation that surrounded the domestic arrangements of the historian Mrs Catherine Macaulay (1731-91). Widowed in 1766, Macaulay had lived at Alfred House in Alfred Street since 1774, as the guest of an elderly admirer, the retired radical cleric Dr Thomas Wilson (1703-84). Wilkes was a regular visitor to their shared home and observed at first hand, the unfolding scandal of the season and the hostility that enveloped the two house-mates when, in December 1778, Macaulay spurned Wilson and married William Graham, a surgeon's mate, twenty-five years her junior. Wilkes relished the scandal and the humiliation it brought to the former friends. So much so that when a caricature of Macaulay and Wilson appeared in April 1778, Wilkes encouraged Polly to buy a copy if only because the print had 'vexed [Macaulay] to the heart'.<sup>21</sup>

On another occasion, Wilkes contributed enthusiastically to the derision that was heaped upon Lady Anna Miller's literary circle which met every Thursday during the season at her Batheaston villa. The focus of these weekly 'poetical assemblies' was a vase ritual during which anonymous *bout rimés* were placed in an Etruscan urn. These poems, which were mostly of dubious literary merit, were then judged and the winning poet adorned with a wreath of myrtle. Wilkes cheerfully recounted to Polly how one such poem had made satirical reference to some unpopular ladies in Bath and especially to the

universally detested 'Mrs Gr-nv-Ile and Miss'. He then described how he had trumped the offending poem with a couple of impromptu lines of his own, which he extemporized for the entertainment of a bevy of ladies as he promenaded with them on North Parade. It was with undoubted pride and impish pleasure that Wilkes reported to Polly that his lines were 'liked at Bath from the gratification they afforded to malevolence'.

To be hated by all, and still do amiss,  
You have only to copy Mrs. Gr-nv-Ile and Miss.<sup>22</sup>

Aside from his numerous dinner engagements and sight-seeing excursions to visit friends and acquaintances beyond Bath, Wilkes would have undoubtedly participated in the city's other daytime diversions such as taking the waters, attending lectures and concerts or strolling along the parades and squares. Wilkes particularly enjoyed sauntering around the markets and indulging his epicurean palate by buying fine quality mutton, cheese and fish for which Bath was famous. On numerous occasions, and particularly when Polly was in London, Wilkes would make presents of Bath produce to his daughter and was assiduous in ensuring its safe delivery: 'this morning's machine is ordered to bring you some fish', wrote Wilkes on New Year's Day 1778, 'which, from the very cold weather, I hope will arrive perfectly fresh'.<sup>23</sup>

For evening entertainment, Wilkes occasionally attended private 'rouths' where card tables and dancing were the main attractions. Wilkes was not especially fond of these, noting that rouths such as Lady Conyngham's which he attended on 20th May 1785, were 'bid fair to ruin Bath, as a public place'.<sup>24</sup> He much preferred the homogeneity of large social gatherings such as the balls which were regularly held in the two assembly rooms at Bath. On 29th December 1777, for example, he assisted Mr Dawson, Master of Ceremonies of the Upper Rooms, at a ball where, noted Wilkes in a subsequent letter to Polly, there was 'a well-dressed crowd of near 900 persons'. Although Wilkes claimed that there were 'very few persons of real fashion' in the Rooms that evening, he was not disappointed for Wilkes would amuse himself on such occasions by admiring all the beautiful women on show. Then aged fifty two, Wilkes assured the surprisingly open-minded Polly that his interest in these lovelies was purely platonic and that he could only 'admire them at fifty years over my head, like beautiful pictures, and indeed some of them are as well painted as Guido's'.<sup>25</sup> A couple of years later, in 1779, he returned to this theme of age and the loss of libido in another letter to his daughter, where he reflected how 'old father Time' had made him impervious to the power of 'all the pretty young misses' who were then busily preparing for a New Year's Eve ball to be held in the Lower Rooms.<sup>26</sup>

A powerfully charismatic man, Wilkes captivated women throughout his life and, as already noted, he had numerous sexual encounters and love affairs. So many, in fact, that a recent biographer felt that to chronicle them all would be 'as tedious to read as to write'.<sup>27</sup> Wilkes's undoubted sex appeal was despite an ugliness which was so proverbial that pregnant women were warned to avoid his gaze.<sup>28</sup> Although tall and slim, and 'a celebrated *beau*' who liked to wear 'either a scarlet or green suit, edged with gold', Wilkes's face had been disfigured from birth by a prognathous jaw which eventually collapsed into his nose, and by sunken, squinting cross-eyes.<sup>29</sup> The dramatist Frederick Reynolds (1764-1841) remembered being 'perfectly startled at his ugliness' when, as a child, he was first introduced to Wilkes.<sup>30</sup>

It was, nevertheless, Wilkes's proud boast that where women were concerned, he could talk away his face in less than thirty minutes.<sup>31</sup> This was all the more remarkable

since the loss of his rotten, crooked teeth by the age of thirty meant that Wilkes lisped badly and 'it required particular attention to understand him, so imperfect was his articulation'.<sup>32</sup> There was, however, no difficulty in catching his seductive eloquence when he expressed himself in *billets-doux* as evidenced by his letters to Stafford in which he confessed to an all-consuming, if unconsummated, infatuation.

