



# Lifting the Georgian petticoats

Historian and TV presenter Hallie Rubenhold says Bath has become the victim of Austenisation – giving the false impression that 18th century life centred around tea parties and romantic happy endings. The truth about Georgian women's lives is much darker.

**Georgette McCready** visited award-winning No1 Royal Crescent museum to find out more

Adaptations of Jane Austen's novels may have given us the impression that those Georgians were a prim and proper bunch given to drinking tea, wearing bonnets and fainting at the merest whiff of a social faux pas, so says historian and 18th century expert Hallie Rubenhold. In fact, as a new exhibition in Bath, curated by Hallie, reveals, 18th century society at all levels was rife with sex and scandal. *Portrait of a Lady: Ruin and Reputation in the Georgian Era* lifts the petticoats of the time and displays its nakedness as we've never viewed it before.

Hallie, who says she lives and breathes the 18th century and who lectures on the period, said: "This exhibition reveals the reality of women's lives in the Georgian era. I fear that the city of Bath has been Austenised. The reality for women in the 18th century was nothing like its genteel portrayal in Austen's books.

"When, in *Pride and Prejudice* you look at Elizabeth Bennett going off into the sunset with her Mr Darcy, in fact if something goes wrong she's not going to have access to her children or to any property. The dowry that was handed over on her marriage isn't hers, she can't even touch it. Her husband can legally rape and beat her if he chooses. I'd like to know what's romantic about that?"

The exhibition takes up just two rooms at No1 Royal Crescent museum, but there's a lot packed in to the space, showing and telling the stories of women of the 18th century. If you're interested in parallels of how life was lived then and now, these displays make for fascinating reading and make the viewer pause for thought. We might think that Twitter, Hello magazine and the tabloids have fuelled our obsession with celebrity, but the Georgians were the first to create the cult of the famous and the infamous.

The statistics are shocking to modern eyes. Women could not vote and even their children did not belong to them but their husbands. In Georgian Britain it was estimated that one in five women was a prostitute at some

point in their lives. It becomes immediately clear that most women had no power back then, there was no career ladder to climb. If they were poor they might find that taking in laundry or working in service didn't bring in enough to make a living, so they had to resort to selling their bodies. Women from better off families might find a bit of social climbing went hand in hand with becoming mistresses of wealthy and influential men.

Then there were the women who came from poor backgrounds who went on to make their names, and their fortunes, by having a series of relationships with powerful men. These women included Miss Spencer, daughter of a Newcastle coal merchant, who honed her skills between the sheets to make a reputed £50 a night as a prostitute and went on to become the mistress of the Duke of Devonshire.

Hallie is the author of *The Covent Garden Ladies*, a book about the 18th century directory of the same name which acted as a guide to the prostitutes in London. This handy little volume told gentlemen where they'd find the sort of woman they were seeking and it packed no punches in telling its readers in salacious tones all about their bodies and their specialities. This early form of soft porn was written under the pseudonym of Harris by Irishman Samuel Derrick, a seedy but apparently charming character who wanted

to make his fortune as a poet but instead found himself sampling the wares of whores before reviewing and rating them for this most unusual of guidebooks. Derrick was to move on from exploring the back streets of Covent Garden to the ballrooms of Bath where he was appointed Master of Ceremonies for the princely salary of £800 a year.

While we might imagine all that coy fan fluttering in the ballrooms of Bath concealed nothing more than innocent blushes and flirting, the truth is rather more seedy. An advert circulating the city at that time was written by Mrs Malone of 9 Gay Street. She claimed to have dropped a merkin at a ball

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**RUIN AND REPUTATION:** opposite, historian and exhibition curator Hallie Rubenhold

Above, top, Keira Knightley played the scandal-hit Duchess of Devonshire

Above, Hogarth's *Harlot*, a warts and all glimpse of life on the streets in the 18th century

Right, Miss Montague, one of the subjects depicted in mezzotint

and was offering a five guinea reward for its safe return. This advert was in fact coded. Mrs M was offering up her very personal services to any man who called at Gay Street for five guineas a time. Mrs Malone was just one of many making their living in the seedy underbelly of Bath society. The top brothels of London would send girls down to Bath during the season so the holidaying men could enjoy regular contact with their favourites.

One of the innovations which rendered women as objects to be bought and sold was the mezzotint – a method of reproducing pictures in black and white so that many copies could be made. This led to women like Kitty Fisher, one of the most successful and celebrated courtesans of her day, having their portraits copied and circulated for all to enjoy. Kitty sat for portraits by Reynolds, which were then copied by mezzotint artists who then shared her beauty with anyone who wanted to buy her image. One wall of the exhibition shows the mezzotint portraits of women (lent from a private collection of Edward Bayntun-Coward, Chairman of Bath Preservation Trust) from all walks of life, challenging us to work out who was ‘respectable’ by their dress and demeanour. Lovely Kitty Fisher, whose portrait by Reynolds shows her as Cleopatra, tragically died in Bath aged around 28. She had been so successful as a courtesan legend had it that she once ate a £50 note between two slices of bread to show how wealthy she’d become.

Kitty was on her way to Bristol when she checked in to the Three Tuns pub in Stall Street. She was dead by the next morning, killed by smallpox, consumption or possibly by lead poisoning from the heavy white make-up all the fashionable ladies wore. Side effects included hair loss and the skin eventually being eaten away by the lead – the equivalent, some might say, of the artificial beauty aids used today.

Kitty’s death in Bath was as big a news as that of Marilyn

Monroe’s centuries later. Her husband, John Norris, the MP for Rye, complied with her wishes for her to be laid out in her favourite ballgown and he decided that such was her fame that her fans would want to pay their respects, so her body lay in state in a public court and details printed for all to see. Town and Country magazine even had a regular feature it called Tete a Tete which saw portraits of men and women linked together if it was perceived they were having an affair. If Mr X was seen visiting Mrs Y’s home once too often, this would be made public in print for all to draw their own scandalous conclusions.

The Georgian equivalent of the tabloid press had a grand old time poking into and speculating about other people’s private affairs. The Right Honorable Mary Bayntum, a married woman, found herself publicly humiliated as her alleged adultery was tried in a public court and details printed for all to see. Town and Country magazine even had a regular feature it called Tete a Tete which saw portraits of men and women linked together if it was perceived they were having an affair. If Mr X was seen visiting Mrs Y’s home once too often, this would be made public in print for all to draw their own scandalous conclusions.

Some of the women featured who won infamy in their lifetime are still famous today. Georgiana Spencer, who went on to become the Duchess of Devonshire, had an affair and an illegitimate son with Lord Grey. A version of her life story was told in *The Duchess* film starring Keira Knightley. Francis Villiers also achieved fame as the mistress of the Prince of Wales (later George IV).

This is an eye-opener of an exhibition and worth a visit, partly as a reminder of how much most women’s lives in Britain have changed since the 1700s, and partly as a cautionary tale of how women can still be used as commodities and objectified. ■ *Portrait of a Lady: Ruin and Reputation in the Georgian Era runs at the Bath Preservation Trust’s No1 Royal Crescent museum until 14 December. Entrance to just the exhibition is £4.*