Age did not diminish Wilkes's appreciation of the female form nor his appetite for female company. As a result, his Bath letters to Polly are liberally interspersed with descriptions of women he met or observed in the city - from the great beauties to the downright ugly - Wilkes deemed them all worthy of comment. For example, he found 'a tall Welsh Mrs. P---s, beautiful beyond description' while he regarded Miss Newman as 'young, ugly, and amiable'.<sup>33</sup> Mrs D----r was dismissed 'as dull, Mrs. G---n as witty, and Miss D---s as ugly, as good-humoured, and coquettish as ever'.<sup>34</sup> At a ball given in the Upper Rooms on 28th December 1778, Wilkes was unequivocal in judging Miss Susannah Wroughton (c.1745-1825), known as 'the Evergreen of Bath', the unrivalled beauty of the evening: in Wilkes's words - 'Miss Wroughton bears the palm here'.<sup>35</sup> It was, however, the twenty-one-year old Miss Rian whom Wilkes regarded as 'the most beautiful woman at Bath' in December 1777. She had charmed him, when they were both guests of William Brereton and his family on New Year's Eve, after she had proposed a toast to Wilkes's absent daughter Polly. Eager to spend time in her company before her return to Southampton on 5th January 1778, Wilkes was set to escort this great beauty to a rural breakfast and private concert at Bathwick, until the event was cancelled owing to the ill health of the host, Philip Thicknesse.<sup>36</sup>

Wilkes might not have realized it, but his description of Miss D---s as ugly, good-humoured and coquettish could have been just as easily applied to himself. His very name was a by-word for flirtation and his playful behaviour afforded him regular opportunities for amorous badinage with the ladies of Bath. On one occasion, after having attended Dawson's ball on Monday, 3rd January 1780, Wilkes regaled Polly with his story of meeting 'a pretty and lively young lady of the name of W--- who live[d] on the Queen's Parade'. She had whispered to Wilkes how she hated being crowded at the ball, adding 'I can't bear to be so squeezed by people one does not know'.<sup>37</sup> Wilkes had straightway borrowed her pencil and captured her feelings in puckish verse:

WITH spirit, lovely Lydia cries,  
Sly Cupid basking in her eyes,  
'I can't bear the creatures who thus press and shove  
No— let me be press'd by the man whom I love'.<sup>38</sup>

In another example, Wilkes's cameo appearance in the satiric *Ode on Dedicating a Building, and Erecting a Statue, to Le Stue, Cook to the Duke of Newcastle* reinforced his reputation for flirtatiousness. The poem parodied an ode to Shakespeare composed by the actor David Garrick at the time of the Stratford Jubilee in 1769. This major theatrical event had been organised, somewhat belatedly, to celebrate the 200th anniversary of Shakespeare's birth. In the parody, however, it was the Duke of Newcastle's cook, rather than the Bard, who was deemed the more fitting subject for a statue and temple. The satire imagined the actor James Quin, who lived in retirement in Bath, relishing a turtle cooked to perfection by Le Stue. The dish, so the parody suggests, reminded Quin of an evening he had spent at Bath in the company of Wilkes and a certain Miss Ash and Miss Gee when they had all dined on turtle. According to the anecdote, Wilkes ate 'like the

Devil', and the ladies asked him 'where he could stow it'. The reply attributed to Wilkes was characteristically risqué and teasingly polyamorous:

Were I in Bed with you, Miss ASH,  
Or you, my dear Miss GEE;  
I'd give to *you* the *Calipash*,  
To *you*, the *Calipee*.<sup>39</sup>

Although the grand assemblies, private parties and plentiful dinners that Wilkes attended at Bath afforded him numerous opportunities for such frivolous flirtations, Bath was, as previously noted, the setting for two of his most serious relationships. The most passionate, yet fleeting, of these was with Maria Stafford whom Wilkes met at a dinner party in Bath hosted by the Hamilton family at their Russell Street home on 10 January 1778. Stafford and the Hamiltons had become neighbours after Stafford had taken up residence in 'the Upper House in Russel-street, corner of River-street, on the west side, *elegantly and newly furnished*'.<sup>40</sup> This was as a consequence of her recent separation from her faithless husband William (d.1796) of The Holt in Wokingham, Berkshire. Sensitive, intelligent and 'the most faultless woman in face, in form, in soul' with 'the prettiest mouth in the world', Wilkes was instantly struck by Stafford's 'wondrous beauties and graces'.<sup>41</sup> Within weeks, the smitten Wilkes professed himself in love with her, declaring to Stafford in a letter dated 17 January 1778 (fol. 61) that she had 'possessed [his] whole soul'. And so, about the time that Wilkes was conceiving Harriet with Arnold, he set about winning the favours of the woman he called 'the sovereign of [his] soul' and '[his] gracious Queen'.<sup>42</sup>

Wilkes's desire to possess Stafford was frustrated, however, by the fact that he was due to leave Bath for London on 14th January 1778 and would not return until 12th April. Undaunted, Wilkes embarked on a three-month epistolary campaign of seduction which was so powerful that success seemed inevitable once the pair were reunited in the spring. Wilkes's letters to Stafford show him to have been an assured lover, well able to flatter, tease, parry and cajole. They also show him to have been mercenary in his single-minded pursuit of Stafford and dismissive of the damage to her reputation that their liaison would necessarily entail. Stafford, for her part, was drawn to Wilkes and flattered by the attentions of a man of his standing and celebrity. She was, however, understandably fearful of the social repercussions for her of any perceived impropriety, telling Wilkes that 'the smallest deviation from prudence must inevitably ruin [her]'.<sup>43</sup> As a result, where Wilkes's letters are bold, forthright and uninhibited by notions of decorum or discretion, Stafford's are a study in 'artful coquetry' and shrewd judiciousness being encouraging yet cautious, inviting yet restrained.<sup>44</sup> Thus, when Stafford forbade Wilkes from writing to her, which she did on numerous occasions, and when she reminded him that '[her] deserted state allows not of intimacys with *such as you*', she invariably couched her proscriptions in language that invited further communication.<sup>45</sup> Wilkes responded in kind. To Stafford's injunction, written on 20th February (fol. 67), that he send her no more letters or presents, Wilkes replied almost immediately and, under the pretence of '[his] zeal, and [his] care not to offend', asked whether elegies and odes were likewise excluded from her blanket ban on their correspondence.<sup>46</sup> Stafford replied at length on 27th February (fol. 69). The game of cat and mouse continued.

Wilkes's pursuit of Stafford began innocuously enough after he sent a card which was delivered on the morning of the 14th January 1778. Stafford wrote immediately to Prince's Court to thank Wilkes 'for his obliging recollection of her' and added,

encouragingly, that she 'shall be truly glad to see him' on his return in the spring (fol. 61). Emboldened by her note, Wilkes replied on 17th January (fol. 61) where he gave an early indication of his serious intentions toward her, hinting at marriage had he been free to consider it.

If instead of my early, unsought doom [marriage to Mary Mead], heaven had made me the guardian, the protector, the –oh rapture! – the possessor of those wondrous beauties and graces, could I—but I tremble at the idea of our different fates – and impossibilities in future.

Indeed, their respective marriages, by which they were both inextricably bound, and the alternative arrangements available to them, proved a recurrent theme in a number of their letters. Wilkes disclosed the circumstances of his marriage to Stafford in a letter dated 14th March 1778 (fol. 71), telling her that 'I never lived with [Mary Mead] in the strict sense of the word, nor have I seen her near 20 years'. Stafford had already confided to Wilkes in a frank letter dated 20th February (fol. 67) that her husband's abandonment had left her isolated and vulnerable: 'death has deprived me of my natural protectors & advisors, infidelity of my legal one'. This impressed upon her, so she wrote in a letter the following week, 'how much it behoved [her] to be cautious & blameless in [her] conduct' and to observe the social strictures placed upon her as a deserted wife.<sup>47</sup> It also taught her to insist upon absolute discretion in her friendship with Wilkes.

Wilkes, of course, hoped for much more than friendship telling Stafford on several occasions, of his desire to be her 'spirited *protector*' and guardian.<sup>48</sup> What Wilkes really aimed at, therefore, was a permanency in his relationship with Stafford. Having intimated this in his letter dated 17th January (fol. 61), Wilkes took the opportunity, afforded by Stafford forgetting to sign her name in a previous communication, to hint at marriage in his letter of 30th January (fol. 62). Her absent-minded omission allowed Wilkes to imagine 'the blank a happy future day may fill with a more fortunate name than the present'. Soon, he would make his sexual desire for Stafford more explicit, writing on 25th February (fol. 68),

you say 'my *best wishes* are always yours'. Do you really, then, *wish* me the *best* thing on earth? the object of all my own fond *wishes*? Do you *wish* me yourself to crown the happiness of your tender admirer and servant?

Wilkes's musings on divorcing his wife Mary and marrying Stafford were pipedreams and both Wilkes and Stafford knew this. Unable to propose marriage, Wilkes wrote to Stafford on 14th March (fols. 71-2) to offer her the only permanent arrangement that was available to him, that of his mistress-cum-wife in 'an honourable and indissoluble union for life'.<sup>49</sup>

Stafford was never going to place herself, or her reputation, in such a precarious position, forever dependent upon Wilkes's word for his constancy and protection. She knew that Wilkes would not settle for a platonic relationship yet she shuddered at 'the bare idea of any connection less durable & innocent' as having 'something in it too horrid even to be hinted at'. All that remained, she noted, was 'sentimental unimpassioned friendship'. She steeled Wilkes for disappointment warning him not 'to form hopes which never can be realized'.<sup>50</sup> Even so, there was enough in Stafford's letters to suggest that her resolve was weakening and Wilkes had only to sit out the 'horrid dreary month of March, and a Lent

season' until April when he planned to 'throw [him]self at [her] feet' and to 'contrive an opportunity or two of breathing out [his] whole soul to [her]'.<sup>51</sup>

As 12th April, the date of Wilkes's return to Bath, approached, Stafford's nerve began to fail her. She reiterated 'that [her] situation allowed not of intimacys with any of your sex, unless they had qualifications which you [Wilkes] are not *yet* in possession of...'.<sup>52</sup> As a consequence, she offered a number of excuses to Wilkes's request, written on 4th April (fol. 75), for 'a private audience' at Russell Street on Monday 13th April. Stafford pleaded a previous engagement that would take her into the country from 11th April, and she insisted that, for the sake of propriety, she could only receive Wilkes in public, along with 'tout le monde'.<sup>53</sup> In the event, Stafford was prevented from travelling by consumptive symptoms – 'a cough attended with a spitting of blood' – so that an hour's private *tête à tête* took place, just as Wilkes had requested.<sup>54</sup> Armed with a bouquet of roses, Wilkes's much anticipated meeting with Stafford was formal, as etiquette dictated, with 'every idea of the most refined delicacy being observed on [Stafford's] side'. His burning desire to discuss an 'indissoluble union' remained unspoken, in part, overshadowed by concerns for Stafford's health but also by Stafford's suggestion of a possible reconciliation with her husband. Wilkes confined himself to pressing Stafford to attend a concert on 15th April and to wearing a rose from the bouquet he had brought her.<sup>55</sup> That night, so it was reported, Wilkes paid 'more attention to the fire in Mrs Stafford's eyes than to the silvery voice of Miss Cantelo [soprano singer] or to the graceful rendering of elections from the *Messiah*'.<sup>56</sup>

Wilkes's hopes for Stafford as a *soi-disant* wife were finally dashed when an unnamed friend of Stafford's confronted her over 'a concert ticket and a few double violets' which were lying on Stafford's hall table, left for her by Wilkes.<sup>57</sup> Stafford confessed all. Reproaching her for her lapse of judgement in consorting with a married man and notorious libertine, the friend warned Stafford that such scandalous indiscretions could only lead to social ostracism and loss of reputation. These censorious words brought Stafford instantly to her senses: she straightway broke off all but the most formal correspondence with Wilkes and requested the return of her letters.<sup>58</sup> The incipient love affair was over despite Wilkes's protestations that '[he] will never cease to love [Stafford] with ardour'.<sup>59</sup> Stafford's 'cold card of compliments' which Wilkes received in reply to his importuning letters made him, so he wrote on 19th April (fol. 81), 'the most unhappy man at Bath'.

Stafford's worsening illness meant that Wilkes left Bath on 2nd May 1778 without seeing her again and he did not revisit the city until 20th December. By that time, Stafford had returned to her husband in Berkshire following their reconciliation in October. The Christmas visit to Bath was a painful experience for Wilkes, heightening his still raw emotions by offering constant reminders and haunting memories of the woman who was now lost to him. When the *Bath Chronicle* carried an advertisement publicising the sale of Stafford's former home, 'the Upper house in Russel-street', Wilkes went to view it, unable to resist a last opportunity to walk through the rooms that she had so recently inhabited.<sup>60</sup> Plagued by thoughts of what might have been, Wilkes wrote to Stafford from Prince's Court on 18th January 1779 (fol. 93), two days after his return from Bath. He told her how he desired to buy a pair of her chairs, if her furniture was also to be sold, as a reminder of 'the bewitching conversation with [Stafford], every word of which [he] could whisper in [her] private ear'. He described how he had 'sat half an hour in [her] chair. I had a groupe [sic] of ideas', confided Wilkes, that 'I dare not express. I was even in your bed-chamber, but hurried away from a scene too luxurious for a warm imagination'.

Wilkes appeared to recover quickly from their estrangement, having written to Stafford on 9th May 1778 (fol. 90) that, 'of all absurd animals, I hold the most ridiculous to be the whining lover'. Behind closed doors, however, the truth might have been different for, in the same letter, Wilkes confessed to a 'heart which still throbs with love'. Even so, Wilkes was a pragmatist in affairs of the heart. He settled for friendship with the Staffords and remained in contact with them for several years more until January 1787. William's willingness to entertain his recent rival might well have been because of his Wilkite sympathies but Wilkes's toleration of Stafford's 'puppy of a husband' was undoubtedly motivated by his continued desire to enjoy the 'grace, elegance and ease' of Stafford's company.<sup>61</sup>



fig 3: **Amelia Arnold** (*private family collection*)

Wilkes's amorous attentions were now fixed on Amelia Arnold whom he had met in 1777 and established in lodgings at Bath. By February 1778, when Wilkes was writing the most ardent letters to Stafford, his young mistress had fallen pregnant. Harriet, 'a beautiful child and a sensible little creature', was born on 20th October 1778, in the very month that Stafford was reconciled with her husband.<sup>62</sup> It is possible, therefore, that Harriet's timely arrival focused Wilkes's feelings onto his new family and distracted him away from his heartache over Stafford. Harriet, who was spared her father's ugliness, grew up to be 'a very agreeable lady in face as well as in manners'.<sup>63</sup> She married the barrister Sir William Rough in 1802 and bore him five children.

Accounts suggest that after Wilkes became Chamberlain of London in December 1779, he had sufficient funds to move his mistress and young daughter from Bath to London.<sup>64</sup> Installing his young family in the second of five little stucco houses in Kensington Gore, Arnold kept house as Wilkes's common law wife until his death in 1797. The couple always lived separately, however, with Wilkes maintaining a main residence in Prince's Court and after 1790, in Grosvenor Square. It was there that he entertained Polly so that the domestic spaces inhabited by his mistress and his eldest daughter rarely collided.<sup>65</sup> Arnold made some fifteen visits to Prince's Court (when Polly was absent) while Polly, hosted by her father, Arnold and her half-sister Harriet, only dined at Kensington Gore on one occasion, on 22nd October 1796. Dividing his time between his two homes, Wilkes regularly dined with Arnold three or four times a week and often in the company of invited friends. Arnold's life, therefore, centred on Kensington Gore, but there were holidays with Wilkes to Brighton, in May/June 1784, June 1786 and 1787, and at least eight excursions to

the Isle of Wight between December 1788 and July 1796. Arnold did not, however, make many return visits to Bath and Wilkes's diary only records a spring trip in 1783 when, on 30th April, he 'dined at the lodgings with Mrs Arnold'.<sup>66</sup>

Very little is known of Arnold other than that she was born of solid, West Wiltshire farming stock, the daughter of George and Christian (née Howel) Arnold of Sutton Veny, near Warminster. Almon, Wilkes's earliest biographer, described her as 'a woman of some education, and not of very humble origin'.<sup>67</sup> This might explain why some years later, it was reported that Arnold 'assisted in training [her daughter Harriet] with a propriety that must have been thought remarkable'.<sup>68</sup> Even so, Captain Edward Thompson of the Royal Navy who was a frequent visitor to Kensington Gore, regarded Arnold as 'apparently without one requisite to entertain the elegant mind of a Wilkes'.<sup>69</sup> It is a severe judgement since few close women friends, and perhaps only Stafford, could have matched Wilkes intellectually.

Arnold's physical appearance was as unexceptional as her intellect. Having the plain features of a hearty, big-boned countrywoman, she was often compared unfavourably with Wilkes's previous lovers. Nonetheless, Frederick Reynolds was overstating matters when he described Arnold as 'nearly as plain as Wilkes himself'. Reynolds had witnessed Arnold's deep distress when a newspaper article suggested that, in terms of beauty, she was well below Wilkes's usual standards. As Reynolds related the anecdote, Wilkes attempted to comfort the anguished Arnold by telling her that, 'the most censorious cannot say there is any *difference between us*'.<sup>70</sup> With her lover's lantern jaw and severe squint, this could only have made matters worse for the suffering Arnold.

Arnold also failed to impress Wilkes's old friend, the author and diarist James Boswell (1740-95) when he met her for the first time on 12th August 1785. Recording his visit to Kensington Gore, Boswell was more struck by the elegance of the house with its 'exquisite collection both of prints and china, and an extraordinary number of large mirrors' than by Arnold herself. He merely noted that 'the woman seemed decent enough' and that she was 'a lady whom [Wilkes] met with eight years ago at Bath, and has had ever since'.<sup>71</sup> It was much the same when Boswell returned to dine at Kensington Gore on 28th July 1786, having hitched a ride with his fellow dining companion, the painter Sir Joshua Reynolds. Boswell noted, somewhat indifferently, that 'Miss Arnold was at table'.<sup>72</sup>

Despite her shortcomings of intellect and beauty, Arnold's relationship with Wilkes was an affectionate, companionable and enduring one. To paraphrase Frederick Reynolds, they were a happy if not a handsome couple. Arnold suited Wilkes well for she appears to have been obliging and submissive as well as down to earth, genuine in her affections, and untroubled by playing a secondary role to the other women in Wilkes's life. Not surprisingly, Polly always took precedence: it was she who accompanied Wilkes on a first holiday to the Isle of Wight and it was with Polly that Wilkes invariably spent the major holidays of Christmas Day and New Year. Arnold was equally understanding about Wilkes's love affairs which continued well into his later years. When Wilkes was turning seventy, he took up with 'a juvenile dulcinea' called Sally Barry who lived in Dean Street, Soho and whom Wilkes visited on at least twenty-two occasions between January 1794 and January 1796.<sup>73</sup>

Arnold's great strength was that she insulated Wilkes from the daily cares of public office by providing him with simple family pleasures and domestic stability. Arnold's letters to Wilkes underline her intrinsic homeliness and cosseting concerns for her lover. In a letter dated 13th January 1789, for example, Arnold tempted Wilkes with the comforting promise of 'a good dinner and a good fire – two good things this cold weather'. On another

occasion, she interjected in a letter written by Harriet to her 'dear Papa', with her concerns for Wilkes's health. Arnold begged Wilkes to look after himself and to take 'the draught Dr. Thompson prescribed for you'.<sup>74</sup> It is apparent, therefore, that Arnold's cherishing impulses ensured that Kensington Gore was a happy, secure and convivial home for Wilkes. Friends and associates were warmly welcomed there and when Boswell arrived in company with Sir Joshua Reynolds in July 1786, they 'had an excellent entertainment: turtle, venison, ices, fruits, burgundy, champagne, cyprus, claret, etc., coffee, tea, and liqueur'.<sup>75</sup> It was also a nurturing home where the couple shared the rearing and education of their daughter Harriet and all against the backdrop of a household overrun with pet animals and birds and especially Peter the owl and Brush the dog.<sup>76</sup>

Bath, as one of the most fashionable leisure resorts in England, was the perfect foil to a man of Wilkes's temperament. Being 'at heart an urban personality', Wilkes revelled in the city's interplay of elegant refinement and flirtatious licentiousness.<sup>77</sup> For several weeks a year, the city offered him an opportunity to divest himself of his political responsibilities and indulge his extrovert nature, being by turns, gregarious, light-hearted, witty and always mischievous. From gourmandising to dancing, from socialising to gentle flirtation, Wilkes embraced Bath's many hedonistic pleasures and diversions and made himself a popular and indispensable member of the resort's vibrant social scene.

For its part, and for almost forty years, the city exerted a remarkable influence over Wilkes, notably in shaping his romantic life. It was in Bath that Wilkes met the great love of his life, the exquisite Stafford but also where he conceived his daughter Harriet. While Wilkes's feelings for Harriet's mother were never as passionate as for Stafford, it was Arnold, rather than Stafford, who provided Wilkes with the life-long domestic stability he needed. It is not surprising, therefore, that the resort held a special place in Wilkes's affections. This was never more keenly felt by Wilkes than in spring when 'the snow now begins to melt, and the meadows reassume that beauteous verdure which distinguishes the environs of this place almost through the year'.<sup>78</sup>

## Notes

- 1 John Wilkes Correspondence, vol. 1, (1739-63). Letter to Wilkes, 19th October 1752. British Library: Add MS 30867, (fol. 65).
- 2 Thomas Potter was MP for St Germans in Cornwall (1747-54), MP for Aylesbury (1754-57) and MP for Okehampton (1757-9). He was also Recorder at Bath (1758-9).
- 3 Letter to Wilkes, 23rd December 1752. Add MS 30867, (fol. 66).
- 4 John Almon (ed.), *The Correspondence of the Late John Wilkes, with his Friends, Printed from the Original Manuscripts, in Which are Introduced Memoirs of his Life*, 5 vols. (1805), vol. 1, pp. 18-9.
- 5 John Wain, (Selected and introduced by), *The Journals of James Boswell 1760-1795* (Heinemann, 1990), p. 143.
- 6 Letter to Stafford, 3rd February 1778, (fol. 63). The letters between Wilkes and Stafford, which are preserved in the British Library (*John Wilkes Papers*, Add MS 30880 B, fols. 58-114), were published by Emanuel Green, *Some Bath Love Letters of John Wilkes, Esq* (Bath: George Gregory, 1918). All subsequent references to the Wilkes/Stafford correspondence refer to the British Library's manuscript collection.
- 7 Letter to Stafford, 17th January 1778, (fol. 61).
- 8 The eight volumes of diaries, which are preserved in the British Library (*J. Wilkes Diaries 1770-97*, Add MS 30866), have been published recently for the London Record Society by Robin Eagles (ed.), *The Diaries of John Wilkes 1770-1797* (Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 2014). See also, *Letters from the Year 1774 to the Year 1796 of John Wilkes Esq. addressed to his daughter, the late Miss Wilkes*, 4 vols (Longman, Hurst, Rees & Orme, 1804), vols. 2 and 3.
- 9 See for example, *The Derby Mercury*, 8th and 15th April 1768; *The Leeds Intelligencer*, 5th April 1768, *The Oxford Journal*, 4th April 1768.
- 10 Eagles, *Diaries of John Wilkes*, pp. xxi and xxxii.
- 11 *Letters ...to his daughter*, vol. 3, p. 120.
- 12 *The Bath Chronicle*, 4th March 1790, p. 3, col. 2 lists a Mr Wilkes as arrived in Bath.
- 13 Letter to Stafford, 14th March 1778, (fol. 71).
- 14 *The Town and Country Magazine* (July 1769 issue), p. 360.
- 15 Not all fell for Wilkes's charm. Writing to George Montagu on October 16th 1765, Horace Walpole remarked that Wilkes's 'conversation shows how little he has lived in good company, and the chief turn of it is the grossest bawdy'. See Peter Cunningham (ed.), *The Letters of Horace Walpole, Earl of Orford*, 8 vols (Richard Bentley, 1857), vol. 4, p. 421.
- 16 *Letters ...to his daughter*, vol. 2, p. 224. Letter dated April 20th 1781 (possibly). Dinner was normally taken at about 2pm in the afternoon.
- 17 *J. Wilkes Diaries*, vol. 1, (fol. 22). Add MS 30866.
- 18 Eagles, *Diaries of John Wilkes*, p. xxiii.
- 19 See diary entries for 8th March 1773, (vol. 2, (fol. 36)); 14th March 1773, (vol. 2, (fol. 36)); 5th April 1773, (vol. 2, (fol. 36)) and 8th July 1778, (vol. 4, (fol. 86)). *J. Wilkes Diaries*, Add MS 30866.
- 20 *Town and Country Magazine*... (July 1769 issue), p. 360. Richard Grenville, 2nd earl Temple became Wilkes's patron.
- 21 *Letters ...to his daughter*, vol. 2, p. 93. Letter dated 28th April 1778.
- 22 *Letters ...to his daughter*, vol. 2, p. 97. Letter dated 3rd May 1778.
- 23 *Letters ...to his daughter*, vol. 2, p. 59. Letter dated 1st January 1778.

- 24 *Letters ...to his daughter*, vol. 3, p. 122. Letter dated 20th May 1785.
- 25 *Letters ...to his daughter*, vol. 2, p. 54. Letter dated 30th December 1777.
- 26 *Letters ...to his daughter*, vol. 2, p. 186. Letter dated 29th December 1779.
- 27 John Sainsbury, *John Wilkes: The Lives of a Libertine* (Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing, 2006), p. 119. Arthur H. Cash in *John Wilkes, The Scandalous Father of Civil Liberty* (& New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006) has, however, undertaken the task. Aside from encounters with numerous unnamed prostitutes and respectable women of his acquaintance, Cash has identified the following as among his conquests: Lucy Ballards (possibly) (p. 300); Mrs Barnard (pp. 84-5 and 325-7); Sally Barry (p. 386); Madame Carpentier (possibly), his daughter's teacher (p. 137); Madame de Charpillon, mistress for four years (pp. 301-2); Mademoiselle Crecy (p. 191), Mademoiselle Chassagne (p. 191); the Italian actress Gertrude Corradini (pp.176-89); Mademoiselle Dufort (p. 191); Englishwoman at Lille (p. 140); the courtesan Mrs Gardiner (p. 300); Betsy Green (p. 186); Mrs Grosvenor (p. 84); Miss H (p. 66); 'dear coy wanton Peggy' (p. 25); Fanny Perfect (p. 386); his housekeeper Catherine Smith who bore him a son known as Jack (p. 56); Kitty Towlers (possibly) (p. 300); unidentified woman 'with the prettiest bubbies' (p. 66); unidentified woman 'with the sweetest bubbies' (p. 66); Jenny Wade of Princes Court, London (p. 300).
- 28 Cash, *John Wilkes*, p. 1.
- 29 Henry Angelo, *Reminiscences of Henry Angelo, with Memoirs of his Late Father and Friends* (Henry Colburn, 1828), p. 55. See also, Frederick Reynolds, *The Life and Times of Frederick Reynolds*, 2 vols. (Henry Colburn, 1826), vol. 1, p. 19.
- 30 Reynolds, *Life and Times of Frederick Reynolds*, vol. 1, p. 20.
- 31 *The Quarterly Review* (John Murray, 1837), vol. 59, p. 407. See also, Reynolds, *Life and Times of Frederick Reynolds*, vol. 1, pp. 20-1.
- 32 Angelo, *Reminiscences of Henry Angelo*, p. 56. See also, Irma S. Lustig (ed.), *Boswell: The English Experiment 1785-1789* (Heinemann, 1986), p. 33.
- 33 *Letters ...to his daughter*, vol. 2, pp. 64 and 91. Letters dated 4th January 1778 and 25th April 1778 respectively.
- 34 *Letters ...to his daughter*, vol. 2, p. 70. Letter dated 7th January 1778.
- 35 *Letters ...to his daughter*, vol. 2, p. 130. Letter dated 29th December 1778.
- 36 *Letters ...to his daughter*, vol. 2, pp. 60 and 64. Letters dated 1st and 4th January 1778 respectively.
- 37 *Letters ...to his daughter*, vol. 2, pp. 194-5. Letter dated 5th January 1780.
- 38 *Letters ...to his daughter*, vol. 1, p. 200.
- 39 *The Ode on Dedicating a Building, and Erecting a Statue, to Le Stue, Cook to the Duke of Newcastle*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1769), p. iv. See also *The Kentish Gazette*, 1 November 1769.
- 40 *The Bath Chronicle*, 3rd December 1778, p. 3, col. 4.
- 41 Letters to Stafford, 18th February, (fol. 66), 14th March, (fol. 71) and 17th January 1778, (fol. 61) respectively.
- 42 Letters to Stafford, 18th February, (fol. 66) and 25th February 1778, (fol. 67) respectively.
- 43 Letter from Stafford, 20th February 1778, (fol. 67).
- 44 Horace Bleackley, *Life of John Wilkes* (John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1917), p. 348.
- 45 Letter from Stafford, 25th February 1778, (fol. 67).
- 46 Letter to Stafford, 25th February 1778, (fol. 67).

- 47 Letter from Stafford, 27th February 1778, (fol. 69).
- 48 Letters to Stafford, 25th February, (fol. 67) and 7th February 1778, (fol. 65) respectively.
- 49 Wilkes reiterated this offer in a letter to Stafford, 14th April 1778, (fol. 79).
- 50 Letter from Stafford, 27th February 1778, (fol. 69). For a discussion of Wilkes as a sentimental lover, see Cash, *John Wilkes*, pp. 343-4 and Sainsbury, *John Wilkes*, pp. 33-4.
- 51 Letters to Stafford, 25th February , (fol. 67) and 14th March 1778, (fol. 72) respectively.
- 52 Letter from Stafford, 6th April 1778, (fol. 77).
- 53 Letter from Stafford, 6th April 1778, (fol. 77).
- 54 Letter from Stafford, 12th April 1778, (fol. 78).
- 55 Letter to Stafford, 14th April 1778, (fol. 79).
- 56 *Bath Weekly Chronicle*, 15th April 1778 quoted in Ian Bradley, *Water Music: Making Music in the Spas of Europe and North America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 43. I have been unable to locate this newspaper reference.
- 57 Letter to Stafford, 20th April 1778, (fol. 83).
- 58 Letter from Stafford, 19th April 1778, (fol. 82).
- 59 Letter to Stafford, 20th April 1778, (fol. 83).
- 60 The advertisement was carried for a seven week period, often on the front page, from 3rd December 1778 to 21st January 1779.
- 61 *Letters ...to his daughter*, vol. 2, p. 176. Letter dated 24th December 1779.
- 62 'The MS Journal of Captain E. Thompson R. N., 1783 to 1785' in *The Cornhill Magazine* (Smith, Elder & Co., January-June 1868 issue, 1868), vol. 17, p. 635.
- 63 'Lounging through Kensington', in Charles Dickens, *Household Words* (New York: McElrath & Barker, 1853), vol. 7, p. 537.
- 64 Almon, *Correspondence of the late John Wilkes*, vol. 5, pp. 85-6.
- 65 Sainsbury, however, has described the Arnolds, Polly and Wilkes 'mingling together in a contented *ménage-à-quatre*' on Isle of Wight holidays. See Sainsbury, *John Wilkes*, p. 40.
- 66 *J. Wilkes Diaries*, vol. 6, (fol. 101). Add MS 30866.
- 67 Almon, *Correspondence of the late John Wilkes*, vol. 5, p. 140.
- 68 'Lounging through Kensington', in Dickens, *Household Words*, vol. 7, p. 537.
- 69 'MS Journal of Captain E. Thompson' in *Cornhill Magazine*, vol. 17, p. 635.
- 70 Reynolds, *Life and Times of Frederick Reynolds*, vol. 2, p. 109.
- 71 Irma S. Lustig and Frederick A. Pottle (eds.), *Boswell: The Applause of the Jury 1782-1785*, (Heinemann, 1982), p. 336.
- 72 Lustig (ed.), *Boswell: The English Experiment*, p. 90.
- 73 Cash, *John Wilkes*, p. 386.
- 74 Almon, *Correspondence of the late John Wilkes*, vol. 5, p. 141.
- 75 Lustig (ed.), *Boswell: The English Experiment*, p. 90.
- 76 Charles Chenevix Trench, *Portrait of a Patriot: A Biography of John Wilkes* (& Edinburgh: William Blackwood & Sons Ltd., 1962), p. 367.
- 77 Sainsbury, *John Wilkes*, p. 12.
- 78 *Letters ...to his daughter*, vol. 2, p. 223. Letter dated 9th April (but possibly 1783).